

*Robert Young's latest novel, THE LAST YGGDRASIL, will be published shortly by Del Rey Books. His new story concerns a 25th century spacecraft pilot named D'etoile who is on galactic rim patrol when he comes across an old space station that to his eyes has the aspect of a medieval castle, perhaps a haunted one....*

## ***Invitation to the Waltz***

**BY**

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The stray space station did not belong in D'etoile's day and age, nor did it belong in the rim regions of the galactic lens. Yet there it was, revolving slowly and smoothly, less than a hundred kilometers off the patrol craft's port bow.

To D'etoile's twenty-fifth century eyes it had the analogous aspect of a medieval castle cast adrift in time. He was on galactic rim patrol, on the lookout for *tsempi* — C-fluctuations that sometimes gave birth to severe photon storms against which his home-world could not defend itself without adequate forewarning. Here, the stars had thinned out to the point of near extinction; here, seemingly at his elbow, yawned the abyss of metagalactic space, while billions of light-years out, pale blurs in the vast blackness, lay a trio of extragalactic nebulae.

Although backgrounded by the dazzling star-clouds of the galactic hub, the station was so remote from the nearest sun as to be a star in its own right. The patrol craft's instruments indicated that it was moving rimward, either of its own volition or still propelled by the hypothetical thrust, or series of thrusts, that had de-orbited it and set it on a starless course that had enabled it to retain its new-found independence. As for its provenance, it had "matrix world" written all over it, which meant it must have been traveling rimward for centuries. D'etoile was not surprised when it did not respond to his radioed challenge, but he was annoyed. Duty demanded that he board it and check it out, and he did not want to. Something about it — its bizarre design, perhaps — repelled him.

It grew rapidly in the viewscreen as he closed in. Space stations were considered unnecessary extravagances these days, but such had not always been the case. Before the development of the trans-Sweike Drive made stellar colonization practicable, the matrix-world — Earth — had built and orbited thousand of such vehicles. Primitive to begin with, they had become increasingly elaborate and sophisticated as space technology graduated from Kindergarten into First Grade. Finally, private enterprise had got into the act, and "starsinos," "astrels," "catellites," and "starbars" had begun appearing in the sky. Vast, cumbersome affairs to modern eyes — metallic castles with little to redeem them save their celestial ambience.

When the station completely filled the view screen, D'etoile programmed the A.P. to locate the boat bay, home in on it and dock. Then he put on his suit. Before closing the equipment locker, he got out a lock-disengager and pocketed it. He doubted very much that there would be anyone to let him in.

He armed himself with a medium-range raze pistol, but this was standard procedure.

By this time the station was so close he could see the myriad pockmarks that successive meteor swarms had made in its black hull. It had a foreboding aspect, and there was no sign of a boat bay — at least none that he could see. Maybe he should reprogram the A.P. to back off. But his fears proved groundless. The station turned out to have an old-type Jenkinsonian sphincter-dock, into which the A.P. had no difficulty fitting the patrol craft's prow. After the boarding light came on, D'etoile went through the inner- and outer-hatch locks and emerged in the bay. With the aid of the disengager, he passed through the station's outer- and inner-locks with similar ease and stepped into the station proper. He found himself standing in a crimson-carpeted corridor filled with reddish light. From the distance came the sound of music.

**T**he reddish light had no discernible source and appeared to emanate from the walls and ceiling,

which were the same color as the carpet. But D'etoile knew better. Psychohistory dwelled at considerable length upon the Freudian conflict implicit in the matrix world's passion for hiding or disguising light sources and its concomitant passion for life-styles lifted from the dark pages of the past. As for the music, it was undoubtedly taped and had probably been activated, along with the light, by the opening and/or closing of the inner-lock.

The mini-instrument panel inset just below eye-level in his helmet indicated an amenable atmosphere, a congenial temperature and a gravity twice that of the patrol craft's. He had surmised as much from the condensation (now dispersed) that had filmed his visor and from an increased heaviness of his limbs. Nevertheless, he did not remove his suit. The instrument panel was neither omniscient nor infallible, and there was no need for him to remove his suit in any case.

Despite the music, despite the amenable atmosphere, despite the congenial temperature, he didn't for one instant believe that the station contained any living beings other than himself. He began walking down the corridor toward the source of the music. The reddish radiance made everything seem unreal, unpugned his own reality. He could hear a faint humming sound in the background and knew that ancient suction fans were at work, circulating the dead air, cleansing it, replenishing its oxygen content from hidden hydroponic vats. Like most such matrix-world stations, this one was self-perpetuating.

Presently the corridor debouched into a huge, balconied room. Suspended from the lofty ceiling was a rotating chandelier in the shape of a barred-spiral nebula. The radiance raining down from it ran the gamut of the spectrum, successively bathing the floor and the dancers below in red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet light. Staring at the whirling dancers, noting their formalized steps and elegant evolutions, D'etoile realized that the musical composition to which they were dancing was a waltz — a waltz composed centuries before they were born; resurrected like the room to titillate a civilization in which art had atrophied and died.

The dancers, for all their seeming reality, were no more than projections — projections emanating along with the music from an audio-visual tape-bank hidden in the walls. Probably they had been taped when the waltz-tape was in progress and were now an inseparable part of it. Some of them, no doubt, were the ghosts of the dead who sat at the encompassing tables, watching.

Not all of the dead "watched." Some had slipped from their chairs and lay like bags of bones upon the floor. Others had slumped forward onto the tables, phalanxes encircling the stems of empty glasses.

Most of the tables were empty.

D'etoile raised his eye's to the balcony that ringed the room, to the doors it gave onto. The thought of what he might find beyond their enigmatic panels made him shudder.

The waltz ended, the dancers vanished from the floor. Immediately another waltz began and other dancers —or perhaps the same ones — appeared. Revolted, fascinated, he studied the phantasmagoria before him, unaware of his ambivalence. The women —girls — were in their late teens and early twenties. They wore outlandish décolleté gowns of lurid hues; their hair was heaped into grotesque coiffures; their faces were gruesome with rouge. The men were of various ages: some were young, some old, most of middle years. All wore formal attire —black suits, black ties, black shoes.

The dead were dancing with the dead.

That was Wilde, wasn't it?

Yes. Oscar Wilde. A revenant himself. Haunting the dark streets after his disgrace. Penning Reading Gaol.

Sick world, D'etoile thought. Robbing its own past like a common thief. Building catellites in the sky instead of cathedrals. Fucking the iceman when it was betrothed to the farthest star.

Old Whore-Mother Earth.

Again he raised his eyes to the balcony, to the enigmatic doors. He traced the railing around to where it curved down to the ballroom floor, to where the stairs began. He found himself mounting them with reluctant tread. There would be records somewhere that would tell him all he needed to know, but a macabre curiosity compelled him to find out all he could firsthand.

He tried the first door he came to. It was locked. He tried another and another. At length he came to one that yielded to his touch and he stepped into the room beyond. It was a small room, permeated with

the same reddish radiance that permeated the corridor. There was a bureau, a chair, a washstand and a bed. The bed was empty. Inset in the ceiling directly above it was a large rectangular mirror.

He returned to the balcony and tried the next door. When it did not give he drew his raze pistol and incinerated the lock. He went inside. The scene was a facsimile of the one he had just viewed. Except for the rotted clothing draped over the back of the chair

Except for the bones on the bed.

They comprised two intermingled skeletons. The ribs of the upper, larger one were entangled with the ribs of the lower, smaller one. The two skulls lay side by side on the rotted pillow, one face down, the other grinning up into the mirror, as though amused by what it saw.

D'etoile tried three more doors. Two were unlocked and gave into rooms that told him nothing. He burned through the third and found two more skeletons. They lay facing each other on the bed. The right femur and tibia of the smaller rested across the left innominate bone of the larger bone of the larger, phalanxes dangling in the red gloom.

Old Whore-Mother Earth.

D'etoile went looking for the control room. He found it finally. It was above the crimson corridor, at the top of a narrow spiral stairway that began just to the right of the inner-lock. He had failed to discover it earlier because the door that gave access to it was indistinguishable, at first glance, from the wall.

Another skeleton — indubitably that of the pilot — greeted him when he entered the room. He ignored it as best he could and searched for the station's log. When he found it, it told him the whole grisly story.

Sickened, he descended the stairway, re-emerged in the corridor. In the ballroom, a new waltz had begun. He knew he should depart at once, but he did not: instead, he returned to the ballroom and resumed watching the waltzers with the same ambivalence.

Somehow he was not surprised when she emerged from the shadows on the far side of the room. In a way he had known all along that she was there. Waiting. She came walking toward him across the crowded floor. Tall, white-gowned, stately. Her black hair, heaped high on her head, gleamed in the spectral light. Her blood-red mouth accentuated the stark whiteness of her face. Her eyes held the blackness of metagalactic space.

She held out her hands to him. "Shall we dance?"

**T**hey danced. To the waltz that had just begun. To *Wein, Weib und Gesang*, by Strauss.

They whirled among the ghosts, through them; he, awkward in his spacesuit, she, light as the air she was made of, yet somehow substantial in his arms.

She said, laughing, "My name is *Treponema Pallidum*."

He said, shuddering, "I know."

She said, "In space, I came into my own."

He said, "I know."

The barred-spiral nebula above them shifted to the red end of the spectrum. She said, whirling with him in the incarnadine gloom, "I mutated. I grew stronger and more virulent. I became capable of accomplishing overnight what once had taken me years. I mastered intercorporeal flight. I acquired the ability to remain dormant for millennia."

He said, "I know."

She said, "The Space Authority quarantined the station and dispatched an epidemiologist to seek me out and destroy me. He tried every antibiotic and every drug he knew. He even tried mercury and Salvarsan."

He said, "I know."

She said, "When he failed, he ordered the pilot to de-orbit and destruct. But I had already reached the pilot. Now, I got to the epidemiologist. The pilot managed to de-orbit just before he died. The epidemiologist jettisoned himself." She grinned. "I invited everyone who remained to the waltz. And now I've invited you."

He screamed, "You can't reach me! My suit is impervious!"

Shrill laughter spurting from her blood-red mouth, shattering the strains of Strauss. He backed away, but not before her long crimson nails raked his chest. Horrified, he turned and ran from the floor. At the mouth of the corridor, he paused and looked back. He glimpsed her just before she blended back into the shadows of the far side of the room. Or perhaps back into the shadows of his mind.

He remained for a full hour in the absolute-zero vacuum of the boat bay. A purification rite. Immediately after passing through the hatch-locks into the patrol craft, he removed his suit and all his clothing and jettisoned them through the disposal tube. An unnecessary precaution, perhaps, but he was taking no chances. He threw his raze pistol in after them; then he went directly to the shower, where he lathered himself with the strongest antibacterial soap the supply closet contained. After rinsing and drying himself, he anointed his entire body with isopropyl. He gargled with mouthwash till he nearly gagged. Wearing fresh clothing, seated once again in the cockpit, he permitted himself a single sigh of relief. Then he went to work.

He retroed five hundred kilometers, turned the patrol craft broadside and centered the distant twinkle of the catellite on the cross hairs of the starboard cannon. The first hit turned the station into a crimson flower; the second reduced it to cosmic dust. He allowed himself another sigh of relief; then he programmed the A.P. to resume its original course and began recording a Report of Incident and Action. By the time he finished, "night" was on hand.

D'etoile slept the maximum seven hours that regulations permitted, but upon awakening he did not feel refreshed. When he stood up on the deck, he found himself swaying and he had difficulty getting into his clothes. Dressed, he forgot briefly where he was; then, remembering, he stepped into the tiny galley and made coffee. He gazed for some time at the familiar trio of extragalactic nebulae glowing palely in the galley viewscreen before he remembered that the galley had no viewscreen. Aghast, he backed out of the room.

He heard a faint rustling, as of a woman's gown. Turning, he beheld her standing in the narrow passageway. She was grinning. The flesh of her face was half gone; her heaped-up hair had matted and strands had broken free and fell to her decaying shoulders. She reached out a bony hand to touch his face, but he saw it only vaguely through the dark tertiary curtain that fell before his gaze. He found himself lying on the deck, listening to her laughter. It was superseded, during his last moment, by the strains of *Wein, Weib und Gesang*.