



FAR POINT

Issue No. 2 - January/February 1992

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The Science Fiction and Fantasy Magazine



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FAR POINT

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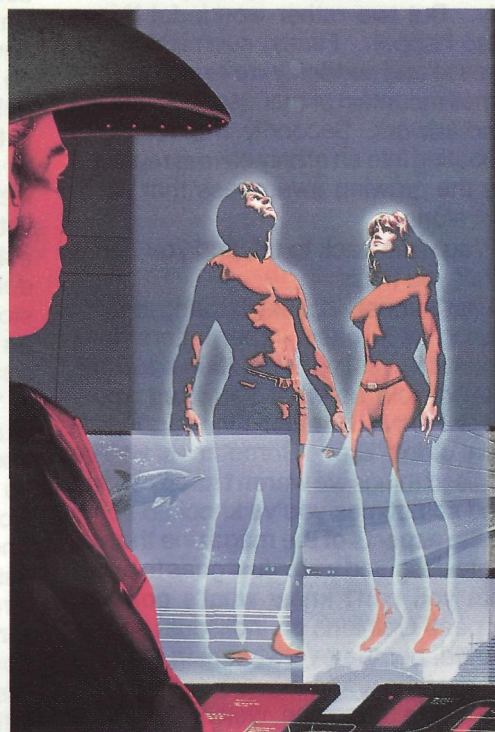
The Dragon, Fly: D. P. Courtice

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VIEW POINT

If the first hurdle in magazine publishing - producing Issue One - looks daunting, it's as nothing compared with the thrills and spills of getting the second one onto the shelves. Deadlines suddenly become much shorter, invoices appear more frequently and jobs multiply. But two rather wonderful things also happen. Firstly, submissions increase and suddenly we're looking at a small mountain of manuscripts, articles and artwork. Secondly, that feeling of shouting into an empty cave is replaced by the growing awareness that we're not alone.

You write back to us, and you tell us what you think.

That's unnerving, exhilarating and sobering all at once. Your letters have poured in, first a trickle, then a torrent. You've told us what you liked about FAR POINT Number One, and what you didn't like. Sometimes you've praised things we weren't happy about, and sometimes you've knocked some of the aspects of the magazine that we were delighted with. Just goes to prove that you can't know what's going to appeal! Opinions on individual stories varied, but the overwhelming majority of you who wrote in were enthusiastic about the magazine, welcomed it as a fresh direction for SF and Fantasy publishing, or were just kind enough to offer encouragement. A very large

number of readers took out subscriptions: if you were one, and you didn't specify when you wanted your sub to start, we've sent you Issue 2 on the assumption that you already have Number One. If we're wrong, we're sorry; Number One is now sold out, unless you can find one on a newsagents shelf. Special thanks must go to Claire Hunter for her secretarial help in getting the subscription copies in the mail.

So what's in Number Two? Well, we're maintaining the emphasis on fiction, and keeping to the "new names/established names" principle. We're delighted to include a **Piers Anthony** story, "Love 40"; it's very gratifying that an author of his stature should support a new magazine. Also very welcome is "Dream Park: The Voodoo Game". Our extract from this new **Larry Niven** and **Steven Barnes** novel is backed up by **Fred Gambino's** powerful artwork, taken from the book cover. There's more fiction - another eight authors in all, including the start of a three part serialization of **DB Norman**'s grotesque novella, "A Substitute For Love", illustrated by the writer. We're featuring work by a total of eight artists, and maintaining our mix of mono and colour. Two planned regular features start this month: SF Convention News and a Science Fact ar-

ticle. Book reviews and news continue. But make no mistake: fiction is where this magazine belongs, and that's where the emphasis stays. We've exciting plans for 1992, and some superb material coming your way.

A word on submissions. Please look at the guidelines for details on fiction, artwork and non-fiction material, if you want to send your work in for consideration. It's especially helpful if you include a covering letter with some background on yourself, particularly if you've never submitted before. **Two** SAEs are appreciated: one for acknowledgement, one for return of any material (unless it's disposable - please specify). We're delighted to see the wide range of styles and subject matter that's coming in - but we aren't looking for traditional ghost stories, horror or the occult. Explicit porn isn't our style either! Interestingly, very few authors submit good space fiction SF and few send in 'folklore fantasy'. We're not specifically seeking either form, but we will always consider it. And if it's good, we'll buy it. That goes for all styles of SF and Fantasy.

To all readers: thanks for the support. Keep the comments and criticism coming, and we'll always take it seriously. Best wishes for Christmas and New Year.

Charlie Rigby

TALKING POINTS

We welcome your letter on any SF/Fantasy-related subject. Obviously, we reserve the right to edit what we print, and we particularly look forward to your comments on FAR POINT.

What follows is a sample of letters we have received commenting on FP1. We've had far more than we can print, but the following extracts represent the general consensus.

I bought the first issue out of curiosity and was overwhelmed at how good it is. Your first selection of stories was excellent. The magazine is beautifully laid out, easy to read and I thought the illustrations by "Sarah" perfectly suited to their text. Also the mag is friendly and unpretentious! "The Door Specialist" is quite simply the best short story I've read for many years. It is incredibly

haunting.

Your front cover was lovely - very cleverly eye catching, I hope it persuaded readers of all these pseudo American comics to pick it off the shelves and try some real SF for a change! I think you are right to underline The! You have done the SF market proud; congratulations.

**S. Hender
Bristol**

TALKING POINTS

Congratulations on the first issue of **FAR POINT**, and also congrats for the View Point editorial which quite nicely summed up my own views.

I enjoyed the first issue, something that I cannot say for any other magazine in this field, the stories were entertaining and well laid out. My only major quibble is the cover, which is very flimsy, and didn't take travelling from London too well!

As to the artwork. I particularly found Sarah Bradnam's excellent, they enhanced the stories, and I would have liked to see some colour piccies from her. Keith Page's work was also great, and a nice centre spread, though I felt your logo was too intrusive. Smaller, at the bottom, would be better. Courtenay-Deal's work was also of a high standard, I really liked the art for *Do You Love*. But the b&w for *Adam's Offspring* were pretty naff compared to his other work. Last minute space fillers??

Ho hum, must dash. I haven't really gone into depth with the criticism, I don't want to take up too much of your time. But I must thank you for bringing original (as opposed to say book extracts) fantasy writing. I have always preferred fantasy, though it is often the poor relation to Sci-fi as far as magazines go. A trend I hope that you'll continue.

Anyway, every success (and with such a strong advertising support you really shouldn't go wrong).

Nathan Cubitt
Great Yarmouth

Greetings and felicitations to all at **FAR POINT**.

Excellent idea, excellent format, excellent magazine, what more can I say, I really enjoyed issue one. Without a doubt, *Reprise*, by Marise Morland was the best of the lot, tight, innovative, and bursting with energy. I was also impressed with the stories by Stephen Markley and Jo Raine, familiar themes with a new approach, very refreshing, but I found *The Door Specialist* by Maggie Freeman, a touch wooden, all technique and little style, and thus somewhat inaccessible to the reader. *The Crow and the Dragonfly* was a

very good story well realised, but the final sentence was superfluous and tended to overbalance the harmony of the text rendering it clumsy as a whole. Martyn J Fogg's story on the other hand, achieved a good balance between technique and style making it very readable, as well as supplying it with pace and momentum. The other stories were also quite good, but didn't really stand out against the others I have already mentioned.

Yours out there on the Edge
David R Francis
Dyfed

Yup, I liked **FAR POINT**. The stories were upbeat with a wow factor that gets sneered at by the arty farty literati crew. Real F&SF not only like it used to be, but as it really is. There's too much stuff being palmed off as F&SF which ain't - instead it's anti this-that-the-other crap full of miserable roll-over-and-die no hopers who blame it all on the government, big business, the evil Americans etc etc. Oh and anybody who likes mere action films like *Terminator* and *Predator* is a lowlife nerd, though of course the lowest of the low are the primitive neanderthals who like *Star Trek*. People like me. Pwhloot! Sorry, got carried away there. As I was saying, I liked **FAR POINT**, particularly *Gorilla* (Peter Davies), *The Firing Line* (Martyn Fogg), *Justice* (Brian Stableford, ye gods!), *The Crow and the Dragonfly* (David Raven), *Home is a House Called Percy* (Stephen Markley). The rest weren't bad either, which is actually something to write home about. And hang on, ten stories? OK, there's maybe one or two shorts too many, but overall it's good value. Long may ye thrive.

Just one thing though. Your black and white illos are crap!
Yours sincerely
John Duffield

Regarding FAR POINT issue 1, I was impressed. The fact that I enjoyed the stories, as a whole, is irrelevant, knowing one cannot please everyone all of the time, but your profes-

sional production is far more important. It was interesting to see colour pictures, although I was fairly disappointed in them. Possibly it was the fact that we are not used to seeing colour, but I felt they were rather dull and downbeat, too many pastel browns and greys. Do you think we could have a more vibrant use of colour in future issues? I must confess to liking Sarah Bradman's illos, despite it not being in a style I expected to find interesting. I suppose the ads are a necessary evil and will be what keeps the magazine in the black, but I won't pretend to like them. Are there any plans to put some non-fiction in? May I suggest articles on the treatment of different themes in SF and F; articles which relate books together and therefore suggest new avenues for readers to explore; but I don't miss the interviews at all. Finding new ways of presenting reviews seems to be hard and the reproduction of publisher's blurb in the New Books pages gives us something we don't see elsewhere, great. All in all, a powerful effort and a worthwhile contender for space on the shelves. Nice to see someone using the cross genre SF/Fantasy stories, not the SF of Interzone or pure fantasy of the short lived Amaranth. Keep up the good work.

Best regards
Daniel Buck
Loch Garten

I would like to congratulate you on the first issue of **FAR POINT**. It is such a relief at last, to have a British magazine for Science Fiction produced in such a professional manner.

Your editorial struck home as far as my own tastes are concerned and so I expect to become a regular reader.

Whilst I enjoyed most of the stories in issue one, for me, Stephen Markley's *Home Is A House Called Percy* stood out above the rest. I hope he writes more.

Again, congratulations, and I look forward to hearing from you in the near future.

Yours Sincerely
John K Williams
Birmingham

I am looking forward to Issue 2, the first was extremely good to say the least.

Mr D Wade
London

I've just recently bought and devoured your first issue of **FAR POINT** with delight. A good quality, sci-fi/fantasy, review magazine for readers, artists and writers new to the genres of print ... wonderful.

Mr J Boote
London

I really hope you can make a go of FP during these difficult times; I'm certain you're right about the potential for a magazine which emphasizes entertaining sf/f, to complement the gloomier stuff that we are more used to in Britain.

Mr M Coward
Middlesex

I was surprised - and delighted - to read the first edition of **FAR POINT** a bold and brave concept in the present times and I wish you every success with the venture!

Ms S Ash
Kent

I enjoyed the first issue immensely, and I was especially glad to see a variety of subjects covered. What SF/F magazines I've come across before have, by and large, generally stuck with one or two particular aspects of the genre, so to discover a publication that is prepared to dispense with any notional ideas of boundaries is refreshing. Keep up the good work.

Mr J Trout
Cheshire



SCIENCE FICTION CONVENTIONS

NOVACON 21 1 - 3 November 1991, Birmingham, U.K.

Report by Johan D Sinclair

The Novacons have been running for quite a long time, 21 years, and for the past three years have been held at the same Birmingham hotel (now renamed the Forte Post House) by the cargo airport. This year's Novacon had a tinge of the retrospective, with the programme book and one of the panels being devoted to a backwards look. In tune with Novacon's 'relaxacon' image, this year's programme, what there was of it, was largely devoted to having a good time; the only intellectual meat in three days being **Ian Stewart's** talk on animal locomotion, the Guest of Honour interview of **Colin Greenland** (conducted by **Chris Morgan**) a talk on the Golem legend, and a panel on How to Get Published, with **Jonathan Wylie**, **Chris Morgan**, **Lisanne Norman**, and **Sally-Ann Melia**. For those of you who are interested, the advice from the latter panel could be summarised as (a) get lucky, (b) marry an editor (c) get an agent, or (d) try short stories. At which point, FAR POINT editor **Charlie Rigby** made a timely intervention from the floor. Friday and Saturday saw showings of a deftly edited and often hilarious sequence of clips from vintage TV SF, and Trekkie abuse, followed by Jitlov's animation 'The Wizard of Space and Time'. Other films shown during

the Con were *The Abyss*, *Android*, *Ghost*, *Frankenstein Unbound*, *It Conquered The World*, *Erik the Viking* and *Total Recall*. Friday also saw the Fancy Dress Party hosted by Masquerade queen **Anne Page**. The more foolhardy, well fuelled by **Arthur Cruttenden's** dreaded punch, attempted party games with warpsticks, apples on strings and loose oranges, and live noughts and crosses. I never thought of noughts and crosses as a contact sport ... There was the charity Book Auction, conducted as usual by **Roger Peyton**, where the highest bid was achieved when 26 people chipped in a pound each to have a copy of **L Ron Hubbard's** 'Dianetics' ripped to shreds, and the Transatlantic Fan Fund auction where **Pam Wells** auctioned off an intriguing collection of American ephemera (OK rubbish) including a can of PAM cholesterol-free cooking oil spray. Sunday's Art Auction was a good deal cheaper than Sotheby's, despite the inclusion of several **David Hardy** prints.

Saturday was otherwise devoted to the other fannish customs of going outside the hotel for dinner and watching the hotel TV. Perhaps appropriately, BBC2 showed a repeat of **Caryl Churchill's** fantasy play 'Top Girls'. Real Fans are wont to deny hav-

ing attended any of the Con programme at all, and will tell you that a convention really takes place in the bar or at room parties. Of course, to a large extent, it does and Novacon 21 was no exception, with the bar open all hours. Also going on to all hours was the Saturday night disco where the younger and more energetic fans bopped away to somewhat timewarped dance music. They drew the line at trying to dance to the Thunderbirds theme though.

Rival Bristol and Isle of Man bids for the 1994 Eastercon were campaigned for, culminating in an orgy of poster-defacing on Sunday. **Dave Langford** handed out copies of #52 of his fanzine ANSIBLE.

For those wanting their books signed, fairly well-known authors attending included GoH **Colin Greenland**, **Bob Shaw**, **John Brunner**, **James White**, 'Jonathan Wylie', **Storm Constantine** and **Robert Holdstock**, and for those wanting to buy books (wot?) there was a Dealers' Room. Not much book-buying seemed to be taking place. This was a friendly, relaxed Con, though it seemed quieter than last year's; certainly attendance was down by about a quarter. Memberships are being taken for Novacon 22, to be held at the same venue.

FORTHCOMING CONVENTIONS

Many people will tell you that conventions are where SF really happens. Guests of honour from among the big name authors, art auctions, talks, interviews, themes, films, workshops - and an exhausting social life ...

Where do you find out about them? Well, they'll all be advertised at other conventions, of course! And from now on in FAR POINT, as well. Each issue we'll provide details of forthcoming conventions which we've heard about, and we'll give it a free listing in these pages, up to a year in advance, until the event.

MASQUE

The First British Costume Convention.
14 - 16 February
Cobden Hotel, Birmingham
Enquiries to:
Melusine
Masque Registrations
27 Coltsfoot Drive
Waterlooville
Hants PO7 8DD

LUCON IVY

21 - 23 February (change of date)
SF, Fantasy, role-playing games
Enquiries to:
LUCON IVY
Leeds Univ SF Society
PO Box 157
Leeds LS1 1UH

EUROCON/ FREUCON

24 - 26 April
Enquiries to:
Achim Sturm
Woltersburger Muhlenweg 1
DW-3110 Uelzen 5
Germany

INCONSEQUENTIAL

22 - 25 May
Aston Court Hotel
Derby
The main theme is humour
Enquiries to:
Inconsequential
12 Crich Avenue
Littleover
Derby DE3 6ES

SCONE/UNICON 13

7 - 9 August
Clyde Halls
Glasgow
Games in SF
Enquiries to:
Scone
c/o Glasgow Univ Union
32 University Avenue
Glasgow G12 8LX

MAGICON: THE 50th Worldcon

3 - 7 September
Main Venue: Orange County
Convention and Civic Centre
Orlando
Florida
UK Enquiries to:
Peter Weston
14 St Bernard's Road
Sutton Coldfield
West Midlands B72 1LE



A SUBSTITUTE FOR LOVE

by
Del B. Normanton

His skin crept over him in neat little folds, each one more chilling than the last, as a vehement storm of impassioned thoughts pervaded his sanctum. They gnawed aggravatingly at him as he tried in vain to ignore them.

He had set sail using his mind as a compass and his heart as a sail to a contrary world of his own creation to which the Disappearing Room, in moments of grave ennui, carried him. The room, or 'the Old Ebenezer' as he liked to call it, crossed the Borderland separating him from reality.

But again he felt the calling, knew it was not Nothing this time, but a granted wish approaching fruition.

The Outdoor Witch approached. He had to get back.

With a cry that tore his heart from the mast and rocked the Old Ebenezer obliquely, Blackheath sailed home in an instant.

He knew he should have stayed indoors.

She was here already.

He had created her, therefore she was his.

He had waited so long for this moment. Adrenalin dripped into his waiting veins as behind him his bedroom moved about, shifted, had not quite settled. Articles in the room disappeared and re-appeared, indistinct colours defused, book titles lay buried in the dust of a thousand wasted hours.

He could feel her presence. He turned.

She stood on the threshold of reality, elusive as a dream image, the mysterious Outdoor Witch.

Yet something was not quite right. It was her, yet not her. She had a name, this witch, but he had not named her. Surely one should be able to control that which he creates?

Then he remembered his mother. He had created her, hadn't he? And she was out of control.

But he had merely 'altered' her. She had existed before he had tampered with her, changing her flesh and blood, her very substance, altering her temperament, her character, her mind. The real person and his creation had then fused to become one; the creature she was

now.

But he meant her no harm. He had done it to test his powers.

Then he had been fooled, he thought. Perhaps the Outdoor Witch was not his, after all.

Perhaps he was hers.

Like a phantom, a seagull shrieked, passing through the room. Their unrealities touched briefly, capturing him in a timelessness, and he watched as the unearthly gull rose up on an invisible tide of air and passed through the opposite wall and out of the room.

Watching from the window, Blackheath saw the seagull climbing the sky. But moments later, he watched as it dropped like a javelin out of the air and fell into the road.

Reaching for his sticks, he disturbed the dust that lay like a trembling film of gauze over every item in the room, and stood up. The cobwebs parted, moving aside for him as he hurried from the room.

His sticks tapped heavily on the stair carpet as he made his way downstairs. And in the silent bedroom, the cobwebs shrugged and began to re-do what had just been undone.

Outside, he knelt beside the dead gull in the road and, reaching out, gently stroked the whiteness of its wing. A droplet of blood over its eye reflected an approaching storm.

Lifting the gull and carefully supporting its limp head against his chest, he took the bird indoors, the magnificent white wings trailing the ground gracelessly.

As Blackheath stepped over the threshold lightning scratched the blackened sky, revealing his mother standing in the dark hallway, her hair curling and spiralling upwards wildly, her arms folded tightly across her breasts, as if she feared her milk might turn.

She stared down at him with eyes like gold coins dropped into the mud of her pock-marked and pitted face that seemed to penetrate him for an age. She may have been the bough that bore him, but he had no pleasant memories of her. She was a cruel and unpredictable woman, a sentinel outside the Disappearing Room whom he had renamed the 'Indoor Witch'.

She continued to study him silently, a grimace smouldering on her stern, humourless face. It was Blackheath who finally broke the spell of silence.

"A waste of a grimace, mother," he said, looking up. "It's only me."

"Nothing's wasted," she retorted, shuffling her stocking'd feet awkwardly and half-smiling. "You should know that. A grimace is but a smile re-cycled." She reached out and quietly closed the front door behind him. "What do you have there, eh?"

The glass chandelier pendants hanging from the hem of her religious dress tinkled and chimed musically, casting an eerie glow along the otherwise unlit passage. The dress, made of a dull sackcloth and heavily adorned with hanging warts and carbuncles, which she had painstakingly sewn on herself, was held on by two or three wooden stakes nailed to carved wooden shoulder-pads, on the end of which perched gargoyles, grinning frenziedly.

"Questions demand answers," prompted his mother, tapping her foot impatiently, "or they never rest, but hang in the air, flying in squares like blue-bottles, troubling folk."

"It's a seagull, if you must know," he said. "It's sheltering from the storm."

His mother looked left and right. "What storm?" she asked, twisting up her face in another grimace. "I don't see a storm." She peered down at the motionless seagull. "Is it dead? It looks dead."

Blackheath did not reply.

His mother nodded at his silence and smiled a crooked smile.

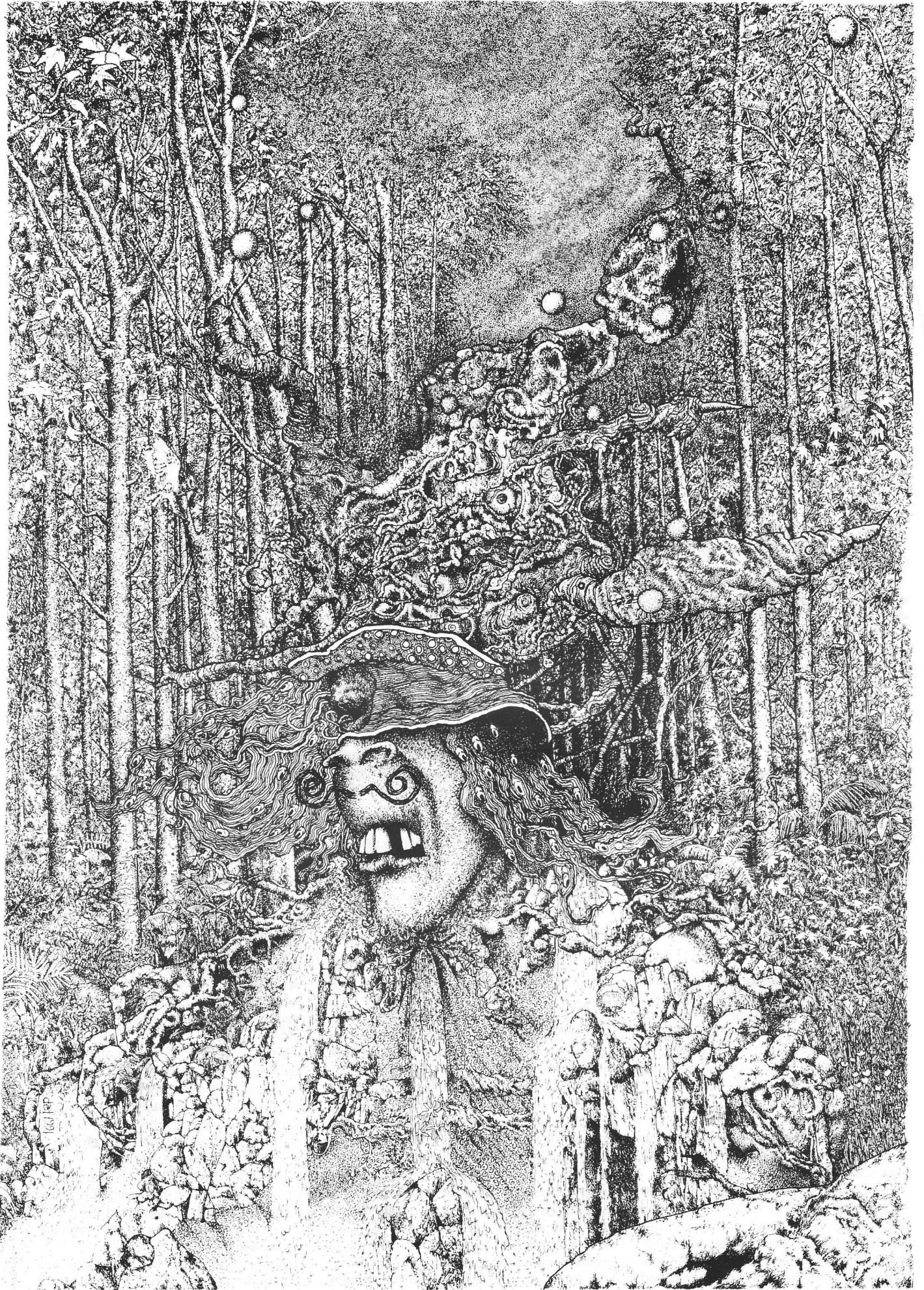
Time ticked by, unconcerned, as they regarded each other in the echo of silence that ensued. Each breath shared warmed them both, yet the distance separating them was vast and immeasurable.

Mrs Dinkie glanced down at her religious dress. The Holy Word of the Week, spelt out in neon lights across the front of it, had begun to flash a premonitory warning. *How odd*, she thought. *It has never changed mid-week before. It usually changes on a Sunday.*

Blackheath watched her, wary, fearful. The lights on the religious dress flickered, faded, re-appeared. The Holy Word of the Week was finally revealed:

HARRY

"Harry?" repeated Mrs Dinkie, quietly pensive. "Is there an apostle called 'Harry'? I don't think so." She arched



her brow in thought. "A saint, maybe?"

Blackheath slid from beneath his mother's shadow, which had pinned him to the wall.

Confused, Mrs Dinkie continued to regard this veiled, anonymous word with suspicion. She cursed it silently for causing her to worry. Swathed as it was in mystery, which she loathed, it was both unwelcome and unacceptable to her.

The Holy Word of the Week, which had previously been the name of either a saint or an apostle from the Bible, had become, instead, a vile and unmentionable disease contracted by dresses, and probably highly contagious to underwear, trousers, shirts and pull-overs; perhaps even curtains and carpets, too! Why, she thought, the possibilities are endless! The whole house could become infected - sheets, bedcovers, cushions, furniture coverings! She shuddered at the thought of such a virulent epidemic, such a domestic contagion. They would have to bring in the exterminators!

And the neighbours - what would they think? Mrs Smith? The Hendersons? They would shun her. She would be despised, an outcast, a pariah; unclean in her scarecrow's hat, her leper's coat, her diseased dress.

Mrs Dinkie couldn't believe it. Her lovely religious dress - diseased! Perhaps she ought to call in the doctor before any more blemishes appeared; boils and pustules were, even as she watched, erupting and spilling their contents onto the dress. But it might not be too late. *Was 'Harry' a terminal disease?* she wondered. *God forbid! They would have to go to Lourdes! Oh, the expense!*

When she looked up again she was no longer smiling. With a snarl, she began slowly to stalk her son down the passage in heavy footsteps.

"Mother!" cried Blackheath, suddenly afraid. "Don't!"

"What have you done?" she demanded, 'ailing her arms wildly in the air and shrieking. "Look at my dress! It's very ill!" One or two lightbulbs on the dress flickered and buzzed, threatening to go out. Her shadows, surrounding her on the walls and ceiling, imitated her movements, raising their arms in mock alarm, waving long, affected fingers at Blackheath's own shadows cowering on the other side of the ceiling light.

"What have you done to religion?" she cried, looming out of the darkness and hooking a finger onto her son's collar. Her eyes darted from wall to wall, watching her disorderly and undignified shadows writhe frenziedly, hypnotically, around her.

"Nothing!" cried Blackheath, struggling to extricate himself from her clutches. "Nothing!"

Her gnarled finger unfurled and his mother stepped back to regard him with sharp, inquiring eyes.

"Where have you been?" she asked. "I kept calling you. Where do you go when you're home?"

"I was playing," he replied.

"Playing?" scoffed his mother. "You're not a child anymore, Blackheath. What child looks a hundred years older than his own mother?" Her anger caused the illuminations on her dress to dull. Then her eyes narrowed into two fissures, through which

she peered furtively down at him. "You've been off again, haven't you?" she asked. "In your room; to that place. I thought I told you never to go there. You know what happens when you do."

Blackheath nodded and drew the seagull closer to protect him from the barrage of her questions.

"Did that bird follow you back?"

He shook his head, shrugged. "I don't know. It just... appeared, passed through my room."

Like a bureau drawer, his mother's mouth dropped open to reveal a hoard of discoloured teeth. "Then it's hers," she said quietly, reflectingly.

Blackheath looked up. "Who?"

"Her," repeated his mother. "The witch; the *other* witch."

He felt his face redden.

"Why did you come back?" asked his mother, her voice trembling, edged like a poison'd blade with loathing. She inched closer; her face, illuminated by the flickering chandelier pendants hanging from her religious dress, became dark and sullen.

"To tell you," he whispered.

"You've been off again, haven't you?" she asked. "In your room; to that place. I thought I told you never to go there. You know what happens when you do."

Burning with curiosity, his mother's shadows leaned forward to listen, for their conversation had quietened to a whisper.

Mrs Dinkie slapped a hand over her mouth, her eyes opened in anticipation.

"She is here," Blackheath whispered, quieter than before. "The other witch."

His mother's eyes slid effortlessly back into their dark lairs, pulling her face across the open sockets behind them.

"Here?" she whispered, glancing over her shoulder and suspecting even her own shadows. "In my house?"

Blackheath shrugged.

His mother studied the dead seagull through the slit-like apertures of her eyes; had they been minor lesions in her face they might have healed on contact, imprisoning her eyes behind the flesh of her face for eternity.

"What is that thing?" she asked, extending a finger and prodding the dead bird sharply. "Her familiar?" She hastily withdrew her finger.

Blackheath shook his head. "No," he replied, clutching it to his chest. "It's an omen."

"An omen, eh?" said his mother, nodding gravely. "What does it portend?"

"Just doom, mother," Blackheath replied with a semblance of a smile.

Mrs Dinkie leapt back and threw up her arms. Her shadows, surprised, leapt back

and threw their arms into the air also, eagerly awaiting her next theatrical gesture.

"We're doomed then!" she wailed, waving her arms wildly in the air and rotating on the spot. "Doomed!"

"Doomed!" shrieked her shadows ecstatically. "Doomed! Oh, joy! We're all doomed!"

The glass chandelier pendants on his mother's religious dress chimed confusedly. The Holy Word of the Week fluttered, threatening to go out.

"Oh, mother," sighed Blackheath. "Don't be so melodramatic."

She thrust a finger at him again, wagging it accusingly; her shadows also pointed at him in this way.

"You dreamer!" cried his mother. "You escapist! Can't you see what you are doing? You and your damn pretending are creating an alternative reality. I won't have you turning me into an intangible! I'm your mother! Stop it at once, d'you hear me? It's very disrupting."

Taking a hesitant step towards him, she grinned devilishly, her swirling aqueous eyes threatening to engulf him. Blackheath retreated further down the dark hallway on his sticks like a spider.

"Now don't be silly, Blackheath," she scolded, moving her face closer. "I'm your mother." Her fingers itched to grab him, wriggling at her side impatiently, as if anticipating a murder. Give your mother a kiss."

Shadowy tongues flickered over the walls as Mrs Dinkie pursued her son down the dark hallway, her thin lips, moistened by her tongue, pursed expectantly.

"I didn't make you what you are," said Blackheath, pushing her away. "You've always been a monster. Leave me alone. I don't want to kiss you."

His mother lunged at him then, trying to kiss his face, his neck, his hands, but her bullets of warm flesh missed their target and, not being a wasteful person, she quickly gathered the kisses back out of the air.

Her shadows didn't want this game to end! They kissed and embraced each other shamelessly across the dark chasm of the hall where Mrs Dinkie and her son faced each other. But when they attempted to kiss Blackheath's shadow, it turned and fled.

They took chase and pursued it down the hall.

"Don't you love me anymore?" Mrs Dinkie asked, her lips drawing back in a hideous mockery of a smile. "Don't you love your little mummy?"

"You're not my mother!" cried Blackheath, struggling to disengage himself from her vice-like grip. "You're a buffalo! Let me go, you old witch!"

"But I'm *your* witch, aren't I?" she rasped through clenched teeth. "I'm your *indoor* witch. You created me. And you could blow me away if only you could control me. But you can't, can you? You can change me, but you can't control me! Can you?"

"Leave me alone!" cried Blackheath, twisting away from her. "You torment me so!" As he struggled to reach the stairs, his sticks tapped an awkward rhythm along the hall carpet.

Behind him, his mother followed the white wings of the seagull as they dragged past her. She slapped a foot down on her son's shadow, which had edged towards them along the hall.

"I hope you're not taking that thing upstairs," she said.

Blackheath ignored her. His mother, standing at the foot of the stairs, watched him go, swaying like a hanged man between the gnarled black sticks. Edging all the time closer to the wall, closer to the darker side of darkness, her son stole away.

"I'm getting closer!" cried his mother. "I'll soon be overhead!"

Pushing open his bedroom door, Blackheath screamed for the room, which returned in an instant.

"You created me!" bawled his mother. "You little bastard! If I'm not your real mother, then who is? Eh? Where is she, eh? Where is your real mother?"

The bedroom door closed and, so sealed, the room shifted obliquely, fading into a greyness, a void. In this transitory state the room began thrashing violently about in order to dissociate itself from the house and escape the clutches of reality, finally deviating into the Old Ebenezer, a flame-red sailing vessel which then set sail across the unfamiliar and variable vastness that was the imagination.

Blackheath lay the dead seagull on the quilted bedcover as a flash of lightning tore open the sky. A wave reared up and spray swept the decks of the strangely twisted ship, which lurched, then plunged again into the undulating body of water awaiting it. Tiny opals of water traced hurried spider-paths across the porthole and back to the sea.

He stroked the white neck of the dead gull, cradling it in his arms.

"The sky will not take you back tonight," he whispered. "You'll have to stay at least until the storm is over.

A floorboard creaked outside his bedroom door.

"I hope that bird is not on the bed!" cried his mother, throwing open the door to her son's bedroom to encounter, from the borderless nothingness that was the room's improbable interior, a blustery wind which charged her, tossing her hair violently this way and that and promptly stealing her only breath.

She wavered in the doorway, a framed example of a woman petrified, as an insignificant rumble rose from the dark depths of her inner space; a scream accelerating upwards through her heartland and through the tonic sofa scale, to explode in her throat; a scream of such volume that, as it tore through her cavernous mouth like a bullet on a mission, shook the very plaque-encrusted foundations of her teeth and the fillings remaining therein.

She quickly closed the bedroom door and stood panting on the landing, quaking with fear, her hair swept up in a wild and unruly skein which would take her hours to untangle.

"Oh, what a fright!" she wheezed, leaning against the doorframe for support. "There was nothing there!"

A cocktail sausage fled into the darkness. "She's coming!"

Mrs Dinkie crossed the kitchen floor to stare up at the dark stairwell inside the larder.

Stairs! she thought. *And they weren't here yesterday. How steep they are, how winding. The food is so far away now. Why has it moved upstairs away from me?*

She cursed and caught her breath. Holding onto the balustrade, she slowly started up the dark staircase leading into the larder. The door slammed shut behind her, leaving her without any light but her own, the illuminations on her religious dress. Clutching hold of the hem of her dress, she mouthed a silent prayer.

She climbed the last few steps leading up to the larder, her footfalls swathed in stealth as the darkness, disturbed by the deranged illuminations on her religious dress, parted to allow her through.

The cocktail sausage suddenly leapt over a plate and hurriedly sought the shadows.

A great cry went up from the food as Mrs Dinkie appeared at the top of the stairs. They took flight, rushing about like mad things, trying to hide as she ran amongst them, snatching them up and piling them onto her tray, from which they leapt moments later, some to their deaths.

"Stop!" she cried. "Don't be afraid!"

She sat down on the lowest shelf to devour the few that had not plummeted to their deaths from the plate. Grabbing an egg, which had been afraid to leap from the tray, she smashed its shell and sucked its insides out.

Downstairs, the dog whined and scratched at the larder door. Ignoring its pleas, Mrs Dinkie continued to eat, eyes bulging from the strain of trying to swallow un-masticated food, as she fumbled with the lids of jars and tore open packet-tops.

Finally, she lay back on the shelf, sated; she could eat no more. The food remaining on the shelves watched anxiously, ready to flee if she made a move towards them.

There was a rustling behind a Cornflakes packet. Reaching out, Mrs Dinkie brushed it aside. Cowering in a corner at the back of the shelf, caught in a twist of cobweb, the cocktail sausage fought to untangle itself. She reached out for it and the cocktail sausage begged for mercy. To silence it, she stuck it with a hat-pin.

Asleep at the back of the shelf, an Old Pork Pie stirred. Mrs Dinkie leaned forward to tuck him in and he lifted one rheumy eye, taking a second or two to recognize her.

"Ah," he said into a yawn, "Mrs Dinkie. I was having such a curious dream..."

She withdrew her hand, smiled, a little embarrassed.

"A woman died," he said, "wearing three coats of paint. They found her bones - such brightly coloured bones - so bright that no one would dare approach them. They had been afraid of her, you see; afraid of what she was, of what she had done.

"Her bones, though, were so beautiful - blue ones, curled and iridescent, fiery orange triangular bones with flapping yellow sails, curious green wheel-like bones with notches on, and a bright red zig-zag shaped

bone on which hung tiny black and purple boxes filled with early morning dew and evening sunlight. They were not like bones at all, really.

"In the midst of all those beautiful coloured bones she lay and appeared, at first, to be asleep; but we soon realised she was dead. The fiery bones were still burning, but the fires were low, needed kindling, were fading fast.

"We stared down at her, watching her sails fold and unfold, her fires die. No one moved to cover her up and she was more than naked. I remember thinking: she deserves at least that.

"Her bones were so pretty that I wanted one, wanted one enough to consider stealing it. I wanted them all, really, but if I could just have one. One wouldn't be missed, surely? I wanted the zig-zag bone - the red one - before it turned grey and dull and her lights went out forever.

"Her bones were so pretty that I wanted one, wanted one enough to consider stealing it. I wanted them all, really, but if I could just have one. One wouldn't be missed, surely? I wanted the zig-zag bone - the red one - before it turned grey and dull and her lights went out forever.

"When I thought no one was looking I reached down and grabbed the bone. I was sure no one had seen me, but when I looked up it seemed that every eye was cast upon me, silent, accusing, unbelieving.

"They drew back then, allowing me to pass, and I quickly left that place, for I was ashamed and wanted only to hide. I ran a little way before I dared look back.

"What I saw filled me with such horror and regret, such revulsion, that I let the bone - the beautiful red zig-zag bone that I had wanted so much that I was willing to steal from a suicide - drop into the gutter, where it shattered and the colour quickly ebbed away. The little boxes burst open, releasing snatches of sunlight into the cool night air, the morning dew ran into the gutter, as somewhere, I heard - I thought I even smelled - her last breath escaping.

"They were looting, you see, when I looked back, fighting over the spoils. These people, who had appeared so shocked when I took one of the bones because it was so beautiful, and who had shunned me and made me feel ashamed because of it, were now brawling for one themselves. Women and children were pushed aside, thrown to the

ground. What had been a lonely woman's quiet and beautiful suicide was now a battlefield, a jumble sale death. I felt even more ashamed, for I had caused this blasphemy.

"Finally, I turned and continued on my way. As I reached my front door a black hearse came out of the derelict house opposite and turned its headlights on me. I fumbled with the door key and hurried indoors, slamming the door behind me.

"Or I thought I had closed the door. There was a noise behind me as I climbed the stairs and I turned to see the hearse entering the hall downstairs. Behind me, I could hear the stairs creaking and groaning as the hearse began to follow me upstairs. It was coming for me! I had caused this poor woman's death to become a farce, a mockery of death, and now Death, who had been robbed of the beauty of her sacrifice, the ultimate self-sacrifice, and was left with only the defiled remains, wanted me in exchange.

"It should have been such a beautiful death, like a poem or a painting or a piece of music; a work of art. She had lain her precious body down to die. But I had not been content with viewing her death, I had wanted more, wanted the sunlight in her hair, the moisture from her eyes, the colour in her cheeks, even her last breath!

"I was afraid then like I've never been before; I stood on the shadowy landing and held my breath so the old hearse wouldn't see me. I watched it tiptoe towards me, searching the darkness slowly with its headlights."

The Old Pork Pie looked up from his dream. A pastry smile had settled briefly on its ancient, volcanic face; but it was an ephemeral thing with the nervousness of a butterfly and was soon gone. Then the Old Pork Pie noticed Mrs Dinkie's pale hand gripping the balustrade and shifted uneasily on its plate.

"The black hearse," continued the Old Pork Pie, looking down, "had, by comparison, the most delicate white hands with which it held onto the balustrade as it climbed the stairs just as you are doing now, Mrs Dinkie." (Conscious of her hand on the rail, Mrs Dinkie removed it, losing it in the folds of her religious dress.) "In fact," continued the Old Pork Pie, "if I'm not mistaken, those are the same hands - the very same hands - of the hearse, of Death, Mrs Dinkie. Your hands are the hands of Death."

Mrs Dinkie took a step backwards, a hand fluttering nervously up to her lips; she saw it approach and sought to avoid any physical contact with it, lest it be as the Old Pork Pie supposed. Then she checked herself. "Nonsense!" she scoffed. "They are my own hands, and no one else's."

"The headlights of the black hearse swept the landing in wide, sweeping arcs," continued the Old Pork Pie. "The glare... I knew that I could never escape Death, Mrs Dinkie, but I had hoped... hoped that... But I shall never know, shall I? For I awoke with a start because you breathed on me. You did, didn't you?" asked the Old Pork Pie. "It was you?"

Mrs Dinkie smiled frugally, moved closer, nodding sympathetically. She reached out and quickly grabbed the Old Pork Pie by its

scrawny collar.

"I am old," he croaked. "I have lived through two wars."

"I think I should eat you," Mrs Dinkie said through clenched teeth. "Consume your store of knowledge, devour your wisdom."

"You'll regret it," snapped the Old Pork Pie. "You'll be sick if you try to eat me. I'd be a most unhealthy meal, not fit for human consumption."

Mrs Dinkie began to crush the pie until its lid raised, its sides split, its innards spilled.

"You would not deny me the knowledge buried in your flesh, would you?" she asked. "You are old, and doubtless contain much wisdom. I, myself, am a living treasure house; bones of pearl with veins of gold. Should I weep, my tears are as flawless as any diamond. They would take from me these riches if they knew of them."

Hearing the rapping of her son's sticks on the floor, she froze. Throwing down the remains of the Old Pork Pie, she leapt off the shelf and hurried down the stairs. It seemed a greater distance down to the kitchen than before, the staircase, spiraling round and round in total darkness, seemed to go on forever.

I'm sure, she thought, as she clattered down the dark, narrow stairwell, that there were no stairs at all here this morning.

How strange! This accursed house! It becomes too big! Nothing is within reach anymore! I cannot hold the kitchen together; already the walls reach out as the room expands.

I fear the house is growing too big! This domicile is fast becoming a metropolis! I fear it will grow too vast for me to rule, and my authority will wane. I will not be able to contain it anymore!

Quite suddenly, the larder door flew open and Mrs Dinkie careered into the kitchen. Turning, she rushed down the ill-lit hallway, pulling at her hair and wailing.

"Oh, woe! Oh, dreadful despair! There's no food, no food! Not a speck, not a freckle! Every morsel, every crumb, every minim, has vanished completely!"

"What a mystery, eh, Blackheath?" she snickered, seeing him heading towards her down the hall. "Every fleck of food, every particle - gone. The i-dots have been stolen, the polka-dots kidnapped. What an enigma, eh? A real Agatha Christie!"

"You'll regret it," snapped the Old Pork Pie. "You'll be sick if you try to eat me. I'd be a most unhealthy meal, not fit for human consumption."

She raced past him like a Hollywood remake of the Turin Shroud, lights flashing, cracked plaster effigies of saints and apostles swinging and crashing. Hushed voices muttered prayers while others

mumbled confessions into the folds of her religious dress.

"Nothing to eat!" she wailed, thundering past him. "This old mermaid will waste away! Her blubber will dry up, her bosoms sag and her buttocks drop!"

Unaware that she had passed him, she continued on down the hallway, waving her arms wildly in the air and dragging her shadows along the walls beside her.

"There's very little hope left in the kitchen!" she cried. "Nothing in the larder!" She stopped then, and looked around. Seeing him nearing the kitchen, her domain, on his gnarled sticks, she shrieked and chased after him.

"Blackheath!" she hollered. "Have you heard? It was on the radio - the North Pole's dead!"

He stopped in his tracks, turned.

Mrs Dinkie laughed triumphantly and knocked one of his sticks out from under him, barring him from entering the kitchen with an extended finger.

"How did it die?" he asked. "Suicide? Cancer?"

"I've no idea," she replied. "They say it was murder." She turned frenzied circles on the spot, flailing her arms about in the air. Her shadows danced about her excitedly, exaggerating her every movement and whelming it in theatricality. "You murdered it!"

She stopped turning then, blinking giddily.

"Where am I?" she asked, looking up in surprise and exhaling a frail sigh. Her shoulders were hunched by the weight of a sudden and inexplicable depression, which had lowered itself upon her like an uninvited lover.

"Oh, no one listens!" she cried earnestly. "There's no audience for liars and fools. Not anymore. There used to be." Leaning towards her dark son in the doorway, she asked, "Where are you going so crookedly?"

Blackheath bared his teeth and turned on her. "What are you? Not a mother, surely? Why do you mock me so? Where is your love, your compassion? I fear I shall die without love."

"I am without love," replied his mother through a poisonous smile. "I am without compassion. I am, if you remember, as you made me. I was built to your specifications. My charms were deemed unnecessary and removed, my beauty, what little I had, was taken from me. What remained of me you then dipped in hideousness and re-hung as your mother. As you wanted me, so I became; your Indoor Witch. Your own mother! And you dare accuse me of mockery! Well, this," (she indicated to the kitchen), "is my domain. Here, I am queen."

His mother glanced down at the gnarled sticks he was using to support himself.

"It unnerves me to see you hobbling around the house like this," she said. "Why do you persist in this unhealthy game? You're not a cripple, Blackheath. Why don't you go out and play with the other boys?"

"Because I'm not like the other boys," he replied despondently. "They are afraid of me. Look at me! For God's sake, I'm older than you! They hate me. When they see me coming they run away, call me names. And these," he added, rapping loudly on



del 1981

the floor with one of the sticks, "substitute the love I never had from you."

His mother frowned and laid a hand on his own, an unexpected motherly gesture, which confused and alarmed him. One of his sticks clattered to the floor.

"You're such an odd child," she said. "I don't know where you get your ideas from, I'm sure; certainly not from me or your father."

Groping for his fallen stick, Blackheath lost his balance and fell painfully to his knees.

His mother stared down at him. "I ought to have left you in the child's playground where I found you," she said quietly. "How I despise you."

He stared up at her in disbelief. "What do you mean 'where you found me'?" he stammered. "Are you trying to tell me -"

"That I snatched you?" suggested his mother with an intimidating, perfidious grin. "Kidnapped you?"

"But I thought..." He knew his mother was not averse to lying to get what she wanted, and to produce in him the emotion she required she would use any tool at her disposal. "You always told me..."

"Oh, what does it matter!" she snapped. "That was a long time ago. You're mine now."

"I just don't know what to believe anymore," Blackheath cried from the carpet. "You've told so many lies. I'll never be yours! Never!"

"But you're already mine," she replied. "You're a mummy's boy. You'll always be a mummy's boy - just as I'll always be a boy's mummy. Not necessarily *your* mummy, but a mummy. Perhaps I murdered our son, and stole you to replace him." She arched an eyebrow, feigning impassivity, and asked: "Where were you headed, dear? The kitchen?"

Blackheath shrugged.

His mother folded and unfolded her fingers thoughtfully.

"I never allow even the shadow of my foot to fall upon a given location until I have first studied the topography of its surrounds. Every cautionary step enables me to foresee and, thereby, avoid the dangers that lie in wait for me." She smiled at him then, an unexpectedly pleasant smile which again

alarmed and confused them both. Her cheek muscles groaned under the strain and the smile slid down her face on a cat's claws.

"I need more food than you do, Blackheath, and there's so little left. I might be able to heat up a tomato."

Blackheath knew he could not match his mother for cunning, and turned to leave.

"But you're already mine," she replied. "You're a mummy's boy. You'll always be a mummy's boy - just as I'll always be a boy's mummy. Not necessarily *your* mummy, but a mummy. Perhaps I murdered our son, and stole you to replace him."

"If you stopped eating for a moment," he said, hobbling down the dark hallway towards the stairs, "there would be enough for all of us."

"Nonsense," retorted his mother, re-locking the padlock on the refrigerator door. "There will never be enough. Don't you think I haven't considered that already. I can't stop eating, I dare not. Don't you understand? If I stopped eating now I would die."

Draped across the chair-arm like a discarded shadow, Mrs Dinkie's sedentary husband stared fixedly at the television, obsessed by the endless series of innocuous dramas that plagued the lives of the denizens of this curious monochrome world. He saw nothing but their lives, their amours, heard nothing but

their incessant voices, as hypnotic as the drone of the television itself.

He rarely ventured from the comfort and security his shabby, tumble-down armchair offered him, preferring it even to his own bed. He slept and ate immersed, as it were, in the faded pattern of the frayed material which suffused the chair's tottery frame. And on rare occasions when he was not in residence, his silhouette reclined there, it being so mysteriously carved into the folds and creases of the chair's material.

Only late at night, when his estranged wife and child had retired to bed, did he embark on the tiresome journey upstairs, where, observed only by the dog, he would sit like a rolled-up section of mildew'd carpet and quietly relieve himself of his bodily wastes into the toilet. Then he would make his way back downstairs to sit once more before the television, a sentinel seated at the edge of the world - at the edge of *his* world - in an old, worn armchair.

But, already violating the natural laws by his own transgression, he was not content to sit for much longer with the knowledge that there were three worlds involved here - the world behind him that he dearly wished to abandon; his own private world of silent vigilance into which he had withdrawn, awaiting acceptance into the third world - a world in which he desperately desired to be - the world beyond the television screen where She awaited him.

Occasionally, a smile crossed his face or a chuckle escaped his lips. But not this night. Tonight, he wanted more. He *needed* more.

DEL NORMANTON

Del Normanton is 38, has a full time job and has been writing and illustrating for many years. "A Substitute for Love" is taken from his first unpublished novel "The Trunk of the Hagflower", and is his first published short story. He also illustrated this story and in his spare time he enjoys listening to classical music, Ska and Rock Steady.



To be continued...

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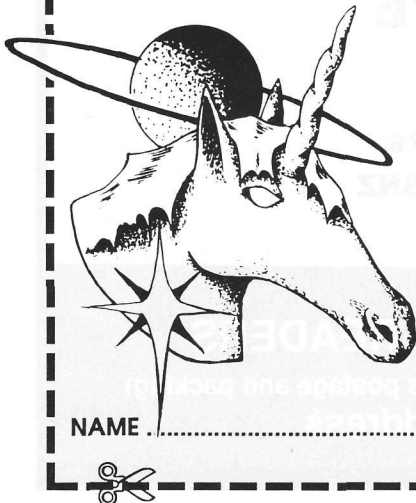
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DREAM PARK

THE VOODOO GAME

NAKAGAWA'S LAW

Thursday July 21
8:20 a.m.

'Generally, an Artful Loremaster will ensure that his lines of support, supply, and information are well maintained. He needs barbarians and magic users for speed. Armoured knights for heavy combat. Locally (game-world or real-world) recruited troops and allies for cannon fodder. Actual provisions are usually supplied by the Gaming facility; therefore one need only stock non-standard material relevant to strategic play within the Game-world; but these must be thoroughly stocked. Caches must be hidden and mapped, and strong backs recruited to carry them.'

Nigel Bishop, *The Art of Gaming*

California, 2059. Televised fantasy games are the spectator sport of the moment. MIMIC, an enormous ruined building in the Mojave Desert, is the site for the California Voodoo Game, the ultimate role-playing contest. Set up by Tony McWhirter and Elmo Whitman, California Voodoo uses holograms and virtual reality to invest its players with "magic powers". Hundreds of support actors and titanic special effects create a new and frightening reality, broadcast to eager home viewers.

Into this unearthly realm come five teams of players. Their quest: to secure the world's last surviving nuclear reactor plant, located deep in MIMIC's heart. But the ancient monorail they are riding crashes on arrival at the immense building. The Games Masters' plan starts to go wrong ...

You expected glitches. Of course you did. You waited for them . . . Those doors were supposed to lock, isolating the Gamers in their respective cars. The message would reach each team separately. The club car, empty, was to be shredded in the crash. Five teams would enter MIMIC separately, wary of enemies, fearing each other more . . .

Tony McWhirter was swearing under his breath, but it wasn't slowing him down. He

put in quick requests for a repair team to examine the train and report to him. Not that they'd be using the cars again, but he had to know what had gone wrong. It would tell him where else to look for problems.

They'd worked around it. They hadn't shredded the club car; the Gamers were alive and walking. The secret message was no secret now. There would be less paranoia, and alliances among the Five Enclaves, probably. Not a ruined Game, just an altered one.

Still, it was a bad omen. Glitches were a lot like cockroaches. If you didn't catch them in time, they'd scuttle off into some place dark and warm, and begin to breed.

Alphonse Nakagawa was third through the door, his adrenalin pumping hard.

Nakagawa's Law #1: *Something in the next shadow is waiting to eat your face.* He never let himself forget that. It was this conviction that kept him alive . . . often.

Fool killer, where are you?

For the moment, nothing. But it was lurking. Al knew it, and the beast knew it. If Al wanted to keep his face, he would have to remember that the beast knew he knew it.

First: search the room. There were broken boxes and scraps of plastic everywhere. Peels of paper littered the floor. Madonna Philips pulled twenty pounds of anonymous metal motor part from under some torn cardboard boxes, hefted it, discarded it. Storage room? Over the decades, scavengers would have stripped it clean. Probably.

Nakagawa's Law #2: *Probably doesn't*

count. There might be weapons here, or clues, or traps-

'They've rifled this stuff a hundred times,' Corporal Waters muttered.

'Search it anyway,' Alphonse said. Acacia flicked him an approving glance, but possibly for the wrong reason.

Corporal Waters was right, of course. There was no treasure here that he need fear to leave in the hands of a rival team. Let *them* spring the traps. Al wanted an overview. Was there any clue to the nature or contents of this vast structure? What did the locals consider worthless? What valuables should be here, but were not?

The others were piling in through the window. The room was getting belly-to-back pretty quick.

'Nothing here, children,' Mary-em said, flinging a torn carton aside. 'Let's go kick some heinie.'

The others were gathering by the door. Al the B picked up the carton. Mary-em had seemed too casual. The box was empty, the logo illegible . . . the trace of a sketch remained . . . girl in a raincoat?

Drop the box before someone sees. Stand by the door. Check the hinges. They seemed in good repair, not too likely to sequel embarrassingly.

Let someone else open it. (When it rains it pours. Salt! The raiders had valued salt. Not a grain remained. There wouldn't be any tinned meat either.)

Another exchange of nods between the Troglodykes, and Tammi turned to Mouser, her scout. 'Enhanced hearing,'

she whispered. 'Anything out there?'

The boy placed his fingers to his temples, tilted his mop of copper hair sideways. 'No . . . distant. I hear feet. Distant. Shuffling. I don't like it.'

California Voodoo. Images of sun-bleached beach bunnies cavorted nakedly around a titanic bottle of sunscreen lotion.

Tammi slipped through the door, followed by the hulking warrior Appellion. He gave Alphonse the Evil Eye as he passed. It was impressively evil, too. It was his left, and it was swollen and bloodshot. A blue flame glowed in its depths.

Alphonse waited to see if the Fool Killer was waiting outside. It seemed to be elsewhere. He chanced a swift, sliding passage through the door, halberd at the ready.

All about him, halls as wide as a city street stretched off to concrete horizons. The ceiling was ten feet above his head. A balustrade lipped a central well larger than most airports.

'Horseshit and gunfire,' Alphonse muttered. The central well's ceiling was at least four floors above them. *One man's ceiling is another man's floor.* Who lived up there? Were they home? How could his people find their way in so vast a structure?

'We could spend a week mapping this place,' Major Clavell said.

The hallway seemed empty in either direction. Alphonse tiptoed to the rail and looked down. An ocean of mist raged down there. It curled, lapping at the lower levels like some semi-sentient primordial soup.

Alphonse was a warrior-magician, with a spell or two of his own. His halberd, enhanced by past adventures, gave him a little extra-sensory data.

thief were with him, and he was damned glad.

Because something was waiting to eat his face.

The halls were musty, reeked with decay. The corridors stretched off in all directions, fading in the mist. Vague light shone through the fog. It swal-

They continued deeper into the cemetery, spreading out as they did. There was little sound, but the ground thrummed with an irregular vibration like distant machinery going bad. Drum beats? Lights flickered, hundreds of metres away. A far lantern . . . or glowing gases of decomposition?

With the tip of the blade he traced a symbol in the ground, a complex curlicue of power. Immediately he heard a chorus of low groans, a herd of shuffling feet. *Something Wicked This Way Comes.*

Tammi was already looking down in that direction. 'All right,' she whispered to Acacia. 'Let's get the others.'

Why did he get the feeling these ladies were in bed together, pardon the pun? In addition, Acacia/Penthesilea might well be allied with Bishop the Living Legend. *That* notion put a spider in his shorts, for sure. Alliances were fencing him in. Al the Barbarian had best watch his backside.

A few at a time, the Adventurers filed out of the room, and crouched down in the corridor. They coalesced into a loose diamond formation. Almost without design, the five individual teams formed themselves again.

Mary-em was right behind Al, with Crystal Cofax, his favourite scout. His engineer and

lowed more than light: it was a sound baffle. Something that might have been voices, machinery, footsteps (or the Fool Killer) echoed around out there, hovering just below the threshold of hearing.

Crystal had sensed a distant glow. She stared through her visor, flipped it up and looked again. Then she motioned with one hand and crept down the hall.

So they filed through the darkness, keeping torches shielded and pointed at the floor. They passed the shattered, ruined shells of stores now: a shoe store (with a sale still on, a TWELVE HOUR SALE!!! lasting for a thousand years. He had a sudden, mad urge to rummage around and see if there was anything in a size 11).

A frozen-yoghurt parlour. Next to that, a transdress shop offered over three thousand colour designs per processor. Just plug it into the transparent dresses, and dial a new fashion every day! He had heard stories of women whose batteries had died while they were walking down the street . . .

The entire column had suddenly stopped, and Al went to the alert. A moment later he saw why.

They had passed the commercial sector and were entering a park of some kind. Perhaps long ago it had been an alluring, restful pit for the overburdened, overstressed shopper. Now it was a graveyard. Epitaphs had been carved in elaborate, almost illegible curlicues on plastic rectangles which slanted at irregular angles from piles of dirt. Ancient topiary was wildly overgrown, to bizarre effect: rabbits seemed toadlike, a lion had grown tentacles and extra, misshapen heads.

A few graves were lying open. He inspected two of them. Their headboards bore different dates: Joseah Miller - died 2234. Millie Washington - died 2189.

He whispered to Mary-em, 'Unburied?' 'It was a warm night. They kicked the dirt



off.' She touched her holstered, telescoping staff. She didn't bother to say, 'Voodoo implies zombies,' and neither did anyone else.

They continued deeper into the cemetery, spreading out as they did. There was little sound, but the ground thrummed with an irregular vibration like distant machinery going bad. Drum beats? Lights flickered, hundreds of metres away. A far lantern . . . or glowing gases of decomposition?

From that direction came a distant scream.

There followed a quick, efficient pause during which everyone checked his equipment. Weapons up, visors down, *duck* as Ozzie the Pike assembles his twelve-foot weapon, non-combatants safely protected in a centre pocket. *Go*.

It felt very strange to be moving *en masse* like this. Damn it, a section of floor could open up . . . anything could happen.

The adventurers were stretched out in a thin line. Alphonse felt his heart in his throat. And if some of the others had made truce, or deals . . . When would the backstabbing begin?

Right after we figure out the Game.

Meanwhile, keep an eye on da Gurls. Give me half an inch and Sayonara, suckers. Pearl Harbor time.

Drum beats? Machinery? And smoke, or something like smoke, boiled out of the corridor ahead. Alphonse raised his hand just before it engulfed them. 'Crystal,' he whispered, and his Scout tucked her nifty little *derriere* beside him.

Crystal's body emitted a soft phosphorescence. Immediately, Alphonse could see crouched, misshapen figures creeping towards them through the smoke.

The Beasts awaken. Can they see in this smoke? Probably. Still, Al wouldn't give away his position by warning the others. If they didn't have enough sense to call for a Scout- 'Stay behind me,' he whispered. 'Mary-em?'

I register outlines. They flicker. 'I'll be OK.' Mary-em's staff, like his halberd, had seen enough campaigns to have magic of its own; her vision rating was phenomenal.

Could the enemy see him? Couldn't they? He had to keep in contact with Crystal-

'Watch your hand, boss.'

'Just business, darlin.'

'Get your business a little higher, then. Or let me.' Her hand closed on his belt. 'Leave your hands free to fight.'

Ahem. He had to keep in contact with Crystal, or he would lose touch with the enemy.

There were four attackers ahead, maybe more elsewhere. They carried maces of some kind. Bludgeoning weapons, and nasty ones at that. Shards of metal and glass projected at odd angles from the knobby ends.

One zombie shambled right at him.

All he had was a vague outline. When he twisted to avoid the mace, he broke contact with his Scout. Crystal's hand left his belt, and the attacker winked out of existence.

Duck! Where'd the beast go? He felt wind as the mace swished by his shoulder.

The combat computer in his brain figured angle and momentum, and he backhanded with the halberd. Nothing, and he was overextended.

If I were him...

Al the Barbarian rolled and brought his weapon up, and felt the blade slam into

legs. Heard the unearthly howl of .. pain? Did zombies feel pain? Wrath, maybe. *The terrible beast, spawn of the undead, no longer recognized pain ...*

Or soap. *Shit fire, they stank!* Then again, rotting odes that to a person.

Decomposing? Ordinary antiperspirants still leave 'em gagging downwind? Try new Vaid the T's, deodorant for the undead -

His thoughts returned to the matter at hand as a body thudded atop him. Teeth bit into his arm, through the thin fabric, and it *hurt* - Screaming, Alphonse kicked the zombie away from him, hacked at it until it stopped quivering.

All around him in the fog pealed screams of pain and fear, laboured breaths, the groans of the undead. He rose shakily to one knee. 'Crystal!'

'Here.'

Behind him. He backed up cockroach-quick, staying low to the ground, until her hand touched his ankle.

As they touched, glowing zombie outlines reappeared. They were almost upon him. He parried the swing of a mace, shattering it. Careful not to lose contact with Crystal, he backhanded the halberd into a face, saw the head peel back and open. Something thick and black bubbled out -

Elmo Whitman caught that one. The blunt edge of Alphonse Nakagawa's composition plastic halberd had hit one of his zombie actors. He was always nervous about that, even with extra padding in face masks, at neck and groin and knees.

Some of the stuntmen had dotted red lines at arm or neck, visible only through Virtual visors. Strokes there produced an especially messy special effect, for the pleasure of the home viewers. Let's see ... should be breakfast time about now. *Watch that over your Rice Krispies. Snap, crackle*

She stood tall with her sabre straight above her head, unable to do anything, letting her frustration show.

and who ate Pop?

Live interactions were his responsibility, and as the actor stumbled back, he watched the programme register a 'kill' producing the requisite disgusting effects. He keyed in the stuntman's code, and got an a/v link. 'You all right? Blow looked solid.'

'Little English on it, but didn't penetrate. My nose stings a little,' the stuntman chuckled softly.

El rang off and went to wide angle again, watching the combat. Nobody had ever been seriously injured in one of his combats, but he had heard rumours....

Behind Alphonse, Acacia screamed: 'Top Nun! Lift this fog!'

Even as her scream faded Al

heard Top Nun say piously: 'Though there was darkness in the land of Egypt, Israel's *mispoché* had - light!'

Light exploded behind him, and the fog disintegrated.

Acacia said: 'Excellent, sister.' 'Darkness has its points,' Top Nun remarked.

The undead enemy became partially visible. They seemed to wink in and out of existence. Their skin was pasty, like Caucasians smeared with mud, or Africans daubed with ash. A mixed breed they were, perhaps human and baboon, hair a beaver's nest of mud and sticks, facial skin drawn so tight across the bone that they resembled some heretofore undiscovered tribe of mutant Java Men.

Friar Duck threw fire. The spell was simple and dependable, if expensive. Two zombies came straight through it - *unfair!* - slashed him with dirty claws. Friar Duck went down in a swirl of brown robes.

Corrinda threw salt. The monster grinned and licked the crystals from its lips with a long, greasy pink tongue. Corrinda scuttled back to safety, limping on her bad knee.

Then Al had no more time for judgment or appreciation, because they were around him. A glancing blow hit his left shoulder, and the arm glowed red - if he tried to lift that arm, red would fade to black.

He saw Madonna Philips die. It shouldn't have claimed his attention, but it was a mistake so classic - the Army team had her enclosed, protected. She stood tall with her sabre straight above her head, unable to do anything, letting her frustration show. Then Clavell faced left to block a zombie's club, Evil Poule clove an enemy with a left-to-right swing of his scimitar, and Lt Philips stepped forward and split a zombie head to crotch. Overwhelmed with her success, she took a classical fencing pose, and thrust into another zombie's body. Her telescoping blade collapsed as she ran him through.

He saw her snarl of triumph change to dismay, and knew what had happened.

A little whisper in her ear. The Game Masters, damn their souls, had just informed her that her sword was stuck fast in the body of an undead.

Instead of springing back to the protection of her comrades, she tugged, hoping to get it free -

And a zombie threw her to the ground and bit her throat out. For an instant she seemed about to bite back;

then she must have believed the voice and collapsed, dead.

Al got his attention back in time to block a blurred motion, a club that would have split his head.

He had lost Crystal again, but the spell shielding the zombies was coming apart now, and he had enough glimpses of them to zero in. He twisted sideways, heard a mace *shoosh* over a shoulder, drove his halberd into a stomach. Yerch - it actually stuck there. Some kind of mucilage sack -?

The zombies were an arc around Ozzie the Pike, who fought alone, back against a wall. For an instant Al considered trying to reach him. In his first Game Oz had played as 'The Great and Powerful', a Magic User.

He'd frozen up and been killed out. An accountant, he'd admitted later, with no imagination. The pike had been the saving of him. He was agile and strong and could wave that pike like a magic wand ... and he was too far away and doing fine without Al.

A zombie approached from behind, and Al wrenched his halberd free and drove it into the juncture of neck and shoulder. A red black gash opened up, splitting the undead from chest to crotch.

Mary-em got behind him now, and they formed a protective sandwich around Crystal. Mary-em's staff spun in figure-eights, and she bounced it from head to crotch to ribs, leaving glowing red and black wherever it touched. 'Hiyahhh!' she screamed and drove its end into a face with an *horrific* crunch.

If she had put the boot to a beetle's carapace, the effect could have been no more dramatic.

The face actually crumbled. The zombie flapped its arms and stumbled back against the wall. Its (un?) dying scream was a gurgle, oily black fluid splashed in a starburst, and it slid to the ground, arms and legs flopping. Locusts crawled out of the shattered head, fluttered their wings, and flew away.

Mary-em was hypnotised for a moment - Then she ducked as a mace whizzed over her head. She howled with battle fever as she cut the zombie's legs from under it.

One leg came off. The zombie crumbled at her feet. Filled teeth filling a hideous, limp twitch of a grin.

As quickly as it began, it was over, except that in the mists around them, from every direction at once came an *horrific* moaning.

Then the mist disappeared.

Alphonse turned over one of the bodies with his axe.

'Is it dead?' Crystal asked breathlessly. 'Too late for that,' he muttered. The body had two black borders undulating about it. Dead-dead. Somebody upstairs was a joker.

It had dropped its weapon. Al hefted it: a stick with a can wired to the top, and a chunk of concrete wedged inside the can for weight. Nasty.

One zombie was still 'alive'.

He was pale skinned, and again the flesh drew so tightly across the bone that he seemed to have just barely enough substance to animate him.

Nigel Bishop pushed his way through a phalanx of groggy gamers, and shook blood from the end of his sword. He knelt over the creature. 'Who is your master?' he asked.

Nothing but a hissing sound. The creature writhed.

Nigel struck a pose, and he swelled with a sudden, fierce inhalation. 'By my forefathers!' Nigel called to the ceiling. 'Spell of revelation!'

Alphonse leapt back a step.

Light pulsed, and something peeled away from the zombie's body. It hovered in the air above him like glowing smoke, but smoke with eyes and ears.

Its eyes were dead flame. As they watched it expanded, then dissipated, seeping through the walls.

'Goddam,' Alphonse whispered. 'What was that?'

Nigel shook his head. 'That's what we were really fighting. Demon of some kind, wearing a mutated corpse.'

Alphonse kept quiet, watching as Acacia

joined Bishop. Captain Cypher crept up beside her. 'Ridden by the Loa, Milady. Possessed.' Cypher stage whispered. Then, briskly, 'Voodoo or Santeria deity. Loa or Orisha. Possession's a way they use to get around'.

The zombie hissed and tried to get up. Nigel was lightning, pressed his sword into it. The creature's back arched as if he were a serpent. His mouth overflowed with black fluid. Then he lay still.

The Clerics scuttled about, healing what wounds they could. There were enough wounded to allow them all to test their powers in this unknown domain. Chaim Coken, Top Nun, Friar Duck, Black Elk and Tamasan chanted in five languages. Gamers winced at the hideous chorus.

Black Elk, blocky in leather chaps, beads and medicine feathers reported to Clavell. 'We've lost Lieutenant Philips.' His impressive facial scar was peeling a little at the lower edge.

Waters said, 'I saw her go down. She tried to macho it.'

'It looks like every team's down one or two,' Black Elk said.

'Now we're screwed', Waters said. 'Without a woman on our team, there are things we just won't learn. Major, think hard about forming an alliance somewhere.'

Clavell's face set. He didn't like losing Philips so fast. Alphonse was already scanning his own team. He had lost an Engineer and a Cleric: Peggy the Hook and Friar Duck.

Al did some quick addition. In the first engagement there had been six fatalities: one each for Apple and Army, two each for Tex-Mits and General Dynamics. Al had lost two: Acacia, damn her soul, hadn't lost anyone.

Al felt queasy. 'Well, we got stretched a mite. Hard ball, is it?'

Smoke tendrils still wafted through the graveyard, muffling the anguished sobs of the injured and mourning.

Nakagawa's Fourth Law: There are no expendables. A Lore master takes the best he can get, in every slot, and loses them only when he must. Law #4 fit the Californian Voodoo Game better than most. Each dead Gamer was a serious loss.

Alphonse shook himself out of trance. 'Scout!'

He got Crystal, and Acacia's Scout Corinda. 'Scan, please.'

They joined hands, and pointed towards a side corridor. Warriors Holly Frost and Appelion joined them.

En masse they moved down the corridor. Alphonse in the front. He tested the flooring with the tip of a toe. 'Crystal - can you do a structural check?'

I've got it, a voice behind her promised. Trevor Stone squeezed his bulk front and centre. He was the oldest of them all, but his bulk was muscle, the heavy thews of an old time weight lifter, and he carried it well. Red black glowed around his right ribs, where a zombie had scored him. It would be an hour before he could fight again.

He tested the ground, then touched his visor and checked again. 'No problems.'

Alphonse hooded his eyes. 'Crystal?' Crystal Cofax checked her power ratings, and gritted her teeth. 'I can give you an 80 per cent "Yes". Best I can do, chief.'

'Let's get it done.'

'All right'. He studied the older man 'No offence Trevor.'

Trevor's smile was tight and plastic. 'None taken.'

The weeping was closer now, and Alphonse flattened himself against a wall.

A woman's voice: 'Please. Please help us -'

She was no more than twenty, and dressed in rags. She was dark skinned, with a face like a Michelangelo cherub in negative, but her nose was narrow and her lips were thin ... What was she? A darkly tanned white person?

At her feet lay a young boy.

'Oy Gevalt.' Top Nun whispered.

He'd been eviscerated.

But was still alive.

The girl looked up at them earnestly, sniffing, wiping tears away from her cheeks. 'Oh,' she said.

She batted huge, incongruously blue eyes at them, and then continued rapid-fire. 'My name is Coral, and this is my brother Tod, and those zombies got him all icky and everything and he's probably going to die if we don't do something but I can't figure out what to do, cause like there's guts *everywhere* and did you like bring a Band-Aid or something?'

A beat of five passed in shocked silence. Then somebody passed a Band-Aid to the front. A big one. Alphonse watched, aghast, as she put the adhesive strip on to a rubbery wet red length of intestine. She looked up at them brightly, an edge of hysteria in her voice. 'There' she said. 'That should be all better now -'

Then fell over sideways in a faint.

To be continued ...

NIVEN AND BARNES

The writing team of Larry Niven and Steven Barnes will be very familiar to readers after the bestselling success of their previous collaborative works, "The Legacy Of Herot" and "The Barsroom Project". Larry Niven is, of course, a Hugo and Nebula award winner, perhaps best known for the "Known Space" novels and many later works. He lives and works in California. Steven Barnes has also written comic books, TV dramas, animated cartoons and non-fiction technical material. He was born and lives in Los Angeles. "Dream Park: The Voodoo Game" is published by Pan on 6th December.

Fred Gambino has illustrated work by Arthur C Clarke, Larry Niven, Isaac Asimov and Roald Dahl, and has worked on video and record sleeve designs as well as on material for all the major publishing houses. Fond of SF (just as well!), travelling, mountain climbing, running and astronomy, he lives in a stone built Derbyshire cottage with his ancient tabby cat.



THE MAN WHO SHOT DINOSAURS

By Cyril Bracegirdle

“**W**omen palaeontologists are a pain in the brontosaurus,” Professor Henry Deerding was often heard to say. He was consequently not too pleased when Amanda Harcourt was appointed as his assistant at the South Downs Museum of Palaeontology.

What stirred his class consciousness was that he had climbed up through grammar school and a scholarship to a provincial university while Amanda was plainly out of the top drawer: Roedean and a first-class honours degree at Cambridge. She was better qualified than himself.

“Marbles in the mouth accent, too,” he complained to the Chief Curator. “I suppose daddy bought that Volvo.”

“She isn’t exactly a youngster,” the Curator pointed out. “She’s forty and has held several good posts lecturing in American universities. I doubt if she needed her father to buy her a car.”

Deerding had to put up with it. Having only four years to go to his pension there wasn’t much else he could do. Surprisingly, he found it not too difficult. Amanda knew how to handle men.

They had been working together for six months when the extraordinary thing happened.

He was relaxing in his little office just off the workroom half way through the morning with his usual coffee break, when Amanda erupted through the door. “Henry!” she exclaimed – he had long since given up hope of her calling him mister – “there’s a strange young man outside with a specimen. You’d better come and look at it.”

He’d be damned if he’d let her hustle him. “Tell him to bring it in here and we’ll have a look at it,” he said, stiffly.

“It’s rather large, and in a van.” She held out a tatty and crumpled piece of card on which, peering at it through his bi-focals, he read “Mr. Michael Trail, Inventor.”

Deerding walked slowly and with dignity out to the courtyard at the rear of the museum. Amanda preceded him with long strides, her tall figure in the form-fitting white coat making his short stout person look stodgy.

The Bedford van had its rear doors held open by rope because the object inside was too big.

“This is Mr. Trail,” said Amanda. “He claims to have found the complete skeleton of a *Baryonix Walkeri* on the Downs.”

Deerding looked at the thin, reedy youth in the open-neck shirt, dirty jeans and dark glasses. Then he stared at the contents of the van in disbelief.

The interior was packed with skeleton. The rib cage and vertebrae occupied the greater part of the space and projected by several feet. Leg bones and claws and a skull cluttered the van floor. Deerding knew the shape of a *Baryonix*, one of the minor dinosaurs believed to have stood between 12 and 15 feet high on its hind legs. But only sections had ever been found. This one appeared to be perfect and complete.

“Did you find it?” he asked.

The youth ran a hand nervously through lanky, unkempt hair. His voice was as thin as the rest of him. “In the D-D-Downs,” he said.

Deerding picked up what appeared to be a femur, and tapped it on the side of the van. “Good stuff. What is it? Some kind of plastic?”

Michael Trail opened his mouth and shut it several times before words managed to tumble untidily out. “Found it. It’s real. Leave it with you. Test it. I’ll come back in a few days. Make me an off-off-offer.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” said Deerding. “It has to be a fake. There is no way a perfect skeleton could survive in any strata for millions of years. These bones are completely clean, not even fragments of clay. As if the creature was alive only recently. I’m not an idiot

to be fooled by clever fakes.”

Michael Trail took hold of the rib cage and pulled it out onto the ground. Then he climbed into the van and began throwing bones wildly into the yard.

“You can’t do that!” Deerding exclaimed.

“He seems to be doing it,” Amanda pointed out, equably.

Deerding had a wild impulse to begin throwing the bones back into the van, but that would have been undignified. When the whole skeleton was on the ground, the youth hurled himself into the driving seat and departed with a grinding of tormented gears and a cloud of blue smoke from an engine badly in need of maintenance.

“Bloody lunatic!” said Deerding.

Amanda walked across to the caretaker’s office and asked him to clear the pile and bring everything inside.

Later, when Deerding, out of curiosity, examined the bones more closely, he had to admit to being baffled.

“It’s amazingly clever. Looks and feels exactly like real bone.”

“I suppose it just couldn’t be,” said Amanda thoughtfully.

Deerding smiled patronisingly. What could you expect of a woman? Even one who had been to Cambridge.

“To be as clean and perfect as this,” he explained patiently, “the creature would have had to have been shot and skinned quite recently. And I haven’t noticed any *Baryonix* prancing about the South Downs lately.”

He was going to have the bones bundled into boxes in the storeroom and left there until the young lunatic decided to collect them, but it was the Curator who suggested that one of the smaller bones be sent for carbon dating. “I agree with you that they are highly unlikely to be real,” he said. “But it might be interesting.”

Between a forger of old bones, the Curator and that woman, Deerding felt more than ever that the sooner he retired the better. Maybe he could apply for early retirement.

It was a month later that the carbon dating report came back from the laboratory. Deerding stared at the sheet of paper with incredulity.

“One hundred and fourteen million years! Impossible!”

“We can’t contradict the CD,” said the Curator. “Do you realise, Deerding, that we have something here that is worth a great deal of money? Question is, where did that young man find it and how much will he take for it? What is more to the point - how much can we afford? Our budget is nearly spent for this year and we are not a wealthy foundation. Yet, if he were to go to one of the big museums they could offer him several times more than we ever can. He might even go abroad - think what the Smithsonian would pay! You must get in touch with him immediately. Offer him five thousand pounds on account while the Trustees make up their minds how far we can go. And you’d better start assembling it.”

It was Amanda who telephoned Michael Trail, she having carefully filed his card.

“Mr. Trail, we have had your bones carbon dated and confirm that they are one hundred and fourteen million years old.”

There was a pause at the other end. “What d-d-d-did you expect?”

Amanda spoke soothingly. “Well, of course, you will appreciate that my colleague was naturally somewhat doubtful at first. But now that the specimen has been authenticated we should be pleased if you would tell us where you found it.”

“Near here,” he replied. “Might find another next time I go out.”

“That would be - well - interesting.” She felt that the word was somehow inadequate, and went on. “You will understand that we are not a wealthy institution but we are prepared to pay you five

thousand pounds on account while our Trustees decide on a final offer. Would that be acceptable?"

"Yeah, yeah. I could screw a lot more out of one of the bigger places but it would take time and I need some ready cash for my ex-experiments."

"Yes, I see from your card that you are an inventor, Mr. Trail. What do you invent?"

There was a short silence. "You wouldn't believe it," he said, with almost a sneer in the voice. "Send me that cheque today, or I'll go somewhere else." He rang off.

"A most disagreeable young man, and mysterious," said Amanda to the Curator.

"We can't let him go somewhere else, mysterious or not. That crowd in South Kensington would love to upstage us if they heard about this. I'll send the cheque immediately."

It was a few days later that Amanda came into the workroom where Deerding had almost completed the assembly of the *Baryonix*. He was staring at something in his hand. "Look at this."

She looked at the small chunk of flattened metal on his palm. "What is it?"

"It's a bullet - that's what it is. The kind that's fired from a heavy rifle used to shoot elephants with. And where was it? Rattling about in this thing's skull - that's where! Take a look at that," he pointed to a jagged hole in the base of the skull. "It went in there. Why the devil should that crazy coot deliberately fire a bullet into the skull? And that isn't all. See here," he held up one of the leg bones. "See that brown stain? There are several others in various places. He's smeared them with patches of what looks like dried blood. Just as if he wanted to give the appearance of having shot it recently!"

Amanda ran a manicured hand through her well-coiffeured hair. "He claims to be an inventor, not a palaeontologist. Maybe he has invented some method of detecting fossils that no one has thought of; though I agree that would not explain the perfect state of the bones, or why he should put a bullet into it."

Deerding was about say rubbish, but checked himself in case it just could turn out to be true. He put the bullet in a drawer with a curious feeling of foreboding.

He stood looking for a long time at a one hundred and fourteen million year old skull with a twentieth century bullet in it, and through his mind ran a film strip of the South Downs in the Cretaceous period of the Mesozoic era. Dinosaurs were on the way out, one of nature's failed experiments, but the *Baryonix Walkeri* was still around, lolloping on its giant claws through the acres of coarse grass that interspersed the densely wooded slopes of the Downs. The primates were still in the future, a gleam in the eye of the Creator. He had a sudden vision of a *Baryonix* clawing at some captured prey in the grass and, some distance away, a thin, reedy specimen of an as yet unborn mammalian quadruped standing erect and pulling the trigger of a heavy rifle - and unaccountably he shivered.

"I know where this fellow lives," said Amanda the next day. "Roselands Cottage, Cherry Lane. It's a few miles outside Arundel. I shall be taking a day of my holidays tomorrow and I'm going to call on him."

"I don't see what good that will do," said Deerding, chiefly because it was his fixed principle to say that about anything she suggested. Amanda knew it by now and smiled inwardly. She could afford to wait. The old fool would probably take early retirement soon and she would step in.

"I will ask him if he has any more specimens for sale. I might get the chance to find out what he's inventing."

The following day Amanda drove towards Arundel through the late summer sunshine. A few leaves were already beginning to fall but the Downs looked good. She tried to imagine what it would have been like in the time when that *Baryonix* had lived. The hills would have been wooded before *Homo sapiens* came along to cut down the trees. There would probably have been grassy areas between the hills because the dinosaurs would have kept the growth down with their powerful claws. It would have been the time when the domination of dinosaurs was drawing to its close, towards that unexplained and sudden end that seemed to have overwhelmed the whole species.

Roselands Cottage was in a narrow lane lined with detached olde worlde style cottages, half buried among the trees and bushes. A tourists' delight with roses and wisteria round the doors and ivy

climbing the walls. Most of them actually belonged to city folk who occupied them only at weekends and for holidays.

She parked the Volvo outside Roselands. Most of the gardens in the lane were well tended, but not this one. As the home of an eccentric inventor it was certainly appropriate. Overgrown with weeds and littered with discarded items of machinery which it was not within the knowledge of a palaeontologist to identify.

Amanda wore a blue polka-dot dress. She had had her hair done that morning and knew that she did not look like most people's impression of a 40-year-old female scientist.

She had confidence in her ability to charm Mr. Trail's secrets out of him. She rang the bell.

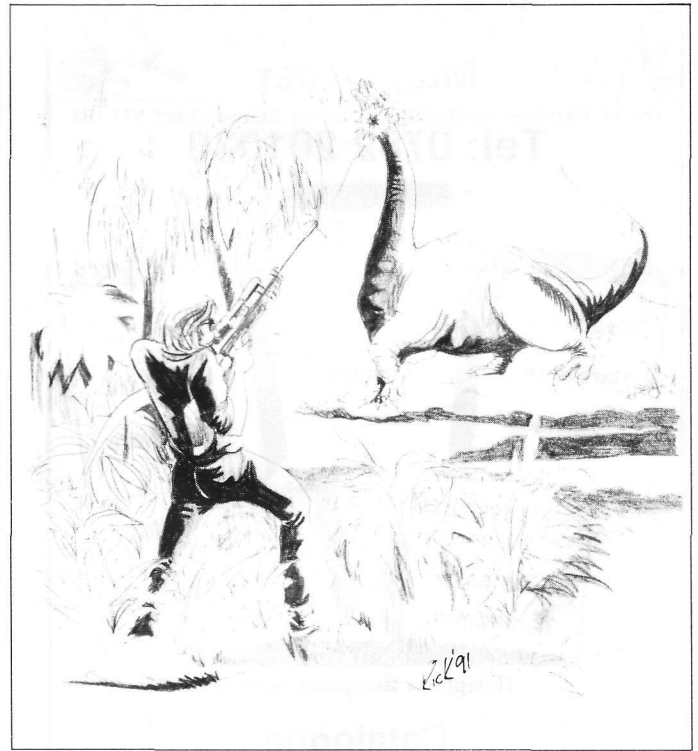
Michael Trail looked much the same: untidy, unkempt, wild, even. He looked at her with surprise through the dark glasses which it seemed he must wear indoors. He obviously failed to recognise in this elegant lady the white-coated person whom he had met only briefly some weeks before in the museum yard.

"I am Amanda Harcourt," she said. "From the museum. We spoke on the telephone."

"Oh, yes. I got the cheque."

"I know. I was passing this way and I wondered if you might have any other specimens lying about. We were certainly impressed by your *Baryonix*."

He stared at her for a long moment with what she imagined was a distinctly cunning expression. "Come in," he said.



She followed him through the tiny hallway into the front room of the cottage. It was as untidy as she had expected. A tattered and dirty carpet, furniture with the stuffing oozing out, shelves bending beneath the weight of books, tools of various kinds littering a work bench. One thing only looked new and well cared for - an impressive and obviously expensive computer, its screen aglow with some obscure drawings and figures.

"Sent you to snoop, did they? Want to know where I got it from?"

"I don't snoop," Amanda replied calmly. "But you will admit that you have made a very astonishing find. There will be quite a furore when we eventually reveal it publicly. Incidentally, my colleague was surprised to find a bullet inside the skull. He wondered why you had fired a gun at it."

"Ah." Something unfathomable seemed to come into Michael Trail's expression, but his eyes behind the dark glasses were not easy to read.

There was a silence. "I should have taken that out. Musn't forget next time. Got a b-b-bad memory."

"You are sure there will be a next time?" said Amanda. "You believe you can find more?"

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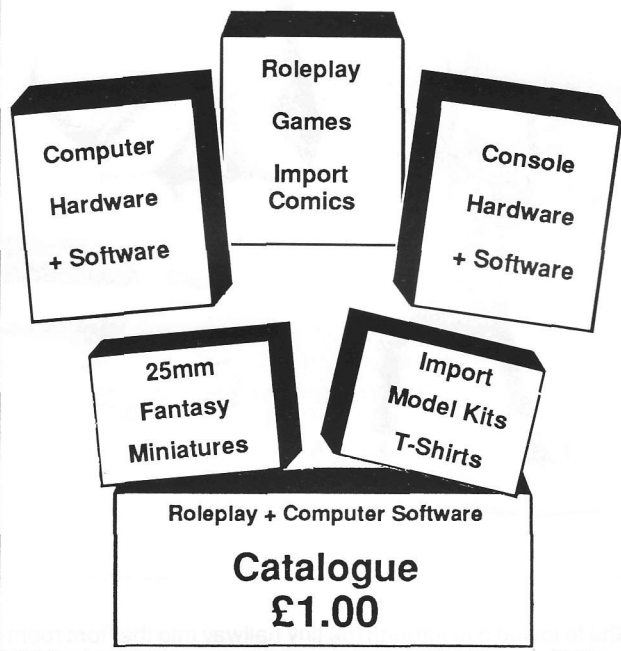
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"Can always shoot another."

"On the Downs?"

"Yeah. Plenty about."

For the first time Amanda began to feel uneasy. Deerding was right. The youth was unbalanced. And she had left her handbag in the car with the attack-alarm that she carried, not that it would be likely to be heard in this lonely lane.

"You want to see how I get the dinos?"

"Of course." The door was open behind her, she could get out quickly if he turned dangerous.

But Michael Trail moved towards the inner door that led to another room. "Look for yourself." He pushed the door open and stood aside. She hesitated only slightly, reluctant to be put off at this stage from what might be a discovery. She stepped forward, peering inside. The room was bare of furniture, most of the floor space occupied by a circular plate of what looked like metal. On the wall, just inside the door, was a panel with several dials and switches.

"This is how I get the dinos," he said.

"I don't understand you," but she had unwisely stepped a little ahead of him. Before she could retreat his hand smacked against her back and she went staggering into the room to fall onto the metal plate. Her hands, going out instinctively, saved her knees from injury as they bumped on the plate. She did not see Trail snap down the switches on the panel.

"I can't get over it," said Deerding, two weeks later. "That loony Trail had something to do with it, I'm certain. All right, her car was found in a layby three miles from his place. So what. He could have moved it there."

"The police can't pin anything on him." The Curator pointed out. "He just denies that she ever called on him and there's no proof that she did get there."

"What the hell does he do in that cottage?" Deerding wondered. "The police inspector told me there's a room there with nothing in it but a metal plate on the floor and a control panel on the wall. Trail said he's experimenting with magnetism. But he stuttered so bloody much the inspector couldn't make any sense of it."

It was the following day that Michael Trail telephoned. Deerding took the call, the Curator being out.

"I've got another *B-B-Baryonix* for you. I'll drop it off in your yard. I want f-f-f-five thou on account and twenty-five for the other. If I don't get it I'll come and take them both back and the Natural History Museum can have them. Get it?"

Before Deerding could say a word the receiver had clicked down.

He was called to the yard later that afternoon to find Trail just completing the unloading of a second and equally perfect *Baryonix*.

"Good 'un, eh?" said Trail. "Don't forget the cash. You tell that Curator of yours." He began to climb back into the seat.

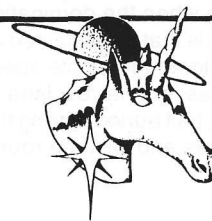
"So you never saw Miss Harcourt that day?" said Deerding.

Trail looked down at him with a grin. "Naw. Told the fuzz that, didn't I. Maybe the dinos ate her." He laughed harshly, and drove away in a cloud of blue smoke.

Later that day the Curator rang on the inter-com for Deerding, but the latter did not answer. He was in the storeroom, holding the skull of the second *Baryonix* in his hand, staring with fascinated horror at the tiny scrap of blue polka-dot dress caught between two of the teeth.

CYRIL BRACEGIRDLE

Cyril Bracegirdle writes articles for a wide range of magazines and newspapers in the UK and overseas. He has published books on antiques, local history and railways. He has also written for the BBC Morning Story slot, but this is only his second success in the SF genre.



SHADOW CASTERS

by
Linda Markley

Being in the flesh had never felt so uncomfortable to Seycha. Her body acted as an amplifier for her anger and fear, bristling with tension and making her want to run or fight. Neither was appropriate, or even possible, in the coapt's crowded corridor.

Chissom had recalled Seycha from her holo-shift. She had snapped back to her body-slot, unclipped the holonet and slid out to see some of her cohabs already assembled in the narrow passage.

It would have been easier to communicate through the holonet but only the long wait, watching more of her cohabs arrive, could make her feel so vulnerable. In holo-form, her pulse couldn't have raced and the holorena's lights would have transformed the sanctimonious effect of the shaven heads, strained faces and long serge smocks.

Finally Dyan, Seycha's soul-mate, slid out and Chissom stepped towards Seycha, his face politely averted to his left, like hers, so that they couldn't feel each other's breath.

"We find you guilty of obstructing Dyan's development and sabotaging personality enhancement equipment. Have you anything to say?"

Seycha swallowed. "I did it to help Dyan, as I promised at our soul-binding. Look at you all. You can't question anything any more. How can that be growth?"

"Enhancements aren't on trial here."

"But I *am* on trial, like a shadow caster thief?"

Chissom looked uncomfortable. "We've warned you before, Seycha, and all we ask is that you take enhancements. Until you do, you must go."

"To another coapt?"

Chissom shook his head.

In her shock, Seycha turned to look straight at him.

"You're expelling me from the holorena?"

Chissom nodded. *Become like everyone else or leave civilization*, that's what he was saying. How could they? She had been here all her life, since the place was built, and no one had ever left before. But, looking at her cohabs' complacent expressions, she knew she had to leave, even though it meant living among ignorant shadow casters.

Despite her fury, Seycha didn't consider breaking the taboos against touch or shouting. She allowed herself to be eased out though the exit of the dead, bowing her head to avoid the blinding light of the holorena. The door slid shut, disappearing beneath the holograph of a desert canyon.

Seycha was far from alone. The vast canyon teemed with more holos than she had ever imagined existed. Behind her, even more hovered over the waters of a fjord, most of them breaking the holo-shift rules to see her. But without the holonet she could neither hear nor be heard and holos were no more company than the shadows that haunted her now.

Gingerly, Seycha felt her way along the unseen physical wall as she passed through the kaleidoscope of seductive vistas that had been her world. There were the twin volcanos she and Dyan loved to gaze at and there the blue lagoon where they had often bathed. Each step brought a new ambience, a different paradise but, without the sounds and pleasant sensations, they served only to mock her fragile memories. She dragged her feet across delicate blossoms that couldn't break, whose scent she couldn't smell, feeling, instead, clammy mud squelch between her toes.

Soon there were no more walls and the light began to fade. Already she had reached the edge of the holorena which had seemed so vast before. And there were holos everywhere, some even forced into the peripheral area where they became two dimensional. Any further and their images would fade away en-

tirely.

Seycha walked past them, nervously peering into the shadows ahead. She had only ever thought about the mundane world outside in vague, global terms and had no idea what ugly, overcrowded city or darkened sweatshop she would find first. Perhaps there would be half reasonable places for people like her.

A sudden, intense pain shot round Seycha's body, throwing her back and blocking out all thoughts. For a moment she was pure pain. Then, almost as quickly as it had started, the pain eased, leaving her feeling raw and jangly. She looked round to see what could have caused it and saw a shadow caster staring at her rudely.

The holorena workers always wore caps and dark glasses. This youth, probably in his mid teens, wore neither. His skin-tight clothes were unusually bright and he wore dirty yellow shoes. But, with an appalling tangle of blond hair, he must be a shadow caster and he was waving something which could be a weapon.

"I'm Fal," the lad said. "Don't look so scared. I'm not supposed to be here either."

"I'm Seycha." She watched him warily, the first shadow caster she had ever actually spoken to.

"Were you trying to get out?" Fal asked.

"Yes." For once, Seycha wished she could lie.

"But you got stung, didn't you? You need my help."

Seycha shrugged. Fal held out the weapon-like object with both hands. Suddenly it jumped and then vibrated violently. It seemed to take all Fal's strength to hold it still. After a few moments he took one hand away and waved it beside the object. Then he turned and bowed to her.

"The shiny-top doesn't understand," he said. "There's an electronic fence here that gave you a nasty shock. But, with this, I've broken the circuit and you can cross."

Seycha walked around the lad, giving him a wide berth. The fence, if there was a fence, must be inadequate if it didn't keep him out.

Fal chuckled. "I could take you to another holorena."

"Are there others?"

"I've been in six," Fal boasted. "There's one for oldies and sickies." He pointed to a dome of light, as bright as the one behind them.

Seycha's spirits lifted. Perhaps she could find a home there, or in one of the others. She looked round for more but, instead, saw a black, box-like vehicle careering towards them. When Fal saw it, he took off in the opposite direction. Terrified, Seycha tried to follow him but, in the flesh, she was awkward and slow. As the car overtook her, a dart hit her chest. She tottered for a step or two and then blacked out.

Seycha felt woozy. Had she missed her food pill? She stretched her limbs in the usual way, pointing her toes and then raising her knees to meet the top of her body-slot. But they didn't. She opened her eyes and blinked at the vast and distant ceiling. She looked around, horrified to find that she was lying on a bed raised about a yard from the floor. Had she really slept here, exposed on all sides?

Worse, there was a shadow caster in the room, her hairy head bent over a phosphorescent screen. Seycha clung to the sides of the bed and tried to sit up. Suddenly, the bed bent in the middle and sprang into the shape of a chair.

The woman came over and steadied the chair. Her face, though lined, was pleasantly pale for a shadow caster, and her long, dark hair was tied back. Her clothes were different too, looser and more comfortable looking, and her hands looked almost as soft and clean as a holoer's.

"I'm Jetta," she said, smiling. "I'm here to help you, Seycha."

"How do you know my name?"

"The implant which linked you to the holonet activates a unique tracing signal if you get out of range. That's how the guards found you and brought you here. Why did you leave?"

"They threw me out."

Jetta looked shocked. "Who threw you out, Seycha, and why?"

"My cohabs, because I tried to stop my soul-mate, Dyan, having personality enhancements and I wouldn't use them myself."

"Why not?"

Seycha was disarmed by her directness. In all the months of attempted persuasion and even during her trial, she had never been asked this question.

"They were supposed to be reversible but, about a year ago, Dyan had one to make him love everyone equally. I tried to reverse it and failed. And everyone was becoming so similar. I vowed not to have any more."

Had she said something wrong? Jetta went to the screen on her desk and then paced the room, eventually stopping beside Seycha.

"If you want, I'll reverse yours for you," she said.

Seycha stared at her in disbelief. "You? A shadow caster?"

"Who else? Don't we do everything for you? Who do you think makes the enhancements?" Jetta sounded patronising, as if explaining to a child.

"But you don't even use them, do you?"

"Precisely. I design something for others that I won't use myself. I worked on the lie-preventer you all have. Surely I'm morally obliged to uphold the promise of reversibility?"

Seycha contemplated the question, hardly able to believe her ears. A shadow caster capable of philosophical discourse!

"By obligation, do you mean to imply ...?" She stopped short, seeing the exasperation on Jetta's face.

"Let's stick to the point. Do you want your enhancements reversed?"

Seycha smarted at the sharpness in her voice. Should she trust Jetta, a shadow caster and therefore a potential liar? Jetta would be in a holorena herself if she were good enough. And what would it be like to go back to no enhancements at all? She would be capable of lies, blasphemy and cruelty. She could meet shadow casters on equal ground. But she would still be Seycha, more so than ever. She had to trust herself if no one else.

Seycha pulled on the cap Jetta handed her. It fitted like a second skin, from the back of her neck to her forehead. She wondered if having hair felt as unnatural.

Jetta linked the small hand control into the pad on her desk and Seycha's scalp tingled. Her consciousness eased away as if she were going into holo-form, giving way to fleeting, dream-like memories.

Again and again, she saw herself in the holorena's enhancement room, with Dyan at her side, helping her. Each time, Dyan looked younger and she felt closer to him. Finally, she was a nervous teenager mercilessly teasing a handsome, twenty year old Dyan. Seycha cringed, knowing she had deliberately hurt him.

She heard Jetta's voice as if from a distance.

"All your enhancements are gone now, Seycha. Did something disturb you?"

"Dyan didn't want to have enhancements at first. I goaded him into it."

If only she had listened to Dyan, he might be with her now. And she wanted him as he was then, fully himself with his wild ideas and loving words. Ignoring Jetta, she spoke out loud. "I want Dyan." It felt good to say it. She raised her voice. "I want Dyan."

"Dyan's changed," Jetta said.

"But you could change him back, reverse his enhancements. We could start again together."

"Dyan would still be different, just as you are. You can't change the past. Sometimes we have to live with uncomfortable memories."

Suddenly Seycha hated the woman. She pulled off the cap and threw it onto Jetta's desk. "I don't expect a shadow caster to understand but Dyan wouldn't have taken enhancements if it wasn't for me. I owe it to him to help him. And we're still soul-mates." *Unless he had bound his soul to another.*

Seycha was so startled by the awful thought that she didn't hear Jetta's reply. If Dyan hadn't already found another soul-mate he soon would. And she would be left alone with her memories and

regrets. But they were meant for each other.

"You *must* get Dyan reversed."

Jetta sighed. "Listen to me, Seycha. I stuck my neck out reversing you. If you adapt to life outside, then others may be released too. I'm not going to risk their future, and yours, for someone like Dyan."

How dare she, a mere shadow caster, presume to decide the fate of holovers? She didn't know what Dyan was like, how clever, different and loving he had been. Seycha made up her mind to get him reversed. He must have been pretty special to have got into the holorena so he would know what to do next.

Jetta must have recognised Seycha's determination because she looked worried and angry by turns. Seycha blocked her ears to the woman's arguments. She had a purpose to her life and it felt right. She hadn't felt so alive since the early days with Dyan. He would resist, of course, but once the old Dyan re-emerged he would be proud of her.

But she couldn't even find the holorena on her own. Perhaps, with a bit of flattery, Fal would help her.

"Can I see Fal?"

"Fal? Oh, yes. Blond lad. Too bright for his own good." Jetta nodded slowly. "So you did have help getting out. I'll have to look into that."

Seycha could have kicked herself. She had no chance without Fal. "He didn't help me on purpose. I wanted to apologise to him."

Hardly able to believe that she had lied, Seycha watched Jetta press some buttons on her desk and speak into the screen, apparently addressing Fal and inviting him over. Seycha broke into a sweat, fearing another expulsion, but when Fal arrived, Jetta simply left them together. Seycha took her chance.

"Can you reverse enhancements?"

Fal shrugged.

"I need your help to reverse my soul-mate."

"Here?" Fal looked around the room.

"No. It's to be a surprise for Jetta." *How easily the lies came.* "And he's presumably got a tracing device like mine. We'll have to use the holorena's enhancement room. I'm not sure if the equipment there can do it."

Fal nodded. "You just have to know how to use it. But this is dangerous. It'll cost you a billion."

Seycha stared at him.

"You can afford it. All holovers are rich. Where do we find him?"

"Once a week we go in the flesh to . . ."

"I know, to the check-ups."

"The check-ups are incidental, but how could you understand the religious significance of our feasts? You'll be the first shadow caster to enter our sanctuary. Even holovers never go there in holo-form, but only in the flesh and prove it by eating real food there. Only after a feast do they use the enhancement room, which is close by."

"So we grab him at the feast. When's his shift?"

"Wednesday afternoons. The holovers shouldn't see me."

"Okay. I'll meet you here, Wednesday morning." Fal winked at her as he sauntered out.

Jetta returned at once. Had she been waiting outside? "Fal, eh, offered to show me round on Wednesday, if that's okay?" Seycha's heart beat furiously. What if it wasn't okay or Jetta guessed? But Jetta nodded.

On Wednesday, Fal looked as relaxed and happy as Seycha felt nervous. They left at once, walking through a long hallway, whose walls could have housed a thousand bodyslots. Fal opened the end door and they stepped out onto a narrow moving belt, squeezing in between packages.

The belt carried them through a long tunnel, sweeping parcels on and off as it moved. Seycha looked around nervously and saw a filthy shadow caster woman staring at her with large, frozen pupils. Then, with a pitiful whimper, the woman was ejected like another parcel. Seycha turned to Fal in terror.

"What happened to her?"

Fal didn't seem to have noticed. He looked back and shrugged. "Probably her last journey. Did she look drugged?"

Seycha nodded.

"Don't worry," Fal said. "You're rich, remember. Jetta'll vouch for you too. We get off here."

Seycha was relieved to leave the belt and get into the open, near the light-domes of two holorenas. They climbed into one of

the box-like cars which Fal steered.

"Why did we have to travel like baggage?" Seycha asked.

"The system's set up to bring things to people," Fal explained. "If everyone used cars like these, it would grind to a halt. But you can get around if you know how."

Fal obviously knew. He stopped the car at the edge of a holorena and set to work with his fence breaker. Once they were in, he led the way through dingy passageways, whose existence Seycha had never guessed at. They moved stealthily, watching out for maintenance workers.

"We're there," Fal said, standing by a window.

Seycha looked through the window and jumped back in alarm. It looked directly into the feast hall, the holy of holies, and she was no more than a yard from the nearest holoer. Fal laughed at her.

"They can't see you," he assured her. "It's one-way glass."

Feeling like a spy, Seycha watched the holoers leave. The mechanical arms cleaned away the debris and laid out bowls. Dyan would be in the next sitting, must even now be working his way through the exercise and purification tunnels. If only she could slip in and join him as if nothing had happened. But when they filed in, another woman took her old place. Seycha resented her, resented them all, sitting there in their clean smocks, with their freshly shaven heads. She would never again be so blissfully unaware.

"Where's he sitting?" Fal whispered.

Seycha told him and watched him go to Dyan. The holoers' eyes were closed as they chanted, *All in the light are as one*. Seycha heard the familiar words as if for the first time. Was that where the seeds of conformity and intolerance were sown?

Fal pushed a cloth into Dyan's open mouth and burst a capsule under his nose. Dyan allowed himself to be pulled to his feet, his zombie-like expression reminding Seycha of the woman on the belt. Holoers stared in horrified disbelief as Fal led Dyan out. Seycha bolted the door and pressed her face to the glass.

"I'm sorry," she muttered, watching the belated panic. She retreated as holoers clawed ineffectually at the smooth wall, looking for the door. Remembering their terrified expressions, she felt like a monster.

Footsteps echoed down the passageway, shadow casters coming her way. How could Seycha, still looking like a holoer, explain her presence outside the hall? She pulled up the skirt of her smock and ran away from them, thankfully making little noise in her bare feet.

Seycha stopped by a dazzling square of light, part of a door which, judging by its brightness, must open onto the holorena. If she could get to a coapt, she could go down the holoers' tunnel to the enhancement room.

She opened the door and stepped out into the Japanese garden where four holoers were taking part in a tea ceremony. They had projected themselves with Japanese features as well as kimonos and Seycha didn't recognise them. It was plain from the panic on their faces that they knew her. And, courtesy of the holonet, every holoer tuned in now knew she was back.

Dozens of holoers appeared in front of her, looking stern and accusing. Seycha blundered through them until she found the canyon behind which her own coapt door had disappeared. She stretched out her arms to meet the invisible wall and groped along it until her hands found the door handle. She pulled it open.

But she had taken too long. Her cohabs, including those who had been in the feast hall, had gathered in the flesh and blocked the corridor.

"Forgive me," Seycha called as she forced her way through them. "I have to help Dyan. Let me pass."

Unable to prevent Seycha touching them, they tried to stop her, one even grabbing her arm. "Where's Dyan?" It was the woman who had taken Seycha's place at the feast. "Did you have him kidnapped?"

"And defile the feast hall with shadow casters?" A man seized her other arm.

"Bring her to the enhancement room," Chissom said, leading the way down the tunnel. Seycha struggled but she was frog-marched after him to the locked door of the enhancement room. Chissom pounded on it.

Even Seycha stepped back when Fal opened the door and leapt out. His tongue lolled out of his mouth and he rushed at the man and woman holding Seycha, licking their faces like a demented dog. They dropped Seycha to get away from him and she

darted into the room followed by Fal. Seycha bolted the door.

Dyan, still subdued by the drug, looked at Seycha fearfully. *This is the old Seycha*, she wanted to tell him, *the one you loved*, but she couldn't believe it herself.

Fal stretched the cap onto Dyan's head and manipulated the controls. Seycha's hopes grew as she watched Dyan relax. Perhaps it would all work out.

"That's it," Fal announced, putting the controls aside.

Dyan stirred, opening his eyes and looking round the room in amazement, all fear now gone.

"What's happened? I can remember my past again?"

"I've reversed your primary," Fal explained.

"You a credit-cop or what?"

"No. Why? What have you got to hide?"

"I used to steal credit."

"Dyan! How did you get into the holorena?" Seycha asked.

"They didn't know the credit was stolen. My girl friend got upset when someone I stole from was terminated. Said I'd as good as murdered him. They nabbed me for strangling her."

Seycha stared at him in disbelief. She had never heard anyone speak like that. Dyan moved towards her.

"Six years in the holorena . . . What did they do to my balls?"

Dyan pressed his body against Seycha's, pushing her against a wall. He forced her mouth open with his until she tasted his saliva. She felt sick and disgusted. His face, this close, looked hideous but he wouldn't let Seycha turn away. His hands tore futilely at her smock and then tried to yank it up.

To Seycha's relief, shadow casters burst in and pulled Dyan back to the chair. Jetta manipulated the controls until Dyan's eyes glazed over.

"What are you doing here, Jetta?"

"Making sure you listen to someone."

"To Dyan?"

"Yes. I told Fal not to remove Dyan's lie-preventer, so all he told you was true."

"Then why was he in the holorena?"

"Because lawyers decided convicted felons could buy time in holorenas rather than be terminated."

"Are there more criminals there?"

"Far too many. We developed personality enhancements to prevent overcrowding problems."

"What was my crime?"

Jetta took a deep breath.

"Holorenas were originally created for potential criminals weeded out at birth. Your crime, Seycha, was to have a criminal signature in your DNA. Your parents were rich enough not to have you aborted."

"You're telling me I was born *bad*?"

"They thought so at the time but a control group of DNA babies left outside have turned out okay. I think you're normal."

"Why weren't we released?"

"Apart from the excuses that you're happy and institutionalised, they fear major compensation claims."

"Compensation claims! How can you justify lives spent in enforced ignorance for that?"

"I don't, Seycha. They brought you to me because my name's on your record, on all the DNA babies' records. I've spent my life trying to get you released."

"Why?"

"I was part of the control group. Will you work with me now?"

Seycha shook Jetta's hand as she had seen shadow casters do.

"We should disclose Dyan's ill gotten wealth," Jetta said.

"Am I rich enough to keep him in the holorena?"

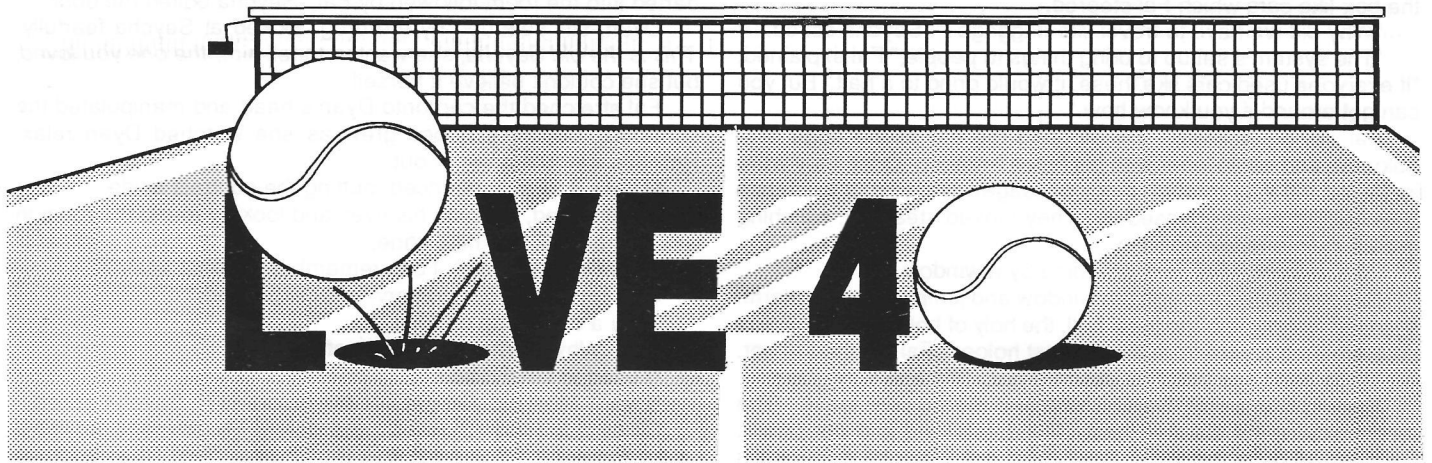
Jetta nodded.

"Then I owe him that much."

LINDA MARKLEY



Linda Markley has had stories published in *Everyman*, *Dream*, *Auguries* and *Fisheye*. She works in computing and lives in Shoreham, Sussex with her husband and fellow writer Steve, whose story "Home Is A House Called Percy" appeared in Issue 1.



by
Piers Anthony

Galen hardly noticed the Oriental girl in the next court. He was concentrating on the tennis balls coming at him from the machine. It was set to feed a variety of balls, so that he could get his exercise the fun way. The girl was evidently setting up for something similar.

Actually, he wasn't paying much attention to the tennis balls either. He was hardly a tennis player, or even a reasonable duffer. He was a special investigator. Several people had mysteriously changed their lives after staying at this resort, and the resort administration had hired him to find out whether anything sinister was going on. Because many extremely wealthy foreign tourists stopped here, and the very hint of danger or scandal could cost the resort heavily.

So Galen, during his vacation from the police force, was not only earning a very nice spot fee, but was being treated to the kind of luxury living that millionaires expected. He was methodically exploring every one of the facilities, constantly watching for anything sinister or even out of the ordinary. He luxuriated in the Jacuzzi, had an expert massage, exercised on the most modern equipment, played a round of golf, feasted morning noon and evening, danced with the most exquisitely garbed and amenable girls, and watched a wider assortment of TV than he had known existed, including some he had thought to be illegal. He was coming to realize that laws did not have the same bearing on the wealthy as on ordinary folk. Now he was trying one

of the lesser facilities, because as yet he had found nothing to account for the management's unease.

He wasn't doing well. The machine was keeping score on his responses, and the score read LOVE 40. That meant that he was supposedly the server, and was about to be skunked on the game.

There was a flash. Galen paused, missing his shot. What had happened?

The girl in the next court paused too. Galen looked at her, and found her looking at him. This time his shock was of recognition. Not of her, exactly, for he had never seen her before this session. But of their relationship. This was the woman he loved.

They walked together and embraced. Then they kissed. It was the sweetest kiss Galen had known.

They drew their faces apart and gazed at each other. The girl looked amazed and alarmed, but she did not try to move away from him. Her pupils were large despite the brightness of the day, and her jaw slack. It was the gaze of sheer adoration.

"I, uh, do you speak English?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied. "I love you."

"And I love you. But I don't know you. I don't understand this."

"This is very bad," she said. "I must go before my father sees."

"Yes. I'm sure we have nothing in common."

"Nothing," she agreed.

Then they kissed again. She was the most precious thing he could imagine.

After a moment they tried to separate

again, and could not. "Maybe we'd better introduce ourselves," he said. "I am Galen Holt, here on temporary business. I go back to Massachusetts next week."

"I am — in your language I call myself Sue," she said. "Next week I return to Japan with my family."

"Then we'll never see each other again."

"Never."

"I've never done anything this weird before," Galen said. "I have a girlfriend back home. I don't hit on strangers."

"I have never been close to a man of your race before," she said. "This is a great scandal. I must go immediately."

They kissed a third time. It was infinitely wonderful.

"Your place or mine?" he asked, failing to make a joke of it.

"You have a room to yourself?" she asked, and saw his nod. "Then it must be there."

"You know this is absolutely crazy." But they were already walking off the courts, forgetting the rackets and balls.

Then a man was calling. Sue jumped. "It is my father! We must get far away from each other."

"Yes."

But they did not follow through. They stopped and kissed once more.

Sue's father arrived. He was well dressed and formidable. Galen wanted to be anywhere else, but he could not let go of Sue.

Under the man's glare, Galen and Sue made a valiant effort to separate. They

drew a few inches apart. It felt like the end of all joy. Then they flung themselves together again.

Sue's father, realizing that something very strange was occurring, addressed Galen in English. "What is this spell you have cast on my daughter?"

Galen turned his head to the man without letting Sue go. "I don't know, sir. We were just practicing tennis shots in adjacent courts, and suddenly it happened. I love her."

Then he made a connection. This astonishing development - could it be related to his investigation? The people could have been changed two at a time. There were an equal number of men and women affected, though he hadn't thought of it that way before. Could sudden, overwhelming love account for it? There had been one suicide, two disappearances, one rape, and two abrupt resignations from high places. All coming without warning or explanation. Galen had been alert for some kind of criminal involvement, but maybe he had been focusing on the wrong thing.

Yet instant love - how was it possible, let alone reasonable? He could appreciate how a man might see a lovely young woman in a tennis outfit, and be smitten by her body, and try to seduce her. Perhaps even to rape her. But that was only one case of six. Maybe if she rejected his advances and he was depressive, he could commit suicide. That might account for a second case. Or if she returned his interest, but they were married to others, then they might run away together. Thus the two disappearances. Or if he were important in government, and started an affair with a woman he met here, but couldn't keep out of the notice of the press, he might resign so he could pursue his illicit love in private.

It was coming together. Instant love *could* account for what had been happening. But *how* did it happen? He had not even been paying attention to Sue, or she to him, when suddenly they had found each other to be compellingly attractive. It couldn't be purely physical, for though Galen was healthy, he was no Adonis in body and was strictly average in face. As for Sue - well, it was hard to be objective, because he loved her, but all Orientals *did* look remarkably similar to him, and she was slightly thickset and not exactly of starlet aspect. He had never entertained the slightest notion of dating one. This wasn't bigotry, just culture; his ignorance of the ways of Japan was monumental. As for her personality - he had yet to discover what it was. This was truly blind love.

Meanwhile Sue was speaking rapidly to her father in Japanese, evidently supporting Galen's ridiculous story. She clung desperately close to Galen.

The man assessed the situation. He was evidently conscious of being in a foreign land, and he did not want to generate an international incident. But he was not about to let his daughter get into trouble with a stranger. He wanted a quick and polite termination of the incident.

"What exactly were you doing when it happened?" he asked gruffly.

Sue spoke more Japanese, pointing to her court. Galen agreed, pointing to his.

A Japanese woman came out, evidently Sue's mother. The man spoke to her. She went unquestioningly to the court where Sue had practiced. Then the man went to Galen's court.

Following instructions, they picked up the rackets, and turned on the machines. The balls started flinging out.

There was a flash. Simultaneously the man and woman paused, looking surprised. Something had happened to them.

That flash! There had been one just before Galen discovered Sue. A flash from the ball-hurling machine. He had forgotten it, in the surge of his emotion. The Japanese, more objective than he, had done what he should have done, and investigated the exact circumstances of the conversion.

The two walked quickly together and embraced. Sue stared; evidently she had never seen her parents do that. Then she took advantage of the distraction to turn into Galen and kiss him again. Galen had heard that Orientals did not display passion in public. So much for that.

The older folk separated. "It is a love device," the man said. "It has made us love each other as we did soon after our marriage. This is what happened to you."

A love device! Something that focused on the man in one court, and the woman in another, and zapped their emotions. It had made his "Love 40" score become halfway literal. This could indeed account for the resort's mystery. Because Galen was ready to dump his career and elope with Sue, and he knew that she felt the same.

But that was foolhardy. They were superbly ill-matched. They would never have gotten together, except for this random zapping. His common sense informed him that what they needed was not togetherness, but an antidote.

He faced Sue. He tried to tell her of his conclusion. Instead he kissed her.

Meanwhile the older couple went to one of the ball machines. Efficiently they dismantled it. "As we suspected," the man said. "A device has been added."

Galen realized that they were doing his job. "We'd better get over there," he told Sue. "I - I love you, but there's something I have to tell you."

"And something I must tell you," she agreed.

The man had removed the extra device, which looked like an elaborate camera. As Galen approached, he handed it over. "Hide this, while we get the other."

"But I have to tell you, I'm with the police. This is evidence. We can't tamper with it."

The man gave him a straight look. "The police will reassign you, and you will never see Sue again. Do you desire this?"

"No!" Sue cried, clinging to him. She was merely echoing his own sentiment.

Galen held the device, while the older couple worked on the one in the other court. He was helpless to interfere, because he knew that his report would indeed destroy his romance. The Japanese family evidently had something better in mind.

"We are not police, we are business," Sue murmured. "We intercepted reports of something odd, and came to investigate. We have been looking for several days. Then we realized that you, too, were looking, so I was assigned to keep an eye on you. I think you did not notice me, before."

"I sure didn't!" he said, amazed. She must be very good at being inconspicuous.

"A thing like this - it could be excellent business," she continued. "Because surely there is much market for love." She turned her eyes up to him. "But I did not expect to be caught in it myself. I did not realize at first that we had found what we sought."

"Maybe the thing can be reset," he said. "To reverse love. So we can be free of this nonsense."

"My father will have it analyzed," she said. "If there is a way, he will find it. Then, as you say, we can be free."

"But meanwhile -" he started.

"Meanwhile -" she echoed.

They kissed. It was as if they could not survive for more than a minute or two without it.

The man approached with the other device. "Come to our suite," he said. "We know that is private."

Galen followed, holding the one device in his left hand; his right arm around Sue's waist. "You must understand, I never intended -"

"We understand." Obviously they did, for they were walking with their arms linked.

In the suite, the man got serious. "We want three things from you, Mr. Holt. We want you to bury your police report, so that we can take this device directly to Japan for analysis. We want you to locate the one who made this device, so we can hire him. And we want you to join our company, and keep its secrets. We can make this worth your while."

Galen had heard that Orientals could take forever to get to the point. Evidently when in America, they played by American rules. "I don't know," he said. "I would lose my job, if I didn't report."

"We will quadruple your present salary, guaranteed for life, indexed to inflation, with generous bonuses."

That was persuasive. But Galen hesitated. "I don't like leaving my job undone. This device has made some real mischief, and could make more."

"We are removing the device, so there will be no more incidents. The resort will be satisfied that the problem has been handled. Indeed, you have already fulfilled your obligation in that respect."

Galen remained doubtful. "I don't know anything about Japan."

"You can work in America. It is your loyalty we want, not your location."

Galen realized that he was in danger of being swept off his feet. It was tempting. Yet he temporized. "And it might take some time to locate whoever made this thing. I don't know how well I could function, apart from Sue. Until we get the antidote."

"She is actually an employee, not our daughter. She will remain with you for the duration."

Galen looked at Sue. She smiled. That was what he needed. He made one more effort to resist, knowing it would be instantly shot down. "There will be complicated paperwork - I mean, I can't just say I quit the police and am working for someone I met on a tennis court."

"We will handle it. There are ways."

Galen considered, and realized that it was a good deal - the best he was ever likely to be offered. "Okay."

They shook hands. Then Sue fetched her things and carried them to Galen's room. They tarried there for an intense half

hour before feeling ready to get back to work, and they still didn't know anything about each other's minds.

The older couple vanished from the scene, with the two devices. They would be in Japan before the resort management realized they were gone.

Galen and Sue set up a watch on the two tennis courts. They found a supply shed where they could hide, and took turns peering out the slitlike window. Sooner or later, the proprietor of those devices should come to check on them. Then the two of them would follow him.

It was a dull watch, but a pleasant time. While Galen watched, Sue rested against him, rubbed his back, massaged his shoulders, and kissed the back of his neck. While Sue watched, he hugged her, stroked her hair, and ran his hands across places that he should have lost interest in after their session in the hotel room. Their love might be artificial, but it was thorough; all they wanted was more of each other.

As dusk loomed, a technician came to check the equipment. When he looked at the first ball-hurler, he froze. Quickly he checked the other. Then he hurried away.

"That's our man," Galen whispered.

They piled out, tucking in their clothing as they went. They tracked the man to his car, and noted the license tag. But they also followed him, in Galen's car. It wasn't difficult, because he seemed distracted. That was understandable; he had just discovered that someone had stolen his special devices. Did he think it was the resort management? Was he going to clear out before he got arrested?

"Best to handle this immediately," Galen said. "Before he can take his stuff and disappear to another state or country." Sue nodded agreement, and squeezed his arm.

Galen went up to the front door, while Sue circled to the back, just in case. When the man answered, Galen introduced himself. "I helped take your love devices," he said. "I have a deal to offer you, if you're the one who made them."

The man let him in. "You're not a cop?"

"I am a cop, but that's not why I'm here. A Japanese company is taking your two boxes to Japan to analyze and reproduce. They figure to make a considerable profit marketing those things. They want to hire you too. Or whoever knows how to make them."

The man walked back to a small make-shift laboratory and machine shop.

"I make them, but they're not for sale," he said. "I'm testing them, to see how well they work, before I get rich selling the secret." He opened a trunk and brought out a device similar to those on the tennis courts. "I've got just one more, but it's enough."

"I don't think you have a choice," Galen said. "Several people have been harmed by them, and you are liable for that. I got put into love with a Japanese woman, and now I'm working for her company. The Japanese will pay you well, and they already have two boxes to copy if you don't cooperate. So you might as well deal with them."

The man laughed. "Think I'm an idiot? Those machines are set to self-destruct the moment anyone tries to get into them. You're lucky you didn't get your head blown

off when you took them out of the ball-throwers. They won't be any good to anybody. I'm the only one who knows the secret, and I stumbled on it by such sheer blind chance that no one else will ever duplicate it. I set those two out at the resort so I could see how well they worked with one emotion. Now I know they work perfectly. They should work just as well on the other settings."

"Other settings?" Galen asked, feeling a chill.

"They're emotion tuners. They can lock in any emotion. I can make two people love each other, or hate each other, or forget each other. Or anything else. I'll make others fiercely loyal to me alone, and then I'll give them more tuners so they can use them on the leaders of the world and make them swear fealty to me. I'll be king of the world!"

"That's a megalomaniac dream," Galen said.

The man pointed the device at Galen. "You are about to change your attitude." He adjusted a setting.

Galen's chill intensified. He knew how well the device worked! "You're going to make me loyal to you?"

"No, I don't know you. I'm not ready for followers yet. I'm just going to make you forget everything. This one's set on amnesia. I'll dump you off somewhere, and by the time they figure out what happened to you, I'll be long gone with my equipment and notes. I've got everything packed, here." He nudged the open trunk with one foot. "I was going to leave the moment anything happened, and now it's happened. I'll be gone within the hour."

Galen realized that it was possible. Those devices were far more versatile than he had assumed. Not just love, but all the emotions, and amnesia too! The man could eliminate anyone who tried to interfere with him, and convert those he chose. By what fluke he had stumbled on the secret Galen might never know, but it obviously hadn't given the man a mature perspective. He wanted to rule the world, and didn't care how much mischief he made in the process.

Was there any way to escape? He doubted it. All the man had to do was click the device on, and he could do that before Galen managed to move more than a couple of feet.

Galen knew he was done for. In that moment he suffered a revelation. *This had to be stopped!* But he was afraid he wasn't going to be able to stop it.

Then a shape appeared in the far doorway, behind the man. Sue!

"Stop him before he zaps me!" Galen cried to her.

The man ignored him, probably thinking it was a ruse. He lifted his free hand to the top of the device.

Sue hurled herself across the room. She grabbed the device from the man's hands and moved on to the front of the room beside Galen. "I couldn't let him hurt you, my love," she gasped.

"I'm grateful for that!" he said, taking the box from her. He pointed it at the man and touched the button on the top. There was a flash.

The man looked around. "Where am I?" he asked plaintively. "Who am I?"

"You're in the condition you had in mind

for me," Galen said. Then he threw the device at the trunk on the floor.

The man had not been bluffing about the self-destruct mechanism. The device exploded, setting fire to the papers in the trunk. In a moment there was a hearty little blaze.

Galen turned to Sue. "I love you, and it tears me up to make you unhappy. But whatever that device is, it can't be trusted to any living person. Not the one who made it, not me, not your employers. So I have destroyed it, and the notes to make it, and wiped the memory of the only one who knows how to make it. It's gone. Now hate me if you have to; I did what I felt I had to do." He stopped, waiting for her fury.

"I had come to the same conclusion," Sue said. "I heard him talking, and realized that it was much worse than I feared. I thought I would have to use the device on you, before I could destroy it." She paused. "But my employer will not understand. I dare not return to Japan. I must hide. Do you think you can help me?"

He took her in his arms. "You know this artificial love is bound to wear out in a year or two. We probably have nothing to hold us together. We're just two people who happened to get zapped at the same time."

"Then perhaps we should make the most of our limited time together," she said, smiling.

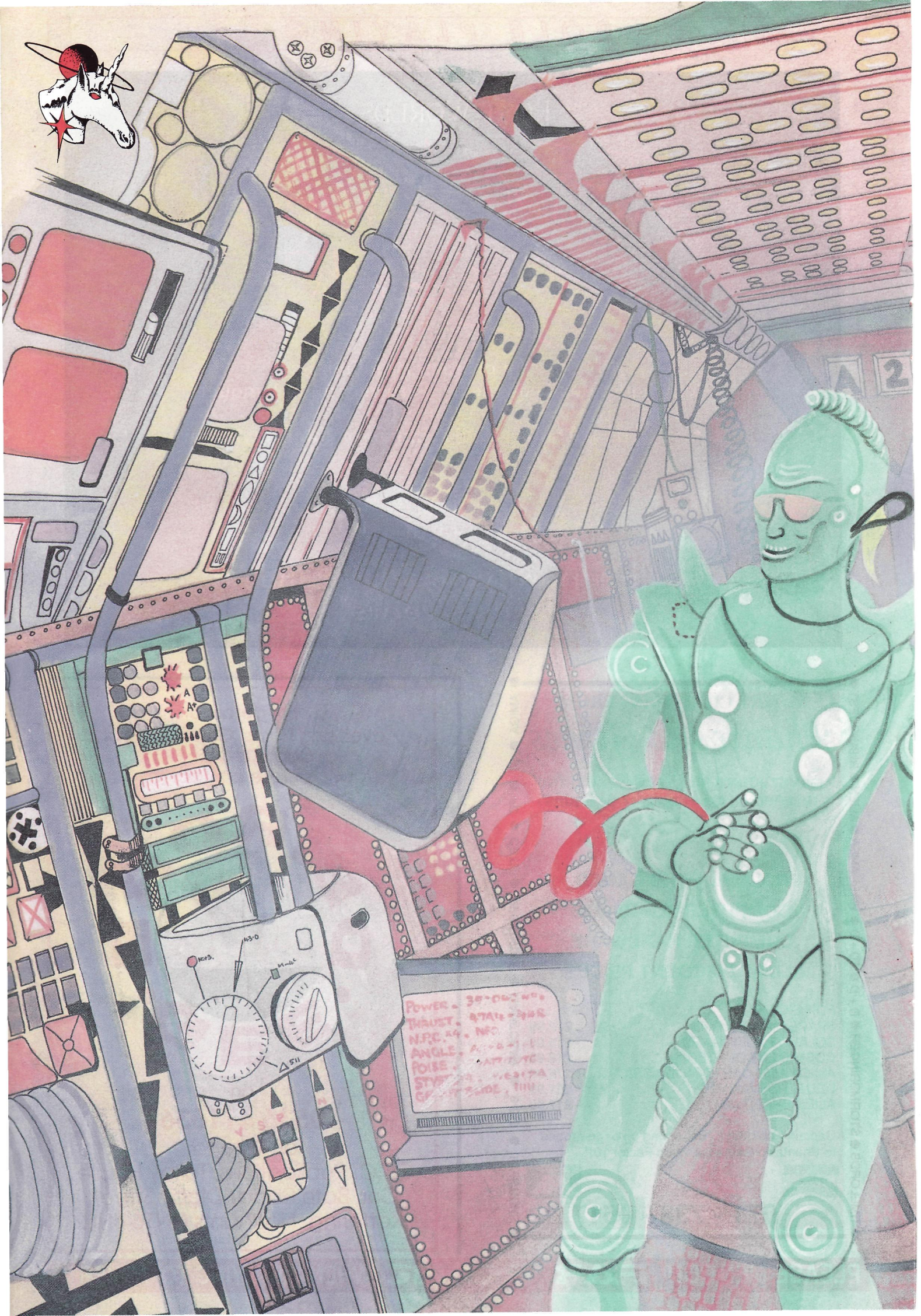
They had, perhaps, just saved the world from emotional slavery. But a stranger passing at that moment would have been hard put to it to distinguish them from any other couple in the first intense flood of romantic love.

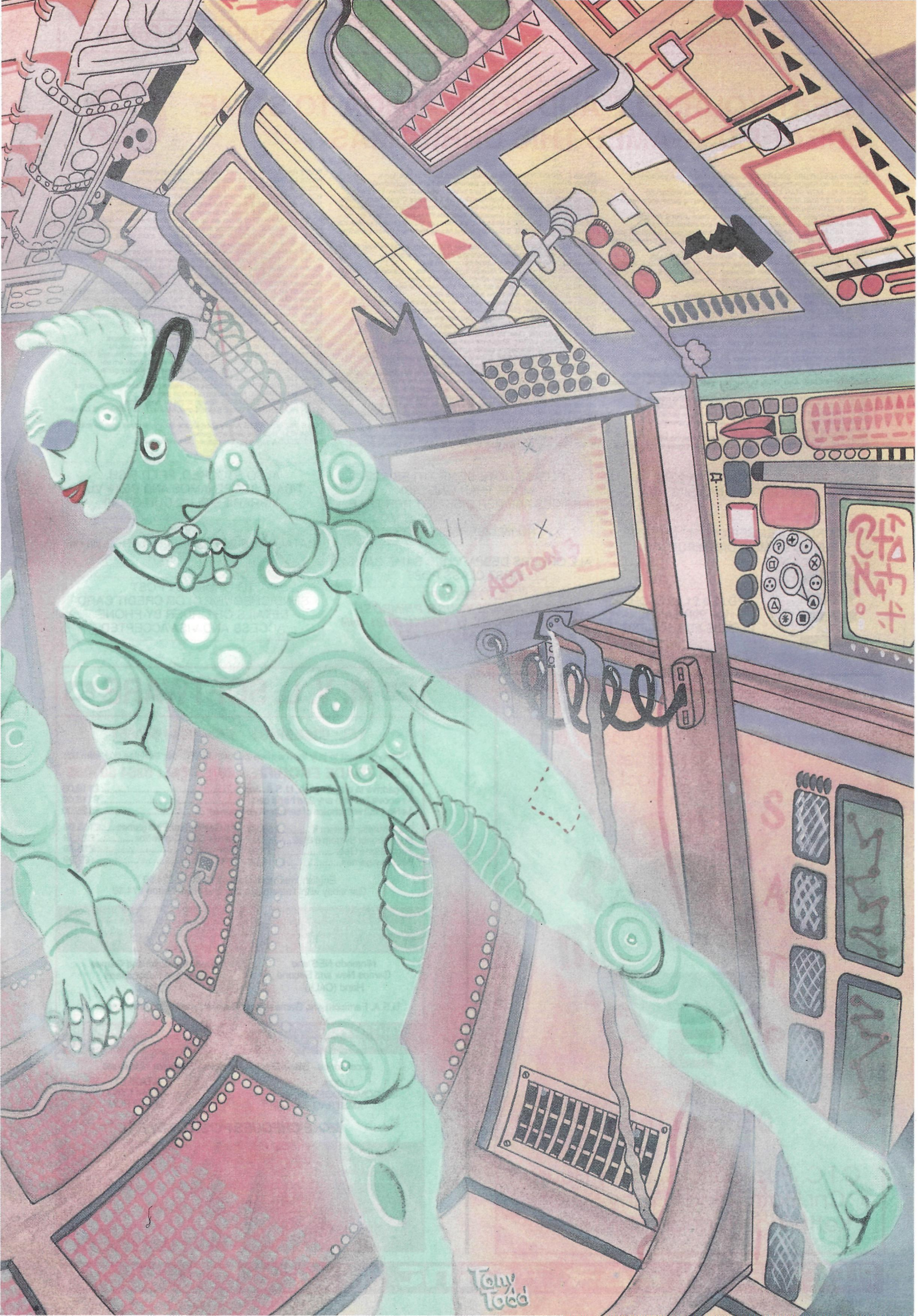
Maybe, Galen thought, their love would last after they did get to know each other. Maybe for forty years. After all, it had started at love 40.

PIERS ANTHONY

British-born Piers Anthony, now an American citizen resident in Florida, is one of the best known and most prolific SF/Fantasy authors, with over sixty novels and countless short stories to his credit. The popular "Xanth" series of novels contributed to his international reputation. On a map, Xanth may remind you of Florida ... His 60-something book, "Isle of View", was published by New English Library on 7th November (in hardback and 'trade paperback').







Tony Todd

Pure Maths

By John Timson

On a fine August day in the year 2005 Jacob Apfel, Nobel Laureate and the man acknowledged by nearly everyone as the world's greatest living mathematician, was awakened by his autoalarm at six in the evening. He was slightly surprised because he'd thought he'd set it for eight in the morning. Once again it seemed he'd got it wrong.

Everyone who knew him agreed that Jacob was a genius at pure maths. They also agreed that he might well be the world's biggest duffer when it came to using any kind of machine, even one as simple as an autoalarm. It was fortunate that he had the latest kind of computer which responded to his voice because the use of a simple keyboard was almost beyond him.

The world's greatest living mathematician yawned and reached for the glass of lemon tea his autoalarm had made.

Time. He'd got it wrong yet again. *Time is a funny thing*, Jacob muttered to himself, sipping the tea. A dimension you couldn't travel in and so different in a fundamental way from the other three of our universe. Which seemed illogical to Jacob even though he knew well enough the obvious objections to time travel. If you went back in time you could kill your grandfather as a child and then you'd never have existed but you did exist so the idea was logically impossible.

Forgetting his tea and everything else Jacob began to wonder about it. He liked to think nothing was impossible, just that the maths were sometimes difficult. For other people at least. *Suppose*, he thought, *that time travel is truly impossible for living things because they arise in temporal order from other living organisms? That wouldn't necessarily mean it applied to non-living things, would it? Of course*, he reasoned, *there would be no way to send things forward into a time which didn't yet exist. But back? Into a time which did exist because it had already happened. That might just be possible.* The outlines of some equations began to run through his mind.

For nearly five days Jacob worked at his computer without sleep until at last he was satisfied he'd solved the problem. He had a mathematical proof that it was possible, in pure maths at least, to send non-living objects back in time. A neat bit of work and quite interesting in a way, he thought, as he told the computer to send the results to the *Journal of Twenty-first Century Maths*. Then the world's greatest living mathematician went to bed. He forgot to reset his autoalarm.

Mark Foreman, the editor of the *Journal*, was one of the laziest men in the world. When he became editor he spent three weeks reprogramming the *Journal's* computer so that it did nearly all his work for him. The computer received up to a hundred papers a day direct from scientists around the world. It sorted them by key words in the titles and eventually put together enough to fill the next weekly issue. So every Wednesday Mark would go in to his office for an hour or less where he had little more to do than press the go-ahead key and the issue would be sent out by computer network and on tapes or discs for those with primitive computers. There was also a small printed edition for some backward libraries.

Jacob's paper, which he'd called "*A Mathematical Exposition of the Possibility of Small Scale Time Travel into the Past*", was never seen by Mark. It was automatically rejected by his computer on the basis of the key words "Time Travel" which Mark had long before decided was mystical nonsense. His subscribers wouldn't have read it anyway since almost all of them shared his opinion.

Two floors below Mark's offices were the much less prestigious ones of *Future Science and Technology*. Once a small, unimpor-

tant quarterly, in the last five years under the editorship of Susanne Lettice *Future* had developed into an influential monthly. In the scientific world it was widely recognised that *Future's* forecasts were often remarkably accurate. It was almost as if Susanne had a direct line into the future. She hadn't. What she did have was a line into Mark's computer which was almost as good.

When the title of Jacob's paper came up on her screen Susanne thought, "*Another idiot*", and her finger moved to the reject key. Then it stopped as she realised who the author was. Jacob Apfel was writing about time travel as if he believed it possible. *Was the world's greatest living mathematician going crazy?* Such things had happened before and if he was then *Future's* readers should be the first to know. Her finger moved two keys right to PRINT. She began to read.

Susanne was not a mathematician in Jacob's class or anywhere near, as she admitted even to herself. But she did have a knack of knowing what could, and what could not, be translated into useable hardware and it was this gift as much as her line into Mark's computer which had made her a success as *Future's* editor. Like many other successful people, however, she wanted more and above all she wanted to be famous. So when she realised to her surprise that Jacob's theory could be used to build a machine using only easily obtainable components she had an idea.

Susanne knew that the *Journal's* computer would reject Jacob's paper and that he would forget all about it. She also knew she could build the machine. If she rewrote the paper putting her name on it and sent it back to when she'd just left university 25 years earlier then she'd become famous, at least in mathematical circles. If the machine worked and she used it on her editor's desk then the paper, her paper now, would arrive in the right place when the first editor of *Future* was looking for new material. That afternoon Susanne began to buy the components she'd need.

Pete Stephandou, the first editor of *Future*, was a sour, embittered man who'd only taken the job because he'd been unable to get anything better. Life, he felt, had treated him badly; he'd never somehow had the recognition he believed was his due. He was still looking for a way to make his name when he saw Susanne's paper and then he realised this was his big chance. If he could build a time machine and send the paper back to 1950, but with his name on it, then at last fame and fortune would be his.

It took Peter longer to get the right components and he had to have some specially made. When he'd assembled it he found that it worked, even though it was larger than he'd expected. His problem was to get it to the right place at the right time. He typed his version of the paper out on an old typewriter, sealed it in an envelope addressed to the old and long established *Solutions in Maths Journal*, bought some stamps of the right period from a stamp dealer, and it was ready to be sent.

Peter knew that, fortunately for him, the post office had been in the same building for over half a century. He took his machine down to the post office one night and persuaded the man in charge to let him run it there. Peter told him that the machine was measuring variations in the Earth's magnetic flux affected by the ozone layer, which meant nothing to the post office man who assumed that it was somehow government research.

Peter's envelope flipped back through time to 1950 where it was found on the post office floor and taken to the sorting room. Two days later it arrived on the desk of *Solutions'* editor, D. Geoffrey Meadowcroft. He soon realised that the ma-

chine could be made, and as an ex-army communications officer he had no trouble in getting most of the components. The others he had to make himself and his machine when he'd finished filled a small truck, but it worked.

The famous paper "A Mathematical Proof of the Possibility of Time Travel" by D. Geoffrey Meadowcroft was published in *Theoretical Physics and Unusual Mathematics* in October, 1926. An editorial comment praised Meadowcroft for his ingenious use of pure maths but said there was, of course, no possibility of any practical application. Everyone knew it was just not possible to build a time machine. The Meadowcroft Equations, as they came to be known in the world of pure maths, were just a curiosity. An interesting example of how something could be proved on paper even when it was impossible in the real world. Now and then over the years some young and eager mathematician would try to find a fallacy in the proof because, as everyone knew, there had to be one somewhere. But no one ever succeeded in finding it.

Meadowcroft enjoyed his small fame in the maths world. Peter and Susanne were puzzled. They each felt they'd been cheated but they couldn't see what they could do about it. They also had a strange feeling that they'd known about the Meadowcroft Equations before they'd sent their papers off into the past. It was a paradox neither cared to think about too much. Jacob Apfel, of course, had forgotten about it. For him once a problem was solved that was that.

On a cloudy day in September in the year 2005 Jacob Apfel, the world's greatest living mathematician, was awakened by his autoalarm at three in the morning. As he sipped his lemon tea he wondered about the nature of time. Which naturally led him to think about the Meadowcroft Equations and he couldn't see why they only applied to sending things back in time. It seemed to Jacob that with some manipulation of the basic ideas forwards time travel should be theoretically possible. He switched on his computer and started work.

The world was never the same again.

JOHN TIMSON

John Timson is a biologist and science writer who likes to explore the logical consequences of something that scientific opinion says is "impossible" becoming possible.



FRONT COVER AND CENTRE SPREAD TONY TODD

Tony works from his home in an Edwardian cottage in Surrey. He renounces the idea of a personalised style and will work in any medium that is appropriate to the subject matter. He is kept busy by an assortment of book and magazine publishers, but is just as ready to handle SF and horror or cats and thatched cottages.



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THE CRYSTAL MAN

by Peter Spooner

Two hunters had been walking through a remote forest in their search for deer and boar but with precious little success. Bearded, heavy-set and with a ragged appearance that made them seem almost as wild as the animals they stalked, the two men were in fact brothers who'd hunted together since they were eight or nine. It had taken them many years to learn the techniques of trapping and skinning, of recognising the tell-tale signs that animals left in their wanderings about the glades - a trampled patch of grass, the scent of musk left on a twig, marks in the mud where a creature had wallowed. By the time the brothers had reached their mid-teens, they could hunt as well as any of the men there, and their mutual understanding born from working so closely together since childhood made them a formidable pair when scouring woodland or marsh for game. But there is always a vital ingredient which all hunters need - namely luck - and that had sadly been missing today. As the hours had passed wearily by, they'd grown more and more disgruntled until, finally, they'd decided to give up and return to their camp amongst the trees.

Taking a different route back, it wasn't long before they came to a part of the forest which neither had ever seen before. The sun was already drifting towards the horizon, and the shadows of the trees were lengthening when the hunters came upon a small pool surrounded by a natural screen of oaks. Peering between the trees, they at first believed the pool to be empty but then something in the centre stirred, sending out gentle ripples, and as this "something" turned, the hunters saw the sun's rays reflect off an invisible, rounded form. For a fleeting moment, it seemed like the head of a man but, as quickly as it had appeared, the vision vanished from sight and the pool was empty once more. Empty, except that a tiny arc of light hung just above the middle of the pool as though the sun was still shining on something other than water.

The two hunters stared at the light, almost unable to believe it was there. Then something in the pool stirred again and, this time, the reflected light clearly showed the head of a man, his chin just above the water, a serene look on his face. But it was only his face that the hunters could see; the rest of his head simply vanished into thin air. And that face, so calm and peaceful, was only the reflection of a face; there seemed to be no flesh, no colouring. It was as though the head was made from the same quicksilver liquid as filled the pool.

The curious man stirred again and a different facet of his head came into view, and then the surface of the water was slowly broken by the man's two arms, limbs that

showed only in outline, made from a substance of such crystal clarity that, as they rested on the surface, they appeared to fade into the water itself. He was impossible to see unless he moved and the sun caught his outline.

The hunters quickly realised what an astonishing prize it would be if they could capture such a creature and put him on display. There was money to be made here.

The crystal man didn't suspect their presence. He stood in his pool, his arms outstretched before him on the water's surface, hardly moving, an expression of calm on his reflected face. The sun shone down onto him; the trees around the pool guarded him; a bird on a far-off bough sang for him. His was a serene and beautiful world.

He moved slowly in the water for a few steps, and then to the hunters' frustration, disappeared completely as he passed through the shadow of a branch. They waited with uncharacteristic impatience until he suddenly reappeared much closer to the edge of the pool than they'd expected. As the pool became shallower nearer the edge, so he seemed to rise gradually into view, if a shimmer of reflections can be called a view. Then, turning his back, he leant against the bank and gazed with the serenity of a saint across the water's surface, silent, unsuspecting and off-guard.

With a rush, the two hunters lunged out and, grabbing hold of the crystal man by his arms, hauled him, struggling, up onto the bank. In a mad panic, he tried to tear himself free but the hunters held him too tightly, and though he kicked and thrashed with all his strength, he couldn't overcome both of them. Eventually, he tired and, unable to stop them, his limbs were swiftly bound before the hunters dragged him away from the edge of the pool and dumped him unceremoniously amongst some bracken whilst they rested from their exertions. Panting, they looked at their captured quarry who was staring back with wide-eyed fear. The hunters had been surprised at how hard his body was. It was like rock-crystal and yet he somehow could move his limbs and facial features as though his body was soft and supple.

"I wonder if he can talk," said one of them, still breathing heavily from the ambush.

"Who knows?" shrugged his brother and, rising to his feet, he wandered over to the crystal man and gave him a kick. "Hey! What have you got to say for yourself, eh?"

The crystal man kept silent, his expression slowly changing from fear to contempt.

The hunter gave him another kick.

"Say somethin', then."

But it was to no avail.

"Ah, he's just a dumb freak," said the hunter, and he bent down to shout at him. "Just a stupid animal, eh?" and he gave a laugh of derision.

Outside a pub in the town of Tryamour, the queue edged slowly forward. The hunters, standing at the doorway to the dingy room, couldn't believe their good fortune as they collected the money. They'd brought the crystal man here because the Tsar was travelling through the realm, holding festivals at every major town he came to. This journey was a rare occurrence and Tryamour was to host the next festival in a few days time when the Tsar and his whole retinue would arrive. Consequently, the town was packed with people from all over the area, and the hunters knew that where you get plenty of people, you get plenty of money.

The crystal man was in a small iron cage, not long enough for him to stretch out in and not high enough for him to stand up in. The cage (which stood on two sturdy tables so the crowds could see him more clearly) was bare except for a few handfuls of filthy straw strewn across its rough wooden floor.

And there the crystal man crouched in the back of his prison, lonely and sad.

All day, the people had come to cluster around the cage; some laughing, some amazed, but all staring at him, encouraging their children to prod him with sticks to see how he'd react. In the early days, when he was first put on display in villages along the way, he would get angry and, tearing the sticks from the youngsters, would vent his rage by thrashing at the iron bars until the sticks were frayed and broken. But it was futile. There was no end in sight to his imprisonment and the misery he felt. So now he just sat in the filth and squalor at the rear of the cage and thought back to happier times when he would wander through the forest or descend into the cool, liquid velvet of his pool hidden amongst the trees. And when a tear rolled from his eyes, the children squealed with delight and prodded him with their sticks again until the adults shook with laughter.

When the crystal man had first been thrown into the cage, he'd hit the iron bars on one side with such force that his right arm had cracked from near the wrist to just below the elbow and, ever since that wretched day, he had clutched the damaged limb, feeling the pain stinging daily as it gnawed into him. He dared not move suddenly for fear of shattering the arm - whenever he was taken in the cage from

one village to another, he waited in dread for every jolt and knock which might fracture his brittle body. Back in the forest, the moss underfoot had been soft and safe, the pool amongst the trees gentle and still. How he longed for the feel of the comforting water around his fragile form now.

The lamps, dim and oily, cast their poor light onto his crystal sadness whilst, on the other side of the iron bars, the humans stared back at the animal.

The Tsar rode between the happy, smiling faces, bowing graciously and waving to his subjects, and they, in turn, cheered loudly and waved back whilst, all along the route, the town's own trumpeters filled the air with their bright, regal notes.

The Tsar smiled gently, pleased, as always, that his people were happy. But behind the kind blue eyes lay a sadness which few knew about; a melancholy which even the Tsar, himself, only dimly understood. It was a sadness caused by the realisation of an end; a death. He found it difficult to isolate and capture in words but it burrowed into his consciousness every day. And, no matter how hard he tried, he could not shake this sadness off.

So the Tsar lived each day with this burden of melancholy, although he tried not to show it, preferring to keep it to himself where it brooded and grew darker with every month that passed.

By the time the Tsar reached the castle, his own royal trumpeters had raised their golden instruments to their lips, and as he rode over the drawbridge, the trumpeters blasted an impressive fanfare. With a final wave to the crowds clustering around the outer banks of the castle's moat, the Tsar passed inside the citadel where he was greeted by his faithful magician, who had made sure that the preparations for the feast were complete.

Turning reluctantly away from the castle, the crowds wandered off to prepare themselves for the evening's celebrations - the highlight of the entire year.

The Tsar made one brief foray into the town before the feast began. He had been told about the strange crystal man and was just as intrigued by the enigma as the ordinary folk, and so he decided to travel to the tavern to see the hauntingly beautiful creature for himself.

The little room at the back of the tavern had been cleared of the commoners, and within its four rough walls now stood the Tsar with a few of his advisors and the two hunters.

As this latter pair told the Tsar their story about the creature's discovery and its capture, emphasizing that they hoped His Majesty found the exhibit interesting, the Tsar looked through the rusty iron bars at the crystal man who knelt on the floor of his cage clutching his right arm defensively.

For a long time, the crystal man crouched with lowered eyes as despair and humiliation coursed through him, and, all the while, the Tsar looked at his unbelievable glassy visage. Only the yellowish reflections showed that there was anything in the cage at all but the Tsar could sense

that there was more than mere reflection before him. The creature seemed to have an aura of intelligence about it; the cage held something higher than any animal.

While he was gazing in, the crystal man looked up and met the Tsar's eyes. Neither said a word but, as they studied each other, there seemed, to the Tsar, to be an almost common bond between them.

"Could it be a bond founded in loneliness?" wondered the Tsar.

Behind the crystal man's glassy face there was loneliness, yes. But there was also something else. It was a burning hatred of all these pink, fleshy people who came and gawped and kept him caged as though he was some kind of animal. They, who saw themselves as clever, important, pretty folk, also saw him as an object without feelings, just something to prod and abuse and keep imprisoned. Their "intelligent" lives were far more animal than any wolf or tiger; their habits crueller than they realised.

And, as the Tsar and his advisors turned away and filed out of the dingy room, the crystal man vowed he would take his revenge.

The air was hot inside the castle hall, filled as it was with sweating, dancing people, and, even outside, the atmosphere was sultry as a warm breeze blew gently from the hills. High above them, building in the darkness, great anvil clouds towered, building a thunderstorm. Slowly but relentlessly, they drifted on the warm wind as blossoms of the evening's heat towards the carnival town.

In Tryamour itself - down every crowded street and lane; in every busy house and tavern - sparkled a wild, effervescent, party mood. But, in a small room off the main square, there was one person who was rejoicing for a quite different reason.

The crystal man, his heart pounding with excitement, sat at the back of his cage and listened intently to the revelling crowd in the adjoining tavern.

A few hours earlier, he had watched the Tsar and his advisors leave the tiny room. After the royal visitors had gone, the two hunters carefully counted up the day's takings and then, blowing out the oil lamps, left the room. Locking the door behind them, they headed for the bar, determined to celebrate the festival with their new-found wealth.

So the crystal man was left alone once more in his rusty cage in the darkness, free from prying eyes. Usually, he would try to block out the sound of drunken singing by escaping into sleep.

But not this evening.

On this occasion, luck was on his side for the first time since he had been snatched from his forest pool.

The innkeeper had been in the room earlier that day to collect some bottles of wine which lay stacked along the far wall, bringing with him a cork-screw so he could open one or two and try the contents.

The innkeeper, a filthy apron tied about his waist over his scruffy clothes, was a fat, bearded man with sagging jowls which dissolved his jaw-line as though it was melted cheese. His nose was pitted and

rosy, and his eyes peered out through rumpled folds of skin which fell in a pink avalanche about his face.

He dug the cork-screw into the tan cork of a bottle of wine and wrenched the stopper free. Holding up a dusty glass, he poured some of the wine in and, with the cultured air of a connoisseur quite out of keeping with his vile, obese appearance, he studied the crimson liquor as though searching an ancient map for a clue to its treasure. However, he soon bludgeoned any aura of grace when he brought the glass to his mouth and, quickly tilting it, guzzled the wine down as though it might have a mind to escape. Belching loudly, he licked his lips.

The crystal man watched with silent disgust.

After the innkeeper had swallowed about three glasses of wine, he decided that the bottle was good enough to serve and so re-corked it. Humming a flat tune, he put the bottle back into the case which he then carried through into the bar before returning to collect a few more. Finally, closing the door behind him, he left the crystal man alone once more in the dark.

But the crystal man noticed something which the innkeeper had evidently forgotten. On the table behind the cage lay the cork-screw. It was an instrument both strong and sharp, and, what was more, the crystal man thought it might be within his reach. The excitement mounted in him as he realised that this might be the opportunity he'd been so desperately hoping for.

Carefully, the crystal man put his left arm through the bars and reached out to the table. He ran his fingers along the dusty wooden top, frightened that someone might come in at any moment. The clear fingers tapped gently over the oaken surface... but there was nothing there! For a moment, panic gripped him as he searched frantically in the dark but, try though he might, he couldn't find the cork-screw. Withdrawing his arm, he tried further along through other iron bars. Again, his fingers played across the surface of the table. He had been *sure* it was within his reach. Had fate again been cruel and placed the cork-screw just too far away for him? He withdrew his arm and tried on another part of the table. The crystal hand splayed out and this time touched something hard. With a surge of relief, he wrapped his fingers around the handle of the cork-screw and drew it carefully into the cage.

Running his fingers down the spiralling steel until they reached the cold, sharp point, he blindly examined his prize. He thought of the construction of his prison, and the second part of the plan flashed through his mind.

The cage was roughly made, the bars of such poor quality that they were going rusty in some places and were badly fitted in others.

Quietly, the crystal man moved over to where one of the iron bars was already slightly loose and, using the cork-screw, he began to dig away at the wooden floor of his cage.

He worked hard, even more desperate to escape now that he had this chance of freedom, and all the while, the singing and

laughter from the tavern next door drifted through to where he was labouring in the darkness.

The crystal man worked unceasingly as the hours ticked by, chips and splinters of wood flying onto the floor as he gouged away with the spiral of sharp steel, urged on by the spirit inside him.

Suddenly, one bar came free in his hand and he knew he was winning.

It seemed like an eternity to get the adjacent bars free but eventually there was just enough room for him to slip out of the tiny cage in which he'd been imprisoned for so long.

He stood silently in the room, upright for the first time in ages, feeling a glorious surge of freedom wash over him. He was free at last!

He couldn't leave by the main door because it led into the crowded tavern but there was another door, bolted on the inside, through which deliveries of wine and beer were made. Gingerly, the crystal man pulled the long bolt back and eased the door open a few inches.

Peering through the gap into the dusty lane which ran along the rear of the tavern, he could see a few drunken people staggering along.

The crystal man armed himself with an iron bar from the cage and slipped outside, blending perfectly with the shadows.

In the castle, the festive mood continued unabated. The Tsar sat at the table, flanked by nobility, and looked across the faces of the festive people, a half-smile on his lips. He was glad his subjects were happy around him. An excited, colourful swirl of delight, they glanced at him with eyes that sparkled, their mouths transformed into ruby crescents as they bowed and curtsied before him. But, for the Tsar, there was only sadness and longing. He did not know why he was so sad nor for what he longed, nor could he tear away the heavy veils of darkness that hung around his spirit, shutting out the light. With every day that passed, he felt he was being dragged ever deeper into a cold, black abyss of despair, and he knew he'd almost reached the point of no return.

Before him in the hall, the people smiled and danced as the music spun its lively course around them.

Watching them all, the Tsar felt himself slip deeper into the dark.

From across the plain, a growl of thunder rolled like an ocean wave towards Tryamour, surging through the streets and alleyways until it finally pounded against the castle walls - the battlements, weathered over the centuries by rain and tears, echoing its doleful cry.

The Tsar's life-long friend, the Chancellor, watched his monarch's face and could sense the despair which lay behind those eyes. He knew there was nothing he could do - he'd tried many times before and had always failed. He could only wait, already mourning.

Turning, the Tsar looked at him with his gentle gaze and then slowly rose.

At the sign of the royal movement, the musicians stopped playing and the Great Hall went quiet as his people stood await-

ing a sign.

"Don't stop," said the Tsar quietly to his subjects. "Sing and dance and laugh. Enjoy the success which your hard work through the year has earned for you."

He looked up at the musicians in the gallery and smiled like a gracious old lion.

"Play on, my friends," he said. "Play on," and so the festivities resumed.

With his cloak wrapped around him and his head low, the Tsar left the table and disappeared through a narrow doorway.

The Tsar slowly climbed a narrow, winding stairway, the walls and steps like silent sentinels to his loneliness as he rose up and up through this secluded part of the castle. At last he was alone, free from the gaze of others, their cold stares unable to pursue him through the labyrinth of ancient stone.

On and on he went, up seemingly endless flights of twisting spirals, each linked by a corridor; deserted passageways lit by brands hissing like snakes in the coolness of the hollow stone. Pausing along one of these corridors, the Tsar leant against the wall, feeling the chill air in his nostrils and on his lips. His hand brushed against a damp patch on the wall where rain-water which had fallen weeks ago on the castle-roofs above trickled down its brown-stained course to disappear between the flagstones at his feet, only to repeat its liquid motion in the dark passageway below.

He sighed, and the delicate waver in the air echoed away from him.

The mustard-yellow light from the brands dripped from the walls, glimmering in the crevices where the raindrops clung.

The Tsar went on climbing through the labyrinth until, finally, he came out onto a small platform which stretched a few feet away from the castle wall into the night air. One more flight of steps led up, this time on the outside of the citadel, lit by moonlight; silver blocks which beckoned to the Tsar.

He climbed slowly as though in a trance until he reached his goal, the flat roof of a small tower. The highest point of the castle, its flagstone floor was surrounded by a low, castellated wall through which could be seen the plain below, stretching away for mile after mile. Only vague outlines of distant hills were visible in the moon's satin glare; a quiet landscape slumbering below faraway worlds.

Moving like floating giants, the approaching thunder-clouds rose in towers of pale malevolence, their shapes, immense and lustrous, crackling with energy which was growing stronger with every passing moment.

The Tsar stood by the wall and looked out across the town that lay draped around the foot of the castle, out across the silent countryside in its cocoon of night-time velvet.

Winding about him, the warm breeze drifted through his moonlit hair whilst his mind, drenched in tears, drowned him in unfathomable melancholy.

As he stood there, a sad, gentle man in his lonely heights, the moon's sheen caught another form and, for a moment, transfixed its crystal beauty as it crouched in the far



corner of the tower, its myriad surfaces bathed in quicksilver.

The crystal man watched the Tsar intently, the iron bar in his hand, waiting for the right moment.

The Tsar was so wrapped up in his own thoughts as he gazed out over the low wall of the tower that he did not see the glinting shape which came slowly towards him; did not sense its presence as it crept up behind him and raised the iron bar. He did not even realise ...

And, whilst the ordinary people danced and laughed and drank in the castle below, no-one saw a crystal figure glinting in the moonlight as it made its way across the castle's roofs, slipping across the flagstones until it finally entered a small door in the forgotten easterly tower and slyly crept away.

The moon slowly faded and then disappeared altogether behind a cloud, and a flash of lightning suddenly stabbed through the humid, heavy air, freezing every motion like a photograph, roaring through the town with its howl of thunder; a storm from the distant hills.

When the Tsar's body was found at the foot of the north tower, his death was, at first, thought to be the result of a tragic accident (although a few, notably the Chancellor, secretly suspected it to be suicide). But when two soldiers, who had been despatched to the roof of the tower, found blood on the flagstones and the low wall, the shocking truth of the Tsar's murder became apparent to the already stunned people.

As the terrible news rapidly spread throughout the town, a cry of horror rose from the Tsar's beloved subjects. At first, they couldn't believe it - who would possibly want to harm as kind and well-loved a monarch as the Tsar? But it wasn't long before their horror soon turned to anger and then fury, and they took to the streets to find the murderer. Various unsavoury characters were rounded up and questioned, but when the two hunters went to the little room at the back of the tavern and found the cage empty and one of the iron bars missing, everyone knew then who to look for. The strange creature - a man made of crystal who could move like a real man but who had never been heard to speak - had to be tracked down and recaptured, for the Tsar's killer must face the wrath of the people.

The entire town was in an uproar, with people running through the streets carrying flaming brands, searching for the murderer in every house and inn, every dark alleyway and hidden corner. The crystal man could not elude them forever.

The two hunters knew that the crystal man would not return to his pool in the forest; that was no longer a safe place to hide. It would require all their cunning to track him down. But they were spurred on by the threat from the Chancellor that if they did not capture the crystal man soon, the courts would hold them responsible for the Tsar's death, and that meant a slow execution for them both.

The days passed and gradually they

found a trail of thefts and murders and queer sights of a man who seemed to fade into the air. The trail led them away from Tryamour and out into the countryside away to the west, towards the distant coast. They came close to him a couple of times but, on each occasion, he'd eluded them by a matter of hours. However, it was obvious that he was not very far ahead now and the gap was closing.

The day finally came when they were able to corner him in a derelict cottage isolated out in the country. The rain pattered down from a grey sky as the two hunters entered the shabby building, ropes in hand ready to bind their captive, as they had once done many months ago beside his pool in the forest; only this time he would never escape them again. Quietly and gingerly, they checked the few rooms downstairs and then, finding them empty, slowly started to climb the stairs.

The crystal man heard the stairs creak and quickly took up position behind the door to the room where he was hiding, iron bar firmly in his grip as he waited for his old foes to come for him. This was the chance he'd long been waiting for.

The hunters stopped at the top of the stairs and looked around them. There were three rooms - one had its door torn off and they could see that it was empty inside; the door to the second room was open and they could see that it contained nothing but one or two pieces of broken furniture. They were distracted for a moment by a rat scurrying across the landing, then turned their attention to the one room remaining. Its door was firmly closed but they knew their prey had to be behind it.

They moved towards the door, the first hunter armed with a wooden stave, the second with the ropes. They hesitated for a couple of seconds, steeling their nerves. They could hear nothing but the pounding of their own hearts. The first hunter swallowed hard and then, taking a firm grip of the stave, kicked open the door and rushed in. He turned just in time to see a flash of light as the iron bar swept down and smashed his skull, killing him instantly.

It happened so fast that the other hunter realised too late the danger he himself was now in. He turned to flee but the iron bar caught him squarely in the back, breaking his spine. Collapsing to the floor, he lay like a crumpled marionette, unable to move a muscle. Although he was paralysed, his wild staring eyes could see only too clearly the crystal man as he came out from behind the door and stand over him, the hint of a smile starting to spread across his glassy face.

And then the crystal man spoke for the first time.

"So, my friend, the roles are reversed and you are my captive, eh?" He spoke in a delicate, tinkling, brittle voice and there was no mistaking the hard smile of cruelty on his face.

The hunter, although unable to move, was just able to speak a little.

"P - please, d-don't kill me. I didn't mean you no harm. I just wanted to make some money, that's all," he gasped.

"Some money?" sneered the crystal man. He crouched beside the hunter and

hissed into his ear: "You made me suffer like some sideshow freak just so you could make some money? Ha! You and the rest of your kind are disgusting. Your race even treat others like you with an animal barbarity. The poor in your streets are treated like scum by the wealthy, and you rob and attack each other for little more than a few coins. I know - I've seen it with my own eyes over the long months that you held me prisoner."

"I - I can't help what goes on," stammered the hunter. "I've got to live just like all the rest. I don't mean no-one no harm. I just wanted to get enough to live by, that's all."

'You meant ME harm!' shouted the crystal man, rising to his feet and looking with contempt at the wretch on the floor. "You came into my world and dragged me away, keeping me locked up so that others of your kind could pay their pennies and stare at me. You couldn't have cared less about my well-being."

The hunter struggled in vain to see the crystal man but couldn't turn his head.

"I was going to let you go, honest I was," he said desperately.

"Don't lie to me," said the crystal man. "You were going to keep me for as long as you could make money out of exhibiting me. And what did it matter if I was kept locked up in a tiny, filthy cage and treated worse than any animal so long as you got your precious MONEY!" He almost spat the words out. "Oh no, my friend. If you cannot even treat your own race with respect, let alone something new and strange to you, then your race doesn't deserve to live."

"N-no, p-please," begged the hunter. "Please, don't kill me, I beg of you."

"Could begging have done me any good as long as I was locked up in your cage?" asked the crystal man.

He put the iron bar down and switched the cork-screw to his left hand. There was silence for a while.

"Your precious money won't help you now," he said and, kneeling beside the hunter, pressed the sharp tip to his throat. The hunter screamed but the cork-screw was pushed violently in and torn to the left.

After the two bodies were discovered, it was decided by the royal court not to risk trying to take the crystal man alive but that he should be killed at all costs. So a large group of men armed with nets and cudgels pursued the fugitive across the green, fertile hills and thickly-forested valleys, and every day they drew closer and closer.

The crystal man knew that he would never again see his pool amidst the trees back in that golden forest, never again feel the velvet cocoon of water around his fragile body or walk at ease across soft springy moss beneath wide-boughed gilded oaks. He knew he could not keep running for ever.

There came a day which was sunny and bright with clear blue skies and only the subtlest of breezes to mingle the scents of the late summer flowers. The crystal man was walking up gently

sloping grassland, the sun catching each facet of his face and body so that as he walked he sparkled and flashed with a thousand ever-changing reflections, a column of light moving between green underfoot and blue overhead.

Suddenly, from out of the woods a few hundred yards behind him burst twenty armed men with savage dogs straining at their leashes. With a wild cry, the men let their dogs off their leads and the whole group went rushing towards the glittering man ahead of them. Turning at the noise, the crystal man took one look at his pursuers and then began running up the slope to where the ground touched the sky. His only hope was that over the crest there might be a wood in which he could lose the men and their hounds. He ran with all his

strength but he was tired and the dogs were catching up with him.

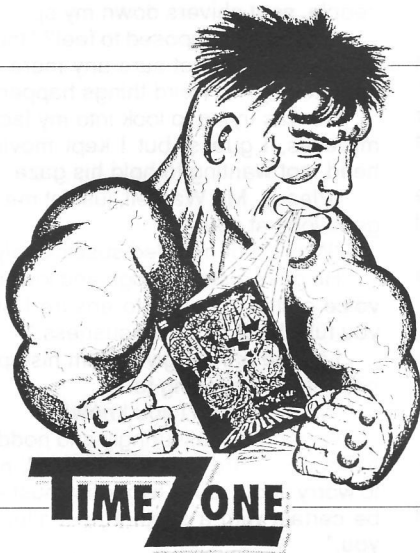
Finally, he reached the crest and, to his utter amazement, found he was standing at the edge of a high cliff and that before him stretched the wide blue expanse of an ocean. He had never seen the sea before and, for an instant, he was dazzled by the beauty of a million waves sweeping majestically towards the foot of the cliff where lay enormous boulders and rocks, cracked by the battering waves. He looked around and saw the men and dogs running up the slope towards him. He turned back to face the sea and jumped just as the first dogs snapped at his ankles. The men arrived in time to see the crystal man - that strange, ethereal beauty of reflected light, hit the rocks far below. Splinters of crystal flew off

as he shattered, catching the sun in a kaleidoscopic shower before splashing into the sea where the rolling blue waves took them away from the light.



PETER SPOONER

Peter Spooner is a technical writer and lecturer. He writes fiction, as he modestly tells us, and has had several articles published in various technical journals.



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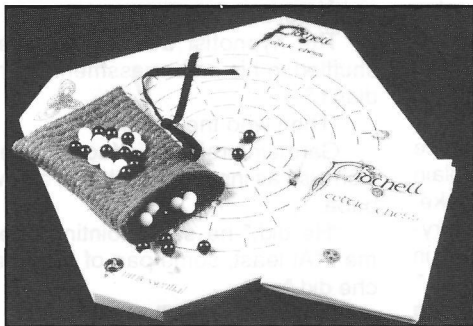
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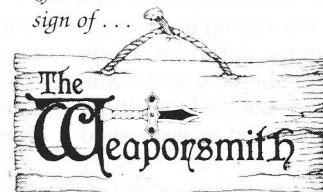
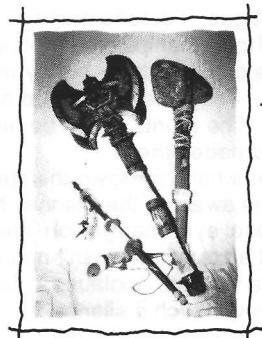
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by L.D. Acaster

If I'd been stone-cold sober I would never have gone up on to the stage.

We were at Mike's farewell party. He was celebrating. We were drowning our sorrows. I know I was. Mike's imminent departure meant the title of "Longest Serving Member" was about to be bestowed upon me. I'd held it unofficially for months whilst others, their feet hardly through the dark oak doors, had taken a good look round and found themselves other jobs.

"Lester will never leave. Hasn't got what it takes. He'll still be here when the old man gets carried out feet first."

I'd overheard that in the cloakroom. The laughter had hurt more than the remark, but the truth of it had haunted me ever since. At my best I was staid; at my worst little more than an automaton, doing the same thing at the same time every single day. Maybe that's why I decided to throw caution to the wind and down every drink that was put before me. By the time the cabaret appeared I'd long since given up looking for reasons and was intent on showing my disparaging colleagues that I did have a more exuberant side to my nature.

The cabaret was a hypnotist. I must have uttered something idiotic, like "It's all fixed", I can't quite recall, but when a volunteer was called for firm hands wheeled me forward. I remember grinning at the audience, their individual forms lost in the glare of the lights, and I remember the hypnotist speaking to me. The next moment I was having my hand shaken and being led off the stage.

I was disappointed, to say the least. I thought I would have had some recollections of what had happened to me, however vague. I'd done it again. I'd allowed myself to be manipulated - not by the hypnotist, he didn't matter - but by my so-called mates. They knew what had happened. I didn't. The taunts would be never-ending and I dreaded them.

I was halfway down the steps before I became aware of the silence. It was eerie, all those eyes caught on me, yet there wasn't a sound. It wasn't natural. People leave a stage to applause - boos, maybe - but never such a silence.

As I reached the floor the hypnotist began speaking over the microphone. His tone was jovial, but the staring eyes which followed my every move dulled his words to a burr. I headed for our table as if it was some sort of sanctuary, but the faces there were as expressionless and as wide-eyed as everywhere else in the room. Andy pushed back his chair so fast I flinched.

"Sit down, Lester. You'll feel much better." His arm slid protectively around my shoulder and he led me to my chair. Chris jumped up like a jack-in-a-box and began

waving his arms about.

"A drink. Get him a drink. He'll feel better after a drink."

I began to laugh. This wasn't real. "Aw, come on, fellas. Don't mess me about."

A double scotch was pushed in front of me.

"Drink it," Chris insisted. "You'll feel better."

"I feel fine."

I swept the faces around the table. I had never seen them so serious, even in the office with Benstead skulking about. Each one of them appeared to be as sober as a judge, which I definitely knew wasn't the case.

I laughed again, trying to lighten the atmosphere. "Don't try to put me on. I know nothing happened up there."

"Nothing happened? You've got to be kidding, Lester!"

"Lester, it was weird, believe me."

Believe them? Against my better judgment I found I was being swayed.

"I don't remember a thing, honest. What happened?"

I was met by a wall of silence. My temper rose.

"You are having me on. Fuck off, the lot of you!"

"It's no joke," Andy said. "It's just that we don't know where to start. Chris is right; it was weird. The hypnotist put you under. Hell, you went out like a light. He asked you what colour your briefs were - you know the kind of thing these people make you do - but you wouldn't answer him. You kept looking round you, out into the wings of the stage and up into the roof.

"When he finally got your attention and asked you to do something, you refused - point blank. We thought it was all part of the act at first, but the hypnotist got more and more agitated, and then you said you'd had enough and tried to walk off the stage."

Chris took up the tale. "Yes, but it was weird. I mean, your movements weren't your movements. I don't know how to explain it to you. It was as if it wasn't you."

I sat there with my mouth gaping, trying hard to be rational about what I was hearing and losing out to the amount of alcohol I'd consumed.

"Was my voice different?"

"It wasn't that the sound of your voice was all that different," Andy tried to explain to me, "it was more the way you spoke. You were so damned positive about everything. I mean, you held that hypnotist in utter contempt. That's not like you at all."

No, that wasn't like me. I was feeling more sober by the minute and I think it was fear that was doing it. What had happened up on that stage?

"Look," said Andy, "we'll get the hypnotist down here and let him explain it to you.

That'll put your mind at rest, won't it?"

I didn't know whether it would or not and sat on tenter-hooks until the interval.

Richard Garmaine, hypnotist, shook me warmly by the hand and sat himself next to me.

"How are you feeling, Mr. Wardell?"

That question, asked by him of all people, sent shivers down my spine.

"How am I supposed to feel? I thought I felt fine, but I'm not sure any more. They keep telling me weird things happened."

He was trying to look into my face, into my eyes, I guess, but I kept moving my head, not wanting to hold his gaze.

"Please, Mr. Wardell, just let me take a good look at you."

"Why?" I demanded suspiciously.

He gave a short cough and lowered his voice a little. "I want to ensure I brought you fully back to consciousness."

I glared at him, giving him his opportunity without meaning to.

"My God! Don't you know?"

He smiled reassuringly and nodded his head. "You are fine, Mr. Wardell, nothing to worry about, but a hypnotist must always be certain with a subject as malleable as you."

Chris scoffed. "Malleable? You couldn't do a thing with him."

"I was referring to the ease with which I could hypnotise him," Garmaine retorted icily.

"I was told I went out like a light," I said. The hypnotist turned to me, his face bright with a disarming smile.

"I would go as far as to say you succumbed due to your own volition. Do you practice self-hypnosis?"

"Good grief, no. I don't know anything about it."

"You've never been hypnotised before?"

"Never."

The man was serious. My blood ran cold.

"What exactly happened up there?" Andy asked. "You didn't seem to have a lot of control over him."

The hypnotist averted his eyes and shuffled in his embarrassment. "Ah, no. I didn't."

"Then who the hell did?"

Garmaine raised his face. His expression was as innocent as that of a new-born babe.

"He did," he said, pointing directly at me. "At least, some part of his inner psyche did."

"His inner what?"

"His inner self. His unconscious self. The face we show to the world isn't the only one we've got. Inside a weak man a strong man can be fighting to get out - and vice-versa."

Every eye turned on me. It was like laying on a hospital bed stark naked with doctors standing over me discussing the intricate workings of my body as if I wasn't there.

"Sounds dubious to me," Chris snorted.

Garmaine turned to him, at once. "Dubious? A psychiatrist wouldn't agree with you, neither would a hypno-therapist. There are some who regress their patients back into a past life."

"Past life? You mean there are people who are convinced they've lived before? Like they've been reincarnated?"

"I read a book about that," Andy mused quietly. "It was uncanny."

"Hey, could that be what happened to Lester? I mean, it reacted so unlike him, it had to be someone else, right?"

I stared at them, my so-called friends. Where had this sudden use of the word *it* come from? I was me, Lester Wardell. I wasn't an *it*.

"Hey, Lester. You could have been a right tough bastard in your past life. Maybe you had a job with a bit of glamour to it; a pilot or something."

"Well, one thing's certain. You wouldn't have been a fucking filing clerk!"

The laughter ran around the table as it had in the cloakroom months before. Their anxiety, their tension, had left them. The effect of the alcohol was creeping back and I, as usual, was the butt of their jokes.

I tried hard to get back into the swing of things after the hypnotist left our table, but the drink tasted foul. I sat there, my false smile fixed firmly in place, wondering how I could extricate myself from the gathering and not daring to try. I'd hate it, but I'd sit it out. I always did.

Garmaine did another spot on the stage. He recruited a volunteer from the farther side of the room this time. The man did exactly what Garmaine asked of him and the audience laughed until tears ran down their faces. It made me feel sick just watching it. It could have been me making a fool of myself up on that stage, me the cat-calls and filth-laden hollerings were aimed at. I found myself feeling smugly pleased that I'd been uncontrollable, that I'd made Garmaine look the fool instead of the other way round. He deserved it. The satisfaction I gained from knowing that made the rest of the evening worthwhile.

I couldn't sleep that night. I lay on my bed trying to visualise how I'd acted with Garmaine on that stage. I couldn't. The sheer idea of acting positively, of speaking my mind - and in front of all those watching people - it was just too much for me to grasp. To hold someone in utter contempt - Christ, I wouldn't know where to start.

Although I had no recollections of what I'd done, I knew exactly what reactions my other self had provoked in my colleagues. For the only time since I'd known them they had been awe-struck. They'd sat up and taken note - of me - and I'd been the one who'd made them. Well, some submerged part of me.

I thought a lot about that, dwelled on it, in fact. I'd had dreams where I'd been assertive, heroic almost, standing up to bullies, rescuing damsels, being - er - rewarded by them for my efforts. You know the sort of fantasies I mean, but what if they weren't dreams at all, not true dreams?



What if it was my other self trying to hammer its way through to my consciousness?

It was a hell of a thought - one I grasped with both hands. If my other self *could* get through to my consciousness the changes it could make would be beyond description. I'd tell Benstead what he could do with his job, for a start, and there would be no more jokes at my expense, either. I'd shut up that loud-mouth, Chris, with one terse retort. That would make them look, alright.

It was a thought which took hold. I could be different. Better. All my other self needed was a little help to get through. Even when the alcoholic haze had dissipated and I stared at the reflection of my coated tongue in the bathroom mirror, the idea still seemed sharp and fresh. If a hypno-therapist could stop a man smoking, or stuttering, or whatever, one could bring my other self to the fore a little. Christ - why hadn't I thought of this years ago?

Over the next few days I made enquiries and a list of people I thought might be able to help me. It wasn't a long list. Hypno-therapists aren't exactly ten-a-penny. And they don't charge pennies, either. I balked at some of the prices that were quoted to

me, but decided that even if it made me bankrupt it would be worth it.

I found one who was fairly reasonable and, in my biggest show of confidence for years, I made an appointment. Which was when I got cold feet.

I hadn't told anyone at the office. I'd had some wild notion that I'd just walk in one day, a changed man; but I needed some reassurance that I was doing the right thing and I had no-one outside my work-life that I could talk to. Besides, it might be a good idea to warn them in case they thought I'd flipped my lid and had me carted off to a psychiatric ward.

It took me two days to pluck up the courage to speak to Andy. He was the only one who had ever shown the slightest concern for my feelings. There had been moments, of course, when I could have cheerfully spat blood at him, but of all my colleagues I knew Andy would listen.

He shook his head and moved his weight from one foot to the other. "I realise what you are trying to do, Lester, I realise what hopes you have, but I don't think it's a good idea."

I was astounded. I suppose I'd expected

him to clap me on the back and tell me it was about time, or something.

"You don't know what you are getting yourself into," he said. "You never saw the way you acted under hypnosis. It wasn't just weird, it made my skin crawl."

I knew what was wrong. Andy didn't want me to change. He liked me the way I was, pliable and downtrodden. Where would he and the others get their fun from if not from me?

"You can't be certain that what we saw was part of your subconscious. You're just taking it for granted, Lester. I mean, it might have been something else. A past life, for instance."

"A past life!" I'd thought he was being serious and he was treating this whole conversation as a joke.

"Don't mock it," Andy retorted. "I read this book once and it damned well unsettled me. I wish I'd still got it. I'd get you to read it."

Exactly where, I don't know, but somewhere in that short exchange I found the reassurance I needed. I'd show them. I'd show them all.

I stopped by a few shops on the way home from work, stylish shops, their windows full of the fashionable clothing I'd always avoided. The new me would need new clothes, brighter, better-cut clothes, more in keeping with someone positive and self-assured. Tomorrow was my appointment, the next day Saturday. I'd come back and send my credit card through the roof.

Friday was a hell of a day to work through. I was jittery the whole time. Nervous excitement, I suppose. Andy kept frowning in my direction, but didn't say anything. I was surprised to realise that he hadn't said anything to the others, either. Nobody ribbed me about my appointment with a hypno-therapist. Obviously, nobody else knew. I caught him as we were closing the office.

"Thanks for not telling the others," I said.

He half nodded, half smiled, and then a grim look came into his eyes.

"You've not changed your mind, have you?"

I shook my head and he sighed in resignation.

"Then let me come with you. It'll be good to have a bit of moral support, and besides. . . ." his voice quietened and he licked his lips, "besides, it might be an idea to have someone on hand you can count on, just in case."

"In case of what?"

"In case this hypnotist isn't sure whether he's brought you out of it properly. Garmaine wasn't sure, was he?"

"Garmaine was a charlatan."

"Well, at least I know you. I will be able to tell if something's wrong."

I thought about it. I could certainly have done with the moral support. "You promise you won't give the others a blow-by-blow commentary on Monday?"

"Of course I won't. Did I tell them about your appointment?"

I felt quite rosy, waiting for Andy to come off the phone. Even without being my new self it seemed that I had a friend I could trust.

It gave me a warm, comfortable feeling. Today was truly going to be a breakthrough.

The rooms were small, but well decorated, the appointments secretary efficient and welcoming. Dr. Harshof was older than I expected, a little doddery, too. Andy frowned at me, but I ignored him and explained to the doctor why there were two of us.

"Most people like to bring a friend to their first consultation." He peered at Andy through his glasses. "If you wouldn't mind taking a seat in the waiting room, young man."

Andy gave me a quick wink and left. I felt awkward, as if I'd been cast adrift, and it took a determined effort not to walk out after him.

Dr. Harshof smiled at me and indicated a comfortable chair opposite his own. "I shall, in fact, I am now, recording our conversation," he pointed to a small microphone on an adjacent table, "and I shall continue to record all that passes between us until the end of the appointment. A client's problem is rarely ironed out in one session and I find an audio recording a good method of charting progress. The microphone is very powerful and will pick up even the smallest noise, so don't feel that you have to speak into it."

The doctor settled himself in his chair while I tried to swallow my nervousness. If he hadn't mentioned the microphone I doubt that I would have noticed it. Ignoring its existence was going to be harder than he maintained.

"Well, Mr. Wardell - Lester - we have a lot of talking to do before I can decide whether submitting you to hypnosis will be beneficial. Perhaps you'd like to tell me everything, absolutely everything, to enable me to make an accurate judgment."

My palms were greasy. In fact, I felt clammy all over, but I forced myself to talk to him, to tell him what I've told you.

"I think it's worth a try," he mused. "One can never tell until one tries, of course, so I can't promise anything."

He smiled at me and I forced a smile back. I just wished that he'd get on with it.

"Now, remove your jacket and your shoes and make yourself comfortable. I want you as relaxed as possible."

I tried hard to relax, but I was sweating again and my tongue felt like a sheet of sandpaper.

"Ready?" the doctor asked. He dimmed the lights and lifted a hand in front of my face.

"Lester, I want you to focus on my..."

It was different from the last time. With Garmaine, I hadn't known that I'd been put under, but this time I did. I was pleased; I would understand what was going on and there'd be no chance of me suffering the resentment that I had the last time.

I looked about me, waiting for whatever would happen to happen. Dr. Harshof must have dimmed the office more. It was quite dark, not totally black, but too dark to see much - see anything, really.

Perspiration forced itself through my pores in one, fear-filled pulse. *I couldn't see anything.*

I gripped the arms of the chair, but my clawing fingers passed straight through them without a single sensation. I launched myself out of the seat, half admitting, half denying, the slow realisation that there

wasn't a chair there at all.

I turned round to face the space I'd just been sitting in, determined to know the truth. I couldn't see the chair. I felt for it with my hands, but there was nothing there to touch. I stepped back feeling sick - and looked at the floor.

Was there a floor? Standing there, motionless, it felt as if there was a floor. A thick carpet-pile moved beneath my feet. But it shouldn't move, should it, not if I wasn't moving.

I jumped a mile - it seemed like a mile - trying to escape my predatory surroundings. It took a long time for me to float back down again - and I was floating, of that I was sure, floating as if attached to some gigantic parachute.

I touched the floor again. It held me, but I could still feel it moving beneath my feet, a truly odd sensation. I tried to think of it as normal, tried to ignore it, tried to think. I forced myself to be calm. If I wasn't calm I wouldn't be able to do it, and if I didn't try I'd never know.

I stepped off the floor down on to a stair, and then down on to another stair, and then down on to another. And then I cried out.

There weren't any stairs. I'd just made myself believe there were. There hadn't been a chair. There wasn't a floor, or a ceiling, a wall, or a building. There wasn't anything. I was in some sort of void where nothing existed.

Did I exist? I forced myself to believe that I existed. The alternative was too horrifying to contemplate.

I exist. I exist. I exist.

I patted my arm with my hand. I patted both arms with both hands. I patted my legs and my chest, pushed my fingers through my hair, felt my face, the slight stubble I'd grown since breakfast. Every part of me was there. I existed.

Thank God.

I looked about me. There was nothing to see. I looked at the darkness itself. There was an opacity about it which shifted in its density.

"Hello?" I said. "Is there anybody out there?"

My voice sounded hollow, far away, the question positively stupid. I stared into the shifting darkness until my eyes ached with the strain. I hadn't been wrong. Part of the moving darkness wasn't moving. Was something really there, or was that part still because I wanted to believe it was still?

"Hello?" My voice sounded tremulous this time, still very hollow, still far away. "Please, answer if you're there. I can't see too well."

"I'm here."

I gasped with the shock of hearing an answer.

"Are you alright?"

The voice sounded genuinely concerned and I almost burst into tears.

"Don't go away," I said. "I must talk to you. Don't leave."

"I won't."

It was a woman. Her voice wasn't particularly soft, rather low-keyed, in fact. She sounded neither young nor old. It didn't really matter. She was someone to talk to, someone who might be able to explain what had happened to me.

I tried to walk towards her, but I wasn't covering any distance. My heart sank. Perhaps she wasn't real, after all. Perhaps



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I'd wanted someone so desperately that someone had come into existence, just as the stairs had.

I stared at her. She didn't look like a woman, or even a human being. She was just a vague shape, a non-moving piece of the darkness which surrounded me.

Emotion exploded in my chest and surged up my throat. "You don't exist!"

"I do!" Her voice was fierce now. "I do exist! If you don't want me here just say so. Don't say that I don't exist!"

I bit back my panic and wiped one eye. A hallucination wouldn't speak like that, would it?

"I thought you'd be different," she continued. Her harsh tone had eased a little. She sounded hurt. "But you're not, are you? You're just like Lester."

"I am Lester," I said. "I am Lester."

She didn't reply at once. When she did her voice was quieter still. "Yes, I know you are. I meant the strong Lester."

She was talking as if there were two of us. Good God! There were two of us. She was talking about my other self.

"You know the other Lester?"

"You mean the strong Lester?"

There was a strange quality about her voice now, which made my skin prickle. It took me a long time to get my tongue around the words I wanted to say.

"How many Lesters are there?"

"I don't know," she said. "Lots. I don't know exactly how many."

"I - I don't understand," I said.

She didn't answer. The darkness began to grow oppressive.

"What is this place?"

"Lester," she said.

Perspiration oozed down my back in cold, clammy rivulets. I felt as if I were breathing through syrup.

"You mean, we're *inside* Lester?"

"Inside? This is Lester. You are Lester. I am Lester."

My voice rose an octave. "You're Lester?"

"Of course. I'm the feminine Lester as you are the introvert Lester. There is the avaricious Lester and the...."

"No! You don't exist! You don't exist!"

"Don't say that," she snapped. "The strong Lester was always saying that, always shouting he didn't belong with us. We thought you'd be different, but you're not. You're exactly the same. It's hurtful."

I slapped my hands over my ears, trying to block out her voice. Each sob I expelled hollowed my chest that little bit more. I fell to my knees in my misery. This wasn't happening. This could not possibly be happening to me.

A sudden draught, like that of a door being opened and closed, swirled the silent darkness around me. I held my breath and forced my eyes as wide-open as was possible.

"Don't leave me!"

I struck out with my arms, flailing the darkness trying to find where she had gone, but there was nothing, nothing ex-

cept the swirling, silent void.

"I don't know what to say," Andy murmured.

I raised my eyes from the rippling thick-pile carpet and rested them on Andy. He was rippling, too, sitting cross-legged opposite me in the dimness, but it didn't matter.

"Say nothing," I said. "It's just good to have you here."

He smiled at me. "That's okay. Things will be different now."

I nodded and smiled back at him. All I'd ever wanted was a friend, someone I could trust.



L. D. ACASTER

Married with one son, who also writes, Linda Acaster lives in rural Yorkshire within spitting distance of the North Sea.

Her previously published fiction includes historical, romantic and thriller material, as well as the occasional fantasy.

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By
Julian Flood

The night before a drop I never sleep. Three o'clock in the morning is the best time to walk the sidewalks of Vegas, there's no-one around, they're all inside playing their luck and the traffic doesn't start to build until the sun comes up and the temperature hits the roof. Then they all totter off to their beds while the day shift moves in. I never gamble, just drift through the casinos and watch, hidden in the crowds. But when I went into Nero's Temple that morning the Big One was unoccupied. It's the highest paying slot in the world, so there's normally a queue of about a hundred suckers. It's free, you get one pull and if you win it pays a fortune. If not you go to the back or move on. Most people relax and move on. Having already lost a million it makes it easier to go and throw away a few thousand. The Big One is very good for business. I'd never played the Big One.

The guards were hardly bothering to watch as I pulled the chromed handle. Four reels clattered, the bells banged into place one two three four and every light in the casino flashed and the Big One laid a single coin. The whole place was quiet, the roulette wheels, even the slots stopped their rattle ching. Everyone was looking at me. I picked up the coin and looked at it.

On one side it had a great big number ten, underneath it said *Ten Million*, on the back it said *Subject To Ratification*. The guards fell in beside me, nothing heavy.

"Let's go and see the manager," said the giant on the left.

"Right away" said his righthand twin. They elbowed their way through the crush. I felt like I'd been caught with my hand in the

President's panties, then some guy near the front recognised me.

"Lucifer Baines, it is, look at that, Lucifer Baines and he's won the Big One." The mutter spread through the crowd, became a shout. "Baines! Baines! Lucifer! Baines!" I grinned and waved, punching my fist in time with the chant. You've got to be good to the fans.

The manager was an understanding guy, when he saw who I was. He offered me a drink. I refused, I never drink before a drop, but then I never gamble before a drop. He offered again. I took a double, straight. I was shaking.

"We'd normally have a doctor in here peering up your ass and past your tonsils. You'd not believe some of the jiggers they use to fix the BO. We had one sucker who had electronics planted where his right lung should have been. We gave him corrective surgery, on the house."

"Anaesthetic?"

His mouth smiled. "Not a lot. We have to be careful with the machines, check up on our winners." He held out one manicured hand in case he'd offended me. "Not on you though, Mr Baines, not on you. We never hassle millionaires. I'm surprised you bothered to play, another ten million can't be that important."

"My laundry expenses are high. I get through a lot of underwear." They put that quote on the wires and it was all round the world by morning. I never read it though, I was too busy.

"How would you like the money? Draft, note or direct?"

"Give it to me in chips." It was good to see him blink. He wasn't a drop fan, didn't

know the net of superstitions we live by and die with. Blue Flash Lumumba now, he wore copper pants. Said they'd bring him luck and if they didn't he'd make the prettiest meteor you ever saw. Upfront Sue reckons if she can get her CG one centimetre higher she'll be able to spit into Dead Centre without getting out of her chute harness. She says it's aerodynamics, she's got the calculations to prove it, but her CG's been moving up for years and she still says it needs to be up just one centimetre more. We've all got our own but we all agree on one. Whatever you do before you drop, don't win. I had a lot of losing to do.

I sat at the wheel with the fans crowding round, two pretty women in place of the guards, watched the table for five minutes and started to play. I couldn't lose. I put a hundred thousand on black and it came up. I let it ride and it came up again. I moved it to red. Red came up. Onto sixteen. Bingo. Thirteen. Win.

Any fool can throw away money; that wouldn't count. What I had to do was stop being lucky. By five I was up to twenty-three million. I was sweating blood and my companions left me. They must have been able to smell the fear. Then the lady left me as well and by twenty past I'd lost the lot. I flicked the last ten thousand to the croupier, tipped an imaginary hat to the crowd and walked out to a clear pink morning. I felt great. I was walking down Main when a cruising hooker, up late or out early, pulled up beside me in a big red convertible. "Hey there, need a ride?" I started to laugh, an hour before and I'd have given her a hundred thou just to get rid of it and here I was with five dollars. I flipped her the coin.



FARNELL

"Have a coffee on me. Sorry."

"Big spender!" The convertible roared off into the traffic. I walked back to the Golden Palm, picked up my rucksack and caught a box to the roof. The chopper was waiting.

Three hours later I opened my eyes and we were at the Nome launch site. I got a coffee from the machine, the worst coffee in the whole world and stepped back into someone. I felt a nudge, two nudges. I knew that gentle touch.

"Upfront Sue," I said without turning "you've moved that old CG up again." She got hold of my face from behind and pulled my head round - my nose lent her some leverage and anyway her workouts have given her a lot of muscle up top.

"Still got the re-entry shield I see." She tweaked my nose. It was said as a joke and the other guys in the room pissed themselves, but her fingers felt as if she'd like to pull my nostrils over my head.

"I feel better meeting you, Upfront, now I know that I've been unlucky right up to the jump." We all josh around, nerves, but with me and Sue it was personal. We'd had a thing going three years back, when she was still four inches shorter than me and the superstructure was not quite so spectacular. Now we could meet eyeball to eyeball. In her search for the perfect centre of gravity she'd first had her legs stretched, and I was so sore about her leaving me I tried to get her tag changed to Tits-on-Stilts. It caught on with the guys for a while but the networks wouldn't wear it, too many kids follow the drops. Then my little joke gave her the idea of raising her CG by upping the weight in her blouson and a drop star was born. Upfront Sue had a following only a few of us could match, and she rated number three behind Lumumba and me. It was a taut season.

"Looking at you gives me an idea. Maybe my theory's wrong, with a conk that size you must have the world's highest CG but you can't fly for shit."

"Perfectly balanced by an enormous weight lower down."

"Not that I remember."

Fireworks Lee shut us up. He never talks much, quiet little guy but we all like him. You'd never think from the way he acts that he holds the speed record, orbit to Dead Centre, flaming all the way down. They say he needed three months surgery to fix the burns and he's number ten now, or, to put it another way, last. Each season he's going to retire and each season he's back. Lumumba was losing his edge, Upfront Sue and Lucifer Baines were breathing fire down his neck. It was the last



drop of the series.

We didn't say any more. As the ship trundled out to the launch point I could see the really dedicated fans beneath their aircraft, waving and chanting, ready to jump aboard and race us to Dead Centre, watching the screens in flight so as not to miss a second. The rockets hit and forced me back into the seat. There's a pause when the boosters cut off and the air-breathers are just firing up. You float up against your straps and it's like falling out of the drop-hole. That's the point I always notice for the first time that I'm scared. Then the Satans start to crackle and you get the illusion of gravity and you can fool yourself for a few more minutes.

It's very quiet on the way up to orbit, ten jockeys alone with their thoughts. I don't think I've heard anyone say anything until we're all in the locker room, then it's just curses as we struggle into the layers of

clothing. Most of the kit's a waste of time, but the inspectors are hot as hell. This weight of garments, that insulation factor. They weigh the suit to a microgram, check its CG to a thousandth of a millimetre. You can design all the fancy aerodynamics you like but the constraints are so tight that it all boils down to three things, skill, luck and guts. The winner of the world series has the most guts, the most skill and the most luck, for that year at least. I was number two and hungry for that last little roll of the dice.

Cannonball Joe was next to me. He'd been smoothing down his suit each jump till he looked like a beachball with legs. I went in for fun, strakes, a bit of decorative artwork, I'd even thought of putting on a forked tail but the sponsors turned it down. All my decorations burn off during the first pass but look good on the launch camera. Earlier that year they'd given me a weight

penalty so now I was jumping three kilos overweight and ablating down to spot on for touch-down. Blue Flash Lumumba was covered in foil, gleaming copper from head to foot. He was going to flash blue to his home crowd and how.

"Dead Centre in two minutes. Good luck everyone, see you in the Dead Centre locker room." That's when it hits you for real, churning inside, your heart thumps and your fingers tingle with the adrenalin. The jump crew slaps the side of your helmet, thumbs up, your chutes are clicked on, main on the front, spare on your left shoulder. You shuffle to the drop holes all in a line. The red light turns to green and your heart stops. With a big woosh of air the ship blows you into space and you tumble out three hundred clicks above the Earth with Dead Centre right below and enough energy in your hurtling carcass to fry your balls off. Take one drop-jockey. Take one impact point. Arrange for the two to meet.

The alignment jets puffed crystals of ice as everyone spun themselves. Head first, somehow, it doesn't seem so bad. The dispersion moved us apart pretty quickly. I saw Cannonball fire his first retro straight off and he dropped away, gaining on us until he'd vanished against the blue of the Atlantic. Then Sue went, then the others. I held on for a few minutes then fired two and down we all went together.

"Hi there China, watch me flare." Lumumba, glowing copper green and blue. We all like hitting the air in darkside first, you look good and you get the biggest eyeball audience. They run out and watch you flame past then back in to catch the TV action. No-one's ever died on the first graze. I hit a touch harder than I'd wanted and I was sweating as I skipped out of the atmosphere to let the red-hot front of the suit radiate the energy away into space. Cannonball was after the record, I saw his flare for the second time as we broke out into daylight. Lumumba was right with him and it must have been there he made his mistake. They said afterwards he only screamed once, I didn't hear it though, I was too preoccupied with my own affairs. I had my tongue on the switch to fire my third shot when I heard Sue. She sounded scared.

"Oh shit." They let it out on all the networks, everyone was too shaken to move, they'd seen what had happened. The big cameras on the jets and satellites homed in on that one little figure. They're prissy about bad language, even though they'll broadcast your dying screams as you burn.

"What's the matter, Sue?" I sounded scared too.

"Chutes. They've both unclipped." Far below I could see the little flashes as Sue's only link with the world flared into ash. I was thinking hard.

"Break break, all stations." The cackle on the airwaves died. "Sue, don't fire until I tell you, Woomera, how far ahead is she?"

"Two hundred clicks."

Fire one, pause, fire two. Wait.

"Sue, we'll need some air for manoeuvre. Don't fire until I tell you. Woomera, how far now?"

"Fifty, three point five lower, closing

slowly."

"Sue, fire one now."

"Done."

She shone against the darkening sky. We both began to glow as the atmosphere bit. I angled my arms, got her centred and said a prayer to the lady. I was far too fast, closing like a train, impact in three, two, fire one, fire two, fire three, NOW. BLAAM. Not too bad, like running full tilt into a wall. I wrapped my legs around her and angled for lift. Sue had her back arched.

"Just like the old days," she said.

We didn't make a lot of height, I'd thrown away too much energy. In the few minutes we were in free fall Sue clicked our docking lugs together and scrambled onto my back. "Just like the old days," I said. "Stand by retro."

She knocked on my head with a knuckle and jammed her helmet against it. I could just hear her voice conducting through.

"Not yet, Lou. Have you thought what we weigh together? We'll drop like a lead brick. We'll gain minutes. Are we going for a safe landing or are we racing?"

"Damn right we're racing." I shouted so loud I was hoarse for a week. I hadn't pushed the transmit button so no-one heard me, just Sue. Privately I wondered what would happen when we hit dirt; whoever got there first was going to take a lot of punishment, double weight on one chute. Sue started crawling up my back.

"What are you doing?"

"Getting the CG upfront. It'll help, you see."

We hit hard air, both firing retros in synchronised bursts. America spread out below and grew. It's all brown from up there. By thirty thousand I knew we had a good one going, as we fell through ten I could tell from the wind count that we were in the groove. With our combined and complicated shape we had damn all manoeuvrability but we crabbed towards Dead Centre and popped the chute at about a thousand up. We piled in two clicks out of town. Just before impact Sue shimmied further up my back and the only legs that hit belonged to me. I felt something break. We rolled a couple of times and ate dirt. I pulled off my helmet and lay on my face, listening to the roar of the crowd around the bullseye and letting the air dry the sweat. They were chanting. *Upfront! Upfront! Upfront Sue!*

"Hey Sue, they've not noticed I'm here. Sue? You OK?"

I looked around. About a K further out was the gleaming shape of Cannonball, waddling along in his fat suit, still wearing his helmet. Rule 45, the whole suit must reach Point Zero. Two hundred metres towards Dead Centre was Sue, helmet under her arm, running like a demon. I got up, dumped my chutes, grabbed my hat and started to run.

With four hundred metres to go I was just getting into my stride. Welcome to Dead Centre. Please drive care-

fully. I would have run right through a car if it'd got in my way. Sue was flagging. We reached the inner neck-and-neck and she put on a spurt. With a couple of metres to go she dived for it and hit the spot under me. I pushed her hand aside, slapped my own on the red mark and fainted. I'd run all that way on a broken leg to come second.

That evening we had the post-drop party, broke open Blue Flash's locker and drank his health. There was a bottle of champagne each. I've got whisky in my locker, nine bottles. When I'm not there I'll leave them all with a hell of a hangover. They say his copper pants looked like the Fourth of July as he burned up. They never tried the little guy who jimied Sue's connectors, they had the video evidence but the drop fans in the jail beat him to death. Whoever put him up to it got away.

Even after a bottle of champagne my splinted leg hurt like hell. Sue came and stood next to me.

"Coming my way, number two?" she said. Her brown eyes were friendly. My leg didn't seem to hurt any more.

"Don't mind if I do, champ." She helped me to the door.

We stuck it until a month before the next season, about the time you need to get into hard training if you want to make a mark. Then one day I packed my rucksack, hid it in the wardrobe and told myself to wake up at three. I didn't touch her to say goodbye, just crept out of the dark room with my sack on my shoulder and the note I'd taken so long to write in my hand. Sue was standing by the door, sack on her back, her note on the table.

She took my envelope and read my words aloud. "Sorry about this. I guess I wasn't born to be lucky every day, just now and then."

I read hers. "Sorry about this. I couldn't take having kids, it would screw up my CG."

We grinned at each other and walked out of the door. The air was warm, still. For a minute we breathed it together.

"Tell me something Sue, when we linked up, before we re-entered, did you really want to get the CG forward or did you figure that it would mean I hit first?"

"Someone had to take the strain."

"You're a hell of a competitor, Upfront."

"Don't be too lucky, Lucifer." I waited politely. She turned left so I turned right.

Drop-jockeys all live alone.



JULIAN FLOOD

This is the first published work of fiction from Julian Flood, his only other success to date is a short factual article in a military magazine about war assets. He owns a small nursery growing climbing plants, likes real ale and real SF. He spends the winter tucked up with his word processor and a glass of real ale.

THE DRAGON, ^{(FLY} ^{FLY} ^{FLY)}

By
Gillian M. Paddock

She sits on a pinnacle of honey-combed stone, a finger stabbing insolent into the heavens, so frost-eaten and windworn it seems that the fragile rock must splinter beneath her weight. Maybe it would fall were she not stick-thin, her flesh eroded away much as the rock has been, her skin tanned to the sallow

colour of the land. She might have been a carving of the ancient, desert peoples, an earth-spirit or air-walker out of their fire-told tales, shaped by a forgotten hand in the friable, ochre sandstone, but for her wispy halo of hair, bleached white now under the fierce suns, and the bright flicker of her eyes. They say she has sat thus for twenty

years, with no shelter under the wild sky, a stylite, unmoving; a saint on her pillar of stone.

Far to the west, at the suns-set edge of the world, is a dark smudge of a city, ten days journey away across the sharp sands on camel-back, only two by skim-raft. Sometimes they venture out here, the tourists,

to stare and wonder at her in this barren place, leaving only footprints and litter, or little, senseless scrawlings in the buttery rock. Then again, the dragons are here too, and perhaps it is only that presence which tempts humanity so far from the safety of its city, to squint up into the brilliance of the twin suns and to gawp and cry out at alien, delicate wings dipping through a cobalt sky.

The Dragons of Teusza!

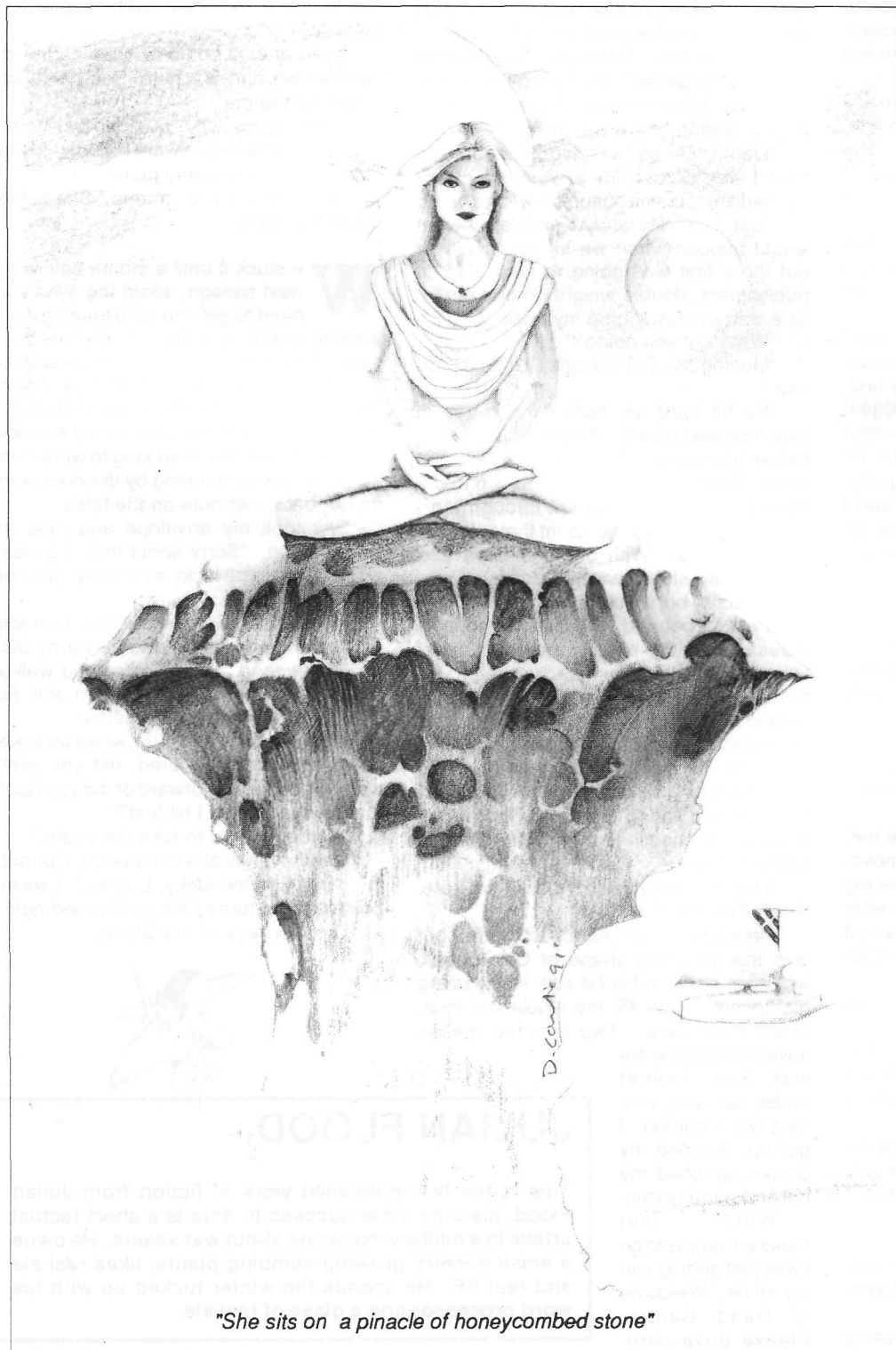
The explorers who first charted this world, those who weighed and measured its grains of sand, and who sifted and catalogued its beasts, birds and flowers - such narrow-souled creatures! - they were blind to the glory of Teusza's winged-folk. Perhaps the dragons hid from them; whatever the way of it, the colonists were on-world for many handfuls of seasons before discovering that they were not the sole owners of Teusza's skies.

Tell then of dragons: sing of their forms and colours!

Yes, sing of the wondrous, liquid contours of them, of the sudden, fierce lightness of them, of the double sunlight dribbling in rainbows along their scales! Two metres long, from lashing tail-tip to the curve of their whiskers. Yes, whiskers, bristling furiously from their narrow snouts, like any Earthly cat. Strap-thin bodies, fluid and seemingly boneless, serpentine and sinuous; large, yet not large enough for any human to dream of riding them, for not even an infant could have clung to such smooth, rippling backs. Wings like fragile, rustling paper, appearing too insubstantial to bear any weight, and little, delicate limbs, eight in all, each blessed with a long, six-fingered hand.

Ah, but the colours of them, the copper blues, the lethal lead greens and iron oxide reds! Describe them on paper: black-inked words will never convey their fearful swiftness or their terrible grace, nor tell how the sight of them tears at the human heart, twisting it in pincers of joy.

What supports them in the thin airs of the desert plateau? Certainly not those absurd wings, since they



"She sits on a pinnacle of honeycombed stone"

scarcely need to beat them to remain suspended in the ether, floating without effort, sometimes hanging motionless and curled asleep in midair. Perhaps they are hollow-boned, perhaps lifted by internal sacs of some light gas. Some have said that they fly by means of mind or magic and no life-scientist has any evidence to contradict such lunatic supposition, since no dragon has ever suffered capture. No net or trap can hold them, no drugged dart or bullet touch them in flight, not even dead do they yield up their secrets, for no dragon-corpse has ever been found on the bare plains.

Tell now of the ways of dragons!

Tell of how they spiral up through the air, until it thins, rarefies and fades altogether, until they wheel, like a cloud of iridescent soap-bubbles, under the cold, sharp stars. It seems to amuse them to mob the spacecraft that ply to and fro from Teusza, playing chicken with the pilot's nerves, and sometimes riding the fiery bow-waves of re-entry, as dolphins do, careless of the incandescence, the vacuum, the gravity, as if such physical things have no meaning for them. Perhaps they do not breathe. How else could they thrive in such harshness? A mystery then, Teusza's mythical creatures, and drawing all the more attention because of that.

And is there no more to tell of dragons?

They have no love for humankind, an opinion they express with needle-tooth and razor-claw if required to, although their preference is to avoid man rather than harm him. Some subtle cunning warns them that to kill their un-friends will invite more determined hunting, so they leave their victims skin-scarred, perhaps missing an eye, invariably alive. The tourists they tolerate, preening and displaying in front of their audience with indifferent vanity, provided that the visitors don't stay too long. Of all humanity, only the solitary woman, the hermit, will they allow to remain in their lands.

What of her, that lonely woman? How does she live in the heart of the desert, trapped on the tip of her pillar?

The dragons feed her, plucking fruit for her from orchards that lie beyond the mountains, bringing her fat, greasy insects that they snap on the wing or choice slivers of raw meat from their prey. Sometimes little troops of them raid the nomad camps to steal fresh-baked cakes or scraps of fish left to dry in the suns. All of this she accepts gravely, eating even the foul without protest or prejudice. Water they carry to her, cupping it in folds of their wings and letting her lap from the saucers of their flesh. The indigenous peoples have built a little shrine at the foot of her pinnacle, where they leave food for her when they pass by, their reward a glimpse of the dragons' sky-dance.

They say that once a young man came to her pillar and dared to scale it, that the dragons didn't pluck him from the rockface and hurl him down. And is it so?

He was tall and strong, proud of that strength, proud of the stretch of his arm and the pull of his muscles. His name was Tyagi and his skin was black, but his long hair was yellower than the desert. The pil-



lar he climbed for a dare; it took him three hours and much sweat, and he tested himself on the raw edge of fear each time his hand slipped from a hold or the dry rock fell to powder under his fingers. By the time he flopped over the rim of the summit he was near exhaustion, his hands flayed and bleeding, his sides heaving with exertion. All the while, the dragons looked on.

She had been there a little less than a year then. Her skin was roughened yet not dried up by the winds and her hair was still brown, the dry brown of dead autumn grass.

"Good day, lady," panted Tyagi, for he was polite and besides, having climbed so far to view the hermit, he found that he liked what he saw.

Eyes like fallen pieces of sky gazed past him and there was no expression on her face. It was as still and serene as the land is, touched by humanity but enduring.

"You have a fine view!" Tyagi observed, unabashed by her silence, settling himself for a rest before his descent. "On a fine day such as today it's grand to be up here but in the rain and wind, that must be a different matter, and, pardon me for bringing the subject up, what will you do when winter sweeps the plateau with snow?"

The dragons began to sing then, their uncanny purring hymn to the empty skies,

and they spiralled up to dance a measure on the wind. The young man had no choice but to watch, as if they had laid a spell on him. She watched also, and did a fragment of a smile touch her lips?

"When the snow falls, they will keep it from my head."

Tyagi started at the sound of her voice, the sound of dead leaves scratching on a pane of glass, the sound of winter's ice strangling the ripples on a lake. She spoke slowly, as if she'd unremembered human speech. The dragons floated close, gazing at her out of one eye and then the other, as if amazed at the sudden rasp of her voice.

"They care for me." This time she did smile, briefly, as if it made her cheeks hurt. "This they have done ever since I came here."

Tyagi said softly: "And where did you come from?"

She wrenched her sky-hued eyes from the cluster of dragons and looked at him for the first time. "Everywhere and everywhere. I have forgotten the names."

Tyagi folded his long legs under him, finding comfort on the bare bones of rock in the hope of a long tale. "But you have a name?"

"My father called me Teusza. He loved this world and dreamed of coming here."

She sighed and one of the dragons unravelled from the flock and swam over to her, crooning and draping itself across her thin shoulders like a ragged leather cape. Tyagi tried not to stare at it, for the dragons never touched the ground and the legends said that to do so was bane to them. The awful nearness of the beast burned his eyes, much as staring at a light-source will, the play of the sunlight on its red-copper, blood-ruby and rosy quartz scales dazzling and hypnotic. The woman reached up and scratched its chin absently, then continued to speak. "I was born on the far side of the sky, in a black pit of a city, a cold, fearsome place where we starved and struggled through what passed for life, my father and I, alone. I knew no mother - she left us."

Tyagi let her rest for a little after so long a speech. "Tell me of your father."

"My father was a great man. He was a weaver of tales, a maker of songs. There was a time when we lived at the court of a merchant-prince, a time of riches, comfort and joy, but the world changed for the worst and our fortunes changed with it. My father's skills were belittled, scorned and he turned his hand to the common trades to feed us, spending his days in mines or factories. For years we survived, sustained by his dreams. Through all the bleak, hungry nights he would sit in the darkness and tell me of Teusza and the dragons." She shivered and the wonder draped about her gaunt body hummed gently to her. "I can still hear his voice, the music of it and how his words would sparkle in the misery of the city. He did so want to come here and I believe he would have, except that he died."

The dragon moaned, somehow in tune with the sorrow in her eyes. Tyagi did not dare to speak, she looked so distant and vulnerable.

"These were his last words to me." Teusza continued.

"'Go away from this terrible place,' he said. 'Don't let them kill you with their indifference, as they've destroyed me. Leave, and if you can, go to the world that I named you for.' I promised to obey - out of love I took up the burden of his geas. I had to sell his body, all of the marketable pieces, until I had enough money to leave. His skull I had them burn and carried that small part of him away with me. Many more empty years passed before I came here. I buried my father's ashes at the base of this rock, where he may rest and dream for eternity, and then I climbed up to get a better view of the dragons."

Tyagi waited for some minutes but she was silent, having reached the end of her history. "And you stayed here?"

"I was carried here by a promise born out of my father's longing. It wasn't my dream, but I was curious to see what had sustained his hopes for so long. Only when I climbed up here and looked out over the desert did I realise the truth of it and know that I'd come home." The dragon blew into her ear, tickling her with its frivolous whiskers, and she laughed, sweet and high as a child would, at which the serpent-thing sprang from her, darting up from its perch

and somersaulting suns-ward.

"Scant comfort for a home." The young man brushed the gritty sand from his skin, where it had adhered and indented his flesh. "Don't you miss warmth, shelter, companionship?"

"I've friends in abundance." She waved at the dragons, who had moved a small distance away to investigate the arrival of a skim-raft. "I have a name for each of them: the bluest one is Be, the green-and-gold Do, that brown pair there are Dance and Leap. My favourite of them all, my special friend, the largest red who was here just now is called Fly."

Down in the desert the raft had stopped and its occupants were waging war on the dragons. Tyagi looked on in horror at the blue-green stabs of lasers and the little sparkling clouds of propellant gas from handheld missile-firers. For all the ferocity of the attack none of the dragons appeared to have been touched.

"They cannot hurt them." Teusza said, smiling, as if the hunters were playing a harmless game. "Sometimes I don't believe that men will ever accept that fact."

"Are the beasts then indestructible?"

"The dragons are" the girl said, as if that explained all of their mystery. "They are our dreams."

The skirmish went on for the best part of half an hour, until the dragons tired of dancing targets for the weapons spitting death, dived in close to deliver a few scratches to indicate their displeasure and climbed into the vault of the sky in a lazy helix, like birds slouching on a thermal. The hunters limped their raft back towards the city.

"This is no kind of life for a young woman like you." Tyagi declared. "What if a stray dart or beam should injure you?"

"My friends would not permit it."

Tyagi shook his head. "Come down with me, Teusza. I'll take you back to the city and take care of you - you should have a man of your own and children by now. You deserve more than a stump of sand-blasted rock."

"I have all that I need." She returned, with infuriating content. "For empty years of my life all that kept me alive was the memory of my father's dream. Now I'm living it."

The suns had raced to the horizon and were vying with each other to splash spoonfuls of red and orange across the sky, while one guilty, premature star glared disdainfully down from its zenith, a prim, barren aunt embarrassed by the behaviour of children.

"I must go, before it grows too dark to climb down." Tyagi shivered at the bright edge of the twilight wind. "Please come with me."

The girl merely shook her head. Tyagi shrugged and eased himself past the overhang but he'd scarcely inched a span down the cliff when a pair of strong, wiry hands caught him under his arms and a second set gripped his belt, lifting him away from the powdery rock. The young man cried out and looked up into the fanged and feline-smiling ruby face of the dragon Fly. The

shock of being suspended in clear air and the warm strangeness of the creature's touch kept him frozen throughout the lazy spiral to the plain, although his pulse beat in his throat as a fox might thrash in a snare. As soon as his toes touched solid ground the dragon released him and he could breathe again. He all but ran away from the rock outcrop, not daring to look back until he had covered several hundred metres.

She sat there with the crimson beast draped about her shoulders and when she saw him turn, she raised her hand in a cheery wave.

And did he love her then, black Tyagi, lion-man?

Yes, although he didn't know it. He'd loved her from that first look into the sky-pools of her eyes. Years later he found a girl to wed, with oak-leaf hair and eyes like his rockbound hermit, yet he knew how he deceived himself and he was never truly happy.

And what became of her, beast-beloved, imprisoned by her own will on that insolent finger of stone?

She sat with the broken land about her, as if atop the mast of a wrecked ship, surveying the shattered spars and timbers, but mostly she watched her dragons. They say she sat there, unmoving, for a century, or maybe more, until a man came and climbed the pillar for a second time. Tyagi's grandson, they say he was, and as proud and strong as his sire. Over many hours he sweated and strained his way up and when he reached the summit he found only the desiccated husk of a woman's body that fell to dust when he touched it, while the dragons looked on and sang their inhuman dirge.

"**A**nd is that the end of the tale?" asked the unborn Child. "Didn't you promise me a happy ending?"

"As the peasants tell it the saint of the pillar didn't die and to this day she, or perhaps the ghost of her, may still be seen, sitting cross-legged on the buttery rock. Yet others say that she became one of the creatures she so loved, a goldscaled dragon, and that she remains there still, flying in the dry desert air."

"And is that true?"

"Who can say?" said the Mother, with a twitch of her whiskers and a lash of her butter-gold tail. "No man has ever counted the dragons of Teusza."



GILLIAN M. PADDOCK

Gillian Paddock lives in Cambridgeshire and is a bacteriologist who lives with eight cats, a book dealer and a computer called Phoebe. She has had one story published entitled "Playing Possum" and has written two novels which are in search of a publisher - one SF and one Fantasy.

Telescopes or Starships

Extra-terrestrial intelligence (ETI), is one of the most common themes within science fiction. What though of the *science* within the fiction? What can scientists conclude about the existence of ETI? The answer is, of course, in the absence of any evidence, absolutely nothing. This lack of proof however has not prevented many philosophers and scientists throughout the ages from debating the subject and, more often than not, from reaching a very definite opinion.

The modern era of the ETI debate began in 1959 when two astronomers, Giuseppe Cocconi and Philip Morrison, published a paper in *Nature* suggesting that, through the use of radio telescopes, we might be able to intercept communications from extra-terrestrial civilizations. The paper caused considerable excitement, for radio telescopes were quite new-fangled in those days and so it seemed possible that, for the first time in history, this area of largely philosophical speculation could be subjected to scientific experiment. Thus SETI (Search for Extra-terrestrial Intelligence), a term that encompasses thirty years worth of diverse and intermittent search effort by various workers at observatories all over the world, came into being.

The first such search was *Project Ozma* carried out by Frank Drake in 1960 using the Green Bank radio telescope (the one that fell down last year). He looked at two nearby sunlike stars, Tau Ceti and Epsilon Eridani. Apart from one unexplained signal from the direction of the second of these stars, which was never again reacquired, Drake heard nothing but silence. There have been numerous other searches since then, sometimes targeting individual stars, sometimes scanning entire star clusters and galaxies. Unexplained signals do occasionally crop up, but none have yet passed muster as a likely candidate for a signal from an alien civilization - natural phenomena or radio interference from the Earth itself being much more probable explanations. However, there is no reason to despair yet as our efforts so far have been anything but comprehensive. The problem is to know *where* and *when* to listen and at *what* radio frequency. A further complication is that the signal strength would be unknown, it could be polarized in two possible senses and the modulation scheme for encoding any message would also be unknown. Searching for a message from the stars is literally like looking for a needle in a nine dimensional cosmic haystack - an enormous parameter space of which we have only investigated a minute one part in 10^{17} ! Thus proponents of SETI are not at all discouraged by our lack of success so far - there's a whole lot more listening to be done yet, they say.

SETI however also has a particular philosophy behind it, the conviction that extra-terrestrial life and alien civilizations are commonplace. Without such a belief, SETI would have no supporters and no backing. Is, however, this kind of thinking at all reasonable? Many would say yes, indicating that the Sun is an ordinary star in a galaxy of one hundred billion stars, which itself is an ordinary spiral galaxy out of billions in the Universe. Surely therefore, they say, with so many other stars just like our own in the Milky Way and beyond, it is almost certain that there exist other planets like the Earth which are host to intelligent life forms. In order therefore to gauge the potential success of their search efforts, SETI astronomers used to attempt a rough estimate of the number of communicative technological civilizations in our galaxy by using the so-called Drake equation:

$$N = R \cdot f_p \cdot n_e \cdot f_i \cdot f_c \cdot L$$

where N = the number of existing technological civilizations;

R = the rate of star formation;

f_p = the fraction of stars with planetary systems;

n_e = the number of planets in each system suitable for the origin of life;

What would you spend your money on?

By Martyn J. Fogg

f_i = the fraction of such planets where life originates;

f_c = the fraction of such inhabited planets where intelligent life forms arise;

f_c = the fraction of the above which develop a technological civilization

L = the average lifetime of a technological civilization.

The Drake equation is not taken very seriously now, but in the sixties and seventies, it became the centre-piece of speculations concerning extra-terrestrial intelligence. A fashion became established for plucking values of the parameters almost out of thin air and plugging them into the equation. The vague discussions that often accompanied this process lent an entirely spurious sense of authenticity to the value of N obtained. Statements such as, "The number of technical civilizations in our galaxy is about one million," became very common.

Let's have a go ourselves, putting into the equation as "reasonable" values as we can and then see how reliable you think the process is.

R: We can probably estimate this parameter reasonably well. The number of stars in the galaxy is about 10^{11} , the age of the galaxy is about 10^{10} years, thus if we assume a constant star formation rate then $R = 10^{11} / 10^{10} = 10$ stars per year.

f_p : Modern cosmogonic theories are increasingly suggesting that planets are created in association with forming stars. No extrasolar planets have definitely been discovered yet, but we do have evidence for dusty discs around young stars which are precisely the kinds of structures planets are predicted to form from. Also, careful observations of the motion of nearby stars have shown that some of them wobble very slightly as they move, tentative evidence for the gravitational effects of unseen planetary companions. Thus, planetary systems may be as common as stars and we can choose $f_p = 1$.

n_e : Each star system will possess an *ecosphere*, a region in which temperature conditions are suitable for the origin of life. In our Solar System we have one planet that is obviously in the ecosphere, the Earth. Estimates of the width of the ecosphere have changed with the advance in astronomical theory. It used to be thought the ecosphere was wide and extended to close to the orbits of Venus and Mars. Then opinion changed suggesting that the zone was so narrow the Earth was only situated inside by a remote fluke. Now, the pendulum has swung back, the ecosphere is again thought to be quite wide, possibly encompassing Mars. Thus, perhaps it is reasonable to choose $n_e = 1$.

f_i : Now we really have to start guessing! The origin of life on the Earth is still very much a mystery; the only thing we are sure of is that it had happened only a few hundred million years after our planet's formation. This suggests that possibly life might originate automatically, given suitable conditions and a bit of time. Empassioned arguments have been put forward to this effect, but are often countered with equally vociferous counter arguments that the origin of life required such a long chain of unlikely events that it may have only occurred once in the entire Universe - on the Earth. Unfortunately we cannot do statistics with one data point - if we were to find fossil life on Mars (which was much more Earthlike early in its history) then this impasse would be overcome. Let's be optimistic and choose $f_i = 1$.

f_c : It is not commonly appreciated that complex life forms have only inhabited the Earth for about 13% of its lifetime. During the long aeons of the Precambrian Era, our planet was a sort of "slime-world", hosting little more than microorganisms such as bacteria and algae. When speaking of intelligence, then human beings, or our immediate semi-human ancestors, have only been about for a mere 0.1% of Earth history. Is it inevitable therefore that a planetary biosphere necessarily gives rise to an intelligent organism, or is our combination of large brain with manipulative hands an unlikely fluke? Just how *average* is

the Earth's story? We don't know and so must guess. A typical choice of scientists involved in the SETI program is $f_i = 0.1$.

f_c: The pace of human progress itself has not been linear. *Homo sapiens sapiens*, fully modern man, has been about for forty thousand years. Specimens of an earlier form of *Homo sapiens* have been found that are three hundred thousand years old. Yet, the beginnings of civilization only happened about six thousand years ago. We have only developed the capability to communicate over interstellar distances in the last half century. What proportion of intelligent life forms will develop a technology? Once again, we have no idea, so let's make it unlikely, but not impossible and choose $f_c = 0.1$.

L: Now for the most unknown quantity of all. How long does an "average" technological civilization last? Unlike the previous parameters, we do not even have *one* example to speculate over. Our present technological civilization is the first to have arisen on the Earth and it hasn't ended yet! It does not seem inherently impossible that a civilization might be able to persist over a geological time scale - say a billion years. It would also seem reasonable however that only a minority - say one percent - might achieve this effective immortality. Thus, the average lifetime of a civilization might be 0.01×10^9 , i.e. $L = 10^7$ years.

So, we've estimated values of all the parameters now, let's plug them into the Drake equation:

$$N = 10 \times 1 \times 1 \times 1 \times 0.1 \times 0.1 \times 10^7 = 10^6.$$

"The number of technical civilizations in our galaxy is about one million."

A million is one hell of a lot of ETs! In the words of one SETI proponent, the sky should be "softly humming with messages from the stars." Do you believe it? Well, maybe: after all, one has to be pretty pessimistic to reduce the output of the Drake equation from $N = 10^6$ to $N = 1$ (us).

However, since the mid seventies serious doubts have been cast on the whole SETI approach. What are the assumptions underlying SETI's philosophy? One of them is that civilizations will only attempt

to communicate by the fastest and easiest method possible, by using electromagnetic radiation. They will *not* try to visit other star systems and a sustained program of interstellar colonization is completely ruled out. In fact, the standard SETI thinking requires interstellar travel to be so close to being impossible as to be forever impractical - for *all* civilizations. Why is this? Well, for the simple reason that if civilizations were able to settle the stars, then they should already have colonized the Earth long before mankind ever evolved. All it would take would be one civilization to undertake a sustained effort of galactic colonization. With ships capable of cruise speeds of a tenth the speed of light (by no means impossible), then such a culture could fill the disc of the Milky Way in about a million years - only 0.01% of the age of the galaxy. This fundamental inconsistency, summed up by physicist Enrico Fermi in his famous lunchtime comment "Where is everybody?" has become known as Fermi's Paradox. There have been numerous papers published (including two by me) which attempt to provide a convincing explanation of Fermi's Paradox whilst simultaneously attempting to keep the dream of a Universe teeming with ETI alive. None have succeeded. Thus, statements such as, "Extra-terrestrial intelligent beings do not exist," are also becoming common.

Thus the scientific community has become split into two camps. The "SETI old-timers" who dispute the logic and relevance of Fermi's Paradox and the "colonizers" who believe that we are alone in a Universe made for Man.

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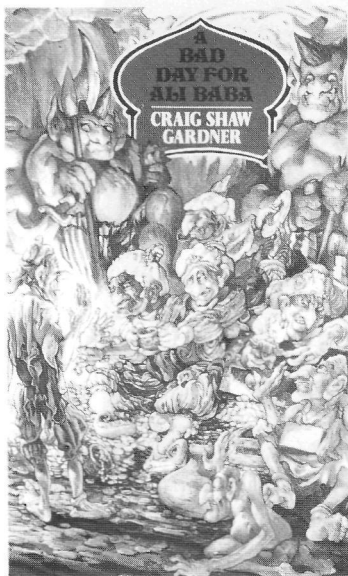
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BOOK REVIEWS

In each issue of FAR POINT we'll be having a closer look at some of the new or forthcoming SF and Fantasy releases. This month C N Gilmore, Ed Hunt and John Hendry are our guest reviewers.



A Bad Day for Ali Baba

Author:

Craig Shaw Gardner

Publisher:

Headline

Price:

£14.95

ISBN:

0-7472-0392-X

Hardback

Craig Shaw Gardner has come on somewhat since his recent *The Other Sinbad*, to which this is very much a companion volume. The formula is much as before, the difference being that on this occasion Gardner re-tells the story of Ali Baba not too much differently from the original but applying his own brand of humour. This covers the first five chapters, or thereabouts, after which the plot diverges. Instead of the business with the boiling oil, Ali Baba is shanghaied into the Forty Thieves' company - purely to make up the numbers, the chief being heavily into numerology. The same fate befalls his rascally brother who, despite being cut into six pieces is (courtesy of a magic cave) not only still alive and vocal but separately mobile as well.

Thereafter Gardner sustains his pace and humour through to the end, finding excuses for ever more fanciful and increasingly bawdy jokes. It is gradually revealed that amongst the prior victims of the Thieves' press gang have been Sinbad the Porter, Aladdin (now separated from his lamp) and Harun al Raschid. Other characters include three murderous eunuchs, a talking rock, the Djinn of the Ring and sundry women of varying ingenuity and lasciviousness. One

trait shared by all is a willingness to converse, in season and out, and at whatever length may be too much for the rest; most of the humour derives from this. Gardner uses the reliable technique of ensuring that the folly and monomania of any character is in direct proportion to his ability to influence events; those whose outlook is more or less rational must therefore use cunning to supply the defect of force. A sample of the leading thief's conversation illustrates both aspects:

'You have a great honour before you. Yours will be the first experimental exploration of our generous Caravan Redistribution Program. Thus, you will be giving them gold, not taking it away. Surely there is no problem with that?'

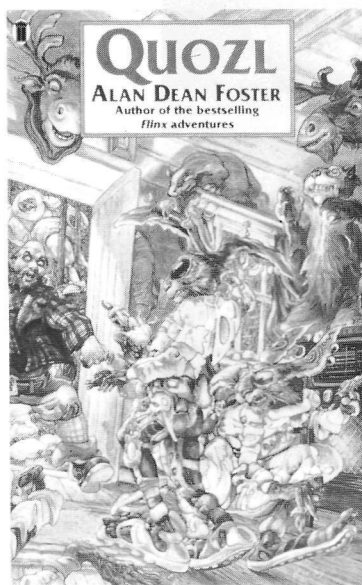
Ali Baba supposed there wasn't. Maybe he wouldn't need the sword after all. He tried to swallow, but all the moisture in his throat seemed to have dried up within the sand.

'Of course,' the chieftain proceeded, 'as soon as you see where they put your golden gift, you will go and take it away, along with any other gold and valuables which may have joined your offering.' The man in black coughed genteelly. 'But then, as a thief, you should have no problem with that.'

Despite the preposterousness of the plot elements, the climax marries the whole thing together extremely well, while at the same time giving him a perfect lead into the sequel (already planned). Well enough, and to be expected; standards of construction in humorous fiction are very high. But why is this so much better than the previous book? Judging from the style, Gardner has immersed himself in Ernest Bramah, and adopted many of his mannerisms. He's not the master's equal, but he doesn't make a bad fist of his pastiche - and good ersatz Bramah is better than most people's real thing. Go forth and do likewise!

According to a rather pretentious epigram, the angels in Heaven play Bach for God, as is proper. In their off time, they play Mozart, and God eavesdrops. I take a God-like view of this book. Really, only to be bought for the older children, but certainly to be read first. Christmas is coming - *verb sap.*

C N Gilmore



Quozl

Author: Alan Dean Foster

Publisher: New English Library

Price: £4.50

ISBN: 0-450-55185-7

Paperback

Sometime around the middle of the twentieth century an interstellar spaceship filled with aliens, the Quozl, approaches Earth. The ship has been travelling for many generations, and its occupants are readying themselves for the climax of their journey - the colonisation of the planet. The Quozl are not your average aliens, since they bear a close resemblance to Earth-bound rabbits, not the normal sized rabbits seen running around in the countryside, but more human sized. They also have very advanced dress sense for rabbits, wearing brightly coloured, some might say flashy clothes, and rings in their ears. The Quozl do have one characteristic in common with Earth rabbits, they copulate at every opportunity, but because they practise birth-control, the population of their colony is kept stable.

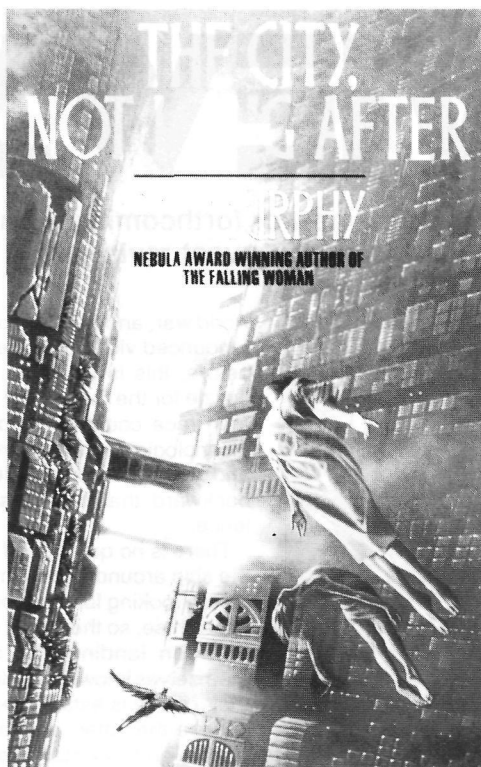
The starship is only one of several that their race has dispatched from the home world to colonise other planets, and none has thus far encountered intelligent life. Thus it comes as quite a shock when they discover that the planet they have chosen as a new home is already inhabited. This is bad enough, but they have arrived at a particularly unpleasant time; the people of the Earth are busily engaged in a

world war, and to the Quozl, who renounced violence generations before, this is appalling. It is a puzzle for the Quozl how the human race could develop to the technological level it has reached and yet remain so intellectually backward that it still uses violence.

There is no question of turning the ship around and roaming the galaxy looking for another planet to colonise, so they must choose between landing and making themselves known, or hiding until their colony is established. They choose the latter, and land in a remote and mountainous part of North America where they build their home. Fortunately, being akin to rabbits, they live in burrows, and are able to live for several generations out of sight and contact with humans, until one day...

The absurd cover of the book suggests that Quozl is a frivolous yarn, but on the contrary, it is fairly serious SF. Foster manages to make the story believable, despite the appearance of the Quozl, and unlike many other tales of alien encounters, Foster's aliens desire peaceful co-existence and have no wish to subjugate or exterminate the human race, despite being technologically superior. The story is quite sympathetic to the aliens and exposes some of the worst qualities of the human race, such as violence and greed, but balances this by using the innocence of children as a vehicle for gaining acceptance for the Quozl. Nowhere does the author actually say when the various events take place, but subtly hints at the year by mentioning such things as a world war, and the beginning of television transmissions, allowing the reader to work out the when for himself. On the whole the book is well written; the author exploits the similarity between the aliens and rabbits to the full, and manages to produce a quite unexpected ending.

Ed Hunt



The City, Not Long After

Pat Murphy
Pan
ISBN 0 330 31277 4
Paperback
£4.99

After The King: Stories in honour of J R R Tolkien

Edited by Martin H Greenberg
Pan
ISBN 0 330 32027 0
Hardback
£15.99
Published 10th January 1991

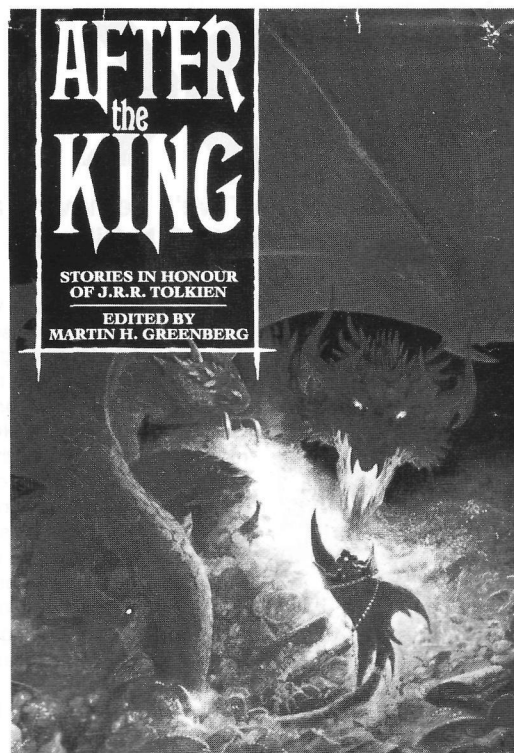
The post-apocalyptic SF story is such well-trodden ground that it's hard to believe that there could be anything new left to say. Usually the scene is American. Usually the cause is nuclear war; occasionally it's alien invasion, cosmic radiation or even cometary impact, and these days there's an increasing tendency to lay the responsibility for our society's impending collapse at the door of an ecological crisis, a sort of soft apocalypse. Once in a while the cause is disease - AIDS, plague, what have you. But all such novels have a common theme, and a common purpose. By stripping away anything upwards of ninety percent of the earth's population in a few short pages or even a couple of flashbacks, the author can simplify her backdrop so that the action stands out with greater clarity.

The City, Not Long After has just such a purpose. We find ourselves in post-Plague San Francisco where the re-

surgent army of General Miles (*miles*, latin, a soldier, see?) has taken over the countryside and now has designs on the city. All the familiar signposts are there: the Golden Gate Bridge is rusting, the freeways are cracking apart, vegetables grow in public parks as the survivors try to hold on. Bike gangs roam free, traders haggle with each other over luxuries like tinned food, and near-tribesmen gaze in superstitious awe at shop-window displays. Into all this comes a fierce, nameless girl with the message of the military's advance.

But the City is the home of an artistic colony of dreamers who can't be stirred to effective collective action, and of Danny-boy, a young loner with a "nice way with wild things" who takes the girl under his wing. We're about to fight a non-violent war. This is the starting point for Murphy to set up some familiar coconuts and fling things at them. In fairly short order we get the anarchistic idealists, the nice older folk who preserve the decencies while looking on indulgently at the youngsters' wild ways, and the youth who thinks he's a robot. We get the conflict between art and military strength, and the one between government and individual freedoms.

That's not to say that this is a derivative book. Far from it; the characters may be of a recognisable type, but they come alive under Murphy's



cool, delicate handling. She dreams up some truly memorable images, and backs them with haunting lines. There are a few moments in the conflict between artists and military when the desire to shout "come off it!" may be quite strong, but the pace and tone drive strongly on. I felt that Murphy tried a little too hard to tidy everything up at the end, and that the climax was a little lost as a result, but that's just a quibble. I enjoyed it; I'll be looking out for more from her, and I can definitely recommend it.

A good month! The same recommendation goes to **After the King, Stories in Honour of JRR Tolkien** (to be published on the 10th January). This sub-title may prompt a horrified shudder to run through you, or it may stampe you off to grab a copy fast, but this collection is worth more than a reflex judgement. You might have thought Tolkien too cute to stomach, you might want to see every precious elf-born whosis go a few rounds with the Terminator, and you might reckon that Celtic twilight should only decently be followed by Celtic total night and silence. But I'd still suggest you give this one a try. After all: Poul and Karen Anderson, John Brunner, Andre Norton, Robert Silverberg, Stephen Donaldson, Karen Haber....and Terry Pratchett? And Gregory Benford? It can't be all that twee, can it? There are some good solid tales here, in a variety of styles that

should give even the most enthusiastic unicorn-hater an entertaining (I won't say entrancing) read. If you're a fantasy addict, on the other hand, you'll still find plenty of non-derivative, well-crafted and genuine magic in these pages.

Non-derivative? Well, it is described as a *festschrift*, a "present for the one hundredth anniversary of Tolkien's birth", so there's much that's Tolkienesque. But none of it is imitation, and all of it is at worst readable. There is an oddity or two; Benford's story "Down The River Road" is wholly misplaced in this collection, but is so good it almost diverted me away from this book to re-read some of his other work. I couldn't say as much for Judith Tarr's "Death and the Lady": nothing much wrong with it, but it didn't really grip. Personal favourite? The Andersons' "Faith" gave a rare and convincing account of conflict between man and goblin, in terms that persuaded me that it could have been so. Anglo-Saxon, if anything; evil lurking on the heath, and the uneasy peace that follows inability to dislodge it. And not a spell in sight.

Come to that, I don't recall a single talking sword in the whole lot.

John Hendry.

Divide

by Robert Charles Wilson

Orbit

£3.99

ISBN: 0 7088 8365 6

A somewhat neglected tradition in hard sf concerns the lonely superhuman, born before his (they always seem to be male, except in one tragic story by John Christopher) time. Forgetting the common psi stories, examples which come to mind include *The Power* (Robinson), *Children of the Atom* (Shiras), *Odd John* (Stapledon), *Gladiator* (Wylie), and Aglis Budrys's story 'Nobody Bothers Gus'. Running parallel to these are the stories of synthetic supermen, among which I would include *Who* (Budrys), *Friday* (Heinlein), *Flowers for Algernon* (Keyes), *Seeds of Life* (Taine), and (marginally) M.A. Foster's *Ler* novels.

I've gone to this length to place *Divide*, not just to display my erudition but because the hero of this book, John Shaw, has read *Odd John* and the blurb refers to *Flowers for Algernon*. An author who anchors himself so firmly in the tradition is demanding to be judged by the highest standards.

John was produced by biochemical tinkering while yet in utero as a clandestine one-off

(and probably illegal) CIA-funded experiment. As he would not breed true (and knows it), I place him among the synthetics. His difference, the *Divide* of the title, is a general enhancement of all the higher mental functions: not only can he acquire doctoral-level understanding of the most advanced sciences straight from the book, and build a guitar from scratch and raw materials without a blueprint; his mastery of human body language is so close to telepathy that he can dominate anyone of either sex by force of will alone.

Predictably, this doesn't make John happy. The experiment is closed down, and he is farmed out to a dreary couple of the sort who don't see why the kids should have any of the advantages they had to struggle along without. As a defensive mechanism, he creates 'Benjamin' as an alter ego, though his function is more that of a shabti figure. Benjamin is a 'regular kid', of whom little enough is expected, and who brings forth nothing surprising. He gets through John's day on the automatic pilot, freeing John to explore the lonely limits of his own intellect until he's old enough to go on his travels.

As the book opens, Max Kyriakides, John's creator, has sent Susan Christopher, a young doc-

tor, to resume contact with John. It seems likely that John is headed for Algernon-style fatal breakdown, and Kyriakides is not only torn by guilt for what he's created and how it's tending, he also has a scientific itch to be there observing when and if the crunch comes. But there are complications, quite apart from John's resentful dismay at being made as he is. Possibly as an aspect of John's forthcoming breakdown, Benjamin has reappeared as an independent entity. John goes into involuntary fugue, leaving Benjamin in charge for days at a time.

Benjamin has taken the opportunity to acquire a girlfriend, Amelie, a French psychopathic body-builder whose idea of family piety is that Amelie should go on the streets to support them both.

The potential for troubles and triangles is obvious, but this is a serious piece of work, not to be confused with soap opera. Wilson never talks down to his readers, whom he expects to have a working knowledge of such minor arcana as the rules of chess and the controversy surrounding B.F. Skinner. Moreover, the situation is set up to make it unlikely that anyone, let alone everyone, will come out of it unscarred. This allows far more

engagement with the characters than usual: Can Wilson engineer a 'happy' ending which doesn't look contrived? If so, will he? The obvious conclusion would involve some sort of *Three Faces of Eve* style fusion of John and Benjamin, but would such a fusion be stable? Recall the further dissociation which happened after Thigpen and Cleckley had published their book!

Wilson delineates character with assurance and economy, which allows him to get away with a multiple viewpoint narrative. He's also a master of suspense, so that the parallel questions of how John's condition will progress and what will happen when Roch catches up with Amelie reinforce each other. Unfortunately, and for no obvious reason, he rather throws it away in the last quarter of the book. The interaction has hardly got underway when he drops it for a contrived and violent climax, apparently written with one eye firmly on the film rights. I don't mind that so much, but it comes about a hundred pages too soon. The relationships have had no time to gel, and the conflicts of motivation are left largely unexplored. Consequently, the closing chapters are dull and unconvincing. But if Wilson can avoid rushing his fences next time ... One to watch.

C N Gilmore

Microworlds

by Stanislaw Lem

Mandarin

£5.99

ISBN: 0 7493 0557 6

Paperback

I greatly admire the better works of Stanislaw Lem - which tend to be the ones translated by Michael Kandel, by the way - but having taken off my hat to *The Cyberiad* and *The Star Diaries*, I'm now tempted to put it back on. Lem's reading is patchy, and he has no concept of literary milieu, yet his idea of how to criticise sf is based exclusively on his reading of James Blish and Damon Knight. They're the noblest exemplars, but they were also steeped in the field. The resulting book of critical essays is very strange indeed.

Lem's initial premise (which has some truth) is that science fiction lies uneasily between the 'lower' and 'higher' floors of literature. On the lower you get thrillers, nurse novels, horror stories and so forth; on the higher, work of literary and philosophical pretention, containing authors' messages Relevant to Life (and other Big Thoughts). Sf writers typically want to pick up the small but easy rewards of the former, while laying claim to the status of the latter.

That some people may want to eat their cake and have it is far from an original observation, but Lem is obsessed by this dualistic vision. He pours scorn on the mild observation that this stuff keeps on selling; sales figures are not an index of quality. Well, no, actually, I had only taken them for an index of fashion. But as the decades mount up, and the books keep on being reprinted (OK in cheap paperback,

but in fairly long print runs), while Booker finalists rot forgotten, the figures begin to indicate something rather closer to quality. The phrases 'lasting appeal' and 'enduring interest' come to mind. They need to be accounted for, at least, though not apparently by Lem. Instead he gnaws at the problem of how you get to exist on both floors at once. At length he comes up with a partial success. Wait for it. Phillip K Dick!

Dick was prolific, and Lem has apparently read only seven novels: *Solar Lottery*, *Ubik*, *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*, *Our Friends from Frolix B*, *Now Wait for Last Year*, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and *Galactic Pot Healer*. Even Lem could find nothing much in this last, but on the evidence of the other six he reached a conclusion: Dick was saying Something Significant about the impact of technology on the problem of identify, but was prevented from saying it very well by the trashy conventions of sf which he was forced to employ in order to sell at all.

This would be laughable if it were not so pitiful. In fact, Dick had nothing significant to say on that topic; if he had, his books would not be full of the logical flaws which Lem notes. What Dick had was an obsessive urge to explore a particular emotional state - that of the man who encounters mounting evidence for the theory that the universe is a gigantic sham, erected with the purpose of deceiving himself as to the true nature of the meta-universe which it conceals. This is dominant enough in *Ubik* and *Androids*, and Lem might have stumbled on it had he read *Time Out Of Joint*, *Eye In The Sky* and *Maze of Death*. That he failed is hardly surprising. Lem is only semi-literate in English. That is, he can read it with some facility, but he

cannot write, converse or follow a conversation in it, and he cannot judge its literary style. Instead he writes about Heinlein, using *All you Zombies* to illustrate his chapter on the problems of time travel.

He fails to recognise the story for what it is - a romp; he also reads it with little attention, since he states that 'for reasons not explained by the author' the hermaphrodite is changed from overt female to overt male by the doctors. In fact, the reason is given in the text - the female organs have been shot to hell by the pregnancy, but the male ones are alright and can now develop normally. He adds learnedly, 'The fact that a sexual hermaphrodite should not be able to bear a child is a relatively small hindrance'. No hindrance at all, Dr Lem. It is not a sexual hermaphrodite, but a true mosaic - a very rare condition, fewer than 300 adults recorded, but one of which Heinlein had evidently heard.

Altogether, Lem isn't very good on the philosophy of sex and reproduction. Consider this:

Now suppose the following case: John not only died but also did not leave a single bodily cell. Instead, John left a will in which he expressed the desire that a genetic technician perform the steps necessary to enable a woman to become the mother of a child of John - i.e., that such a woman gave birth to a child, and the child be markedly similar to John. In addition, the technician is not permitted to use any spermatozoa. Rather, he is supposed to cause a parthenogenetic (sic) development of the female ovum. Along with this he is expected to control the genic (sic) substance and direct it by embryogenetic (sick of sics) transformation in such a way that Peter is born 'the spit and image of John' (there are photographs of John available, a recording of his voice etc). The geneticist 'sculptures' in the chromosomal substance of the woman all the fea-

tures John craved for in a child. And thus, to the question 'Is John the father or not the father of Peter?' it is now impossible to give an unequivocal answer of 'yes' or 'no'.

It may be impossible to Lem, but hardly to any first year philosophy student. Goes like this. Peter would emerge, the 'spit and image of John', regardless of whether John had every existed. The will, recordings etc. could be an elaborate hoax, but the outcome would be the same. Since, by definition, an entity which has never existed cannot effect anything, including fatherhood, the demonstration that John need not have existed proves that he cannot be the father, whether he actually existed or not.

Lem isn't too good on physics either. Elsewhere he appears to confuse a meson (he doesn't say what sort) with a virtual particle. Altogether, reading this book is enough to make me wonder if the author is good for anything at all - except that I've read *A Perfect Vacuum*, *The Futurological Congress*, and one or two more.

Probably some of the infelicities are the fault of the translators but the bulk must lie at the door of Lem and his compiler (editor is not the word). How did this pathetic farrago of sententiousness and ignorance come to see the light of day? Well, a little western currency goes a long way in Poland. It was cheap, and Mandarin had just contracted to bring out the *Tales of Pirix the Pilot* (of which only one isn't dross). The name of Lem on the cover ensures sufficient sales for a modest profit, and look at the saving from doing without an index! And therein, Virginia, the true trashiness of sf doth reside.

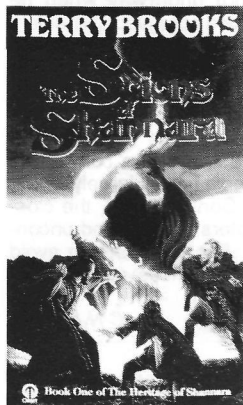
C N Gilmore



These pages detail the new books we've received at FAR POINT since the last issue appeared. Space obviously prevents us giving a full review to every one, so these pages simply provide you with the publishers blurb and the details you'll need if you want to get hold of a copy. Full review of some of them will appear in future issues; this month's reviews start on page 57.

The Scions of Shannara

Terry Brooks
Orbit
Price £4.99
ISBN 0-7088-4889-0
Paperback



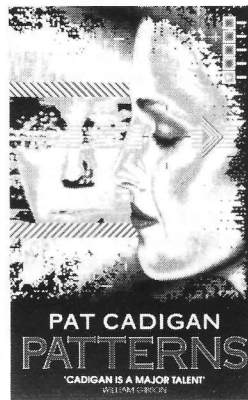
Three hundred years have passed since the events of *The Wishsong of Shannara*. The totalitarian Federation now controls all of the Southland; in the West, the Elves have vanished; in the East, the Dwarves are enslaved.

Par Ohmsford has retained some of the magical powers of his ancestors, although he does not fully understand the way they work. Travelling the Southlands with his brother, Coll, he is troubled by dreams of Allanon, the Druid whose fate has always seemed linked with that the Ohmsfords - and yet Par knows Allanon is dead. Almost captured by the deadly Seekers, who search out users of forbidden magic, and attacked by a witch-woman, Par is saved by Cogleine, another name from the Ohmsfords' past.

Thus begins a thrilling new episode in the bestselling *Shannara* series. A magical, stirring fantasy of the Four Lands and the Ohmsfords, descendants of kings.

Patterns

Pat Cadigan
Grafton
Price £3.99
ISBN 0-586-21148-9
Paperback

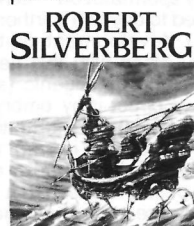


Patterns defies any standard category. Outlandish ideas merge with everyday situations and real characters that live and breathe. The whole range of human (and alien) emotions is covered in these fourteen astonishing stories.

Witty, eerie, shocking, always provocative, *Patterns* is ultimately about people, often leading what appear to be normal lives. But in Cadiganland nothing is normal, and 'life' can be a very misleading term.

The Face of The Waters

Robert Silverberg
Grafton
Price £8.99
ISBN 0-856-21502-6
Paperback



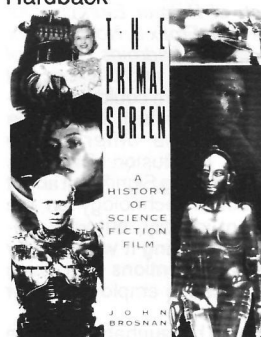
THE FACE OF THE WATERS

It is the year 2450. Humanity is scattered among the stars, which teem with intelligent life, while the home world itself has been destroyed by an inadvertent catastrophe two hundred years before. Thus all Earthmen are exiles, and Earth itself is only a memory.

To Hydros have come an assortment of Earthmen, to whom it is a world from which there is no return, since it has no form of outbound space transportation. This brilliantly inventive new novel tells their story as they travel across the planet's endless ocean in search of the mysterious area, from which no human has ever returned, known as the Face of the Waters.

The Primal Screen

John Brosnan
Orbit
Price £16.95
ISBN 0-356-20222-4
Hardback

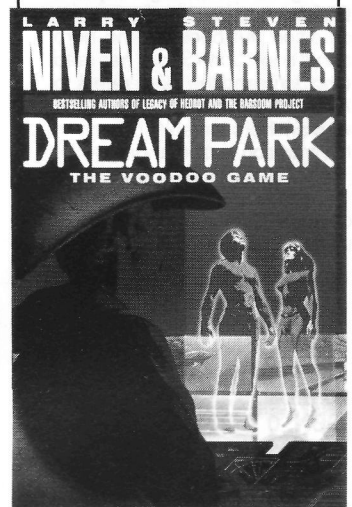


With his customary wit, Brosnan celebrates the genre's great achievements - but is never afraid to dissect its failures. His book is also packed with comments from the filmmakers themselves, as well as those of the special effects wizards and the science fiction writers.

If you are interested in science fiction, sf films or the cinema itself, *The Primal Screen* is an engrossing read.

Dream Park: The Voodoo Game

Larry Niven and Steven Barnes
Pan
Price £8.99/£15.99
ISBN 0-330-32056-4
Paperback/Hardback



In 2055 the ruined, ghostly shell is due for renovation. But before the space carriers move in, Cowles Enterprises, owners of the fabulous Dream Park, unveil their plans for one last fantastic game ... Voodoo!

25 gamers, lined up against the most sophisticated forces in modern technology, cunningly allied with the most potent powers of ancient magic.

Their task: to stop Tata Nkiti, undead Man-Demon and descicator of corpses, and his insatiable army of devils - before they destroy the good followers of the White Path, the worshippers of Chango. Only the strongest will be allowed to survive as the boundaries of fantasy roll back and the ultimate adventure begins...

See also page 16!

Isle of View

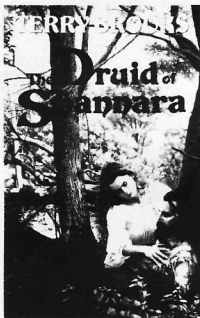
Piers Anthony
New English Library
Price £7.99
ISBN 0-450-55363-9
Paperback/Hardback



Xanth is the faraway kingdom where fairies socialize with ogres, centaurs are snobs about flying, monsters and goblins are the terror of the forest. It is a land whose prince has the hardest of decisions to make ...

The Druid of Shannara

Terry Brooks
Orbit
Price £13.95
ISBN 0-356-20119-8
Hardback



To the scions of Shannara had fallen three tasks: Par must find the fabled Sword of Shannara. This he has accomplished, but he believes he has killed his brother, Coll. Rimmer Dall, the Federation's Chief Seeker, has planted an awful thought in Par's mind - that he himself is

Shadowen, the very evil he seeks to destroy.

Walker Boh has been commanded by the shade of Allanon to discover the lost city of Paranor and recreate these three hundred years. To begin this, he must find the Black Elfstone, but the gem is in the hands of an ancient being of timeless evil - the Stone King. Beset on all sides by enemies, and his own self-doubt, Walker sets out on his part of the perilous quest which will either bring success or destruction.

The Fetch

Robert Holdstock
Orbit
Price £13.95
ISBN 0-356-19699
Hardback



There is a landscape between reality and dreams, a strange and primitive country that exists upon the edge of our waking world. Michael Whitlock knows that country well. His best friend lives there ...

It begins with a scatter of earth, thrown over the infant by unseen hands, a haunting attack that is repeated day after day, culminating with an explosive fall of mud that nearly kills the boy. And found in those tons of raw, wet earth: flints, chalk artefacts, the remains of a primitive shrine and the dismembered carcass of a hunting dog.

Robot Adept

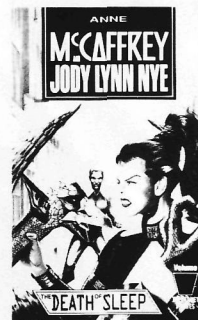
Piers Anthony
New English Library
Price £6.95
ISBN 0-450-42932-6
Paperback



The book continues the saga of Mach, the brave and sensitive robot from Proton, and Bane, his alternate self from the magical world of Phaze. Having discovered how to swap places Mach and Bane have fallen into forbidden love in each other's worlds. But their delights are short-lived when the two worlds erupt into bitter feuding.

The Death of Sleep

Anne McCaffrey and Jody Lynn Nye
Orbit
Price £13.95
ISBN 0-356-20308-5
Hardback



Like every other citizen of the Federation of Sentient Planets, Lunzie Mespil knew the so-called "planet pirates" were capable of terrible things. But - also like every other citizen of the Federation - she never in her heart of hearts believed anything would happen to her.

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KRYOMEK



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