

54

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Redd Boggs'

SPIROCHETES

CLUNK, CLUNK

In my long and misspent life I have met many questionable characters: MZB, Bjo, Dave Rike, Burb, Blackbeard, LeeH, DAG, Ruth, Betty Vinmar, Juffus, 4sj, Jim Harmon, SaM, Avram, G. Legman, Phil Dick, r-tRapp, Harlan, Yhos, Silverberg, Jean Cox, Tom Perry, and other Weird People. I have visited New York, London, Paris, Reims, Marseille, Mount Carmel, Fond du Lac, El Paso/Ciudad Juarez, Hollywood, Reno, and Comanche Oklahoma. Jim told me how he broke down The Door, Jack hid under the bedclothes in a Santa Fe hospital (but Gretchen and I found him, even so!), and Karen Anderson described, with gestures, her "transformation" into Countess Dracula at the South Gate in '58 costume ball. I have flown in a B-24 bomber on a mission to succor the recently-liberated French. I have stood atop an airraid shelter and shook my fist at a marauding Nazi warplane. I have dodged those science-fictional weapons, the V-1 and V-2, one of which knocked a large bulletin board down on my head (but I'm all right; I'm perfectly normal!). I pictured Hitler standing in his underground bunker shouting "Get Boggs! Otherwise he'll live to write nasty things about me. I don't care how, but get him!"

Even so, I have not led a very adventurous life. Possibly Audie Murphy was a bigger war hero than I was. Harlan does more crazy things in an hour than I do in a year, and Bob Silverberg has visited more foreign places in a week than I have in all my decades. Mine has been only a Miniver Cheevy existence. I came to this reluctant conclusion the other night when I woke in the darkness of 3 a.m. and started laughing like an idiot at a recollection that had nothing to do with the ignoble strife of fandom or of war. When I was about seven years old and my brother Jerry was about five, our family moved from one house to another in Moorhead Minnesota, and the two of us carried some of our toys and other possessions between abodes in a small coaster wagon. On the way we came to an intersection just as two cars approached from different directions, at right angles to one another. As we stood there watching, the two cars collided with a sharp metallic clunk. This was followed by another, smaller clunk, caused by the front driver's-side hubcap of one car falling off and dropping to the pavement.

After that, there was utter silence. I think the motors of both cars died abruptly in the accident, though neither car seemed damaged by the impact. Both drivers sat in their cars, unmoving, both wondering, no doubt, how they could possibly have run into one another on a quiet neighborhood street at an unobstructed corner. Neither of them said a word to the other, and my brother and I stood without speaking on the curb. That was long ago in a more sedate era, and there was no other traffic anywhere in sight. Finally one driver got out of his car, picked up the hubcap, and tossed it into the backseat, got back in and drove away without a backward glance. The other driver drove away too. My brother and I stood there a few moments, pondering the meaning of the incident, and then continued on our way. And that was the adventure that I remembered when I woke in the dark. Not the kindness of Bjo, the wrath of Hitler, the glimpse of the Eiffel tower, but a minor accident in a small town in the dawn of the world. Yes, mine has been a quiet life indeed.

THE VIZIGRAPH (2)

"I don't propose to spend much space on
Heinlein's shorts..."

-- Alexei Panshin,
Heinlein in Dimension

You shouldn't expose anybody's dirty laundry, I suppose; perhaps Panshin thought he was being kind, but he had no reason to be. He was talking about the "shorts" in Heinlein's postwar period, but unfortunately he gave little space or time to the early Heinlein short fiction, either, and I think those stories are greatly superior to his early novels like "Sixth Column" or "If This Goes On," or even "Methuselah's Children." Panshin gave a grudging six lines to a review of "The Roads Must Roll" (ASF, June 1940), a story that revealed Heinlein as a major talent and a man who would reshape the field. Panshin dismisses the story as one about the "Little Tailor, or man-who-learns-better" and explains the story's problem as that of "combatting a transportation strike." All this is true, and it is true that *Moby Dick* is a story about a whale hunt. But before Heinlein nobody had depicted a possible future quite so vividly and imaginatively, and with such impressive verisimilitude. At least that was my reaction when I read the story fresh off the newsstands. Stories about interplanetary travel ("Crucible of Power") or adventures alongside a Martian canal ("The Empress of Mars") were routine -- but one about a future America crisscrossed by mechanical roads instead of highways, that was new and intriguing.

We had many stories about future transportation systems before: all those melodramatic stories in *Air Wonder*, for example, such as the one I recently reread: Harl Vincent's "Through the Air Tunnel" (October 1929), but never one handled with such mastery. "The Roads Must Roll" is written in relatively untutored prose, yet it exhibits the author's innate gift of story-telling. He keeps the story as well as the Roads rolling, with only a few glitches in each case, and displays much cleverness in the creation of the outside observer, the cartoon Australian, Blekinsop, to whom Gaines, the chief engineer of the Roads, can explain the function of the Roads, while we listen in. Of course ultimately Blekinsop is mislaid in the story, as well as by Gaines, and I always regretted that.

One is struck (at least from this far distance) by the story's brisk, confident, and, above all, commercial tone. Heinlein sounds as glib as a salesman. Like Jack London he hit the ground running and kept moving. That was Heinlein #1, who was never a Lewis Carroll or an Emily Dickinson, one who wrote out of some spontaneous creative urge. His art was premeditated and often predictable; sometimes his prose surges and wiggles, but it stays in a familiar groove. In those days he needed the money. Heinlein #2, after *Stranger in a Strange Land*, was another writer entirely, a madman in a mad universe -- more like a "real" writer, but much less likable. By then he was rich and famous and could forget pragmatism. You can't

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be both writers #1 and #2 -- commercial AND idiosyncratic -- at the same time, unless you're Silverberg, perhaps.

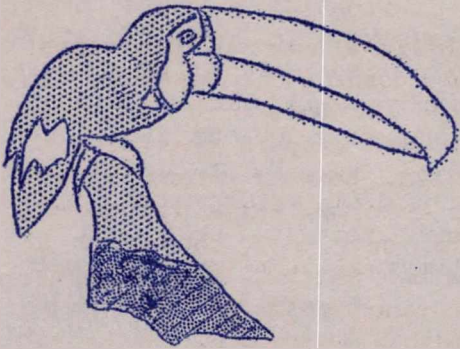
As in most of Heinlein's stories, his hero is soulless, alienated, humorless, and the story at bottom is silly and reprehensible -- why should the Roads be run like a military outfit, any more than the railroads or the airlines are? Heinlein had the sensitivity of a rhinoceros, but in a way few other writers ever did, he illuminated some of the human aspects of tomorrow's world, however wrong he was in the details. The future, like the past, is a foreign country, where things are done differently. Heinlein, by mid-1940, was looming strangely over the whole sf scene, and the Schachners, Burkses, Cummingses, even the Doc Smiths, were history, even though they probably didn't know it. He was a phenomenon such as never comes more than once to a particular genre (there's only one Dashiell Hammett, one Ernest Haycox), and -- to me, in 1940 -- a mysterious entity. Who was he? Campbell didn't tell us much, and not till seven years later did Heinlein's face appear: the portrait published in Lloyd Arthur Eschbach's *Of Worlds Beyond* (1947), of an dapper young fellow, somehow disappointing in his movie-idol looks. (I don't know what I expected him to look like, but not like that.) All we knew, or at least all I knew, in 1940, was that he was a prodigy, and I think Panshin underestimates the power of a story like "The Roads Must Roll" when he expends only 65 or so words to talk about it. It needs at least a thousand words.

In his introduction to *The Past Through Tomorrow*, the collection of Heinlein's "future history" stories, Damon Knight imagines Heinlein on an alternate time-track, where in 1967 he was a retired admiral, who had "served through World War II with distinction" and was spending his last years tending his garden in Carmel. Heinlein as an admiral is a frightening thought. I think it's likely that, in such a world, we would be speaking Japanese as well as watching Japanese TV sets. Like Knight, we can be glad that it happened that Heinlein had to retire from the navy and "turned to writing almost at random." I'd hate to try spelling out Godzilloid novels in the original Japanese.

Lester del Rey's "Helen O'Loy" (from December 1938) is, I suppose, history-making, too. It humanized (!) robots, paving the way for the positronic machines watched over by Susan Calvin. But, oh dear, I always liked the old clanking robot, like Tik-Tok and Grag. As I'm sure del Rey would admit, and probably has admitted, it's a very primitive story, although effectively told, and it fizzles out, and ends, before the real story begins. What's life like with a robot bride? There's the intriguing part of the tale. And how was it possible to inter Helen beside her husband without revealing to the coroner and the undertaker that she was a machine? Good grief!

Antique science fiction isn't the only vintage that is deficient in one aspect or another. Here is Gerard F. Conway's "Mindship" (in *Universe One*), that begins with this description of a spaceman: "He was a thin man...with lines and hints of age wrinkling the paperweight thinness of his skin." It turns out that he is something called a "Cork," of a type that "blows," and this is mysterious. With that "paperweight" holding him down, how could this happen? I shouldn't think he would blow very far. (The author probably meant "paperthin," don't you suppose?)

Some months ago I found a copy of the May 1990 *F&SF* forgotten or abandoned on a BART train in Berkeley. After paging through the magazine, I suspect that it was discarded; I can't believe anybody but an ardent collector would want to preserve the thing. Nearly everything in the magazine has a sour, jaded quality. This is what sf has become: tired, cold, and outworn! Even Algis Budrys, writing about books, and Harlan Ellison (movies) sound a little weary. In mid-column they



flog themselves on, each mindful of the fact that there's a dirty job to do and deadline is near. "Onward," says A. J.; "Moving right along," echoes Harlan. At least they're interesting even when bored, or talking about boring things. Harlan once entertained a meeting of the LASFS by reciting the litany of dreary hacks in the Teck *Amazing*: "Captain S. P. Meek, Charles Cloukey, Stanton A. Coblentz, Frank J. Bridge, Joe W. Skidmore, John Russell Fearn," he intoned. No gloss was necessary. Perhaps someday he will regale them by chanting "R. Garcia y Robertson, Robert Reed, John Maddox Roberts, Esther M. Friesner....," the neo-hacks in the May *F&SF*.

Asimov is never boring, and in his "Science" column in this issue he offers his solution to the problem of achieving "a drug-free society." He believes "the drug epidemic" is the result of an "imbalance of our society": too many rich people, and too many "poor and hopeless people" who turn to drugs as an escape from their misery. Incidentally, he thinks tobacco and alcohol are more harmful than "hard drugs." His solution, like most everything he proposes, is perfectly reasonable: "to change society so that the rich aren't as rich and the poor aren't as poor." I'll, uh, drink to that. But how are we to go about it? Star-travel shouldn't be limited to the speed of light, either, and the solution is to build inertialess drive spaceships. Don't ask me how, and don't ask Asimov how to build the "kinder, more gentle society" he so rosily envisions.

THE CAPTURED CROSS-SECTION

RICHARD BERGERON [P. O. Box 5989, Old San Juan PR 00905]: I write in a secluded, converted mill at the foot of the extinct, cloud-covered volcano of Nevis. Overhead, in this night filled with the songs of tree frogs, a mega-million of stars blaze in an incandescence which reminds me of winter nights in northern Vermont in the 1940s. Spirochete #52 is with me and I impart the news that your creativity has found its way even now to Nevis. Thank you for your kindness in sending me a copy. AVRAM DAVIDSON [901 Pleasant Av. #2, Bremerton WA 98310]: That was a rather magick time [Berkeley, 1965], and I want to say that I knew it at the time! Every weekday morning I would go to the Berkeley public library and take home 8 albums of classical music, put them on the machine, and play them over all day long. Next day, another 8. I wrote so easily that I scarcely recall writing — me, my small son, a dog, two white cats, and for a while, two hippyesses in the basement and, in the yard, a jackass. Lordy! CHARLES BURBEE [P. O. Box 2284, Temecula CA 92390-0028]: I am acknowledging receipt — he grandiosely said — of Spirochete #53. Dammit, I need more practice on this typer and a lot more on my word processor. I've started an article on Elmer Perdue, with some of the various stories about him I've accumulated over 40 or so years. This article, or series of articles, is intended for Bob Lichtman. JEAN YOUNG [RR 4, Box 47, Decorah IA 52101]: On Spirochete #53: "Yucatan But I Just Burn and Peel" was a wonderful title and pretty amusing. You, and many others, may "sculpt" your dreams; "lucid dreaming," or controlled dreaming is Big Stuff in some of the circles I have friends and interest in. There are people who know they are dreaming while they're dreaming. I don't even know I've been dreaming until I wake up. I should read Silverberg's "Homefaring." I LIKE lobsters, especially evolved, telepathic lobsters. I even think there are things of that order somewhere in the galaxy. "That was now. This is then." I love that. NIKKI DELANEY [Oakland CA]: My poor manuscripts nearly bled to death when you edited them for me, but now the shoe's on the other foot. I am VERY happy to be able to point out that you misspelled "ciudad" as "cuidad" in your last issue. Gotcha! [EC: Thanks for not mentioning that I also typoed "Juarez" in one mention. I need a Spell Check that speaks Spanish!]

Get thee behind me, Satan, and push!
