

DISCOVERED CRUMPLED-UP ON
FLOOR BEHIND ^{BOOK} SHELVES

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DOES ANYTHING SOUND / READ
FAMILIAR?

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Redd Boggs'

SPIROOCHES

THE FATAL SHOCK

"I know you'll find it remarkable," I remarked casually to my friend Carson when I met him by appointment on California street in San Francisco, "but believe it or not, at the BART station I found an escalator that was actually working!"

Carson faunched back in amazement. "Uff da!" he mumbled feebly.

"Even more astounding," I added, hoping this time completely to overwhelm his sense of wonder, "is that when I walked past two pedestrians on Powell street I noticed that they were conversing in *English!*"

I knew this would shock him, but I hadn't realized how thoroughly. A look of utter disbelief passed across his face. He turned white, his eyes rolled back in his head, and he shivered strangely. Right there on the sidewalk he collapsed in a heap and expired without a word.

DARKNESS UPON THE FACE OF LAGASH

Though first published as long ago as September 1941 "Nightfall" remains -- somewhat to his own chagrin -- Asimov's most famous story. But as we all know, the idea for the story was John W. Campbell's to begin with. We know this because Asimov has told us (more than once). He keeps a diary that would remind him of circumstances relating to the composition of his stories even if his persistent self-regard faltered; he is a "blabbermouth" (his term) about his stories; and he loves to take us, his "Gentle Readers," into his confidence, for as he says, he has, literarily speaking, "nothing to hide." The result is that, as with Bernard Shaw, the Good Doctor's introductions and headnotes to his writings are sometimes more interesting than the works themselves. (It is safe to say that no other writer in history has been so wonderfully voluble and irreproachably honest -- like one of his famous robots -- in his confiding chatter about his work. "I can tell you," he remarks to his readers in revealing a small secret about one of his short stories, "because you're my friends.")

But if Asimov hadn't told us, how could we have guessed that Campbell originated the idea for "Nightfall"? After all, the idea was inspired by a passage from Emerson's first book, *Nature*. Probably it came indirectly, perhaps from a book of quotations, for I can't picture Campbell improving an evening by browsing in a Transcendentalist essay. Even so, very curious. But not so curious as Campbell's idea for a story that was triggered by the passage.

You remember that -- as he describes it in his autobiography -- Asimov visited Campbell on 17 March 1941 and was shown the quote from Emerson that later stood at the head of "Nightfall" and runs as follows: "If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would men believe and adore, and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God..." Campbell asked, "What do you think

would happen, Asimov, if men were to see the stars for the first time in a thousand years?" Asimov thought, and said he didn't know, whereupon Campbell said, "I think they would go mad," and sent him home to write the story.

Armed -- or perhaps more precisely, burdened -- with Campbell's theory, Asimov sat down the next evening and in only three weeks wrote the story swiftly and easily even though, as he remarks, it is one thing to be presented with an idea and quite another "to go home and face the empty sheet of paper in the typewriter." After a few revisions Campbell bought the story, and featured it on the cover of *Astounding*, September 1941 (cover by Rogers, interior illos by Kolliker). Obviously Campbell liked the story -- he paid Asimov an extra bonus of \$.0025 a word -- just as much as most fans and readers have ever since.

So far as I know, nobody has ever found anything seriously wrong with the story. The few critical remarks about it that I have read are mostly nonsense. One critic claims that "Nightfall" was "written in rebuttal to Emerson's Transcendental Idealism" (Ah, the rubbish one must allege in order to survive in Academia!), and Joseph F. Patrouch Jr, in his otherwise useful book, *The Science Fiction of Isaac Asimov*, spends much time commenting fribblingly on the story's "stereotyped pulp diction" and its "pulpish characters." These aspects of course did not bother me in the least when I read the story in *Astounding*, and do not bother me today. Patrouch also remarks that "There is really no story. There is instead a continuing revelation of a situation." But isn't that what a story is? Even if Patrouch is right, this does not detract from one's reading pleasure. "Nightfall" remains a very enjoyable and impressive story (or whatever it is).

Patrouch does mention one aspect that bothered me when I first read the story. He points out that it is unlikely that Lagash could develop an urban civilization "without having experienced darkness and developing artificial sources of light on a large scale." Interiors of buildings -- unless they were far different from ours, and there is no reason why they should be -- would inevitably have dark areas in bathrooms, closets, and hallways. I remember thinking when I first read the story 48 years ago, "I guess they don't have movies on Lagash." Asimov tries, not too successfully, to patch over this difficulty. Please note that the Lagashian fear of darkness was not Campbell's idea -- or if it was, Asimov doesn't mention it. Night had to fall if the stars were to be seen in all their glory, but Asimov need not have used darkness as a source of terror. The stars that finally gleam forth as night falls only add to the panic. The darkness itself, even if it were a starless night, would have been sufficient to cause civilization's downfall.

It's hard to see why the stars should cause madness, except that Campbell decreed that they should. The stars, after all, are a source of light -- an awe-inspiring blaze of it, for Lagash is in a globular cluster of 30,000 suns -- and the Lagashians, driven to such frenzy by darkness that they are torching their cities, ought to have welcomed the light of the stars. Surely Emerson, not Campbell, is likely to be correct here. Lagashians would "believe and adore," not go mad at the sight. Remember Hugh Hoyland's first glimpse of the stars in "Universe."

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But this is idle speculation, for we know too little about Lagashian psychology to say one way or the other. The physical situation of Lagash is another matter. Patrouch doubts that "30,000 mighty suns" would always have been invisible even in Lagash's eternal daylight. (The relatively modest glimmer of Venus is sometimes visible during the day on Earth.) We might wonder about comets, too. Didn't comets ever visit Lagash? Were there no supernovas close enough to be seen? Comets and supernovas often appear in the daytime, and would give Lagash an inkling of the world beyond the sky. And by the way, whatever did that Observatory observe?

Insofar as darkness is concerned, what happened on heavily overcast days? A stormy sky often brings darkness to local areas of the planet -- a darkness without stars but nevertheless a phenomenon that should have accustomed Lagashians to a sort of night. Perhaps Asimov will address some of these problems in "False Dawn," his long-awaited sequel to "Nightfall." (He hasn't written it yet, has he?)

One other aspect of the Lagash system worries me even more than these matters. As you remember, Lagash is a planet in a complicated system comprising three pairs of binary suns. Both Patrouch, and James Gunn in *Isaac Asimov: The Foundations of Science Fiction*, mention the unstable orbit of a planet in such a situation -- as well they might. Asimov himself, in his science book *The Exploding Suns* (1985), points out that in a dual-sun system "it might not be possible for a planetary orbit to exist...that would provide a stable enough environment for life to develop." A member of a binary system may become a nova or a Type I supernova. How much more likely in a six-suns arrangement! But leaving that aside, let us consider the situation described in the story. The only time at least one sun is not shining in the sky is when an unknown moon ("a non-luminous planetary body") eclipses the one sun that remains above the horizon. This happens only once in 2049 years. As the story opens this phenomenon is about to occur. Only one sun, Beta, is in the sky, and it is about to be eclipsed, although how anybody knows this for certain is unclear.

I must confess that I don't understand this at all. Asimov himself, Campbell, Willy Ley (who read the story in manuscript) and other great minds seemed perfectly able to accept the astronomy without question. But my small withered brain begins to wonder. Where are the other five suns at the moment when the moon obscures the dwarf sun Beta? Well, one sun, Gamma, "the brightest of the planet's six suns," has just set in the west. Alpha, the sun about which Lagash revolves, as well as "the two distant companion pairs" of suns (doesn't that add up to seven suns altogether? -- but who's counting?) are "at the antipodes" and out of sight, presumably so antipodal that they don't even make a glow upon Saro City's horizon during "nightfall."

Lagash is a planet of at least moderate size. One character, Sheerin, traveled 6000 miles to visit the Jonglor Centennial exposition two years before, and this would indicate that the civilized portion of Lagash extends well beyond the horizon in one direction or another. We don't know for certain and this seems to me a serious omission of necessary information. In the story Sheerin claims that "the eclipse...covers all of Lagash and lasts well over half a day, so that no spot on the planet escapes the effects." How can this possibly happen? How can the eclipse of one sun cause "total darkness all over the world"? For surely below the western horizon Gamma continues to shine, brightly and serenely, even as the moon eclipses Beta and causes "nightfall" in Saro City. And surely, at the antipodes, below the southern (or northern) horizon, Alpha and three, perhaps four, other suns continue to shine as well. On half the planet, at the start of the eclipse, Beta (eclipsed or not) would not even be visible.

I must be wrong, but it seems to me that night has fallen on only a small part of the planet: one-quarter of the globe, perhaps. Saro City may be under the pall

of night, but most of Lagash would be unaware of the eclipse or unaffected by it. A far cry from "no light on all the surface of Lagash"! James Gunn rightly objects to the intrusion of Earth near the end of the story (this was a Campbell interpolation, inserted without Asimov's knowledge). He points out that "if Lagash were aware of Earth the psychological fear [any other kind?] of darkness and the Stars would be irreparably weakened." How much more true that would be if "nightfall" happened over only a small part of Lagash.

This is not a backward, rustic world. Apparently it has telephonic communication with other regions of the globe (Aton says, "I've just gotten word from the Hideout on the private line") and of course newspapers. People elsewhere would be aware of what was going on in Saro City, and Saro City would know what was going on elsewhere. Surely rationality would prevail. In any event civilization, although perhaps greatly impaired by widespread panic, would not fall suddenly or at all, any more than, on Earth, China was brought down by the onset of the Dark Ages in Europe.

But I *must* be wrong. I must be missing the whole point of the story. If "Nightfall" is to succeed at all -- and it is often considered to be the best sf story of all time -- it seems to me that darkness must (somehow!) have covered the entire face of Lagash at the same time. Otherwise it doesn't really work at all, does it? But Asimov wouldn't have made, and sold, an ill-conceived and ill-constructed story, would he? He wouldn't have committed such an egregious error, would he? "Nightfall" has been reprinted so often that if such were the case he would have told us long ago in one of his headnotes. Wouldn't he?

THE CAPTURED CROSS-SECTION

LEE HOFFMAN

401 Sunrise Trail N.W.
Port Charlotte FL 33952

Spirochete is indeed "comfortable to the eye," not to mention enjoyable to the mind. While I am an avid supporter of the concept that the message is more important than the medium, I do admit that the medium adds a quality to the message, just as the quality of a speaker's voice adds to what is said. As you mimeo it, Spirochete has a more melodious voice than the typical Xerox zine.

I wonder how you would get along with a word processor. Considering all the work you put into a dummy, it would seem a natural for you. It's so easy to move text around, make corrections and substitutions, etc. But some people just don't find computers compatible, and I have a mild suspicion you might be one of them.

For all of my fondness for the computer and lust for state-of-the-art desktop publishing equipment, I rather like the old hand-inked hand-cranked mimeos. There was a certain intimacy, an involvement in the work. I was just recently reading something in some fanzine that suggested a relationship between the editor's involvement in the mechanics of publishing and the quality of the zine produced. I don't think there's any direct ratio, but I do think there is something special about the involvement where the mechanics of reproduction is not merely means but a thing in itself. Something like the difference between building a model plane from balsa wood and a set of plans and assembling a kit of cast plastic parts. The end result may not be as pretty but it's a lot more personal.

Your essay on modern sf is very entertaining -- witty. I kind of miss wit as a form of humor in this age of shotgun slapstick comedy. I don't read much sf nowadays myself, and don't recall having read anything by Orson Scott Card (though I heard him speak at the Conference on the Fantastic). I read very little fiction these days. Mostly I get my fiction fix from old movies.

Asenion? Didn't he write the "Fountain Trilogy"?
