

THE MASK OF DEMETER

The International Scientific Association met once a year in New York City, which made it easy for members who lectured in Columbia or N.Y.U. Others had, often, to travel thousands of miles to partake of the delights that comprised the annual meetings. Among these delights were gratuitous insults, given and taken, violent challenges to debate which never came to anything, and—if it was a lucky year—a fist fight between two eminent figures in the realm of science.

The convention for 1950 wasn't getting anywhere, it seemed. There had been a number of papers read, a few desultory impeachments of fact with half-hearted rejoinders from the platform.

Next on the program was the good Dr. Brewster, astronomer from Vernier Tech. His topic was "Some Recent Observations and Correlations Regarding the Spectrum and Band-Shifts of Demeter," which was mysterious. Nobody could think for the moment of a star named Demeter, though there probably was one. If you look hard enough you could find a star with any name that comes to mind.

Dr. Brewster, with a slight cough, advanced on the stage, smiling. Not yet referring to his notes, he began with the usual informal comments, intended to be humorous: "Well, gentlemen, I trust I can read a paper on Demeter without you all being scared out of your wits, eh?"

"Huh?" violently grunted a few of the members of the I. S. A.

"Now why should we be scared of anything *he* has to say?" demanded an astronomer from McGill University of a botanist from Yale.

Dr. Brewster chuckled mildly. "To wander a bit," he said, "I was one of those very few who read the original romance in its first edition. I found it vastly thrilling, of course—and totally improbable. But Orson Welles had—shall we say—a knack of putting over the totally improbable with a plausibility that is terrifying to the uninitiate."

The botanist from Yale looked at the astronomer from McGill. "What's the man talking about?" he asked.

"Damme if I know," said the Canadian.

"In fact," said Dr. Brewster, "this whole business of invasion from Demeter has been badly overdone, I should say. There was a time when one could scarcely pick up a pulpwood magazine without finding a story about that theme. Not that I have anything against the pulps, gentlemen. They have done much to popularize astronomy in their own indirect way.

"To ramble a bit further, Mr. Bonestell, the cover painter, has done some very striking scenes of Demeter viewed from space—works which might well hang in the corridors of many an observatory building, I believe."

A large part of the audience looked uneasily at the other part. They read the science fiction pulps, but it was not considered proper to talk about them. "And furthermore," whispered the astronomer from McGill, "Bonestell has never done a Demeter cover that I know of—and I've seen practically everything he's done . . . *Coronet* to 'Conquest of Space'." He looked dazedly at Brewster, smiling from the lectern.

"Well," said Brewster briskly, "to get to the point, my observations were conducted until a very short time before the convention; since then I've been in seclusion—as it were—correlating them and whipping them into shape for this reading. An ambiguity I trust you will excuse; I had a bit of a shock lately, thought that as an astronomer I was quite finished. My eyes seemed to have failed me, but fortunately it was only temporary."

He rattled the papers and began to read off strings of figures. The astronomers in the audience twisted more and more uncomfortably in their seats. Finally the gentleman from Canada rose and said: "Excuse me, Doctor Brewster, I'd like to ask a question."

"Certainly."

The Canadian looked a bit uncomfortable, "I'm ah—afraid I don't quite understand. You seem to be giving *atmospheric* spectrum readings."

"Exactly," said Brewster mildly.

"But how can you get detailed atmospheric readings from a star? And, by the way, just where is Demeter—in what constellation?"

Brewster opened his mouth and closed it again several times. At last he gasped: "I—I don't understand. I mean Demeter—the Demeter. It's the only one I know of."

"Well, where is it?" barked the Canadian, baffled.

"Right where it always was, I presume," said Brewster loftily. "Between the orbits of Earth and Mars."

"An asteroid?" asked the gentleman from McGill. "There is an asteroid named Demeter, but it isn't where *you* say it is, and it's only a miserable score miles in diameter—and anyone who suggests it has an atmosphere is a fool!"

"Hardly!" said Brewster, laying his paper down on the lectern. "That Demeter—if there is such a silly duplication of names—isn't the one I mean—and you know it! You don't call a planet two-thirds the size of Earth an asteroid, sir,—whoever you are!"

"I," yelled the Canadian, "am Culloch, associate professor of astronomy at McGill University."

"And I, Mr. Culloch, am Brewster—full professor of astronomy at the Vernier Institute of Technology. If you will allow me to continue—" He stared at the Canadian until the man simply slumped into his seat.

Said the botanist from Yale: "Mr. Culloch, I think you're quite right."

Culloch stared at him. "I know I'm right. You can't pull planets out of your hat!" But Brewster, who had seemed to have done just that, continued with his fantastic paper on a major planet that nobody had ever heard of.

There was a great deal of buzzing from the rear of the stage where the officers of the International Scientific Association were seated. Finally, they rose in concert and advanced on Brewster.

"Excuse me, doctor," said the Vice President, laying a firm hand on the astronomer's shoulder.

"This session is adjourned," announced the President. "Reconvene at eight promptly tonight for appointment of a publications committee. Please leave quietly without discussion."

The hall emptied in a few minutes and the Vice President unhanded Dr. Brewster, who sputtered incoherently for a few minutes, then pulled his dignity and his scattered typescript together. "Will you be good enough," he snarled, "to explain the meaning of this uncalled-for interference with my dignity and reputation?"

"I don't think," said a brash young corresponding secretary, "that you have much of either left after reading that nightmare of yours. What's the idea? Doing an act to get some publicity?"

Dr. Brewster, with an animal snarl, lunged at the corresponding secretary and would probably have torn his throat out if the young man had not hit him squarely on the jaw.

"You killed him!" gasped the President.

"Don't be foolish," said the secretary, rubbing his knuckles. "He'll come to." He propped the doctor up in a chair and massaged the back of his neck in the usual ring-side manner. Dr. Brewster opened his eyes and worked his jaw, then burst into tears.

"There, there," said the Vice President. He went to the switchboard at the side of the stage and economically turned out the house lights, leaving only the overhead borders.

Brewster sobbed: "What *is* the matter with everybody? I begin to read a paper about Demeter and you all jump on me!"

The officers looked blankly at one another. "What *was* that about Demeter?" asked the President. "I mean, what *is* it?"

The astronomer stopped weeping long enough to look wildly at the officer. "You're insane!" he shrilled. "You're all mad! Either that or you're railroading me!"

The Vice President took him by the arm, helping him to his feet. "When did you first hear of this Demeter?" he asked.

"*Hear* of it? It's one of the ten planets, man! It's one of the planets the Assyrians knew all about!

You'll find it in all the astronomical bushwah for the past thousand years! You can get its coordinates in any textbook. Kepler used it to calculate the elliptic orbit. Tycho Brahe measured its diameter. Aristotle swore up and down that if you slept in the light of Demeter you'd be cured of earache.

"Manly Hall, the occultist, says that Demeter governs the joints of the body, Shakespeare wrote a sonnet:

*"So near are you to my thoughts as food to life
Or wandering Demeter to the velvet night
And for the peace of you I hold such strife
As cross-gartered gallant, gold-bedight—"*

The brash young corresponding secretary wrinkled his brow for a moment. "You have that all wrong," he finally observed. "It's Sonnet LXXV, and it goes like this:

*"So are you to my thoughts as food to life,
Or as sweet-seasoned flowers are to the ground;
And for the peace of you I hold such strife
As twixt a miser and his wealth is found."*

He grinned. "But your version sounds good too."

"But what," raved Brewster, "what about the Invasion from Demeter that Orson Welles scared the country with in '39, that others have repeated in South America, in France more recently? What about that? And the book by H. G. Wells? And Edgar Rice Burroughs' famous series about John Carter, the Warlord of Demeter?"

"Both the radio play and the books were about the planet Mars," said the President.

"Look," added the President. "Try to be reasonable. Nobody ever heard of this Demeter of yours. There never was a major planet Demeter. If there were, we'd have known about it, wouldn't we?"

"Let me see an ephemeris," asked Brewster weakly. The secretary handed him a copy of the Columbia University's current pamphlet of heavenly data. Brewster riffled through it eagerly.

"Mercury, Venus, Luna—Mars!" he gasped. "They left Demeter out! How could Columbia University have done a thing like that?"

"We manage," said the President, offended. "I think, doctor, that you ought to go to a hospital for a little rest—eh?"

"Nothing of the sort," said Brewster. He was studying the ephemeris again. "Not only did they leave Demeter out," he said unhappily, "but Mars is altogether too near the Earth. Look at that—ridiculous!"

"That," said the President, "is where Mars has always been. You *do* need a rest, Brewster. I'm going to send for—ah—an auto." He went to the service phone in the wings of the stage. "Get me Bellevue Psychiatric Hospital," he said softly, shielding his mouth.

Brewster had slumped into a chair again and was holding his head in his hands. "I *saw* it," he muttered again and again. "It was real after all. I *saw* it."

"You mean that Demeter of yours?" asked the corresponding secretary. "What does it look like?"

"It's blue, bright blue," said Brewster. "No moon. Look at the magazine covers—some of the *Astounding* paintings of the '40s are the best astronomical plates available on the subject. But I don't mean the planet. It was that hand."

"What hand?"

"You wouldn't believe me. I didn't believe it myself when I saw it. I thought my eyes were going back on me. That's why I knocked off work to do the correlations for my paper. I must have been the only one who saw it—the only telescope trained on Demeter at that precise time. A second off either way and I would have lost it."

"What the deuce are you talking about, doctor? Speak up!"

Brewster raved on: "You know how it is—direct observation through a telescope—you see things vaguely. Eye-strain after a few minutes, and in a couple of hours you're nearly blind, you're so intent on watching whatever particular point you're studying. I've often seen strange things through the telescopes. Chromatic aberration can put a rainbow across the Milky Way—surely you've seen that?"

They nodded gravely. Every astronomer has seen peculiar things through a telescope. A joke that goes around observatories tells of the greenhorn just out of school who polished a mirror objective glass with steel wool and discovered twenty new spiral nebulae.

"Well," babbled Brewster, "that's what I saw, sort of. One of those very firm constructions that drift across the field of vision—and when I saw it I'd been observing directly for five hours. So I knocked off right away. I don't want to go blind any more than the next man."

The President came back from the phone. "I've arranged for a—ah—cab to come for you, doctor," he explained. "What were you saying? Something about Demeter?"

"Yes. I haven't observed it or even looked through a telescope since then—when I saw that thing. It seemed to come from beyond the stars—through Magellan's coal sack, like a port-hole."

Eye-strain can play funny tricks; astronomers know that better than any other class of men. All those present had seen their quotas of flying fish in space, rocketships, octopi, flying coffins, castles and what-have-you.

"What was it you saw?" they asked with great interest, hoping he wouldn't get violent before the men came from Bellevue.

Instead of answering, he started up suddenly. "My God!" he yelled. "I nearly forgot about this!" He whipped a pamphlet bound in durable gray paper from his pocket. "I was using this very booklet when it happened. The pages almost got blurry for a moment—eye-strain—but I kept it in focus just the same." He waved the pamphlet in the air. "Read this," he snarled. "And then you can laugh out of the other side of your mouth. I was checking it again just before I began to read my paper. It's still accurate."

The men from Bellevue came at that moment, big silent men in white jackets. The President whispered to one of them with some pointing of his finger at Dr. Brewster.

Not saying one word, the Bellevue men took Brewster by both arms and began to walk him off the stage. He seemed to accept them as natural forces rather than as human beings, for he neither struggled nor addressed them. He turned his head far around to the officers standing on the stage. "What I saw," he yelled at them, "was a *hand*. It reached through Magellan's coal sack and *took Demeter away*. It *took Demeter away! Took Demeter away . . .*" His voice died, echoing in the wings and flies of the bare stage.

"What did he give you?" asked the corresponding secretary.

The President glanced at the pamphlet bound in durable gray paper which Brewster had thrust into his hands. "It's the United States Naval Observatory Ephemeris for October 1949," he said.

He riffled through it casually. "Lists coordinates for that month. Celestial coordinates for Mercury, Venus, Luna," he muttered. Then he bent over the page, wild-eyed: "Mercury, Venus, Luna—

"Demeter!"