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fantastic
SCIENCE FICTION

NEVER BEFORE PUBLISHED!

A Sword & Sorcery Feature written and illustrated by Fabian

Cover Illustration For "THE BIG BLOW-UP" (See Page 108)

EARLY WINTER (See Back Cover)

THE WORM • "Probably the most intriguing tale you'll ever read anywhere."

July, 1979

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Robert H. Wilcox,
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Scott Mavor, Staff Illustrator
W.L. Thomsen,
Circulation Manager

About the Cover

We hope our cover reached up with outstretched arms, entreating you to pick us up and find out what is going on inside! The illustration, by Elinor Mavor, interprets "The Big Blow-Up" by picturing one of its aliens inside a "bubble" symbolizing his protective powers. *See Page 108.*

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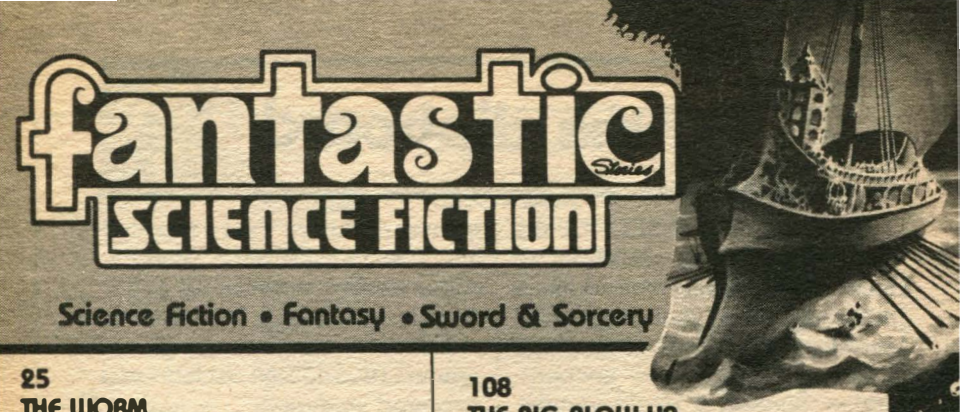
FEATURES

FICTION



DEPARTMENTS

off the clipboard

PREPARE YOURSELF for the pages ahead! You are about to meet statues that come to life; a pulsating "thing" that engulfs as it evolves; a witch and her confused "demon"; a man who encounters — himself; a world wonder with strange appetites; and more.

Herewith a delicious banquet of ideas selected to nourish a very discerning and imaginative group of readers — a very stimulating one to work with, by the way. We are enjoying the mail immensely (see our letters column) and are using your feedback as a guide for our "new directions."

WE WELCOME to this issue of Fantastic two new writers; William E. Fark, who has created a dandy little fantasy entitled "Hessie and the Spaced-Out Demon,"; and John E. Stith whose short, short piece, "Early Winter," is featured on the back cover. Fark describes a "close encounter of the third kind" we are sure you will enjoy. And Stith delivers a kicker we couldn't resist.

TIME DOES not permit us to give individual criticism to the large number of manuscripts submitted, much as we would like to do so. We may sometimes keep a manuscript more than a month if it is under consideration. After the editor reads a story, he will either send it back with a brief note or present it to our panel of editorial readers (two college students and two grad students).

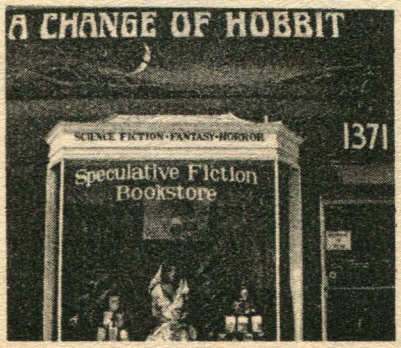
Another perusal is given by our editorial consultant, Robert Wilcox. Mr. Wilcox has a background in metallurgical engineering and publishing, plus he has written hundreds of articles, currently does free-lance technical and creative writing and teaches *both* subjects at Glendale Community College in Glendale, Arizona. In addition to all that, he has created the first science fiction literature course at Glendale Community College, and is presently developing a textbook and teacher's manual for that course. (Anyone interested in contacting Mr. Wilcox about this text may do so through the magazine.)

So you can see what careful attention is given your manuscript. And if we cannot give much individual criticism to each contributor, we feel you will be able to figure out the kind of writing we are looking for by what we choose to include in the publication. Furthermore, our new column, "Between the Lines," by Mr. Wilcox will be examining just what goes into a good piece of writing. In this way, we can give you a taste of what a science

fiction literature course contains. (See Mr. Wilcox's comments following "A Museum Piece," which appears in this issue.)

Perhaps in this way we can make up for not being able to contact each budding writer personally; we hope so! The ideas flowing into our offices from fertile imaginations all over the country (and beyond) are legion. But, *please,* get someone to proofread your work for spelling, punctuation and proper usage of words — your piece stands a much better chance of going over if it reads *smoothly* and *correctly.* It takes an extraordinary gem of an idea to shine through layers and layers of mistakes, and we really don't have the time to chip through it all.

WHILE VISITING Los Angeles recently, we had the pleasure of dropping into "A Change of Hobbit," a special book store "catering to the cravings of SF fiends," on Westwood Boulevard. Proprietor *Sherry Gottlieb* and assistant *Bill Glass* were most pleasant and informative about the kind of "being" that is an "SF fiend." Input like this won't hurt any of us at all!



FAVORABLE RESPONSE to our new "heavily illustrated" look will keep us striving for bigger and better visual entertainment to spice your reading. Our April issue boasted 23 pages with full or spot illustration and this issue has even more. We have even dropped ads in favor of more of what you buy us for!

WE FIND this field an exciting one in which to be involved — speculation about the future or about alternate fantasy worlds serves to tickle the mind and enliven the spirit. And presenting such ideas within a literary framework is no less important to publisher or reader. Fuzzy-headed, semi-literate philosophizing may be a great exercise for the guy who's doing it — but we will not be publishing that kind of ego-trip on these pages.

Our challenge is to entertain the majority of you with high-class, imaginative writing — some of it from sf's Golden Age writers and some from new writers in our audience.

ARTIST JON Gerung, who created "Sex Queens from Outer Space" for this issue of Fantastic, is graduating from college this year and will be heading to Los Angeles to seek his fortune. Paul Freeman, who runs the "ONE BOOK SHOP" in Tempe, Arizona (and who, by the way, has sold out his entire allotment of the April Fantastic) introduced us to Jon. Thank you, Paul!

I WISH you could have heard my conversation by phone with Steve Fabian in New Jersey the other day. We have never met. The answering voice said simply, "Fabian." It was soft-spoken and pleasant. As we talked, I learned that the artist is also a writer; the Daemon Sword and Sorcery feature was totally created by Fabian—the words and the art. "I enjoy writing," said Fabian, "and it's fun to have an upbeat, hopeful ending."

Amen!

BE SURE to ask your newsdealer to save you a copy of the next issues of FANTASTIC (October, 1979) and AMAZING (November, 1979). We are enjoying a wider distribution now, and you should be able to find us at more of your favorite outlets. Otherwise, we'll be happy to enter a subscription for you.

Until next time—enjoy your reading and keep on sending those cards, letters and manuscripts. We love it!—ed.

IF YOU want a big dose of SF and Fantasy to curl up with or give as a gift, you can take advantage of our "Grab Bag" offer and get your wish.

We will send you EIGHT back issues of FANTASTIC or AMAZING, chock-full of top writers and artists, for just five bucks! Please, don't specify any dates—that would take too much time and the reason we can make our offer for such a low price is because we don't have to sort out special issues.

That's some 1024 pages of your special kind of reading.

If you want the "Grab Bag" offer, please send your name and address with $5.00 (plus $1.00 postage and handling) to:

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INTERCOM

If any of you ever become publishers or editors, you will discover that it can be lonely work because you rarely, if ever, come face to face with your reader. That is why we open the morning mail eager for some feedback, some expression that tells us how YOU feel about what we are doing! Here are a few letters that we think say something interesting and good or bad, they are worth sharing. If we can feed the majority of you what you want in the way of entertaining and intelligent SF and fantasy reading, we will feel gratified, indeed. So, tell us how you feel and break the loneliness of our relationship. — ed.

Dear Sir:

Well, well, well. FANTASTIC didn't die after all. I just this minute received the April, 1979 (Vol. 27, #5) edition. The last issue I received was Volume 27, #3, hence my amazement (no pun intended).

I would greatly appreciate it if you would be so kind as to send me a copy of the missing issue.

By the way, for what it's worth I think the new format is strikingly attractive and the simple fact of novelty is extraordinary in a field where all the magazines seem to look alike.

Thank you for your attention,

Wm. Barron Jr.
Honolulu, Hawaii

Dear Mr. Gohagen,

Upon buying your magazine this week the first story I read was *"Ooops,"* the story on the back cover. The idea of putting a story on the back cover intrigued my friends and I. The four of us are aspiring but as yet unpublished authors and members of the campus Science Fiction Club here at the University of South Florida. While discussing some of the stories we have recently written, I recalled my own story, *"Endtime"* and my friends encouraged me to send it to you.

I hope you enjoy my story and will consider printing it in your magazine. Thank you,

Ellen C. Lindow
Tampa, Florida

Your story didn't meet our requirements, but we hope you and your friends will send in future efforts. We appreciate your comments and your interest very much. — ed.

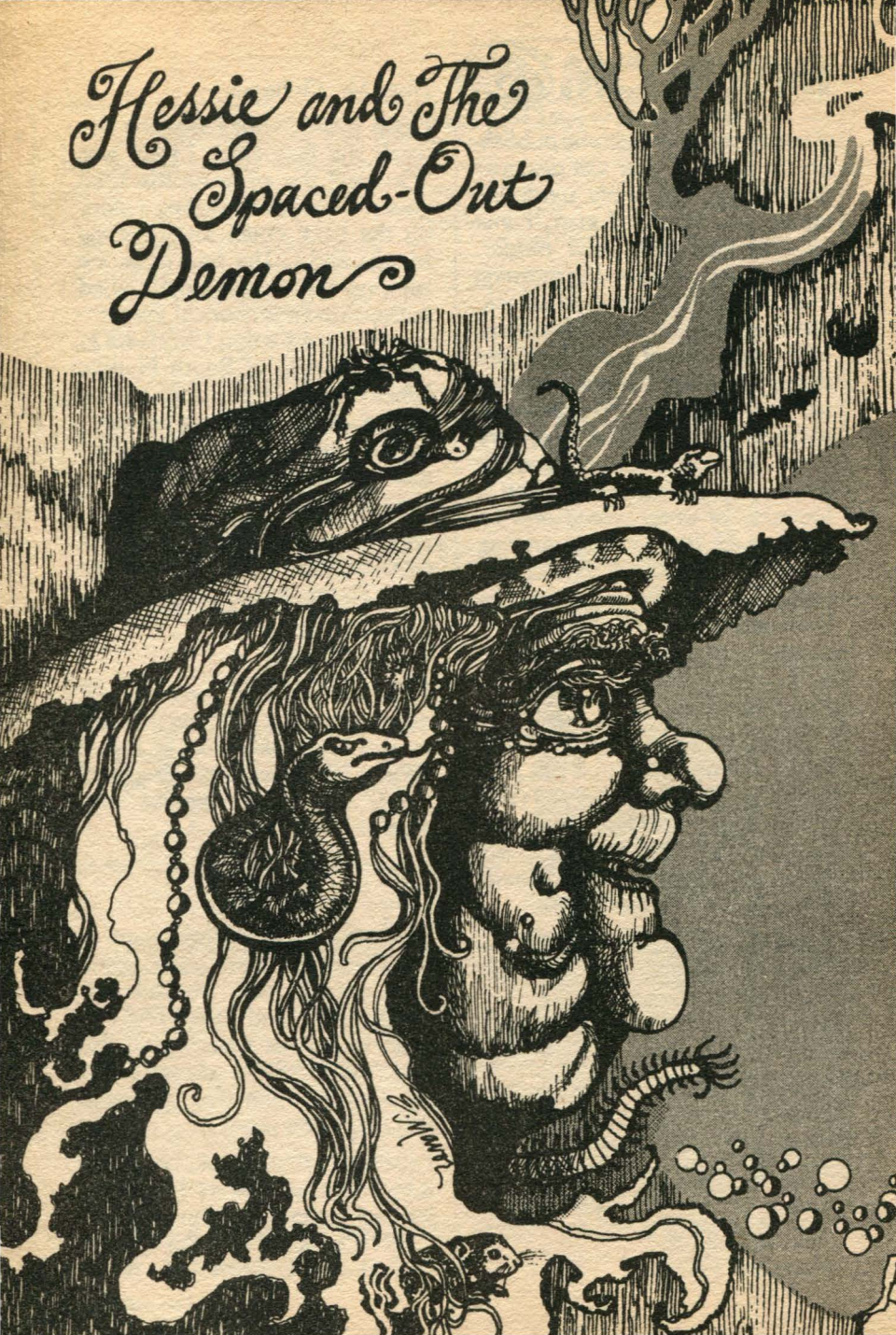
Dear Mr. Bernhard,

I have just seen the new issue of FANTASTIC. For quite some time I have been worried that AMAZING and FANTASTIC were in serious trouble, but the new FANTASTIC shows more signs of life than that magazine has in several years.

I also hope that you plan on using non-fiction articles and reinstating the Letters column in FANTASTIC. Also, I hope to see the marvelous artwork of Steve

Continued on page 128

Hessie and The Spaced-Out Demon



by W. E. Farke

We think you'll fall in love with Hessie — and then, Penrose. Such adorable bumblers, and how hilarious to us their contemplation of one another. Be glad we are allowed to peep into their extraordinary rendevouz — and hope that our encounters with any of those UFO pilots orbitting the earth may be as benign as Hessie's!

AS WITCHES go, Aunt Hester Tolbert ranked pretty far down the scale. Had there been a sorcerers' union in the area, she would not have been admitted to the local except as an apprentice — one who required close supervision. Lack of professional status, however, did not bother Hessie, nor had it prevented her from making a good living. Her cures saved as many sick people as the country doctor's attentions, and her love potions were always effective, although she admitted to herself that the girls who bought them generally needed nothing more than self-confidence.

The hexes she sold worked in the same manner generally, and if the charms that were supposed to keep soldiers from getting killed didn't always do so, she could usually claim successfully that the unlucky casualty had not obeyed her stringent instructions. Not one in a thousand heeded the caution about celibacy, for instance.

Hessie hadn't been so active in the last few years. The old doctor died, and his replacement was a young man with a lot of new drugs. Also, the young folks didn't seem to need her love spells. From what she had heard about some of them, an anti-love, or at least an anti-sex spell might have been more beneficial.

Still, she didn't suffer. Lanny, her youngest son and the only one of her children who inherited any of her feelings about the work, went into accounting. And he it was who figured out the Social Security angle. As soon as the government started adding self-employed people to the rolls, Lanny signed her up. And ever since her last birthday, she had been drawing a check every month. She was supposed to report anything she took in for part-time work, but it didn't amount to much. Not most months anyway, or so she reasoned.

She did keep her hand in; the way politicians run things, it wouldn't do to depend absolutely on the government. And she fooled around some with new ideas, things she'd never done before. In the past, Hessie hadn't been the adventurous kind, ever. Old Mother Suddeth cautioned her when she was starting out.

"Jes' don't try nuthin' ye cain't do, Hessie. I knows my powers and I don't promise things what's above me. Sich things as raisin' a corpse. Cain't no one bring back a dead 'un, not in any shape ye could stand to gaze on anyway. Or shootin' yerself through the air. I reck-lekt seein' that wunst, but I ain't sayin' I wuzn't tricked. Jes' stick to wotcha kin do, and ye'll be all right."

Hessie followed the older woman's advice, but in retirement she began trying some of the impossible chores. Summoning, for instance. She never had got the hang of it, or maybe she hadn't really tried when she was raisin' her kids. She didn't rightly know how she'd deal with a demon if she brought one, to say nothing of the danger. She wasn't worried too much about the risks anymore. Not at her age, and with her experience standin' off some of the randy widowers who'd come

around after Paw passed on. And she would like to pull off a really big one before she had to give up entirely, so she kept trying.

The circle on the floor had been chalked so many times it was nigh fixed there, and she knew the incantations as well as her recipe for mustard pickles. But never had any figure come . . . "in darkness, gliding in with its nose backward and its face turned."

Nor did this one. He came with a swoosh, right through the shingle roof without disturbing so much as a splinter and plopped down onto the floor like a croaker-sack full of calf's foot jelly. Hessie was so surprised she jumped back, expecting the thing to slop over or to splash on her.

THE MISSION was routine so far, but Mdval had expected as much on that particular run, monitoring a Class II planet orbiting a minor star. True, the inhabitants possessed rudimentary nuclear capabilities and had begun tentative explorations into space — reasons Mdval's race maintained an interest — but their efforts would not create off-planet problems for some time yet. He was being punished, of course. Any advanced trainee could handle such a low priority mission, and many of them had. It did not require a Space Patrol Analyst, Senior Class, Mdval's rank.

If only he hadn't corrected the Executive Coordinator's projections! The explorations party would have been destroyed, but the exec would not have been embarrassed by an underling's brilliance. Mdvel vowed, when he returned to his own star, to request transfer.

The audio-communicator monitor ran continuously; the people below seemed to like the sounds they created. Mdval had never bothered to learn any of their so-called languages. All were so primitive the universal translator could handle them with little more than stand-by power. Not that he turned it on; nothing they might say would concern him, and he was bored enought without listening to the exchange of others. His own race had given up oral communication generations before.

He did glance at the view plate between yawns, noting the absence of lights beneath him. Passing over an uninhabited area, he supposed, a mountainous region according to the altitude indicator.

The feeling of something wrong struck him before the alarm was activated. The craft rocked under the assault of a tremendous force that set lights flashing and automatically initiated defense mechanisms. But despite the super-sophisticated counter measures which he had been assured would protect ship and crew against any attack or disaster short of a supernova, Mdval was taken. How, he didn't know, nor did he have time to examine the method.

An arm he couldn't see plucked him from the cockpit, through the alloy shell of the ship and whirled him into space. He fell, generating no

friction, toward the planet's surface where he passed through materials he recognized as vegetation. With no discernible deceleration, his descent ended and he landed with a slight bump. He needed but a second (unit of measure, not time) to see he stood in a kind of ill-lit dwelling within a circle drawn on a hard floor.

HESSIE RECOVERED quickly, once she realized she had actually summoned a demon. Pushing her glasses up on her nose, she examined her visitor, clucking at his somewhat worn appearance.

"Ye ain't much of a demon, I reckon. But since you're the one they sent, I guess I'll have to make do."

Mdval was furious! The planet possessed weaponry of the highest sophistication, and none of the previous patrols had even hinted at such a development. Just wait till he made *his* report. *If* he made his report, he amended. He was committed to escaping, of course, but first he would have to discover where he was being held in relation to his ship.

He scanned the visi-ports of his space suit, seeing the cabin interior in one perfectly circular view. Insecure for a prison and certainly not appropriate for a captive of his rank. He focused on the figure he took to be his keeper. Ancient. Pensioned off long ago on his planet. And a member of the breeder gender, he believed, or had been. Nor did she look very intelligent. Escape was possible after all.

First, he must calm her fears. Make certain she understood he came in peace. Mdval tried to spread the extensor flaps on his suit to show he carried no weapons. But the gravity was greater than he was accustomed to, and the extensor edged outward slowly until its metal tap tapped against an invisible barrier.

"Ye kin move, kin ye? That means ye're alive. I feared maybe the trip had been too much fer ye."

She was talking to him he supposed. The faint sounds in the audio system were similar to some he had heard in the ship. He tried again to communicate in return, his second attempt with the extensor flap failing also.

He had to get out of the suit. The gravity was too great for him to move the flexible alloy. A glance at his instruments showed no elements he could not tolerate, so he would be in no danger from that quarter. Moving sluggishly, he activated the hatch lock.

"Well, I'll be — No wonder ye look so odd. Ye come in a shippin' crate."

With the alloy barrier removed, Mdval understood telepathically. Not the speech, but the image. The creature was capable of communication. Excitedly, he directed a stream of concepts toward her, identifying his star system and showing aspects of his galactic existence.

Hessie shook her head. Must be dust or something in the air from the

summonin' makin' her dizzy. She closed her eyes, but funny haphazard flashes against the lids dazzled her. She blinked rapidly to clear her vision.

Several attempts at communication and several matching blinks later, Mdval stopped transmitting. Wait and try with some higher official later. The keeper wouldn't be much help to him anyway. Wait! She was imagining something, what he would look like outside the crate. She obviously had never seen a member of an off-planet race before. Very well, why not give her what she wanted?

The task proved more difficult than he had supposed. Hessie had no fixed idea on a demon's appearance. At first she favored a miniature Lucifer, similar to an illustration she had seen as a child on a box of wood matches. Her second choice was a mischievous cupid with horns and tail, then for a few seconds she pictured an amorphous porcine creature with a hide of leaping flames. These rapidly changing concepts applied to Mdval's squatty one-fourth human size resulted in a composite image, minus flames, which he projected back to her as he opened the hatch.

He was a mite wobbly, Hessie thought, and slow; moved like she did on rainy mornings when her rheumatiz was plaguin' her. Had she caught an old one, or a runt? They had them in demon litters, she reasoned, same as other animals. He was kinda cute, though.

"Wotcher name, sonny?"

Did she have to continue addressing him orally after he had demonstrated his telepathic capabilities? He answered as he had previously with his name, rank and a series of equations as required by the Galactic Convention.

"Cat gotcher tongue? Well, if ye won't tell me, I reckon I'll have to name ye myself. Whatta ya say to Penrose?"

Penrose! The utter absurdity of it shocked him so thoroughly he let his image projection waver. When he realized he had startled her, he reestablished it immediately.

"None of that," Hessie ordered as the demon wavered. "Ye stay right where ye are till I say ye kin go."

Mdval hastily reinforced the image, but Hessie was not mollified. Must be something she had left out of the incantation. Better bind him to earth with a little sprinkle of goofer dust just to make sure. She kept an eye on him while she got the jar from the shelf.

She hadn't used the mixture much of late. The last time was when Old Payte Detweiler's boy come back from Vietnam and turned into a wolf. It sure cured him. His paw rolled the goofer dust into one of them brown cigarettes Arnie had brung back from across the water. It worked same as the time she had made her own boys try some half-cured long green when they decided they were old enough to smoke. Against the combined essences of dirt from a hanged man's grave, a

witch's first menstrual blood, bull semen, an umbilical cord that had strangled a baby in the womb and the gizzard from a bald eagle, all powdered and mixed with snuff, cannabis didn't stand a chance. Mdval couldn't take it either. He knew of her distrust of him, but her other ideas defied translations. He felt relief when he saw her take down a household container instead of a weapon. And the handful of dust merely obscured his optics. Then he exploded.

Actually, he exhibited the first behavior common to both his race and his keeper's. He sneezed. No ordinary violent, spasmodic exhalation of breath — he didn't breathe in the ordinary sense. Violent, yes! His exterior membrane rippled in undulations of tidal proportions, crashing together at each succeeding and increasingly stronger spasm. And he shook, his vision dancing with the vibrations that bounced his bulk in tremendous peristaltic tremors. He forgot everything else as he attempted to regain control over the centers responsible for entity movement. His telepathic image disappeared with the first sneeze.

Hessie watched aghast as her demon went into convulsions. The poor thing had such a palsy he couldn't hold his hide together, and it was getting worse. She had to do something; another minute and he'd go into spasm. She grabbed the dipper gourd and dashed a quart of water over him to wash off the dust.

Mdval flinched. His was an oxygen-using planet, and he recognized the combinant H^2O. It wouldn't hurt him, although he would have preferred it at a higher temperature. It cleared his intake sphincters and rinsed the corrosive from his outer membrane. The violent rejection impulses lessened and he was able to steady his optics.

"Better?" Hessie held the gourd ready for a second treatment.

Mdval was still disoriented. Instead of telepathing, he tried to speak, producing a sound between the mew of a hungry kitten and the squeak of an ill-tuned radio.

Hessie heard him whimper, a croupy, feverish sound like those that used to waken her when the kids were still little. And she reacted accordingly. Clucking in concern, she wiped out a portion of the demon circles and swept the quivering sack-like creature into her arms.

"Now, now," she crooned, hugging him to her breast. "You're all right. Mother's right here." Patting and soothing, she backed to the chair and began to rock, her rhythm not forgotten after nearly thirty year's break.

He welcomed the warmth, and the movement was particularly restful. He snuggled against the softness, marvelling at a structure quite at odds with his image of what a guard should be.

"I hope ye ain't comin' down with somethin'." Hessie felt where a forehead should be. "Still mighty cold. And I ain't got a thing warmin' to give ye. I et all the greens I cooked up for my supper, and the fire's gone out." She looked around the cabin. "Maybe a little moonshine and wat-

er. I don't hold with givin' younguns hard likker, but that's all I got."

It wasn't easy: getting out of the rocker, opening the jug and pouring with one hand, but Hessie managed as she had hundreds of times before, adding a second generous splash of liquor for good measure. The iron teakettle had just enough warm water to dissolve the honey she stirred into the toddy. The little rascal took it like one of her own, once she found the proper opening. When he emptied the cup, she raised him to her shoulder to burp him.

Mdval resented the creature rousing him and jabbing at him with the clay container. She almost smashed his optics before she located his food receptor and tipped something into the opening. It was liquid and warm, and after the first bitterness remarkably potent. The warmth spread through him, erasing the last tensions from the corrosive and lowering his consciousness level. In this euphoric state, he estivated.

HE RETURNED to animation slowly, his optics blurring when he first moved, and his food receptor seeming distended with a heavy, unpleasant undertaste. After a brief check that revealed his various organs and neural connectors functioning properly, he decided the liquid he had absorbed must be responsible for his sub-par reactions.

Another item for his report: the planet had unsuspected chemical weapons along with their space arsenal. The corrosive would probably have eaten through his external membrane had not his guard flooded him with H^2O. It might well have destroyed his neural network too. Then the liquid catalyst he had ingested which forced him into estivation prematurely, almost one-fourth of a lifespan early; pleasant though it might have been, it was probably addictive. He knew of entire civilizations that had fallen because similar substances had been introduced into their cultures.

As he became fully reanimated, he examined his resting place. Comfortable but not luxurious; designed obviously to incarcerate one of his kind — a large, circular container woven from thin, narrow staffs with a peculiar arch of the same material spanning the open entrance. He had been covered with a soft, faded mantle of animal fibres cunningly constructed into a continuous, flat panel. Mdval could not identify the odors of lye soap, sunshine and grass, but he enjoyed them nevertheless.

Cautiously, he lay back the mantle and peered over the edge of his cell. The room was empty, although loud vocal communication sounds told him his guard was not far away. She was likely observing him electronically. That, of course, was her privilege. He shifted his bulk to flow over the side of the container, noticing that the gravity was less oppressive than when he had first arrived. He was adjusting to the planet.

The floor felt cold to his pedal extensors; the local inhabitants required less heat than his race. He hurried as much as he could toward

an opening where he could see light from the planet's star. As he came nearer the outside, the speech sounds increased, accompanied by a grating noise.

"Heavy the bur-den I carr-ry!
Long is the way and I'm wear-ry.
For you and for me
He died on a treeeeeeee!
My sins I bear to the Lord."

Hessie bent to the tub, singing as she rubbed the wet laundry vigorously against the washboard. She obviously saw nothing incongruous in proclaiming the glory of God while she was harboring a resident demon.

Mdval, who knew nothing of philisophy, religious or otherwise, cared little for the harmonics. The chant did have a certain infectious rhythm though; his pedal extensors vibrated in a surprising twitch. Had Hessie not spied him on the stoop, he might have become the first born-again extra-terrestrial on record.

"Mornin', Penrose." Her chorus stopped in mid-syllable. "How you feelin'? I was beginnin' to think ye might sleep all day."

The creature meant him no harm, Mdval realized. He was learning to classify the nuances in the sound of her speech.

"I et a long time ago, but they's some johnny-cake left and some tea whenever you're hungry."

Did he dare accept food after the effects of the catalyst? He caught the picture of a golden brown loaf spread with a paler yellow substance and liked the idea.

"Come along, then. Back in the house."

Hessie stripped soapy water from her hands and wiped them on her apron. Mdval turned sluggishly, fighting to maintain traction on the sloping board floor of the stoop.

"Cain'tcha make it? Lanny's been promisin' to put in a new corner rock and level that up. But he's got his own place to look after and them younguns. Here!" Without waiting for him to respond, she grabbed a lateral extensor and righted him. And to save him any more problems, she led him through the door.

"They's enough tea for me to have a cup too, so's ye won't have to eat by yerself."

Mdval marvelled at her sophistication. Previous reports from his planet's surveillance patrols had missed that as well as other important facts. He knew she had never seen his kind before, still she displayed no aversion and little curiosity although he had changed substantially from the image he had originally projected. And she was a most capable and confident guard, secure in the knowledge he would not escape. She evinced interest in his food receptor as he ingested the cereal-based energy sheet she had prepared. Her mental analogy was a hand-oper-

ated machine into which she thrust a staff of the cereal from which the food was made and gathered pellet-like flakes the machine ejected. The food was durable, pleasantly flavored with monoclinic, sucrose crystals as was the liquid she poured for him.

"Eat plenty." She shoved the last piece of johnny-cake toward him. "I've got a job fer ye this mornin'." She hitched her chair nearer his and lowered her voice. "Paw went outa his head a tetch, jist afore he passed on. Thought we wuz gonna be burned out or such like, the way his folks wuz back in the Rebellion, when Cantrell was raidin' through here. So he up and took my Chiny box and hid it. Tain't worth no great lot, but the things in it is precious. My Maw's weddin' band, went all the way back to when her folks come up this way from Virginny, ten generations ago that wuz. And the pin my Paw got from President McKinley when he was a soldier. They's some old-timey coins, too. A man tried to swap Paw fer 'em once, but Paw wouldn't trade. And some other knick-knacks, locks o' hair from my babies, includin' the two I buried, and things like that."

For a second Mdval thought she was accusing him of theft, but soon realized she needed a detector of some nature — for metal. She expected him to do that? His spacecraft was equipped for prospecting, but without instruments he could do nothing.

"I'll show ye where I think he hid it." With no apparent difficulty, she swooped him out of the chair and deposited him astraddle her hip. Very unusual treatment for a prisoner, Mdval thought, although undoubtedly efficient. Had she waited for him, they would have needed much longer to reach the area she wanted him to search.

He had seen atom-blasted planets that looked more inviting. The surface was eroded to an evil, yellowish layer in which he was surprised to see vegetation. Low, gnarled, heavily-barbed plants clung tenaciously to the soil, covering every clay rib.

"Them's dewberry briars, and som'mers in there is my Chiny box. We had a heavy rain, so's the clay was soft and Paw could dig 'thout no trouble, but there's no tellin' where. Now if ye jist find my treasures, I'll senja back to where ye come from." Gently she lowered him to the ground.

Mdval flinched as his base settled into the hard, dry clay. Did she actually believe he could penetrate that formidable growth? A nudge from her pedal tipped him forward.

"Do ye want I shouldn't watch?" Hester turned her head away. After a minute during which she heard no activity, she looked again.

"Penrose!" His lateral extensors flapped wildly at her sharp tone. "I'm about to the end of my patience with ye!" She nudged him again.

Mdval agitated rapidly to keep from tumbling into the gully, whimpering at the idea of the spikes piercing his outer membrane. His guard righted him once more.

"I jist don't know what I'm gonna do with ye." Her flesh was softer than the clay, but Mdval's posterior ached from the impact as she jerked him up and slammed him astraddle her hip again.

"I've gotta finish my warshin', then you and me's gonna have a talk." Hessie stamped up the hill and dumped him on the stoop. "And ye stay there, y'hear?"

She scrubbed a pillowcase, muttering about ungrateful younguns and how if she wanted anything done, she always had to do it herself.

"Penrose! Git up off them lazy haunches of yourn and fill my rinch tub. Ye oughta be able to witch water from the spring if ye cain't do nothin' else."

Mdval got the picture — H^2O emerging from a fissure in the planet's surface some distance away. Anyone with basic engineering skills should have been able to reroute the liquid's path as it rose to the surface and to move it nearer the house. He understood the principles involved though he had no background in hydraulics whatsoever.

"Well!" Her disgust so evident that the lowest life-form in space would have comprehended, Hessie grabbed the bucket and set off toward the spring. Three trips later, as she poured the last drop into the rinse tub, she was all set to give him a good talkin'-to when she heard someone walking up the trail.

"Who's that?" She listened intently. "Tain't no one from around here. Ye gottny thing to do with who's comin'?"

Mdval too heard someone approaching and searched telepathically, but the visitor was too far away to make contact.

"Jist in case, they's no good in havin' ye underfoot." For the third time, she grabbed Penrose up and carried him. "Now, ye stay in that basket, and if I hear so much as a rattle outa ye, I'll give ye a good goin' over. Y'hear?"

Mdval did; threats existed in his culture, too. The pleasant smelling softness covered him again, and he heard the door close as his guard went to repel an intruder.

DAMN! WEBB Clayton fanned and slapped furiously at the gnats around his face, hating every winged, buzzing insect on earth. He'd like to see them all dead, consumed in a mushroom cloud or something, along with chiggers and ticks. The woods literally teemed with the little bastards! More than that, the weather was too hot to be hauling himself up a mountain — probably a waste of time anyway. Hessie Tolbert was crazy according to the old woman who ran the store down below, not that she was such a brilliant specimen herself. Webb believed the bit about Hessie, though; no one with half a mind would live in such a place. It was desolate! Great, he supposed, if you were a fugitive from justice or a moonshiner. Hey! Perhaps that was why the old hag hid away up there — she had a still. Nice if she had some on hand; he could use a fifth of white lightning. It would go over big in the faculty lounge.

Mdval shuddered at the violent vibrations he was receiving from the newcomer. And the visual image was even more alarming: a holocaust of some nature. An enemy — definitely! His opinion of Mdval's keeper was most unfriendly and unflattering. He recognized the moonshine image. So! The creature also dealt in the liquid catalyst. Its use as a weapon was obviously widespread on the planet. Better not reveal himself, Mdval decided, until he discovered the newcomer's intentions.

"Hello!" Webb pushed aside a hazelnut bush and stepped into the clearing.

Yeech! The pits! A cabin and lean-to that might have been built in Daniel Boone's day, a garden plot and some gooseberry bushes. And, as he had expected, deserted. The yard had been swept recently and there were washtubs in the shade, but no sign of whoever might have provided the labor. "Anyone home?"

Hessie peered around the corner of the cabin. Another investigator, snoopin' around to see if she had reported her earnings the month before? No, he wasn't got-up dressy enough for that. Kinda mean lookin', too.

"I'm here. Ye don't have to wake up the dead."

"Mrs. Tolbert?"

"Might be. Who are ye?"

"I'm Webster Clayton, from the University of Tennessee Science Division. I'd like to talk to you, if I may. I won't bother you long." He was certain of that. Of all the suspicious old people he had met in his investigations, this one looked least promising.

"Talk don't cost ye nothin'." Leastways, he wasn't from Social Security. "Come up and set."

Hessie watched silently as Webb crossed the yard to the stoop before she took a chair near the washtubs. For several minutes they faced each other in psychological battle, neither wanting to be the first to speak or to look away.

Mdval, monitoring them intently, was confused by the conflicting images he received. And he was right about their relationship — they were definitely enemies. Their mutual hostility almost overwhelmed him. But there was no audible accompaniment. Were the creatures communicating telepathically at a level beyond his skills at detection? The only audible activity was from a pen behind the cabin where some slight, domestic beasts clucked as they pecked and scratched at the ground.

"Your friend, Mrs. Riley," Webb began, abnormally loud.

"She ain't no friend of mine."

"Oh! Uh, Mrs. Riley, your neighbor, that is, reported an U-F-O sighting in the area last night."

"A what?"

"An unidentified flying object. She claims she saw some strange lights and activity which she thought were in the vicinity of your property."

"Sairy Riley!" Hessie gave a hoot of laughter. "Ye come up here on account of what she told ye?"

"We have to investigate every report," Webb replied stiffly. "Is she a reliable witness in your opinion?"

"That woman's been bad-mouthin' me for fifteen years er longer." Wasn't that jest like Sairy? And all because Hessie wouldn't put a love spell on Harm Sanders after his second wife died. Too bad she hadn't; it woulda served Sairy right. Harm married Mamie Larkins and beat her up ever' week till he died.

Webb sighed. A morning down the tube because two old crones hated each other. He should have checked on the personal relationships before making the climb.

"How about you, Auntie? Did you see anything unusual last night?"

"Up in the sky?"

"Yes!" Where else did the old hag think she might see spacecraft? In a coal mine?

"I wasn't outa my house all night long."

That figured. Webb knew the routine from previous contacts in the mountains. Seal the doors and windows soon as the sun goes down. The night air's bad. Good Lord! Hadn't these ignorant hillbillies learned anything? And he wasn't going to get much more out of her, either. She had her mouth clamped shut, tighter than a trap.

Mdval followed the exchange with increasing excitement. At the first U-F-O image he had stirred, ready to throw off the blanket and emerge. But the unvoiced antagonism stopped him. He didn't understand the unexpressed conflict, but the creatures seemed to belong to opposing, warring groups, both of which wanted possession of the prisoner — of himself. If so, he preferred the side which had captured him. The newcomer was not so far removed from barbarism as the female, and

Mdval resented his contempt and condescension for the older creature. Just like the younger generation on his own planet — no respect for the experience and wisdom of age.

"Then you didn't see anything?" Webb asked.

"Like what?"

"You know, space ships! Flying saucers, filled with little green men."

Mdval quivered! The images were horrifying, of hideous little organisms transported in a circular trough. Ugh! He had never heard of such a race. Were they intra-galactic or outsiders? Before he could probe further, the image changed.

Webb stood. "Could I please have a drink before I start back down?"

"The spring's right there, aback that sassafras."

The water was cool and sweet tasting. Webb splashed some on his face after he drank. "If you've got anything stronger, I'd be glad to buy a jug."

Mdval saw the moonshine image again.

"I don't mess with moonshinin'," Hessie answered. He was a snooper after all. She had been right not to trust him.

"Well, thanks for talking to me. And if you do see anything unusual, let us know."

Hessie waited until the sounds of his going died away before she moved. Still she did not enter the cabin but stood looking thoughtfully across the blue green of the valley. Finally she sighed and walked inside.

"Penrose?" The blanket stirred and his top showed over the edge of the basket. "Come on out. I was scared you might have run off while I was talkin' to the snooper."

Slowly, amoeba-like, he flowed down the side of the slippery elm basket to the floor. "Ye ain't got much git-up about ye fer a demon. If that's what ye be."

Mdval recognized but did not understand her doubts.

"That young whelp set me thinkin'. Maybe ye ain't what I thought ye was after all."

Mdval tried once more to show her his galaxy and his star. He was delighted that for a few seconds she visualized the heavens at night.

Hessie blinked and shook her head. "They's jist one way I know about to make sure. Now ye git over there in that circle whilst I fetch your crate." He took the hand she extended, and she led him across the floor.

Mdval made one last survey of the cabin with his 360^0 vision before he dropped into his suit and lowered his optics to the visi-ports. His guard stood directly before him, her face a mixture of curiosity and hope. Just before he closed the hatch, he caught a mental image of her cradling him in her arms.

Hessie marked the floor again, then began to chant. With the suit sealed and the mental link removed, Mdval understood none of it. Over her shoulder he glimpsed the basket and remembered the soft, sweet-smelling interior. Then he was rising and moving. She had activated the transport without his knowing, and he was climbing through the sky toward his ship, half a globe away. He reentered as mysteriously as he had departed.

Except for a message on the communication grid for him to contact his home planet, nothing had changed during his absence. Emergency systems had taken over navigation and monitoring functions, showing how unimportant his superiors considered the patrol mission.

Not after his report, however. Mdval settled into his seat and plugged into a circuit for immediate physical evaluation. The read-out showed only a slight irritation of his outer membrane and recommended an emollient. He busied himself with notes, preparatory to filing a detailed account of his observations. As he dictated, he kept remembering and rejecting personal reactions which he considered non-objective. Even so, the report was lengthy; and when he finished, his craft was once more near the orbit where he had been taken prisoner.

He owed his captor, Mdval reasoned. She had treated him fairly and far more gently than he had had any right to expect. And when she realized he was not the being she sought, she had released him. He masked all lights that might betray his presence and just before dawn lowered the ship to hover above the cabin.

With a probe-beam, he located and retrieved the tin box from the field of barbed vegetation. He placed it on the stoop, then switched the beam to where the H^2O emerged from the earth. With little effort he rechanneled the liquid's path to a new location directly in front of the cabin. Almost as an afterthought, he raised the corner of the stoop and positioned a boulder under to level it.

Hessie woke to the sound of running water and went rushing to the door. Fingers trembling, she tore the heavy oiled wrappings from the box. Her treasures were safe, just as Paw had planned for them to be.

"Penrose," she whispered, her eyes full of tears. "Penrose. So ye wuz who I thought all along."

And she wasn't a failure. She had summoned a demon. She wiped her cheeks and smiled at the little rascal's cleverness. Makin' her think he was somethin' else so's she'd let him go. Then comin' back and doin' the things she wanted.

"Next time, I think I'll try teleportin'."

Mdval, waiting to witness her astonishment, was surprised at Hessie's image of herself flying through the air unaided. Quickly he resumed dictating an addition to his report on the development of another transportation method unknown to his race.

"Will continue monitoring activities on this planet and of its *primitive* inhabitants." His irony, he hoped, would not go unnoticed. "Until comprehensive data have been collated and analyzed. End of communication." As the last message units clicked through the communicator, he added, "Code Name, Penrose." ■

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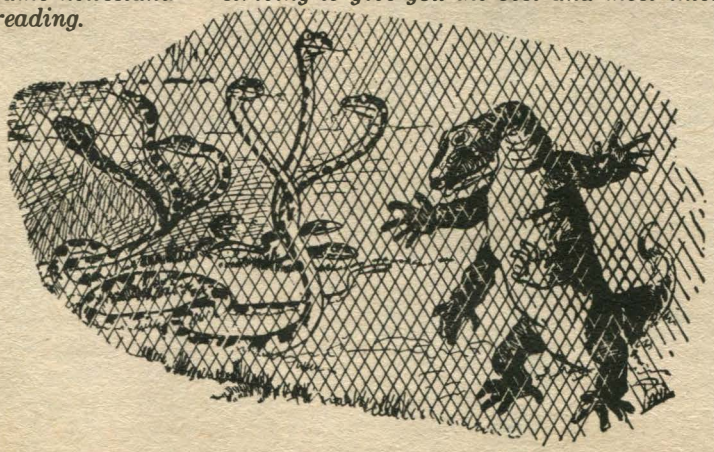

The Worm

The Worm
by David H. Keller, M.D.

What in the world is happening to this old man's peaceful, predictable life? And why does he stay in his home where such havoc occurs? Do you find him witless, perhaps senile... or is he possibly the most courageous of men, refusing to knuckle under, regardless of the outcome? Curl up with this one for an intriguing interlude; but lock the doors (especially the one to the basement, if you have one!)

THE MILLER patted his dog on the head, as he whispered: "We are going to stay here. Our folks, your ancestors and mine, have been here for nearly two hundred years, and queer it would be to leave now because of fear."

The gristmill stood, a solid stone structure, in an isolated Vermont valley. Years ago every day had been a busy one for the mill and the miller, but now only the mill wheel was busy. There was no grist for the mill and no one lived in the valley. Blackberries and hazel grew where once the pastures had been green. The hand of time had passed over the farms, and the only folk left were sleeping in the churchyard. A family of squirrels nested in the pulpit, while on the tombstones silent snails left their cryptic messages in silvery streaks. Thompson's Valley was being handed back to nature. Only the old bachelor miller, John Staples, remained. He was too proud and too stubborn to do anything else.

The mill was his home, even as it had served all of his family for a home during the last two hundred years. The first Staples had built it to stay, and it was still as strong as on the day it was finished. There was a basement for the machinery of the mill, the first floor was the place of grinding and storage, and the upper two floors served as the Staples homestead. The building was warm in winter and cool in summer. Times past it had sheltered a dozen Stapleses at a time; now it provided a home for John Staples and his dog.

He lived there with his books and his memories. He had no friends and desired no associates. Once a year he went to the nearest town and bought supplies of all kinds, paying for them in gold. It was supposed that he was wealthy. Rumor credited him with being a miser. He attended to his own business, asked the world to do the same, and on a winter's evening laughed silently over Burton and Rabelais, while his dog chased rabbits in his heated sleep upon the hearth.

The winter of 1935 was beginning to threaten the valley, but with an abundance of food and wood in the mill, the recluse looked forward to a comfortable period of desuetude. No matter how cold the weather, he was warm and contented. With the inherent ability of his family, he had been able to convert the water power into electricity. When the wheel was frozen, he used the electricity stored in his storage batteries. Every day he puttered around among the machinery which it was his pride to keep in perfect order. He assured the dog

that if business ever did come to the mill, he would be ready for it.

It was on Christmas Day of that winter that he first heard the noise. Going down to the basement to see that nothing had been injured by the bitter freeze of the night before, his attention was attracted, even while descending the stone steps, by a peculiar grinding noise that seemed to come from out of the ground. His ancestors, building for permanency, had not only put in solid foundations, but had paved the entire basement with slate flagstone three feet wide and as many inches thick. Between these the dust of two centuries had gathered and hardened.

Once his feet were on this pavement, Staples found that he could not only hear the noise, but he could also feel through the flagstones the vibrations which accompanied it. Even through his heavy leather boots he could feel the rhythmic pulsations. Pulling off his mittens, he stooped over and put his finger tips on the stone. To his surprise it was warm in spite of the fact that the temperature had been below zero the night before. The vibration was more distinct to his finger tips than it had been to his feet. Puzzled, he threw himself on the slate stone and put his ear to the warm surface.

The sound he now heard made him think of the grinding of the millstones when he was a boy and the farmers had brought corn to be ground into meal. There had been no corn meal ground in the mill for fifty years, yet here was the sound of stone scraping slowly and regularly on stone. He could not understand it. In fact, it was some time before he tried to explain it. With the habit born of years of solitary thinking, he first collected all the available facts about this noise. He knew that during the long winter evenings he would have time enough to do his thinking.

Going to his sitting room, he secured a walking stick of ash and went back to the cellar. Holding the handle of the cane lightly, he placed the other end on a hundred different spots on the floor, and each time he held it long enough to determine the presence or absence of vibration. To his surprise he found that while it varied in strength, it was present all over the cellar with the exception of the four corners. The maximum intensity was about in the center.

That evening he concentrated on the problem before him. He had been told by his grandfather that the mill was built on solid rock. As a young man he had helped clean out a well near the mill and recalled that, instead of being dug out of gravel or dirt, it had the appearance of being drilled out of solid granite. There was no difficulty in believing that the earth under the mill was also solid rock. There was no reason for thinking otherwise. Evidently some of these strata of stone had become loose and were slipping and twisting under the mill. The simplest explanation was the most reasonable: it was simply a geological phenomenon. The

behavior of the dog, however, was not so easily explained. He had refused to go with his master into the cellar, and now, instead of sleeping in comfort before the fire, he was in an attitude of strained expectancy. He did not bark, or even whine, but crept silently to his master's chair, looking at him anxiously.

The next morning the noise was louder. Staples heard it in his bed, and at first he thought that some bold adventurer had come into the forest and was sawing down a tree. That was what it sounded like, only softer and longer in its rhythm. Buzzzzzz — Buzzzzz-Buzzzzzz. The dog, distinctly unhappy, jumped up on the bed and crawled uneasily so he could nuzzle the man's hand.

Through the four legs of the bed, Staples could feel the same vibration that had come to him through the handle of his cane the day before. That made him think. The vibration was now powerful enough to be appreciated, not through a walking stick, but through the walls of the building. The noise could be heard as well on the third floor as in the cellar.

He tried to fancy what it sounded like — not what it was — but what it was like. The first idea had been that it resembled a saw going through oak; then came the thought of bees swarming, only these were large bees and millions of them; but finally all he could think of was the grinding of stones in a gristmill, the upper stone against the lower; and now the sound was Grrrrrrrr — Grrrrrrr instead of Bzzzzzzzzzz or Hummmmmmmm.

That morning he took longer than usual to shave and was more methodical than was his wont in preparing breakfast for himself and the dog. It seemed as though he knew that sometime he would have to go down into the cellar but wanted to postpone it as long as he could. In fact, he finally put on his coat and beaver hat and mittens and walked outdoors before he went to the basement. Followed by the dog, who seemed happy for the first time in hours, he walked out on the frozen ground and made a circle around the building he called his home. Without knowing it, he was trying to get away from the noise, to go somewhere he could walk without feeling that peculiar tingling.

Finally he went into the mill and started down the steps to the cellar. The dog hesitated on the top step, went down two steps and then jumped back to the top step, where he started to whine. Staples went steadily down the steps, but the dog's behavior did not add to his peace of mind. The noise was much louder than it was the day before, and he did not need a cane to detect the vibration — the whole building was shaking. He sat down on the third step from the bottom and thought the problem over before he ventured out on the floor. He was especially interested in an empty barrel which was dancing around the middle of the floor.

The power of the mill wheel was transferred through a simple series of shafts, cogs, and leather belting to the grinding elements

on the first floor. All this machinery for transmitting power was in the basement. The actual grinding had been done on the first floor. The weight of all this machinery, as well as of the heavy millstones on the first floor, was carried entirely by the flooring of the basement. The ceiling of the first floor was built on long pine beams which stretched across the entire building and were sunk into the stone walls at either side.

Staples started to walk around on the slate flagstones when he observed something that made him decide to stay on the steps. The floor was beginning to sink in the middle; not much, but enough to cause some of the shafts to separate from the ceiling. The ceiling seemed to sag. He saw that light objects like the empty barrel were congregating at the middle of the cellar. There was not much light but he was easily able to see that the floor was no longer level; that it was becoming saucer-shaped. The grinding noise grew louder. The steps he sat on were of solid masonry, stoutly connected with and a part of the wall. These shared in the general vibration. The whole building began to sing like a cello.

One day he had been to the city and heard an orchestra play. He had been interested in the large violins, especially the one that was so large the player had to stay on his feet to play it. The feeling of the stone step under him reminded him of the notes of this violin the few times it had been played by itself. He sat there. Suddenly he started, realizing that in a few more minutes he would be asleep. He was not frightened but in some dim way he knew that he must not go to sleep — not here. Whistling, he ran up the steps to get his electric torch. With that in his hand, he went back to the steps. Aided by the steady light, he saw that several large cracks had appeared in the floor and that some of the stones, broken loose from their fellows, were moving slowly in a drunken, meaningless way. He looked at his watch. It was only a little after nine.

And then the noise stopped.

No more noise! No more vibration! Just a broken floor and every bit of the machinery of the mill disabled and twisted. In the middle of the floor was a hole where one of the pavement stones had dropped through. Staples carefully walked across and threw the light down this hole. Then he lay down and carefully put himself in such a position that he could look down the hole. He began to sweat. There did not seem to be any bottom!

Back on the solid steps he tried to give that hole its proper value. He could not understand it, but he did not need the whining of the dog to tell him what to do. That hole must be closed as soon as possible.

Like a flash the method of doing so came to him. On the floor above he had cement. There were hundreds of grain sacks. Water was plentiful in the millrace. All that day he worked, carefully closing the hole with a great stopper of bags and wire. Then he placed timbers above and finally

covered it all with cement, rich cement. Night came and he still worked. Morning came and still he staggered down the steps, each time with a bag of crushed stone or cement on his shoulder, or with two buckets of water in his hands. At noon the next day the floor was no longer concave but convex. On top of the hole were four feet of timbers, bags and concrete. Then and only then did he go and make some coffee. He drank it, cup after cup, and slept.

The dog stayed on the bed at his feet.

When the man woke, the sun was streaming in through the windows. It was a new day. Though the fire had long since died out, the room was warm. Such days in Vermont were called weather breeders. Staples listened. There was no sound except the ticking of his clock. Not realizing what he was doing, he knelt by the bed, thanked God for His mercies, jumped into bed again and slept for another twenty-four hours. This time he awoke and listened. There was no noise. He was sure that by this time the cement had hardened. This morning he stayed awake and shared a Gargantuan meal with the dog. Then it seemed the proper thing to go to the basement. There was no doubt that the machinery was a wreck but the hole was closed. Satisfied that the trouble was over, he took his gun and dog and went hunting.

When he returned, he did not have to enter the mill to know that the grinding had begun again. Even before he started down the steps, he recognized too well the vibration and the sound. This time it was a melody of notes, a harmony of discords, and he realized that the thing, which before had cut through solid rock, was now wearing its way through a cement in which were bags, timbers and pieces of iron. Each of these gave a different tone. Together they all wailed over their dissolution.

Staples saw, even with first glance, that it would not be long before his cement "cork" would be destroyed. What was there to do next? All that day when hunting, his mind had been dimly working on that problem. Now he had the answer. He could not cork the hole, so he would fill it with water. The walls of the mill were solid, but he could blast a hole through them and turn the millrace into the cellar. The race, fed by the river, took only a part of what it could take, if its level were rapidly lowered. Whatever it was that was breaking down the floor of the mill could be drowned. If it were alive, it could be killed. If it were fire, it could be quenched. There was no use to wait until the hole was again opened. The best plan was to have everything ready. He went back to his kitchen and cooked a meal of ham and eggs. He ate all he could. He boiled a pot of coffee. Then he started to work. The wall reached three feet down below the surface. A charge of powder, heavy enough to break through, would wreck the whole building, so he began to peck at the wall, like a bird pecking at a nut. First a

period of drilling and then a little powder and a muffled explosion. A few buckets of loosened rock. Then some more drilling and another explosion. At last he knew that only a few inches of rock lay between the water and the cellar.

All this time there had been a symphony of noises, a disharmony of sounds. The constant grinding came from the floor, interrupted by the sound of sledge or crowbar, dull explosion of powder, and crashing of rock fragments on the floor. Staples worked without stop save to drink coffee. The dog stood on the upper steps.

Then without warning the whole floor caved in. Staples jumped to the steps. These held. On the first day there had been a hole a few feet wide. Now the opening occupied nearly the entire area of the floor. Staples, nauseated, looked down to the bottom. About twenty feet below him, a mass of rocks and timbers churned in a peculiar way, but all gradually disappeared in a second hole, fifteen feet wide. Even as he looked they all disappeared in this median hole.

The opening he had been breaking in the wall was directly across from the steps. There was a charge of powder there but no way of going across to light the fuse. Still there was no time to lose and he had to think fast. Running to the floor above he picked up his rifle and went to the bottom of the steps. He was able to throw the beam from his searchlight directly into the hole in the wall. Then he shot — once — twice, and the third time the explosion told him he had succeeded.

The water started to run into the cellar. Not fast at first but more rapidly as the mud and weeds were cleared out. Finally an eight-inch stream flowed steadily into the bottomless hole. Staples sat on the bottom steps. Soon he had the satisfaction of seeing the water fill the larger hole and then cover the floor, what there was left of it. In another hour he had to leave the lower steps. He went out to the millrace and saw that there was still enough water to fill a hundred such holes. A deep sense of satisfaction filled his weary mind.

And again, after eating, he sought sleep.

When he awoke, he heard the rain angrily tapping at the windows with multi-fingers. The dog was on the woven rug by the side of the bed. He was still restless and seemed pleased to have his master awake. Staples dressed more warmly than usual and spent an extra half hour making pancakes to eat with honey. Sausages and coffee helped assuage his hunger. Then with rubber boots and a heavy raincoat, he went out into the valley. The very first thing that he noticed was the millrace. It was practically empty. The little stream of water at the bottom was pouring into the hole he had blasted into the stone wall hours before. The race had contained eight feet of water. Now barely six inches remained, and the dread came to the man that the hole in the cellar was not only

emptying the race but was also draining the little river that for thousands of years had flowed through the valley. It had never gone dry. He hastened over to the dam and his worst fears were realized. Instead of a river, there was simply a streak of mud with cakes of dirty ice, all being washed by the torrent of rain. With relief he thought of this rain. Millions of tons of snow would melt and fill the river. Ultimately the hole would fill and the water would rise again in the millrace. Still he was uneasy. What if the hole had no bottom?

When he looked into the basement he was little reassured. The water was still going down, though slowly. It was rising in the basement, and this meant that it was now running in faster than it was running down.

Leaving his coat and boots on the first floor, he ran up the stone steps to the second floor, built a fire in the living room and started to smoke — and think. The machinery of the mill was in ruins; of course it could be fixed, but as there was no more need of it, the best thing was to leave it alone. He had gold saved by his ancestors. He did not know how much, but he could live on it. Restlessly he reviewed the past week, and, unable to rest, hunted for occupation. The idea of the gold stayed in his mind and the final result was that he again put on his boots and coat and carried the entire treasure to a little dry cave in the woods about a half mile from the mill. Then he came back and started to cook his dinner. He went past the cellar door three times without looking down.

Just as he and the dog had finished eating, he heard a noise. It was a different one this time, more like a saw going through wood, but the rhythm was the same — Hrrrr — Hrrrrr. He started to go to the cellar but this time he took his rifle, and though the dog followed, he howled dismally with his tail between his legs, shivering.

As soon as Staples reached the first floor, he felt the vibration. Not only could he feel the vibration, he could see it. It seemed that the center of the floor was being pushed up. Flashlight in hand, he opened the cellar door. There was no water there now — in fact there was no cellar left! In front of him was a black wall on which the light played in undulating waves. It was a wall and it was moving. He touched it with the end of his rifle. It was hard and yet there was a give to it. Feeling the rock, he could feel it move. Was it alive? Could there be a living rock? He could not see around it but he felt that the bulk of the Thing filled the entire cellar and was pressing against the ceiling. That was it! The Thing was boring through the first floor. It had destroyed and filled the cellar! It had swallowed the river! Now it was working at the first floor. It this continued, the mill was doomed. Staples knew that it was a Thing alive, and *he had to stop it!*

He was thankful that all of the steps in the mill were of stone, fastened and built into the wall. Even though the floor did fall in, he could still go to the upper rooms.

He realized that from now on the fight had to be waged from the top floors. Going up the steps, he saw that a small hole had been cut through the oak flooring. Even as he watched, this grew larger. Trying to remain calm, realizing that only by doing so could he retain his sanity, he sat down in a chair and timed the rate of enlargement. But there was no need of using a watch: the hole grew larger — and larger and larger — and now he began to see the dark hole which had sucked the river dry. Now it was three feet in diameter — now four feet — now six. It was working smoothly now — it was not only grinding — *but it was eating.*

Staples began to laugh. He wanted to see what it would do when the big stone grinders slipped silently down into that maw. That would be a rare sight. All well enough to swallow a few pavement stones, but when it came to a twenty-ton grinder, that would be a different kind of a pill. "I hope you choke!" he cried. "Damn you! whatever you are! I hope you choke!" The walls hurled back the echo of his shouts and frightened him into silence. Then the floor began to tilt and the chairs to slide toward the opening. Staples sprang toward the steps.

"Not yet!" he shrieked. "Not today, Elenora! Some other day, but not today!" And then from the safety of the steps, he witnessed the final destruction of the floor and all in it. The stones slipped down, the partitions, the beams, and then, as though satisfied with the work and the food, the Thing dropped down, down, down and left Staples dizzy on the steps looking into a hole, dark, deep, coldly bottomless surrounded by the walls of the mill, and below them a circular hole cut out of the solid rock. On one side a little stream of water, a tiny waterfall, came through the blasted wall and fell below. Staples could not hear it splash at the bottom.

Nauseated and vomiting, he crept up the steps to the second floor, where the howling dog was waiting for him. On the floor he lay, sweating and shivering in dumb misery. It took hours for him to change from a frightened animal to a cerebrating god, but ultimately he accomplished even this, cooked some more food, warmed himself and slept.

And while he dreamed, the dog kept sleepless watch at his feet. He awoke the next morning. It was still raining, and Staples knew that the snow was melting on the hills and soon would change the little valley river into a torrent. He wondered whether it was all a dream, but one look at the dog showed him the reality of the last week. He went to the second floor again and cooked breakfast. After he had eaten, he slowly went down the steps. That is, he started to go, but halted at the sight of the hole. The steps had held and ended on a wide stone platform. From there another flight of steps went down to what had once been the cellar. Those two flights of steps clinging to the walls had the solid stone mill on one side, but on the inside they

faced a chasm, circular in outline and seemingly bottomless; but the man knew there was a bottom and from that pit the Thing had come — and would come again.

That was the horror of it! He was so certain that it would come again. Unless he was able to stop it. How could he? Could he destroy a Thing that was able to bore a thirty-foot hole through solid rock, swallow a river and digest grinding stones like so many pills? One thing he was sure of — he could accomplish nothing without knowing more about it. To know more, he had to watch. He determined to cut a hole through the floor. Then he could see the Thingwhen it came up. He cursed himself for his confidence, but he was sure it would come.

It did. He was on the floor looking into the hole he had sawed through the plank, and he saw it come: but first he heard it. It was a sound full of slithering slidings, wrathful rasping of rock against rock — but, no! That could not be, for this Thing was alive. Could this be rock and move and grind and eat and drink? Then he saw it come into the cellar and finally to the level of the first floor, and then he saw its head and face.

The face looked at the man, and Staples was glad that the hole in the floor was as small as it was. There was a central mouth filling half the space; fully fifteen feet in diameter was that mouth, and the sides were ashen gray and quivering. There were no teeth.

That increased the horror: a mouth without teeth, without any visable means of mastication, and yet Staples shivered as he thought of what had gone into that mouth, down into that mouth, deep into the recesses of that mouth and disappeared. The circular lip seemed made of scales of steel, and they were washed clean with water from the race.

On either side of the gigantic mouth was an eye, lidless, browless, pitiless. They were slightly withdrawn into the head so the Thing could bore into rock without injuring them. Staples tried to estimate their size: all he could do was to avoid their baleful gaze. Then even as he watched the mouth closed and the head began a semicircular movement, so many degrees to the right, so many degrees to the left and up — and up — and finally the top touched the bottom of the plank Staples was on then Hrrrrrr — Hrrrrrrr, and the man knew that it was starting upon the destruction of the second floor. He could not see now as he had been able to see before, but he had an idea that after grinding a while the Thing opened its mouth and swallowed the debris. He looked around the room. Here was where he did his cooking and washing, and here was his winter supply of stove wood. A thought came to him.

Working frantically, he pushed the center burner to the middle of the room right over the hole he had cut in the floor. Then he built a fire in it, starting it with a liberal supply of coal oil. He soon had the stove red hot. Opening the door he again filled the stove with oak and then ran for the steps. He was

just in time. The floor, cut through, disappeared into the Thing's maw and with it the red-hot stove. Staples yelled in his glee, "A hot pill for you this time, a *hot pill!*"

If the pill did anything, it simply increased the desire of the Thing to destroy, for it kept on till it had bored a hole in this floor equal in size to the holes in the floors below it. Staples saw his food, his furniture, the ancestral relics disappear into the same opening that had consumed the machinery and mill supplies.

On the upper floor the dog howled.

The man slowly went up to the top floor, and joined the dog, who had ceased to howl and had begun a low whine. There was a stove on this floor, but there was no food. That did not make any difference to Staples: for some reason he was not hungry any more: it did not seem to make any difference — nothing seemed to matter or make any difference any more. Still he had his gun and over fifty cartridges, and he knew that at the last, even a Thing like that would react to bullets in its eyeballs — he just knew that nothing could withstand that.

He lit the lamp and paced the floor in a cold, careless mood. One thing he had determined. He said it over and over to himself.

"This is my home. It has been the home of my family for two hundred years. No devil or beast or worm can make me leave it."

He said it again and again. He felt that if he said it often enough, he would believe it, and if he could only believe it, he might make the Worm believe it. He knew now that it was a Worm, just like the night crawlers he had used so often for bait, only much larger. Yes, that was it. A worm like a night crawler, only much larger, in fact, very much larger. That made him laugh — to think how much larger this Worm was than the ones he had used for fishing. All through the night he walked the floor and burned the lamp and said, "This is my home. No Worm can make me leave it!" Several times he went down the steps, just a few of them, and shouted the message into the pit as though he wanted the Worm to hear and understand, "This is my home! *No Worm can make me leave it!*"

Morning came. He mounted the ladder that led to the trap door in the roof and opened it. The rain beat in. Still that might be a place of refuge. Crying, he took his Burton and his Rabelais and wrapped them in his raincoat and put them out on the roof, under a box. He took the small pictures of his father and mother and put them with the books. Then in loving kindness he carried the dog up and wrapped him in a woolen blanket. He sat down and waited, and as he did so he recited poetry — anything that came to him, all mixed up, "Come into the garden where there was a man who was so wondrous wise, he jumped into a bramble bush and you're a better man than I am and no one will work for money and the King of Love my Shepherd is" — and on — and then —

He heard the sliding and the

slithering rasping, and he knew that the Worm had come again. He waited till the Hrrrrr — Hrrrrrr told that the wooden floor he was on was being attacked, and then he went up the ladder. It was his idea to wait till the Thing had made a large opening, large enough so the eyes could be seen, and then use the fifty bullets — where they would do the most good. So, on the roof, beside the dog, he waited.

He did not have to wait long. First appeared a little hole and then it grew wider and wider till finally the entire floor and the furniture had dropped into the mouth, and the whole opening, thirty feet wide and more than that, was filled with the head, the closed mouth of which came within a few feet of the roof. By the aid of the light from the trap door, Staples could see the eye on the left side. It made a beautiful bull's eye, a magnificent target for his rifle and he was only a few feet away. He could not miss. Determined to make the most of his last chance to drive his enemy away, he decided to drop down on the creature, walk over to the eye and put the end of the rifle against the eye before he fired. If the first shot worked well, he could retire to the roof and use the other cartridges. He knew that there was some danger — but it was his last hope. After all he knew that when it came to brains he was a man, and this Thing was only a Worm. He walked over the head. Surely no sensation could go through such massive scales. He even jumped up and down. Meantime the eye kept looking up at the roof. If it saw the man, it made no signs, gave no evidence. Staples pretended to pull the trigger and then made a running jump for the trap door. It was easy. He did it again, and again. Then he sat on the edge of the door and thought.

He suddenly saw what it all meant. Two hundred years before, his ancestors had started grinding at the mill. For over a hundred and fifty years the mill had been run continuously, often day and night. The vibrations had been transmitted downward through the solid rock. Hundreds of feet below the Worm had heard them and felt them and thought it was another Worm. It had started to bore in the direction of the noise. It had taken two hundred years to do it, but it had finished the task, it had found the place where its mate should be. For two hundred years it had slowly worked its way through the primitive rock. Why should it worry over a mill and things within it? Staples saw then that the mill had been but a slight incident in its life. It was probable that it had not even known it was there — the water, the gristmill stones, the red-hot stove, had meant nothing — they had been taken as a part of the day's work. There was only one thing that the Worm was really interested in, only one idea that had reached its consciousness and remained there through two centuries, and that was to find its mate. The eye looked upward.

Staples, at the end, lost courage and decided to fire from a sitting position in the trap door.

Taking careful aim, he pulled the trigger. Then he looked carefully to see what damage had resulted. There was none. Either the bullet had gone into the eye and the opening had closed or else it had glanced off. He fired again and again.

Then the mouth opened — wide — wider — until there was nothing under Staples save a yawning void of darkness.

The Worm belched a cloud of black, nauseating vapor. The man, enveloped in the cloud, lost consciousness and fell.

The Mouth closed on him.

On the roof the dog howled. ■

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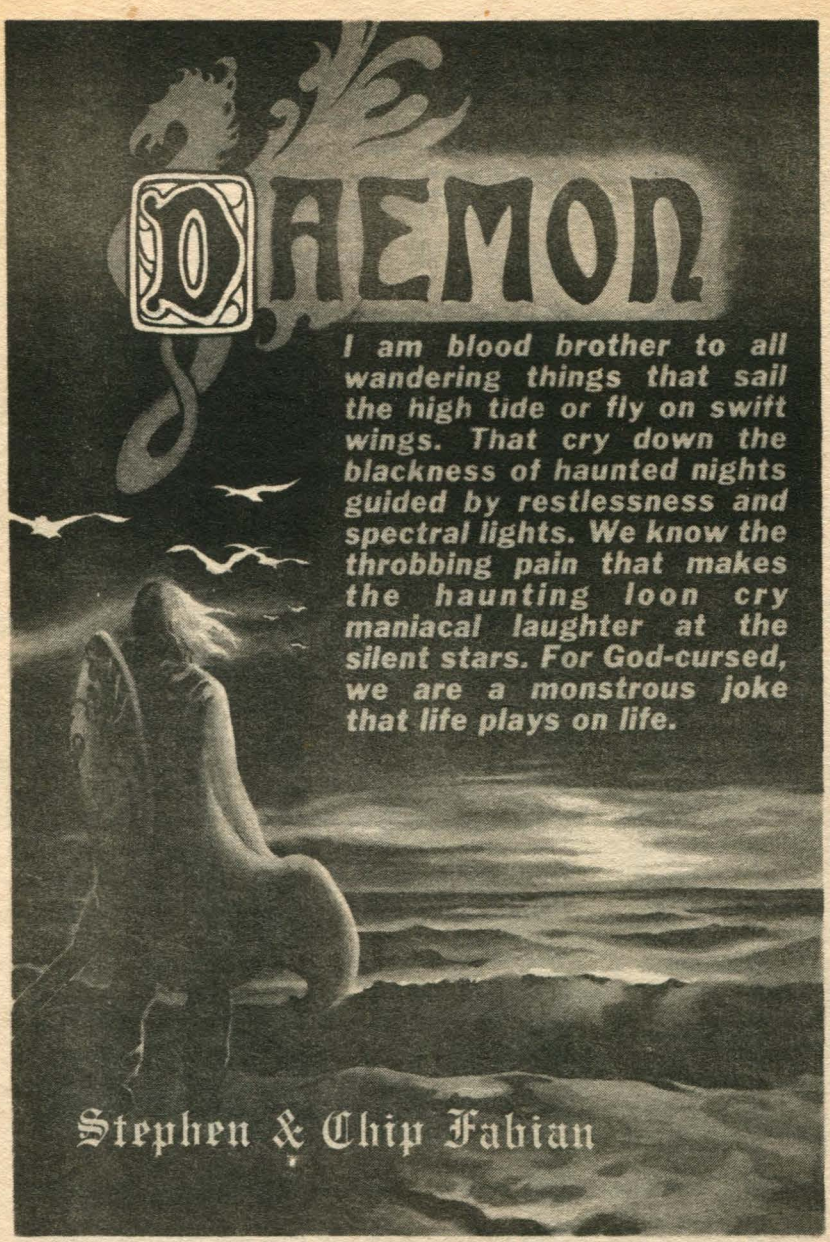
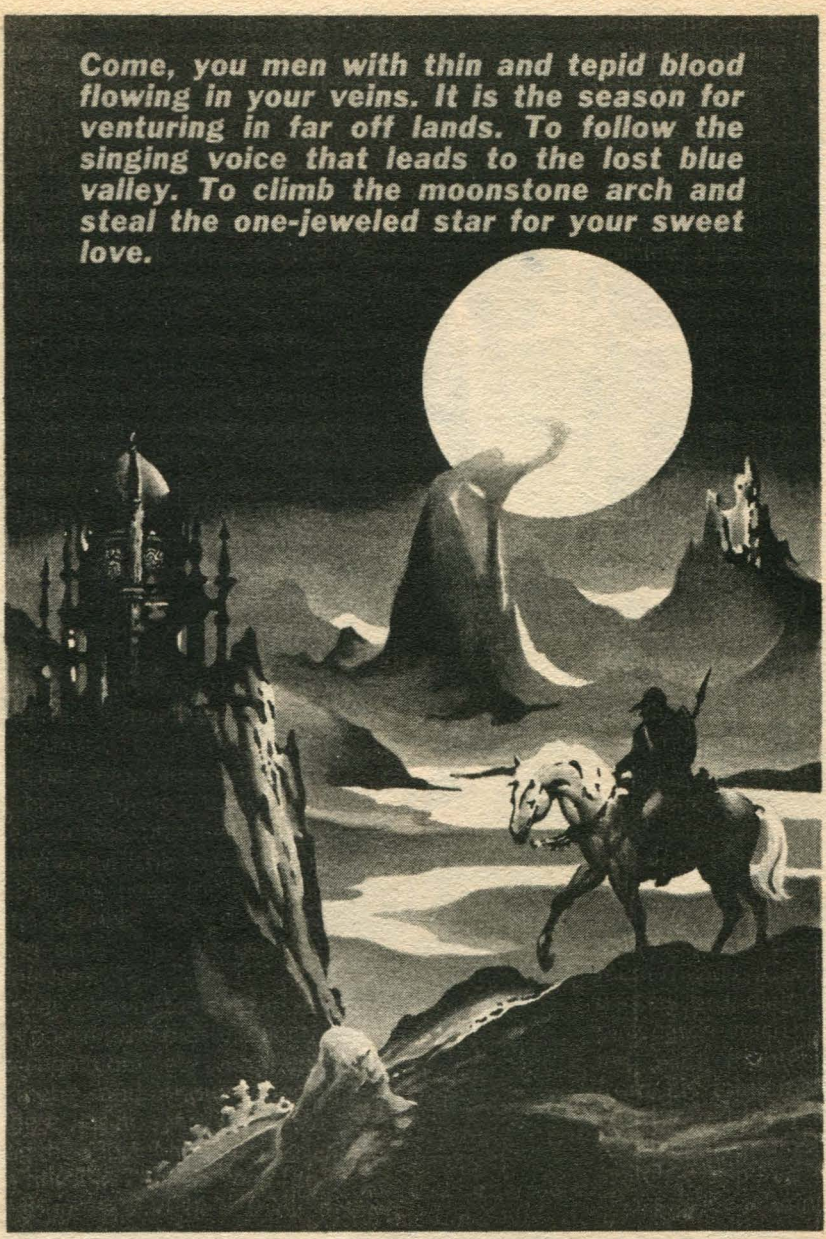
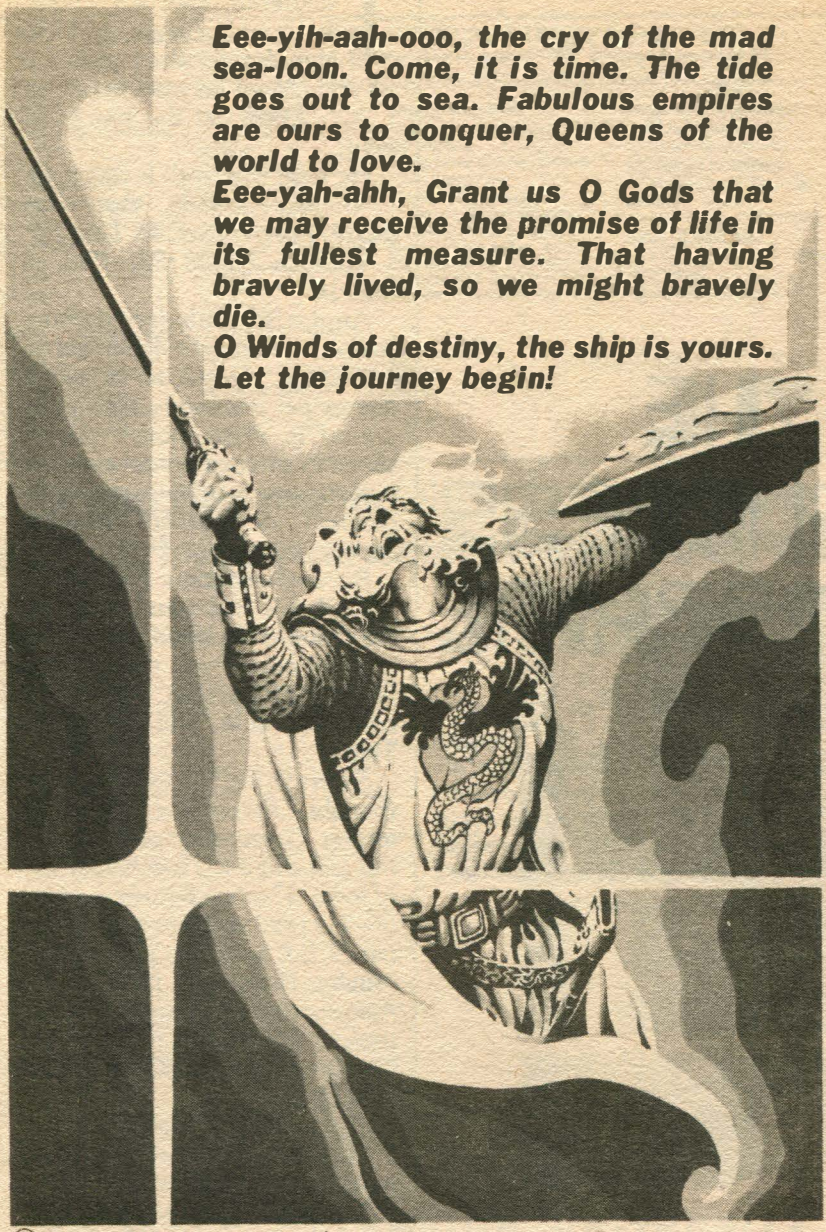

DAEMON
I am blood brother to all wandering things that sail the high tide or fly on swift wings. That cry down the blackness of haunted nights guided by restlessness and spectral lights. We know the throbbing pain that makes the haunting loon cry maniacal laughter at the silent stars. For God-cursed, we are a monstrous joke that life plays on life.
Stephen & Chip Fabian

We know not what strange land will be our last, nor care. The treasure found is less to us than the treasure sought. Lured by the wonder of far off places, ready to bid love and danger, greeting farewell.


Come, you men with thin and tepid blood flowing in your veins. It is the season for venturing in far off lands. To follow the singing voice that leads to the lost blue valley. To climb the moonstone arch and steal the one-jeweled star for your sweet love.


Balk not, or has the siren wail lost its power? Then adventure and romance are dead, beauty is a hag, love an idle tale, and gone is life's meaning from all the world, for you.


Come, I have made a ship of dreams and it's ready for sailing. The oars are teak and sandlewood, the sails are woven star-dust. The course is set across a sea of moonlight with the evening star to guide us.



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THE SUCCESS MACHINE

by Henry Slesar

Aren't computers like efficiency experts? Drive you nuts with the "absolute" truth. We love to bend the truth into all manner of acrobatic contortions to suit our various needs. But, watch out for the intelligent machine!

THE Personnelovac winked, chittered, chortled, chuckled, and burped a card into the slot. Colihan picked it up and closed his eyes in prayer.

"Oh, Lord. Let this one be all right!"

He read the card. It was pink.

"Subject #34580. Apt. Rat. 34577. Psych. Clas. 45. Last per. Vac. An. 3/5/98. Rat. 19. Cur. Rat. 14.

Analysis: Subject demonstrates decreased mechanical coordination. Decrease in work-energy per man-hour. Marked increase in waste-motion due to subject's interest in non-essential activities such as horseracing. Indication of hostility towards superiors.

Recommendation: Fire him."

Colihan's legs went weak. He sat down and placed the card in front of him. Then, making sure he was unobserved, he broke a company rule and began to Think.

Something's wrong, he thought. *Something is terribly wrong. Twenty-four pink cards in the last month. Twenty-four out of forty. That's a batting average of*—He tried to figure it out with a pencil, but gave it up as a bad job. *Maybe I'll run it through the Averagovac,* he thought. *But why bother? It's obvious that it's high. There's obviously SOMETHING WRONG.*

The intercom beeped.

"Ten o'clock department head meeting, Mr. Colihan."

"All right, Miss Blanche."

He rose from his chair and took the pink card with him. He stood before the Action Chute for a moment, tapping the card against his teeth. Then, his back stiffened with a sense of duty, and he slipped the card inside.

THE MEETING had already begun when Colihan took his appointed place. Grimswitch, the Materielovac operator, looked at him quizically. *Damn your eyes, Grimswitch,* he thought. *It's no crime to be three minutes late. Nothing but a lot of pep talk first five minutes anyway.*

"PEP!" said President Moss at the end of the room. He slammed his little white fist into the palm of his other hand. "It's only a little word. It only has three little letters. P - E - P. Pep!"

Moss, standing at the head of the impressive conference table, leaned forward and eyed them fixedly. "But those three little letters, my friends, spell out a much bigger word. A *much* bigger word for General Products, Incorporaged. They spell PROFIT! And if you don't know how *profit* is spelled, it's M - O - N - E - Y!"

There was an appreciative laugh from the assembled department heads. Colihan, however, was still brooding on the parade of pink cards which had been emerging with frightening regularity from his think-machine, and he failed to get the point.

"Naughty, naughty," Grimswitch whispered to him archly. "Boss made a funny. Don't forget to laugh, old boy."

Colihan threw him a sub-zero look.

"Now let's be serious," said the boss. "Because things *are* serious. Mighty serious. Somewhere, somehow, *somebody's* letting us down!"

The department heads looked uneasily at each other. Only Grimswitch continued to smile vacantly at the little old man up front, drumming his fingers on the glass table top. When the President's machine-gunning glance caught his eyes, Colihan went white. *Does he know about it?* he thought.

"I'm not making accusations," said Moss. "But there is a letdown someplace. Douglas!" he snapped.

Douglas, the Treasurer, did a jack-in-the-box.

"Read the statement," said the President.

"First quarter fiscal year," said Douglas dryly. "Investment capital, $17,836,975,238.96. Assets, $84,967,442,279.55. Liabilities, $83,964,283,774.60. Production costs are—"

Moss waved his hand impatiently. "The meat, the meat," he said.

Douglas adjusted his glasses. "Total net revenue, $26,876,-924.99."

"COMPARISON!" The President screamed. "Let's have last first quarter, you idiot!"

"*Ahem!*" Douglas rattled the paper in annoyance. "Last first quarter fiscal year net revenue,

$34,955,376.81. Percent decrease—"

"Never mind." The little old man waved the Treasurer to his seat with a weary gesture. His face, so much like somebody's grandmother, looked tragic as he spoke his next words.

"You don't need the Accountovac to tell you the significance of those figures, gentlemen." His voice was soft, with a slight quaver. "We are not making much p - r - o - f - i - t. We are losing m - o - n - e - y. And the point is—what's the reason? There must be *some* reason." His eyes went over them again, and Colihan, feeling like the culprit, slumped in his chair.

"I have a suggestion," said the President. "Just an idea. Maybe some of us just aren't showing enough p - e - p."

There was a hushed silence.

The boss pushed back his chair and walked over to a cork-lined wall. With a dramatic gesture, he lifted one arm and pointed to the white sign that covered a fourth of it.

"See that?" he asked. "What does it say?"

The department heads looked dubious.

"Well, what does it say?" repeated Moss.

"ACT!" The department heads cried in chorus.

"Exactly!" said the little old man with a surprising bellow. "ACT! The word that made us a leader. The word that guides our business destiny. The word that *built* General Products!"

HE PACED the floor. The chair in the conference room creaked as the department heads stirred to follow him with their eyes.

"ACT is our motto. ACT is our password. ACT is our key to success. And why not? The Brains do the thinking. All of us put together couldn't think so effectively, so perfectly, so honestly as the Brains. They take the orders, designate raw materials, equipment, manpower. They schedule our work. They analyze our products. They analyze our people."

Colihan trembled.

"There's only one important function left to us. And that's ACT!"

The President bowed his head and walked slowly back to his seat. He sat down, and with great fatigue evident in his voice, he concluded his polemic.

"That's why we must have pep, gentlemen. Pep. Now—how do you spell it?"

"P! E! P!" roared the department heads.

The meeting was over. The department heads filed out.

COLIHAN'S secretary placed the morning mail on his desk. There was a stack of memos at least an inch thick, and the Personnel Manager moaned at the sight of it.

"Production report doesn't look too good," said Miss Blanche crisply. "Bet we get a flood of aptitude cards from Morgan today.

Grimswitch has sent over a couple. That makes eleven from him this month. He really has his problems."

Colihan grunted. *He deserves them,* he thought.

"How did the meeting go?"

"Huh?" Colihan looked up. "Oh, fine, fine. Boss was in good voice, as usual."

"I think there's an envelope from him in the stack."

"What?" Colihan hoped that his concern wasn't visable. He riffled through the papers hurriedly and came up with a neat white envelope engraved with the words: OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT.

Miss Blanche watched him, frankly curious. "That will be all," he told her curtly.

When she had left, he ripped the envelope open and read the contents. It was in Moss's own cramped handwriting, and it was a request for a three o'clock "man-to-man" talk.

Oh, Lord, he thought. *Now it's going to happen.*

PRESIDENT MOSS was eating an apple.

He ate so greedily that the juice spilled over his chin.

Sitting behind his massive oak desk, chair tilted back, apple juice dappling his whiskers, he looked so small and unformidable that Colihan took heart.

"Well, Ralph—how goes it?"

He called me Ralph, thought Colihan cheerfully. *He's not such a bad old guy.*

"Don't grow apples like they used to," the President said. "This hydroponic stuff can't touch the fruit we used to pick. Say, did you ever climb a real apple tree and knock 'em off the branches?"

Colihan blinked. "No, sir."

"Greatest thrill in the world. My father had an orchard in Kennebunkport. Apples by the million. Green apples. Sweet apples. Delicious. Spy. Baldwin." He sighed. "Something's gone out of our way of life, Ralph."

Why, he's just an old dear, thought Colihan. He looked at the boss with new sympathy.

"Funny thing about apples. My father used to keep 'em in barrels down in the basement. He used to say to me, 'Andrew,' he'd say, 'don't never put a sour apple in one of these barrels. 'Cause just one sour apple can spoil the whole derned lot.' " The boss looked at Colihan and took a big noisy bite.

Colihan smiled inanely. Was Moss making some kind of point?

"Well, we can't sit around all day and reminisce, eh, Ralph? Much as I enjoy it. But we got a business to run, don't we?"

"Yes, sir," said the Personnel Manager.

"Mighty big business, too. How's your side of it, Ralph? Old Personnelovac hummin' along nicely?"

"Yes, sir," said Colihan, wondering if he should voice his fears about the Brain.

"Marvelous machine, that. Most marvelous of 'em all, if you ask me. Sizes up a man beautifully. And best of all, it's one hun-

dred percent *honest*. That's a mighty important quality, Ralph."

COLIHAN WAS getting worried. The boss's conversation was just a little too folksy for his liking.

"Yes, sir, a mighty fine quality. My father used to say: 'Andrew, an honest man can always look you in the eyes.' "

Colihan stared uncomprehendingly. He realized that Moss had stopped talking, so he looked him squarely in the eyes and said: "He must have been a fine man, your father."

"He was honest," said Moss. "I'll say that for him. He was honest as they come. Did you ever hear of Dimaggio?"

"It sounds familiar—"

"It should. Dimaggio was a legendary figure. He took a lantern and went out into the world looking for an honest man. And do you know something? He couldn't find one. You know, Ralph, sometimes I feel like Dimaggio."

Colihan gulped.

"And do you know why? Because sometimes I see a thing like *this*—" the boss's hand reached into the desk and came out with a thick bundle of pink cards—"and I wonder if there's an honest man left in the world."

HE PUT the cards in front of Colihan.

"Now, sir," said Moss. "Let's talk a little business. These cards are all pink. That means dismissal, right? That's twenty-four people fired in the last month, is that correct?"

"Yes, sir," said Colihan unhappily.

"And how many cards went through the Personnelovac this month?"

"Forty."

"So that's twenty-four out of forty. A batting average of—" The boss's brow puckered. "Well, never mind. But that's quite an unusual record, wouldn't you say so?"

"Yes, sir, but—"

"So unusual that it would call for immediate ACTION, wouldn't it?" The President's face was now stormy.

"Yes, sir. But I checked the Brain—"

"Did you, Ralph?"

"Yes, sir. And the Maintainovac said it was perfect. There's nothing wrong with it."

"*Nothing* wrong? You call twenty-four firings out of forty *nothing*?" The old man stood up, still holding the core of his apple.

"Well, I don't understand it either, Mr. Moss." Colihan felt dew on his forehead. "Nothing seems to satisfy the Brain anymore. It seems to develop higher and higher standards, or something. Why, I'm not sure it wouldn't even fire—"

"WHO?" said Moss thunderously. "WHO wouldn't it even fire?"

The thunder hit Colihan squarely. He swallowed hard, and then managed to say:

"Anybody, sir. Me, for in-

stance."

The President's face suddenly relaxed.

"You know I'm no tyrant, my boy. You know that. I'm just doing a job, that's all."

"Of course, sir—"

"Well, all I want you to do is keep your eye on things. It could be a coincidence, of course. That's the *logical* explanation." He narrowed his eyes. "What do *you* think, Ralph?"

"Me, sir?" said Ralph, wide-eyed. "I don't *think*, sir. I ACT, sir!"

"Good boy!" The boss chuckled and clapped his hand on Colihan's shoulder. Moss was momentarily satisfied. . . .

The Personnelovac burped.

Colihan picked up the card with a groan. It was pink.

He walked over to the Action Chute and dropped it inside. As it fluttered down below, Colihan shook his head sadly. "Thirty-one," he said.

He placed the next personnel record into the Information chamber. He flipped the lever, and the Personnelovac, now hot with usage, winked, chittered, chortled, and chuckled with amazing speed. The burp was almost joyful as the card popped out. But Colihan's face was far from joyful as he picked it up.

Pink.

"Thirty-two," he said.

The next card was from Grimswitch's department. It was Subject #52098. The number was familiar. Colihan decided to check the file.

"Sam Gilchrist," he said. "*Couldn't* be anything wrong with Sam. Why, he's a blinkin' *genius!*"

Flip Wink. Chitter. Chortle. Chuckle. BURP!

Pink.

"Poor Sam!" said Colihan.

He fed the other records through quickly.

Pink.

Pink.

PINK.

At the end of the day, Colihan worked laboriously with a blunt-pointed pencil. It took him fifteen minutes for the simple calculation.

"Sixty-seven tests. Twenty-three okay. Forty-four—"

Colihan put his hands to his head. "What am I going to *do?*"

GRIMSWITCH followed Colihand down the hall as he came out of the boss's office for the third time that week.

"Well!" he said fatuously. "Quite the teacher's pet, these days. Eh, Colihan?"

"Go away, Grimswitch."

"On the carpet, eh? Temper a little short? Don't worry." Grimswitch's beefy hand made unpleasant contact with the Personnel man's shoulder. "Your old friends won't let you down."

"Grimswitch, will you please let me alone?"

"Better watch that think-machine of yours," Grimswitch chuckled. "Might fire *you* next, old boy."

Colihan was glad when Morgan, the production operator,

hailed Grimswitch away. But as he entered his own office, Grimswitch's words still troubled him. *Grimswitch,* he thought. *That fat piece of garbage. That big blowhard. That know-it-all.*

Almost savagely, he picked up the day's personnel cards and flipped through them carelessly.

Grimswitch, that louse, he thought.

Then he had the Idea.

If Grimswitch was still chewing the fat with Morgan, then his secretary would be alone—

If he called her and asked for Grimswitch's record—no, better yet, got Miss Blanche to call—

Why not? he thought. *After all, I am the Personnel Manager. Sure, it's a little irregular. He IS a department head. But it's my job, isn't it?*

Colihan flipped the intercom and proceded to call Miss Blanche.

HIS HAND shook as he placed Grimswitch's card into the Personnelovac.

The machine, though still heated by the day's activity, seemed to take longer than usual for its chittering, chuckling examination of the pin-holed facts on the record.

Finally, it gave a satisfied burp and proferred the result to Colihan's eager hand.

"Aha!" cried the personnel man gleefully.

He walked over to his desk, wrote a quick note on his memo pad, and placed both note and card into an envelope. He addressed it to: OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT. Then he dropped it into the Action Chute. When it was out of sight, he rubbed his hands together in happy anticipation.

WHEN MISS Blanche announced that President Moss himself was in Colihan's outer lobby, the Personnel Manager spent a hasty minute in straightening up the paper debris on his desk.

The old man came striding into the room, exhibiting plenty of p-e-p, and he seated himself briskly on Colihan's sofa.

"Sharp eyes, Ralph," he said. "Sharp eyes and a quick wit. This business demands it. That was a sharp notion you had, doing a run-through on Grimswitch. Never trusted that back-slapping fellow."

Colihan looked pleased. "Trying to do a job, sir."

"Put your finger on it," said Moss. "Hit the nail on the head. It's just like my father said: 'Trees go dead on the top.' Colihan—" The boss leaned forward confidentially. "I've got an assignment for you. Big assignment."

"Yes, sir!" said Colihan eagerly.

"If Grimswitch is a sour apple, maybe *other* department heads are, too. And who knows? IT knows."

Moss pointed a finger at the Personnelovac.

"I'm rounding up all the aptitude records of the department heads. They'll be in your hands in the next couple of days. Feed 'em

in! Root 'em out! Spot the deadwood, Colihan! ACT!"

"ACT!" echoed Colihan, his face flushed.

The old man got up and went over to the Brain.

"Marvelous machine," he said. "Honest. That's what I like about it."

As Moss went out the door, Colihan could have sworn he saw the Personnelovac wink. He walked over to it and fingered the lever. It was turned off, all right.

IT WAS an interesting week for Colihan.

Morgan, the production man, was fired.

Grimswitch came up to see the Personnel man and tried to punch him in the nose. Fortunately, he was a little too drunk, and the blow went wild.

Seegrum, the Shipovac operator, was fired.

Douglas, the Treasurer, was permitted to keep his job, but the Personnelovac issued a dire threat if improvement wasn't rapidly forthcoming.

Wilson, the firm's oldest employee, was fired.

In fact, seven out of General Product's twelve department heads were greeted by the ominous pink card.

Colihan, no longer plagued by doubt, felt that life was definitely worth living. He smiled all the time. His memos were snappier than ever. His heels clicked merrily down the office hallways. He had p - e - p.

Then, the most obvious thing in the world happened—and Colihan just hadn't foreseen it.

His record card came up.

"HAVE YOU run through the stack yet?" Miss Blanche asked.

"Er—just about." Colihan looked at her guiltily. He pushed his glasses back on the bridge of his nose. "Couple more here," he said.

"Well, we might as well finish up. Mr. Moss would like to have the schedule completed this afternoon."

"It will be. That's *all*, Miss Blanche."

His secretary shrugged and left. Colihan went to the Personnelovac with the record in his hand. The file number was 630.

"Don't let me down," he told the Brain.

He placed the pin-holed card into the machine and flipped the lever. It winked, chittered, chortled, and chuckled with almost sinister softness. When the card was burped out at the other end, Colihand took it out with his eyes firmly shut.

HE WALKED over to the Action Chute mechanically. His hand hesitated before he dropped it inside. Then he changed his mind, walked back to the desk, and tore the pink card into the smallest possible shreds.

The intercom beeped.

"Mr. Moss wants you," said his secretary.

"Colihan!"

"Yes, sir?"

"Don't act so innocent, Colihan. Your report isn't complete. It should have been ready by now."

"Yes, sir!"

"You're not ACTING, Colihan. You're stalling!"

"No, sir."

"Then where's *your* Personnelovac report, Colihan? Eh? Where is it?"

Colihan wrung his hands. "Almost ready, sir," he lied. "Just running it through now, sir."

"Speed it up. Speed it up! Time's a'wastin', boy. You're not *afraid*, are you, Colihan?"

"No, sir."

"Then let's have it. No more delay! Bull by the horns! Expect it in an hour, Colihan. Understand?"

"Yes, sir!"

The boss clicked off. Colihan groaned audibly.

"What can I do?" he said to himself. He went to the Brain and shook his fist helplessly at it. "Damn you!" he cursed.

He had to think. He had to THINK!

It was an effort. He jerked about in his swivel chair like a hooked fish. He beat his hands on the desk top. He paced the floor and tore at the roots of his hair. Finally, exhausted, he gave up and flopped ungracefully on the office sofa, abandoning himself to the inevitable.

At that precise moment, the mind being the perverse organ it is, he was struck by an inspiration.

The Maintainovac bore an uneasy resemblance to Colihan's own think-machine. Wilson, the oldest employee of General Products, had been the operator of the maintenance Brain. He had been a nice old duffer, Wilson, always ready to do Colihan a favor. Now that he had been swept out in Colihan's own purge, the Personnel Manager had to deal with a new man named Lockwood.

Lockwood wasn't so easy to deal with.

"Stay out of my files, mister," he said.

Colihan tried to look superior. "I'm the senior around here, Lockwood. Let's not forget that."

"Them files is my responsibility." Lockwood, a burly young man, stationed himself between Colihan and the file case.

"I want to check something. I need the service records of my Brain."

"Where's your Requisition Paper?"

"I haven't got *time* for that," said Colihan truthfully. "I need it *now*, you fool."

Lockwood set his face like a Rushmore memorial.

"Be a good fellow; can't you?" Colihan quickly saw that wheedling wasn't the answer.

"All right," he said, starting for the door. "I just wanted to help you."

He opened the door just a crack. Sure enough, Lockwood responded.

"How do you mean, help *me?*"

"Didn't you know?" Colihan turned to face him. "I'm running through an aptitude check on the Personnelovac. Special department head check. Mr. Moss's orders."

"So?"

"I was just getting around to yours. But I figured I'd better make sure the Brain was functioning properly." He grew confidential. "You know, that darned machine has been firing *everyone* lately."

A little rockslide began on Lockwood's stoney face.

"Well . . ." he said. "If that's the case—"

"I knew you'd understand," said Colihan very smoothly.

EAGERLY, THE Personnel Manager collated the records of the Personnelovac. They were far more complex than any employee record, and it took Colihan the better part of an hour.

Any moment he expected to hear the President's angry voice over the intercom. His anxiety made him fumble, but at last, the job was done.

He slipped the record, marked by a galaxy of pin-holes, into the Brain.

"Now we'll see," he said grimly. "Now we'll find out what's eating this monster."

He flipped the switch.

The Personnelovac winked.

It was several minutes before it digested the information in its chamber. Then it chittered.

It chortled.

It chuckled.

Colihan held his breath until the BURP came.

The card appeared. It read:

"Subject #PV8. Mech. Rat. 9987. Mem. Rat. 9995. Last Per. Vac.

An. None. Cur. Rat. 100.

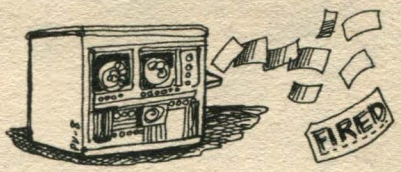
Analysis: Subject operating at maximum efficiency. Equipped to perform at peak level. Is completely honest and does not exhibit bias, prejudice, or sentiment in establishing personnel evaluations. Cumulative increase in mnemonic ability. Analytic ability improving."

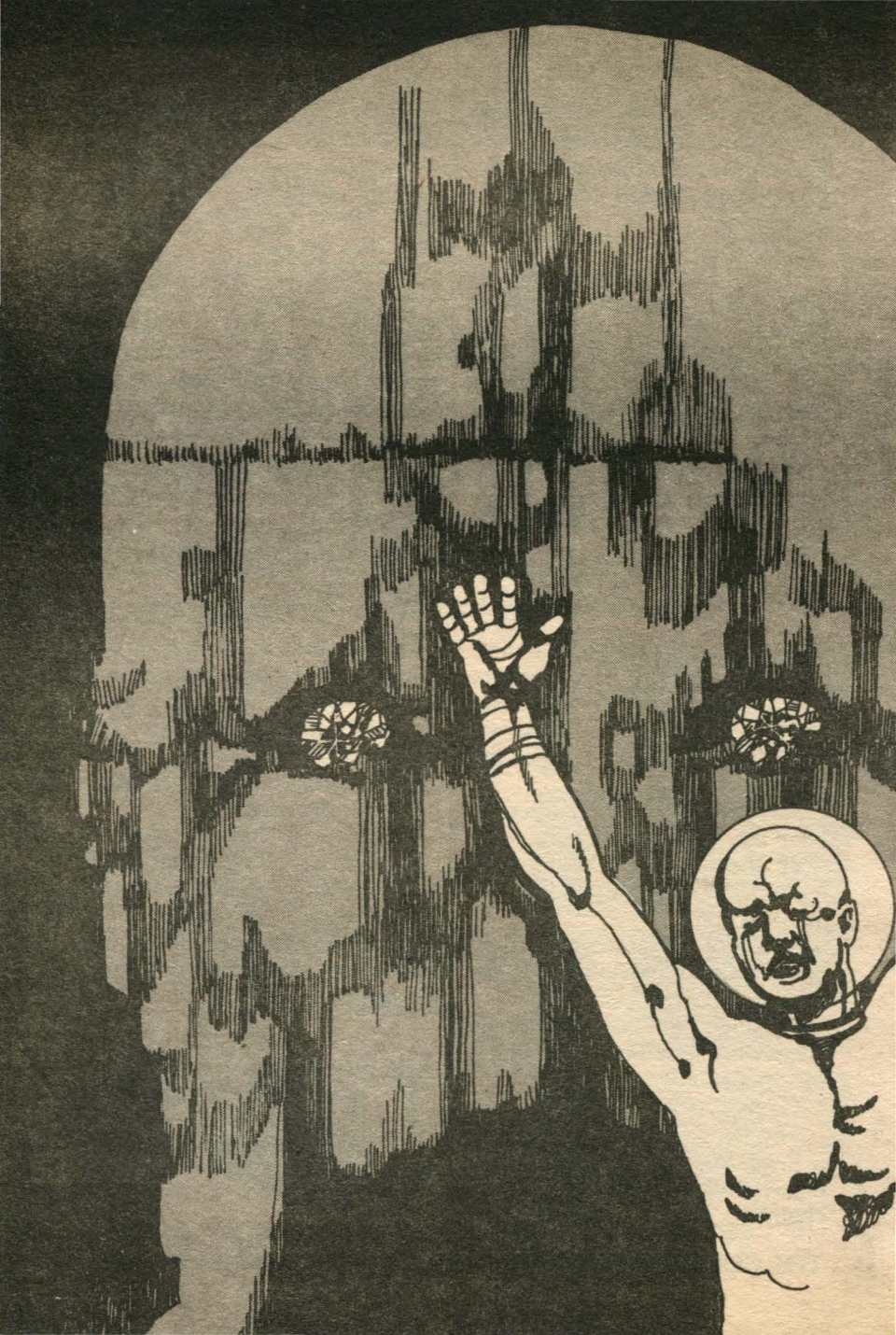
Colihan walked slowly over to the Action Chute as he finished reading the card.

"However," it read, *"because of mechanistic approach to humanistic evaluation, subject displays inability to incorporate human equation in analytical computation, resulting in technically accurate but humanistically incorrect deductions.*

Recommendation: Fire him."

Colihan dropped the pink card into the chute. In half an hour, the Action wheels of General Products concluded their work, and the Personnelovac had winked for the last time. ■

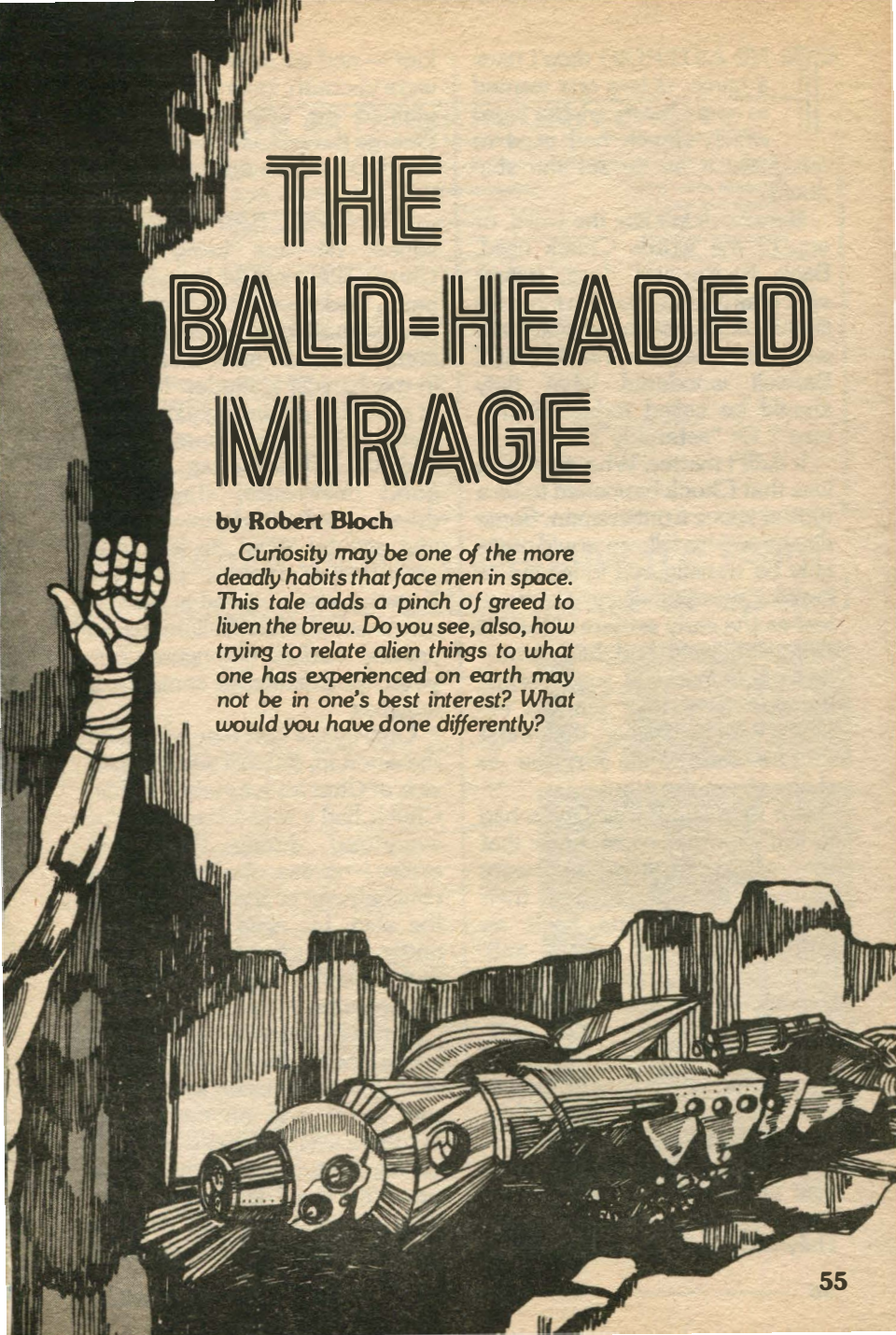




THE BALD-HEADED MIRAGE

by Robert Bloch

Curiosity may be one of the more deadly habits that face men in space. This tale adds a pinch of greed to liven the brew. Do you see, also, how trying to relate alien things to what one has experienced on earth may not be in one's best interest? What would you have done differently?



THE ASTEROID didn't have a name, unless one wanted to count the four-letter word which Chuck had used to designate it as he set the ship down.

Barwell didn't like the word, or any of the words Chuck used. Back in the old days, before space-travel, people with Chuck's limited and unsavory vocabulary were often described as "earthy." Barwell wondered what they should be called today. "Planetary"? Or "asteroidy"?

It didn't matter. What mattered was that Chuck happened to be a typical space frontiersman. Some day he and his fellows would probably be transfigured in legend as heroic, interplanetary pioneers, just as the early settlers of the old American west had been transfigured. Songs and sagas would be written of their fearless exploits, their bold vision, their thirst for freedom, their struggle to shake down the stars.

But men like Barwell, who had to live with them now, knew that the space frontiersmen were probably no different than their historic counterparts back on Earth. They were misfits, antisocial aberrants who fled the responsibilities of organized society and the punishment of its laws. They sought the skies not out of poetic yearning but in a desperate attempt to evade bad debts, extortion charges, murder raps, bastardy warrants — and what they hoped to find was not the beauty of nature but the booty. They were led not by light but by loot — and because most of them were uncouth, ignorant men, they teamed up with partners like George Barwell who provided the brain to balance the brawn.

PERHAPS, BARWELL reasoned, he was being unfair. Chuck like most of his counterparts, had more than brawn; he had natural coordination, natural comprehension manifesting itself in mechanical aptitudes. He was, in a word, a damned good pilot — just as the stumblebums of the Old West were often damned good horsemen, stagecoach drivers, bull-whackers, hunters and scouts. What he lacked in ratiocination Barwell provided. Together they formed a team — cerebrum and cerebellum, plus a psychic *medulla oblongata* composed of a fusion of component qualities.

Only by the time they landed on the asteroid, Barwell was damned sick of Chuck's four-letter words. Chuck had a four-letter word for everything during their long cruise — to describe the food, the confinement in the tiny cabin of the ship, his need for a sexual outlet. Chuck talked about nothing else, was interested in nothing else.

Barwell's own tastes ran towards poetry; the oldstyle poetry of long ago, complete with rhyme and metre and onomotopoeia. But there was no sense even mentioning the subject to Chuck; give him a title like *The Charge of the Light Brigade* and he'd think it was about the narcotics supply of

some regiment. And as for *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* —

No, it was easier for Barwell to keep silent and let Chuck do the talking. About the . . . mineral deposits they were going to find, and the . . . money they'd make so they could go back to that . . . Lunadome City and tell everybody to . . .

It was easier for Barwell to keep silent, but not much easier. And by the time they were approaching the surface of the asteroid he was heartily sick of his partner, and his earthy aspirations. If George Barwell had invested his small inheritance in a second-hand ship in order to conduct a private sky-scan, it wasn't because he wanted wealth to gratify his aggressive drives against society. He knew exactly what he meant to do with his money, if successful. He'd buy himself a little place out past Pluto and set up an interplanetary Walden's Pond. Here he'd settle down to write poetry in the ancient manner; not the intermediate *vers libre* of the first space age or today's soundspeak synthesis which had emerged from what the scholars once called "progressive jazz." He hoped, too, to do some erudite and expensive research with the priceless tapes of forgotten folk-songs.

BUT THERE was no time for such speculations now, no time for poetry. They were skimming across the surface of the asteroid, off autopilot, of course, while the instruments tested for grav., ox., density, radiation, temp., and all the rest. Chuck was at the controls, set for a handland any minute.

Barwell got the tape comps and studied them. "We'll do all right," he muttered. "One and one-fourth grav. is no problem. But we'll have to wear our bubbles. And —"

Chuck shook his head.

"Dead," he muttered. That was one of the bad things about a trip like this — both of them had gotten into the habit of muttering; they didn't really converse with one another, just vocalized a *monologue interieur*. "All dead. Desert and mountains. Of course, we want the mountains, but why the . . . does it have to be so dead?"

"Because it's an asteroid." Barwell moved over to within visual range of the scanners. "You seldom find mineral deposits on inhabitable bodies."

His mind played the usual tricks, contradicting his last statement. He thought of the mineral deposits he had seen in the form of gold and diamonds, ornamenting the women of Lunadome City; mineral deposits on *very* inhabitable bodies. And that thought led him to still another; the lying premises of most of the "space romances" he had read, or for that matter, the so-called "factual accounts" of space travel. In almost all of them the emphasis was on the so-called thrill and challenge involved in expeditionary flights. Few were honest enough to present the reality of a

spaceman's outlook, which was one of constant physical frustration. When he set up his interplanetary Walden's pond, he'd make sure to bring along some feminine companionship. *All* spaceships were really powered with sex-drive, he decided. But to satisfy the libido required money. *Libidough.*

"LOOK!" CHUCK wasn't muttering now, he was shouting. And pointing at the starboard scanner.

Barwell gazed out and down.

They were at a half-mile elevation, over the desert, and the white sky shone pitilessly on an endless expanse of nothingness — the flat, monotonous expanse of sand or detritus was like a smooth, unrippled lake. *A lake in which giants bathed, immersed to their necks —*

Barwell saw them now; four giant bald heads in a row. He turned to Chuck. "What do you mean, dead?" he murmured. "There's life here. See for yourself."

"Stones," Chuck grunted. "Just stones."

"Look like heads to me."

"Sure they do, from this angle. Wait, I'll make another run."

The ship obeyed, dipping lower.

"Statues," Barwell decided. "Those *are* heads, you can see that now, can't you?"

". . . !" said Chuck. It wasn't a reply, merely a forceful observation. And now Barwell could see what he observed. The four heads set in sand *were* artificially carved, and in their eyesockets blazed a livid luminance.

"Emeralds," Chuck whispered. "Emeralds as big as wagon-wheels!"

"Can't be." Barwell shook his head. "There are no such concentrations of stratification — "

"I see 'em. So do you."

"Mirage. Some kind of igneous deposit."

"Why the . . . can't you talk English, like me?" Chuck demanded. "That's no mirage. It's real. Whoever heard of a bald-headed mirage?"

He began to snort and busied himself at the controls.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"Setting down for a landing, that's what."

"Now wait a minute — "

"What for? Man, those emeralds — "

"All right, hold it." Barwell's tone was subdued, but something about it caused Chuck to hesitate.

"Let's think things through for a minute," he continued. "Grant that there *are* actual stone heads down there. And that they have some kind of ornamentation for eyes."

"Emeralds, dammit!"

"That's beside the point. The point is, statues don't come into existence through spontaneous generation."

"Will you for . . . talk English?"

"Somebody has to *make* statuary. Don't you see, there must be life down there."

"So?"

"So we land a good distance away. *And* come out armed. Armed and cautious."

"All right. Anything that shows its head, I blast."

"You don't blast. Not until you know what it is, and whether or not it shows hostility."

"Blast first, talk later." Chuck repeated the code that was older than the hills. *The only good Indian is a dead Indian.* Is prejudice a survival-mechanism?

Chuck's instantaneous, automatic response to anything new or different would be to lash out at it and destroy it. Barwell's would be to examine it and intellectualize. He wondered which of them was reacting correctly, then decided it would depend upon individual circumstance. But then, one must never generalize, because everything is unique — and this in itself is a generalization.

BARWELL UNRACKED the weapons, nevertheless, as Chuck went into reverse landing position. He opened the compartment and extracted the suits and the bubbles. He tested the oxygen-cycle of the containers. He checked the food-belts. He brought out the footwear. And all the while he was drowning in the muddy stream-of-consciousness. Bubbles arose.

Columbus, buckling on his armor before the landing at San Salvador . . . Balboa, that voyaging *voyeur*, peeking at a peak on Darien . . . Henry M. Stanley, being presumptuous with Dr. Livingstone . . . the first footfall on the moon, and the first man to scrawl *Kilroy Was Here* and disfigure the lunar landscape with an obscene injunction . . . a faroff memory of the California hills and a whitewashed message writ on rock; *Help Stamp Out Reality* . . . what was this land worth if those *were* emerald eyes? . . . Emerald Isles . . . when Irish eyes are bloodshot, sure, 'tis like a . . . but the eyes weren't emeralds, it was a mirage . . . a bald-headed mirage . . . a mirage of convenience. *What do you think about when you're preparing to land on a strange and alien world? You think about what a wonderful thing it would be to be back in Lunadome City, settling down to a good meal of dehydrated eggs or a bad night with a dehydrated woman.* Powdered women. A new recipe. Just add water and stir. Serves two. *That's what you think about, that's all you ever think about.*

AND CHUCK? What was *he* thinking about?

"Better make sure you use the relief tube before you put a suit on and go out there," Chuck grunted.

That was Chuck, all right — the *practical* one.

And on this high note, the expedition proper started.

On the sweat of opening the locks. On the wrenching effort of lowering the landing-ladder. On the stumbling contact with the hard sand. On the wheezing accommodation to the oxygen-feeders. On the blinding brilliance

of the garish glare, searing into the skull through eyes long-accustomed to half-darkness. On the trickle of sweat inside the suit, the tightness of the constricting crotch at every step, the heaviness of tank and weapon. *O Pioneers* —

"Oh . . .!" said Chuck. Barwell couldn't hear him, but like every spacer, he'd learned lipreading. He'd also learned to keep his own mouth shut, but now, as he turned towards the stone heads in the sand a dozen miles to their right, he broke his own self-imposed rule of silence.

"They're gone!" he gasped. And then blinked, as the echo of his own voice rebounded in reverberation from the bubble in which his head was encased.

Chuck followed his stare and nodded.

The heads were gone.

There was no possibility of miscalculation in landing. Chuck had set down within ten or twelve miles of the sighting spot. And Barwell remembered now that he had glanced sidelong through a scanner as he'd donned his suit and bubble. The heads had been visible then.

But they were gone.

Nothing on every side but an expanse of shimmering sand. And far beyond, to the left, the mountains.

"Mirage," he whispered. "It *was* a mirage, after all."

Chuck was reading him. His own lips formed a phrase. It wasn't exactly a reply — merely an obscene reaction.

As if by common, unspoken consent, the two men turned and trudged back to the ship. They clambered up the ladder, closed the locks, wearily removed their suits.

"We were space-bugged," Chuck muttered. "The two of us." He shook his head. "But I saw 'em. So did you."

"Let's go over the course again, retrace our route." Barwell waited until he saw Chuck nod. Then he sought a position at the starboard scanner.

"Waste a lot of juice taking off," Chuck grumbled. "Damn clumsy old tub!"

"If we find what we're looking for, you can have a new one. A whole fleet," Barwell reminded him.

"Sure." Chuck tested, then busied himself. There was a shuddering lurch.

"Slowly," Barwell cautioned.

Chuck answered with a suggestion as impossible as it was indecent, but he obeyed. The ship skimmed.

"Right about here," Barwell murmured. "Wasn't it?"

"Think so."

THE SHIP hovered and the two men peered down. Peered down at empty wasteland.

"If only Mr. Eliot were alive to see it," Barwell told himself aloud.

"Who?"

"T.S. Eliot." Barwell paused. "A minor poet."

"T.S., huh?" Chuck snorted. Then he sobered. "Well, now what do we do?"

"Keep cruising. We'll head for the mountains. That's where we intended to go, anyway."

Chuck nodded and turned away. The ship rose, picked up speed.

Barwell contemplated the dryness of the desert, then refreshed himself by plunging back into the stream-of-consciousness.

Well, Columbus was disappointed with San Salvador, too; it wasn't really Asia. And Balboa never *really* stood upon a peak of Darien, except in the poem. Actually, he was at the Isthmus of Panama. Henry M. Stanley couldn't persuade Dr. Livingstone to return with him, and the first man to reach the moon was the first man to die there. And there were no dehydrated women, either, or hydrated ones, either. *Water, water, everywhere, and not a drop to drink.*

THE FEELING of frustration came again, and Barwell thought of the one woman he had truly loved, wishing she were somehow beside him now as she had been beside him once, so long ago.

"There they are!"

Chuck's shout brought him wet and dripping tears of self-pity, from the pool of memory. Barwell stared down and out.

The heads rose from the desert below. The great eyes gleamed.

"We're setting down!" Chuck told him.

Barwell shrugged.

Once again, the interminable routine. But this time, after both men were fully accoutred, they stared through the scanner to reassure themselves the stone heads were still visible, scarcely a mile away.

The heads stared back.

Then the locks swung open, the ladder swung down, and they emerged. Emerged upon the emptiness.

"Gone!"

Both men muttered simultaneously.

Then they walked — walked warily, weapons at the ready, across the barren plain. And walked wearily back again.

In the cabin, interminably, they argued and discussed. "Gone with the wind," sighed Barwell. "Only there is no wind."

"It can't be a mirage. I saw those emeralds just as clear — " Chuck shook his head. "But if it was, why in hell did it have to be stone heads? When it comes to mirages, I'll take — "

And he proceeded to describe his preferences in mirages very graphically. It was Barwell who finally resolved the situation.

"The mountains," he said. "Let's not waste any more time."

So they went to the mountains.

That is, they went *near* the mountains, skimming in low for a drop-landing on the smooth sands before the foothills. They squinted through the shimmering sheen of the scene, but there were no stone heads; only the looming loftiness of the great peaks in the distance.

Leaving the ship, they set forth on foot to clamber and climb and curse. But in the end there were

merely the muttered oaths. For there was nothing to climb. The mountains were merely another kind of mirage — palpable, but not solid. Mountains of detritus, mountains of dust into which the two men swiftly sank as they attempted to proceed.

"Volcanic ash," Barwell mouthed, through the bubble. "That's the answer."

Chuck had another answer, but Barwell ignored it. He knew now that their quest was quixotic. There would be no mineral deposits in the non-existent soil of this asteroid; it was merely a gigantic lava-splinter flung forth into space by the eon-old eruption of a volcano on some far-distant planet. Either that or a meteoric byproduct. The actual explanation didn't matter. What mattered was that there would be no way to wealth in this wilderness. They'd have to go back to the ship.

The two men turned, the grippers on the soles of their footwear useless in the shifting sand as they plodded down into the plain once more. Far in the distance they could see the black speck of the ship. It was hard to walk, but they kept moving as the speck became a bulk, the bulk became a recognizable object, the object became a —

Chuck must have seen it first, because he halted. Then Barwell squinted and stared. Even in the lurid luminence his eyes widened as he saw the ship; saw the crushed and crumpled hull that had been squashed and serrated —

THEN THEY were both running across the plain, stumbling and lurching towards the wreckage. Everything seemed to function in slow motion, as in a nightmare, but the nightmare continued. It continued as they peered up at the incredibly battered silver shell; proceeded as they swung up the ladder and found the entry squeezed shut.

They stood below, on the surface of the sand, and there was no need to mouth a word from behind the bubbles. Both of them knew the situation. Food and water for a day, if they dared remove the bubbles long enough to ingest a supply. Oxygen for perhaps another twelve hours at most. And then —

There was no point in considering what had happened, or why, or how. All that seemed important now was the *fait accompli.*

"Fate *accompli,*" Barwell told himself. And that's all he could tell himself, or trust himself to tell. Staring up at the shattered sides of the spaceship, he experienced a sensation surpassing horror. For this phenomenon was alien.

Alien. A much-used, misused word, which cannot express the inexpressible. *Alien* — foreign. Foreign to understanding, foreign to human comprehension. Barwell recalled Arthur Machen's definition of true evil — when the roses sing.

When the roses sing.

PERHAPS *ALIEN* isn't always synonymous with *evil* — but something had destroyed the ship. There was no wind, and no life; yet they had walked away for a few miles and returned, and the ship was crumpled.

The roses were singing. What is a rose? Barwell thought of a long-dead poetess, Gertrude Stein. *A rose is a rose is a rose.* And added, *is evil.* But do roses live, does evil live, does the impalpable truly exist? *A rose by any other name* —

"Dammit, what happened?" Chuck, and the voice of reality. He wasn't concerned with roses, or neuroses, either. He wanted to name the enemy, locate it, and strike back. And with the realization Barwell (like a rose) wilted.

Here was a situation which didn't call for theory, or for any form of abstruse speculation. The ship was gone. They were stranded, with food and oxygen in short supply. A clear call for Chuck and his pioneer blood — or would his pioneer blood, too, be spilled across the sand?

Barwell hesitated helplessly, waiting for his partner to make the first move. No sceptre changed hands, but both sensed it was a moment of abdication. *The king is dead, long live the king. For another twenty-four hours, anyway.*

Both of them knew better than to waste breath in trying to talk through their bubbles. When Chuck turned back towards the mirage-mountains, Barwell followed without even moving his lips in token assent. At least there would be shadow there, and shelter, and surcease. The desert held nothing for either of them. The desert was all utter emptiness and shimmering mirage. Once more, Barwell thought of a lake.

Lake. As he trudged along behind Chuck's steadily-striding figure, he wondered what would happen if — as in the olden space-romances, the aliens actually invaded Earth. They'd probably send out scouting parties first; perhaps one or two at a time, in small ships. Granted the premise that their sensory organs roughly corresponded to the human and afforded similar impressions, what might they surmise from a skimming expedition over the earth at a height of a few hundred miles?

The first thing they would note was that the Earth's surface is more than three-quarters water and less than one-quarter land. So the logical conclusion; if there is any life on this planet, the chances are better than three to one that it is *marine* life — or at the very best, amphibious. The denizens of the great seas must be the highest and most intelligent life-forms. Conquer the fishes and rule the world. A hightly sensible notion, that.

But there are times when high sense does not prevail. And if aliens could not be expected to comprehend humanity's existence offhand, then how could humanity interpret alienity?

In short — was there life on this asteroid which Barwell could not detect?

While there's life, there's hope. But Barwell had no hope. He had merely a premise. Something had crushed the spaceship. Where did it come from, where did it go? How did it link with life as he knew it, how did it differ? And the desert — *was* it a desert? The mountains had not been mountains. And the mirage had been —

CHUCK STILL wasn't wasting words, even obscene ones. He merely turned and gripped his partner's arm with a plasticene-and-metal glove. Gripped it tightly, and turned, and pointed with his free hand. Pointed straight ahead, at the heads in the sand. Yes, they were here.

Barwell could have sworn that the heads hadn't been there a moment ago. But there they were, silhouetted against the searing surface, a scant mile before them. Even at this range the emerald eyes gleamed and glared, gleamed and glared as no mirage was meant to.

Four huge stone heads with emerald eyes. Visible to them both; visible to them *now.*

Chuck's lips formed a sentence beneath the bubble. "Keep looking at them," he said.

Barwell nodded. The two men moved forward, slowly.

Their gaze was intent, focussed upon the lambent, livid flame of the monstrous emeralds. Barwell knew, or thought he knew, what Chuck was seeing. Riches, infinite riches.

But he saw something else.

HE SAW all the idols of all the legends; the idols with the jewelled eyes, who stirred and moved and walked amongst men to spread destruction with a curse. He saw the massive monoliths of Stonehenge and the great figures of Easter Island and the stone horror beneath the waves in sunken R'lyeh. And the waves reminded him again of the lake, and the lake of the aliens who might misconceive and misconstrue the lifeforms of Earth, and this in turn caused a curious concept. There had once been a man named Ouspensky who had speculated upon the possibility of *varieties* of time and different *rates* of duration. Perhaps the rocks also live, but at infinitely slow pace by comparison to flesh, so that flesh is unaware of the sentience of stone.

What form might life take, if forged in fire, if birthed precipitately from a volcano's flaming womb? Those great stone heads with the emerald eyes —

And all the while they were coming closer, approaching slowly. The stone heads stared and did not disappear. The emeralds blazed and burned, and now Barwell could no longer think; he could only stare and he tried the old trick again. The cool stream-of-consciousness was waiting. Little eddies of thought swirled.

Emerald eyes. His love had emerald eyes; sometimes turquoise, sometimes smoky jade, but his love was not stone. And she was worlds away and he was here, alone on the desert. But that's not where he wanted to be

— plunge back now into the stream, use the fanciful thoughts to ward off the still more fanciful reality. Think of anything but emeralds, think of longforgotten stars of a longforgotten art-form, the motion pictures; think of Pearl White and Ruby Keeler and Jewel Carmen and of anything but emeralds, think of Diamond Jim Brady and the fabulous stones of history which men wrested from the Earth for love of woman. *Love is just around the Kohinoor.* Faith, the Hope Diamond, and Charity . . .

Emerald eyes . . . Esmeralda, and the *Hunchback of Notre Dame* . . . Hugo's title was *Notre Dame de Paris* . . . the vast cathedral with its stone gargoyles staring . . . but stones do not stare . . . or do they? *The emeralds were staring.*

Barwell blinked, shaking his head. He half-turned, noting that Chuck had broken into a run as he neared the four fantastic monuments in the sand. Wheezing and panting, he followed. Chuck didn't see what *he* saw — that was obvious. Even at the point of death, he wanted the emeralds. Even at the point of death —

SOMEHOW BARWELL managed to overtake his companion. He clawed at his arms, halted him. Chuck stared at him as he shook his head and mouthed the words.

"Don't go any closer!"

"Why not?"

"Because they're *alive!*"

"Nonsense." That was not the word Chuck used, but Barwell divined its meaning.

"They *are* alive. Don't you see? Living rock. With their immense weight, the desert is like water, like a lake in which they can immerse at will. Immerse and reappear, up to their necks. That's why they disappeared, because they were swimming beneath the surface — "

Barwell knew he was wasting precious oxygen, but he had to make Chuck understand.

"They must have grabbed our ship, picked it up to examine it, then discarded it."

Chuck scowled and said another word which meant, "Nonsense." He pulled free.

"No — don't — keep away — "

But Chuck had the pioneer spirit. The grab-claw-lunge-loot-rape reflex. He could only see the emeralds; the eyes that were bigger than his stomach.

And he started to run the last five hundred yards, moving across the sand towards the four staring heads which waited, *watched* and waited.

Barwell sprinted after him — or tried to sprint. But he could only flounder forward, noting as he did so that the huge rock heads were pitted and eroded, but not *chiselled.* No man, and no conceivable alien, had sculpted these semblances. For they were no semblances but actualities. The rock *lived,* the stone *sensed.*

And the emerald eyes beckoned . . .

"Come back!" It was worse than useless to shout, for Chuck couldn't see his face behind the bubble. He could only see the

great faces before him, and the emeralds above. His own eyes were blinded by hunger, by a greed greater than need.

Panting, Barwell caught up with the running man, whirled him around.

"Keep back," he mouthed. "Don't get any closer — they'll crush you like they crushed the ship — "

"You lie!" Chuck turned, his weapon suddenly poised. "Maybe that was a mirage, too. But the jewels are real. I know your idea, you . . . ! Get rid of me, take the emeralds for yourself, repair the ship and take off. Only I'm way ahead of you, because that's *my* idea, too!"

"No — " gasped Barwell, realizing at the same moment that some poet had once said, "Say *Yes* to life!" and simultaneously aware that now there would be no time for further affirmation.

Because the weapon blazed, and then Barwell was falling; falling into the stream-of-unconsciousness and beyond, into the bubbling blackness of the stream-of-unconsciousness where there were no stone heads or emerald eyes. Where there was, no longer, any Barwell . . .

SO IT remained for Chuck to stand over the body of his partner at the base of the great stone head; to stand and grin in triumph as the smoke curled up as if before the altar of a god.

And like a giant god, the stone accepted its sacrifice. Incredulous, Chuck watched the incredible — saw the rock split open, saw the mountainous maw loom large as the head dipped and *gulped*.

Then the sand was smooth again. Barwell's body was gone.

Realization came brutally, belatedly. Chuck turned to run, knowing the heads *were* alive. And as he ran a vision came to him of these cyclopean creatures burrowing through the sand, bathing beneath the surface of the plain — rising at will to survey the silence of their dread domain. He could see a great stone paw emerge to fumble with the ship; knew now what the serrations in its sides meant. They were simply the marks of gigantic *teeth*. Teeth in a mouth that tasted, rejected; a hand had tossed the ship aside like a crumpled toy floating on the lake of sand.

For one moment Chuck thought and then the thought was transfigured by reality. A gigantic paw *did* emerge from the sand before him as he ran. It scooped Chuck up and tossed him down into the grinding stone mouth.

There was the sound stone makes when it gulps, and then silence.

The four heads turned to stare once more — stare at nothingness. They would gaze silently for a long, long time through ageless emerald eyes, for what is eternity to a stone.

Sooner or later, in another thousand years — or a million, what did it matter? — another ship would come. ▣

FANTASTIC FACTS

Our Connection with the Universe

(Based on astronomer Dr. Carl Sagan's book, "The Cosmic Connection."

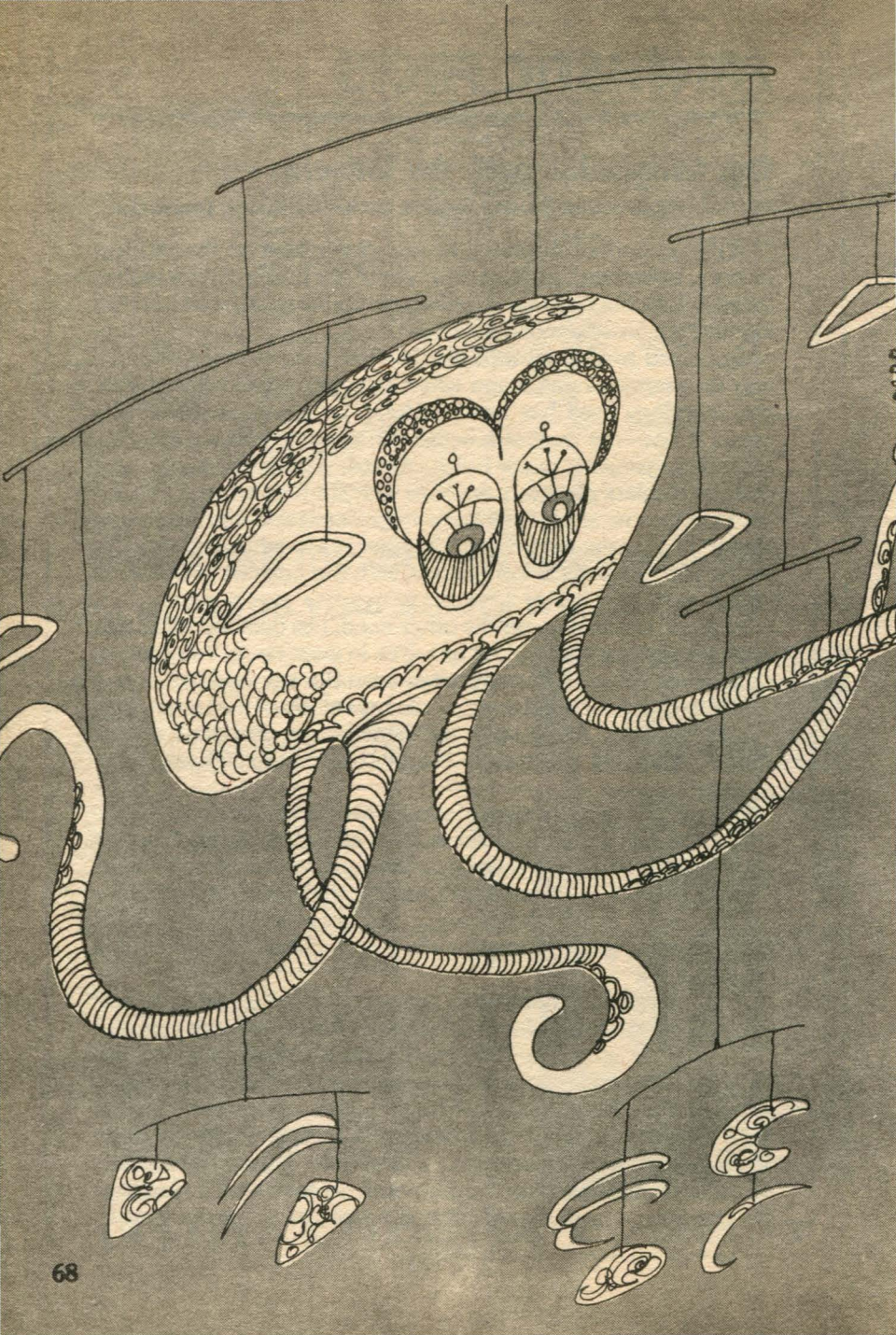
While countless numbers in our ranks look to the pseudo-science, astrology, for "answers" about the future, man's real relationship to the cosmos unfolds as something far more interesting and immensely more profound.

Our need to identify with the universe is as strong today as it was thousands of years ago when astrology was invented. And yet, astrology itself has failed to keep pace with scientific progress; it does not deal with asteroids, comets, pulsars, quasars, exploding galaxies, black holes, X-rays, gamma rays, etc., nor does it calculate planetary motions with any high degree of accuracy. There is no study indicating a significant success rate in prediction of either personality or the future through horoscopes. In short, the astrological connection with the cosmos is based on fancy.

Modern astronomy, on the other hand, has demonstrated that we are indeed related to the universe in ways never imagined by astrologers. Studies of meteorites from the asteroid belt; moon samples; the solar wind and cosmic rays all show that everything in the cosmos is made up of the same atoms, and these atoms, roughly speaking, are present everywhere in about the same proportions.

By studying the evolution of stars, astronomers understand the processes by which our solar system came into being. Quoting Dr. Sagan: "Our sun is second or third generation star. All of the rocky and metallic material we stand on, the iron in our blood, the calcium in our teeth, the carbon in our genes were produced billions of years ago in the interior of a red giant star. We are made of star stuff."

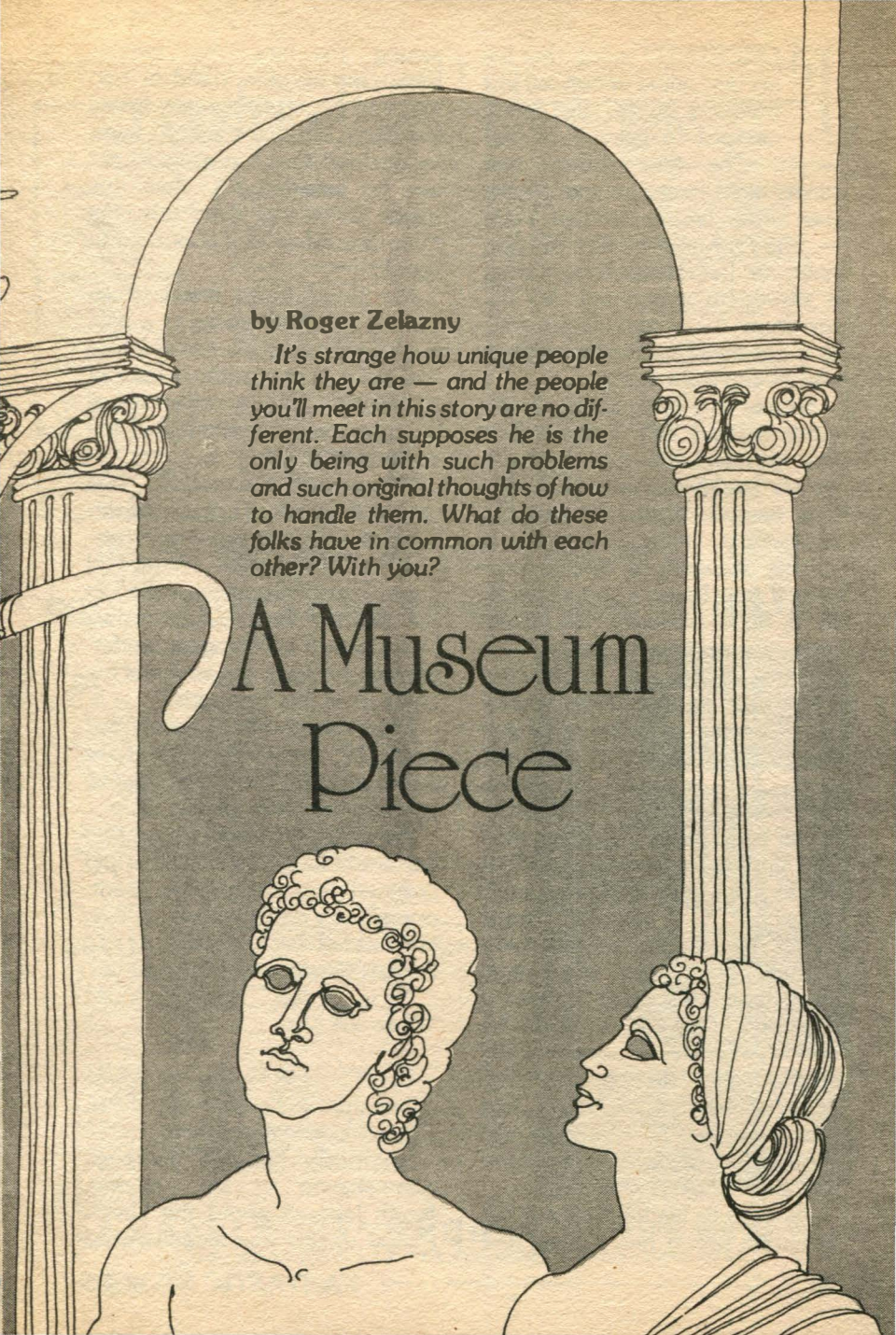
"Our atomic and molecular connection with the rest of the universe is a real and unfanciful hookup. As we explore our surroundings by telescope and space vehicle, other hookups may emerge. There may be a network of intercommunicating extraterrestrial civilizations to which we may link up tomorrow for all we know. The undelivered promise of astrology — that the stars impel our individual characters — will not be satisfied by modern astronomy. But the deep human need to seek and understand our connection with the universe is a goal well within our grasp."



by **Roger Zelazny**

It's strange how unique people think they are — and the people you'll meet in this story are no different. Each supposes he is the only being with such problems and such original thoughts of how to handle them. What do these folks have in common with each other? With you?

A Museum Piece



FORCED TO admit that his art was going unnoticed in a frivolous world, Jay Smith decided to get out of that world. The four dollars and ninety-eight cents he spent for a mail order course entitled *Yoga — The Path to Freedom* did not, however, help to free him. Rather, it served to accentuate his humanity, in that it reduced his ability to purchase food by four dollars and ninety-eight cents.

Seated in a padmasana, Smith contemplated little but the fact that his navel drew slightly closer to his backbone with each day that passed. While nirvana is a reasonably esthetic concept, suicide assuredly is not, particularly if you haven't the stomach for it. So he dismissed the fatalistic notion quite reasonably:

"How simply one could take one's own life in ideal surroundings!" he sighed (tossing his golden locks which, for obvious reasons, had achieved classically impressive lengths). "The fat stoic in his bath, fanned by slave girls and sipping his wine, as a faithful Greek leech opens his veins, eyes downcast! One delicate circassian," he sighed again, *there* perhaps, plucking upon a lyre as he dictates his funeral oration — the latter to be read by a faithful countryman, eyes all a-blink. How easily *he* might do it! But the fallen artist — nay! Born yesterday and scorned today he goes, like the elephant to his graveyard, alone and secret!"

He rose to his full height of six feet, one and a half inches, and swung to face the mirror. Regarding his skin, pallid as marble, and his straight nose, broad forehead, and wide-spaced eyes, he decided that if one could not live by creating art, then one might do worse than turn the thing the other way about, so to speak.

He flexed those thews which earned him half-tuition as a halfback for the four years in which he had stoked the smithy of his soul to forging out a movement all his own: two-dimensional painted sculpture.

"Viewed in the round," one crabbed critic had noted, "Mister Smith's offerings are either frescoes without walls or vertical lines. The Etruscans excelled in the former form because they knew where it belonged; kindergartens inculcate a mastery of the latter in all five year-olds."

Cleverness! Mere cleverness! Bah! He was sick of those Johnsons who laid down the law at someone else's dinner table!

He noted with satisfaction that his month-long ascetic regime had reduced his weight by thirty pounds to a mere two twenty-five. He decided that he could pass as a Beaten Gladiator, post-Hellenic.

"It is settled," he pronounced "I'll *be* art."

LATER THAT afternoon a lone figure entered the Museum of Art, a bundle beneath his arm.

Spiritually haggard (although clean-shaven to the armpits), Smith loitered about the Greek Period until it was emptied of all

but himself and marble.

He selected a dark corner and unwrapped his pedestal. He secreted the various personal items necessary for a showcase existence, including most of his clothing, in its hollow bottom.

"Good-bye, world," he renounced, "you should treat your artists better," and mounted the pedestal.

His food money had not been completely wasted, for the techniques he had mastered for four ninety-eight while on the Path to Freedom, had given him a muscular control such as allowed him perfect, motionless statuity whenever the wispy, middle-aged woman followed by forty-four children under age nine left her chartered bus at the curb and passed through the Greek Period, as she did every Tuesday and Thursday between 9:35 and 9:40 in the morning. Fortunately, he had selected a seated posture.

Before the week passed he had also timed the watchman's movements to an alternate *tick* of the huge clock in the adjacent gallery (a delicate Eighteenth Century timepiece, all of gold leaf, enamel, and small angels who chased one another in circles). He should have hated being reported stolen during the first week of his career, with nothing to face then but the prospect of second-rate galleries or an uneasy role in the cheerless private collections of cheerless and private collectors. Therefore, he moved judiciously when raiding staples from the stores in the downstairs lunch room, and strove to work out a sympathetic bond with the racing angels. The directors had never seen fit to secure the refrigerator or pantry from depredations by the exhibits, and he applauded their lack of imagination. He nibbled at boiled ham and pumpernickel (light), and munched ice cream bars by the dozen. After a month he was forced to take calisthenics (heavy) in the Bronze Age.

"Oh, lost!" he reflected amidst the Neos, surveying the kingdom he had once staked out as his own. He wept over the statue of Achilles Fallen as though it were his own. It was.

As in a mirror, he regarded himself in a handy collage of bolts and nutshells. "If you had not sold out," he accused, "if *you* had hung on a little longer — like these, the simplest of Art's creatures . . . But no! It could not be!

"Could it?" he addressed a particularly symmetrical mobile overhead. "*Could* it?"

"Perhaps," came an answer from somewhere, which sent him flying back to his pedestal.

But little came of it. The watchman had been taking guilty delight in a buxom Rubens on the other side of the building and had not overheard the colloquy. Smith decided that the reply signified his accidental nearing of Dharana. He returned to the Path, redoubling his efforts toward negation and looking Beaten.

IN THE days that followed he heard occasional chuckling and

whispering, which he at first dismissed as the chortlings of the children of Mara and Maya, intent upon his distraction. Later, he was less certain, but by then he had decided upon a classical attitude of passive inquisitiveness.

And one spring day, as green and golden as a poem by Dylan Thomas, a girl entered the Greek Period and looked about, furtively. He found it difficult to maintain his marbly placidity, for lo! she began to disrobe!

And a square parcel on the floor, in a plain wrapper. It could only mean . . .

Competition!

He coughed politely, softly, classically . . .

She jerked to an amazing attention, reminding him of a women's underwear ad having to do with Thermopylae. Her hair was the correct color for the undertaking — that palest shade of Parian manageable — and her gray eyes glittered with the icy-orbed intentness of Athene.

She surveyed the room minutely, guiltily, attractively . . .

"Surely stone is not susceptible to virus infections," she decided. " 'Tis but my guilty conscience that cleared its throat. Conscience, thus do I cast thee off!"

And she proceeded to become Hecuba Lamenting, diagonally across from the Beaten Gladiator and, fortunately, not facing in his direction. She handled it pretty well, too, he grudgingly admitted. Soon she achieved an esthetic immobility. After a professional appraisal he decided that Athens was indeed mother of all the arts; she simply could not have carried it as Renaissance nor Romanesque. This made him feel rather good.

When the great doors finally swung shut and the alarms had been set she heaved a sigh and sprang to the floor.

"Not yet," he cautioned, "the watchman will pass through in ninety-three seconds."

She had presence of mind sufficient to stifle her scream, a delicate hand with which to do it, and eighty-seven seconds in which to become Hecuba Lamenting once more. This she did, and he admired her delicate hand and her presence of mind for the next eighty-seven seconds.

THE WATCHMAN came, was nigh, was gone, flashlight and beard bobbing in musty will o' the-wispfulness through the gloom.

"Goodness!" she expelled her breath, "I had thought I was alone!"

"And correctly so," he replied.

" 'Naked and alone we come into exile . . . Among bright stars on this most weary unbright cinder, lost . . . Oh, lost — ' "

"Thomas Wolfe," she stated.

"Yes," he sulked. "Let's go have supper."

"Supper?" she inquired, arching her eyebrows. "Where? I had brought some K-Rations, which I purchased at an Army Surplus Store — "

"Obviously," he retorted, "you have a short-timer's attitude. I believe that chicken figured prominently on the menu for today. Follow me!"

They made their way through the T'ang Dynasty, to the stairs.

"Others might find it chilly in here after hours," he began, "but I daresay you have thoroughly mastered the techniques of breath control?"

"Indeed," she replied, "my fiance' was no mere Zen faddist. He followed the more rugged path of Lhasa. Once he wrote a modern version of the Ramayana, full of topical allusions and advice to modern society."

"And what did modern society think of it?"

"Alas! Modern society never saw it. My parents bought him a one-way ticket to Rome, first-class, and several hundred dollars worth of Travellers' Checks. He has been gone ever since. That is why I have retired from the world."

"I take it your parents did not approve of Art?"

"No, and I believe they must have threatened him also."

He nodded.

"Such is the way of society with genius. I, too, in my small way, have worked for its betterment and received but scorn for my labors."

"Really?"

"Yes. If we stop in the Modern Period on the way back, you can see my Achilles Fallen."

A very dry chuckle halted them.

"Who is there?" he inquired, cautiously.

No reply. They stood in the Glory of Rome, and the stone senators were still.

"*Someone* laughed," she observed.

"We are not alone," he stated, shrugging. "There've been other indications of such, but whoever they are, they're as talkative as Trappists — which is good.

"Remember, thou art stone," he called gaily and they continued on to the cafeteria.

ONE NIGHT they sat together at dinner in the Modern Period.

"Had you a name, in life?" he asked.

"Gloria," she whispered. "And yours?"

"Smith, Jay."

"What prompted you to become a statue, Smith — if it is not too bold of me to ask?"

"Not at all," he smiled, invisibly. "Some are born to obscurity and others only achieve it through diligent effort. I am one of the latter. Being an artistic failure, and broke, I decided to become my own monument. It's warm in here, and there's food below. The environment is congenial, and I'll never be found out because no one ever looks at anything standing around museums."

"No one?"

"Not a soul, as you must have noticed. Children come here

against their wills, young people come to flirt with one another, and when one develops sufficient sensibility to look at anything," he lectured bitterly, "he is either myopic or subject to hallucinations. In the former case he would not notice, in the latter he would not talk. The parade passes."

"Then what good are museums?"

"My dear girl! That the former affianced of a true artist should speak in such a manner indicates that your relationship was but brief — "

"Really!" she interrupted. "The proper word is 'companionship'."

"Very well," he amended, " 'companionship'. But museums mirror the past, which is dead, the present, which never notices, and transmit the race's cultural heritage to the future, which is not yet born. In this, they are near to being temples of religion."

"I never thought of it that way," she mused. "Rather a beautiful thought, too. You should really be a teacher."

"It doesn't pay well enough, but the thought consoles me. Come, let us raid the icebox again."

They nibbled their final ice cream bars and discussed Achilles Fallen, seated beneath the great mobile which resembled a starved octopus. He told her of his other great projects and of the nasty reviewers, crabbed and bloodless, who lurked in Sunday editions and hated life. She, in turn, told him of her parents, who knew Art and also knew why she shouldn't like him, and of her parents' vast fortunes, equally distributed in timber, real estate, and petroleum. He, in turn, patted her arm and she, in turn, blinked heavily and smiled Hellenically.

"You know," he said, finally, "as I sat upon my pedestal, day after day, I often thought of myself: Perhaps I should return and make one more effort to pierce the cataract in the eye of the public — perhaps if I were secure and at ease in all things material — perhaps, if I could find the proper woman — but nay! There is no such a one!"

"Continue! Pray continue!" cried she. "I, too, have, over the past days, thought that, perhaps, another artist could remove the sting. Perhaps the poison of loneliness could be drawn by a creator of beauty — If we — "

AT THIS point a small and ugly man in a toga cleared his throat.

"It is as I feared," he announced.

Lean, wrinkled, and grubby was he; a man of ulcerous bowel and much spleen. He pointed an accusing finger.

"It is as I feared," he repeated.

"Wh-who are you?" asked Gloria.

"Cassius," he replied, "Cassius Fitzmullen — art critic, retired, for the Dalton *Times*. You are planning to defect."

"And what concern is it of yours if we leave?" asked Smith, flexing his Beaten Gladiator halfback muscles.

Cassius shook his head.

"Concern? It would threaten a

way of life for you to leave now. If you go, you will doubtless become an artist, or a teacher of art — and sooner or later, by word or gesture, by sign or by unconscious indication, you will communicate what you have suspected all along. I have listened to your conversation over the past weeks. You know, for certain now, that this is where all art critics finally come, to spend their remaining days mocking the things they have hated. It accounts for the increase of Roman Senators in recent years."

"I have often suspected it, but never was sure."

"The suspicion is enough. It is lethal. You must be judged."

He clapped his hands.

"Judgement!" he called.

Other ancient Romans entered slowly, a procession of bent candles. They encircled the two lovers. Smelling of dust and yellow newsprint and bile and time, the old reviewers hovered.

"They wish to return to humanity," announced Cassius. "They wish to leave and take their knowledge with them."

"We would not tell," said Gloria, tearfully.

"It is too late," replied one dark figure. "You are already entered into the Catalog. See here!" He produced a copy and read: " 'Number 28, Hecuba Lamenting. Number 32, The Beaten Gladiator.' No! It is too late. There would be an investigation."

"Judgement!" repeated Cassius.

Slowly, the Senators turned their thumbs down.

"You *cannot* leave."

"Smith chuckled and seized Cassius' tunic in a powerful sculptor's grip.

"Little man," he said, "how do you propose stopping us? One scream by Gloria would bring the watchman, who would sound an alarm. One blow by me would render you unconscious for a week."

"We shut off the guard's hearing aid as he slept," smiled Cassius. "Critics are not without imagination, I assure you. Release me, or you will suffer."

Smith tightened his grip.

"Try *anything*."

Judgement," smiled Cassius.

"He is modern," said one.

"Therefore, his tastes are catholic," said another.

"To the lions with the Christians!" announced a third, clapping his hands.

And Smith sprang back in panic at what he thought he saw moving in the shadows. Cassius pulled free.

"You cannot do this!" cried Gloria, covering her face. "We are from the Greek Period!"

"When in Greece, do as the Romans do," chuckled Cassius.

The odor of cats came to their nostrils.

"How could you — here . . . ? A lion . . . ?" asked Smith.

"A form of hypnosis privy to the profession," observed Cassius. "We keep the beast paralyzed most of the time. Have you not wondered why there has never been a theft from this museum?

Oh, it has been tried, all right! We protect our interests."

THE LEAN, albino lion which generally slept beside the main entrance padded slowly from the shadows and growled — once, and loudly.

Smith pushed Gloria behind him as the cat began its stalking. He glanced toward the Forum, which proved to be vacant. A sound, like the flapping of wings by a flock of leather pigeons, diminished in the distance.

"We are alone," noted Gloria.

"Run," ordered Smith, "and I'll try to delay him. Get out, if you can."

"And desert you? Never, my dear! Together! Now, and always!"

"Gloria!"

"Jay Smith!"

At that moment the beast conceived the notion to launch into a spring, which it promptly did.

"Good-bye, my lovely."

"Farewell. One kiss before dying, pray."

The lion was high in the air, uttering healthy coughs, eyes greenly aglow.

"Very well."

They embraced.

Moon hacked in the shape of cat, that palest of beasts hung overhead — hung high, hung menacingly, hung long . . .

It began to writhe and claw about wildly in that middle space between floor and ceiling for which architecture possesses no specific noun.

"Mm! Another kiss?"

"Why not? Life is sweet."

A minute ran by on noiseless feet; another pursued it.

"I say, what's holding up that lion?"

"I am," answered the mobile. "You humans aren't the only ones to seek umbrage amidst the relics of your dead past."

The voice was thin, fragile, like that of a particularly busy Aeolian Harp.

"I do not wish to seem inquisitive," said Smith, "but who are?"

"I am an alien life form," it tinkled back, digesting the lion. "My ship suffered an accident on the way to Arcturus. I soon discovered that my appearance was against me on your planet, except in the museums, where I am greatly admired. Being a member of a rather delicate and, if I do say it, somewhat narcissistic race — " He paused to belch daintily, and continued, " — I rather enjoy it here — 'among bright stars on this most weary unbright cinder [belch], lost.' "

"I see," said Smith. "Thanks for eating the lion."

"Don't mention it — but it wasn't *wholly* advisable. You see, I'm going to have to divide now. Can the other me go with you?"

"Of course. You saved our lives, and we're going to need something to hang in the living room, when we have one.

"Good."

He divided, in a flurry of hemidemisemiquavers, and dropped to the floor beside them.

"Good-bye, me," he called upward.

"Good-bye," from above.

They walked proudly from the Modern, through the Greek, and past the Roman Period, with much hauteur and a wholly quiet dignity. Beaten Gladiator, Hecuba Lamenting, and Xena ex Machina no longer, they lifted the sleeping watchman's key and walked out the door, down the stairs, and into the night, on youthful legs and drop-lines. ■

Between the Lines

A closer look at "A Museum Piece" by our editorial consultant who teaches creative writing and has developed the first science fiction literature course at Glendale Community College in Glendale, Arizona.

by Robert H. Wilcox

Most of us play the English language by ear. That is, we start to communicate with one another by imitating what we hear as babies, and we continue to check our understanding of what is said and heard that way throughout the rest of our lives. This system works very well; primitive people have used it for thousands of years. But such simple communication falls apart when it comes to reading and writing.

First of all, nobody really understands the connection between speaking and writing, yet we all somehow make the jump from the sound "cat" to the written look of "cat." It was hard enough for us to grasp, when we were infants, the connection between that sound and the warm, furry playmate our parents brought us. How much more difficult it is to see the cat that isn't there, except as a word on the page.

The difficulty increases when we don't even make up the word ourselves, but are given it by someone else who may have a special kind of cat in his mind -- one completely unlike that kitten we cuddled in babyhood. But somehow we overcome this difficulty because there is enough cat-ness on both sides of the communication -- ours and the writer's -- to go around. And so we learn to read, or think we do, until we reach about the sixth grade in school. At this point we've collected enough written words to match most of the spoken sounds that come our way, and our ability to read actually goes no further. This is a sad but true con-

dition with most of us in our highly complex and technological world: we stop learning to read at the sixth grade in school.

We still have our intelligence; it's just that life is so simple and convenient -- and there's always good old television to fall back on. Most of us get along quite well the rest of our lives, staying in the sixth grade, except that we read with the understanding of a child. This makes life simple, aside from small details like bills of sale, house mortgages, legal contracts, and other experiences with the "fine print" which get us into trouble.

But all is not lost. Sure, we may be older now and can't go back to school and learn to read all over again. Well, why not? Life is a school. We learn something every day, whether we realize it or not. So if we pretend that this magazine is a text book, we might surprise ourselves by escaping into the worlds of fantasy and imagination, by learning as we yearn for life and experiences which seem to appear in these fanciful yarns. Actually, it's this learn-while-you-yearn that will make us children once again and will help to shine up a life that sometimes seems dull and uninteresting.

So let's look at a slice of make-believe, "A Museum Piece," a bit more closely than we might normally do. First of all, the setting is ideal for our purposes. Most of us were taken as children to museums. They were strange and exciting, filled with unusual and unexpected objects, items we never encountered in everyday life. And this is exactly what our story author wants us to remember as we read. People "dropping out" because of frustration and disappointment, stealing into a kind of sanctuary, pretending to be works of art themselves -- all of this seems quite unlikely, but most inviting. Few of us would survive the shock of an actual conversation with a bronze Shakespeare or an embrace of Venus in alabaster -- even if she had the arms for it. But there is an appeal to such a dream, a thrill like that experienced by Pygmalion when his marble Galatea warmed to life and love. Surely there's nothing sixth grade about all of this, and the writer hopes we will stretch to embrace his expectations in having chosen the museum for a special world.

If we inspect the other inhabitants of this fanciful setting, we bolster our willingness to enter. Achilles, gladiators, Roman Senators, lions -- these reassure us that we haven't lost our way. And the inclusion of a mobile alien who lost his way journeying to Arcturus seems perfectly proper in such company.

In fact, it is this remarkable creature which impels us to examine our story even more closely. We hadn't noticed before, but one of the reasons we find the tale so readable is that it's funny. Oh, not funny in a back-slapping, belly-flopping way. Rather, we

go through a number of double-takes as we read along. Notice we have a hero on a diet who "hasn't the stomach" for suicide, who has forged his body (his name is Smith), feels uneasiness at being stolen by a second-rate art collector, and we chuckle at the connection between K-rations and duty in the museum. These are perhaps obvious quips. But we move on to "piercing the cataract of the public eye," the detailed reference to the fate of critics, the connection between catholic taste and being thrown to the lions, and Xena ex Machina. The humor here is not child's play; we need background and sophistication to appreciate it. But at all levels the story is funny, which gives it universal appeal.

So this brings us back to our starting place. Words have small beginnings, as we do, but they grow with experience. As we become more sophisticated in our activities, the words follow similar development. The cat we cuddle when we are babies becomes other forms of feline, or a piece of construction equipment, or even a descriptive term for human behavior. And all of us can do this magic with words, can find new and expanding worlds of the mind. All we have to do is to put away childish things -- and step up from that sixth grade. ▣

Did you enjoy reading this issue of FANTASTIC? If you did, we want you to know that we will try harder with future issues to please you even more! We love working on FANTASTIC and want to make it a magazine that pleases you -- that takes your fantasy to the beyond and back . . .

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SEX QUEENS OF OUTER SPACE

Science Fiction and Fantasy are no longer Male Preserves! Women, too, are seeking the New Frontiers of Space!

No longer shrieking "EEEK" at Bug-Eyed Monsters, Women, too, have become Heroic.

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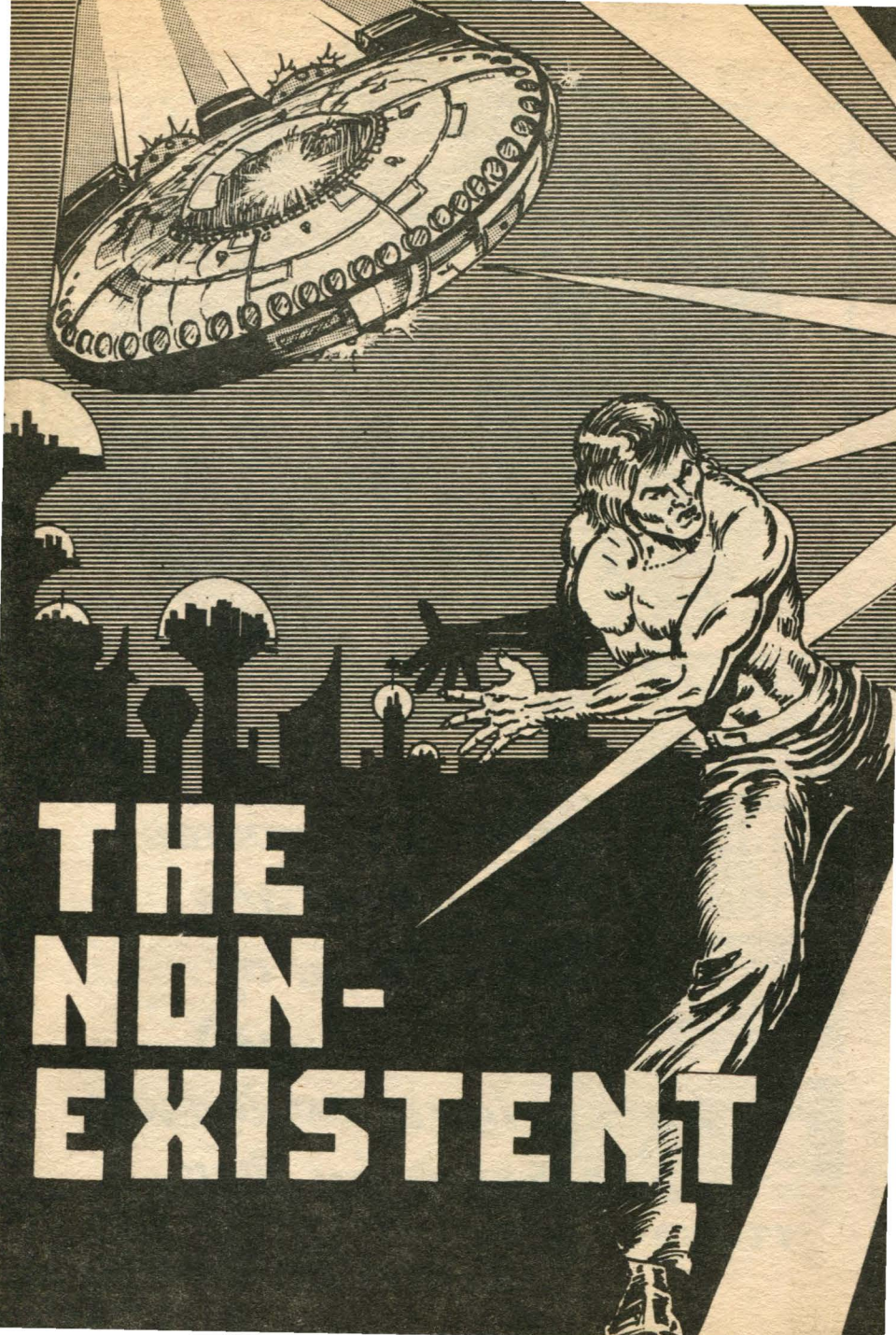
Today's SF women are Superstars in a Galaxy of highly developed Technology no longer dominated by Men.


THE
NON-
EXISTENT

by Wynne Whiteford

Tampering with the past carries inherent dangers that may not be avoidable. If man ever does achieve the capability of tripping in time, what motives might justify the risk of altering events in some catastrophic way? Certainly it should be something far more important than personal gain! But . . . even then . . .

MARK! I don't want you to go through with it!"

"What?" By the door, Mark Fallon turned. With two long strides he crossed to the table, putting his brief case on it. As he looked down at his wife, his black brows met in a single heavy bar across his pale face.

He put his hands on her shoulders. "Ria, we've been through this a hundred times. Tonight will be the last time I have free access to the laboratory."

"I don't want you to do it. I'm frightened!"

He shook her slightly, smiling with his mouth but not with his eyes. "I'm running no risk. We know the time-disk works. We've had it back much further into the past than the time I'm aiming for. Neither Jennison nor I have ever got out of it — that's all. But there was nothing to stop us stepping out into the world of any past time — nothing, that is, but Jennison's superstitious fear of changing the course of events." His lips twisted. "As if they couldn't be better."

"But it's such a terrible period you're going back to. Those newspapers in the library — murder and shooting on nearly every page."

Mark gave a confident laugh. He took the revolver out of his pocket and weighed it in his hand, sighting at a point on the wall.

"Put that away!" Her voice was high and shaky. "It's barbaric."

"Probably not one chance in a thousand I'll have to use it. But I feel safer with it. Listen! I'll be in that period only one-hundred minutes. Just long enough to find John, deliver the photographs, and come away."

"What if he thinks they're faked?"

"He won't. Why d'you think I picked him, out of all my ancestors?"

"Because you've got his diary. He's the only one you know where to find."

"Well — partly that, yes. But more than that, because he had brains. He was an inventor. Not a great inventor, perhaps, but there are still a couple of electronic gadgets named after him."

Ria was silent, troubled. "But — you don't know what effect you'll have on *today*, giving him the plans of inventions before their time."

Mark flung his arms wide. "It's not long before their time. Damn it, it doesn't matter whether the antigravity field is invented by Cranston in 1996 or by my great-great-grandfather in about 1959 or '60. The same with all the other things." He laughed. "He'll know how to use the stuff. He was bright. Remember, he left quite a fortune — not that any of it came down to me. But this should give him the greatest fortune any man ever had — and there should be plenty left over for me, and for you. If there isn't, I suppose I'll just have to go back again, but we'll worry about that when we come to it."

He picked up the brief case again. "There's no reason why it shouldn't work. It's *got* to work. With enough money, I could be running the whole project, not

Jennison." Suddenly he grinned. "See you later. I've got a long way to go. A hundred and thirty-seven years each way."

"For heaven's sake be careful," she called after him as he strode out.

HE LANDED his air-car close to the laboratory, walked along in the dark, and let himself in with his key. He didn't turn any lights on until he was in the windowless inner room with the time-disk.

It was partly an aircraft, because it would be necessary at times to maneuver in space to some extent before making a landing in a past period of time. It had a circular cabin with round port-holes, surrounded by a broad circular flange which contained the time-distortion coils. Beneath were three rounded projections of the antigravity thrust-units which lifted it, similar to those used on an air-car. He pressed the button which slid back the laboratory roof, exposing the dark, star-flecked sky.

He entered the cabin of the disk, and carefully set the dials to the date on which his great-great-grandfather's diary had recorded a quiet, uninterrupted evening at his apartment — March 13, 1958. One hundred and thirty-seven years ago. He started the generators. On the antigrav drive, he lifted a thousand, three-thousand, ten-thousand feet into the night air, and then he hovered. He set the emergence-point at 2120 hours, and sent the current flowing through the coils. He threw in the activating switch, and the tremendous force of the temporal-distortion field flowed through him . . . .

A different landscape was suddenly below him. Still a city, but with dim spots of light along narrow streets. He compared it with the photograph of the old map he had copied in the library, and sent the disk skimming horizontally across the river. He wondered if anyone below had noticed it. It didn't matter — in those days, the newspapers often carried reports of strange things seen in the sky.

He picked up his co-ordinates, and lowered the disk on its antigravs into a vacant lot near a gaunt iron structure that appeared to be some form of elevated railroad. He took his brief case, set the disk's controls to return on automatic to the laboratory at Time Zero plus ten seconds, then to return exactly to this point at 2300 hours — one hundred minutes from *now*. He got out quickly, dropping to the bare ground and moving away as the disk flicked out of sight.

He looked about him. A train thundered along the elevated railroad, its long line of yellow-lit windows showing strangely attired people within. He watched it out of sight, then walked rapidly towards the street, passing through a gap in a line of straggling bushes.

He looked tensely in each direction, his mind filled with mental pictures of newspaper headlines in the ancient papers of the period — a man shot in the street, another held up and robbed

somewhere else. As Ria had said, it was a barbaric time.

He began to run along the asphalt sidewalk.

"Hey!" called a voice nearby. From the corner of his eye, he saw a figure emerge from the shadows where the bushes grew thickly.

He whirled. The other man was about his own build, similarly dressed, and in his hand was a revolver! Mark's own gun seemed to leap into his hand. He hadn't time to feel fear. The other man moved forward, his face shadowed, menacing.

Mark's gun spat orange flame into the gloom, once, twice. The other man spun with the impact of the bullets against chest and shoulder, sprawling to the ground. His hands clawed forward to the edge of the asphalt.

MARK RAN, flashing beneath a street-lamp and pounding on into the dark. There was the taste of metal in his mouth. He wished the incident hadn't happened, but he couldn't afford complications. If he were held, questioned, he could miss the return of the time-disk. He would be trapped in this hideous, violent world of the past for the rest of his life.

He was still running when he reached the street where his great-great-grandfather, John Fallon, had his apartment. Not ten minutes after leaving the disk, he found the right building.

He was glad of the chance to regain some of his breath as he scanned the names on the mail-boxes. There it was — J.A. Fallon, Apartment 3B. He pressed the button beneath it, and a moment later a buzzer shrilled. He opened the inner door, and walked up to the third floor, the muscles at the backs of his legs trembling slightly from the unaccustomed effort of climbing stairs.

THE DOOR of apartment 3B was open, with yellowish light flooding out into the passage, and a dark, slim man of medium height stood looking at him. He was quite young. It gave Mark a feeling of incongruity, somehow, to find his great-great-grandfather a young man — but of course, in this year he would be only twenty-two.

"John Fallon?" he asked.

"That's right."

"I'm a relation of yours — Mark. We haven't met before."

The young man gripped his hand, looking at him searchingly. "Are you sure? Didn't know I had a relation called Mark. Come in, anyhow."

The room had queer, old-fashioned wooden furniture. A shaded standard-lamp threw soft yellow light near the single table. Mark sat down, and the younger man moved across to a chest-of-drawers with bottles and glasses on top of it.

"Care for a drink?"

"No, thanks. I haven't much time." Mark was aware of the fact that John was looking at his clothes, particularly at his shoes.

"Just how are we related?"

Mark hesitated, looking at his watch. 2140 hours — twenty of his

hundred minutes gone already. "You might find this hard to take, at first. I'm your great-great-grandson — actually, I think it may be great-great-great-grandson. The point is, I've come back in time from the year Twenty-ninety-five. That is, from a hundred and thirty-seven years in your future."

John stared at him without speaking. Suddenly he laughed. "Okay. But I think I asked a reasonable question. Just how are we related?"

Mark frowned. "I'm serious. Look here, you keep a diary, don't you?"

"What if I do?"

Mark took the photographs from his brief case, and selected one, looking at it. "Yesterday, you wrote in that diary 'Received check from P. Stoddard, $52.00.' Today, you wrote, or will write, 'Had lunch with Mae. Phone Andrews 2:30.' Right?"

John's face was white. "Say — what the hell *is* this?"

Mark held up his hand. "Tomorrow, you're going to write 'Called on Andrews 11 a.m.' "

"Tomorrow? What d'you mean, *tomorrow?*"

MARK HANDED him the photograph of the two open pages of the diary. John took it. His eyes went wide. He walked across to a writing desk, and took out the very diary Mark had so often held in his hands — only now it was crisp and almost new, not faded, battered, patched with tape as Mark knew it. John Fallon spread it out on the table beneath the light, holding the photograph beside it, his eyes travelling from one to the other.

He looked at them for a long time, leaning shakily on the table with both hands. "But how — " He lifted his eyes to Mark's. "Look! Am I going mad?"

Mark shook his head. "Just a demonstration. I've come to help you."

John walked staggeringly across to the chest-of-drawers and poured himself a drink, the neck of the bottle rattling against the glass. He drank quickly, his dilated eyes on Mark.

"You see," said Mark, "I'm speaking the truth. I've come back a hundred and thirty-seven years to help you." He spread some of the other photographs across the table. "Since you were the most promising of my ancestors — you have quite a career ahead of you as an inventor, you know — I decided to give you some help. Not from pure altruism, I admit. You made a moderate fortune, but not enough for it to survive to my generation. If you were to make a really gigantic fortune — are you listening?"

"Go ahead."

"Here are several ways you can do it. First, these copies of articles in technical journals published in 1997, 2014, 2029 — all detailed stuff on ion-drive for space-flight, antigravity fields, electron-shields — but I'll leave it to you to work out the details. There are some simpler devices here that can be real money-spinners — and to get you started, some papers from

nearer your own day. These stockmarket reports — one for next week, and others scattered over weeks, months, years. And a map of a uranium mine that wouldn't otherwise be discovered until 1988 — there's nothing to prevent you — "

"Stop it! Stop it!" John strode to the door and threw it open. "It's impossible! It's madness! What are you? Some kind of demon? *Get out!*"

Mark lifted his hand. "Wait a minute — "

"It isn't true!" John's face was ashen. "None of this is true. I don't know what your game is, but I've a damned good mind to lock you in here and — "

Mark didn't hear the rest. Lock him in? With the disk returning at 2300 hours? He sprang to his feet.

"Come away from that door." He drew the gun. John froze. "Close the door. Right. Now, over there."

John moved warily round the room. As he passed the chest-of-drawers he exploded into lightning movement. Mark saw a bottle flying through the air, ducked, heard its splintering crash against the wall behind his head. Then John Fallon was on him. He got his hand on the gun, and they grappled.

THE LAMP smashed to the floor, and the darkness closed in on them like a sack. Mark was bigger, but the younger man's frenzy multiplied his strength. As they struggled in the darkness a shot crashed with an instant of flame like a photo-flash. John's grip relaxed, and he sprawled against Mark's legs.

Mark put the gun in his pocket. He staggered against the table, the sweat stinging his eyes. He found his little pocketlamp and switched it on.

"Lord!" He turned the sprawling figure over. The eyes stared up at him, their pupils differently dilated. John Fallon, his ancestor, was dead.

Dead. Mark stood upright. According to the diary, he had married at 35, and his first son had been born when he was 37. Yet he was dead, now, at the age of 22.

He heard voices somewhere in the building, and his immediate preservation claimed his attention. He locked the door, opened the window. An iron fire-escape zig-zagged down the back of the place. Within minutes, he was back at the vacant lot.

The man he had shot was still lying there, half-hidden by the bushes and the shadows. Two men he had killed, within less than an hour. Worst of all, he had killed his own ancestor — killed him before he had fathered any children. Theoretically, that meant — What did it mean? Did it mean he should never have been born? . . . He shivered.

He thought the disk would never arrive. He waited, waited, waited, with a chill, void horror within him.

At last, the disk was there. He sprang into it and immediately climbed on the antigravs for a

thousand feet. He hovered, then threw in the switch that cut the time-distortion field. As the vast force was withdrawn, the disk snapped back into its own time.

WITHIN MINUTES, the bright lights of the laboratory were blazing coldly about him again. He climbed out, his knees almost buckling beneath him. He looked around at the familiar benches. Had someone been in here? Things looked just slightly different, although he couldn't at first put his finger on the difference. But he could when he turned around to look at the new rack of shelves he had installed last week.

It wasn't there. In its place was a pile of packing-cases, and a strange drilling machine. The familiar drilling machine he had installed a month ago was gone from its place across the room.

What had happened? An icy, gnawing fear began within him.

He switched off the lights and the power, and let himself out, walking to where he had left his car. It was not there. He found the exact spot where he had left it, but couldn't even see the impressions it must have left in the ground.

His heart thudded heavily. He began walking. It was only a mile to his home, but it seemed to take him a long time to get there. When he reached his house, the thudding of his heart was pounding in his eardrums.

It was the same house he had left two hours ago — yet it had been painted a different color. And a complex metal trelliswork had been built at the side — trelliswork overgrown with ivy that must have been there for years. Reeling a little, he walked up the drive.

Would there be any change in Ria? He tried to open the door, but his key didn't seem to fit. As he was struggling with it, a light flashed on above him and the door opened. A blonde, Teutonic-looking woman he had never seen before peered out at him.

"What is it?" she demanded.

"Er — is Mrs. Fallon in?"

"No one of that name about here."

"Sorry. I — ah — just moved into the neighborhood. Must have the wrong house."

He could almost feel the woman's eyes on him as he went away. She didn't shut the door until he had turned the corner of the street.

He walked along two blocks to the air-car park. At least, this looked familiar. There seemed to be no change in anything, although when he looked where he usually kept his car he saw another one in its place. Tom Bryan sat in his little office, the light pouring down on his half-bald scalp. Mark walked up and pushed in through the door.

"Hi, Tom."

A blank, questioning gaze met him — hesitant, explorative. "Hi. Have we met?"

"You remember me, Tom. Mark — Mark Fallon."

Tom's forehead corrugated. "Can't recall. But I see a lot of people. What can I do for you, Mr.

Farron?"

"Is my bus here? A blue and white '93 Kesarc." He hesitated as the other man's frown deepened. "I — er — thought my wife might have left it here."

"Sorry, Mr. Farron. Try Gianetti's three blocks down."

MARK WAS glad to get away. The blood thundered in his temples. God, this was his world, his town — the place where he had lived for years. Yet it was as if he'd never been here.

He found a public visiphone booth, and flicked through the directory. His name wasn't in it. Neither was his brother's. He turned to another directory covering the area across the river, where his parents lived. The print blurred and danced on the pages, and he lit a cigarette with shaking hands before he tried to look for his father's name. When he didn't find it, he stared stupidly up and down the columns of names that seemed to pulse in and out of focus with the thud, thud, thud, thud of the blood in his skull.

Then in this world which he, himself, had changed, he had never lived . . . He looked across the street, at the street-lamp shining on the green foliage of a tree. It was solid enough, solid and real, the street, the houses, the parked air-cars, all of it. The people he had known, his neighbors, his school-friends, even Ria — wherever she was — they were all living in it, yet to them he was a stranger, a phantom from nowhere . . . .

His school-friends! Peter Barkly — he was the fellow he knew better than any, from school-days up through the University to adult life. He turned again to the directory.

Barkly, Peter E. He dialed the number, pushing the door of the booth open with his foot so that the cool air reached his face. The sweat was like ice on his forehead.

Barkly's face appeared on the screen, expectant, unrecognizing.

"Peter, I'm Mark Fallon. Remember me at school?"

"Can't say I place you. You must have changed a lot."

"Remember, I used to go around with a girl called Ria Walton."

"Ria Walton? Oh, sure. I remember her well. She's married now, you know. Married a guy called Wilson, or Williams, or something like that. . . . ."

Mark walked out of the booth and strode aimlessly down the street. He kept on walking like a machine. Occasionally people passed him, one of them a neighbor, but the man glanced at him without a spark of recognition. It would be the same wherever he went — no one would ever know him. They couldn't know him. He had never lived in their world.

Suddenly he stopped in midstride. There was a way out!

Fool, that he hadn't thought of it at once. He had gone back 137 years, landing the time-disk at his chosen co-ordinates at 2120 hours, March 13, 1958. Within an hour of that point in time, he had killed his ancestor, changing the

following 137 years in such a way that neither he nor his direct ancestors had been born. But why not go back in the disk again, and stop the change from happening?

HE WAS running towards the laboratory before the thought was fully formed. It was ridiculously simple. All he had to do was go back to that same evening in 1958, *just before* his first moment of arrival, and stop himself from seeing his great-great-grandfather.

He was breathing heavily as he re-entered the time-disk, but there was intense, profound hope within him.

To hell with the fortune! Once you started to change things in the past, you had no idea where the different chains of cause and effect would lead. He'd stop himself, explain things to himself, then return. The world would remain as he had known it.

He set the co-ordinates for the same point in space, and the time of emergence at 2100 hours. He checked everything meticulously, double-checked it, triple-checked it. He sent the power humming through the coils. Aloft, he threw the switch and felt again the vast surge of power of the time-distortion field . . . .

He maneuvered the disk over the same dark, vacant lot where he had landed before — or, rather, where he was to make his first landing in twenty minutes' time. 2100 hours. He set the return emergence for 2150 hours, then sprang out, running across towards the dark tangle of bushes as the disk flicked out of sight.

He kept looking at his watch. The night seemed the same as when he had been here before. He looked about, feeling the gun in his pocket. He must keep a lookout for the man who had sprung at him from the bushes the first time. He could see no one about.

A TRAIN thundered along the elevated railroad behind the lot. He watched its yellow-lit windows racing past, and then, from the corner of his eye, he saw something else.

The disk — just flicking out of sight as he looked at it. It had come and gone while he had been intent on his search of the bushes. At that rate —

He heard running footsteps. A man raced past him through the gloom, head down. It looked like — *It was!*

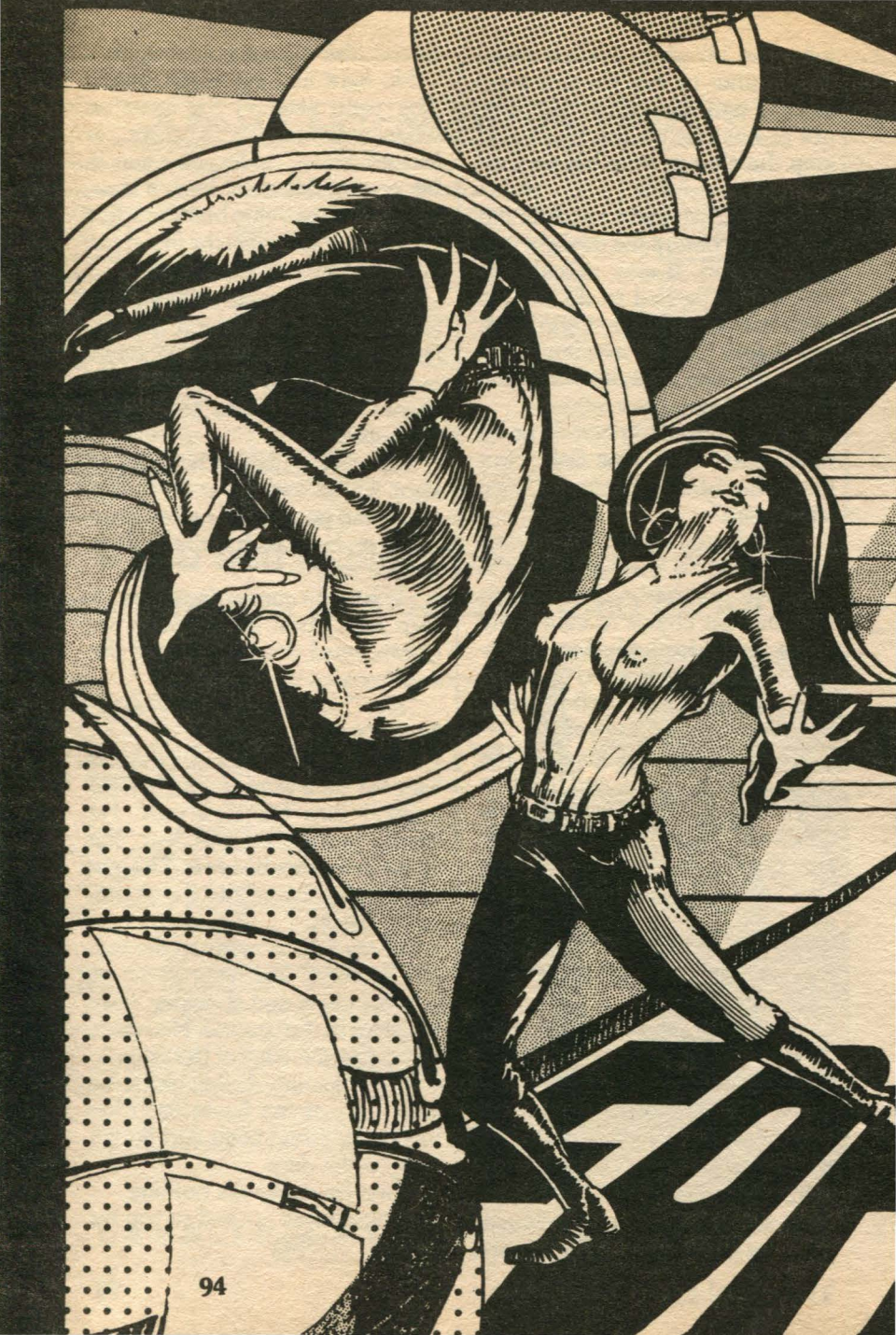
"Hey!" he shouted. Involuntarily, he jumped forward.

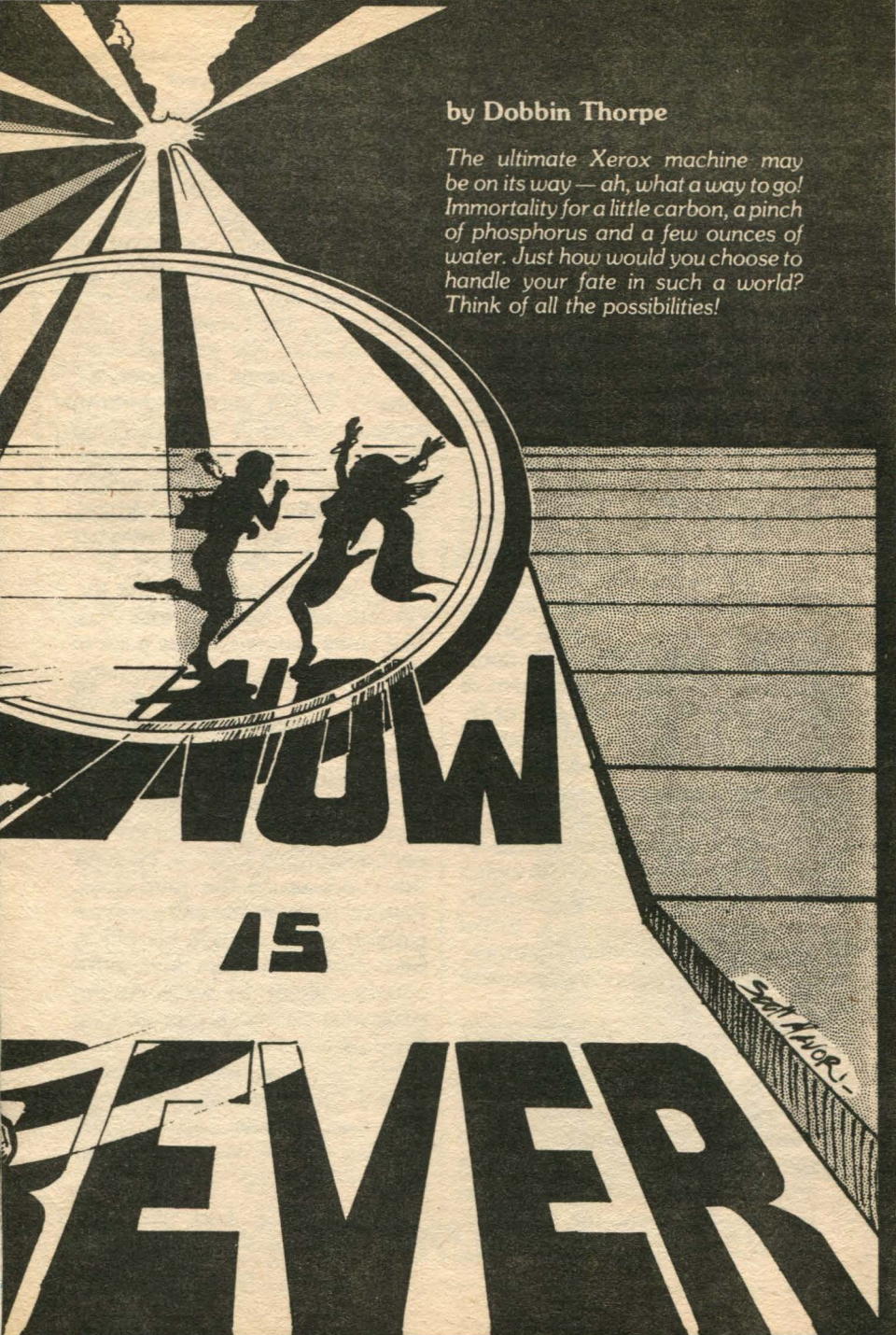
The figure whirled, and as the light fell on it Mark found himself looking into his own face. He hardly recognized the fear, the tense determination in it. The gun spat orange flame into the gloom, once, twice.

He tried to scream as the bullets smashed like hammer-blows into his chest and shoulder, spinning him to the ground. His hands clawed to the edge of the asphalt.

With blurring, fading vision he saw the running figure flash beneath the street-lamp and pound on into the dark.

Then he could see nothing . . . The blood was hot and salty in his mouth . . . .





by Dobbin Thorpe

The ultimate Xerox machine may be on its way — ah, what a way to go! Immortality for a little carbon, a pinch of phosphorus and a few ounces of water. Just how would you choose to handle your fate in such a world? Think of all the possibilities!

CHARLES ARCHOLD liked the facade best at twilight. On June evenings like this (Was it *June?*), the sun would sink into the canyon of Maxwell Street and spotlight the sculptured group in the pediment: a full-breasted Commerce extended an allegorical cornucopia from which tumbled allegorical fruits into the outstretched hands of Industry, Labor, Transportation, Science, and Art. He was idling past (the Cadillac engine was beginning to misfire again, but where could you find a mechanic these days?), abstractedly considering the burning tip of his cigar, when he observed peripherally that Commerce had been beheaded. He stopped.

It was against the law; a defacement, an insult. Maxwell Street echoed the slam of the car door, his cry — "Police!" A swarm of pigeons rose from the feet of Industry, Labor, Transportation, Science, and Art and scattered into the depopulated streets. The bank president achieved a smile of chagrin, although there was no one in sight from whom he would have had to conceal his embarrassment. Archold's good manners, like his affluent paunch, had been long in forming and were difficult to efface.

Somewhere in the acoustical maze of the streets of the financial district Archold could hear the rumble of a procession of teenage Maenads approaching. Trumpets, drums, and screaming voices. Hurriedly, Archold locked his car and went up the bank steps. The bronze gates were open; the glass doors were unlocked. Drapes were drawn across the windows as they had been on the day, seven months earlier or thereabouts, when he and the three or four remaining staff members had closed the bank. In the gloom, Archold took inventory. The desks and office equipment had been piled into one corner; the carpets had been torn up from the parquet floor; the tellers' cages had been arranged into a sort of platform against the back wall. Archold flicked on a light switch. A spotlight flooded the platform with a dim blue light. He saw the drums. The bank had been converted into a dancehall.

In the sub-basement, the air-conditioner rumbled into life. Machines seemed to live a life of their own. Archold walked, nervously aware of his footsteps on the naked parquet, to the service elevator behind the jerry-built bandstand. He pressed the UP button and waited. Dead as a doornail. Well, you couldn't expect everything to work. He took the stairs up to the third floor. Passing through the still-plush reception room outside his office, he noticed that there were extra couches along the walls. An expensive postermural representing the diversified holding of the New York Exchange Bank had been ripped from the wall; a Gargantuan and ill-drawn pair of nudes reclined where the mural had been. Teenagers!

HIS OFFICE had not been broken into. A thick film of dust

covered his bare desk. A spider had constructed (and long ago abandoned) a web across the entire expanse of his bookshelves. The dwarf tree that stood in a pot on the window sill (a present, two Christmases ago from his secretary) had shriveled into a skeleton where, for a time, the spider had spun other webs. An early model Reprostat (of five years ago) stood beside the desk. Archold had never dared to smash the machine though, God knew, he had wanted to often enough.

He wondered if it would still work, hoping, of course, that it would not. He pressed the archtype button for memo-pad. A sign flashed red on the control panel: INSUFFICIENT CARBON. So, it worked. The sign flashed again, insistently. Archold dug into one of his deck drawers for a bar of carbon and fed it into the hopper at the base of the Reprostat. The machine hummed and emitted a memo-pad.

Archold settled back in his own chair, raising a cloud of dust. He needed a drink or, lacking that (he drank too much, he remembered) a cigar. He'd dropped his last cigar in the street. If he were in the car, he could just touch a button, but here . . . .

Of course! His office Reprostat was also set to make his own brand of cigars. He pressed the cigar Archtype button; the machine hummed and emitted one Maduro cigar, evenly burning at its tip. How could you ever be angry with the machines? It wasn't their fault the world was in a shambles; it was the fault of people that misused the machines — greedy, short-sighted people who didn't care what happened to the Economy or the Nation as long as they had Maine lobster every day and a full wine cellar and ermine stoles for a theatre opening and . . . .

But could you blame them? He had himself spent thirty years of his life to get exactly those things, or their equivalents, for himself — and for Nora. The difference was, he thought as he savored the usual aroma of his cigar (before the Reprostats, he had never been able to afford this brand. They had cost $1.50 apiece, and he was a heavy smoker) — the difference was simply that some people (like Archold) could be trusted to have the best things in life without going haywire, while other people, the majority, in fact, could not be trusted to have things that they couldn't pay for with their own industry. It was now a case of too many cooks. Authority was disappearing; it had vanished. Morality was now going fast. Young people, he had been informed (when he still knew people who would tell him these things), didn't even bother to get married anymore — and their elders, who should have set them an example, didn't bother to get divorced.

Absent-mindedly, he pressed the Reprostat button for another cigar, while the one he had been smoking lay forgotten in the dusty asktray. He had argued with Nora that morning. They had both been feeling a little under the weather.

Maybe they had been drinking again the night before — they had been drinking quite a lot lately — but he could not remember. The argument had taken a bad turn, with Nora poking fun (and her finger) at his flabby belly. He had reminded her that he had got his flabby belly working all those years at the bank to provide her with the house and her clothes and all the other expensive, obsolescing goodies she could not live without.

"Expensive!" she had screamed. "What's expensive anymore? Not even money is expensive."

"Is that *my* fault?"

"You're fifty years old, Charlie boy, *over* fifty, and I'm still young," (she was forty-two, to be exact) "and I don't have to keep you hanging around my neck like an albatross."

"The albatross was a symbol of guilt, my dear. Is there something you're trying to tell me?"

"I wish there was!"

He had slapped her, and she had locked herself in the bathroom. Then he had gone off for a drive, not really intending to come past the bank, but the force of habit had worked upon his absent-minded anger and brought him here.

THE OFFICE door edged open.

"Mr. Archold?"

"Who! — oh, Lester, come in. You gave me a start."

Lester Tinburley, the former janitor-in-chief of the Exchange Bank, shambled into the office, mumbling reverent how-do-you-do-sirs and nodding his head with such self effacing cordiality that he seemed to have palsy. Like his former superior (who wore a conservative grey suit, fresh that morning from the Reprostat), Lester wore the uniform of his old position: white-and-blue striped denim overalls, faded and thin from many launderings. The black peppercorn curls of his hair had been sheared down to shadowy nubbins. Except for some new wrinkles in the brown flesh of his face (scarcely noticed by Archold), Lester appeared to be in no way different from the janitor-in-chief that the bank president had always known.

"What's happened to the old place, Lester?"

Lester nodded his head sadly. "It's these kids — you can't do a thing with them nowadays. All of them gone straight to the devil — dancing and drinking and some other things I couldn't tell you, Mr. Archold."

Archold smiled a knowing smile. "You don't have to say another word, Lester. It's all because of the way they were raised. No respect for authority — that's their problem. You can't tell them anything they don't know already."

"What's a person going to do, Mr. Archold?"

Archold had the answer even for that, "Discipline!"

Lester's palsy as though Archold had given a cue, became more pronounced. "Well, I've done

what I could to keep things up. I come back every day I can and look after things. Fix up what I can — what those kids don't smash up for their own fun. All the records are in the basement now."

"Good work. When things return to normal again, we'll have a much easier job, thanks to you. And I'll see that you get your back wages for all the time you've put in."

"Thank you, sir."

"Did you know that someone has broken the statue out in front? The one right over the door. Can't you fix it somehow, Lester. It looks just terrible."

I'll see what I can do, sir."

"See that you do." It was a good feeling for Archold, giving orders again.

"It sure is good to have you back here, sir. After all these years . . . ."

"Seven months, Lester. That's all it's been. It does seem like years."

Lester glanced away from Archold and fixed his gaze on the skeleton of the dwarf tree. "I've been keeping track with the calendars in the basement, Mr. Archold. The ones we stocked for '94. It's been two years and more. We closed April 12, 1993 . . . ."

"A day I'll never forget, Lester."

". . . and this is June 30, 1995."

Archold looked puzzled. "You've gotten confused, boy. It couldn't be. It's . . . it *is* June, isn't it? That's funny. I could swear that yesterday was Oct. . . . I haven't been feeling well lately."

A muffled vibration crept into the room. Lester went to the door.

"Maybe you'd best leave now, Mr. Archold. Things have changed around the old bank. Maybe you wouldn't be safe here."

"This is my office, my bank. Don't tell *me* what to do!" His voice cracked with authority like a rusted trumpet.

"It's those kids. They come here every night now. I'll show you out through the basement."

"I'll leave the way I came, Lester. I think you'd better return to your work now. And fix that statue!"

Lester's palsy underwent a sudden cure, his lips tightened. Without another word or a look back, he left Archold's office. As soon as he found himself alone, Archold pressed the Beverage, alcoholic Archtype button on the Reprostat. He gulped down the iced Scotch greedily, threw the glass into the hopper and pressed the button again.

AT MIDNIGHT Jessy Holm was going to die, but at the moment she was deliriously happy. She was the sort of person that lives entirely in the present.

Now, as every light in the old Exchange Bank was doused (except for the blue spot on the drummer), she joined with the dancing crowd in a communal sigh of delight and dug her silvered fingernails into Jude's bare arm.

"Do you love me?" she whispered.

"Crazy!" Jude replied.

"How much?"

"Kid, I'd die for you." It was true.

A blat of static sounded from the speakers set into the gilded ceiling of the banking floor. In the blue haze about the bandstand, a figure swayed before the microphone. A voice of ambiguous gender began to sing along to the hard, rocking beat of the music — only noises it first seemed; gradually, a few words emerged:

Now, now, now, now —

Now is forever.

Around and around and around —

Up and down

And around and around — because

Tonight is forever

And love, lo-ove is now.

"I don't want to stop, ever," Jessy shouted above the roar of the song and the tread of the dancers.

"It's never gonna stop, baby," Jude assured her. "C'mon let's go upstairs."

The second floor lobby was already filled with couples. On the third floor they found themselves alone. Jude lit cigarettes for himself and Jessy.

"It's scary here, Jude. We're all alone."

"That's not gonna last long. It's getting near ten o'clock."

"Are you scared — about later, I mean?"

"Nothing to be scared of. It doesn't hurt — maybe for just a second, then it's all over."

"Will you hold my hand?"

Jude smiled. "Sure, baby."

A shadow stepped out of the shadows. "Young man — it's me, Lester Tinburley. I helped you fix things downstairs if you remember."

"Sure, dad, but right now I'm busy."

"I only wanted to warn you that there's another man here —" Lester's voice diminished to a dry, inaudible whisper. "I think he's going to — " he wet his lips. " — to make some sort of trouble."

Lester pointed to the crack of light under Archold's door. "Maybe you'd better get him out of the building."

"Jude — not now!"

"I'll only be a minute, baby. This could be fun." Jude looked at Lester. "Some sort of nut, huh?"

Lester nodded and retreated back into the shadow of the reception desk.

Jude pushed open the door and looked at the man who sat behind the dusty, glass-topped desk. He was old — maybe fifty — and bleary-eyed from drinking. A pushover. Jude smiled, as the man rose unsteadily to his feet.

"Get out of here!" the old man bellowed. "This is my bank. I won't have a bunch of tramps walking about in my bank."

"Hey, Jessy!" Jude called. "C'mere and getta look of this."

"Leave this room immediately. I am the president of this bank. I . . . ."

"Jessy giggled. "Is he crazy, or what?"

"Jack," Jude shouted into the dark reception room, "is this guy on the level? About being bank president?"

"Yessir," Lester replied.

"Lester! Are you out there? Throw these juvenile delinquents out of my bank. This minute! Do you understand? Lester!"

"Didja hear the man, Lester? Why don't you answer the bank president?"

"He can open the vault doors. You can make him do it." Lester came to stand in the door and looked in triumph at Archold. "That's where all the money is — from the other banks too. He knows the combination. There's millions of dollars. He would never do it for me, but you can make him."

"Oh Jude — let's. It would be fun. I haven't seen money for just an age."

"We don't have the time, baby."

"So we'd die at two o'clock instead of twelve. What difference would it make? Just think — a bank vault crammed full of money! Please . . . ."

Archold had retreated to the corner of his office. "You can't make me . . . . I won't . . . ."

Jude began to seem more interested. He had no interest in money as such, but a contest of wills appealed to his forthright nature. "Yeah, we could toss it around like confetti — that would be something. Or build a bonfire!"

"No!" Lester gasped, then, palliatively — "I'll show you where the vault is, but a fire would burn down the bank. What would the people do tomorrow night? The vault is downstairs. I've got the keys for the cage around the vault, but he'll tell you the combination."

"Lester! No!"

"Call me 'boy' like you used to, Mr. Archold. Tell me what I've got to do."

Archold grasped at the straw. "Get those two out of here. Right now, Lester."

LESTER LAUGHED. He went up to Archold's Reprostat and pressed the cigar Archtype button. He gave Jude the burning cigar. "This will make him tell you the combination." But Jude ignored Lester's advice, or seemed to. He threw away his cigarette and stuck Archold's cigar into the corner of his mouth, slightly discomposing his studied grin. Emboldened, Lester took a cigar for himself and followed this up with Scotches for himself, Jessy, and Jude. Jude sipped at his meditatively, examining Archold. When he had finished, he grabbed the bank president by the collar of his jacket and led him down the stairs to the ballroom-banking-floor.

The dancers, most of whom were shortly to die like Jude and Jessy, were desperately, giddily gay. A sixteen-year-old girl lay unconscious at the foot of the bandstand. Jude dragged Archold up the steps and into the hazy blue light. Archold noticed that Mrs. Desmond's name placard still hung on the grill of the teller's window which now formed a balustrade for the bandstand.

Jude grabbed the mike. "Stop the action. The entertainment committee has something new for

all of us." The band stopped, the dancers turned to look at Jude and Archold. "Ladies and gentlemen, I'd like to introduce the president of this fine bank, Mr. — what-did-you-say-your-name-was?"

"Archold," Lester volunteered from the dancefloor. "Charlie Archold."

"Mr. Archold is going to open up the bank vault special for tonight's little party, and we're going to decorate the walls with good, old-fashioned dollar bills. We're going to roll in money — isn't that so, Charlie?"

Archold struggled to get loose from Jude's grip. The crowd began to laugh. "You'll pay for the damage you've done here," he moaned into the mike. "There are still laws for your kind. You can't . . . ."

"Hey, Jude," a girl yelled, "lemme dance with the old fellow. You only live once and I'm going to try everything." The laughter swelled. Archold could not make out any faces in the crowd below. The laughter seemed to issue from the walls and the floor, disembodied and unreal. The band began a slow, mocking fox trot. Archold felt himself gripped by a new set of hands. Jude let go of his collar.

"Move your feet, stupid. You can't dance standing still."

"Turn on the dizzy lights," Jessy shouted.

"You're forgetting the vaults," Lester whined at her. She took the old janitor in hand and led him up to the bandstand, where they watched Archold floundering in the arms of his tormentor.

The blue spotlight blanked out. The bank was suddenly filled with a swarm of bright red flashes, like the revolving lights mounted on police cars. That, in fact, had been their source. Klaxons sounded — someone had triggered the bank's own alarm system. A trumpet, then the drums, took up the klaxon's theme.

"Let me lead," the girl was shouting in Archold's ear. He saw her face in a brief flash of red light, cruel and avid, strangely reminiscent of Nora — but Nora was his wife and loved him — then felt himself being pushed back, his knees crumbling, over the grill, and down. The girl lying on the floor broke his fall.

There were gunshots. The police, he thought. Of course, there were no police. The boys were aiming at the spinning lights.

Archold felt himself lifted by dozens of hands. Lights spun around him overhead, and there was a brief explosion when one of the marksmen made a bulls-eye. The hands that bore him aloft began to pull in different directions, revolving him, cart-wheel-fashion, in time to the klaxon's deafening music, faster and faster. He felt the back of his jacket begin to rip, then a wrenching pain in his shoulder. Another explosion of light.

HE FELL to the floor with shuddering pain through his whole body. He was drenched with

water, lying at the door of the vault.

"Open it, dad," someone — not Jude — said.

Archold saw Lester in the forefront of the group. He raised his arm to strike at him, but the pain stopped him. He stood up and looked at the ring of adolescent faces around him. "I won't open it. That money does not belong to me. I'm responsible to the people who left it here; it's their money. I can't . . . ."

"Man, nobody is going to use that money anymore. Open it."

A girl stepped out from the crowd and crossed over to Archold. She wiped his forehead where it was bleeding. "You better do what they say," she said gently. "Almost all of them are going to kill themselves tonight, and they don't care what they do or who they hurt. Life is cheap — a couple bars of carbon and a few quarts of water — and the pieces of paper behind that door don't mean a thing. In one day, you could Reprostat a million dollars."

"No. I can't. I won't do it."

"Everybody — you too, Darline — get back here. We'll make him open it up." The main body of the crowd had already retreated behind the cage that fenced in the vault. Lester, of course, had had the keys to get them into the cage. Darline shrugged and joined the rest of them.

"Now, Mr. President, either you open that door or we'll start using you for a target."

"No!" Archold rushed to the combination lock. "I'll do it," he was screaming when one of the boys shot the glass-faced regulator above the lock.

"You hit him."

"I did not."

Darline went to look. "It was a heart attack, I guess. He's dead."

They left Lester alone in the outer room of the vault with Archold's body. He stared bleakly at the corpse. "I'll do it again," he said. "Again and again."

On the floor above them, the klaxons were quieted and the music began again, sweetly at first, then faster and louder. It was nearing midnight.

NORA ARCHOLD, wife of Charles, was embarrassed by her red hair. Although it was her natural color, she suspected that people thought she dyed it. She was forty-two, after all, and so many older women decided to be redheads.

"I like it just the way it is, honey," Dewey told her. "You're being silly."

"Oh, Dewey, I'm so worried."

"There isn't anything to worry about. It's not as though you were leaving him — you know that."

"But it seems *wrong*."

Dewey laughed. Nora pouted, knowing that she looked becoming in a pout. He tried to kiss her, but she pushed him away and went on with her packing — one of a kind of everything she liked. The suitcase was more of a ceremonial gesture than a practical necessity: in one afternoon at the stores, she could have an entire

wardrobe Reprostated if she wanted to take the trouble (a kind of trouble she enjoyed taking). But she liked her old clothes — many of which were "originals." The difference between an original and a Reprostated copy was undetectable even under an electron microscope, but Nora, nonetheless, felt a vague mistrust of the copies — as though they were somehow transparent to other eyes and shabbier.

"We were married twenty years ago, Charlie and me. You must have been just a little kid when I was already a married woman." Nora shook her head at woman's frailty. "And I don't even know your last name." This time she let Dewey kiss her.

"Hurry up, now," he whispered. "The old boy will be back any minute."

"It's not fair to *her*," Nora complained. "She'll have to put up with all the horrible things I have all these years."

"Make up your mind. First you worry about him; now, it isn't fair for her. I'll tell you what — when I get home, I'll Reprostat another Galahad to rescue *her* from the old dragon."

Nora observed him suspiciously. "Is that your last name — Galahad?"

"Hurry up now," he commanded.

"I want you out of the house while I do it. I don't want you to see — the other one."

Dewey guffawed. "I'll bet not!" He carried the suitcase to the car and waited, while Nora watched him from the picture window. She looked about the living room once more regretfully. It was a beautiful house in one of the best suburbs. For twenty years it had been a part of her, rather the greater part. She didn't have any idea where Dewey wanted to take her. She was thrilled by her own infidelity, realizing at the same time that it made no difference. As Dewey had pointed out to her, life was cheap — a couple bars of carbon and a few quarts of water.

The clock on the wall read 12:30. She had to hurry.

In the Reprostating room, she unlocked the Personal panel on the control board. It was meant only for emergencies, but it could be argued that this was an emergency. It had been Charles' idea to have his own body Archetyped by the Reprostat. His heart was bad; it could give out at any time, and a personal Archtype was better than life insurance. It was, in a way, almost immortality. Nora, naturally had been Archtyped at the same time. That had been in October, seven months after the bank had closed, but it seemed like only yesterday. It was June already! With Dewey around, she'd be able to cut down on her drinking.

Nora pressed the button reading "Nora Archold." The sign on the control panel flashed; INSUFFICIENT PHOSPHOROUS. Nora went to the kitchen, dug into the cupboard drawers for the right jar, and deposited it in the hopper that had been set into the floor. The Reprostat whirred and

clicked to a stop. Timidly, Nora opened the door of the materializer.

Nora Archold — herself — lay on the floor of the chamber in an insensible heap, in the same state that Nora (the older, unfaithful Nora) had been in when — that day in October — she had been archtyped. The elder Nora dragged her freshly Reprostated double into the bedroom. She considered leaving a note that would explain what had happened — why Nora was leaving with a stranger she had met only that afternoon. But, outside the house, Dewey was honking. Tenderly, she kissed the insensible woman who lay in her own bed and left the house where she had felt, for twenty years, a prisoner.

FAIR YOUTH, beneath the trees,
thou canst not leave
Thy song, nor even can those trees be bare.

"Afraid?"

"No. Are you?"

"Not if you hold my hand." Jude began to embrace her again. "No, just hold my hand. We could go on like this forever, and then everything would be spoiled. We'd grow old, quarrel, stop caring for each other. I don't want that to happen. Do you think it will be the same for them as it was for us?"

"It couldn't be any different."

"It *was* beautiful," Jessy said.

"Now?" Jude asked.

"Now," she consented.

Jude helped her to sit down at the edge of the hopper, then took a seat beside her. The opening was barely big enough for their two bodies. Jessy's hand tightened around Jude's fingers: the signal. Together, they slid into the machine. There was no pain, only a cessation of consciousness. Atoms slid loose from their chemical bonds instantaneously; what had been Jude and Jessy was now only increments of elementary matter in the storage chamber of the Reprostat. From those atoms, anything could be reassembled: food, clothing, a pet canary — anything that the machine possessed an Archtype of — even another Jude and Jessy.

In the next room, Jude and Jessy slept next to each other. The sodium pentothal was beginning to wear off. Jude's arm lay across Jessy's shoulder, where the newly-disintegrated Jessy had laid it before leaving them.

Jessy stirred. Jude moved his hand.

"Do you know what day it is?" she whispered.

"Hmm?"

"It's starting," she said. "This is our last day."

"It will always be that day, honey."

She began to hum a song; Now, now, now, now — Now is forever.

For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

AT ONE o'clock, the last of the revelers having departed from the bank, Lester Tinburley dragged Archold's body to the Cadillac in the street outside. He found the

ignition key in Archold's pocket. It was an hour's drive to the president's suburban home — or a little longer than it took to smoke one of the cigars from the Reprostat on the dashboard.

Lester Tinburley had come to work at the New York Exchange Bank in 1953, immediately upon his release from the Armed Services. He had seen Charles Archold rise from the bond window to a loan consultant's desk to the accounting office on the second floor and eventually to the presidency, a rise that paralleled Lester's own ascension through the ranks to the lieutenantcy of the janitorial staff. The two men, each surrounded by the symbols of his authority, had had a common interest in the preservation of order — that is to say, bureaucracy. They had been allies in conservatism. The advent of the Reprostat, however, changed all that.

The Reprostat could be programmed to reproduce from its supply of elementary particles (some sub-atomic) any given mechanical, molecular or atomic structure; any *thing*, in short. The Reprostat could even reprostat smaller Reprostats. As soon as such a Machine became available to even a few, it would inevitably become available to anyone — and when anyone possessed a Reprostat he needed very little else. The marvellous machines could not provide Charles Archold with pleasant sensations of self-justification in the performance of his work and the exercise of his authority, but only the vanishing breed of the inner-directed required such intangible pleasures. The new order of society, as evidenced in Jude and Jessy, were content to take their pleasures where they found them — in the Reprostat. They lived in an eternal present which came very close to being an earthly paradise.

Lester Tinburley could not share either attitude perfectly. While Charles Archold's way of life was only affected adversely by the new abundance (he had been able, as a bank president, to afford most of the things he really desired) and Jessy and Jude indulged themeselves in Arcady, Lester was torn between the new facts of life and his old habits. He had learned, in fifty years of menial work and mean living, to take a certain pleasure and a considerable amount of pride in the very meanness of his circumstances. He preferred beer to cognac, overalls to a silk lounging robe. Affluence had come too late in his life for him to do it justice, especially an affluence so divested of the symbols with which he (like Archold) had always associated it: power, the recognition of authority, and, above all else, money. Avarice is an absurd vice in the earthly paradise, but Lester's mind had been formed at an earlier time when it was still possible to be a miser.

Lester parked the Cadillac in the Archold's two-car garage and wrestled the stiff body of the bank president into the house. Through the bedroom door, he

could see Nora Archold sprawled on the bed, sleeping or drunk. Lester shoved Archold's old body into the hopper of the Reprostat. The Personal panel on the control board had been left unlocked. Lester opened the door of the materializer. If he had been partly responsible for Archold's death earlier that evening, this was a perfect atonement. He felt no guilt.

He laid the drugged body of the bank president on the bed beside Nora's and watched them breathing lightly. Archold would probably be a little confused in the morning, as Lester had noticed he had been in the office. But calendar time was beginning to be less and less meaningful, when one was no longer obliged to punch a time clock or meet deadlines.

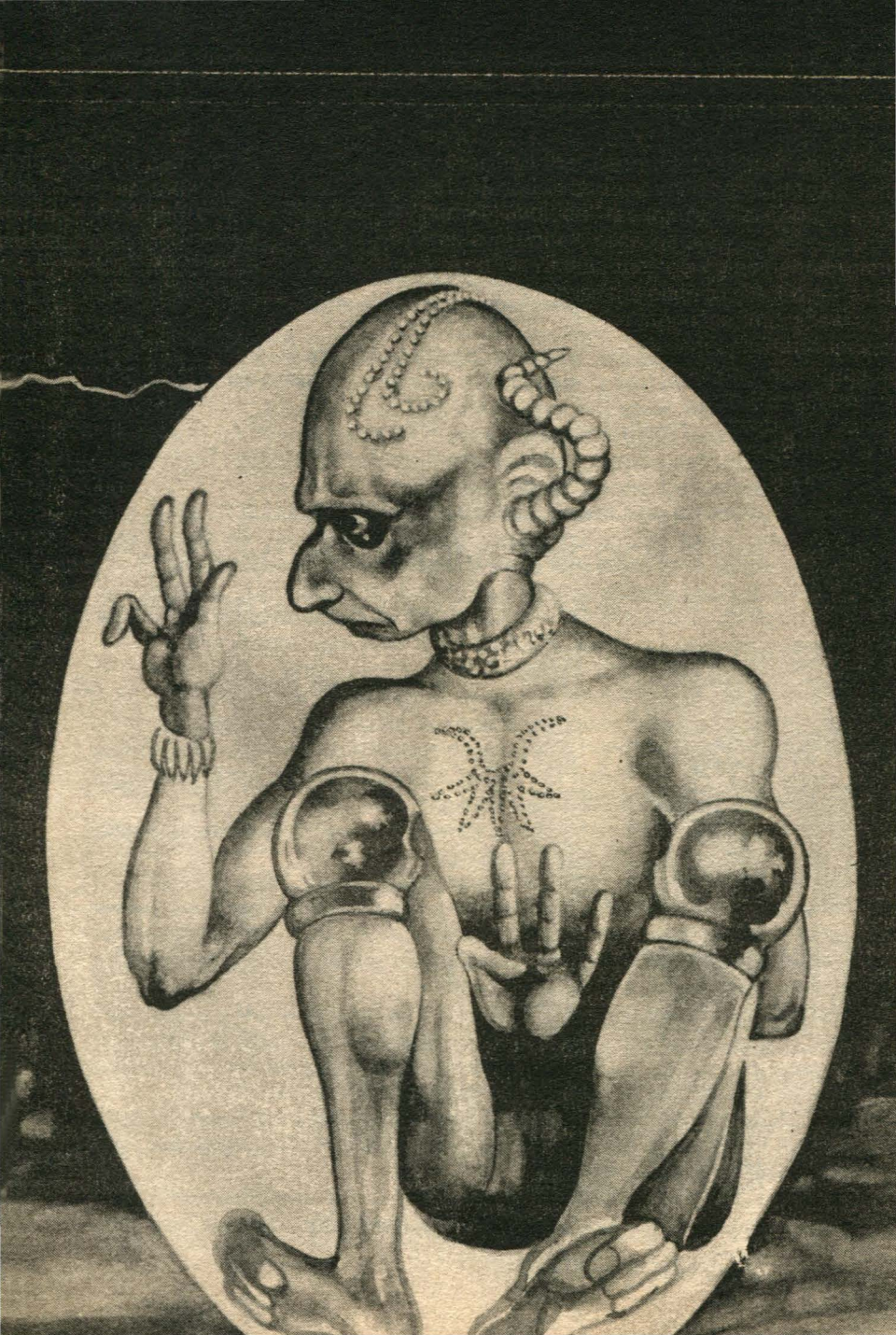
"See you tomorrow," he said to his old boss. One of these days he was convinced, Archold would open the vault *before* his heart failed him. In the meantime, he sort of enjoyed seeing his old employer dropping in at the bank every day. It was like old times.

CHARLES ARCHOLD liked the facade best at twilight. On June evenings like this (or was it July?), the sun would sink into the canyon of Maxwell Street and spotlight the sculptured group in the pediment: a full-breasted Commerce extended an allegorical cornucopia from which tumbled allegorical fruits in to the outstretched hands of Industry, Labor, Transportation, Science, and Art. He was idling past (the Cadillac engine was definitely getting worse), abstractedly considering the burning tip of his cigar, when he observed peripherally that Commerce had been beheaded. He stopped. ■

THE BIG BLOW-UP

by Daniel F. Galouye

A tense adventure for earth scientists investigating a dying star. With all the power of scientific knowledge behind them, they are in trouble. Would it be better to try and develop the power possessed by the natives? Could we all do it?



WEARILY, POWDERKEG struggled to life itself over the distant range of icy peaks. It finally cleared the obstruction and hung exhaustedly above the saddleback — a flickering, mottled disc of full orange color.

I watched Munrov, the solar-dynamist in charge of Project Flash, as he dominated the plain beyond the ship. Dumpy and with a mat of dense white hair, he was like an excited dwarf racing about among the battery of sunscopes and shouting instructions in his thin, coarse voice.

At the other end of the plateau, an occasional native stirred within his lean-to and wrapped animal hides about his shivering body.

IT WAS a typical morning on Powderkeg II. Except for the primitives, it was just as every other morning had been for the past two weeks — ever since the expedition had made planet.

The natives were something else. They had shown up three days after our arrival, despite assurances from Pre-expedition Survey that there was no advanced life on this world.

My attention was drawn to the suddenly brightening morning sky. The sun was acting up again. It had hurled out another major prominence that outshone even the full disc of the dying star.

Powderkeg was behaving just about as expected. It would go through its mortal agony over the next eighteen days. Then, on the nineteenth day . . . Well, I like to think of it euphemistically:

Perhaps two million years from now some astronomer to Andromeda would watch a pinpoint of light in the vast Milky Way flare up brilliantly, bedimming the billions of stars in its own galaxy.

Walter London stood in the hatch distastefully surveying the dismal landscape. He buttoned his jacket tightly about his neck and came down the ramp into the weak sunlight.

"How's it acting this morning, Banks?" he asked, nodding skyward.

"According to schedule, I suppose."

"Any chance of it going off *before* the nineteen days are up?"

London was a huge, friendly person with a blunt chin and thick brows that gave his face a primitive cast. We got along well together, since this wasn't the first time he had served as pilot and I as security officer on one of Munrov's solar cycle expeditions.

"If it does," I said, smiling, "I wouldn't want to be anywhere around."

He laughed at that. But, apprehensively, he kept Powderkeg in the corner of his eye. "Tell Munrov Group B just reported securing for the night. They'll begin transmitting data in about an hour."

Group B was the second half of Munrov's party. It had been dropped off on the other side of the planet by the auxiliary ship, which had long since returned to Fenlow V.

I had to stand around almost a half hour, watching Munrov flit from one long-snouted instrument to another. He was an eternally

preoccupied little man whose greeting was always edged with a certain amount of indifference, if not outright disdain.

"All right, Banks," he said finally. "What is it?"

I relayed London's message.

"Very well. Put the data on triple tape when it comes through. And don't disturb us any more than you have to. Anything else?"

I hesitated. "About the natives — "

"Damn it! You're not going to start *that* all over again? There isn't *anything* we can do."

"Then you're going to let them stay here?"

He shrugged. "I know it sounds damned harsh. But that's the way it's got to be."

"You could send London back for a rescue fleet. It's nineteen days to nova — seven to Fenlow, one to muster the fleet, seven back. That leaves a safety margin of four days."

Munrov bristled. "Almost every man in London's crew doubles as a technician in Project Flash. Sending that ship back would mean missing half of the data we came here for!"

"Is that more important than an intelligent race?"

"You can scarcely call them intelligent. They are hardly gregarious and have no means of communicating among themselves — not even a sign language. Anyway, how could we muster them?"

I gestured toward the forest. "The whole surviving population must be concentrated on this little peninsula. It's the only land that hasn't been iced over for the past several thousand years."

The solar-dynamist was shaking his head obstinately. "We couldn't get them aboard ships without giving them a language impress and explaining what's happening. And, unless they have a basic language of their own to start out with, an impress treatment would only drive them mad."

"Let's get the ships here first and *then* decide how to get them aboard."

"There'll be no rescue fleet," Munrov reiterated unbudgingly. "For years science has hoped it might stumble on a prenova. By sheer luck, here we are — only fifty million miles from one that's due in nineteen days. I'll not have one minute of one man's time wasted!"

With that, the expedition chief stormed away and I stood there cursing a whole range of things — that the auxiliary ship had to leave *before* we found out there were natives; that man had never solved the riddle of faster-than-light communications, even though he had learned to travel at hyperspeeds; that the demands of science had to take priority over a simple mercy.

THROUGHOUT THE day Powderkeg flaunted its awesome threat of soon-to-be-unleashed solar ferocity. Great rifts appeared again and

again in the pallid orange disc, exposing its raging inner regions. It was as though the curtains of hell itself were being drawn open.

As I started out on my security check just before sunset, I imagined it would be a miracle if our hemisphere didn't rotate into the full fury of a fiery nova the next morning.

Halfway to the native encampment, I was overtaken by London. "Mind if I come along?"

"I can't promise any lift out here — unless you enjoy consorting with the doomed."

Of course, he knew I was being facetious. And, as for his real purpose in wanting to come along — he opened his jacket and indicated the inner pouches filled with space ration chocolate.

"Munrov said it would be all right to pass out a few bars, since the metabolism test showed it wouldn't do any harm."

I laughed rudely. "He must have dug damned deep to come up with those sentiments."

London munched on one of the bars. "Oh, he's human — I suppose. After all, he *does* have his orders."

"Which say nothing about sacrificing a whole race."

"Maybe not. But with novas as scarce as they are, chances are it'll be another two thousand years before we run across anything like Powderkeg."

Continuing toward the village, we detoured around a large, rugged outcropping and quite suddenly came upon one of the natives. He was pensively watching the sun ease into the dark silver sea.

He was a tall, white-skinned creature with smoothly etched features that bore a certain mark of nobility rather than the savagery his living conditions suggested. His head was hairless and his brow and skull almost of ponderous proportions. His nose was quite small and his chin negligible. Folded in his lap were hands which possessed only three fingers and a thumb.

Respectfully, he rose and regarded us. Then a subtle, dignified smile formed on his lips.

London made an exemplary gesture of taking a bite out of his chocolate bar. Then he unwrapped another and handed it over to the man.

I wondered for a moment over the lack of hesitancy, the complete absence of suspicion as the native took the offering, returned to the camp and resumed his contemplation of the setting sun.

We went on to the encampment and approached the main communal fire where most of the others were collected in their eternal silence.

Three children came forward, hands extended, and eagerly explored the bulging contours of the pilot's jacket.

London frowned. "How do you suppose they *know* I brought

something for them?"

I stared back uncertainly at the outcropping. The solitary native had not come into sight. Nor had we been visable to the others when we gave him the chocolate bar.

"Don't you see?" I explained. "They *must* have some means of communicating.

MUNROV WAS tied up with data sampling when we returned to the ship. He had already had supper sent it and had posted notice on the hatch of the correlator compartment that he wasn't to be disturbed. I waited outside.

It was well after midnight when he finally stepped into the corridor, bent with fatigue.

"I'm in no condition to listen to any more appeals for the natives," he gruffed at me.

"All I want is permission to try a language impress on one of them."

"Why?"

"Because our test was wrong. They *do* communicate."

"They can't. They have absolutely no ability for matching concept with symbol."

He started to move off but I caught his arm. I told him about the native hidden behind the outcropping and how the other primitives seemed to know instinctively that we had brought candy for them too.

"They must use some form of supersonic contact," I concluded.

"Impossible. That hidden native simply stepped into view and signaled."

"I'm sure he didn't. But even if he did, he *had* to use predetermined symbols. Which proves they *do* communicate and *can* tolerate a language impress."

He looked away wearily. "And so you want to try a semantics transfer?"

I nodded.

"Suppose the concept behind vocal communication is too much for their primitive minds? They'd go off the deep end and we'd have a bunch of otherwise docile natives running amuck on us."

"I'd try it on only one of them and it wouldn't be an oral transfer," I went on eagerly. "There's a dactylology bank in the impress rectifier. We could select a simple eight-finger sign language. I'd take the treatment first."

"Go ahead then," he submitted with a defenseless sigh. "But I don't know what you're trying to prove."

"There's only three days left to send London for a rescue fleet," I explained confidently. "In that time I'm going to convince you those primitives are worth saving."

IT WAS almost noon the next day when I unbuckled the semantics

transfer helmet. The light coming in through the sick bay port blazed into my suddenly unshielded eyes and I realized Powderkeg was putting on another fearsome display.

London relieved me of the headpiece. "How did it come through?"

"Pretty clear," I answered uncertainly, trying to review in an instant my new vocabulary of hand gestures.

He turned off the rectifier. "So much for the easy part. Now's when the fun begins — trying to get one of those natives in here without touching off a first-rate riot. And we don't even have a Morpheus beam to use."

"That one we found by himself yesterday — he might not kick up too much of a fuss. You're still with us, aren't you?"

"Sure. Wouldn't miss out on the rhubarb for anything. But, like Munrov, I'd like to know what it's going to get you."

We started down the corridor. "I'll let you in on something. Munrov has overlooked an obscure section of contact law. It says all possible assistance *has* to be extended wherever and whenever requested by any group in peril."

Climbing down the ramp, I was almost certain the big blow-up had come. Entire sections of Powderkeg's lambent hydrogen surface were convulsing violently and sending out huge arching plumes of incandescent brilliance. They gave the dying star the appearance of a blazing pinwheel.

I cast a desperate glance at the solar survey crew. None of them seemed particularly concerned. So I decided that this, after all, wasn't *it*.

As we continued on toward the native encampment, London asked worrisomely,"What's that escape factor again?"

"A little over eight minutes." That was our safety margin to get back into the ship, clear the surface and slip into subspace. It was all the time we could expect between visual sighting of the blowup and arrival of the blanket of searing gases.

I began considering plans to lure the native back to the ship without arousing his suspicion or getting his friends hopping mad.

But suddenly a single, fur-wrapped figure was coming across the plain toward us. When he drew closer we saw it was the primitive I had hoped to find.

He stopped a few feet away and flashed a smile of recognition.

Hopefully, London extended a bar of chocolate but withdrew the candy as the native reached for it. When we backed off toward the ship he followed.

I was even more surprised at the docile manner in which he went with us up the ramp, through the hatch and down the passageway into sick bay.

He was sitting on the bunk nibbling his bar of candy when London sneaked up from behind and hit him in the neck with a syringe of sodium pentothal.

JUST AS in any kind of learning, the secret of success in semantics transfer is time — time and subliminal repetition. With any race that has a fairly well evolved language pattern of its own, you can pull off an impress treatment in three or four hours. With Pensive One though (that was the name we had decided upon for our contact candidate), I didn't want to take any chances. We set the rectifier for minimum transfer speed and waited out the full twelve hours.

So it wasn't until after midnight that I removed the impress helmet and sat on the side of the bunk searching for the native's face for signs of awakening.

London paced in the small compartment. "I don't like it."

"What?" I watched the primitive's eyelids quiver under the impact of our voices.

"These natives — there's something damned unusual about them."

"That's what I've been trying to tell Munrov."

"I don't like their complete lack of suspicion — the way they're taking us in stride."

"Like accepting that candy without any misgivings, gulping it down without even sniffing it," I proposed.

"Or the way Pensive One followed us into the ship without showing any fear at all."

The primitive opened his eyes and looked slowly around the compartment before sitting up.

"For my money," I said finally, "these boys deserve to be studied as much as that nova out there. The important thing now, if the language transfer worked, is to see that this fellow makes a direct plea for rescue."

I gave him the sign language symbol for myself — rigid index finger elevated.

He hesitated, but only briefly, then alertly came up with his own designation — finger tips pressed against his temples.

I cast a hopeful glance at London. Then I made stiff steeples of all my fingers before sending the right index in a swooping motion to touch the clenched fist of my left hand.

Pensive One responded with a series of gestures that was almost the reverse of what I had done, adding several flourishes of his own.

"What does he say?" London asked impatiently.

"I told him we had come from the sky to visit his people and he answered that they're glad we're here. From what he says, I gather some of them were watching from the forest when our two ships first landed."

"Pensive One had a few normal questions to ask — such as who we were, where we had come from and how we had gotten there. The basic answers were, of course, inherent in the wealth of data that had been transferred during the impress treatment. Concrete replies, however, served to elevate the information to his conscious plane.

Then I got down to cases with a critical question. "How many are your people?"

IF HE could answer that one, it would mean his primitive mind had the basic ability to understand the mathematics to which it had been exposed during semantics transfer.

"In Pensive One's tribe?" he answered.

"How many tribes are there?"

"Three."

"And how many people altogether?"

His hands hung there a moment, then he flashed the reply. "About twelve hundred."

I turned aside and busied myself with mental calculations. In order to avoid any possible conflict with established mathematical concepts, it was a thumb rule of semantics transfer that all primitive races be impressed with numerical systems to match their digital characteristics. Since Pensive Once had eight fingers, we had selected a sign language with an octaval system, as contrasted to our own decimal system. So, any figure he came up with above the number seven would have to be transposed mathematically.

But suddenly he moved in front of me, his hands flitting in communicative gestures. "That would be about nine hundred and sixty of your numbers."

I drew back in stark surprise.

London seized my arm. "What's he say? What's the matter?"

"He can transform figures! He probably knows as much arithmetic as we do!"

I continued even more directly with the native. "A great disaster awaits your people," I told him in the stilted phrases of the sign language, repeating the words orally for London's benefit.

"Yes, we know." Pensive One's fingers moved sluggishly, as though expressing hallowed thoughts. "Our sun nears its death."

I straightened, numbly translating the native's expressions.

The pilot's sudden laughter snapped me out of my amazement. "What's so funny?" I asked.

"It took us hundreds of years with all kinds of gimmicks to learn how to tell when there's going to be a big blow-up. And the backward Joes know it *instinctively!*"

"How do you know death awaits your sun?" I asked the primitive.

"We just know it."

I glanced away for an indecisive moment. "Your people can be saved if you do what we tell you. You must come and ask our Superior One for help. I will act as your interpreter."

He placed his hands calmly over mine to stop their motion. Then he went on with his own signals:

"There is no need for that. He Who Wanders Among the Stars will

save us."

I drew back exasperatedly. This was no time for blind superstition and false hope. "You *must* do what I tell you!"

Calmly, he repeated his refusal.

"What's he say?" London demanded. "What's going on?"

I brought him up to date.

And while I did, Pensive One strode serenely from the compartment and out of the ship.

I OVERTOOK the expedition director on his way to the cluster of instruments that morning.

"Really, Banks," he protested resentfully, "this is going to be our busiest day."

"We tried language impress on one of the natives last night. It took."

"Well, good for you," he said cynically. "Now suppose you take your primitive friend aside and have a nice little chat with him — say for a couple of days. That way everybody will stay out of everybody else's hair."

"If the native we tried is average, then this could be the most intelligent primitive race ever discovered. They even know mathematics."

Annoyed, Munrov hooked his thumbs under his holster belt. He and I were the only ones who were armed.

"How could they accumulate and pass on knowledge," he asked skeptically, "without a language?"

"I don't know what the explanation is. But I do know we can't sacrifice this race. You've got until day after tomorrow to send London for a rescue fleet."

"Rundmire, our thermopathologist," he began patiently, "only yesterday formed a theory for possible control of a nova through hyperfrequency bombardment from subspace. With more observation here, he may get a clue as to how to apply his theory. Do you want me to take him from his work?"

There was no denying the logic of his argument. But still I couldn't quite balance *possible* danger to some world in the distant future against *imminent* peril to these helpless natives.

"If that bunch out there could offer some noteworthy contribution to galactic culture," Munrov went on, "I might consider sacrificing our work to save them. But it would have to be a damned significant contribution."

"They *know* about the nova!" I blurted hopefully. "The native we communicated with — I told him there was a disaster coming and he said yes, we know our sun is near death! Doesn't *that* suggest they might have something to offer?"

Munrov laughed stiffly. "It suggests that when you mentioned disaster, your native put two and two together. After all, we've been

pointing twenty-three tubes at this star twelve hours a day for over two weeks. He probably thinks we're 'killing' it."

LONDON WAS busy most of the day running his forth-eight-hour readiness check on the ship's powerplant and control system. So I didn't get a chance to see him until late that afternoon.

Security being only a token assignment on this expedition, I spent part of the day looking unsuccessfully for Pensive One and the rest soaking up what little warmth Powderkeg was still managing to put out.

Lying on a stone slab a few feet from the ship, I dozed off and was immediately swept up in a terrifying nightmare.

Blow-up came — fiercely, devastatingly. For a few horrifying seconds I watched the sun disintegrate, sending out searing blasts of hellfire in slow-motion agony. But my feet were paralyzed and I couldn't join the rush for the ship. Then suddenly my legs were pumping frantically but not carrying me anywhere.

Meanwhile, Munrov, London and the others were packed tightly on the ramp trying to get into the ship. Only, the hatch was stuck.

Then came the natives, wave after wave of them, trampling over me in their savage dash for the ship. No longer speechless, every last one of them was frenziedly shouting in pure Galactic English, "Save me! Save me!"

Jolting awake, I wiped perspiration from my face and saw that the dream had probably been stimulated by another outburst of raw energy from Powderkeg. For a moment, as I tried to bring my eyes to focus, it seemed that the setting sun had actually split in half. But it was only an illusion caused by two tremendously bright prominences that appeared as twin tongues of fire jutting out into space.

London was standing there. "Easy on the panic button, it isn't Judgment Day yet."

He motioned toward the battery of instruments where the operators were going unconcernedly about their tasks.

But I was staring across the plain at the makeshift native village. There were twice as many lean-tos, double the former number of communal fires.

"They've been streaming in for the past hour," London explained.

"Let's go take a look," I proposed. "I want to have a talk with Pensive One anyway."

SURPRISINGLY, THE natives did not run forward into the twilight begging for candy. And I wondered how they knew we hadn't brought any along.

As we pressed forward, they made room for us around the central fire. I searched the scores of expressionless faces but failed to find Pensive One.

"Either he's at one of the other fires or he's out there among the rocks," I suggested. "Let's split up and find him."

"I'll scout around the camp," London volunteered.

As I had more than half expected, the native was seated in solitude on his lonely slab, watching the planet's single moon lift itself out of the sea. He rose and offered the simple greeting of his newly acquired sign language.

"Where are all these people coming from?" I worked my hands slowly so he could understand the gestures despite the scant light.

"They are the second tribe," he said proudly. "The third will be here tomorrow."

"Why are they coming?"

"To wait for Him Who Wanders Among the Stars."

I felt a deep compassion for this simple primitive and his people whose abiding faith would collapse so bitterly at that last moment of doom.

After letting my hands rest idly by my side for a moment, I asked, "How do you know the third tribe will be here tomorrow?"

But it was obvious his attention had been captured by something other than the question. He drew up tensely and signaled, "Why do you not go help your friend?"

"What makes you think he needs help?"

"He has hurt himself, hasn't he? I do not understand. Why did he not avoid the injury?"

Before I could answer his puzzling questions, London's voice, crying out my name, came weakly on the night air. It was tinged with pain.

I stood there confounded for a moment, then raced off across the plain with Pensive One following close behind.

We found London not too far from one of the fires. He was sitting on the rock-strewn ground and gripping his foot. Several natives were crowded curiously around him.

"I think I fixed up the ankle," he explained with an apologetic half grin.

"Serious?"

"I don't believe so. Nothing that a couple of hours under the lesion negator won't erase. But I'm afraid you'll have to get me back to sick bay."

Relieved that it was nothing critical, I turned anxiously toward Pensive One. "How did you know this had happened."

He signaled back casually, "I watched it through the eyes of those who were nearby."

"You mean you got it *directly from their minds?*" My fingers were tripping over themselves with excitement.

His hands produced an affirmative gesture.

"Cut out the finger talk," the pilot remonstrated, "and help me get to

the ship."

"London!" I exclaimed triumphantly. "Munrov *has to* save these people! They're all *pure telepaths!*"

AT SICK bay I helped London get his foot propped up under the lesion negator. Then I hurried over to the wardroom to look for Munrov. He had finished his supper, however, and was already locked away with the correlator Banks.

I banged on the hatch.

"Go away." His voice came weakly through the metal panel.

Cupping my mouth against the door, I shouted, "You said these natives didn't have anything to contribute. Well, they have!"

I banged again and he finally opened the hatch. His stare conveyed severe annoyance. "What's this all about?"

"You were right. They *don't* use language symbols. They don't need them. They communicate by direct thought transferrence!"

He went back into the compartment and I followed, trying to give a rational account of what had happened at the native encampment.

"Don't you see what this means?" I asked finally. "These few hundred natives, given the right environment, could multiply into thousands, millions! They — "

"That would logically seem to follow," he cut me short indifferently.

"But a telepathic race!" I emphasized. "Think of the instances of *accidental* telepathy on record. They prove direct transfer of thought is instantaneous over *any* distance!"

He looked up patronizingly and I pressed my argument: "There isn't a planet or a ship in the federation that hasn't suffered from total lack of communications. All we have is a packet system on an interstellar plane, no better than the days of sailing ships on Earth. But even a child could see what it would mean if a *naturally* telepathic race was integrated into galactic society — with representatives at every world capital, aboard every ship!"

Munrov lowered himself listlessly into a chair. "I figured they might have extrasensory talents. I hoped not though — for my own peace of mind."

"You mean you actually *suspected* they were telepathic?"

"Not until you told me how the others seem to know instinctively that you'd given chocolate to the one by the rocks."

"Then you *will* send London to get a rescue fleet?" I asked, relieved. "Day after tomorrow is the last day he can leave and still make it to Fenlow and back before the blow-up. But I don't think we should lose any — "

Munrov, however, was shaking his head. "We won't send London anywhere."

I exploded. "Well, why in hell not?"

"Four days ago Kaufmann, our hydrogenologist, found out Powderkeg's taking a short cut through the final phase. The big blow-up won't come *seventeen days* from now. It's due *day after tomorrow.* Powderkeg would have novaed even before London could have gotten to Fenlow, much less returned with a mercy party."

For almost a minute I stood staring grimly at him. "Why didn't you tell us?"

"I know my crew. I knew that as the blow-up neared they'd become tenser, less efficient. I wanted to avoid that. If it's going to be impossible to do anything for the natives, then the least we can salvage is a successful expedition."

He rose and walked sluggishly over to the desk, fidgeted with a tape container. "If only those natives had showed themselves *before* the auxiliary ship left! Then there would have been enough time to get a rescue fleet here, even taking the premature eruption into account."

"Can't we bring *any* of them back?" I pleaded.

"We can and we will. By abandoning as much equipment as possible and by bumping our heads against the load factor ceiling, we may be able to save perhaps twenty of them."

He sensed my disappointment and spread his hands helplessly. "That's the best we can do."

Then he paused uncertainly. " No — not quite the best. A couple of children could fit in under my weight allotment, I suppose."

"You mean you'd *stay here?*"

"Why not?" He offered a spiritless smile. "I'll be the first human ever to see a nova close enough to touch it."

FOR THAT matter, my weight allotment could accommodate another pair of children, bringing to twenty-four the total number of natives who could be saved.

That was the horribly fascinating thought that stuck with me throughout the night as I tossed sleeplessly on my bunk. A thousand times I reached a decision and lay peacefully back on the pad. But each time my resolve was shattered by the thought of standing on the naked planet, helpless before the fiery wrath of a raw nova.

"It wasn't until I went outside and watched Powderkeg rise above the frigid peaks that I finally distilled the true values. I was one among billions whose loss would never be noticed. On the other hand, the worth of any one of these natives to galactic culture and progress was incalculable.

And some day, when vital messages were spanning the farthest reaches of the galaxy with the speed of thought, they might name a system after me — if I didn't change my decision again during the thirty hours that remained before blow-up.

Surprisingly, the sun seemed exceptionally subdued on Doomsday Eve. Its disc was an even blend of pastel orange with only a few negligible splotches of dark brown. Only minor prominences were visible.

Munrov and Kaufmann broke the news of tomorrow's nova to the others at breakfast. They took it calmly enough. There was a tense stare here and there, puntuated by the sound of a fork clattering on the floor.

Then the expedition director filled us in on the details — blow-up at ten the next morning, plus or minus one hour. Finally he released his double-duty technicians back to their responsibilities as ship's crew members so London could lift off at noon and retrieve Group B from the other side of the planet.

I watched blastoff, then gave a hand with dismantling the various solarscopes and collecting their permanent data cartridges. Several hours later, after seeing what must have been the third tribe arriving to join the native encampment, I trudged off across the plain. I wanted to find Pensive One and make sure he'd be among those saved.

Munrov overtook me halfway there and laid a friendly hand on my shoulder.

"You don't have to do it, you know," he said smiling.

"Do what?"

"Sacrifice yourself to save a couple of backplanet Joes."

"How did you know I had that in mind?"

"It's written pretty plainly on your face. Look, Banks — I'm almost twice your age. With me it doesn't make any difference. Of course, you can do what you want. But it would be my guess that you'd serve a better purpose by going back with those twenty-eight natives and looking out for their interest."

"I glanced up sharply. "Twenty-*eight?*"

"Kaufmann, Prescott and Windmire also decided they're too attached to this place to leave."

I felt a sudden swell of pride for those eminent scientists in Munrov's crew — pride for them and the whole of humanity which they represented.

"Make it thirty natives," I said determinedly. "I like it here too."

And I suspected that by blast-off time we might have trouble getting enough crewmen aboard to take the ship back.

The deafening roar of rockets suddenly shook the plain and we watched London returning with the second half of the expedition.

With his customary precision, he lowered the ship delicately toward the surface. It touched down, then heaved violently. Fire belched from its side as landing struts crunched with a sickening sound. When the dust cleared the craft was tilted at a precarious angle, its main tube ruptured in a great mass of twisted, jagged metal.

Dismally, Munrov said, "It looks as though we've *all* become

attached to this place — permanently."

POWDERKEG WAS a magnificently frightening spectacle as it rose in perverted majesty the next morning and sent its now weak, now fierce rays down on our group, huddled about the useless ship.

Its entire surface boiled and heaved vehemently, spattering the darkened space around it with great splashes of liquid radiance that fell back down ever so slowly. It was like watching thick bubbles bursting in the mouth of an angry caldron.

Blow-up was less than four hours off. London and some of his crew, exhausted from a frantic night of work, were asleep on the cold, rocky plain. Refusing to accept doom, they had labored from twilight until dawn, trying to squeeze a thirty-day repair job into a few hours. They didn't give up, however, until their hopeless effort to right the ship with a pair of tractor beams backfired and sent the huge craft crashing down on its side.

Watching the sun climb torturously into the sky, I tried to shake off my desperation with the fascinating realization that, for billions of years, this same sun had risen dutifully every day — on schedule. But now it was all over. For, before it could reach the zenith on this, its last cycle, it would disintegrate in a tremendous stellar explosion that would reduce every body in its system to molten rock and swirling gas.

I rose, thrust my hands in my pockets and walked away from Munrov and his grimly silent group. Out on the plain, I paused and stared at the native village.

All the communal fires were out and the lean-tos had been leveled. The primitives, in several scraggly lines, were streaming out onto the plain.

Puzzlement broke through the pall of horror that lay over my senses and, for a brief, impersonal moment, I wondered what they were doing. Then I remembered Pensive One's blinding faith — his belief that their god would pluck them from the maw of death.

There was a violent paroxysm of light and I hit the ground, rolled over and tried to wedge myself under a boulder. Terrified, I glanced skyward. The sun was still there. Only, its entire surface seemed to have leaped outward several million miles. But now it was falling back in on itself. There was no doubt that Powderkeg was in its final convulsions.

I rose, not bothering to brush myself off, and stood there trembling. The natives, however, had continued their trek out upon the plain, unconcerned. And now they were collecting into five groups.

THERE WAS a tapping on my shoulder and I must have jumped eight feet. I whirled and saw London standing there. Normally, he would have been guffawing at my reaction. Now, he had only the look of pallid death on his face.

He glanced at his variable watch, synchronized with the day-night cycle of the planet. "Two hours left."

"Plus one or minus one," I reminded.

"All right then," he conceded dully. "One to three hours. How do you feel?"

"Just great," I answered, poker-faced.

"We'll never know what hit us."

"Doomsday wouldn't be so bad," I said, "if we were on a bustling world with tall buildings and the press of people all around us."

"I know what you mean. Out here it's so — desolate. I wonder how they're taking it." He motioned toward the primitives.

"They won't regret a thing," I promised. "They're so sure of salvation they're not even worried."

"Here comes one of them now."

The native trotting across the field toward us was our Pensive One.

He pulled up sharply and I signaled, half facetiously, "Where's the Star Wanderer?"

He smiled as he worked his fingers. "Do not worry. He will come in time."

London was staring trancelike at the ground, uninterested in the primitive.

Pensive One nodded toward the pilot and asked. "The Big One — why did he not save the ship?"

"It was an accident."

"But he should have avoided it."

When I didn't answer, he went on with his sign language. "It makes no difference. He Who Wanders Among the Stars will see to it that the sun destroys none of us."

I drew back and surveyed him warily. It might be possible for them to know something was going to happen to their sun and to guess approximately *when* it would happen. But how could they hit the nail on the head with the knowledge that their "destruction" was involved?"

POWDERKEG FLARED suddenly in a tremendous display of vivid brilliance that lit up the sky with the ferocity of a lightning bolt. I cringed and threw my hands protectively over my head. London only sat there, hunched in a tense, quivering bundle.

Pensive One was in front of me again, his hands flitting in communicative gestures. "The time is not yet."

The words had been spoken with such conviction that I squinted at the fur-wrapped figure. There was so *much* we didn't know about the natives — so much we'd never learn.

For instance: It was understandable that somewhere way back in their evolution Nature had linked their minds together in emphatic union. Since we were not part of that unity, it was impossible for them to tune in on our thinking. Still, how did Pensive One know *London* was

piloting the ship when it cracked up?

And he had asked why the pilot hadn't "saved" the craft. It was as though he expected that London could easily have averted the accident.

Nor had that been the first time something like that had happened. After London had sprained his ankle, the native had asked why the pilot hadn't "avoided" the injury — as though some form of control over fate was everyone's prerogative.

And there was the too coincidental manner in which the primitive had come across the plain to meet us — at the exact moment we were seeking him for the language impress treatment.

The whole picture was deeply intriguing and I wondered whether the natives' total lack of suspicion, their unusual degree of self-assurance didn't also fit somewhere into the general outline.

Pensive One was signaling with his hands again.

"What's he say?" London asked with only superficial interest.

"He wants to know: 'Why is the Lean One going to kill himself?"

"What's he getting at?"

"I don't know."

It wasn't until a moment later that the significance of the natives question suggested itself. I lunged up and stared back at Munrov and the others. The "Lean One" would be Spectrologist Badington, who eminently fit that description. But Badington, who was lying face down on the ground when I had left the group a half hour earlier, hadn't moved.

Puzzled, I turned back to Pensive One and began signaling, "Why do you say the Lean One — "

London seized my shoulder and wheeled me around. "Look, Banks!" He pointed.

Badington and Munrov were grappling on the ground. They rolled over twice and the spectrologist's hand came away from Munrov's holster with the latter's gun.

He broke free from the expedition leader's grip and backed away from the others, holding them off with the weapon. There was an insane desperation on his face as he raised the muzzle to his head and fired.

Munrov went calmly over, took the weapon from the dead man's hand and emptied its charge into the air.

"GOOD GOD!" London whispered. "This native *knew* it was going to happen!"

"Of course he did!" I agreed, with a sudden and excited comprehension. "Just like he and the others *knew* the candy was harmless; just like they *know* their sun's going to blow up. And we didn't trick Pensive One into that language impress. He came because he knew we would need him! He came willingly because he also knew we wouldn't hurt him!"

"What are they — *crystal gazers?*"

"Practically. They're *precognizant*. They can see into the future and avoid the pitfalls! It's so natural with them that they take it for granted we have the same talent. Pensive One couldn't understand why you didn't avoid that sprained ankle or why you didn't foresee that tube blow-out yesterday."

"I'll be damned!" The pilot shook his head in wonder. "Their telepathic ability in itself would have been a pretty good thing for the rest of the civilized galaxy. But think what this new stuff would have meant!"

Powderkeg was in solar agonies once more. Like an ancient steam engine, it was discharging puffs of hellfire that spread out like expanding halos before breaking up and falling inward again. Each collapse seemed only to touch off a greater, more violent expulsion of blazing gases.

I glanced at my watch. The end would be only minutes away now. But still there was a more important consideration welling in the back of my mind.

"London!" I shouted. "This native may be right when he says we're all going to be saved by the Star Wanderer!"

The pilot frowned incredulously.

I signaled frantically to the primitive, "He Who Wanders Among the Stars — where is he now? What is he doing? Is he on a — ship?"

Pensive One gestured affirmatively. "He is on the ship that left here twenty days ago (he meant sixteen in our numbers system). It will be back soon."

"With other ships?" I demanded.

He said, "Yes, with five others."

I grabbed him around the shoulder and danced him across the plain and back again.

"What is it?" London pleaded.

I SEIZED a handful of his hair and twisted his head skyward so he could see what I had just that moment sighted — six interstellar ships plunging through the atmosphere.

"He Who Wanders was a stowaway!" I shouted. "The natives *knew* their sun was going to blow up. They also saw that planting a stowaway aboard the returning auxiliary ship would be a satisfactory solution to their dilemma and to ours too!"

Munrov and the others danced and cheered hoarsely as they watched the fleet descend. The natives, however, were taking it phlegmatically, as though it were all something they had experienced before.

"They were never in doubt about the outcome," I went on, "because they *knew* things would work out all right for the stowaway — that he would get an impress treatment — that he would convince headquarters that if they sent a rescue fleet out immediately it would get here just in time!"

London was grinning too now. "And all the while they were in telepathic contact with Star Wanderer. They *saw* that everything was working out like they knew it would in the first place. But why such a high-sounding name for a common stowaway?" He was shouting to make himself heard above the roar of the landing ships.

"It figures. They're communally telepathic. They converse in pure concepts and images. They probably identify themselves and one another by the overall quality of each individual's thought pattern. They don't need names."

"I get it." London nodded comprehendingly. "When Pensive One had to identify another native for your benefit, he had to invent an appropriate *descriptive* name. After all, didn't *you* have to give *him* a descriptive designation?"

Just then the big blow-up came.

But the natives had already filed aboard their respective ships and there was plenty of time for us to reach the waiting auxiliary craft.

As a matter of fact, we slipped into subspace a full two minutes before the nova front reached the planet. ▣

FANTASTIC FACTS

THAT THE earth's temperature is slowly rising is an observational fact. As more and more data are accummulated the exact rate will be determined. And this temperature rise may have some rather chilling fantastic effects.

For one thing, the oceans are rising—at a very slow rate—but rising. Every three hundred years the seas thrust themselves up just one more foot! And where does this extra water come from?—it comes from the slowly melting Polar caps!

It has been estimated that if the ice which sheaths Greenland were to melt, there is such an enormous amount of it, that it would cause the oceans of the world to rise about one hundred and fifty feet! And this is only a small portion of all the ice that covers the Polar Regions. Such an event, of course, would occur slowly and only over many thousands of years time, but its effects would be all to the good. True, some of our coast-lines would disappear, but on the other hand, vast areas of fertile ground beneath the ice-caps would be exposed to agriculture.

This warming up of the Artic Regions is further shown by the fact that fish are breeding farther north, Alaskan forests are growing northwards and new land is beginning to appear. Come to the North Pole—it's a perfect summer resort!

Fabian in these pages again soon.

Lastly, I hope you can combine this new vitality with the fine tradition of two of SF's senior magazines, AMAZING and FANTASTIC.

James J.J. Wilson
Drake University
Des Moines, Iowa

We're happy to have answered some of your wishes in this issue! — ed.

Dear Editor,

No, it's almost too good to believe.

When I first spotted the new, revamped FANTASTIC, I instantly knew that some awesome changes had been made. New letterhead, new layout, new editor, even a new publisher. I can't say I'm crazy about your modified visual format; it strongly resembles some of the poorer fanzines I have seen. But I do, oh, do very much, go along with your new fiction policies. I didn't even have to read any of the stories to know that I liked the new direction FANTASTIC was taking very much. An Edmond Hamilton reprint, for God's sake! Do you know how long I have been clamoring for a magazine to offer us something like that?

Arthur Bernhard's New Directions editorial summed it up. Yes, we *do* need real heroes, plots you can sink your teeth into, satisfying endings! Yes, you *can* feed brains and guts at the same time! Yes, we *do* need a new level of sf writing using the Golden Age as a training ground! Look at all the cerebral classics that were penned during the late forties and fifties. You don't realize this, Mr. Bernhard, but you have granted my utmost wish. Finally I have found someone out there, besides Steven Duff, who appreciates the kind of sf I do. If you'll peruse some of my letters and Steve's letters that have appeared in past issues of AMAZING, FANTASTIC and IASFAM, you'll see that we both think the way you do . . . and I'll bet there are plenty of other readers out there that are going to be as excited with the new editorial policies of AMAZING and FANTASTIC as we are! I still almost can't believe it. It's like rubbing the magic lamp, it's like meeting your first girl, it's like all the wonderful things you have ever wanted are finally here!

Please stay around for a good long time, Mr. Bernhard. We need the kind of gutsy entertainment you are endeavoring to bring us. The roaring red meat, not the soft, malleable gruel.

Denny Daley
Chicago, Illinois

I'm afraid you are outvoted as to "visual format" which is following the popular trend toward heavy illustration and big bold layouts. But yours is the most lavishly favorable response toward our new editorial directions. If we keep you happy in your reading, you'll forgive us the rest? — ed.

Dear Fantastic Editors:

I just read the April, 1979 FANTASTIC and the May, 1979 AMAZING STORIES as well. I couldn't wait to read them when I saw the new look on them both. It was thrilling to me to see the old lettering used again for AMAZING and the look of the old lettering for FANTASTIC. I see, too, that there are new names on the staff list.

I'm a SF and Sword & Sorcery buff. SF widens my life and stretches my mind and beams out a broad light on the future. I want to tell you that a new look, a new design and new people coming into the lives of FANTASTIC as well as AMAZING just thrills me. You must have courage to do what you are doing and you must love what you are doing and you must feel a brand new sense of challenge especially with AMAZING, the very, very first magazine ever published in SF. I felt good all day. The whole world had a nice new look. I will back you all the way. I want to see Fantastic and Amazing stay around for another fifty years. Go to it people --- there is no end to space and no limits to what you can accomplish. Anyway, your stories are great, and there are plenty of illustrations. That's what I like.

A LOVER OF SF,
Quincy, Ill.

Thanks for your very "upbeat" letter, which we can't help but agree with!—ed.

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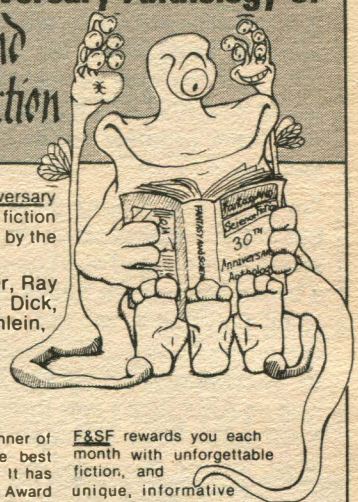

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EARLY WINTER

(continued from Back Cover)

The distribution of hit points was calculated to guarantee complete coverage. If each hit point was on target, mankind could be divided into three categories; the dead, those having zero to twenty-four hours to live, and those having one to fourteen days to live. As far as the defense and counter-offense targeting computers could tell, the enemy should have been in a similar condition.

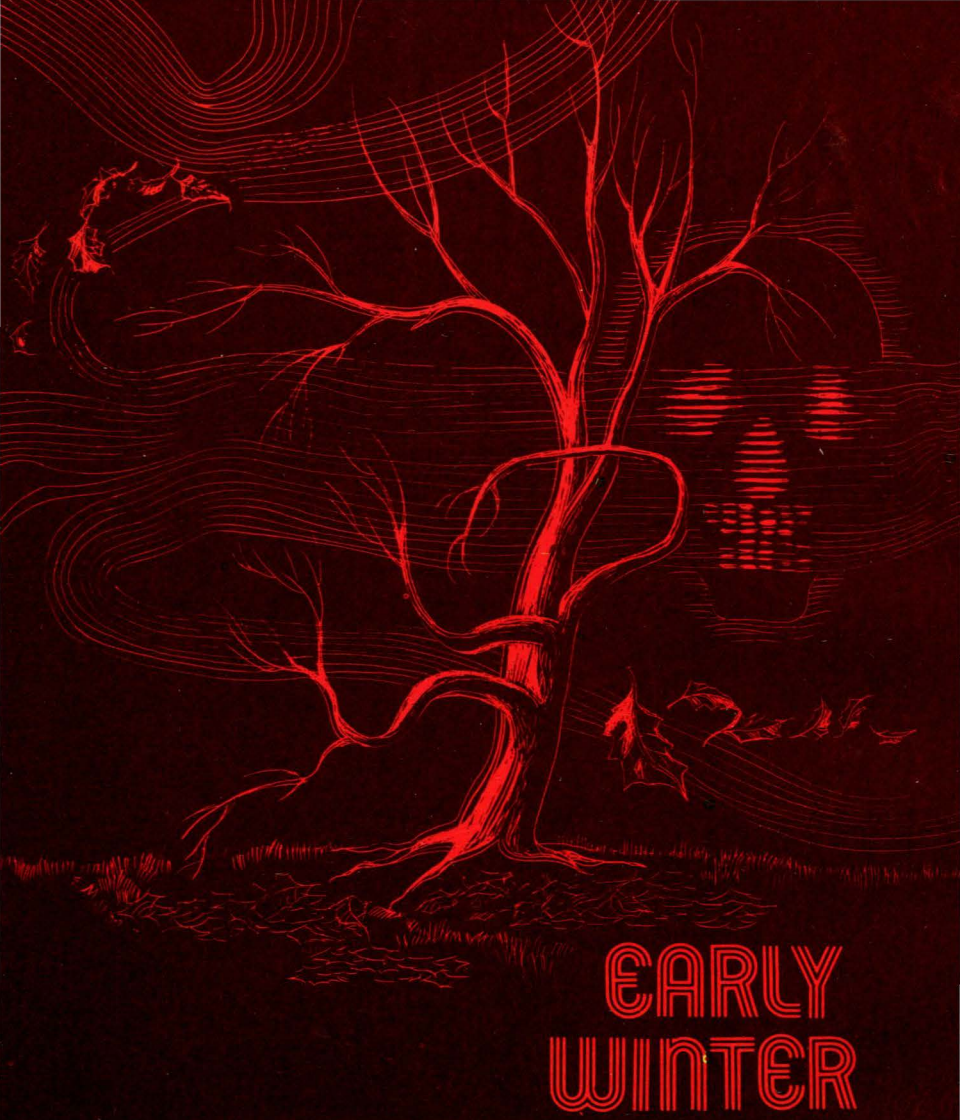
The people in the second and third categories immediately lost all interest in conventional pastimes like electric barbeque cook-outs and television specials, but selected power systems continued to function on automatic. While the people in category two thought about the people in category one, and the people in category three thought about the people in category two, other automated systems functioned. They too, gradually failed because of lack of attention, but even after twenty days, at least one device was still functioning, oblivious to the changes that rendered its purpose obsolete.

A sophisticated, sleek, chrome and electronic automated advertising telephone calling device continued its duties, unaware of the reason for its diminishing success rate. One by one, it called each number in the metropolitan area, allowing six rings, mindlessly hoping for an answer, filing away unanswered numbers for future retries. The first few days after the event, it received occasional responses.

Mostly, people just slammed the receiver back down, so the machine never got a chance to deliver its sales pitch on hide-away resort acres in Montana. As the days passed, the responses grew even more infrequent. After fourteen days, the responses stopped entirely.

If the machine had been endowed with automatic diagnostics, it might have attempted to determine if it was still properly connected to the telephone lines, but it was unable to do so, and consequently it simply continued trying and trying. The machine was not intelligent enough to realize that its primary purpose in existing was now destined never to be fulfilled. It couldn't know that it was currently engaged in a search for the last man on Earth.

Suddenly, after six more days of no success, its call was answered. If it had been alive, one might have said its prayer was answered. If it had a pulse, its electrons might have flowed a bit faster. It eagerly started its pitch, but was soon disoriented by the voice which refused to provide the desired "yes" or "no" answers when the machine paused for responses. It recorded the response, but its circuits couldn't understand the words as they listened to the voice of what might be the last man on Earth say, "Hello. This is Harold Jameson. I am unable to answer the phone right now, but if you'll leave your name and number, I'll be glad to get back to you." ■



EARLY WINTER

by John E. Stith

THAT FALL, the neutron bombs fell along with the leaves. Leaves in the nearby vicinity of any given hit point were vaporized. Those farther out were subjected to treatment ranging from violent shock waves and roaring winds to a faint rustle of a breeze. When the sun set, its last few rays illuminated areas covered with leaves of crimson, brown, yellow, and green. There were many more leaves on the ground than normal for that time of year. There were many people on the ground, too.

Winter came early.

Continued inside back cover