

Jesting Pilot

by Henry Kuttner and C. L. Moore

(as by Lewis Padgett)

Under normal circumstances, a man must face reality to be a sane, well-balanced citizen. But not in that city! Any man who faced and understood the reality of the place was insane!

Illustrated by Orban

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Notes

The city screamed. It had been screaming for six hundred years. And as long as that unendurable scream continued—the city was an efficient unit.

"You're getting special treatment," Nehral said, looking across the big, bare, silent room to where young Fleming sat on the cushioned seat. "Normally you wouldn't have graduated to Control for another six months, but something's come up. The others think a fresh viewpoint might help. And you're elected, since you're the oldest acolyte."

"Britton's older than I am," Fleming said. He was a short, heavy, red-haired boy with an unusual sensitivity conditioned into his blunt features. Utterly relaxed, he sat waiting.

"Physiological age doesn't mean anything. The civilization-index is more important. And the empathy level. You're seventeen, but you're emotionally mature. On the other hand, you're not—set. You haven't been a Controller for years. We think you may have some fresh angles that can help us."

"Aren't fresh angles undesirable?"

Nehral's thin, tired face twisted into a faint smile. "There's been debate about that. A culture is a living organism and it can't exist in its own waste products. Not indefinitely. But we don't intend to remain isolated indefinitely."

"I didn't know that," Fleming said.

Nehral studied his fingertips. "Don't get the idea that we're the masters. We're servants, far more so than the citizens. We've got to follow the plan. And we don't know all the details of the plan. That was arranged purposely. Some day the Barrier will lift. Then the city won't be isolated any longer."

"But—outside!" Fleming said, a little nervously. "Suppose—"

Nehral said, "Six hundred years ago the city was built and the Barrier created. The Barrier's quite impassable. There's a switch—I'll show it to you sometime—that's useless at present. Its purpose is to bring the Barrier into existence. But no one knows how to destroy the Barrier. One theory is that it can't be destroyed until its half-life is run, and the energy's reached a sufficiently low level. Then it blinks out automatically."

"When?"

Nehral shrugged. "Nobody knows that either. Tomorrow, or a thousand years from now. Here's the idea. The city was isolated for protection. That meant—complete isolation. Nothing—nothing at all—can pass the Barrier. So we're safe. When the Barrier goes, we can see what's happened to the rest of the world. If the danger's gone, we can colonize. If it hasn't, we pull the switch again, and we're safe behind the Barrier for another indefinite period."

Danger. The earth had been too big, and too full of people. Archaic mores had prevailed. The new science had plunged on, but civilization had lagged fatally. In those days many plans had been proposed. Only one had proved practicable. Rigid control—thorough utilisation of the new power—and unbreakable armor. So the city was built and isolated by the Barrier, at a time when all other cities were falling...

Nehral said, "We know the danger of status quo. New theories, new experiments aren't forbidden. Far from it. Some of them can't be studied now, a great many of them. But records are kept. That reference library will be available when the Barrier's lifted. Meanwhile, the city's a lifeboat. This part of the human race has to survive. That's the main concern. You don't study physics in a lifeboat. You try to survive. After you've reached land, you can go to work again. But now—"

The other cities fell, and the terror roared across the earth, six hundred years ago. It was an age of genius and of viciousness. The weapons of the gods were at last available. The foundations of matter ripped screaming apart as the weapons were used. The lifeboat rode a typhoon. The Ark breasted a deluge.

In other words, one thing led to another—until the planet shook.

"First the builders thought the Barrier alone would be enough. The city, of course, had to be a self-contained unit. That was difficult. A human being isn't, he has to get food, fuel—from the air, from plants and animals. The solution lay in creating all the necessities within the city. But then matters got worse. There was germ warfare and germ mutations. There were the chain reactions. The atmosphere itself, under the constant bombardment—"

More and more complicated grew the Ark.

"So they built the city as it had to be built, and then they found that it would be—uninhabitable."

Fleming tilted back his head. Nehral said, "Oh, we're shielded. We're specialized. For we're the Controllers."

"Yes, I know. But I've wondered. Why can't the citizens—"

"Be shielded as we are? Because they're to be the survivors. We're important only till the Barrier lifts. After that, we'll be useless, away from the lifeboat. In a normal world, we have no place. But now and here, as Controllers of the city, we are important. We serve."

Fleming stirred uneasily.

Nehral said, "It will be difficult for you to conceive this. You have been specially conditioned since before your birth. You never knew—none of us ever knew—normal existence. You are deaf, dumb, and blind."

The boy caught a little of the meaning. "That means—?"

"Certain senses the citizens have, because they'll be needed when the Barrier lifts. We can't afford to have them, under the circumstances. The telepathic sense is substituted. I'll tell you more about that later.

Right now I want you to concentrate on the problem of Bill Norman. He's a citizen."

Nehral paused. He could feel the immense weight of the city above him, and it seemed to him that the foundations were beginning to crumble...

"He's getting out of control." Nehral said flatly.

"But I'm not important," Bill Norman said.

They were dancing. Flickering, quiet lights beat out from the Seventh Monument, towering even above the roof garden where they were. Far overhead was the gray emptiness of the Barrier. The music was exciting. Mia's hand crept up and ruffled the back of his neck.

"You are to me," she said. "Still. I'm prejudiced."

She was a tall, slim, dark girl, sharp contrast to Norman's blond hugeness. His faintly puzzled blue eyes studied her.

"I'm lucky. I'm not so sure you are, Mia."

The orchestra reached a rhythmic climax; brass hit a low, nostalgic note, throbbingly sustained. Norman moved his big shoulders uneasily and turned toward the parapet, towing Mia beside him. They walked in silence through the crowd, to a walled embrasure where they were alone, in a tiny vantage-point overlooking the city.

Mia stole occasional glances at the man's troubled face. He was looking at the Seventh Monument, crowned with light, and beyond it to the Sixth, and, smaller in the distance, the Fifth—each a memorial to one of the Great Eras of man's history.

But the city—

There had never been a city like it in all the world. For no city before had ever been built for man. Memphis was a towered colossus for the memory of kings; Baghdad was a sultan's jewel; they were stately pleasure-domes by decree. New York and London, Paris and Moscow—they were less functional, less efficient for their citizens than the caves of the troglodytes. In cities man had always tried to sow on arid ground.

But this was a city for men.

It was not merely a matter of parks and roads, of rolling ramps and paragravity currents for levitation, not simply a question of design and architecture. The city was planned according to rules of human psychology. The people fitted into it as into a foam mattress. It was quiet. It was beautiful and functional. It was perfect for its purpose.

"I saw that psychologist again today," Norman said.

Mia folded her arms and leaned on the parapet. She didn't look at her companion.

"And?"

"Generalizations."

"But they always know the answers," Mia said. "They always know the right answers."

"This one didn't."

"It may take time. Really, Bill, you know... no one's... frustrated—"

"I don't know what it is," Norman said. "Heredity, perhaps. All I know is I get these... these flashes. Which the psychologists can't explain."

"But there has to be an explanation."

"That's what the psychologist said. Still, he couldn't tell me what it was."

"Can't you analyze it at all?" she asked, sliding her hand into his. His fingers tightened. He looked at the Seventh Monument and beyond it.

"No," he said. "It's just that I feel there isn't any answer."

"To what?"

"I don't know. I... I wish I could get out of the city."

Her hand relaxed suddenly. "Bill. You know—"

He laughed softly. "I know. There's no way out. Not through the Barrier. Maybe that isn't what I want, after all. But this... this—" He stared at the Monument. "It seems all wrong sometimes. I just can't explain it. It's the whole city. It makes me feel haywire. Then I get these flashes—"

She felt his hand stiffen. It was jerked away abruptly. Bill Norman covered his eyes and screamed.

"Flashes of realization," Nehral said to Fleming. "They don't last long. If they did, he'd go insane or die. Of course the citizen psychologists can't help him; it's outside their scope by definition."

Fleming, sensitive to telepathic emotion, said, "You're worried." He did not speak aloud.

"Naturally. We Controllers have our own conditioning. An ordinary citizen couldn't hold our power; it wouldn't be safe. The builders worked out a good

many plans before they decided to create us. They'd thought of making androids and robots to control, but the human factor was needed. Emotion's needed, to react to the conditioning. From birth, by hypnosis, we're conditioned to protect and serve the citizens. We couldn't do anything else if we tried. It's ingrained."

"Every citizen?" Fleming asked, and Nehral sighed.

"That's the trouble. Every citizen. The whole is equal to the sum total of the parts. One citizen, to us, represents the entire group. I'm not certain that this wasn't a mistake of the builders. For when one citizen threatens the group—as Norman does—"

"But we've got to solve Norman's problem."

"Yes. It's our problem. Every citizen must have physical and mental balance—must. I was wondering—"

"Well?"

"For the good of the whole, it would be better if Norman could be eliminated. On purely logical grounds, he should be allowed to go mad or die. I can't countenance that, though. I'm too firmly conditioned against it."

"So am I," Fleming said, and Nehral nodded.

"Exactly. We must cure him. We've got to get him back to a sane psychological balance. Or we may crack up ourselves—because we're not conditioned to react to failure. Now. You're the youngest of us available; you have more in common with the citizens than any of us. So, you may find an answer where we can't."

"Norman should have been a Controller," Fleming said.

"Yes. But it's too late for that now. He's mature. His heredity—bad, from our viewpoint. Mathematicians and theologians. The problems of every citizen in the city can be solved, with the Monuments. We can give them answers that are right for them. But Norman's hunting an abstraction. That's the trouble. We can't give him a satisfactory answer!"

"Haven't there ever been parallel psychoses—"

"It's not a psychosis, that's the difficulty. Except by the arbitrary standards of the city. Oh, there've been plenty of human problems—a woman who wants children, for example, and can't have them. If medicine fails to help her, the Monuments will. By creating diversion—arousing her maternal instinct for something else, or channeling it elsewhere. By substitution. Making her believe she has a mission of some sort. Or creating an emotional attachment of another kind, not maternal. The idea is to trace the problems back to their psychological roots, and then get rid of the frustration somehow. It's the frustration that's fatal."

"Diversion, perhaps—?"

"I don't think it's possible. Norman's problem is an abstraction. And if we answered it—he would go insane."

"I don't know what my problem is," Norman said desperately. "I don't have any. I'm young, healthy, doing work I like, I'm engaged—"

The psychologist scratched his jaw. "If we knew what your problem is, we could do something about it," he said. "The most suggestive point here—" He rustled through the papers before him. "Let's see. Do I seem real to you now?"

"Very," Norman said.

"But there are times—The syndrome's familiar. Sometimes you doubt reality. Most people have that feeling occasionally." He leaned back and made thoughtful noises. Through the transparent wall the Fifth Monument was visible, pulsating with soft beats of light. It was very quiet here.

"You mean you don't know what's wrong with me," Norman said.

"I don't know yet. But I will. First we must find out what your problem is."

"How long will that take? Ten years?"

"I had a problem myself once," the psychologist said. "At the time I didn't know what it was. I've found out since. I was heading for megalomania; I wanted to change people. So I took up this work. I turned my energy into a useful channel. That solved my problem for me. It's the right way for you, once we get at what's bothering you."

"All I want is to get rid of these hallucinations," Norman said.

"Auditory, visual, and olfactory—mostly. And without external basis in fact. They're not illusions, they're hallucinations. I wish you could give me more details about them."

"I can't." Norman seemed to shrink. "It's like being dropped into boiling metal. It's simply indescribable. An impression of noise, lights—it comes and goes in a flash. But it's a flash of hell."

"Tomorrow we'll try narcosynthesis again. I want to correlate my ideas in the meantime. It's just possible—"

Norman stepped into a levitating current and was borne upward. At the level of the Fifth Monument's upper balcony he stepped off. There were a few people here, not many, and they were busy with their own affairs—love-making and sight-seeing. Norman rested his arms on the rail and stared down. He had come up here because of a vague, unlikely hope that it would be quieter on the high balcony far above the city.

It was quiet, but no more so than the city had been. The rolling ways curved and slid smoothly beneath him. They were silent. Above him the Barrier was a gray, silent dome. He thought that gigantic claps of thunder were pounding at the Barrier from outside, that the impregnable hemisphere was beginning to crack, to buckle—to admit chaos in a roaring flood.

He gripped the cool plastic rail hard. Its solidity wasn't reassuring. In a moment the Barrier would split wide open—

There was no relief on the Monument. He glanced behind him at the base of the softly shining globe, with its rippling patterns of light, but that looked ready to shatter too. He stumbled as he jumped back into the drop-current. In fact, he missed it entirely. There was a heart-stopping instant when he was in free fall; then a safety-paragravity locked tight on his body and slid him easily into the current. He fell slowly.

But he had a new thought now. Suicide.

There were two questions involved. Did he want to commit suicide? And would suicide be possible? He studied the second point.

Without noticing, automatically he stepped on a moving way and dropped into one of the cushioned seats. No one died of violence in the city. No one ever had, as far as he knew. But had people tried to kill themselves?

It was a new, strange concept. There were so many safeties. No danger had been overlooked. There were no accidents.

The road curved. Forty feet away, across a lawn and a low wall, was the Barrier. Norman stood up and walked toward it. He was conscious of both attraction and repulsion.

Beyond the Barrier—

He stopped. There it was, directly before him, a smooth, gray substance without any mark or pattern. It wasn't matter. It was something the builders had made, in the old days.

What was it like outside? Six hundred years had passed since the Barrier was created. In that time, the rest of the world could have changed considerably. An odd idea struck him: suppose the planet had been destroyed? Suppose a chain reaction had finally volatilized it? Would the city have been affected? Or was the city, within that fantastic barrier, not merely shielded but actually shifted into another plane of existence?

He struck his fist hard against the grayness; it was like striking rubber. Without warning the terror engulfed him. He could not hear himself screaming...

Afterward, he wondered how an eternity could be compressed into one instant. His thoughts swung back to suicide.

"Suicide?" Fleming said.

Nehral's mind was troubled. "Ecology fails," he remarked. "I suppose the trouble is that the city's a closed unit. We're doing artificially what was a natural law six hundred years ago. But nature didn't play favorites, as we're doing. And nature used variables. Mutations, I mean. There weren't any rules about introducing new pieces into the game—in fact, there weren't any rules about not introducing new rules. But here in the city we've got to stick by the original rules and the original pieces. If Bill Norman kills himself, I don't know what may happen."

"To us?"

"To us, and, through us, to the citizens. Norman's psychologist can't help him; he's a citizen, too. He doesn't know—"

"What was his problem, by the way? The psychologist's, I mean. He told Norman he'd solved it by taking up psychology."

"Sadism. We took care of that easily enough. We aroused his interest in the study of psychology. His mental index was so high we couldn't give him surgery; he needed a subtler intellectual release. But he's thoroughly social and well-balanced now. The practice of psychology is the sublimation he needed, and he's very competent. However, he'll never get at the root of Norman's trouble. Ecology fails," he repeated. "The relationship between an organism and its environment—irreconcilable, in this case. Hallucinations! Norman doesn't have hallucinations. Or even illusions. He simply has rational periods—luckily brief."

"It's an abnormal ecology anyway."

"It had to be. The city is uninhabitable."

The city screamed! It was a microcosm, and it had to battle unimaginable stresses to maintain its efficiency. It was an outboard motor on a lifeboat. The storm raged. The motor strained, shrilled, sparked—screamed. The environment was so completely artificial that no normal technology could have kept the balance.

Six hundred years ago the builders had studied and discarded plan after plan. The maximum diameter of a Barrier was five miles. The vulnerability increased according to the square of the diameter. And invulnerability was the main factor.

The city had to be built and maintained as a self-sufficient unit within an impossibly small radius.

Consider the problems. Self-sufficient. There were no pipe lines to outside. A civilization had to exist for an indefinite period in its own waste products. Steamships, spaceships, are not parallels. They have to make port and take in fresh supplies.

This lifeboat would be at sea for much longer than six hundred years. And the citizens—the survivors—must be kept not only alive, but healthy physically and mentally.

The smaller the area, the higher the concentration. The builders could make the necessary machines. They knew how to do that. But such machines had never been constructed before on the planet. Not in such concentration!

Civilization is an artificial environment. With the machines that were necessary, the city became so artificial that nobody could live in it. The builders got their efficiency; they made the city so that it could exist indefinitely, supplying all the air, water, food and power required. The machines took care of that.

But such machines!

The energy required and released was slightly inconceivable. It had to be

released, of course. And it was. In light and sound and radiation—within the five-mile area under the Barrier.

Anyone living in the city would have developed a neurosis in two minutes, a psychosis in ten, and would have lived a little while longer than that. Thus the builders had an efficient city, but nobody could use it.

There was one answer.

Hypnosis.

Everyone in the city was under hypnosis. It was selective telepathic hypnosis, with the so-called Monuments—powerful hypnopedic machines—as the control devices. The survivors in the lifeboat didn't know there was a storm. They saw only placid water on which the boat drifted smoothly.

The city screamed to deaf ears. No one had heard it for six hundred years. No one had felt the radiation or seen the blinding, shocking light that flashed through the city. The citizens could not, and the Controllers could not either, because they were blind and deaf and dumb, and lacking in certain other senses. They had their telepathy, their ESP, which enabled them to accomplish their task of steering the lifeboat. As for the citizens, their job was to survive.

No one had heard the city screaming for six hundred years—except Bill Norman.

"He has an inquiring mind," Nehral said dryly. "Too inquiring. His problem's an abstraction, as I've mentioned, and if he gets the right answer it'll kill him. If he doesn't, he'll go insane. In either case, we'll suffer, because we're not conditioned to failure. The main hypnotic maxim implanted in our minds is that every citizen must survive. All right. You've got the facts now, Fleming. Does anything suggest itself?"

"I don't have all the facts. What's Norman's problem?"

"He comes of dangerous stock," Nehral answered indirectly. "Theologians and mathematicians. His mind is... a little too rational. As for his problem—well, Pilate asked the same question three thousand years ago, and I don't recall his ever getting an answer. It's a question that's lain behind every bit of research since research first started.

But the answer has never been fatal till now. Norman's question is simply this—what is truth?"

There was a pause. Nehral went on.

"He hasn't expressed it even to himself. He doesn't know he's asking that question. But we know; we have entree to his mind. That's the question that he's finding insoluble, and the problem that's bringing him gradually out of control, out of his hypnosis. So far there've been only-flashes of realization. Split-second rational periods. Those are bad enough, for him. He's heard and seen the city as it is—"

Another pause. Fleming's thoughts stilled. Nehral said:

"It's the only problem we can't solve by hypnotic suggestion. We've tried. But it's useless. Norman's that remarkably rare person, someone who is looking for the truth."

Fleming said slowly, "He's looking for the truth. But—does he have—to find it?"

His thoughts raced into Nehral's brain, flint against steel, and struck fire there.

Three weeks later the psychologist pronounced Norman cured and he instantly married Mia. They went up to the Fifth Monument and held hands.

"As long as you understand—" Norman said.

"I'll go with you," she told him. "Anywhere."

"Well, it won't be tomorrow. I was going at it the wrong way. Imagine trying to tunnel out through the Barrier! No. I'll have to fight fire with fire. The Barrier's the result of natural physical laws. There's no secret about how it was created. But how to destroy it—that's another thing entirely."

"They say it can't be destroyed. Some day it'll disappear, Bill."

"When? I'm not going to wait for that. It may take me years, because I'll have to learn how to use my weapons. Years of study and practice and research. But I've got a purpose."

"You can't become an expert nuclear physicist overnight."

He laughed and put his arm around her shoulders. "I don't expect to. First things come first. First I'll have to learn to be a good physicist. Ehrlich and Pasteur and Curie—they had a drive, a motivation. So have I, now. I know what I want. I want out."

"Bill, if you should fail—"

"I expect to, at first. But in the end I won't fail. I know what I want. Out!"

She moved closer to him, and they were silent, looking down at the quiet, familiar friendliness of the city. I can stand it for a while, Norman thought. Especially with Mia. Now that the psychologist's got rid of my trouble, I can settle down to work.

Above them the rippling, soft light beat out from the great globe-atop the Monument.

"Mia—"

"Yes?"

"I know what I want now."

"But he doesn't know," Fleming said.

"That's all right," Nehral said cheerfully. "He never really knew what his problem was. You found the answer. Not the one he wanted, but the best

one. Displacement, diversion, sublimation—the name doesn't matter. It was the same treatment, basically, as turning sadistic tendencies into channels of beneficial surgery. We've given Norman his compromise. He still doesn't know what he's looking for, but he's been hypnotized into believing that he can find it outside the city. Put food on top of a wall, out of reach of a starving man, and you'll get a neurosis. But if you give the man materials for building a ladder, his energy will be deflected into a productive channel. Norman will spend all his life in research, and probably make some valuable discoveries. He's sane again. He's under the preventive hypnosis. And he'll die thinking there's a way out."

"Through the Barrier? There isn't."

"Of course there isn't. But Norman could accept the hypnotic suggestion that there was a way, if only he could find it. We've given him the materials to build his ladder. He'll fail and fail, but he'll never really get discouraged. He's looking for truth. We've told him he can find truth outside the Barrier, and that he can find a way out. He's happy now. He's stopped rocking the lifeboat."

"Truth..." Fleming said, and then, "Nehral—I've been wondering."

"What?"

"Is there a Barrier?"

Nehral said, "But the city's survived! Nothing from outside has ever come through the Barrier—"

"Suppose there isn't a Barrier," Fleming said. "How would the city look from outside? Like a... a furnace, perhaps. It's uninhabitable. We can't conceive of the real city, any more than the hypnotized citizens can. Would you walk into a furnace? Nehral, perhaps the city's its own Barrier."

"But we sense the Barrier. The citizens see the Barrier—"

"Do they? Do—we? Or is that part of the hypnosis too, a part we don't know about? Nehral—I don't know. There may be a Barrier, and it may disappear when its half-time is run. But suppose we just think there's a Barrier?"

"But—" Nehral said, and stopped. "That would mean—Norman might find a way out!"

"I wonder if that was what the builders planned?" Fleming said.

The End.

Notes and proofing history

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