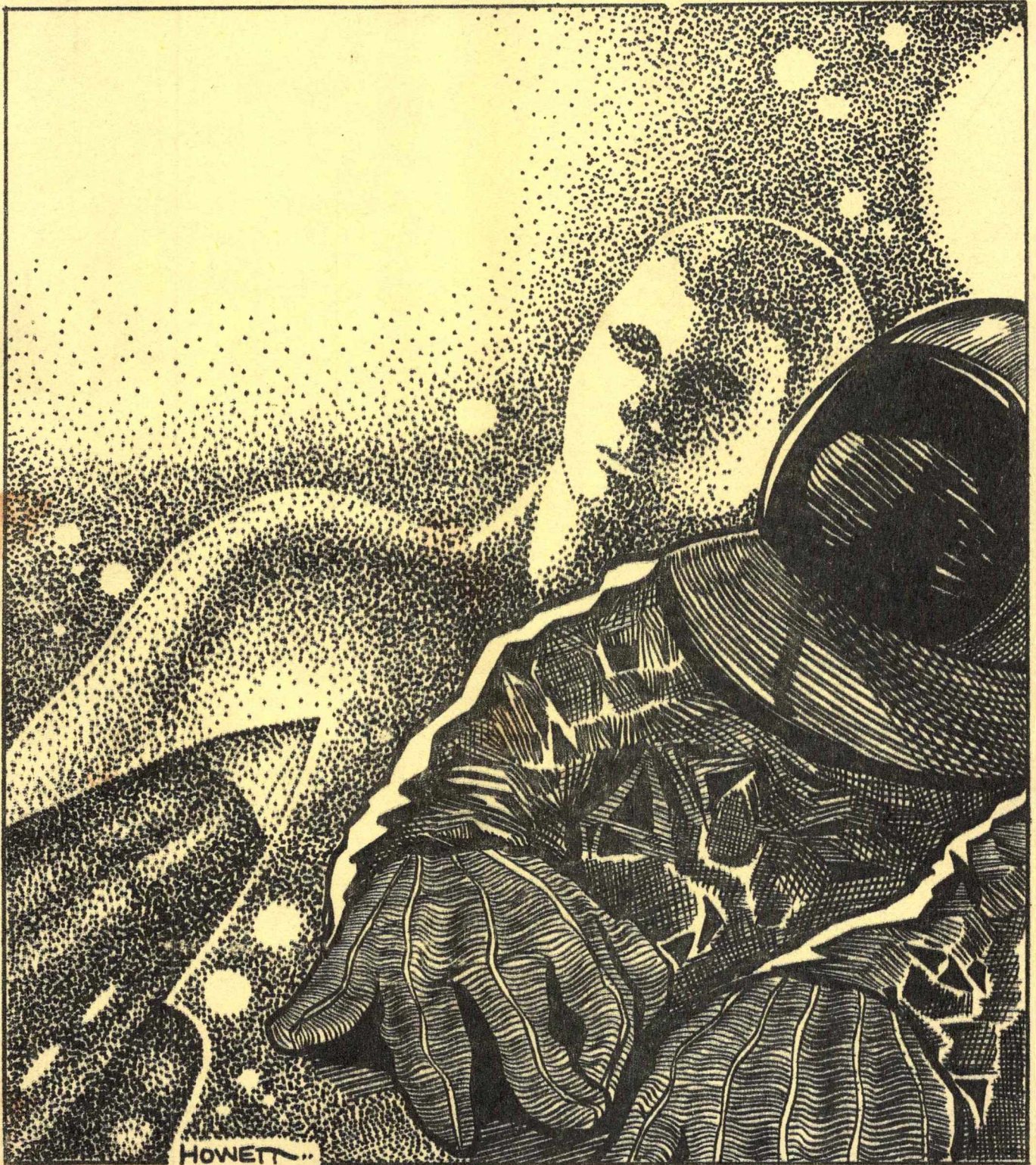


# Tangent

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HOWETT

# Tangent

Number 1

January 1965

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# EDITORIAL

TANGENT is a new BSFA magazine that will be devoted entirely to fiction. The reason for having a separate magazine instead of including the occasional story

in VECTOR is twofold. Firstly, many members have expressed dislike for amateur fiction in VECTOR whilst others have pleaded for more fiction. TANGENT caters for the latter set without affecting the former. Secondly, it will be possible to increase the BSFA's publications output. Simply including fiction with VECTOR, making it twice as big, only puts more work on the shoulders of one person. This way, there can be two editors - one for TANGENT and one for VECTOR. The status of TANGENT's editor in relation to the BSFA committee is not yet certain. It is quite probable, though, that it will be up to the Publications Officer to find someone willing to edit TANGENT. Whether this person will have voting status or not can be discussed more fully at the Annual General Meeting at Easter. Doubtless many other points will be raised at the same time.

This first issue will be distributed free to all members of the BSFA. It is also available to non-members at 1/- per copy (including postage). The second issue will not be distributed to everyone - only those who want it will receive it. It may cost 1/- per copy (1/6 to non-members) but there will be news of this in future VECTORS.

It is hoped that the BSFA will pay for future stories published in TANGENT but this will depend to a large extent on the number of members who are interested in receiving future TANGENTs. In this respect, I would appreciate your help. Those people who think they will be wanting future TANGENTs should drop me a postcard so that I'll have some idea of how many there will be. This will in no way obligate you to having future TANGENTs. If, after you've sent me a postcard, you decide not to have TANGENT, then you won't be sent one. It will be a great help if you also put on the postcard points for these stories in TANGENT 1. With a maximum of 10 points for an excellent story, this system will give a rough idea of what stories you like or don't like. The more people who send in postcards awarding points the better.

Artists may be pleased to hear that if the stories are paid for then we'll be paying for artwork as well. If you think you have artistic talents and would like the opportunity to illustrate a story, let me know. If possible, please send samples of your work if I haven't previously seen any.

Letters of comment are requested if they are sensible, constructive letters. We are not interested in letters which have comments to the effect that the whole magazine is a load of old rubbish. If you feel that way then please keep your views to yourself - you are obviously one of the people who aren't interested in TANGENT. However, you may feel that way but, at the same time, have some useful, constructive comments to make then we welcome them. It should be borne in mind, though, that TANGENT is not intended to be up to professional standard - it is intended to help budding authors who are striving to sell to the professional magazines.

DESTINY

UNKNOWN

WILLIAM AITKEN

Sitting in a spacesuit, on an outcropping of a crumbling red stone embedded in the sand of Mars, Alan Bertram Craig, (or Alpha as his friends had once named him,) wondered whether to laugh or cry. He considered the question academically and did neither. Alone and 70,000,000 miles from Earth no one would hear him anyway, and hysterical bleats inside a spacesuit might only precipitate the inevitable insanity.

He thought back to 'touchdown'.

Descending on its cone of fire, the 'Pioneer' was perhaps a hundred feet from the surface when the thundering motor cut. Cut for a micro-second, but it was too long. The ship had plummeted and his two ship mates had died. He wished he had died too.

The utter silence was 'loud' with the infinitesimal noises of his own mind and body as he gazed through the quartzite facepiece across the red ochre sandscape. Distance faded to a deep purple, the sky was a rich dark blue and he felt he could almost see the curvature of the small planet.

If the two remaining batteries in the ship would last and he could extend the eighteen months supply of food indefinitely, he might live on this barren world for years. Yes, and if he had some eggs he'd have ham and eggs if he had some ham!

The batteries compressed the thin Martian air in the gadget he'd mocked up from the ship's air purifier system but they grew weaker every day. Soon they wouldn't turn the compressor. He visualised the last prolonged and undignified gasping at the too thin atmosphere and a small cloud of red dust as he writhed in agony on the alien soil of Mars. Not moving, he had breathed the tenuous air and could manage it for a few minutes - his lungs pumping madly until he had to slap the mask

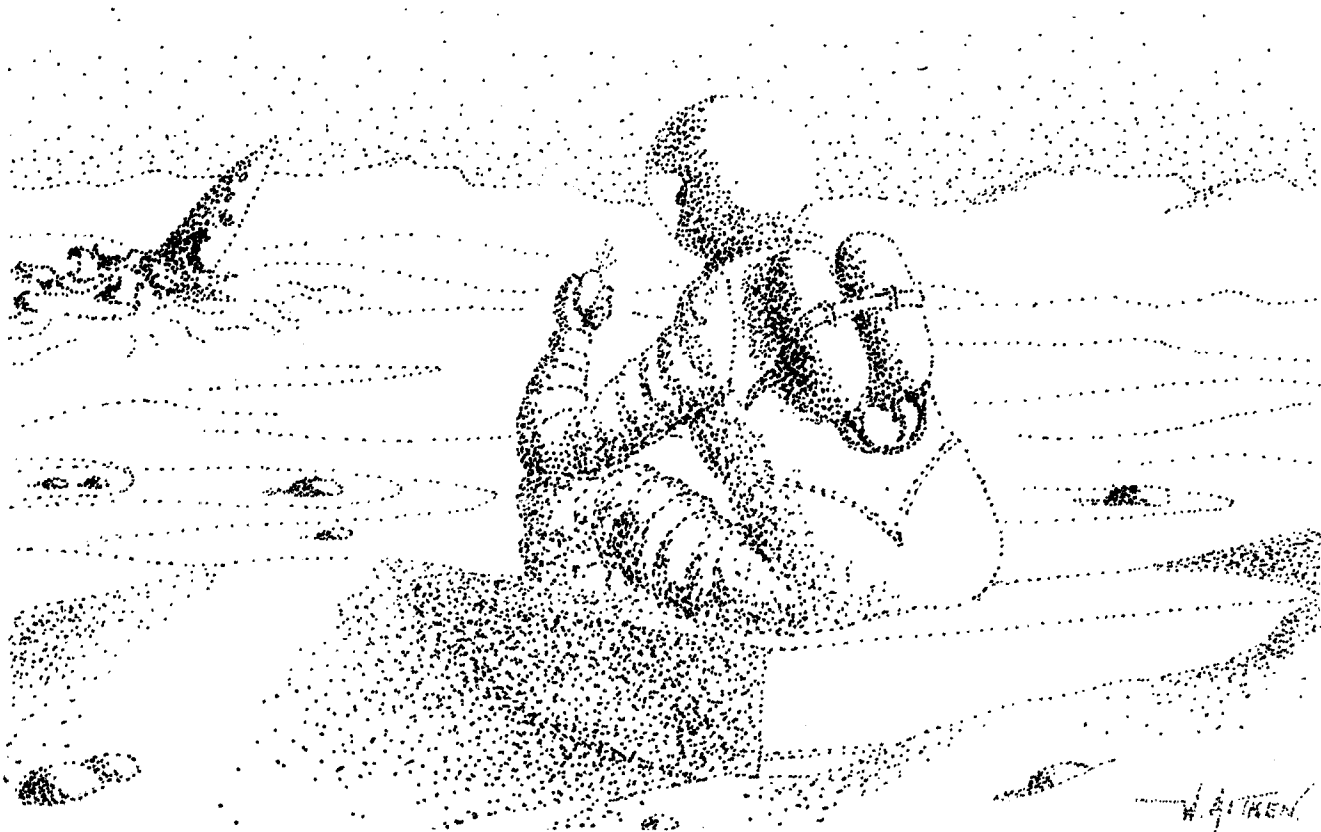
feverishly to his mouth.

One man left staring at an alien sky, staring into a short and hopeless future.

In bitterness at the indifference of the universe he raised a clumsy gauntleted fist and shook it at the twisted wreck a few hundred yards away. He thought another expedition might come but knew it would be too late. Much too late! They might find a skeleton clothed in the tattered remnants of a Mark VII spacesuit with no expression on the faceless skull. None but that of Death. Perhaps they would find out if Mars had once supported intelligent life and if any artifacts remained. The ever singing wind, thin and fairy light though it was, might, in countless millenia, erode any surface proof away. Stones like the one he sat on had puzzled him these past few days, pre-occupied though he was with his existence. It could have been a corner stone of some building, for he was sure there was an unnaturally straight line between it and the one below. He would never know and he now had neither energy or object in digging to confirm it, one way or the other.

A little dust devil, stirred by the ever cold, thin wind, formed a few yards away and danced drunkenly off, the motion rousing him from his reverie. He rose carefully, his muscles still too powerful for the fifty-odd pounds he weighed on this planet. He stepped out slowly.

Heavy boots scuffing the dust in low eddying clouds, he suddenly stopped and stared. It was beautiful. He'd been around the ship many times since crashing and seen nothing like



it. Kneeling slowly, he clumsily picked up the half hidden object. About five inches long, ovoid and just slim enough to be grasped comfortably, and somehow comfortingly, in the hand, it glowed with an unbelievable translucency. It was heavy for its size and the colours made him gasp. They reminded him of a Chinese vase he had once seen in a museum, consisting mainly of a brilliant, transient turquoise and peacock blue underlaid with a rippling white pearliness.

As he held it the colours seemed to writhe and flow with a life of their own. Absurd, but he would keep it now as a charm. He held it at arms' length to admire the glowing colours and wished it would charm him home. Astonished, he felt the Stone quiver lightly in his hand. He almost dropped it as a slight heat permeated the thick glove! Impossible! This empty lonely planet was ousting his sanity. But if he was mad, would he know it? He didn't think so, and that seemed to confirm his stability. He laughed at his credulity, but this time spoke aloud. After all, no one was there to witness his madness!

"Alright then, take me to Earth."

No doubt this time! The ovid had definitely trembled and warmed slightly. Perhaps the Earth was too far for a first request! He tried again.

"Take me to the ship."

Again the same thing happened, nothing else. He opened his hand; the stone lay there, vibrant with something more than just unearthly colours. He was now sure it was a device of some kind; but what, he wasn't sure. The thudding of blood in his ears told him of a quickened heartbeat, and the faint echo of hope at the end of a long dark tunnel of despair was barely recognised on the sounding board of his mind. He would try again before returning to the 'Pioneer' for a more technical examination. Alan was specific.

"Take me five yards."

Vertigo gripped him for a micro-second. The stone lay quiescent but he felt something different. He turned slowly. The small low sun cast deep shadows in his footprints which ended - five yards away!

His mind whirled giddily for a moment as he realised the import of what had happened. He shouted incoherently in ecstasy for a while before calming enough to try it again. After switching himself short distances about the dusty plain for some time, shouting with hysterical joy at the completion of each jump, he found the stone only functioned when he specified a distance and extended his arm in the required direction! It also made no concessions or deviations to other commands after initial one. He learned that the hard way.

In whisking about he got careless of direction and only noticed as he said the last word that his arm was in line with the ship. Frantically he tried to change it. Too late.

Sweat beaded on his forehead as he realized he was still unharmed. Another few inches and he would have been a mash of flesh, bones and suit as the stone tried to take him through the ship's hull. His outstretched hand was only a fraction from the shining metal. He didn't understand this enigmatic stone but had suspicions of its origination. Psionics!

He couldn't be sure, but, when held at arms length, it probably linked up the electromagnetic forces of the mind and body with those of the universe, and the thought that it was required caused the stone to be alerted. If that was so, then the function of the device was merely to act as booster and put into action what the mind desired. To teleport!

That being so, then the desire existed whether voiced or thought and should still function. Alan tried it, concentrating on direction and distance. He teleported instantly!

He considered. It would not matter whether he thought in Gaelic or idiomatic Chinese, for obviously his own mind controlled it and so, if he thought three yards he would shift three yards, if three metres then it would move him what he considered three metres constituted! Simple. Psionics made an exact science by some ancient race, instead of a tentative fumble in the immense darkness of ignorance by humanity still largely sceptical of the possibilities.

It could have other inherent properties as well as the one he had inadvertently discovered. The potential of psionics was unknown and perhaps undreamed of. He decided two, at least, were feasible; telepathy and precognition. But how to test them? Certainly he felt nothing. He whisked back to the ship in one long soundless, timeless leap and several small ones, the last very carefully.

The immensely distant and tiny sun sunk below the horizon and he looked at the blue twinkle of Earth before seeking the cold comfort of the ship. He wasn't sure, maybe it was a subconscious fear to risk the unknown, but he decided to sleep one night more before the big test. Excitement gripped him but he was afraid to let his joy bubble up. Many things could happen. Only one worried him - if the stone should fail and leave him alone among the cold stars!

He conserved the suit heating unit during the night but the deathly cold came seeping into the ship and through his suit. He may have need of it later tomorrow but he had to live through the night. At intervals he woke and switched on for a while, enough to stay alive.

Dawn came slowly to his again doubting mind. Had it all really happened?

Alan straightened his numb and aching body and examined the still gleaming ovoid, holding it before distant Sol. It was opaque but he got the dissatisfying feeling it might become transparent any moment, that moment always being the one he

looked away! This then was a device left by some alien civilization now long gone? Gone perhaps to the stars. Maybe one hadn't gone!

Fearful lest it had been imagination Alan tried it once more, this time with his hand held perpendicular. If he meant to leave Mars then it was time to see if he could leave the surface at all! He thought, "Take me two hundred feet."

He gasped, perhaps he even screamed, and vertigo clawed wildly at his mind. He struggled for a few seconds, then with a superhuman effort he gulped his panic down. He stared. He was far above the desert!

He laughed, on the verge of hysterics. It worked, it really worked! "Take me another hundred feet", he snouted.

The wrecked 'pioneer' now assumed the proportions of a broken toy. What a feeling! At last he indulged his pent-up feelings, he could go home.

Discretion gone, he flung his arms wide in joyous abandon. He gyrated madly, and panicking again tried to grasp at nothing, accentuating the disturbing motion. Breathless with fear, his heart stopped momentarily as he thought of what might have happened had he dropped the stone. Then, gradually, calming down, he looked at the panorama of Mars spread on all sides. Barren - but beautiful. He could now be more dispassionate about the beauty. The long dark shadows were gradually lessening as the planet turned ponderously, the colour livening, and the distant mountains which he could just see for the first time were a deep, hazy purple on the violet skyline. Maybe one day man would make all this desert green.

He pointed his arm at the surface. "Take me three hundred feet."

He should have remembered, and he did - later.

His spine jarred, he crashed to his knees and dropped the ovoid, the pain in his heels intolerable. Gradually the pain subsided and he could marvel at his stupidity and luck.

Of course! The planet had swung in those few minutes and he had no longer been over the point where he had left the surface! He had no broken bones but it could have been disastrous.

Dust was inches thick where he had returned. Had he come down on rock his whole frame might have shattered if the contour of the surface had risen more than a few inches. Careful handling was essential.

Now he would eat, sleep, have another meal (for he did not know if transference was instantaneous) and when the brilliant green evening star rose, he would go home. It appeared instantaneous but then, he had travelled short distances only, infinitesimal compared to what he intended!

He prepared carefully.



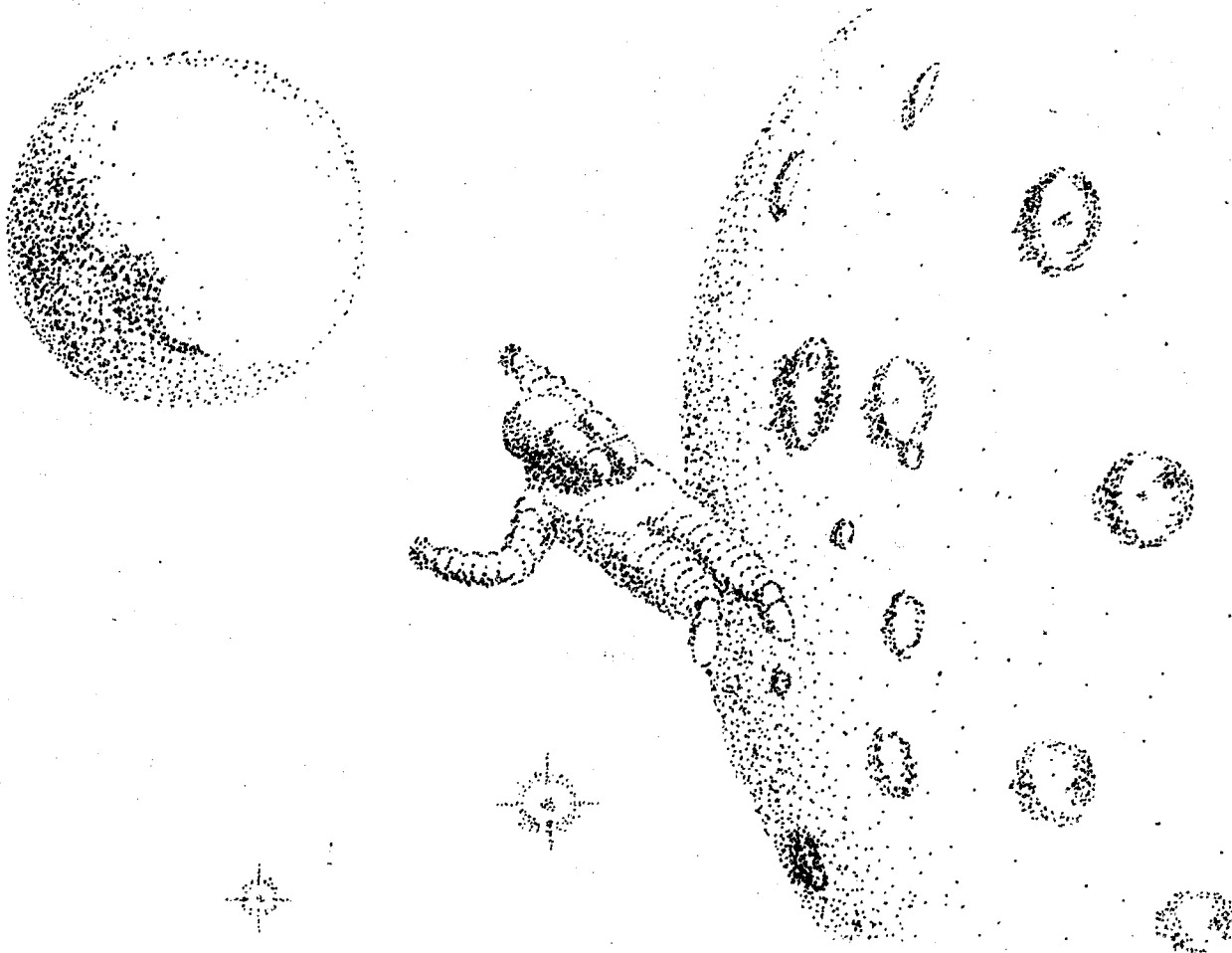
Air supply, suit checked, notes on the trip out and a supply of water from the one remaining tank in his helmet container. He rechecked and was satisfied.

Alan had been unable to sleep. Carefully he drew the ovoid from his suit pocket. He hoped his calculations were accurate. The Earth was very unyielding! It wasn't likely he would hit it anyway. Large though it was, it was still only a point of light at this immense distance.

Alan took a last, long look round the silent landscape, knelt, took a handful of sand and small smooth pebbles, straightened and slipped them into one of the suit pockets as a memento. Swallowing on a suddenly dry throat, he pointed his hand, with the ovoid now bound into the awkward glove, at the Earth. Alan spoke slowly and solemnly. "Take me seventy three million miles."

Again nausea snatched cruelly at his insides, worse than before, but this time he controlled the wild surge of panic. He was going home!

Seconds passed before he realised one thing; it wasn't



instantaneous. Earth was still a star. He strained in the opposite direction of the sun's blinding light, and managed to gaze back at the dwindling red planet. It was still plainly an orb, but receding at incredible speed. As he watched, Mars became only a point of light and the blackness closed around him. This was loneliness which plumbed the depths of his soul and made the memory of the Martian deserts almost homelike. He must fix his mind on something tangible and ahead was Earth wheeling in her orbit.

Although only seconds had passed, it was easier to pick out Earth from the myriad, many coloured fiery points which stabbed at his eyes. They streamed all round him as he fell through the black gulf, the blue star swelling and rushing towards him at fantastic velocity. When Earth was as large as an orange would appear at arm's length, he knew for certain that, even if he had overestimated the distance, he would miss it. His mind congealed as he thought of plunging on for ever if the stone should now lose it's power.

Then he screamed. He had forgotten this!

Like a brilliantly illuminated, mottled ball, the moon hurtled at him, growing and growing; massive, overpowering till it filled the universe. Like a huge, curved wall, pock marked and streaked, the moon swelled to full extent of his side vision, soundlessly rushed past and was gone. Close - too close. Sweat stung his dilated eyes.

Partial composure regained, he realised he had stopped. Exultation filled him. He was perhaps half a million miles out and the blue green of Earth hung against the darkness below his feet, the moon a mere tiny crescent far to one side, the system serene and immobile. Only now did he allow himself to begin to believe he might really make it.

During the next few seconds, he jumped in, ever closer, till Earth filled all his vision. He had to use all his will to conquer the feeling of endless falling, on and on.

Suddenly the suit heated intolerably, over and above the intense heat coming from his body in the confined suit. He was in atmosphere! Another second or two and he would have burned up like any meteor, only faster.

Not liking the idea of being radar spotted, Alan decided on the north pole for touch-down. He thought it would be the most unorthodox landing in the long history of Old Mother Earth, and it was!

Gradually he found, by experience, how far he could travel in any one move before he felt the heat of friction through the suit. Heart pounding clamourously, he dropped the last few inches to the cold white ceiling of the world. His world.

Thick boots touched hard packed snow, then he really went wild with joy. He patted the snow in triumph and waddled

around in the suit, hardly aware of the unusual gravity, and breathing the biting cold, but so sweet, air through his now open facepiece. Keeping close to sea level, he followed the curvature of the Earth in the direction of civilisation.

Alan stood on a Scottish moor, not far from a high-land town, on almost the farthest north point of the mainland. It was foolhardy to risk his life now, where so many things could be in his path. Quickly discarding and hiding his space-suit, he made his way townwards and to a televisor. There was more than a surprise in store for a few people!

Later, sitting in a comfortable monorail cabin, he chuckled silently but with real mirth, as he recollected Director Barnett's face on the small 'visor screen. The grey-haired commander of the Interplanetary Project had dropped his craggy jaw in bewildered incredulity.

Alan smiled, shaded the window, and looked up to catch the small orange point of light that was Mars. He felt the smooth coldness of the stone through his pocket against his thigh and sighed. Man could have the stars now.

Barring snags, the human race was being handed the Rosetta stone of interstellar travel.

He decided he wouldn't be going.....ever!

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Weeks later, anyone interested might have seen a small news item low on one of the pages of a national newspaper. The text would have puzzled the uninitiated.

"Craig, sole survivor of the ill-fated Mars venture, is reported to have sent a letter, obviously written under great strain and confusion of mind, to Director Barnett of the Interplanetary Project; in which he discloses a fact of vital interest to the nation and humanity. Our privacy may soon be forfeit.

Craig intimated that he has transferred secretly, since his return all provisions necessary to live on Mars for an indefinite period. He regrets the necessity for this move but emphasises he must leave his neighbours, friends and associates for now they are none of these things to him. The stone from Mars had other properties. He is now telepathic!

Somewhere, Craig continues, in the human mind there is a spark of inherent goodness, glowing and fading continually, but at least there, perhaps some day to grow and spread through all humanity. But for him this is not enough. Constantly, waking and sleeping, he is subject to the silent shouting in his mind of lust, greed, envy, spite and bestiality with only an occasional shaft of purity to enable him to barely retain his sanity.

Continued on Page 22.

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# THE STRINGS OF LOVE

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W. T. WEBB

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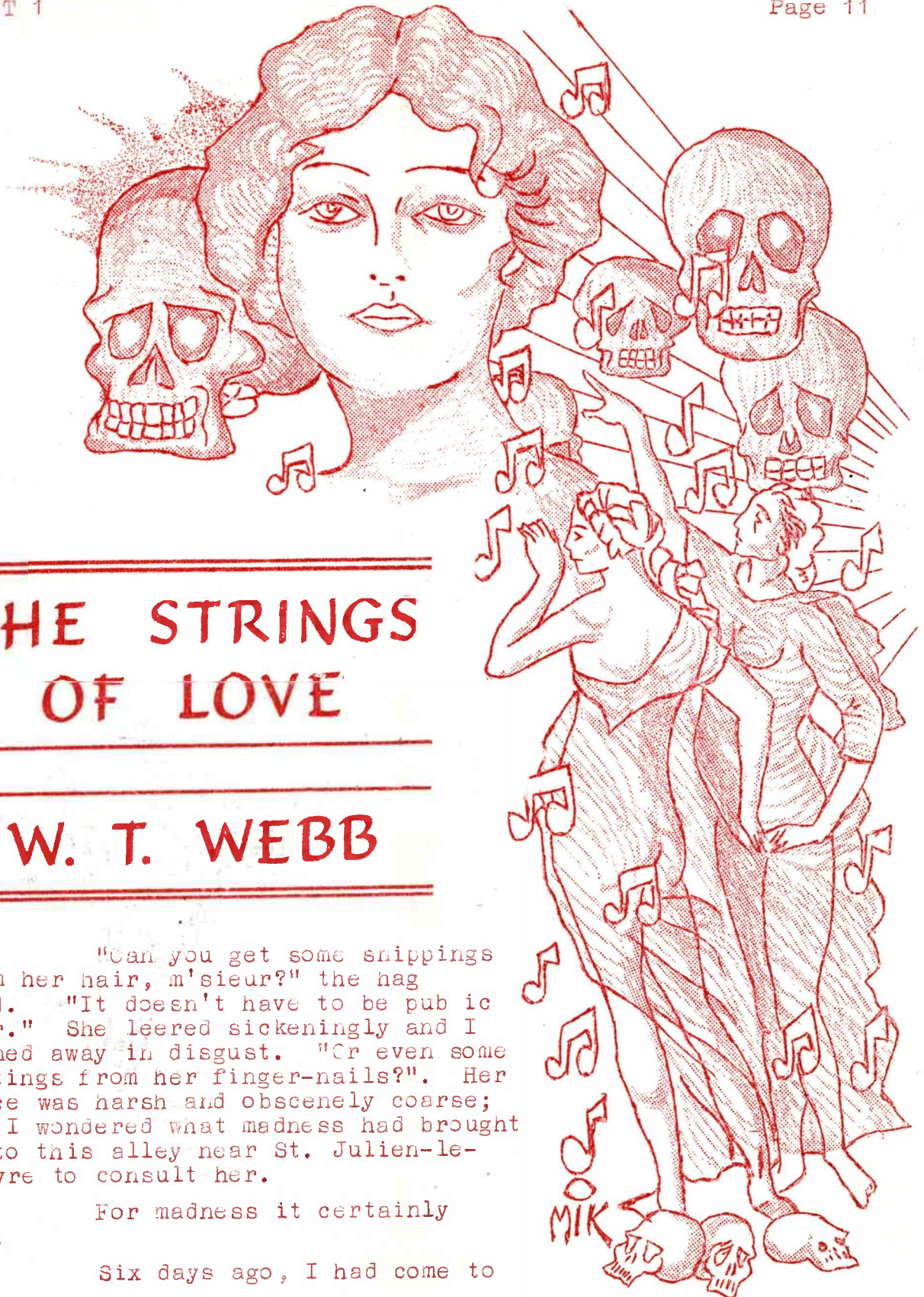


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"Can you get some snippings from her hair, m'sieur?" the hag said. "It doesn't have to be public hair." She leered sickeningly and I turned away in disgust. "Or even some cuttings from her finger-nails?". Her voice was harsh and obscenely coarse; and I wondered what madness had brought me to this alley near St. Julien-le-Pauvre to consult her.

For madness it certainly was.

Six days ago, I had come to



Paris with the Starlighters Beat Group to play in one of the cafes near the Boulevard St. Michel. On the very first night I had heard the singer who had driven me out of my senses.

Naturally, I had heard haunting songs before. All my life I have been seeking music of one kind or another. I have lived by music and starved for it, and although I played several instruments besides my beloved guitar, Music, real music, always seemed to elude me.

Then, on my first evening in Paris, I heard, from a distance, a woman singing a song which welled deep into my soul. Her stirring voice, the superb melody, and the fiery words, although muted by distance, added up to the one song that all my life I had wanted to hear. Afterwards, I knew I could not be happy unless I spent the rest of my time in that woman's company.

I deserted the Starlighters without compunction, and since that day I had wandered the streets of the Left Bank trying to find my singer. In my mind's eye I pictured her, tall and dark, with a good figure, and the sort of defiant yet soulful face that would go with the immensely moving words and music of her song.

I wandered with my guitar slung across my shoulders, sleeping by day, and at night haunting the bistros and clubs where she might put in an appearance. Sometimes, above the roar of Paris, I caught the sound of her voice singing that one song, but always the sound was coming from another street, and I lost the trail down some dark, cobbled alley. Then once more the song would blossom in the night wind. Over the grimy roofs it floated, luring me on and on, until by the light of dawn I collapsed with exhaustion in some sordid little hotel.

During my wanderings I was often accosted by women of the street and other perverted prowlers of the night-world, but to me they were no more substantial than phantoms. I had always been fastidious, and from now on there would only be one woman for me, in this world and the next - the singer of that haunting song. If she were already married when I found her, I would work for her in any capacity - if necessary without payment. Just to know her and be close to her was all I demanded of life.

At last my searchings had brought me to the repulsive Madame Cornelius, who had a reputation throughout the Latin Quarter, as a woman of extraordinary powers - especially where affairs of the heart were concerned. But, having asked her to locate my singer, I felt sure she was nothing but a charlatan imposing upon the love-lorn and the superstitious.

"Wait!" she commanded, as I approached the door. I turned, and she spread her hands in a rapid gesture. Despite her age, her figure was slim and well-rounded. Her black hair was decorated with numerous jewelled combs. Her ugly face was mobile, expressive and viciously intelligent.

"They told me you could do many things," I said. "Especially for people in love. I had hoped you would find this singer for me, but with your talk of hair and nail-clippings, it is obvious you only aim to mock me."

She threw her head back and, with her heavily-lidded eyes half closed, regarded a dark corner of the room near the ceiling.

"This Englishman," she said, as though conversing with a third person, "He asks me to find for him a woman - a singer- in Paris, which is as full of singers as the Bourse is full of thieves. He does not know her name, or where she lives or works. He does not know how old she is, if she is pretty or ugly, or even her nationality. All he knows is that she sings a love-song that goes something like this. La-di-da-di-da!" Her screeching hag-voice made a hideous parody of the song I loved.

"Stop!" I said fiercely. "It goes like this."

And swinging my guitar round, I began to play the melody that had ruled my consciousness for the past six days. My guitar seemed to sing as I strove with all I had in me to reproduce the sound-waves of the singer's voice. For once I was successful, and I seemed to capture her very timbre with my vibrating strings. When I had finished, the old woman was looking at me with something like wonder on her cynical face.

"Ah - that song!"

"You know it? You know the woman who sings it?"

Her reptilian lips stretched into a smile. "In Paris there are many women who sing that song," she said. "It is all the rage."

"Then-"

She held up a hand with many rings on the fingers.

"But there is only one woman in the whole world who can sing it as you have just played it. She was the one who first made it popular."

"Who is she, Madame Cornelius? I must see her."

She smiled craftily.

"You desire to meet this woman?"

"Indeed I do. Can you arrange it?"

The old hag pouted her mouth and made an avaricious gesture with her fingertips. "In Paris, anything can be arranged for lovers - with money. Without money, love is only a pain."

"I have money," I told her eagerly. "How much do you want to arrange this meeting?"

For a moment she was silent. Her lined old face remained so still that it almost looked corpse-like. Only her fingers twitched, as though she was mentally calculating figures.

"One thousand," she said at length.

"A thousand francs?"

She looked at me pityingly.

"What do you take me for? A cheap procuress? I am Madame Cornelius, the woman who can do things which no one else would dare. For this service, m'sieur, the fee is one thousand English pounds. I cannot do it for less."

"But that's impossible!" I protested.

She shrugged and made a half-insolent, half cringing gesture.

"Then forget it m'sieur! Who are we to attempt the impossible? Only the good God can work miracles." Her eyes narrowed into slits. "The fee for a meeting with this singer of yours is one thousand pounds, not a penny less."

I turned to go. And then I thought of the voice and the music.

"Alright, madame, I'll try to raise the money somehow."

"Tomorrow at midnight," she said, dismissing me. "At number 173 the Rue Alma."

I have no intention of recounting here how I raised the money, or how I passed the intervening hours. Suffice to say that within half an hour of the appointed time I was walking down the Rue Alma with a thousand pounds in my pocket and looking for number 173. It was a cloudy night with the wind howling down the narrow street and a half-moon occasionally showing above the tall, decaying buildings.

The surroundings were mean and sordid. At times I was tempted to abandon my search. What if the singer I idolised should prove to be the depraved inmate of some vile bordello?

Yet I knew that even then I could not prevent myself from loving. She had only to begin her song and I would be helplessly infatuated.

And then, even as these thoughts came into my mind, I heard it. The song and the singer. Faintly at first, it throbbed wild and lovely down the ill-lit street, making me think of Joan of Arc, and Heloise, and Marie Curie. Always before the singer had been in another street. But now I was heading right towards her. I began to run. My heart thumped. My guitar bumped against my hip.

At the door of number 173 I did not need to look at the number-plate. Two men stood outside it as though on guard; but heedlessly I rushed past them and up a short flight of stairs. The song was loud now, loud and close. Within seconds I would be with the singer.

At the top of the stairs a door opened, and the witch-like silhouette of Madame Cornelius blocked my view of the inside of the room.

"You have brought the money?"

I gave her the wad of notes without a glance. As she stepped aside I entered the room and saw the singer for the first time. But she was not singing. The voice was coming from a portable gramophone placed on a bedside chair. And upon the nearby bed in an earth-daubed coffin lay the corpse of a woman. It was hard to tell, by looking at her, how old she had been when she died. But the grave had not entirely taken away her beauty. I knew without a doubt, that she was indeed the singer of my wonderful song.

As I stood there, gripping my guitar, the music came to an end. The gramophone stopped; and I read the words on the label of the disc. "The Strings of Love" sung by Emelie Palmier.

Then I rubbed some soil away and read the inscription on the coffin. "Emelie Palmier 1922 to 1964. She plucked the strings of love with her singing."

While Madame Cornelius looked on mockingly, I tore the strings from my guitar, placed them across the breast of the dead woman, and closed the coffin lid.

"M'sieur is satisfied?" said the hag beside me. She took the disc from the turntable and thrust it into my hand.

"Take it for a souvenir. And now hurry away! My sons must return the coffin to the graveyard before daylight.

I dropped the record from my numb fingers and heard it fall to the floor beside my muted guitar. And then, as I walked blindly down the stairs, the night was made suddenly wonderful by the voice of Emelie Palmier singing, "The strings of love bind for ever..."



# PLEASURE MASK

## EDWARD MACKIN

The boxes were lethal. This wasn't realised at first, of course. They were just plain, square boxes addressed to the recipient and delivered in the ordinary way through the post.

Inside was something that looked like a respirator. It fitted over the face and the elastic headbands kept it in position. From the outside the bulbous lenses were opaque. You put it on, and you were fishing. You were fishing in a silver stream. Everywhere was green and gold and wonderful, with the heart-stirring warmth that comes, not just from the sun but, from within. That's if you liked fishing. Maybe your tastes ran to something more sophisticated. Sitting in a night club, perhaps, surrounded by beautiful women.

If you were a woman it might be your lost youth that you pined for, or the sights and sounds of your childhood, with everything far more beautiful than the world has ever been. It was the world transformed. There was a feeling that this is what lies behind the commonplace, a feeling of exaltation, of pure happiness, and not just for the moment; but the moment expanded, extended.....indefinitely.

Behind the grotesque masks with their protruding eye-pieces were a billion different worlds. Most of them were far better than the real world; but some were far worse, if only slightly more insane, because all the stops of horror had been pulled out before. Hell was there for those who wanted it.

The whole planet was like a run-down clock. The dreamers sat entranced and almost starved. Then, grudgingly they awoke, and stole out into the cold, grey world. They

found no-one to sell them anything. There was no-one to stop them from stealing, either. So they stole as much tinned food as they could carry and went back to their dusty flats. They ate a little, and shivered until they lost themselves again in the worlds behind the masks.

There was no transport, no manufacturers, no tilling of the land, no doing anything any more. The human race was trapped on the flypaper of its own sick dreams.

But one man roamed the deserted streets like a raging lion. Up one street and down another; in and out of the houses, shops and flats; removing masks, and pleading with people, explaining to them, even throwing their masks through the windows, or trampling them underfoot, smashing the lenses into luminescent splinters, and breaking the intricate mechanism hidden in the face-piece.

He was a man without a name and with only a vaguely-remembered past. A man who had awakened into a world of nightmare stillness. He left a trail of ruin behind him. People just threw themselves out of the windows after the masks, or killed themselves in some other way. They took no heed of his explanations and warnings. He might have been talking pure gibberish. It meant nothing to them. He shouted his warning in the echoing streets, feeling like a biblical prophet.

"The aliens are coming!" he shouted. "The aliens are coming!"

Only the blind listened to him. He went from city to city, and his sightless army grew. One day he called a conference of his officers and told them what he thought they had to do.

"They'll be here in force soon," he said. "They will come in their starships and overrun the Earth. Then they will kill some of us and enslave the rest. Their agents are already here, and they will be waiting at the airfields or near the plains. Anywhere flat and open where a starship can land. We must find them and kill them, and mine these places."

"We won't have time," someone pointed out. "It would take weeks to mine even a moderate-sized field."

"We'll use H-bombs," he told them. "One bomb to each possible landing place, and we'll leave a man behind to detonate it should they land there. After that we will wear pseudo pleasure masks, and wait for them with gun and knife. There is no other way. Their technology must be centuries ahead of ours."

"At least three-thousand years," they said.

He looked at them, curiously, and saw the eyes appear

where no eyes had been. He saw the way they smiled a cat-and-bird smile, and fled through the open window. Only their laughter followed him. They were so sure of themselves.

Hours later he was still running. Running and walking, and falling flat on his face, and getting up, and forcing his legs to continue their flight from horror. Suddenly he stopped and looked about him. He was in open country and he knew what he had to do. He had remembered something. A little of his past life.

One man was not beaten. Not though the stars fell, he thought, and ground his teeth with rage. It was strictly a one-man job now. There was no-one else to do it.

It was the end, too; but he couldn't help that. Better a dead world, or no world at all, than a world of aliens. That was where his specialised knowledge came in. Hadn't he worked on the new cobalt war-head? And what had the chief technician called it? The final weapon!

"This is it," he had observed with satisfaction. "No-one dare use it, though. It's a planet-buster. The final weapon."

There were thirty-three cobalt war heads in that secret dump at Leverton, and there, right ahead, was Leverton Wood. Two-hundred yards from the first fringe of trees was what had once been the most heavily-guarded military establishment in the country. It took him only a few minutes to reach the place. There was no-one to prevent his entering. Somewhere out of sight, and beyond hearing, the soldiers and the technicians would be dreaming strange dreams under their alien pleasure masks.

He found the keys to the central dump, where the bombs were, without any trouble. Then he was walking down the narrow, concrete steps that were there only for use in an emergency, such as a power-cut when the lift wouldn't be workable. Now there was a permanent power-cut. Nothing would work again.....ever. He turned the key in the great door and went in.

The war-heads lay, black and shiny and enormous in their springy cradles of steel and rubber. You set them electrically and a timing mechanism detonated them. He set all thirty-three of them allowing nine seconds to zero. Smiling sardonically, he did the count-down.

"Here's luck!" he said, with one second to go.

Then a hand swept across his face and the pleasure mask, he thought he had spurned, was torn away. He was lying across the unmade bed in his own flat. He felt no fear; only utter desolation as the truth wormed into his betrayed mind.

There was death in their violet eyes.

# THE STRANGERS WILL COME . . .

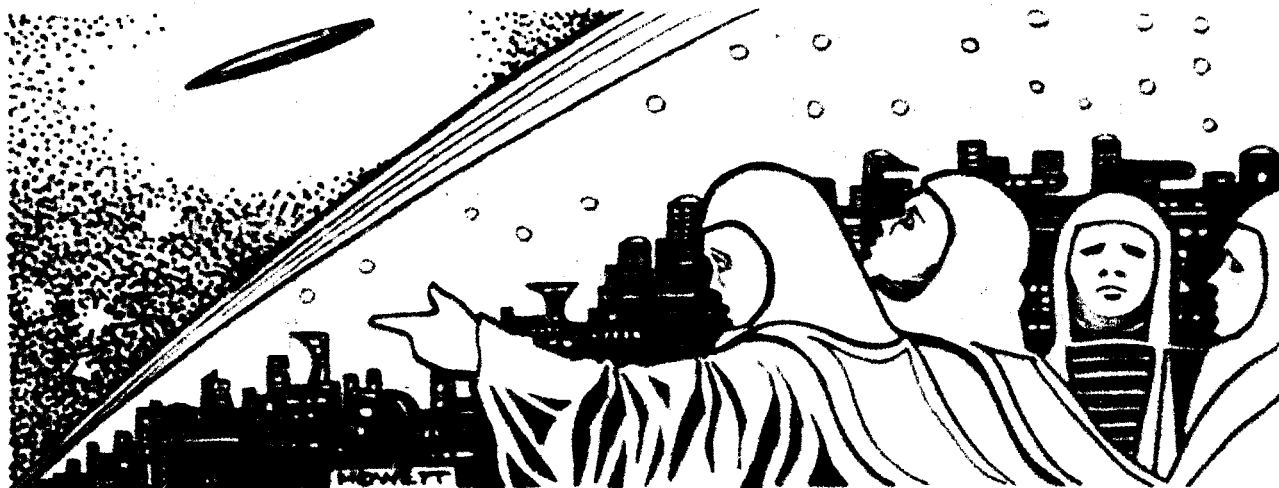
## BERT LEWIS

Life had gone on very serenely in the great domed cities all over the planet for over a hundred generations. Life was very pleasant too, in this millenium of peace; war had been abolished and with it, fear of want and all that it brings. Science now served man in every way that he needed it.

There had been a time when there was danger of over-crowding and its relative over-consuming of the necessities needed to support life. This had reached a critical stage at about the time that the scientists discovered that the planet's atmosphere was slowly being lost into the stratosphere above, mainly through the unguarded use of nuclear power and its abuse by a few power-crazed groups of unscrupulous politicians.

Once this was known, there had been a mad race for power by some groups to save their own possessions and their own skins. Planet-wide fighting led to a war which lasted for years, during which two thirds of the population were wiped out.

Sane men had banded together; if man had to survive, then man had to fight in a different way. Science and sanity eventually prevailed. All available sources of supplies, food and scientific instruments were mustered to serve mankind. Synthetic foods alone were not enough, but to produce them naturally, they needed the vital elements of the atmosphere. These were fast draining away into space, so the air must be kept there by artificial means. Science found the way.



Necessity became the mother of invention. Scientists and engineers toiled together to overcome the danger which threatened man and , out of their combined efforts there was born the life-dome.

From small beginnings developed the huge transparent domes to cover the new cities. Cities which had sprung up to replace those destroyed by the ravages of planetary war. Science produced the material for the domes which retained the precious air envelope, but still allowed the life-giving rays of the sun to come through and keep mankind warm in the night periods, when the tenuous atmosphere made the cold more intense.

Stout hearts and strong backs provided the wherewithal to create the great atmospheric domes which now dotted the planet. Transport between the cities was made possible by the creation of covered ways between them. Food was now available beneath the giant transparent roofs. Food was produced in sufficient quantities in hydroponic farms attached to each city.

Government became simple; leaders were elected by common consent, no reward was asked and none was given. All knowledge became the property of the people, education was open to all members of the communities. All knowledge was recorded on phonic-wires, picture record was made on thin film-tapes. Such records could be used to educate all future generations.

To ensure that overcrowding should not occur, families were limited by common consent to two children. In this way, there was no rapid growth of population. All cities had ample room for their inhabitants. Work was evenly distributed amongst the people so that leisure time was plentiful and life and living assumed a serene state.

Contentment rested on every family; worry was a thing of the dim past for the peoples of these lovely cities, with their exotic gardens and magnificent halls with the collections of beautiful art-forms.

The only time that man ventured outside the life-domes, was to further the needs of the sciences. Subsidiary domes had been erected atop the main structures and in these were housed the giant telescopes which probed the heavens through the thin atmosphere of the planet.

New galaxies were discovered, photographed and analysed, providing an ever-widening field of knowledge of the universe.

The first hint that something was wrong, came as a shock to the people of this idyllic world. At first it was only a hint, but it could not be kept a secret for long. To prevent undue panic, the scientists had refrained from saying too much, as it had been difficult to pin-point anything with surety. It was certain that what had been seen, had no origins on the planet itself. They had caught a brief glimpse of what had appeared to be some sort of space-craft. It had been

observed as a bright object, traversing the heavens towards the sun, but the observation was not of sufficient length to obtain an accurate photographic record, so it was dismissed as some unidentified object not known to science.

Gradually the matter faded into the background of conversation, then, less than a year later, the scientists were again jolted into alertness when an exposed photographic plate had shown a bright streak, obliquely made against the background of stars.

Telescopes above the largest cities were quickly trained on that part of the heavens where the original observation had been made. Film-tapes were made of the subject; these were then enlarged to attempt identification. More film-tapes were made with greater magnification power and again enlarged to allow a more detailed examination.

There was no mistake this time, something out there was orbiting the planet at regular intervals.

Due to the conditions prevailing on the planet, space-flight had been ruled out as a doubtful means of exploration. What had not been envisaged, was that someone, or something, from another world could come to this planet.

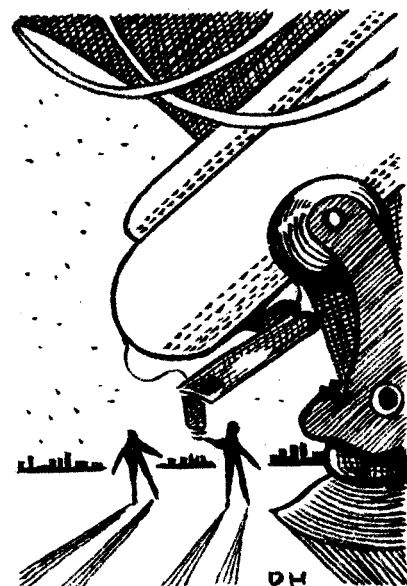
Even the photographs did not show for sure that the space-craft passing overhead contained beings like themselves. What then did it contain? Some form of robot? Were they being observed by some race of alien beings from outer space, or was this perhaps the prelude to some fantastic invasion?

Imagination began to paint bizarre pictures of what the space-ship might contain. People meeting in the streets, talked of it in hushed tones. "Strangers will come from other worlds...." "Will we be invaded"? "If they come, how will we be able to defend ourselves"?....."We have had no weapons for generations."

It was true, in their way of living, they were almost defenceless in the domed cities. Of course, the domes were made of tough plastic material, that had been necessary from the first, but against an attack such as could be launched from the space above them they were almost powerless to offer any defence against it.

For the first time in living memory, fear became a daily experience and soon began to show in their daily lives.

The, after many days of the growing terror, the orbiting vessel suddenly vanished from the skies overhead and was seen to leave in a large trajectory-arc in the direction of the sun.



What was its point of origin and what was its destination as it swung away from their skies?

Would it return, perhaps with others? What had happened once could happen again. What would happen to them when it returned?

Never again would they live in their idyllic security. Always there would be hanging over them this feeling of dread for a future so utterly unpredicable.

By day and by night, the very thoughts of the people were being dominated by the fear that the strangers would come...sooner or later.

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In homes throughout the country, television screens showed an announcer making report on the progress of the latest triumph in space-flight.

"We have just been informed that the latest space-probe has proved completely successful. Following the failure to send a space-capsule to orbit the planet Mars, scientists at Cape Kennedy report that the probe sent out last month was made to orbit the planet and completed over forty circuits, during which film records were made. In answer to a signal sent out from the controlling station, the capsule's guidance system operated the subsidiary rocket-jets and blasted off from the pull of the planet and has returned safely to earth."

"The capsule was recovered intact and preliminary checks show that good films were obtained, which showed the surface of the planet, taken from an altitude of 250 miles. Although very little detail can be seen from these pictures, it would appear that the surface of the planet would be suitable for eventual landings."

"It is thought that within the year, another probe will be sent out to the planet Mars, but this time, a soft landing with instruments will be attempted. If this should fail, it is even possible that a crash landing could be accomplished, as it is considered that no great harm will be done by this technique. It is not expected that any form of life as we know it, exists on the planet."

"Further details of the recent probe will be given as they are received. That is the end of the communique from Cape Kennedy".

Destiny Unknown

Continued from Page 10

his letter grows incoherent towards the end, scrawling across the paper in page wide words "...noise...unbearable noise...must leave..eternal yammering..humanity not prepared... must go...!" and ends up enigmatically with the wildly scribbled signature...."Omega!"

Cf Alan Bertram Craig, there is no trace on Earth."

