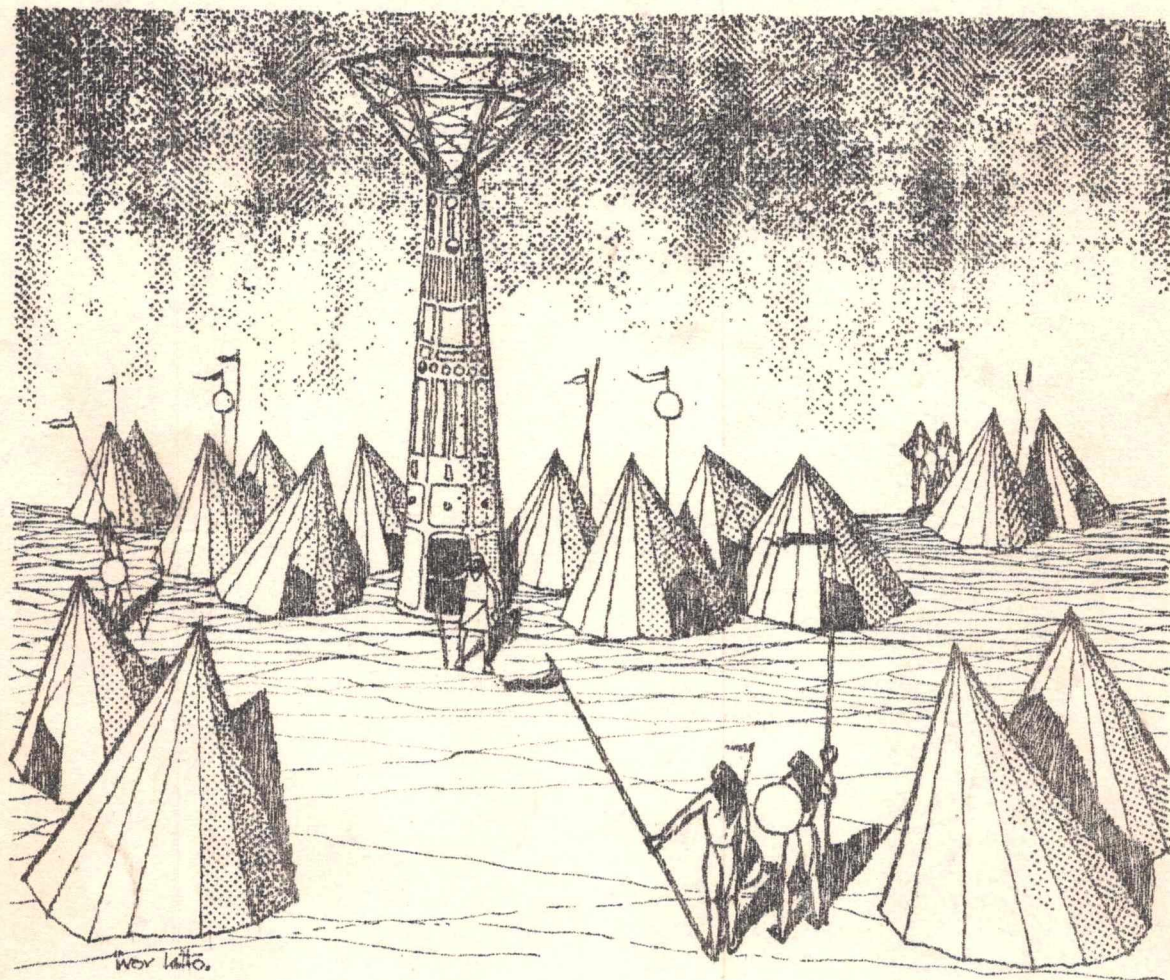


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# TANGENT

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**E. C. TUBB**

**MICHAEL MOORCOCK**

**JOHN BARFOOT**

**P. F. WOODS**

**ROY KAY**

**DAVID COPPING**

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**NUMBER 2 · TWO SHILLINGS**

# THE BIBLE

THE BIBLE IS THE WORD OF GOD

THE BIBLE IS THE FOUNDATION OF OUR FAITH

THE BIBLE IS THE LIGHT OF OUR LIVES

THE BIBLE IS THE POWER OF GOD

THE BIBLE IS THE TRUTH

THE BIBLE IS THE WAY TO LIFE

THE BIBLE IS THE GIFT OF GOD

THE BIBLE IS THE WORD OF GOD

# TANGENT

EDITED BY CHRIS PRIEST

TANGENT. Vol. I, No. II  
SEPTEMBER, 1965

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Illustration (from Reach out for Yesterday)

- Ivor Latto

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# EDITORIAL

ONCE UPON A TIME there was a family who lived in a house on the outskirts of a metropolitan sprawl called Mainstream, and although it was indeed a large house conditions inside it were extraordinarily cramped. The whole family lived there, from grandfather, great-uncle and great-grandfather, down through all the fathers, brothers and uncles, aunts wives sisters, mothers and daughters, nephews, sons, grandsons, cousins and stepsons.....to as many great-grandchildren as you care to imagine. They all lived there for many years, and because they were such a close-knit family unit, they acquired a certain notoreity with the neighbours. Although they were accepted into the rather smug existence of the suburb it was with a marked air of tolerance; mention their name in public, and you did so in hushed tones.

You see, the name of the house was Speculation, and the family's name was Science Fiction.

For nearly forty years the family has lived there, constantly growing. Back in the old days, when the family wasn't as large as it is today, they'd have a lot of visitors; Authors, the neighbours called them. These people would call often, some of them staying for many years before passing on into Mainstream, others only staying the night. The neighbours would sometimes catch sight of these Authors flirting with sister Immortality, or chasing one of the nieces. Usually, Grandfather Space-Travel would come out and stop the hanky-panky, and take the girls back into the house sternly warning them not to follow the Authors into Mainstream.

From time to time distant relatives would call, and be welcomed inside with much noise. Other times, errant sons or nephews would be banished forever, exiled into the realms of Mainstream by stern fathers. Brother End-of-the-World was one of the first to go, and his half-cousin Translation-Machine soon followed him.

But mostly the family stayed where it was, as it was and how it was. Uncannily though, it continued to expand. Soon, the neighbours began to gossip. Rumours spread quickly of incest and in-breeding; mother Faster-than-Light was said to be skating pretty near to scandal with nephew Hyperspace, and you can imagine what her stepson Sub-Etheric thought of that. Then the affaire between Robotics and Androids....with Humanoids mixed up in it as well somewhere. Then, there was the officially-announced marriage between the cousins Death-Ray and Laser, and the wildly-spreading gossip doubled overnight. And when the betrothal became official between Post-Atomic and Mutancy (both of them half-cousins to each other and to the excommunicated End-of-the-World), no respectable person in the whole country of Literature would openly mention the family's name.

Intermarriages cropped up all over the house, some of them doubling and trebling the permutations within themselves. Unhealthy strains developed, and appeared to thrive on the explosive in-breeding. New, pure breeds of Concept were introduced spasmodically....but they soon disappeared, losing themselves in the swilling momentum of corruption. Insanity gradually developed. Its first symptoms were gibbering bursts of prolific creation; its second, cold spells of frightening quietude. Like a true collective manic-depressive the family fluctuated wildly between loud demands of recognition, and quiet spells of introspective self-examination.

Which brings us up to date. The family still lives there: an ageing and recessive family living in the tatty remains of a once-fine mansion. The house is of good stock,

although it might outwardly appear to be crumbling and in disrepair, it is built on solid bed-rock. But the family inside it is in danger of becoming senile. Without a careful segregation of its bloods, without a periodic dose of new Concept, without that visiting stream of new Authors....without all these the family will weaken, and eventually die.

One day, perhaps not too far into the future, the house called Speculation will stand empty on the edge of town; inhabited only by ghosts and memories, left as a memorial tomb to its occupants. Eventually, the ever-encroaching mass of Mainstream will bulldozer it into the dirt, using its broken bricks for the foundations of some new and shiny suburb.

For a body of literature which purports to be forward-looking, this seems a strange and sad fate. Perhaps the analogy is a little strained. Perhaps.

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All of which brings us, somewhat incongruously, to TANGENT. In its continuing policy of encouraging the newer writer, whilst featuring well-known professionals within the field, TANGENT is helping the search for "new blood". The stories in this edition have been selected in the main for their readability, not through any specific attempt at encouraging the "budding" (see Editorial, TANGENT-1) writers, of whom there are so many in the world of sf. As it turns out, three of our contributors to this issue are appearing for the first time in any fiction magazine. Roy Kay, who incidentally is Chairman of the BSFA, contributes a quietly philosophical tale of a decaying culture and a strangely senile alien presence. John Barfoot's story, "Rebirth", is notable for something which, in a moment of editorial aberration, might be called an important new phallic symbol; and David Copping's "The Height Does Not Matter" is a haunting vignette, remarkable for an off-beat approach. All three stories show different kinds of promise in each respective author.

On the other side of the fence we have the established writers. P. F. Woods, a regular contributor to NEW WORLDS SF, is represented by "Catspaw", a story with a flavour and essence all its own. E. C. Tubb, who needs no introduction other than mention, has written "An Answer for Augustus"; not strictly sf, but an amusing fable nevertheless. And Michael Moorcock, to whom much is owed for his generous advice and assistance in preparing TANGENT, contributes the first of a new series of features exclusive to TANGENT, concerned with the techniques involved in writing sf. In this first article, Mr Moorcock discusses the cliché sf-plot, and makes it sound suspiciously like a cri de coeur at times!

TANGENT, at the moment, is at a crucial period in its existence. With this issue it starts to pay its contributors; and because of this, it needs financial support in the form of sales. TANGENT will make a conscious effort to expand, not only in size but in the quality of its content. It cannot do this without the reassurance of a solid circulation behind it. With future issues TANGENT should attain not only a more frequent appearance, but will possibly graduate to a more presentable format. You are therefore (unashamedly) invited to use the subscription blank on Page 12!

From the nervously incongruous to the frankly mercenary. On that schizophrenic note I leave you to the tender mercies of TANGENT.

CHRIS PRIEST.

# REACH OUT FOR YESTERDAY

ROY KAY

He watched. In the valley below, the primitive village was silent. Earlier, as the yellow dawn crept over the mountains, he had seen the men leave the village to hunt in the wooded marshlands to the north. Their females had stood in the doorways of their rough wooden dwellings, gathering their children about themselves, watching as tight groups of men disappeared into the dawn. Now the women hid themselves behind barred doors. Faintly, he heard the cries of children, carrying on the wind. He watched, his computer mind storing, evaluating data. The village houses arranged themselves in an untidy circle. In the centre of this circle was a building from another age. Its smooth metallic surface reflected rainbow colours in the morning sunlight. It reached upward, a sleek cylinder, on top of which perched a reversed cone constructed from a wild cross-hatched pattern of wire. The structure towered over the rest of the village. As he watched an opening appeared in the cylinder, and a man stepped out. He was snow-haired, deep etchings traced over his face. He stood a moment, eyes turned upward to the yellow-blue sky. Then he turned away, the opening sliding back behind him.

Sharn frowned as his brown, bony fingers reached out for the prophet console. The thin line of grey clouds that had formed over the hills had disturbed him. Was it possible that the Rains were coming so soon? A row of keys faced him, a symbol marked on each. For a moment he hesitated. As time hurried away it was becoming increasingly difficult to remember.

He bent forward, pressing a key. The screen above burst into life. There was a graph, a chart with coloured symbols. Sharn's face contorted as he strained his failing eyes to read the analysis. He pressed a second key, then a third.

There it was. Just three days away.

Sharn eased himself away from the machine, and began to pace the room. He had allowed the Rains to creep up on the village. Three days away and nothing had been

prepared, no supplies had been stored. Finally he sunk down, easing his body into the chair. He asked himself sadly, would they have listened? Once they had looked to him for advice, but that time was long passed. More and more Sharn sensed their contempt for him, a foolish old man who spoke only crazy nonsense. The village had turned its back on him. He had been wrong once, it was unlikely that they would trust him again.

The people of the village lived close to the earth like animals, they talked only of hunting and of their ignorant half-formed superstitions. Sharn was left alone. Even his only son had denied all he had attempted to teach him and had left to live with the villagers and to hunt with bow and arrow.

Day by day, month by month, Sharn was growing older. The years were catching up with him and with each passing hour he seemed to grow more tired of his life. He had tried everything possible to keep alive the flame of knowledge, to pass on what little he remembered to his son. But Arnas had been restless, rebellious. Sharn had realised long before that he would remember little, scraps of disconnected knowledge, worse than no knowledge at all.

Sadness burned deep into him. His time was short; when he went the last fragile link with the past would be broken.

Arnas led the hunters along a track that led back to the village. The hunt had been fruitful, three marsh-bathers were slung on poles carried between them. Arnas walked ahead, in his hands he grasped a blood-stained arrow that had been pulled from the heart of the first kill. He held the trophy proudly, the token of his leadership of the hunt. Arnas had brought the hunt good fortune, soon they would call him hunt chieftain. He smiled at that. Arnas still remembered vividly how they had treated him as an outsider, barring him from their customs.

The fight had been arduous, but he had fought hard, proved his manhood in brutal games and in the playhunts.

Now, he reflected, he was no longer an outsider. He had grown into a respected hunter, his praises were sung amongst the village women. He knew that he could pick and choose amongst them.

The track widened as they came closer to the village. The march was long and several times they rested, paused to seek shade from the sun now high and fierce in the sky. Once, stretched out lazily, shielded by twisting ferns, Arnas let his mind drift back to his childhood relationship with his father. Sharn had always been old, he remembered. Often he had been angry, a strange anger that Arnas never understood, an impatient anger. He could never grasp the old man's hurried, impassioned teachings. When Sharn talked he would let his mind wander away, so that the voice became a meaningless blur. Later, when Sharn would ask questions and Arnas could only stutter, the old man had struck out viciously.

There were times when it made him unhappy to think of his father, brooding and alone. But he knew that it would be a mistake to speak with him. The villagers, his new friends, would not like it and neither, he thought, would Sharn himself. Arnas had chosen the road he must take, he was not sorry. His father dwelt insanely on stories of a strange past; Arnas wanted too much to live in the present. Soon Sharn would die, Arnas was satisfied to let his memories die with him.

When the hunters reached the village the women greeted them excitedly. The men grinned, boasted of their battles with the cunning marsh-bathers. Arnas laughed with them, the feast that night held great promise.

Away from the chattering group Moray stood alone, her dark eyes fixed on Arnas. He turned, and saw her watching him. Their eyes met and she smiled widely, reaching up a slim hand to brush back her long ebony hair. Arnas went over to her.

"It was a good hunt?" she asked.

"Good," he told her.

"You have brought me something?"

He grinned. "The first kill, for you and your family. Tonight there will be a feast."

Then she had gone, vanished into the village. It did not matter. Arnas had only to wait for the setting sun.

Long ago it seemed he had lost his power of speech. When, after the long sleep, he had found himself here in a cave which bore deep into the hillside, in many ways his efficiency was impaired. He had sought out the faulty circuits, and had been able to repair some. But many he was forced to leave. His memories were vague and uncertain. There was a time, he thought, when his task had been to rule, when there had been others like him. Now he was alone. He had explored the caves, his scanners covering every inch of the hundred twisting tunnels that crossed and merged together, a honeycomb of rock and earth. He had found nothing. It was then he made the decision to observe the village and record the information until he was supplied with new instructions. He had also decided to remain hidden, selecting a place where he could survey the valley without being seen from the village. He had drifted there, intent on his self-assigned task. In quiet moments he searched himself, seeking the forgotten reason for his existence. But his cells had grown feeble, they would not supply the answer.

Sharn decided that he would have to tell them about the coming of the Rains. The prospect of having to face the village did not please him, for he knew how they would react. They will not listen, Sharn told himself. They will laugh at you. But even though he knew this, he could not leave them in ignorance. Somehow he had to make them believe him.

Slowly, he made his way to the Chieftain's lodge. Eyes turned, watching him as he walked. He looked rigidly ahead, holding himself erect.

He stopped before the lodge, waiting. He could sense the crowd gathering behind him, could hear their whispers.

The lodge door swung open.

The man who came out to stand before him was stocky and broad, heavily muscled. An angry scar twisted its way from his cheek down to his shoulder. He wore the scar proudly, about him hung dirty-red chieftain's robes. Other men came from the lodge to stand behind the Chieftain.

Sharn was surprised to recognise Arnas standing with them. His son was no longer an awkward youth, he stood with the stance of manhood. He had grown strong and tall. Sharn saw something new in his son's eyes, they were those of a hunter: quick and alive. There was a kind of intelligence there too, he thought. Perhaps his teaching had not all been wasted. When age had mellowed him, Arnas could become a good leader of these people.

Thane stood facing him. He had been Chieftain for almost four years, a man who did his thinking with his muscles, but nonetheless quick and perceptive in his own way. He was waiting for Sharn to speak.

"This morning there were storm-clouds to the south," Sharn said quietly. "I checked with the prophet forecast. The charts say the Rains will come in three days."

Thane looked around, then up to the clear sky. When he spoke his voice was tinged with sarcasm. "The charts say Rain. Three days?"

They had to listen! "Yes, Thane. I see the village houses need repair, you'll



need supplies. Look, according to the prophet charts we're in for a tough season, the toughest yet. I'm worried about the village."

Thane held up his hand. Some of the crowd, who had been muttering amongst themselves, were instantly silent. The scarred chieftain smiled grimly, baring yellow-brown teeth. "You are an old fool," he told Sharn. "Last season you came to me. Did you think I'd forgotten? Your face had the same look as now. You said to me, 'There will be Rain'. Shutter your doors, you said, repair your houses. You told us to store supplies. The Rain is coming, you said, angry rain that would beat the ground. We were fools too, we listened to you. Our men worked hard, they hunted, went without sleep. But, you said, we were ready, ready for the Great Rain." Thane's mouth twisted. "And when it came, there was a trickle from the sky. It lasted two days and then it was gone."

Men looked mockingly in Sharn's direction. He glanced behind the Chieftain. Arnas stood, brows knit in a deep frown.

Sharn spoke quickly, anxiously. "I explained to you then, Thane. My eyes....I made a mistake. Please, you must listen to me now. The village is in danger; your houses, your children will not be safe if you don't protect them now. This time I swear to you I'm right, you have to listen."

Thane looked again towards the sky, for a brief second doubt passed over his face. But then he looked back at him and it was gone. "No Sharn," he said. "You are an old man, your head fails you. Your eyes are turned on yesterday. We cannot listen to you."

Sharn began to protest, but he was waved silent. Thane turned back towards the lodge. Arnas' expression was impassive, his eyes studying his father. Sharn tried to understand his look, but failed. After a long minute Arnas followed the others into the lodge. Sharn was suddenly aware of the villagers crowding around him. Ragged children pointed, clinging to their mothers' skirts. Young boys made jokes, laughed at him. He looked around bitterly, began walking away.

Old, Thane had said. Old and spent. They had rejected his warning blindly, no longer interested in what he said. And because of this they would face the Rains unprepared, and children would die. He could do nothing.

He heard running feet behind him. Hushed voices, sounds of a group forming. He stopped walking and turned his head.

There was a close group of people. A man was pointing excitedly, the others looking in the same direction, talking in subdued tones. They sounded wary, afraid. They were looking towards a rocky hillside. Sharn looked in the same direction, and saw it immediately.

Half hidden by rocks a crystal sphere of light floated, high on the hillside. From this distance it was difficult to make out any details, just the strangely shining globe-shape, hovering motionless. Somehow, cold fear infected Sharn. He stared with the others, his mind caught and held by the light from the distant sphere. The man who had gathered the group together, who had pointed, who had directed their eyes to this stranger on the hillside was talking; quietly, almost reverently. Sharn heard, with the others, that the man had been climbing the hills at the end of the valley, searching for fresh patches of the root-vegetable the villagers called sweet-taste. He had been unlucky in his search, but as time wore on he had grown more interested in exploring his surroundings. So he had climbed further up the hillside. Then he had seen the globe of light. He saw the thing floating; floating somehow above the ground. It was as large as the man. He had looked only a moment before it glided back to the cover of its cave, but in that moment it had hovered before him, solid and real, yet seemingly pure light: a sun brought down to earth. The man had searched the sky, but the sun he knew still burned in its place. This then was a new sun, come down to live in a hillside cave. Not daring to stay longer, he had climbed swiftly down back to the

village. From there he had watched the hillside, half-believing that perhaps he had undergone some sunburnt dream. Then he had seen it again, peering down on the village from the mouth of its cave-home. He had called the others and now they traced his pointing finger, listened to him uneasily. Sharn was aware of the strange fear that whispered formless words in a corner of his mind: somehow he remembered the sphere. But from when? A race-memory from a forgotten millenium?

He turned, seeing that the group were looking at him, questions in their eyes. They look to me, he thought ironically. In spite of everything, they look to me for an answer.

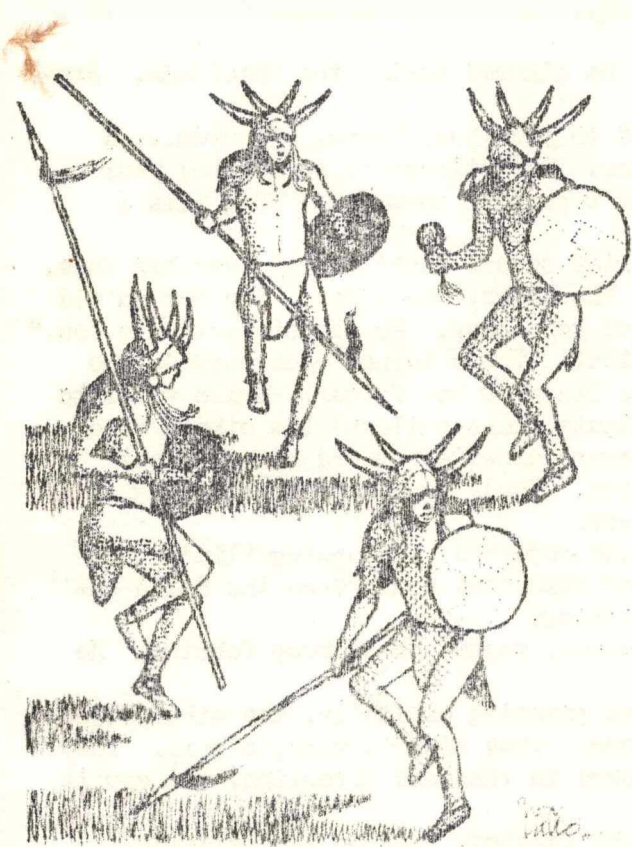
This time, he had no answer. Without speaking he turned away, walked back to the cylinder.

Dusk settled its shadow over the valley. Above, the first stars glimmered faintly. Long ago the hillside sphere had drifted from view, and now it had vanished from thoughts and speculation. The village was busy. Behind their walls, families prepared for the feast, girls who that night would know the world, dreamed happily, young men stamped, scowled, hunters anticipated the night's festival with wise smiles.

Arnas laughed with his friends in the chieftain's lodge. He wore the decoration of hunt-chieftain for the first time. Often he had heard, from his prison with his father, the laughing, singing, shouting sounds of feasts. Many times he had wished he had been part of them. Now he was no stranger to village festivals. He no longer dreamed but took part, welcomed for his humour and virility. This night, Arnas knew a fresh happiness. At last a hunt chieftain, an honoured fighter. And also, at last, Moray. Silken-dark Moray, a dream that many a hunter shared. But that night, Moray would be his alone.

Sitting silently away from the laughing men, Thane looked deep into himself. Arnas looked at him; he seemed suddenly old, sitting in shadow, bull face drawn heavily, engrossed in his own thoughts.

As if sensing Arnas, Thane looked up. He lifted his hand, and motioned Arnas over.



He sat down next to the chieftain, stretching out on the warm furs.

Thane waited before speaking, Arnas became nervous. Only one man in the village could have effected him in this way. The chieftain's voice was oddly quiet, hushed against the laughing and excited talk. "I worry about your father's words," he said. Arnas realised that he spoke in confidence. "Sharn was a good man once. The people forget this, but I can remember. He has helped us. And that place of his; you know Arnas, he has things there none of us understands. Machines, he says, made by people who lived in this valley long before we came. Who can tell about these things."

His voice trailed away. Arnas ventured to speak. "And the Rains...?"

Thane looked at him. "Yes. The Rains. I ask myself, what if those things he has, what if they do somehow know? Yet, I cannot listen. I am growing older, Arnas. I think about this place, about the machines. There is much that we do not know; much that we have forgotten."

Outside the lodge, the shade of dusk deepened, slowly becoming night.

Against blackness, a billion stars burned. A giant's hand reached into the blackness, into the shining constellations. The stars distorted, their patterns wavered and danced, traced in the fingers and the palm. Slowly, the hand withdrew and the heavens became again undisturbed.

Sharn stared deeply into the star-cube, as if seeking an answer somewhere there amidst a scaled-down universe.

The sphere haunted him. I should remember, Sharn told himself. What is this fireball from a forgotten age? How has it suddenly appeared from the cave of time to hover silently, watching them with a thousand eyes.

Watching. The word struck a chord somewhere. A phrase came back across time's gulf, disconnected. A complexity of eyes and ears.

Sharn looked around the room. Panels of now-dead needles laid against forgotten scales, switches arranged themselves in banks below long-lifeless screens of grey. He understood only a fraction of the great room's toys. He had explored warily; switched switches, testing. But never life, they clicked against nothing. If the connections were made, somehow the power they needed had been lost. The star-cubes worked, the weather-analyser could still compute and predict. Inexplicably, a few circuits remained alive. Two needles danced busily over a single circular dial, the information they gave long since ignored, and now the figures on the dial could no longer be interpreted. One small screen flickered with occasional life, its picture remaining jumbled, an abstract blur, a dancing of wild colours.

In other places, other worlds, Sharn thought, other rooms like this one. Other dead machines, forgotten purposes. And the sum, the total? The star-cubes told him. A forgotten universe, a thousand worlds perhaps, each alone where once they had been joined into one?

He had been told the story once. Even then it had been confused, hardly more than a speck of memory in a vacuum of lost years.

After the Rains. A whisper of truth came back to him. After the Rains, rise up brothers. Slaves no more. Rise up.

Slaves, Sharn thought, how long ago was that? More than a century, more than two hundred years.

Slaves? But slaves to whom? Whose slaves?

The silver taskmasters, my son. The silver spheres of light.

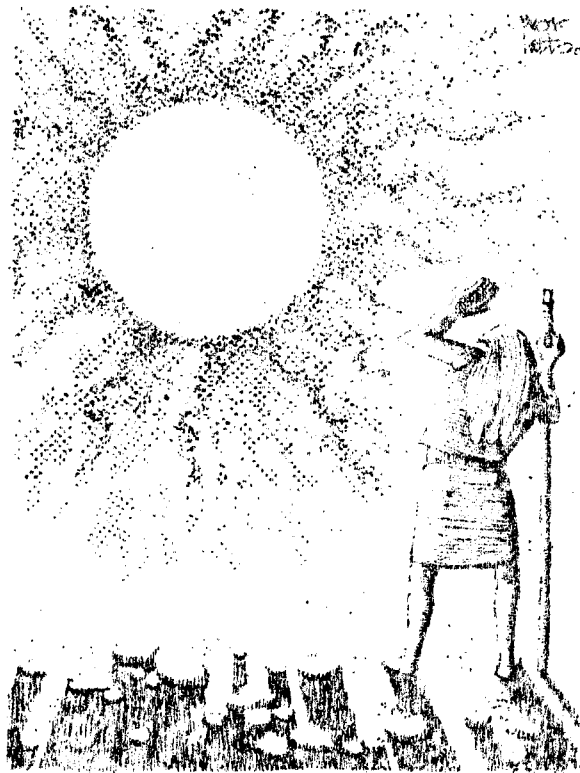
He knew he had been discovered. He could not understand his carelessness. Carelessness due only to his severe malfunctioning. The illness worried him. He who dimly remembered an indestructable past, a time when circuits were smoothly infallible. More and more his cognition blurring,

unreliable. Circuits breaking free, living their own lives, going their own ways. Instead of each part together forming a complete whole, each part was becoming disconnected from its neighbour. Stay! But he had drifted, no longer in control, unable now to select and judge. Insane, without being aware of the word. Dying, yet the power still flowed strongly. Blind power now, burning itself slowly toward nothing. Aware, yet uncontrolled, conscious, yet helpless, the sphere began to drift slowly towards towards the valley below.

Arnas sat to one side of Thane, happy with the honour. A clearing had been made at the edge of the village. Torches burned fiercely, piercing the cool dark night. In the centre of the circle of watching eyes some of the village youths, still not hunters, danced wildly, waving circling. Acting out their hunting dreams, making the pattern of their future manhood.

The flames of the torches bathed them in prancing light, they moved with the flames, weaved with the shadows. Arnas let his thoughts wander. He thought of Moray, still waiting somewhere, hidden amongst the women. Arnas turned his head briefly, saw Thane beside him. The chieftain's eyes darted back and forth amongst the dancers, a faint smile on his lips. His scar was livid-red in the torchlight. Looking again on long-dead years? Arnas wondered. He turned back to the dancers.

Sharn stood hidden at the edge of the circle. He had waited until the eating was done, then he had made his way to where they had grouped, beyond the chieftain's lodge at the village edge. He had avoided being seen. A barrier had been built between the villagers and himself and much of it, he realised, had been his own doing. He had made a mistake when he had tried to lock himself away from their lives. Sharn had remained aloof, perhaps he was beginning to understand why they ignored his words.



He watched the young men intently. The single beat of the hide drum quickened, inspired the dancers. Their mock hunt moved closer to the kill.

Sharn wrapped himself up in the drum beat, the torch flames warmed his skin. He was not the first to see it.

A tall youth, one of the dancers, stopped in mid-stride, staring. The others stumbled into each other, confused. In another second the circle had seen it, and scattered, shouting.

Sharn saw it at last. The sphere floated not twenty yards away from the village. Slowly, it was coming closer. Sharn watched, shading his eyes against its raging light. People poured from houses, stood in awe before the sphere, forming themselves in an arced line, backing away as it came steadily closer.

Sharn did not retreat, he stood away from his hiding place, waiting, watching the burning sphere. The crowd hushed as they saw him facing the sphere.

Arnas stood in front of the growing crowd, watching his father. Without understanding why, he wanted to rush out and pull him away, out of danger. But something tied his feet, and held him back. A slim figure fought her way through towards him. Moray came beside him and he reached out for her. She looked up at him wordlessly, concern in her eyes. Only ten yards away now, drifting ever closer. The silent crowd shuffled backwards. Arnas saw his father stand firm. He pulled Moray closer to his side, felt her tremble.

Thane watched with the rest. For the first time in years he knew he was afraid. His words echoed back at him, there is much that we do not know; much that we have forgotten.

It was Sharn who stood alone, Sharn who did not back away, but waited.

I cannot stop. Who is this who stands here waiting? Run. Run slave, or you die.

Sharn did not move, the sphere drifted. More than two hundred years, Sharn thought. Then they had been the wardens of humanity, the computer taskmasters of an alien race, the race that had crushed man's resistance and held him slave. But then the race had left, retreating somewhere to the far reaches of the galaxy. With them they took their taskmasters, leaving a scattered race to fend for itself on alien worlds. The jigsaw fitted, and even though Sharn could only guess, he felt inside himself that he had the answer at last. He realised that they had left a sentinel, a sentinel who would wake and observe against a time when the race would return. But age comes to everything, even machines. Reflexes blur, memory dims. More than two hundred years.

Dying. Why cannot I speak? Say go, stand away. One by one, circuits burning out. How long? How long before a lifeless hulk, a shell without function, drifting on the wind but without thought, hearing nothing, seeing nothing. I cannot stop.

The crowd drew breath. The globe of angry light was hardly nine feet away, and Sharn stood watching it.

Thin tears stained Arnas' cheek. What was this mighty globe? Why did Sharn stand so proudly, waiting to meet it? A word tugged at his mind, half-formed on his lips. Something his father had said, many years before.

Sharn reached out his hand towards the sphere, stretched out his fingers.

Why? thought Sharn. To kill the angry globe, to douse its fire in one last orgy of power?

Why? He stretched out his hand to me. He must not touch me. Run slave. Can't you understand? I drift helpless.

Don't touch me!

Closer. Close enough to touch. Just reach out, stretch with his fingers. To drown its power, soak up its energy. Would Arnas know, could he ever hope to understand? Or would he be hopelessly wrong, grasping half the truth, or hanging on to ideas born of ignorance?

Now!

Sharn stretched out his fingers.

The globe erupted: a thousand suns, a million stars.

Then the fire was gone. The sphere floated, motionless, glowing dully. Sharn was gone. Not even dust blowing on the rising wind. Around the sphere, the earth was burned black.

The word came to Arnas. He whispered it in silence, then spoke it out loud.

Grasping Moray's hand, Arnas bowed to the ground. Without knowing why, the villagers bowed before the globe of dull light. Over the mountains to the south, black storm-clouds blotted out the stars.

The word was God.

ROY KAY.

THE NEXT ISSUE OF TANGENT.....

.....will be published in March '66. Contributions should include stories by George Collyn and Richard A. Gordon, and the second in our series of special features. Why not subscribe to TANGENT? It's the safest way of ensuring you get every issue. The form below is for your convenience.

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# AN ANSWER FOR AUGUSTUS

by

E. C. TUBB

If Augustus Patrick Williams had ever met a demon face to face, and that demon had offered him his heart's desire in return for his immortal soul, then Augustus wouldn't have hesitated for a moment. If he ever, by some incredible stroke of good fortune, discovered an ancient bottle which, when opened, released a captive djinn who was both able and willing to grant a wish no matter what that wish might be, then Augustus would have had his demand on the tip of his tongue. And if, by some insane configuration of the planets, he had stumbled on a charm which gave not one wish but three, then his demands would have been in triplicate.

Augustus Patrick Williams knew what he wanted.

Ambition is a strange thing and a hard taskmaster. There are those who devote their lives to the gathering of a greater quantity of engraved slips of paper than anyone else. Others seek to garner polished fragments of crystallized carbon. Some, more realistic but no less ambitious, attempt to increase their liquid capacity to a point which gains them a noted, if transient, fame. There are men, women too, who, for no apparent reason, scale mountains, emulate fish, walk around the globe at great personal hazard and expense. Others hurl their bodies through space, squat on the tops of tall poles, dance until they collapse from sheer exhaustion. And they do these things because they must, because it is their ambition in life, their aim, the reason they have for existing at all. And, as it is with them, so it was with Augustus.

He wanted to be accepted as a master of prose.

It was a harmless enough ambition as ambitions go. Harmless and even laudable. It wasn't the kind of ambition to cause distress to his fellow man—he didn't want to be a top trumpeter, for example, or a pop singer or a noted murderer or bigamist. He didn't even want to be a famous general. All he wanted was to achieve fame as an author.

"It's like a great fire burning within me," he used to explain. "A terrible conflagration of the soul which gives me no respite, no peace, no rest from the hungry craving, the overwhelming desire to reach out and snare the world with polished gems of scintillant brilliance laden with the soft breath of summer winds, the gentle rain

of spring, the luting of our feathered friends as they make their orisons to the sun. All this coupled to the awful grandeur of storm-swallowed sunsets and the brittle chill of the remote stars flung like a double handful of diamonds against the velvet backdrop of eternal night."

Thus he used to talk when he still had friends.

But wanting wasn't enough. Between desire and achievement reared the iron wall of accomplishment and it was a barrier Augustus found impossible to scale. He tried. No man could have worked harder, ruined more paper, punished more typewriters. But even trying wasn't enough and, after years of vain effort, Augustus was forced to admit to himself that something was wrong.

It wasn't a world-wide conspiracy of editors terrified to loose his naked genius on their readers.

It wasn't the machinations of some malignant demon who hated all that was good and bright and true in the unsung master of the emotion-laden word.

It was something else.

And, because his ambition had grown with the years and because he was the man he was, Augustus faced the necessity of seeking advice. So he took what money he had, selected a few of the manuscripts he particularly favoured, and went in search of those who could tell him why it was that, with the ability to think such polished thoughts, he still could not sell a single thing.

"My fee," said the brown-skinned man with the dirty turban and the pointed beard, "is payable in advance."

"I will pay it," said Augustus, "on the condition that you tell me what it is that I must know."

"Rhama knows all, tells all," intoned the turbanned seer. His eyes rolled towards the cobwebs on the ceiling of the dingy room wherein he communicated with the Universe. "Rhama knows all the travails of the heart, the pains of the soul, the anguish of the mind. I will send my spirit into the realms beyond the mundane and, from those who serve me there, I will discover the solution to your problem no matter what it might be." He laid a thin, clawed hand palm uppermost on the table. "My fee, if you please."

Caution struggled with desire, and lost. Slowly Augustus counted out the requisite fee. Rhama might have the answer or he might not, but one thing was certain—he would never be put to the test unless his grimy hand was crossed with silver; much silver.

Augustus waited impatiently as the fee was counted, disposed of, and the mystic gave him his attention.

"I want to become a selling author," said Augustus. "I can think the most polished of thoughts, whole streams of literary brilliance and yet, when I come to transcribe those thoughts onto paper, something eludes me."

"Indeed?"

"Yes." Augustus stared hard at the mystic. "Now tell me why this should be so."

"Why you cannot sell? Do you submit your stories on quarto paper, double spaced, one-inch margin to the left, and—"

"Yes," said Augustus impatiently.

"Do you enclose return cover and postage? You do? Then that is not the reason." The seer brooded for a moment. "Editors," he said, "are peculiar people. Men of commerce. You study markets?"

"I write," said Augustus with dignity. "I spill my soul on paper and my soul reveals itself in words of burning purity, brilliant characterisation, vivid tempo



and succulent action. Yet what I write does not sell. You must tell me why that is so." His eyes grew a little hard. "Or," he threatened, "I want my money back."

"A moment!" One brown hand lifted in a gesture as if a mother were restraining an impatient child. "These thoughts of which you speak. Can you give me an example? This room, for instance, will you describe it in your own words?"

"I will try," said Augustus, and drew a deep breath. "A cavern," he murmured, "lost in time. A strange, cramped, womb-like structure, the walls dripping with redolent dew, the window a dirt-caked eye leering at Heaven, the ceiling starred and scratched as if the claws of mythical birds of noisome doom had traced their runic symbols of death, destruction and decay on the yellow sheathing smeared by no human hand. On the floor, fluff and dust and the droppings of rats mingled with the sweaty exudations of a beast-like creature who shambled in the mocking form of human guise. The air is thick, vile, heavy with the stench of time and rot and putrescence. The black slime and the black grease all a blend of filth and corruption reeking to the nostrils and flung like a flaunting hand in the face of elementary decency. Vile is the room! Vile all whoin there dwell! Vile the door, and vile he who——"

"Enough!" The mystic swallowed. His dusky skin held a peculiar flush. "Do you always think like that?"

"Mostly," said Augustus with simple pride. "You see," he explained, "I have a pretty vivid imagination, and that's the first thing an author should have. Now, if only I could find out why thoughts like that can't sell."

"You shall be answered," said Rhama hastily. He breathed deeply as if to calm himself. "Now I will depart from this plane to seek that you need to know." He closed his eyes, rested the tops of his fingers on his temples, shuddered a little as if entering a trance. His lips moved and strange contortions twisted his features. Augustus waited impatiently for the answer which would put him, at long last, on the ladder to success.

"Well?"

Rhama didn't answer.

"Well?" said Augustus again. "What's the answer?"

The mystic sighed, a long, shuddering exhalation then, opening his eyes, he stared at Augustus as if seeing him for the first time. Slowly comprehension dawned in his eyes and he sighed again.

"Oh my unfortunate young friend," he said solemnly. "I fear that the answer to what you seek provides no easy path for the attainment of your desire."

Augustus waited.

"It is a question of language," explained the mystic. "Words are stubborn things and incapable of showing the finer shades of meaning. The thoughts which fill your head are visual patterns and, even when transposing them within your mind into speech, some of their purity is lost. That purity is wholly lost when you attempt to confine them to the discipline of prose. You sir, are a poet, not an author."

"I've tried poetry," said Augustus.

"I did not say that you could snare your thoughts by that medium," said the seer hastily. "Poetry or prose, the words are the same. You are an emotional thinker, a dreamer of cosmic thoughts and our mundane language is incapable of being used to fully express them. It is as if a carpenter were asked to fashion a door with a pair of knitting needles. The tools are wrong for the job. You grasp the analogy?"

Augustus nodded. "Then——?"

"Until a language has been devised suitable to express the thoughts that you think, then I fear you face a hopeless task." Rhama folded his hands and nodded towards the door. "That is your answer."

"So I've got to invent a new language?" Augustus frowned as he thought about it. "But if I do that then who is going to understand what I've written?"

"That," said the mystic serenely, "is another problem."

As a problem it was insoluble or, at least, Augustus had better sense than to try to solve it. Fame as an author wouldn't come his way by setting down a lot of gibberish which no-one but himself would understand. He decided that the mystic had only confused the issue. Not to be beaten he tried again.

The psychologist, like the mystic, also wore a beard but, instead of a dingy turban and soulful eyes set in a brown face, he had a bald head, snapping eyes of gleaming blue, an air of barely-suppressed impatience. He listened to what Augustus had to say with the air of a man who already knew the answer and his confidence was contagious.

"You can help me?" Augustus' smile was diffident as he asked the question. "You know what is wrong? What is stopping me achieve my ambition?"

"Naturally." The psychologist settled himself back in his chair. "You realise, of course, that treating the symptoms is a waste of time. If you were to come to me with a neurosis, something which caused violent headaches of a psychosomatic nature, it wouldn't do you any good to prescribe aspirin. We must first seek out the cause and, by treating it, eliminate the symptoms."

"But I haven't got a headache," said Augustus. The psychologist ignored the interruption.

"Now," he said briskly. "You have the delusion that you want to become a famous author." He leaned forward across his desk, eyes probing into Augustus like a pair of gimlets. "Tell me, did you have a very happy childhood?"

"It isn't a delusion," protested Augustus. "No."

"I thought not." The psychologist nodded as if he had suspected it right from the start. "An only child? I thought so. Discord at home? As I suspected. Not very popular at school, either, I should say, and not good at games." He leaned back. "The pattern is a familiar one, I assure you. Lonely child feels himself unwanted and so lacks a sense of security. Poor physique and an inability to make friends. Naturally you were thrown into the company of books and, in them, you found an escape from unpleasant reality. Books became your like, and their creators your heroes. It was logical that you should want to become one of them and, by so doing, prove to those about you that you are better than they thought."

"But—"

"Fortunately the cure is relatively simple. We must first probe your subconscious and heal the traumas inflicted by your parents. When you can see the roots of your neurosis and realise how unimportant they are, then the cure will be automatic." The psychologist flipped a card index. "The treatment will take some time. Several weeks, or even months. Shall I make an appointment for this time next week?"

"Listen," said Augustus desperately. "Let's get one thing clear. I do not want to lose my ambition to become a famous author."

"You mean that you want to retain the symptoms of your neurosis?" The psychologist looked baffled. "But when we have cured it, the symptoms will vanish."

"Then we won't cure it," snapped Augustus. "Just let's leave it alone, shall we?"

"Is this your idea of a joke?" said the psychologist testily. "You are paying for my time, I admit, but it is still valuable and could be put to better use. If you don't want to be cured of your obsession then why have you come to me?"

Augustus told him. He made himself very clear. When he had finished the savant sat for some time in deep thought. Finally he shrugged and drew a pencil across the

pad before him.

"It is a matter of censorship," he explained. "You know, of course, that a part of your mind acts as a censor between the promptings of the subconscious and the actions of the conscious. An urge to commit murder, for example, remains merely an urge---the desire to translate the urge to action is damped out by the censor. In normal men, that is, in the mentally ill the censor isn't always working as it should. Then we get irrational behaviour."

"But---"

"In your case," continued the psychologist cheerfully, "the censor is operating as it should but you are unaware of it." He pointed the tip of his pencil at Augustus. "You may have noticed that these streams of poetic thought usually occur at night when you are tired, or when you have been drinking. Both fatigue and alcohol tend to depress the censor. To you, naturally, the thought-streams appear to be perfect in construction and content, but that is only because you have lost the power to criticise. When you attempt to set down these streams of thought you are, in effect, waking the censor. Naturally, when awakened, the censor tells you that what you thought was something superb is really something quite banal."

"I can't believe it," said Augustus. "It can't be true."

"It is true," insisted the psychologist. "It is a common occurrence but, in your case, it is aggravated by your obsession. Now, if only you would let me clear up this delusion you'd be far better off."

"You mean that all the beautiful thoughts I think, all the polished gems of prose I set down, they aren't what I think they are at all?"

"That's what I said."

"Thank you," said Augustus, and left the office before he did something he'd regret later.

The man was a fool. Despite his degrees and air of confidence, the psychologist was a fool. And he had proved his folly. Were all the years of time and uncounted hours of effort, all the hope and heartbreak, all to be casually tossed aside? Augustus couldn't face the prospect and so he did what he should have done before. He sought the advice of one who could give him his answer without dressing it up in pretty words of mystical fog.

The man was old, or maybe he just looked that way, with eyes pouched by much reading and fingers stained with nicotine. His hair was sparse over a dome-like skull. He wore a rumpled suit of blue serge and cigarette ash. He waved Augustus to a chair, and listened as he told his story without comment or interruption.

"So that's how it is," finished Augustus. "I want to become a famous author more than anything else in all the world but I don't seem to be getting anywhere. Something must be wrong. Can you tell me what it is?"

The old man said nothing but held out his hand in a tired, almost resigned, gesture. Augustus carefully placed in that hand one of his precious manuscripts. "This is the best thing I've ever done," he said. "I have it with me by pure coincidence. I've worked on it, polished it, given it my best." Gently he released the sheets. "It's the best that I can do."

The old man grunted, let his eyes fall to the pages. He scanned them quickly with the skill born of much practice. Finally he let the sheaf fall from his hand on to his littered desk. "Well?" Augustus was bursting with impatience. "Can you tell me what is wrong? Can you tell me why I'm not a famous author?"

"I can," said the old man heavily.

"Then---?"

"It is quite simple," said the editor, that man of wide experience. He threw the papers back and nodded curtly towards the door. "You are suffering from verbal diarrhoea."

E. C. TUBB.

# The Height Does

## Not Matter

DAVID COPPING

When the shadow creeps over you, you freeze. The shadow is at hand for Thomas A. Halman. Resting against a jagged, ridged rock, he watches it come. Slowly, it comes, but he knows that as it nears him the faster will be its progress. It is the sight of the shadow which seems to insure the fate that is his. He tries not to watch. He shuts his eyes tightly. His forehead creases as an itch begins to irritate his brow. His eyes pan the horizon, coming to rest on that huge orb suspended in space, the Earth. How close it seems; how near. It is much more than 250,000 miles away. Those many miles are but yards compared to the miles to the nearest star. He may as well try to reach the latter, as the former.

The moon is beautiful, in a rough sort of way. Strewn with uneven boulders and covered with craters. The results of volcanic action and the bombardment of meteorites. The craters vary in circular size and depth. There are thousands of craters. In one he sits and dies. As he dies he thinks. He thinks of the height of the walls of the crater. One hundred, one thousand yards? He decides that they are about a mile high. He asks himself why he thinks of this, and decides that he must be trying to forget something. Then he remembers what it is, and sobs like a child. Tears cloud his eyes, stream down his face and enter his open mouth. He stops crying and looks toward his craft. It stands upright in the centre of the crater like an over-grown cigar. He giggles and then bursts out laughing. The portholes and the gaping door seem to form a face which joins in and laughs with him.

A hiss! His last tank starts to provide the life that death will remove. The atmosphere inside the suit feels cleaner to his mouth as he slowly breathes it in. He tells himself not to laugh for he can't afford the air used up in this way---there is nothing to laugh at anyway. Again he looks at Earth. The activity in its atmosphere has begun to cease its fury; but the Earth is no longer blue and paradisiacal. It is like an ugly, self-inflicted sore from which pus is likely to ooze at any moment. The sore of a disease-ridden world. The sore caused by the aggravation of a spot of pain. Thomas A. Halman wishes that the spot had been cut out many years ago like a cancer in a limb. He wishes that he could be already dead and unaware. Nearby, the shadow creeps on.

Once more, he thinks. The seas of Earth will be boiling if water can still exist.

The cities of man will now have vanished, returning to the substance from which they came. The London in which he was born has gone. No London, no England, Europe, America, China, no land; just a compoundation of matter. Excited atoms, electrical energy, existence of the deathless kind.

All his life, time had gone too fast for Halman. Only now, when he was waiting, would it go slowly. Time is going slower than ever as he waits for the last time. Belief in God is a helpful thing to have when the end is near. He prays. He does not believe in God, but in himself. He prays that he is more than a temporary existence. He prays so that time may pass.

He thinks of when he will awake from the dream. When the sun will enter his small room and tell him of dawn. The scramble to pull on his clothes. The rush to reach the bathroom before his father. Hurrying down to breakfast and corn-flakes. Fighting with his sister over some minor hurt. The excitement of a football game with his friends. The feel of the punishing cane at school, and the fun of boasting to his pals. The reflection of his voice....the reflection of his voice on the visor of his helmet reminds him that the dream is true life, and that he will only awaken into death.

For the first time, he realises that he is the last man alive. He is unique in all the universe. The stars shine brightly above him; brighter than through the atmospheric blanket of Earth. They are all his. No-one else can lay claim to them. He considers how lucky he is. Then he wonders why. The shadow creeps on; that is his, too.

Man invented the bow and arrow to kill his enemy. A strange thing that man's own enemy should be man. Thomas A. Halman could blame his fate on the first man to fight his fellow. A seed was sown which took but a short time to grow into a nettle. Man stung himself with hatred and the base matter which he disturbed. Just excited atoms disorganised by the cleverness of man; they killed mankind. Halman is grateful that he wasn't blown to bits by his fellows. Only he will die a natural death which nature will provide. The shadow creeps over his legs and he watches it with glassy eyes.

He feels something touch his shoulder, and he turns his head. Suddenly, he knows that he will not die. Not just now.

DAVID COPPING.

## GOD IN A SPACESUIT

by MICHAEL MOORCOCK

This is an opportunity to save us all some time because, at the editor's request, I'm going to write about the obvious and I hope you'll ignore it.

How does this sound?

There's a force-creature in outer space. It is a throbbing, gleaming ball of energy and it progresses through space looking for a sentient host on a planet. Eventually it sees a planet with sentient, reasoning life, the third from a sun. It homes in, greedily. In return for hospitality it can give its host extra-special powers. For a moment it hovers over a stable outside a Middle Eastern city. It is seen by shepherds, wise men, etc. After hovering for a while it enters the person of a new-born baby.

Or this one?

A galactic criminal, member of a super-race, is hunted by members of its species. It finds a peaceful planet and hides there. Being preternaturally evil, it spreads its evil influence over the planet. In the language of its species, it is called Sa-tan.

Or this one?

An advanced civilisation is threatened by disaster in the form of a flood. It builds a spaceship and takes off for a new world. The leading protagonist is called Nor.

Or this one?

A galactic race performs an experiment on a minor planet, creating life. It creates two bipeds capable of reproducing their kind. One's called Ahdum, the other Eev. Something goes wrong with the experiment....

In his worthy rejection of superstition and his search for rationality, the would-be sf writer is puzzled by the wealth of early prose and poetry relating the mythologies of the ancient races. He reads quite a lot of it, however, since he is attracted by the imagery, the clearly-defined super-heroes and super-villains, the miracles, the sense of wonder. He cannot accept the supernatural, and yet cannot believe that people

just thought up all that impressive stuff about world cataclysm, pillars of fire, miracle-workers and everything. Perhaps not being very well acquainted with the theories of ethnologists or psychologists, he decides that there had to be a start somewhere. By this time his particular bent has brought him in contact with science fiction in which he reads about galactic races, psi-powers and so forth. Immediately he is struck by a revelation, and his genesis as an sf writer begins. Perhaps it all started, he thinks, inspiration surging in him, with these aliens who....

At last, an idea for a story. It's obvious! There's a force-creature in outer space....

He gets out an old school exercise-book which still has some blank sheets, picks up his leaky ballpoint, settles himself down and his hand begins to speed rapidly, and sometimes illegibly, across the paper. He finishes, reads it over, altering a word here and there (where there's just enough space if he writes small)---and there it is, his first story. Why hasn't anyone else thought of it? he thinks, as he looks out an old issue of a science fiction magazine for an address to send the story to. He folds the pages up small and crams them into a 6" x 3 $\frac{1}{4}$ " size envelope, sticks a stamp on it, and puts it in the post. Days pass. What's happened to the story? Surely some jealous editor hasn't stooped so low as to....? More days pass and back comes an envelope, in it his story. Pinned to it is a rejection slip bearing the name of the magazine, but with a different address from the one he sent it to. On the rejection slip are two words:

Oh, Jesus!

The editor was in a bad mood and has sent back the story with his standard comment. Meanwhile, a mile or two away, another budding writer might receive a similar slip, but this one informs him that the reasons for the delay in replying were:

- A The story was sent to an address four years old;
- B It was hand-written and hard to read, thus got put aside until the editor had time to decipher it;
- C It didn't have a return, stamped, self-addressed envelope, which courtesy demands; and
- D It was on the lines of six other stories, similarly submitted, which the editor received in the same post.

The editor must have relented after sending the terse rejection slip to the other writer; perhaps too, the story was better-written than the other five, so that the editor might also have said: "We would, however, be interested in seeing future stories, presented on quarto paper, using double-spaced typewriting, on numbered pages with wide margins, with a top-sheet containing author's title, name, address, and estimate of words to the nearest fifty or one hundred."

The editor is not unsympathetic, he realises how it all started, but he is desperate and weary of typing the same message over and over again, week after week; he knows that that pile of stories hand-written or typed out messily on a toy typewriter contains more force-creatures hovering over stables, more Aldums and Eevs, more Sa-tans and Nors, more gods in spacesuits called Zoos and O'Din, working unexplained scientific miracles no wit more credible than the legends they purport to "explain". He knows that all that the writer will have done is to have rewritten the old story in sf terms, denuding it of its original force and poetry in the process, and appending a punchline in red underlined capitals followed by at least three exclamation marks, to the effect that what the reader hasn't realised until now is that this force-creature has entered the body of a little new-born baby called JREUS!!!

That's about how it normally looks, except it's in red.

The young, would-be writer, of course, curses the editor for a blind, bigoted old

fool, probably full of religious prejudice. He may give up there and then. Or another idea might be taking shape in his mind. There's this galactic criminal, incredibly evil...

The conventional sf story that has two galactic explorers landing on an alien planet which has a mystery, having adventures, and at last discovering the answer to the mystery (4-20,000 words are the normal lengths) is as nothing beside the god-in-a-space-suit story. The story where the narrator turns out to be an ant, an alien (you thought he was a human being) or a robot, is a rare, once-a-week event compared to the force-creature-hovering-over-the-stable story. The galactic-war story which reads like a re-write of the D-day landings in sf terms, or the overcrowded future-society story, machine-dominated, where one man, a rugged individualist, fights the system and usually loses, or after-the-Bomb story where the world is once again a strange and mysterious—and under-populated, of course—place and people can be people without the restricting pressures of present-day society to get in the way of their having man-to-man fights, doing heroic deeds, getting the beautiful rancher's/king's daughter—these stories of unadorned wish-fulfilment are a welcome relief to those which "rationalise" the Bible. Even a story written within these overworked conventions can have some merit—and since they make up the bulk of the stuff he receives, an editor is forced to use the best of them—but not even the finest writing and characterisation can overcome the built-in rejectability of the straight shaggy god story, as Dr Peristyle called it in a recent NEW WORLDS.

When he gets the well-written story with a good idea that ends with the protagonist dying because that's the only climactic note the author can think of, since he hasn't had the experience to construct a story with a better climax, the editor doesn't mind. He sends the story back with suggestions. Sometimes he will spend several hours and several pages writing out possible suggestions to the author, showing him how he can introduce a sub-plot—possibly, in its simplest form, some kind of character conflict—which can be resolved, at the same time resolving the central plot-line, and produce a satisfying story where characters and "idea" complement one another without the need of a sensational ending. Or, if the writing is good and the "idea" a trifle over-used or too obvious, he will suggest ways of giving the story freshness and relevance to the present-day. If the writing shows promise, he will point out where the author has used clumsy syntax or too-overt statement where inference might make the story subtler and more satisfying to the intelligent reader.

In short, the editor hates to use a rejection slip as much as the author hates to receive one. It is in his interest to help the would-be author—it is, in fact, as much a part of his job as the compiling of the magazine month by month—and he is willing to spend a large chunk of his life in encouraging and helping authors as much as he can. But he needs a start—there must be something about the story, even if only a spark of good writing and general creativity—something to work on, before he can do this part of his job. He works long hours, sometimes he will spend a great deal of time writing to a particular author who shows promise, and suddenly the author decides to throw it all in and run away to sea. The editor's wasted his time, but that's the way it goes and it's a risk he's fully prepared to take. But the editor does need time—and the god-in-a-spacesuit story wastes his time more than any other. Thus he is sometimes driven to write "Oh, Jesus!" on a rejection slip and hurt and perhaps even destroy some budding talent. He doesn't often do it, but he'd sleep better at nights if he didn't have to do it at all.

MICHAEL MOORCOCK.



# Catspaw

by

P. F. WOODS

For the past hour, Otto the panther had lain motionless in the Prime Minister's sunny parlour. All that morning he had prowled the spacious villa restlessly. Now he was still, waiting; his body blazing in the sunlight.

About midday he saw the Prime Minister and his aide cross the terraced gardens and approach the house. He stood up with an eager question in his mind. Within moments he read the news they carried in their thoughts. Mentally he snarled in frustration at what he learned. The battle-fleet which was Earth's last-ditch defence had been cut to pieces in the wastes of space between Sol and Procyon. Few ships had managed to escape and limp back home.

The cat-human civilisation had its back to the wall.

One other aspect of the news caused him some measure of grief: his mate, whom he had sent as an observer, had been aboard the annihilated flagship. Head low, he padded restlessly to and fro in the carpeted room until the two men entered. Then he lay down quietly, to listen.

Prime Minister Kendall was living under considerable strain. Otto could not restrain a certain amount of contempt as he surveyed the leader's mind. He recognised that man is only partly a fighting animal, and in his belief the human administration had lost faith.

Neither man paid much attention to the huge beast who sprawled on the carpet, a sparkling silk ruff about his neck. The Prime Minister sat down at a desk where the morning's reports had been placed for him. He scanned them lightly, then turned and looked his aide Tyler straight in the eye. It was as if he hoped to draw some strength from the man. But it was plain that they were both embarrassed by their predicament. The situation was as bad as it could possibly be.

"I suppose we shall have to rely on the new weapons to pull us through now, Prime Minister," Tyler said.

"Indeed?" Kendall's tone was sarcastic. He tapped one of the papers on his desk. "This is one we shan't rely on, for a start. It appears Mulling committed suicide

last night. His new force-missile is no good."

Tyler swallowed. "There was something else. Just before you arrived a message came through from the Hounslow plant. The wave-frequency weapon is coming along well. They have prototype equipment already completed."

"How is it performing?"

"It works perfectly on terrestrial life, but they can't test it on an Invader specimen since our only prisoner died two weeks ago. The Director seems very enthusiastic about it, though."

The Prime Minister's despair seemed to lift slightly. He rose, arranging his cloak about his shoulders with a business-like motion. "I've convened a Cabinet meeting for tonight, but I think there's time for us to visit Hounslow. It would be as well to see what's going on there. Afterwards, we can ask the Americans what progress they are making." He glanced at his watch. "Have the car ready in ten minutes, will you?"

Dispassionately, Otto stared after the humans as they left. His incisive mind was at work, racing ahead of the slow, subjective thinking he had overheard.

Within a few moments he reached his conclusions. Then he waited patiently. Every day about this time, he received a visitor.

Otto's head turned calmly as the Persian cat dropped through the window. He sent a signal of reassurance that no humans were nearby and stood up, lowering his head. His eyes glowed as he gazed directly into the wide, passive stare of the Persian. Chill, complete, supremely confident, the plush animal's thoughts slipped into his mind. There was a sophistication about them that made the panther feel like a savage uncontrolled brute.

"What news?" the Persian demanded.

"The eighth fleet is smashed."

"That I already know. Anything else?"

Otto licked his chops. "Yes. The research at Hounslow may have produced a decisive weapon."

The Persian seemed gratified. "That should indeed prove useful...."

"I hope so," Otto answered, "for if the wave-frequency weapon is a failure, I would say all is up with us."

The housecat's eyes became icy and even more limpid. "Your attitude does not commend you. The war is still far from lost, for even if the Invader effects a landing on this planet, we will then be in an advantageous position to fight him."

Otto growled and lashed his tail. "You speak as though this were a game for cubs. I take my duties seriously."

"You are not alone in feeling the strain of it." The Persian settled himself primly on his haunches. "Apart from the discomfort of coming more openly into man's society, this method of mind-to-mind communication is also most distasteful."

"I don't mind it so much," the panther said, lidding his eyes.

"Perhaps not—only half a century ago all big cats were savages."

Otto accepted this not as an insult but as a statement of fact. Stretching his body in a luxurious gesture, he said: "The Minister is leaving shortly to inspect the installation at Hounslow."

"You will go with him."

Otto concurred with a grunt.

The door opened. The Prime Minister and his aide returned. For several seconds the cats continued to gaze into each other's eyes, then the Persian walked over to the window to clean himself in the warm sunshine.

Otto leaped after the humans. Tyler, about to enter the car, paused when he trotted up.

"Want to come along, puss? Okay, hop in."

He opened the door wide. Otto sprang lightly inside, and made himself comfortable on the rear seat.

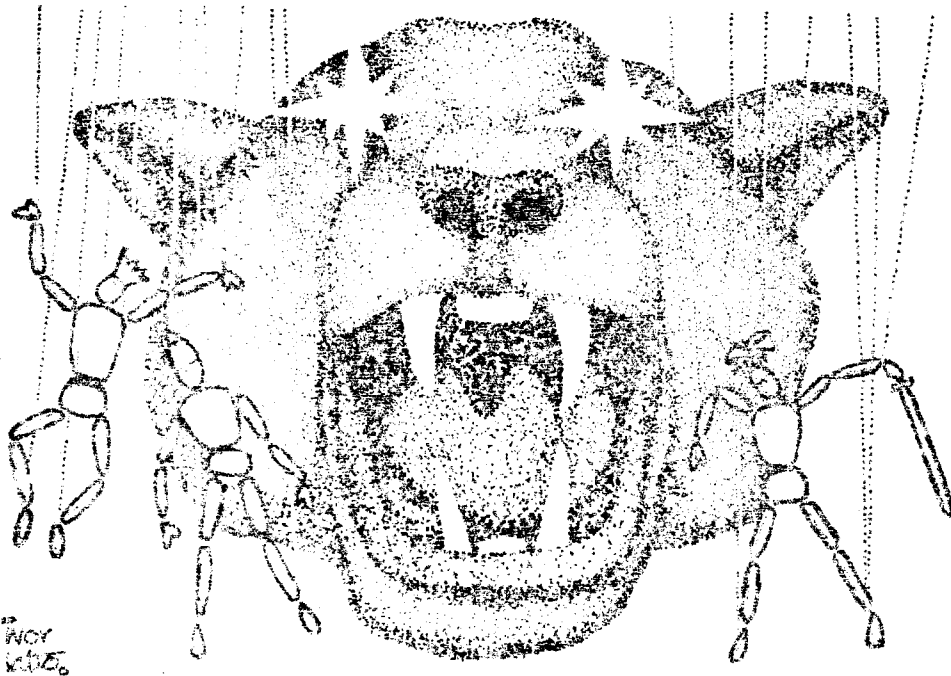
The journey took about an hour. Relaxing, the panther watched the scenery race by, and idly turned his attention to the ever-present, ever-pressing problem of avoiding the destruction of civilisation. As he looked over the garden-like quality of England his alert mind could imagine all too easily the holocaust which the aliens would bring to it. Once out of the industrial area, he saw herds grazing; a great yellow lion dozed lazily by the roadside; a hybrid tigon passed them, driving a specially-designed scooter; and the whole peaceful cat-governed Earth lay in the warm sun, and it was no matter that the human servitors knew not who was master, knew not who, in reality, directed the defence of the Solar System.

Otto did not share the housecat's regret at having to increase the number of cats who were actually intelligent. He would have liked to see the felines' part become even more obvious.

And the assumption which the housecats so calmly accepted, namely that the war would continue on the surface of the Earth, filled him with fury. For though it was true that the enemy would find progress much more difficult there, it seemed unutterable that alien life should despoil the feline realm itself.

But how to avoid it? Otto had pondered the problem until his brain grew weary.

He recalled the alien prisoner that had been brought to Earth some months ago. Like a furry, articulated starfish, it had huddled against the bars of its cage, shaking and screeching in its psychopathic hatred of human beings. He had been unable to define the psychic incompatibility which made the Invader forever man's enemy, but he still recalled his surprise when his telepathic scrutiny elicited that there was no hostility towards cats. The Invader had no interest in Earth beyond the extermination of mankind. The sombre disturbing thought remained with Otto to this day.



The wave-frequency research station lay in the middle of a vast and extravagant park. The air was filled with perfume from the trees, flowers and shrubbery. Otto's ancestral senses, with their inheritance of an open, free life, found the last few miles of the drive most pleasing.

As they walked towards the low building, he noticed that a second structure to one side of it housed an atomic power-plant. The size of the plant confirmed what his instincts had already told him: something in the midst of this luxuriant park contained a force within a hair's-breadth of death.

As they came near the pastel-coloured house, the feeling intensified. He caught no hint of it from either of the two men. Obviously their senses were not equipped to detect the fine tremors of destructive energy radiating from the building.

His awareness of it grew even stronger when the Director of the research team led them into the main workshop and showed them the primary frequency generator.

"The principle of the idea," he told them, "is to find a way to shatter the chemistry of living organisms the same way a glass can be shattered by sound waves of the right frequency. Here we are attempting, by means of radio waves, to break up the nucleic acids of every one of the victim's cells. Death is practically instantaneous. Since every creature has a different arrangement in its DNA and RNA which governs the life of the cells, we need a different pattern of precise frequencies for each creature, and this has to be learned beforehand—a difficult and protracted business."

The Director paused. "This procedure calls for the generation of finely-calibrated radiations whose wavelengths do not exceed the size of a single aggregated molecule, and for the transmission of these radiations over long distances. Once, it seemed impossible. We finally overcame the problem by broadcasting a beam consisting of thousands of separate transmissions of the same wavelength, but slightly out of phase with one another. The harmonics provide the wavelengths we need. However, this greatly complicates the task of setting up the required wave-patterns.

"Once these difficulties have been overcome, we find we have an effective death-ray."

"And it works?" Kendall asked incredulously, peering at the massive control-panel which accompanied the generator.

"It works on every animal we've tried," the Director answered. "We also took the frequency-pattern of the Invader prisoner, but he died before the weapon was finished and we were unable to preserve the body for experiments.

"Another point," he continued, "is that the equipment here—we call it a Resonator—is bulky and requires a lot of power. To overcome this we have receiver-transmitters which can relay a beam, amplify and direct it onto a target over—well, pretty nearly interplanetary distances."

Kendall's eyes gleamed. "How many have you?"

"Five, so far, including two fitted to fast planes given us by the military."

While this conversation went on, Otto cast his mind into the Resonator. He had no interest in the theory of machines: his thinking was purely pragmatic. Nevertheless his perceptions raced easily through the intricate electronics, assessing their uses instinctively as he did anything else that came his way. Within minutes he had formed an outline of the whole apparatus.

He drew in his breath with wonderment. Here indeed was a weapon of great potency!

He gave particular study to the instruments assigned to calibration, and shuddered inwardly when he saw how easy it was to make the settings. He was exploring a device which, properly employed, could selectively destroy entire species. It was fortunate, he thought, that it could not happen by accident.

Suddenly his attention was diverted by something the Director was saying.

"I think we shall be able to give the Resonator a laboratory test after all," the scientist told his visitors. "A message came through while you were on your way here—"

another ship is en route from the Procyon area with two captives."

The Prime Minister chuckled. "Good. You can bring me news like that any time of the day."

"There is another piece of news, but good or not I don't know. An Invader battleship has entered the Solar System and is approaching Earth fast. There are no ships within interception range!"

Otto himself received the information with a quickening tension of his being. This was the first harbinger of the coming deluge. It was expected, but still galling.

For an Invader ship to raid Earth was not new. On the last occasion, three specially-fast vessels had fought their way through the Terran Cordon and reduced San Francisco to rubble. Only the fanatical vigour of home defence had prevented these excursions from being more frequent, and following the recent defeat in space they would no doubt mount rapidly in number.

Half an hour later a second message reached the Director's office. The alien vessel had entered the atmosphere and was approaching London.

Apart from what the visitation predicted for the future, Otto was less perturbed than the humans. London had its own anti-bombardment resources, and if necessary the cats would take over. Feline fighting instinct, together with the fact that ambush cruisers were stationed on the other side of the plane of the ecliptic, would ensure that the raider did not have an easy time of it.

But later...well, that was for the Resonator to decide.

The idea which Otto arrived at by a chain of thought hit the Prime Minister as an inspiration.

"This is your chance, man!" he exclaimed. "Get one of your planes out there and find out if this thing works!"

The Director reached for his phone and gave an order. "It will be away in less than five minutes."

Kendall stood up. "I'm going too," he announced. "I'd like to be in on this."

"But Prime Minister," Tyler objected, "you are too valuable. If the aircraft were destroyed—"

"Your concern is touching, my dear Tyler," Kendall said wearily. "I suppose you are right, nevertheless I intend to watch. You and I will both observe the experiment from a second aircraft. That should reduce the risk."

Otto swished his tail in excitement. How often he had longed for combat! It would give him great satisfaction to see an Invader battleship brought to the ground, to say nothing of the victories it would promise for the future.

He met with one small obstacle. When they came to board the plane, Kendall frowned at his pet's attempt to follow him up the gangway. He put out a staying hand. Genuine concern for the panther emanated from him.

Insistently, Otto urged his body forward.

"Sorry, old chap!" said Kendall firmly. "You're too expensive an animal." He gave the beast a friendly shove and turned to mount the last step.

Impatience seized Otto. He hurled a mental compulsion at Kendall, and climbed the steps questingly. It was of an intensity forbidden by the housecats, but in his temper Otto was careless of the infringement.

The Prime Minister did not appear to notice that his judgement had been tampered with, though he paused visibly before he acquiesced.

"Well, if you're so lonely without me, come aboard," he said. "You're used to flying, aren't you puss?"

Angrily, Otto brushed past him and acquainted himself with the control cabin. Its all-round view was obscured only by a large apparatus having connections with an

antenna array fixed outside the hull. He supposed it to be a twin of the Resonator to be used on the Invader. Facing it, a man sat in a bucket seat, a television view-magnifier within easy reach.

Tyler noticed the apparatus. "I thought the other plane was to make the attack," he said quickly.

The pilot tapped the viewscreen. "That's right. We'll get you a good view of it on this. It might not be wise to get too close."

Otto had his own views about that, but he decided not to interfere any further. He settled himself up against the rear wall of the cabin, from where he had a good view of the television screen and through the domed canopy, and where he wouldn't be thrown about too much by any banking of the aircraft.

The plane had been in the air for a few minutes when he felt a small, signal-like stimulation in his mind. He opened up his receptors.

It was the telepathic voice of the Persian, carried by the concerted efforts of a dozen other cats. His thoughts came faintly, wavering slightly in the uncertain conditions of long-range transmission.

Rapidly, Otto related what was taking place. The cat answered: "Describe the attack to me. In particular, I want to know how much time elapses before the Invader ship goes out of control, or if there is any other reaction when the weapon is put to use."

Otto acknowledged the order.

There was silence. Otto gazed at the men in the cabin tinkering with their gadgetry. He experienced the usual disdain he felt, when he observed the inefficiency of human beings. He was about to communicate his dissatisfaction, when the Persian's presence faded away without warning. One or other of the several conditions necessary for distant telepathy had ceased to obtain.

No matter, the Persian would have to learn the outcome from his own sources. Now they were over London, and Otto's pulse quickened. He found it hard to restrain his eager instincts when the long, weighty bulk of the alien ship came in sight. His every nerve urged him to snarl and spit at the detested image. Instead, he forced himself to stay impassively still, watching unblinkingly as they manoeuvred for position. As he had predicted, two Earth cruisers had arrived and a heavy exchange was taking place, as well as a missile fusillade from the London batteries two miles below. He was pleased to see that the raider was in trouble.

"Attention please," a radio 'speaker announced, "we are about to beam the Invader ship."

The screen controller twisted his dials to bring the ship into closer focus. Already its hull bore char-scars and rips; an explosion had torn away one turret. The Terrans watched tensely, fully expecting to see the entire mass plunge like stone.

They waited. Nothing happened.

"It must be under robot control," Tyler said.

The screen controller shook his head. "I don't think so."

"Hello, Observer," a despondent voice from the loudspeaker called. "The beam appears to have no effect. I have been ordered to return to Base."

"Perhaps the very short wavelengths can't penetrate the metal hull," the Prime Minister suggested in the sudden deep silence of the cabin.

Again the controller shook his head. "The beam is 'carried' on relatively long waves," he pointed out. "They can go through it."

With a roar of sudden, sheer fury, Otto leaped up. Throughout the conversation his disappointment and dismay had been mounting as he saw that the battle still continued full tilt. Now his control broke, and his lips forced back in a snarl of hatred for the Invader whose warship faced, and who he could only think of smashing to

splinters.

The men gave him a startled glance as he bolted towards the screen, then in the same instant an atomic missile overloaded the Invader's trigger field, hitting home with a miniature sunburst on the starboard flank. The aircraft banked steeply to escape the shockwave. Claws scratching, Otto slithered across the metal floor, snarling and cursing.

He regained his balance just in time to see the wreckage of the thousand-foot hull go crashing into a London suburb. His growls subsided gradually into a bass grunt.

But his feral outburst was not over. He stood with every muscle vibrant, yellow eyes blazing, and now his rage was directed not only at the enemy, but at the men who were so incompetent to defend his planet. How he longed to rage about the cabin, clawing and rending at the futile creatures in whom the cats had placed their trust!

He realised forcibly now that it was not necessary to defeat the Invader: just to make him go away would be enough. But that would never happen while men remained. He found himself amazed at his kind's loyalty to the human servitors, without whom it could certainly do.

By the time they returned to the research station, the panther had regained his composure. Even so, his mood was black. Yet it did not match the depression of the Director who met them, but who nevertheless met Kendall's accusing eye without a flinch.

"My man," the Prime Minister said stonily, "I am beginning to regret the time I have spent with you this afternoon. In fact, I am beginning to regret that I ever gave backing to this project. How do you explain the colossal failure we have just witnessed?"

No change was discernible in the Director's face. "I am sorry you find the hopes I had entertained so completely worthless," he said. "For my part I would think any avenue worth exploring, if we are to survive at all. As for the failure of the Resonator, that can be explained."

He took a deep breath. "I have just received a report on the two alien prisoners. The ship carrying them was met in space and the aliens examined by biochemists. It was found that the molecular chromosome structure—their version of our DNA—differed from that of our earlier prisoner, and also from each other. We must conclude that with the Invader radical differences of basic molecules exist from individual to individual."

"Then the weapon is useless?"

"Quite useless. It would have to be tuned separately to each individual. This could not have been foreseen. It is a quite unaccountable phenomenon in our understanding of living processes."

"Why not broadcast all possible frequencies?" the Prime Minister snapped, ignoring the excuse.

"That is scarcely a feasible way out. If it were, it would be as fatal to the user as to the enemy."

The Prime Minister nodded, looking at his watch. "Very well," he said curtly. "That will be all."

Night fell as they drove back to the villa, and the park began to whisper with a cool breeze. Otto sprawled on the back seat of the car, apparently asleep, but inwardly he was a world of despairing calculations, well aware that his planet's entire 360 degree surface gaped bare into space. How different if only four-footed things walked abroad!

The Persian cat was waiting for him when he padded into the house.

"I know the weapon is a failure," he said at once. "What is the reason?"  
Otto told him what he knew.

The silky-furred animal sat for a long time, cogitating. His gold-flecked eyes, half closed, shone reflectively in the warm darkness.

Otto was restless. "Human capacities please me less and less," he commented. "I would like to see fighting done by cats alone."

"Men serve as well as they are able," the Persian replied after a pause.

"That may be," Otto said gloomily, "but I have never met the man I could not out-think ten ways at once, nor the man worth more than slavery. We depend too much on inferior minds."

The housecat made it clear that Otto's opinions did not interest him. "Our ancient forebears adopted humans for good reason," he said, "and we continue in their reckoning. Do not plague me with dissensions now—"

Lurid red glares of light tore down from the sky and illuminated the room bloodily. Great rumbling sounds rolled far above them like thunder.

"What is that?" asked Otto testily.

"Attacks by Invader ships."

"So it has begun already."

"Yes." The Persian leaped onto Otto's back. "I wish to see this place in Hounslow for myself. Dull-witted humans may have missed something. Take me there."

Otto felt the sharp little pricks of extended claws as the cat hauled himself along the larger beast's spine to gain a good grip on the neck-ruff. He moved out of the villa, carrying his rider.

"It will be a long journey," he warned. "I estimate over two hours."

"No matter."

Reaching the shed on one side of the house, Otto started the motor of his scooter and settled himself on the riding platform. The machine purred as it rolled out of the garage, then roared softly when he pushed the throttle forward on the open road. Otto travelled as fast as the little engine would allow.

The summer air was heavily scented. "On such a night as this," he said, "we ought not to be thinking of war!"

No trace of such a sentiment came from the mind of the Persian, whose outlook was purely practical. "We are thinking of it, and we must," the small creature said in a silvery tone.

The panther kept silence for the rest of the journey, though he was conscious of his passenger crouching tenaciously behind his head. Sometimes it was hard to strangle a growl as they whined round the black curves of the highway.

A midnight calm had fallen on the park when they halted before the research building. The Persian jumped to the ground and minced towards the entrance. Otto followed.

More flares came from the sky, and even louder explosions. Then a swiftly-growing white light glowed in the south, gradually dying away. The two cats looked at each other.

"The battle comes closer," Otto grunted.

"This area may well be occupied within the next few hours," the Persian disclosed casually.

Otto put his paw against the closed door of the building, and pushed. It yielded, swinging noiselessly open to reveal a lightless interior.

Blackness did not bother the cats. Their eyes were night-eyes, glimmer-sharp, and besides they had their minds to guide them. Otto led the way to the inner laboratory where the Resonator lay unactivated.

The housecat immediately became absorbed in a mental exploration of the instrument. No comment came from him for twenty minutes.

Restlessly, Otto scanned the Resonator for the second time, following the cables through to the subsidiary building where the atomic reactor lay sleeping.

Waiting to come to life!



His attention lingered momentarily over the calibrator. Attached to it was a scale of destructive frequency-patterns containing readings for some of the higher animals. With passing amusement Otto noticed that man was included.

He fidgeted impatiently. "Well," he said at length, "what do you think?"

The Persian turned blank eyes at him. "I find that the humans are right. No use can be made of this weapon against the Invader."

"None?" echoed Otto. In spite of everything, he had taken it for granted that this confident, efficient creature would not journey eighty miles for nothing.

"We must ensure that the apparatus is destroyed before it falls into the hands of the Invader. Let us return to the villa." The Persian walked towards the door, tail held high.

Nuclear explosions crashed above the atmosphere, showering them with the light of subdued, significant flashes. Otto stayed where he was, sniffing mightily and pawing his whiskers. The idea of impending defeat struck him intolerably. He gave vent to a vicious snarl, allowing all his thoughts and feelings of the last few days to flood in on him. The rage of a wild animal contorted his being, a rage coupled with a savage reason—dispense with humanity, and cats were safe!

Otto's incensed mind reached out moodily, and prowled among the electronic innards of the Resonator. Cats had no need to understand the principles of science: they had an instinctive appreciation of its effects, and it had been discovered by them long ago that electricity responded to mental control. As neatly as a housecat toys with a mouse, Otto slapped and cozened the modulated currents running in the intricate circuits. He adjusted the calibrator, setting it to the destructive frequencies he desired. He activated the transmitter for full circle broadcast. Then he roused the simmering energy of the atomic reactor.

Electromagnetic energy streamed into the room.

It took the Persian only a fraction of a second to discover his intention and move to prevent it. By that time it was too late. The pile was warming up and Otto had rendered the process irreversible.

Otto was triumphant. He calculated that the broadcast radio frequencies would destroy all human life within a radius of fifty miles. Of a certainty the Invader, pressing hard only a few miles above, would detect and record these frequencies and later deduce their import. Almost certainly, the station itself would fall into the aliens' hands.

"Here is an end to all men," he growled with pitiless satisfaction. "What need have we of humanity! Such puny minds mean nothing!"

The Persian sprang onto his back. "Quickly! At close range intense energy burns to death!"

Otto had neglected this fact. He charged through the door. There was no time for the scooter. He cleared the fence in one bound and ran for the damp coolness of the park. Overhead the flashes and rumbles were growing even more frequent. Leaves and branches whipped at his face. He urged more strength into his limbs, hurling himself into the belt of shrubbery bordering the lawns.

"Fool!" the Persian spat.

Lusty humour poured from Otto's mind. He felt vigorous, audacious and strong.

"The war is over!" he snarled. "Cats can carry on alone!"

The Persian, clinging desperately and without dignity to Otto's muscling back, was incredulous. "What?" he said. "How can we sustain civilisation without hands?"

"Hands?" panted Otto uncomprehendingly.

"Of course! But for human hands, none of this would be. Now we are back where we began—in the forest!"

Otto did not slacken pace, but he realised in a flash his terrible mistake. All

the Earth's automatic tools meant nothing without hands. He could steer his specially-built scooter, but how would clumsy paws dig for fuel when the oil gave out? Without hands, no stone was laid on another, no stick was sharpened.

This was man's value to cats. Not his intellect: but his hands.

Cat civilisation was at an end. In that moment the ferocity shared by panther and Persian was so great that they could do nothing but keep silence as they plunged through the great park. Low twigs ripped at Otto's silk ruff, that exquisite product of a million years' cunning, the like of which would not be seen again on Earth for a million million years.

P. F. WOODS.

## story ratings:

**tangent** —

The first issue of TANGENT produced a large mail-bag, from which the following ratings have been calculated. A quick word on the method of computation would be in order. Basically it is very similar to that system used by ANALOG; one point being awarded to the 'best' story as voted, two points to the second, and so on. In the event of a voted 'tie', the points are split. When all the votes are in, an average is taken, and the stories listed in the order of merit.

The stories in the first issue, in order of popularity, are as follows:-

PLEASURE MASK	Edward Mackin	1.95
DESTINY UNKNOWN	William K. Aitken	2.33
THE STRINGS OF LOVE	W.T. Webb	2.71
THE STRANGERS WILL COME	Bert Lewis	3.00

These ratings are a great help to us, as it tells what kinds of stories you like best. If you care to vote on this present issue, all you need to do is drop a post-card to the Publications Officer, whose address is listed on the Contents page.

# REBIRTH

by

John Barfoot

The meteor leapt onto the screen in a blur of green light. Travelling at over half light-speed, it narrowed the distance between itself and the ship by half-a-million miles even before the warning system had time to react and the meteor alarm began to wail. By the time the computer had plotted its trajectory, compared it to the course of the ship, and decided that the two paths would intersect, it was less than one-hundred thousand miles away; and while the machine was still debating as to which was the most convenient escape-curve, it struck the spaceship.

After billions of miles of free, unimpeded flight it struck solid matter! It passed through the hull as if it were non-existent, and might have passed through the opposite bulkhead, leaving no more damage than two easily-repairable punctures, had Chance not had it that the meteor should hit the feet-thick lead and cadmium shielding of the atomic reactor. The two networks of densely-packed atoms came into contact and gave up their inconceivable energies in an explosion of near-nuclear intensity.

All this happened in less than three seconds.

Ores had been smelted and tempered and welded to make the ship; controlled nuclear reactions drove it; men decided its course.

The meteor had been minted in some vast stellar furnace; had been allowed to cool in a slow orbit around its parent; and had been given its tremendous velocity by the soundless explosion of the nova sun.

For decades on the one hand, and millenia on the other, the two objects had travelled through space. One had been deflected from its course by the relative convenience and monetary gain of different cargo pick-ups; the other only by light-pressure and the clutching gravity of solar giants.

And both had been created to meet here, on the rim of the galaxy. It was their destiny. And it was the destiny of Thomas Leiper to be blown out of the ship by the shock waves.

He cartwheeled away into the blackness, unconscious.

The pain in his bladder brought him back to consciousness. Almost automatically, he urinated into the plastic bag provided for the purpose, and opened his eyes.

There was no light—not even starlight—he was enclosed in impenetrable darkness. For almost sixty seconds his heart seemed to stand still, then he laughed with a choking, gasping cough as he realised what had happened. Experimentally, he moved his right arm. It seemed as if he were moving a body several million miles away, by remote control. Unable to see, he felt like an amputee controlling the ghost of his missing limb. He raised the disembodied arm to his head. He felt nothing. Blind, he was unable to locate even his own body. Slowly he moved the arm in a tight arc. His helmet rang softly as the armoured glove touched it.

He sighed with relief as the dark visor which had obscured his vision swung onto the top of his helmet.

That released the memory block, and he remembered the whole incident in detail. The meteor!

Latent shock triggered his reflexes and he jerked convulsively. His eyes filled with tears as his nose banged painfully against the projecting feed-tube. He realised that he was alone—really alone. There was nothing—literally nothing—around him for billions of miles. He was floating in a vast ocean of nothingness. He was a bubble of consciousness and the nothing was pressing in. Soon, he would burst.

But no, ships would already be tracing his automatic distress signal, he reassured himself. Perhaps he was showing as a small green blip on the radar screen of some rescue ship even now. Feeling better, he put his mouth around the feed-tube, and sucked up some of the warm, nutritious soup contained in the electrically-heated tank clamped to his chest. It filled his stomach with its rich warmth and relaxed his tense body. He stretched his limbs as much as the cramped spacesuit would allow, and lazily looked outward.

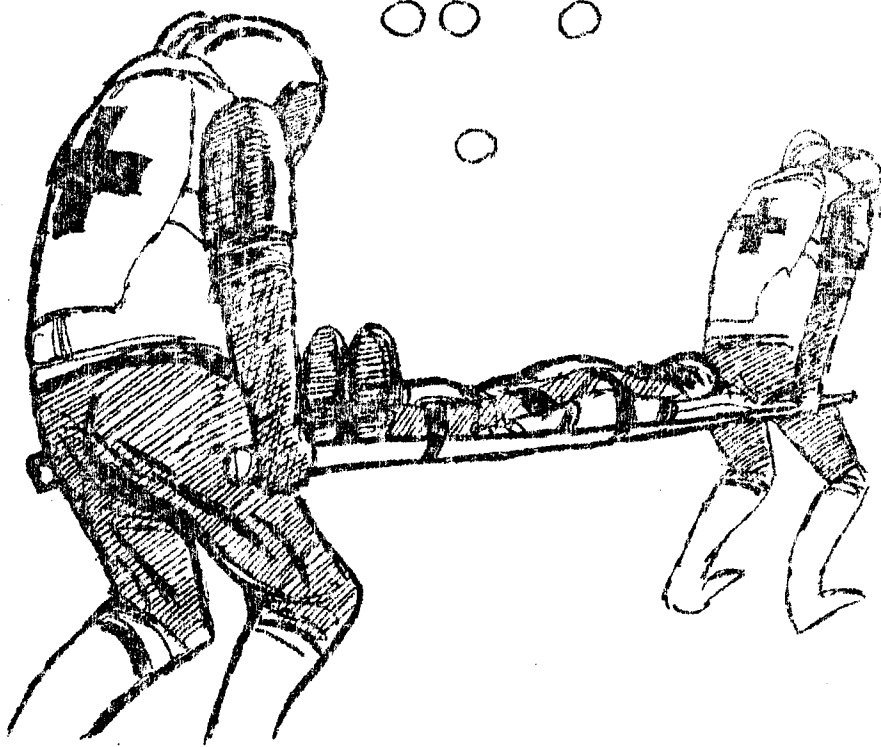
For the first time since regaining consciousness, he fully realised where he was. He saw the blackness stretching away into farther blackness, and still farther. He saw the stars like grains of salt scattered on black velvet; then they were holes in a black canopy through which a greater light shone; then they were Christmas tree lights in a vast, darkened room; but always they were tiny and insignificant against the black nothingness. Far, far away, the Andromeda galaxy smudged the darkness: a tiny, nebulous whirl of dust.

For a fraction of a second, he viewed himself and the Universe objectively. He was outside looking on, yet not outside; for the Universe was infinite. But still, he saw, felt and was everything. In one insane moment of all-knowingness, he saw all; the huge, inconceivably vast—infinite vast—universe of light and heat and atoms and gas; the mindless, disordered, chaotic universe of tumbling sun-sparks and vacuum; there was no Law or conception of such a thing, for the whole system negated God by its very existence.

In this mad, whirling chaos he saw a world—a pebble!—which chance had created momentarily and might destroy immediately. On its surface crawled a race of beings who imagined that they were alive, and could think, and were conquerors of matter. They imagined that the Universe ticked over quietly in obeisance to "natural" laws they had made themselves. He saw himself—a scrap of blood and flesh and bone drifting in darkness which was only one manifestation of Infinity.

His mind refused to accept what he saw, and he screamed in terror. He looked down and saw nothing beneath his feet, and beneath that, nothing, and suddenly he was falling. Falling through infinite expanses of nothing, and his stomach was thrusting itself up his throat, and he was a child again, and he was dreaming of falling down-stairs, only this time there were no stairs and no house and no subconscious realization that his parents were in the next room, and there was no bottom and he was sick and he lost consciousness.

He didn't open his eyes when the blankness in his mind went away. Why should he?



It was nice, just floating comfortably and knowing he was safe. It was nice being enclosed in these comfortable walls that kept him safe and secure and warm. There was an unformed memory of....something, at the back of his mind. Something....outside? But there was no outside. There was nothing but security and warmth and being. He snuggled deeper into his cosy foetal position and went to sleep....

Something was happening. He was being joggled and shaken. But—but, how? It was impossible. He was all; he was everything. Nothing else existed. So what was shaking him? (The two men strapped him onto the taxi vehicle.) He was moving! But how could he move? What was there to move in? He repeated to himself, "I am all, only me." (The taxi coasted into the open airlock of the rescue ship and the men lifted him and carried him between them.) "No! It is a dream!" Slowly, cautiously, he opened his eyes. He was moving down a long, dark, narrow passage. "No! I am all!" (They brought him out of the constricting airlock tube, and into the main cabin.)

Light and sound and heat and smell dashed themselves against his senses. Air whispered across his shrinking skin. Tall, lumpy, pink things bent over him and roared into his sensitive ears. "No! No! I want that other warm, dark universe! I want to be safe! I want to be all again!" His slack mouth opened wide, and he began a loud bawling as of lusty, new life. And the men of the rescue ship paled and shrank back as they heard what he was wailing and shrieking.

He lay there, on the floor, threshing his limbs, his fists clenched tightly, screaming his primitive and frightened need.

"Mother," he shouted. "MOTHER!"

JOHN BARFOOT.

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