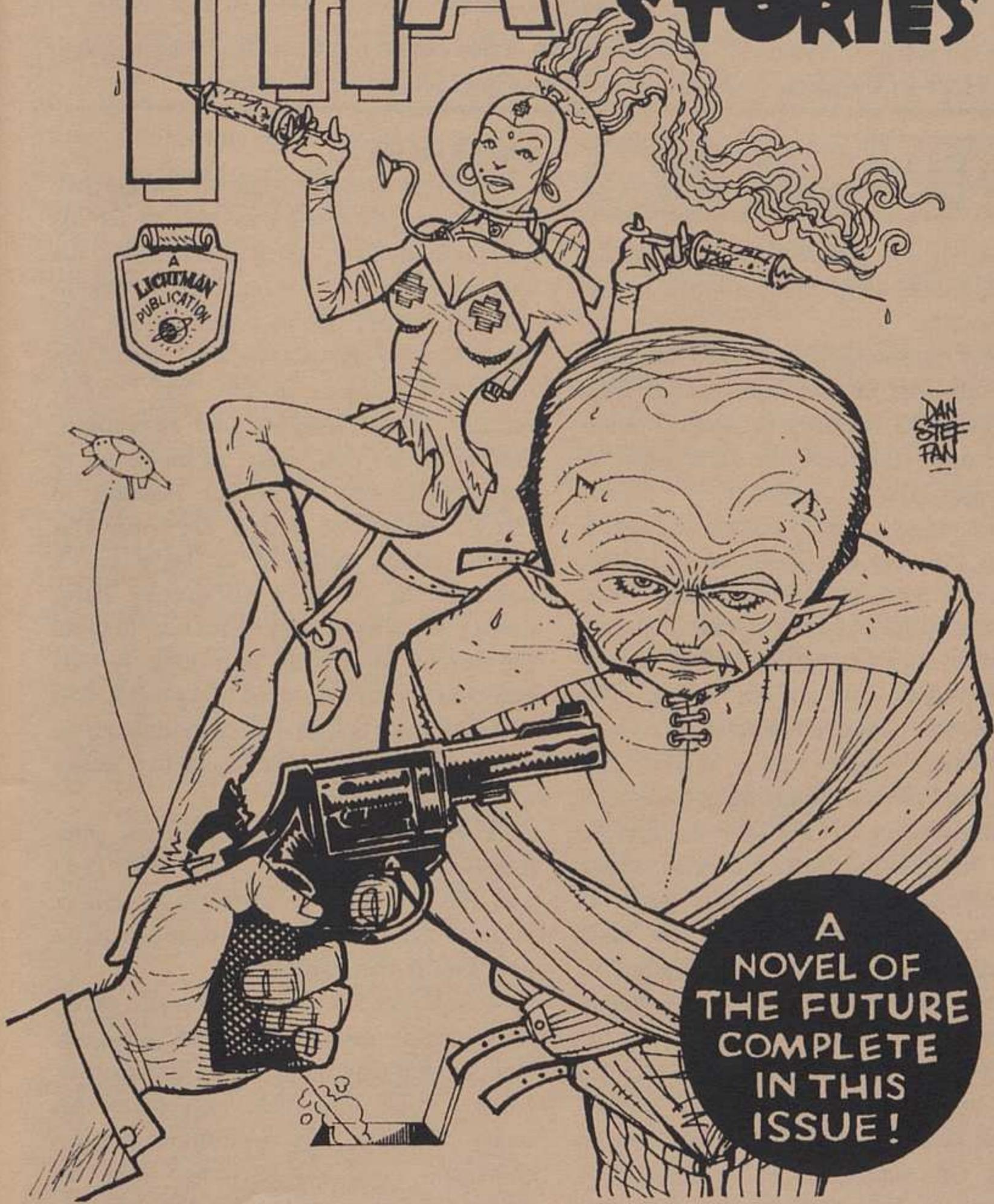


Astonishing

TRAPDOOR STORIES



A
NOVEL OF
THE FUTURE
COMPLETE
IN THIS
ISSUE!

Trap Door

Issue No. 22, May 2003. Edited and published by Robert Lichtman, P. O. Box 30, Glen Ellen, CA 95442 USA. Please send trade fanzines and letters of comment to this address (or locs2trapdoor@yahoo.com). Founding member and Past President 1991: fwa. This fanzine is available by Editorial Whim for The Usual (letters, contributions both written and artistic, and accepted trades), or \$5.00 per issue (*reviewers please note!*).

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ART & GRAPHICS: ATom (2). All other artwork in this issue is by Dan Steffan. Major egoboo to Carol Carr for a superbly crisp conversion of Dan's originals into electronic form.



Two of my personal fannish giants recently passed away: Harry Warner Jr. and John Foyster.

Harry became active in 1936 and published his first fanzine, *Spaceways*, from 1938 and 1942, but his most famous publication was *Horizons*, the first issue of which appeared in October 1939. Harry started it out as a second general circulation fanzine, but after five issues, in mid-1940, *Horizons* became his FAPAzine and continued almost uninterrupted after that. He missed only one mailing in 1943 due to serious illness and another in the '90s because the parcel containing the issue went astray. There was a total of 252 issues, the final one appearing in this year's February mailing. It's safe to say that no one is likely to top Harry's 64-year record of regular publication of the same title.

Harry is best known as the most dedicated author of letters of comment of all time, a feat that inspired many cartoons by Rotsler and others in homage to his dedication to the craft. For decades he could be counted on to turn in a publishable LoC on just about any fanzine sent to him. (In counterpoint to this distinction, he went to few conventions; they just

weren't his thing.)

Harry is also well-known for his two volumes of fan history as well as for his contributions to fanzines in addition to his stream of letters. He won Hugo awards in 1969 and 1972 for best fan writer, and again in 1993 for *A Wealth of Fable*, his history of fandom in the '50s. Interestingly, Harry wrote *All Our Yesterdays*, the first of his two books, as the result of Sam Moskowitz's vitriolic reaction to Harry's review of Sam's *The Immortal Storm*, which appeared in Terry Carr's *Innuendo* in 1959. In his article, Harry made various assertions about *how* to write fan history to which Sam took serious exception. Harry resolved to do better, and although there are schools of thought about how well he succeeded, these two books were the happy result.

Harry also wrote science fiction, publishing a dozen short stories between 1953 and 1957. He never made much mention of this, and I discovered their existence only shortly before his death.

Harry and I only spoke on the phone occasionally, mostly on FAPA business. But, having read hundreds of his fanzines, I felt I knew him more personally—his many interests, his well-known hypochondria, and (as it turned out) his excessive fiscal prudence. We had our

disagreements in his later years, mostly in FAPA and SAPS where, in the interchange of mailing comments, he revealed a more deeply conservative viewpoint on social and fiscal issues than I had suspected. I found myself unable to resist responding to that side of him, and to his credit he remained a gentleman throughout and never let our differences of opinion in those areas interfere with our more fannish exchanges.

John Foyster came into fandom the same year I did, if you count attending his first convention in April 1958 as joining up. He didn't publish his first fanzine until 1961, but after that there was no stopping him. We were SAPS members together for a few years starting in 1963 until I dropped out; he continued until 1972, when he left both FAPA and SAPS in protest of Nixon's actions in Vietnam. I didn't know that until the *Festzine* in celebration of his sixtieth birthday came out last year, and I admire him for it, even though it was a rather quixotic gesture. John's fanzine titles are legion and the total number published enormous. In addition to publishing fanzines, John organized and worked on numerous conventions. He and John Bangsund were co-chairs of the first Australian Worldcon when it was in the early bidding phase, and later he served as "program manager" of the convention. He also founded the Down Under Fan Fund (DUFF) in 1971 and served as its first Australian administrator, although he was never a DUFF delegate. However, later he was the first winner of GUFF, attending the 1979 Worldcon in England and publishing a highly readable report of over 100 pages in 1996. John's final fanzine was *eFnac*, which saw 39 issues between February 2000 and his death, the last one published posthumously.

I met John only once, at the 1996 Worldcon in Los Angeles and then all too briefly, but there was a connection between us that I increasingly became aware and appreciative of. As I wrote above, John

came into fandom when I was in my late teen years and so, like Harry, he was always there. He was the first of the new, literate generation of Australian fans, hard on the heels of and soon replacing the dry-as-dust, plonking "Etherline" crowd, and whereas he was soon supplemented by John Baxter and later John Bangsund and Bruce Gillespie, he simply *was* Australian fandom to me. Beyond that, over the years as our interaction matured and deepened, he was a good friend, a compatriot, a sympathetic ear, and more. I didn't know until after his death, however, how much I'd also meant to him. Yvonne told me that I was always the first one he would write after one of his medical setbacks, to let me know he was still there, still coping and putting up a good fight. A month or so before his death, he and Yvonne also called me and we had a good, long talk. John was only a little over a year older than me, far too young to leave us.

Harry and John approached their fanac in different ways, but both were grounded in the production of fanzines—and thus in communicating with us—and each enriched our subculture in ways that will live on. I miss them both.

This is the All-Fiction Issue of *Trap Door*, in case you hadn't already noticed. When I first got Gordon's story last year, I typeset it in the more usual size of type (such as this editorial) and it filled just over half an issue. But when Dan Steffan offered to do the amazing and extensive artwork that graces this issue and suggested this format—well, what could I say. (I *could* say think of Dan next year when it's Hugo-nominating time.)

I hope you enjoy the stories and the art. Please let me know your reactions so I can share them with Gordon and Dan. There will be another, regular issue before the end of the year, I promise

—Robert Lichtman



1942
Z. Z. Z.



Sense Of Wonder

gordon eklund

PROLOGUE

"Die, Gernsback, die!" I hiss.

With my guts jammed in my throat like a palsied python I shove my revolver right smack straight into the drooling, slack-mouthed visage of the crazed maniac cowering in front of me, his eyes bugged like frogs in a soup, the lips like two skinned mackerels.

He simpers senselessly back at me, tongue flapping like an eel. Spittle spattles his chin like crocodile urine. I tighten my finger kangaroo-like on the trigger.

"Pussy," babbles Hugo Gernsback, father of science fiction. "Cunt, prick, big hairy balls."

I can't hold myself an instant longer.

I fire at the egg-glazed whites of his eyes.

1

The name's Frap. Charlton H. Frap.

My friends call me Charlie.

Except that I ain't got no friends.

(Not really—that's a gag.)

I'm a fan. A science fiction fan. (Is there any other kind?) Just about ever since I can remember my entire life has been totally wrapped like a bright red bandana around the solitary beaming flagpole of the ever-lovin' blue-eyed science fiction field.

I'm in love with it. Literally. More than I've ever loved anything in my life. Girls, gods, gladiolas, goldfish, (bars of) solid gold. You name it: anything and everything. Science fiction has, I truly believe, provided my life its sole meaning. It's given me a place in the cosmos I can call home and where I know if I crawl inside and pull my legs in after me no mundane clod is going to dare hassle my ass.

How it began: When I was eleven years old my best buddy Dougie Fogarty and I were down at the old Cuyahoga school yard one hot August night, lying flat on our backs in the

new mown grass like a couple ducks floating in a pond, white tee shirts, rolled-up jeans, smoking Lucky Strikes and staring at the sky. We both saw it at the same time: the orange-white flaming light, bright as the eye of God, zipping nonchalantly through the starry firmament like it had a will of its own, the speed and precision of a bullet fired from a gun.

"What the hell's that?" drawled Dougie.

Me, I knew.

"Flying saucer," I said.

"Don't look like no saucer, Charlie."

"They never do, Dougie."

"From outer space, huh?"

"The deepest, the darkest, the blackest."

"There's monsters inside?"

"Nope. Entities. Real live alien entities."

A split second later, like spit in the eye, the saucer was gone.

I never saw its like again. But from that moment on I knew one thing for sure. We ain't alone in the universe. We got company. And just like us, too. Maybe better than us.

An important thing to know.

After that schoolyard night with Dougie I stopped going to church. (Not that I ever went that much to begin with.) I didn't stop believing in God though. Heck, even Arthur C. Clarke believes in God. I think. Though the one time I met him face to face at a COSFO party in the mid-'60s I didn't have the nerve to ask.

But I'd just found a new way to worship Him. (God, I mean, not Clarke.)

It was called science fiction.

I became a fan.

My half-brother Sidney, who was already in high school and captain of the football team and as popular as a joint at a hippie conclave, took me to see the movie version of *The War of the Worlds*. That's the one, if you don't know it, that's even sort of scary today. On the walk back home Sid kept grabbing my shoulder and pointing at the sky: "There's one there! Look, Charlie! There's another! A light! A meteor light! Eiiiiyeee! Eiiiiyeee!"

Me, I didn't so much as quiver an eyeball. Why should I? I'd already seen the real thing.

Men from Mars—huge fucking deal. Try scaring me with a moose in a see-through penguin suit, why don't you?

After that I went and saw every monster movie that came to Cleveland: *The Thing from Another World*, *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms*, *King Kong* (revival), *Son of Kong* (double bill), *Tarantula*, *The Deadly Mantis*, *Them!* (giant ants), *The Mole People*, *Forbidden Planet* (good!), *Frankenstein* (another revival), *Dracula* (ditto), *The Horror of Dracula* (remake), *The Curse of Frankenstein* (also ditto).

And so on.

One thing I want to make clear. Except for (arguably) *Forbidden Planet*, none of these pictures was truly science fiction. In true science fiction it's axiomatic that the science make sense according to present-day knowledge. You can't have anything occur that's flatly impossible. Like the giant ants in the movie *Them!* Due to

the Law of the Inverse Square as formulated by Sir Isaac Newton (and later Einstein), any ant as big as the ones in the movie would collapse under its own sheer mass. That's how come whales, the largest animal on the face of the earth, live in the deep ocean. So they can float. Like turds in a tub.

I also read a lot of science books, searching for anything I could find that dealt with outer space travel.

One time when I was ten years old I went around all day with bricks strapped to my shoes because I'd read that on Jupiter a person's body weight is eight times what it is on the earth and I wanted to get a feel for it.

In time I got around to reading my first ever real science fiction book.

It was *Red Planet* by Robert Heinlein. You know the one. The kid growing up on Mars with his Martian pet, Willis, who turns out to be a higher form of Martian life in a sort of embryonic phase.

I read all of Heinlein's other books out of the school library: *Between Planets*, *Citizen of the Galaxy*, *Farmer in the Sky*, *Starman Jones*, *Space Cadet*, *Tunnel in the Sky*. I think the last remains my all-time personal favorite.

I found and read other books by other authors in the library, too: Isaac Asimov and Ray Bradbury, Alan Nourse and Lester del Rey.

I stumbled upon Arthur C. Clarke's *The City and the Stars* in one of the paperback racks in the big liquor store on Superior where my stepdad stopped on his way home from work every evening. (He was a dental technician and practicing alcoholic.)

That's also where I discovered another whole entire rack devoted to digest-sized science fiction magazines: there was *Astounding*, *Galaxy*, *Amazing*, *Infinity*, *Venture*, *Future*, *Fantastic Universe*, and *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*.

Then I found out about a second-hand magazine shop off Euclid where you could buy old pulps, some of them dating back to the 1930s. The entire store smelled of must and dust and ancient antiquity. It bore a sweet, sickly stench that filled your nostrils and stuck there like a pot of glue. The proprietor was an old man in a green eyeshade and round pink eyeglasses named Pops Shue, who I don't think ever read a word in his life.

Pretty soon I was reading everything I could find anywhere that was remotely science fiction.

I was hooked. Like an addict. With a fat green monkey on my back named Earl. I couldn't budge free.

Most all this took place in the spring, summer and fall of 1957. I wouldn't mention the date except that time is critical in this story. Time is what this narrative is all about.

Now let me skip ahead a bit and tell you about the first time I was ever sexually molested.

2

December 17, 1925.

New York City, New York.

Picture it. The President of the United States is Calvin Coolidge, the king of England is George V, the heavyweight champion of the world is Jack Dempsey, the best baseball player

alive is George Herman Ruth (even if he did have a shitty year the season before, the Yankees finishing seventh). Valentino is alive, Rockefeller is rich, Jolson is singing, Satchmo is blowing, the stock market is soaring, and Adolf Hitler is a fruitcake with a Chaplin mustache who nobody except a couple prescient foreign correspondents has ever heard of.

A heck of a goddamn glorious time to be alive, you'd think.

Except for the howling blizzard to beat holy hell through which I am presently trudging like a hog in wingtips down the middle of a deserted Manhattan boulevard on my way to the editorial offices of the Experimenter Publishing Company, Hugo Gernsback, president and editor-in-chief.

A little background here: Gernsback, a Luxembourg-born gentleman of forty-one years, presently publishes a monthly, *Science and Invention*, largely devoted to the still nascent field of radio electronics. As early as 1911, with his own short novel *Ralph 124C41+*, Gernsback has evidenced a genuine enthusiasm for the sort of scientific based fiction originally made popular by Jules Verne and H.G. Wells. On occasion Gernsback has printed such tales—by himself and kindred souls—in his science magazines. These have proven surprisingly popular with his readers and Gernsback has lately announced plans to launch a new monthly devoted exclusively to such fiction. This new magazine will be called *Scientifiction*.

(As a matter of fact, under pressure from distributors Gernsback will soon change the title of his embryonic publi-

cation to the more clearly commercial *Amazing Stories*. He may or may not be aware of this yet, hopefully not, that being the main reason why I am here in New York City at this particular point in time nearly twenty years prior to my own birth.)

In the pocket of my plaid jacket I grip, as cold to the touch as a Bowie knife, a camera. (A Kodak Brownie, believe it or not, a good thirty, forty years old, the only camera Arbogast seems to own; this man, Mr. Science fucking Fiction himself, who you'll get to meet formally below, is not exactly what one would call *au courant*. He sleeps in a flannel night-shirt, too, and cuts mimeograph stencils for his fanzine *Blight* on a Royal standard typewriter.)

Taped to my chest, like a tit gone flat, throbs a portable tape recorder.

Or throb it would if I had it turned on, which right now, since there isn't another human being anywhere around and thus about as much life to record in this New York City 1925 as on the ancient seabeds of the dying red planet Mars, would be pretty damn dumb of me.

So on I trudge, my poor frozen fingers, even buried in my pockets and wrapped snugly around the Brownie, threatening to snap off in my fists.

I'm pretty convinced there has to be an icicle dangling from the tip of my nose.

My lips could French a horny snowman and in the process grow warm.

My toes—you don't want to hear about my toes. I can't feel them anyway.

As for my ears—what ears? Feel them, heck. I can't even remember what part of my head they're attached to. And no, I didn't think to bring anything with me as sensible as a knit cap any more than I thought to bring gloves. Who would have figured on a blizzard just because it's mid-December and New York City, New York? You might think the mad genius N. B. Norton (another character yet to come) would have considered that far ahead, flipped through some newspaper files, looked up a local weather report. A fairly basic precaution for everyday time traveling, right? But no, sir, not fucking him. Not fucking us. We're all too brilliant for that.

Do I sound bitter as a chunk of Limburger cheese?

Just then another nasty thought pokes me like a stick in the eye. What if old man Hugo isn't home? What if him and his whole damn Experimenter Publishing Company decided to shut down for a snow day?

I first landed here in 1925 in Central Park right back of the pond. That part we did plan out in advance. It seemed the safest, quietest place to arrive. "A straight shot from there to the E.P. offices," murmured Arbogast, grunting deep in his pipestem throat, gazing down at the Manhattan borough map stretched out on the stovetop between us. "Perfect—absolutely perfect."

A straight shot for him maybe—he isn't here in this blizzard—a frozen cookie ass for me.

I take a glance at my watch—or my chronometer as we chrononauts call it, hooha!—and see it merrily

ticking away. Three forty-seven. Christ. Already. Trudging through all this goddamn snow—and, yes, me in my navy blue sneakers—has decidedly slowed me down. I want to be able to get this over with and be back in the park before nightfall.

Even if they haven't invented muggers in 1925, I'm holy goddamned if I'm going to try finding Norton's Way Back Device in the weeds in the dark.

Just then, like a miracle from on high, a pigeon shits on my head.

I lift a bone-frozen hand to wipe away the goo.

And that's when I see it.

The building! Gernsback's building! The Experimenter Publishing Company! The golden pot at the end of my shimmering science fiction rainbow!

I hear church bells toll. Angels from on high sing hosannas of joy. Etc.

I don't even bother wiping off the pigeon shit.

Let it freeze solid like the rest of me.

I'll be warm enough, soon enough. When I'm inside.

Thrusting my chest boldly in front of me, I plunge forward like an aardvark in pursuit of the great granddaddy of all fat plump ants.

I reach inside my shirt and give the tape recorder a gentle thumb flick.

On it comes.

Whirring!

Humming!

Throbbing!

Howdy, Mr. Gernsback, here comes Charlie Frap!

Arbogast's the name. Burton T. Arbogast.

Not mine—his. The guy I said I'd be telling you about.

So you're mumbling to the effect of how you think maybe you know him. The name makes a distant tinkling noise, like a firebell in the night, a cowbell on the moon, only you just can't place it in the here and now. Unless you're yet another died and gone to heaven science fiction fan like yours truly, in which event you know Burton Arbogast better than you know any man alive except for maybe the Pope in Rome, Ray Bradbury, Arthur Clarke, all of the above.

But for the rest of you: Burton. Arbogast. Mr. Science Fiction himself. The Number One Fan Face. The man with the world's biggest collection of everything written, seen, smelled, spat or smoked that might even remotely be called by that term. Where you've probably heard of him is every time *People* or *TV Guide* want to run a spread on "The Sci-fi Cult Phenomenon," usually tied in with the latest popular cable show, they send a stringer out to Cleveland to interview Arbogast so he can tell them some shit they didn't already know they knew.

Like that sci-fi's cool stuff.

Like that it appeals most directly to the wonderment of the adolescent boy.

Like that sometimes those adolescent boys (like Arbogast) (or me) never grow up.

Like that it takes you in your imagination to places where only the

dreams of the angels could have brought you otherwise.

And so on.

Arbogast first chanced upon the world of science fiction one late night in 1938 when he was six years old and his old man came stumbling into the big white shingle house on the east side of Cleveland that he, Arbogast's mother Pearl, and young Burton the boy shared, clutching in his mitt the August issue of *Astounding Stories*.

Arbogast's father's father had been one of John D. Rockefeller's original partners in the Standard Oil Company and even after the old shark pushed him out the door in the 1880s he hung on to his original stock. So the son—with wife and child—lived off the dividends. Never had to work a lick in his life. And boozed like a salmon.

Which is why I describe him here as stumbling home that crucial 1938 midsummer's night. Because, quite frankly, that seems to be what he did every night of the week. According to his son, that is. (The same son who, when Pops Arbogast kicked the pail, inherited the pile.)

As for that August 1938 *Astounding* supposedly clutched in the old man's drunken fist, don't ask. That's the part that's got to be taken on faith. Like the virgin birth. But Arbogast insists it's true and who am I to doubt his word at this late date? If I've heard him tell this tale fifty times, I've heard him tell it fifty times fifty. And it never alters. (He doesn't mention the drunken part, though—that's my own embellishment.)

And so old man Arbogast comes

stumbling home from some nameless Lake Erie-side saloon, *Astounding Stories* clutched in hand, weaves an unsteady path through the darkened parlor, and plops one drunken foot smack down on top of one of young Burton's roller skates, lying where it has no good right to be.

Picture the rest: Mr. Arbogast shoots straight into the air like vomit fired at a toilet bowl and comes spinning back down to land—smack, blooey!—square on the back of his head, blood puddling in a pool.

That's right: deader than a door-knob. Old Mr. Arbogast.

The *Astounding Stories*, like a descending angel, flutters to the floor beside him.

The following morning an early rising Burton discovers lying on the parlor floor like fungus on a log both his deceased Daddy and the form of literature which ever afterward would stand as his one true love and devotion in life.

The Freudians among us could untangle one big ball of string over that one, right?

But as for Arbogast—old Mr. Science Fiction himself—the only critical factor in this tale is that issue of *Astounding*. Cover by Hans Wesso-(lowski). Lead story, "Who Goes There?" by Don A. Stuart. (In reality, editor John W. Campbell Jr. under a *nom de plume*.)

And so what of Arbogast ever afterward?

The decades rotate past like sprockets on a reel of film. Burton, like his father, never works an honest day in his life. With that Standard Oil

stock still producing fat dividends, there's no earthly need, and Burton is nothing if not about as ambitious as a lizard on a rock. He's a good, dutiful son (Mom Arbogast finally shuffles off this mortal coil in 1961) and the two of them continue to inhabit the big old east side Arbogast manse as the rest of the neighborhood decays like a rotting corpse around them. In 1952 (according to actual receipts) Arbogast installs a chain link fence surrounding the grounds. In 1955 three strands of razor-sharp barbed wire are affixed to the top. In 1958 he electrifies the works. In 1960 he acquires a pair of matching Doberman pinschers, male and female, named Ralph and 124C, to prowl the grounds day and night.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

It was in 1945 that Burton Arbogast, aged thirteen, founded the Cleveland Ohio Science Fiction Organization. He was already editor and publisher of one of the top science fiction fanzines of the period, *Space Time Gazette*, a leading member of both the Fantasy Amateur Press Association and the National Fantasy Fan Federation, and in regular correspondence with other devotees of the genre throughout the world including Forrest J Ackerman in California, Bob Tucker in Illinois, and Walter Gillings in England.

It was at a COSFO meeting in 1962 at age 17—me, not him, Arbogast was already a grizzled 30—that I first met good old Mr. Science Fiction himself.

There'd been an article in the Sunday rotogravure section of the

Plain-Dealer: Arbogast and his amazing collection of science fiction and fantasy which filled eight rooms of his large Eastside home. An address was given for the local SF club. Naturally, I wrote away for information.

At only my third COSFO meeting Arbogast sidled up to me and asked in a hushed, surreptitious tone that sounded like his throat was seeped in phlegm if I was interested in dropping by one afternoon and examining his collection.

I'd just got out of high school. My stepfather wanted me to join the Navy. My mother said I needed to find a job and, goddamn it, right away. They didn't have any programs back then to pay your way through college. My life seemed stretched like a flaccid rubber band ahead of me, like frog shit mixed with yesterday's black gravy.

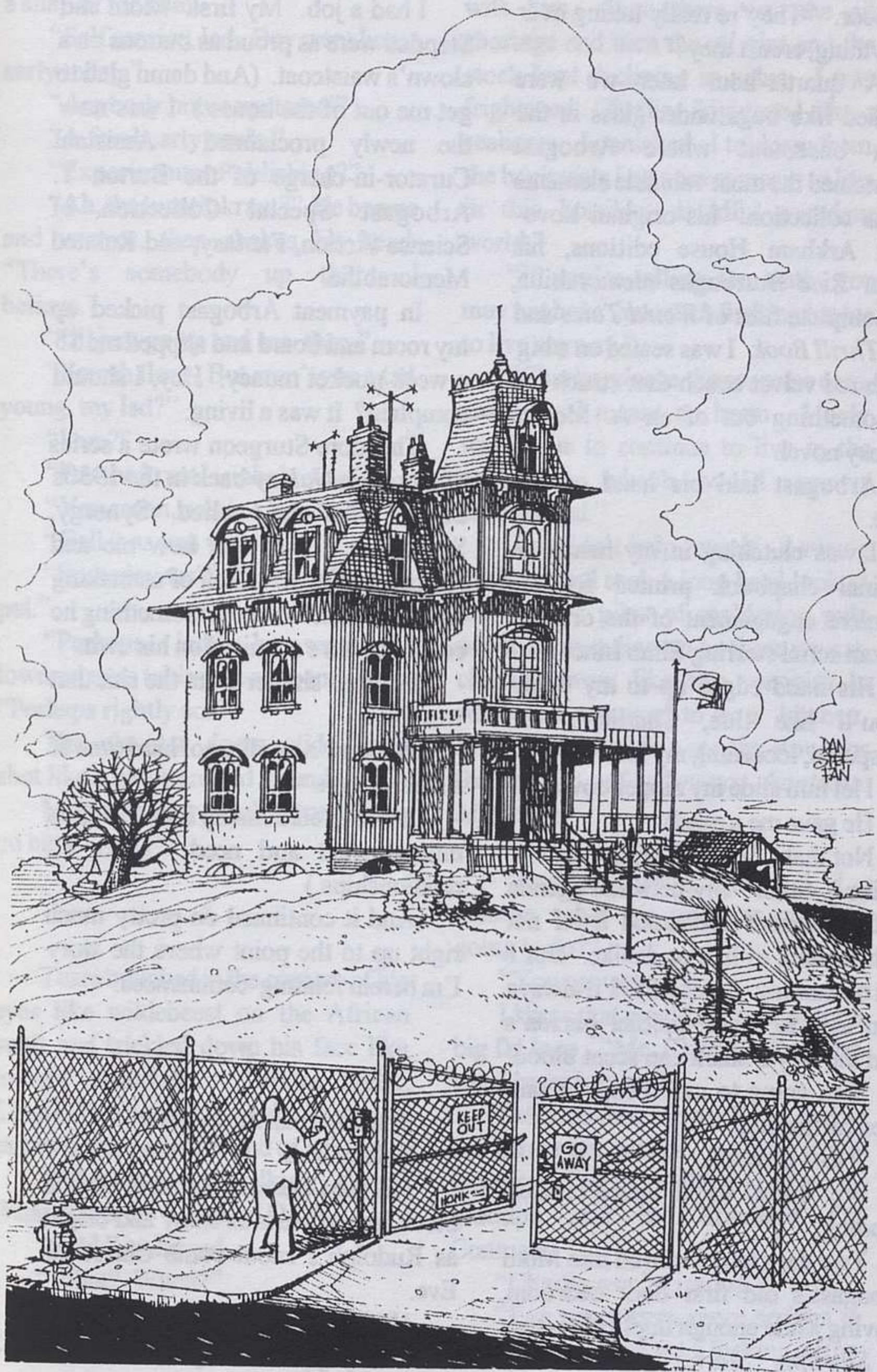
So I told Arbogast, sure, I'd see him Sunday at ten.

And thus, bus transfer clutched talisman-like in hand, there and then I appeared at Arbogast's electrified gate, tinkling the bell.

The man himself emerged from inside the white shingle house, a bone-thin, already graying man with the skinniest lips I've ever seen on a human and a patchy goatee beard to conceal his lack of chin. (A "beatnik beard" we would have called it back then.)

"Have any difficulty finding the place?" he inquired throatily, escorting me through the gate. ("They don't bite," he added, meaning the two dobermans. "Down Ralph! Down 124C!")

"Ever seen so many Negroes in



your life?" he inquired as we maneuvered through ankle-deep dead grass to the door. "They're really taking over everything, aren't they?"

A quarter-hour later we were huddled like bugs under glass in the open basement where Arbogast maintained the most valuable elements of his collection: his original Lovecraft Arkham House editions, his Edgar Rice Burroughs memorabilia, his complete files of *Weird Tales* and *The Thrill Book*. I was seated on a big plush red velvet couch that struck me as something out of an A. Merritt fantasy novel.

Arbogast laid his hand on my knee.

I was clutching in my hands an original chapbook printed for the premiere engagement of the original Tarzan serial starring Elmo Lincoln.

His hand edged up to my thigh. "You'll like this, Charlie," he whispered, loosening my belt.

I let him slide my zipper down.

He gave me a pinch.

Not that I did. Like it, that is. Or dislike it either. My personal agenda of the moment concerned itself not with matters of like or dislike. But I was no dummy. Since birth I'd always been able to sense another person's need the way a shark can scent blood.

"I'm going to call a cop," I said when he finished.

"No—please."

We came to a quick understanding.

Two days later I moved into Mom Arbogast's old first floor bedroom, shoving aside enough duplicate issues of *Startling Stories* and *Captain*

Future to make room for me and my bedroll.

I had a job. My first. Mom and Stepdad were as proud as buttons on a clown's waistcoat. (And damn glad to get me out of the house.) I was now the newly proclaimed Assistant Curator-in-charge of the Burton T. Arbogast Special Collection of Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Related Memorabilia.

In payment Arbogast picked up my room and board and slipped me \$5 a week pocket money. Hey, I should complain? It was a living.

Theodore Sturgeon wrote a series of stories in *Galaxy* back in the 1950s about what he called Synergy. Symbiosis. That was how me and Arbogast related. Each of us making use of the other to obtain something he could not have acquired on his own.

For me: shelter from the shit that was life.

For him: no pulling of hard time at a state prison.

It was a relationship founded upon mutual want and need. (Like all relationships.)

And it continued on pretty much right up to the point where the story I'm herein relating commences.

4

The doorman looks Irish.

Shanty Irish.

His wart-encrusted nose in a wood block face glistens as shiny and bright as Rudolph's snout come Christmas Eve.

He smells of cheap whiskey, the stem of a jug protruding from his uni-

form pocket like a thumb from a fist.

"Elevator working?" I ask, giving a snap of the chin.

"Self service, lad. Boy went home early today."

"Anybody home upstairs?"

"A few hearty souls."

"Experimenter Publishing?"

"Ah, the lunatic kraut?" He beams and weaves, then shakes his head.

"There's somebody up there, I believe."

"I'll just go up and see, then."

"Fourth floor. But aren't you a tad young, my lad?"

"I am?"

"For the kraut's unholy wares."

"You mean, science fiction?"

"Call it as you will."

"Someday we'll all be living in it, pal."

"Perhaps, lad," he says, his lowered eyes taking on a dreamy haze.

"Perhaps rightly so."

The elevator doors glide softly shut like a glove around a hand.

Moments later the elevator lifts me on high.

5

Tears bunched in the corners of his eyes like wildebeest on the African veldt and trickled down his face like midget waterfalls. "We're broke, Charlie," Arbogast gasped. "As broke as two promises at the end of a fat lie."

"What are you talking about? What about the Standard Oil?"

"Sold," he hissed.

"What? When?"

"Over the years. Not all at once. Starting—I don't know—starting

around 1970. I knew I shouldn't have voted for that thief Nixon. It all began with him. First there was the oil shortage and then the oil glut and the stock kept declining in value. I was frightened, Charlie, frightened like a seahorse. I panicked. I told you from the beginning I was never meant to live in this horrible, dreadful mundane world."

"If you're telling the truth, you may not have that much fucking longer to live anyway."

"Charlie, please. Show some compassion. I meant no harm. I only wanted us to continue to live in the style to which we'd grown accustomed."

I couldn't help myself. I swung my head and took a long hard look at the tangled piles of moldering pulp paper surrounding us as there we sat, chatting away like two magpies in what was supposed to be a kitchen. Except you couldn't see the stove for the stacks of *Famous Fantastic Mysteries*.

"Some goddamn style."

"And now we're broke. I...I... Charlie, what are we ever possibly going to do?"

"You can get a job."

I knew that would throw him for a big fat loop: "Me, Charlie? But who would ever hire me?"

"McDonalds, Burger King, maybe the corner gas station. I think it's a Chevron. Tell them about your great-grandpa and the Standard Oil Company."

"Charlie, you're jesting."

"I've never been more serious in my life. Either you get a fucking job or

else"—I waved an arm—"you'd better start selling some of this crap."

"Crap?" he swung his head like a lost child. "What crap?"

"Your stupid collection."

"But, Charlie, don't you believe in science fiction anymore?"

"Sure, I do. But I believe in being able to eat, too."

"Charlie, I—I have a confession to make." His voice grew hushed again. I saw him swallow hard, like python digesting a brick. Momentarily, I was tossed back in time to my first visit ever to the house, when he'd given me that first dose of molestation. "I've already sold off the majority of the duplicates. It's—it's what's supported us the last two years. I tried to do it surreptitiously, a few items at a time, without your noticing. But they're gone, Charlie. There's nothing left to sell."

"I wouldn't be so damn sure about—"

Just then the telephone rang.

6

The office stinks.

But it's a stink I know well, a scent which has long pervaded my life like an all-encompassing fog.

The smell of wood pulp paper.

There's a girl in the anteroom seated in back of a wooden desk. A good-looking girl, too, with cobalt black hair, eyes like a pair of baby blue marbles, lips as red as a baboon's bottom, a round pert smooth chin.

She looks incredibly like the silent film actress Louise Brooks. One of Arbogast's favorite videos is some-

thing called "Pandora's Box" with her in it. (Needless to say, he's a huge fan of the silent cinema. His all-time favorite movie is *Metropolis*. I swear he jerks off (in private) to the false robot Maria.)

"Good afternoon, sir. May I help you?"

I fight for words. Let me tell you something: hanging around science fiction fans all these years I haven't seen many girls as gorgeous as this one. If any.

So who gives a shit if—looked at from one angle—she's a half-century older than me?

I plop my rear end as delicate as a fawn on a corner of her desk and meet her gaze head-on, like a bull rhinoceros. "That depends, sweetie," I drawl.

"Depends upon what, sir?" Her voice is like the moan of an ostrich in heat. (Or what I've long imagined such a cry would be.)

"Depends on what your name is."

"I'm Misty LaTour."

"And I'm Charlie Frap." I put my hand out to shake. "So what are you doing for dinner tonight, Misty baby?"

Her touch is a jolt of electricity. I gasp.

"With this dreadful storm, I'll likely eat in."

"Mind if I join you?" I leer. "Maybe we can eat together, both at—"

There's a sudden loud noise from the back. As if somebody has just dropped an unabridged dictionary on the floor.

Thud!

Misty LaTour doesn't blink a

gorgeous blue eyeball, though.

The noise jolts me back to reality. A dinner date? Who am I kidding? Christ, this is 1925. And it's getting damn late.

Misty's wearing a perfume that tickles my nostrils with the scent of an Arabian mare. Me, I'm as intoxicated as a stallion.

I struggle to restrain my brute animal instincts. There isn't time. "I'm here to see the editor-in-chief," I manage to blurt out.

"Oh, you don't mean Papa?"

"Papa? Hugo Gernsback? I didn't know he had kids."

"I'm adopted."

"Well, I'm, uh..."—the cover story the three of us, me and Hapgood and Arbogast, concocted between us starts coming back to me—"I'm a writer. And I heard about this new magazine of his, this *Scientifiction*. I think it might be straight up my alley. I'm a big fan of Wells and old Jules Verne."

"I'm afraid Papa isn't in," she says softly. For some reason the baby blue glow has gone out of her eyes. She looks sad as a lost caribou.

"Because of the storm?"

"I'm afraid...afraid Papa won't be in for...for some time."

There's another loud noise from the back. Another dropped Webster's.

Thud!

I swing my head questioningly in that direction.

"Dr. Sloane," she says, by way of explanation.

Sloane! T. O'Conor Sloane. Gernsback's managing editor on *Amazing Stories*. "He'll have to do," I say, springing up from the desk and

darting toward the door in the wall. After all, I remind myself, it's not Gernsback personally I'm after. It's his latest creation.

"Wait, Mr.—"

But she's too late. I'm through the door like an angel entering heaven.

On the other side, T. O'Conor Sloane—or who I assume must be Sloane—a tall, stiff as an arrow, straight-backed man with a full gray beard, peers at me blearily from behind wire-rimmed spectacles.

He's standing next to a big wooden desk.

Between his hands he grips a large book, what I recognize as nothing less than Webster's Unabridged. Standing there, staring at me, Sloane drops the book on the floor.

Thud!

"Huh?" I manage.

"Scientific experiment." He stoops down to pick up the dictionary. "What I hope will be the lead piece for our new magazine."

"*Scientifiction*?"

"What's that?" He gives me a sudden quick glare.

"Your new magazine."

"Oh, that's been changed."

He lets the dictionary go again.

Thud!

"But Gernsback—"

"Gernsback?" he says, cocking an eyebrow. "The poor sad fellow. Bonkers, I'm afraid. Totally bonkers." He stoops down to retrieve the dictionary. "So what would you say? Six-tenths of a second? That's what I make it as. Did you know that Galileo himself once dropped a grapefruit from the top of the Leaning Tower of Pisa?"

Bonkers? Gernsback? But that he can't be. "But I came here to see Mr. Gernsback."

"Then try the asylum. In Brooklyn. He's been confined there nine months now. Mad as a blue banana. A hopeless case, it appears."

Sloane dumps the dictionary on his desk and picks up a sheet of paper from another pile. He holds it up to me.

"So what do you think, young man?"

I stand there with my mouth wide open in an oval as big as the moon.

It's a magazine cover proof. I immediately recognize the sturdy, archaic, quasi-Germanic style of Frank R. Paul.

The cover depicts a view of the Leaning Tower of Pisa.

Squinting, I can make out the shadow of a round object spiraling toward the earth below.

A grapefruit?

The title of the magazine reads: *The Practical Experimenter*.

"So what do you think, young man?" Sloane repeats. "Don't you agree this ought to thrash that *Scientifiction* tomfoolery all to Hades and back? Voyages to the moon indeed. On a day like today when we can't even manage to get to the Bronx."

And he giggles.

It's only then that I realize the old geezer's drunk as a bull moose.

His expression suddenly stiffens. "Say, what do you want here anyway? You're not with the police, are you? We paid you fellows off last week."

"No, I—I'm a writer."

His eyes narrow. "What kind of writer?"

"Fiction." I almost say *science fiction* but catch myself first. There is no science fiction here—not yet. "Stories."

"Then you've come to the right place." He's back at his desk again, holding up yet another cover proof.

This time my jaw damn near hits the floor.

Sexology. That's what the cover says. And the illustration: I recognize Misty LaTour.

Naked. Stark naked. Limbs akimbo on a red velvet couch.

And, yes, it's Frank R. Paul again.

"We've got a 5,000-word gap in next issue," Sloane says. "Quality fuck fiction is always welcome here at the Experimenter Company."

7

As I was saying earlier, just then the telephone rang.

Now I know that sounds way too convenient to be true and I wouldn't necessarily buy in on it myself if somebody came up to me and said hey, this was utter fact.

But that's the way I remember it happening.

The telephone rang.

Riiiiing, riiiiing, riiiiing.

(Oh, sure, it might have been an hour or two later—maybe even a whole day—but that's not the point: the telephone did ring. Honest Injun.)

Riiiiing.

Arbogast crossed over and plucked the receiver off the left front burner of the gas stove, shoving aside the August 1949 issue of *Fantastic Adventures* and an A.L. Burt illus-

trated edition of *The Beasts of Tarzan*.

"Hello."

His voice altered instantaneously. "Hapgood," I heard him gasp. "Hapgood, how *are* you?"

And he made it sound as if he really gave a fat flying fig.

And in this one particular instance I knew he did.

The Hapgood on the other end of the line was none other than the Man Himself, Hapgood Snails. Yes, the very same. The Hapgood Snails who: author, painter, poet, actor, musician, producer, composer, director, carpenter, plumber, etc. And otherwise all-around genius. The most renowned graduate in the history of our very own ever-lovin' blue-eyed science fiction field and (believe this or don't) also (like me) a one-time protégé of good old Mr. Science Fiction, the Number One Fan Face of All Time, Burton T. Arbogast.

The two of them had kept in touch over the intervening years since Hapgood, unlike most other successful escapees from the field, never saw fit to conceal his original scientific roots, though ever since the Worldcon incident in the middle seventies he stopped attending public fan functions.

(You've probably heard one version or another of what allegedly took place there. As an actual eye witness, I can confirm the following: a enormous waddling blonde femme fan dressed as an alien warrior huntress complete with brass brassiere and antlered helmet—and also, inexplicably, a pair of Mr. Spock ears—forced Hapgood into a freight elevator and there attempted to commit an act of

physical violation upon his person, the instrument in question being a hard rubber dagger which she most violently wielded.

(And which was one hell of a sight to behold, believe you me, even after a group of us fans managed to break down the elevator door with a fire ax and rescue Hapgood from the proverbial fate worse than death. In any event, without meaning to brag, I was the cool-headed one who actually pulled the crazed huntress off her chosen prey. It turned out later she was an L.A. area costume fan who'd gotten hold of some of the bad acid that was making the rounds of the room parties the night before. "I thought he was a bull hog," she told anyone who would listen. "I really truly honestly did. A bull hog. Really.")

(And, no, please don't ask me what a bull hog is. Or why an alien huntress would want to violate one. With or without the rubber dagger.)

In any event, Hapgood turned more reclusive after that.

In the beginning, though, years back, the then thirteen-year-old Hapgood Snails had materialized like a gift from heaven at his first meeting of the Cleveland Ohio Science Fiction Organization in response to a mention of the club in Rog Phillips's fanzine review column in *Amazing Stories*. (The same magazine which, two years later, would publish Hapgood's first story.) They tell me that even then there was something about Hapgood the boy, something indelible that set him apart from the multitude of other teenage SF fans: a spark, a flame, a fierce gold glint in the eye.

Whatever.

Once when I'd been sneaking maybe a bit too hefty a dose from one of my hidden peach brandy flasks (I haven't mentioned those, have I?—well, go figure: anyway, there's got to be plenty of places to hide a bottle in a house filled with 17,500 books and magazines) I asked Arbogast straight out if he'd ever tried to fool around with Hapgood as he'd done with every other Cleveland boy fan including, as previously related, one Charlton H. Frap.

"Oh, my God, no!" he said, throwing a hand in front of his face in sheer abject dread. "For the love of all that's holy, no, no, no! How can you even suggest such a thing? Laying a hand on Hapgood, that would be like—like soiling the Mona Lisa."

And, again, I believed him.

By the time he turned eighteen, Hapgood had published his fourteenth professional science fiction story, this one a lead novelette in *Galaxy* entitled "Erupting Centaurus," which not only brought Hapgood his first professional Hugo (he'd already won two for his fanzine *Blight*) but which is nowadays regarded as a breakthrough piece in adult-themed SF, the first story ever to deal realistically with alien/human sex. And I repeat for emphasis: Hapgood was then eighteen years old. I also repeat: he hadn't been molested by Arbogast. (That's a gag. Alien, human sex. Get it?)

And have I mentioned that he was as beautiful as a Grecian god? And an exact spitting replica of the movie actor Warren Beatty. From a very early age, too, according to Arbogast.

"Hapgood looked like Warren Beatty before anyone had ever even *seen* Warren Beatty," he confirmed.

By the time he turned twenty-five, Hapgood had left the science fiction field behind, propelling a swift orbit through the literary universe with the relentless velocity of a meteorite piercing the earth's ionosphere.

The rest is history.

For the past couple years Hapgood has been holed up in Los Angeles, where he now mostly resides when he isn't hanging out in Paris or Berlin, working on a screenplay for his remake of the D.W. Griffith silent masterpiece *Intolerance*, a four-part historical epic (with one far future segment) which he intends directing himself and which has been rumored to star Leonardo DiCaprio, Carrie-Anne Moss, Brad Pitt, ex-porn actress Annie Sprinkles and rock star Trent Reznor of the band Nine Inch Nails. The tentative budget is supposedly in the \$300 million range with Paramount, Fox and Disney pooling their resources to pick up the tab.

And yet here he was now. On the phone. With Arbogast.

Who was saying (as I listened in): "Yes, Hapgood...yes, I'm very well indeed...thank you so very very *much* for asking. And how is the *Intolerance* project coming?"

I heard a murmur from the other end of the line: Hapgood no doubt. It gave even me a tiny little tingle to know I was actually hearing his voice.

"You've changed the title?" Arbogast again. "*The Human Condition*...yes, I like that...oh, I agree totally...it's much, much more con-

temporary. And sexier. And how's the weather out there, Hapgood?"

Another murmur.

Arbogast: "Yes, I know that's not why you called...a fan?...a fan is stalking you?...from Cleveland?...by phone?...Norton...N.B. Norton?...No, I'm afraid I don't...it's a new name to me, Hapgood."

More murmuring.

"Of course, Hapgood...I'll be more than happy to...you have an address?"

Arbogast made a scribbling motion in mid-air. Pencil and paper. Like an obedient armadillo, I hastened to fetch.

He jotted: *1814 Aldrich Avenue.*

Beneath he scribbled: *N.B. Norton.*

"He's not a COSFO member, Hapgood. I'd know him if he were."

Murmurs.

Arbogast: "Certainly we'll take care of it...Charlie and I. Yes, Hapgood, I'll give him your best...I know you feel you owe him for the Worldcon thing...yes, I'm pleased to hear from you, too...if there's anything else, I'll be sure to get back to you. Yes, good-bye. Good-bye, Hapgood. Talk to you again soon?"

Click.

He hung up the phone.

"That was Hapgood Snails," Arbogast said, his eyes rolling circles in his head, his cheeks and forehead as damp as washrags. "He'd like us to do him a personal favor."

"Did you tell him he could kiss my ass?"

Arbogast blanched.

"Hey, just kidding," I said.

"So what favor?" I didn't bother asking how come, considering our most recent topic of conversation—that is our own precariously lousy finances—he hadn't hit up Hapgood for a loan. I knew his reply: something to do with the soiling of the Mona Lisa.

He said: "Some local fellow, apparently a fan of some sort going by the name of Norton—"

I shook my head in ignorance.

"—got hold of Hapgood's private phone number and keeps calling him day and night. Even when he has the number changed, this Norton character uncovers the new one and starts the phone calls all over again."

"Hapgood say what about?"

"Something to do with a device this Norton claims to have invented and which only Hapgood can properly evaluate."

"Perpetual motion?" I guessed. "Another Dean Drive?"

"Not this time. It sounds more like a variant on the classic Wellsian time machine. Norton calls it his Wayback Device."

"I saw the show, too."

"Show?" Arbogast looked blank as a paper bag. (If it wasn't hardcore science fiction, the chances were he hadn't a clue. Mention *The Iliad* and you'd draw a blank, too.)

"Mr. Peabody. And Sherman. From the old Rocky and Bullwinkle show."

Arbogast still looked blank as a fig leaf.

I let it ride.

"So what's Hapgood got to do with this Norton and his Wayback Device?" I asked.

"Hapgood says Norton keeps trying to bring up the old Time Rebels series Hapgood had in *F&SF* when Avram Davidson was editor. You remember, classic time travel pieces but with a surreal twist. Norton thinks they were the best, most realistic writings ever on the theme of travel into the past."

"They were. The novelette Silverberg had in *Galaxy* about the same time with the dinosaurs and shit—that was good, too. But Hapgood's was hipper, which a lot of fans missed."

Including, I was sure, Arbogast.

He nodded anyway. "But pure fiction."

"Well, sure. Norton thinks otherwise?"

"I guess that's what we have to find out. First that and then get him to leave Hapgood alone once and for good:

"What you mean 'we,' white man?" I inquired.

Arbogast didn't seem to get that reference, either—early comic book *Mad*.

I let it ride.

The next morning, pooling our resources like a couple racetrack touts with a line on a hot nag, we boarded a crosstown bus.

driver in frail hopes that our proximity to authority would convince the various thuggish types on board to let us eventually disembark with our lives and sacred fortunes intact. (Hey, if you want to meet a bunch of folk you never in your life wanted to meet in the first place, take a trip on your local crosstown bus.)

The way the two of us dressed may have helped some to keep the riffraff at bay. Arbogast was making his usual fashion statement of chinos, broken-soled sandals, and a 1978 Midwescon souvenir teeshirt. Me, I wore my dingy blue work shirt, hacked-off-at-the-knee Levis, and matching blue sneakers.

Did I forget to mention? Arbogast was as bald as a beet. Me, I wore my frizzy black locks coifed in a banded pony tail.

Somehow intact and utterly unmolested, the two of us staggered off the bus at a corner dead across the street from the pile of soot-streaked shingles and boarded-up windows that appeared to be the home of one N.B. Norton. The address fit, anyway. It wasn't the first time it had been brought home to me that there were neighborhoods on Cleveland's east side that made the one Arbogast and I inhabited look like the hills of Beverly by comparison.

Wishing I had a third eye in the back of my head like the alien in the bar in the famous Damon Knight story to keep watch on the pack of lounging crackheads on the corner, the two of us skirted a zigzag path through the piles of broken glass and rusty beer cans, the million or so crumpled up cigarette

Like baby marsupials cuddled in a pouch, Arbogast and I sat up front, taking up between us the whole of the sidewise seat directly in back of the

packs, the scattering of discarded condoms that looked recently used.

When we at last reached the front door of the alleged Norton domicile, Arbogast rang the bell.

It didn't work.

So I knocked.

There was a long wait.

Something thudded on the other side of the door.

I knocked again.

A bone-thin woman in a pink-and-purple flour sack dress hurled open the door. She could have been on either side of eighty years old. Rivulets of sweat puddled her skeletal physiognomy like pools in a forest.

"What you want, white trash?" she asked, amiably enough and despite being as white as a fresh carnation herself.

"Norton?" I managed to squeak.

"N.B. Norton?"

"My little boy!"

"Your son?"

"Grandbaby." She swept suddenly aside, moving with the grace of a matador teasing a bull. "Come on in, fellows. One of you this Hapgood white trash he's been waiting for?"

"Well, we represent Hapgood Snails," I said.

"Don't say nothing 'bout the buck teeth thing, though. The child's a bit sensitive 'bout that part."

10

The old lady guided us lemming-like through a veritable maze of dim, narrow, dust-choked, low-ceilinged, vaguely diseased hallways to a unexpectedly open, sun-splashed room

at the rear of the house. And there on the floor knelt what I assumed had to be N.B. Norton.

He was damn near as bone skinny as his grandmother and dressed in a set of bib coveralls that closely matched her flour sack dress in both color and fabric. And when he lifted his head to gape at Arbogast and me a pair of dirty yellow buck teeth protruded walrus-like from his mouth.

Otherwise, he looked like a pretty average guy. If your idea of an average guy is the banjo-playing kid from *Deliverance*. All grown up and moved to the big city.

I half expected to hear him to say, "Yuk." But he didn't say a thing.

He just gaped at us.

In one knotty palm he clutched a big heavy crescent wrench, in the other a pair of needle-nose pliers. There were a couple of long-necked screwdrivers sticking out of the bib pocket of his coveralls.

It was Arbogast who finally snapped the silence. "Mr., ah, Mr. Norton, my colleague and I represent Hapgood Snails and we—"

Norton cut him off with a brisk head shake. "You ain't him." His voice was like a reedy snort.

"Ain't—aren't who?"

"Snails."

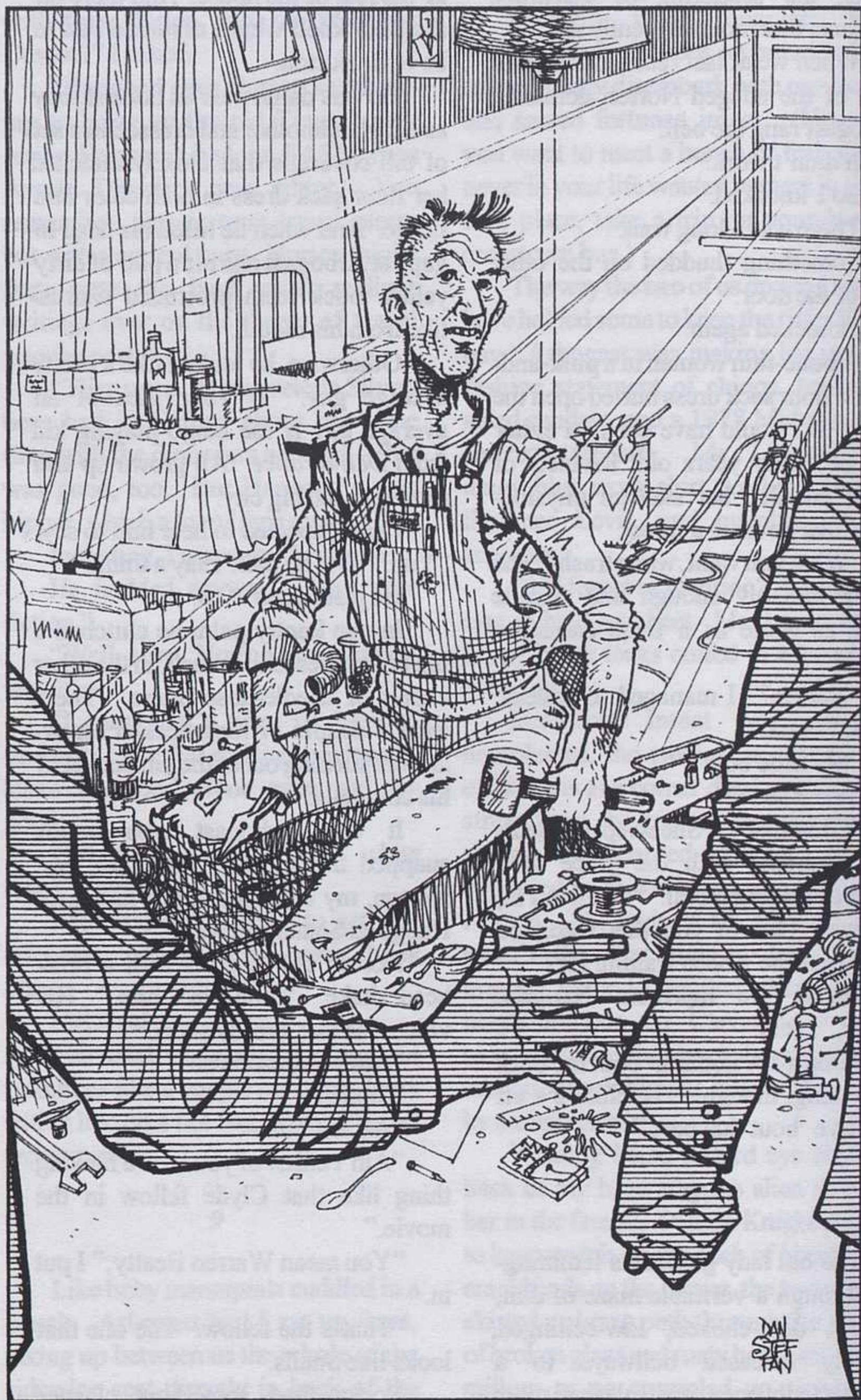
"Ah, no, but—"

"Ain't either of you look a fucking thing like that Clyde fellow in the movie."

"You mean Warren Beatty," I put in.

"That's the fellow. The one that looks like Snails."

Norton had something clasped



between his long bony knees. Something mechanical, a machine. I couldn't help trying to get a better look. It resembled a spider's web of black and red wires held together by nuts, bolts, and screws. The whole contraption glistened with a silvery sheen.

Norton saw where I was looking. "My Wayback Device," he confirmed.

"I know. I saw the show, too."

"What show?"

Arbogast took a tentative step forward, holding out both hands in front of him. "Mr. Norton, we're here to represent Hapgood Snails and to request that you kindly refrain from disturbing him further in the future."

Norton lifted one albino-white eyebrow. The hair on the top of his head grew in tufts, a patch here, a patch there. It was impossible to guess at his age. "Snails told you to come down here and say that, did he?"

"Why, I—yes, yes, as a matter of fact, he did."

"Then tell him to come here and say it his own fucking self."

I could see that a direct approach was getting us nowhere. I decided it was time to try the opposite tack: indirection.

"So what's the N.B. stand for?" I asked, in what I hoped was an amiable tone.

"It stands for No Bullshit," he said. "And that means you, too, chubby boy."

"Look, friend, we're just a couple of local science fiction fans who—" Arbogast chose to try to put in at just that point.

"Fans." Norton spat on the floor

as if he'd just uttered a dirty word. "Pack of fans make a circus of geeks look cool as a sea breeze," he observed.

I decided to let that one pass since I couldn't necessarily disagree.

He rose to his feet, all six feet, five inches of him. It took a while. He stooped to pick up the Wayback Device and then marched across the length of the room to where the hazy afternoon sun streamed through mottled window panes like urine through a sieve.

He set the machine down on top of a card table and gaped at us again. "Don't think it'll work, do you?"

"Well, I wouldn't—"

"Built the whole contraption in two nights, using nothing but an erector set and the brains the good Lord blessed me with. And you and fucking Snails don't think it works."

He was starting to make me feel guilty. "Hapgood's a busy man." (And if you don't know what an erector set is, ask a guy over fifty; he'll tell you.)

"Want to see it work?" he asked.

"Why—" I looked at Arbogast. "Why, sure."

"Then don't shut your eyes."

Bingo!

And he was gone.

Vanished.

Disappeared from the room.

Ker-poof!

And the Wayback Device had disappeared right along with him.

I tried to do what he said. Not shut my eyes. But I did blink. One time.

Bingo!

He was back again.

The Wayback Device, too.

There was something tucked underneath his arm.

He held it up to the sunlight.

A newspaper. *The Cleveland Plain-Dealer*. Arbogast and I crept closer.

We read the headline.

KENNEDY SHOT IN DALLAS

“You old farts know when that was, don’t you?”

Like puppets on strings, Arbogast and I both jerked our heads.

“November 22,” I said, “1963.”

“You got it on the button,” he said.

The *Plain-Dealer* was as fresh as the day it was printed.

“He could have had it hid in his pants,” Arbogast whispered.

But we both knew better.

“So it does—” I began.

“—work,” Arbogast finished lamely.

“You bet your sweet fucking buns it works,” Norton said. “You think I’d hassle a bright boy like Snails if it didn’t?”

11

Of course that meant we had to go back home and think things over and since this isn’t the main thread of the narrative but rather what Hapgood Snails writer-types would call the background exposition, let’s squeeze up tiny up like a toad tonguing a fly and herewith quickly summarize a few basic facts for the record:

• We tell old No Bullshit Norton not to tell anybody else about his

Wayback Device—please, oh pretty please—we’ll be right back just as soon as we phone Hapgood Snails out in California to give him the general lowdown.

• We phone Hapgood and let him know this crazy turkey Norton really has invented a working time machine. No shit, sez Hapgood. I can hear female giggling in the background and a gush of running water. Well, keep in touch, fellas, sez Hapgood, clicking the phone.

• Arbogast and I put our heads together. Me, I’m imbibing peach brandy; him, he’s sucking on a stogy-sized joint. (I didn’t mention that either, did I? Burton Arbogast, pot-head. Hey, think about it. It does sort of figure.)

We thereby arrive at a certain set of mutual conclusions.

These conclusions entail to wit:

1. Norton’s Wayback Device works like a clockwork fucking orange. (Previously established, I acknowledge.)

2. We’re flat fucking broke, me and him (Arbogast) both (ditto).

So take point two above and divide it by point one and what you end up with is yet another future possibility, namely:

A method for achieving wealth beyond both our nuttiest dreams exists. (Italics added for emphasis.)

Another fact I throw out at this time for whatever it’s worth: All Arbogast and I really know from shit and a tree is science fiction.

You then take all the above, datum and possibility both, roll it up into one huge ball of earwax, hit it hard with a

hammer, stand back, and let the shattered pieces topple to the floor.

So what it all means is:

The next morning finds the two of us, me and Arbogast, again riding that crosstown bus on our way to visit the brilliant, brain-big, bursting-with-talent genius of an inventor, Mr. N. B. Norton.

12

Norton gave us a short lesson on how it worked.

"It's so dang fool simple even a couple of sci-fi nerds—"

"Please don't call it that," Arbogast broke in softly.

"Don't call what what?"

"Don't call it sci-fi. We fans hate that."

Norton tossed his shoulders. "Okay, then, let's just say the Wayback Device is so goldarn simple even a couple scientific devotees like yourselves ought to be able to figure it out. What you do first is you pick it up and hold it in your hands. Then you press this lever here. The one painted fire engine red. Hold it down and count to five. One... two... three... four... five... and —*zippo!*—you're gone. Like that. Then you just keep holding it down—the red lever, not the green, remember—and whatever you do, don't let go too soon because you're traveling through time and you don't want to accidentally blow up into a couple zillion pieces—"

This was where I broke in. "Excuse me. Blow up?"

"You don't want to land some time

you already are. Two of the same body cannot occupy the same place at the same time. It's basic physics. What year were you born in?"

"1932," said Arbogast.

"Then you can't go back any later than that. And you, hoss?"

He'd taken to calling me "hoss." I hated it but thought it wiser not to immediately object.

"1945," I said.

"The same thing there with you." I nodded.

"The Wayback travels at a rate of one day back through time for every ten seconds that passes for the fellow using it. So if you wanted to go back, say, one week—and you wouldn't 'cause you'd blow up if you did—then it'd take seventy seconds for you to get there. If you wanted to go back one year, it'd take 3,650 seconds or a shade over one hour. So you can figure on that: one hour for every one year."

"So then what you're telling us," Arbogast said, "is that yesterday, during your demonstration, it took you some forty hours to travel back to 1963."

"Right. And then another forty hours getting back here."

"Yet Charlie and I noticed nothing. For us it was a matter of microseconds."

"Sure. But you were here. I was there. Different places, different times."

"And you didn't get hungry?"

"It doesn't seem to work that way. Or thirsty either. I don't think you even get older."

"And there's no way of doing this any faster?" I put in.

"Oh, maybe," said Norton with a shrug. "But I'd have to tinker. And stopping the machine would be tougher. Unless you've got a few seconds lead, it can be hard getting the Wayback to stop right when you want it on an exact date."

"And how does that occur?" Arbogast asked. "The stopping, I mean?"

"Take your finger off the lever. What do you think?"

"And the green lever?" I chimed in. "What does that do?"

Norton gaped at me. "That's for the return trip. Coming back. Just push it down—the same as the red lever—and count to five. You don't have to hold it down this time. It'll get you back where you belong."

"What's the power source?" I asked.

"Power? I don't get you, hoss."

"What makes it run? You know, fuel."

"Just batteries."

"What batteries?"

"The ones it runs on. Eight flashlight batteries. Evereadys. I got them from the Wal-Mart on sale."

I looked at Arbogast. And he was looking at me. Neither one of us was logically believing a single word. But we'd seen it. With our own eyes. We'd seen the newspaper from 1963. And the headline—crisp, clean, clear as a butterfly on a mountaintop.

Arbogast said: "What about travel into the future?"

"Come again," said Norton.

"Suppose one wants to visit 2199."

Norton grinned from ear to ear. "Are you goddamn crazy out of your

head or what?"

"No," said Arbogast stiffly. "Not that I'm presently aware."

"Then what gives you the goofy idea you can visit some place that don't exist? The future ain't real, pal. It's still out there ahead of us. In a state of flux—pure temporal flux. Like kangaroos in a pickle jar. You can maybe picture it in your head. But it ain't real. It ain't happened."

Arbogast and I shrugged our shoulders. So much for a thousand and one science fiction tales from Wells's original *Time Machine* onward. Bye-bye, Morlocks.

I looked at Arbogast.

Arbogast looked at me.

"So when can we go?" I said.

"What you mean 'we,' white man?" said Arbogast.

13

So it was just going to be me. I should have figured. Arbogast, like Asimov and Bradbury and Stanley Kubrick, to name three other visionaries of the future, refused to set foot aboard an airplane. Not surprisingly, a time machine didn't strike him as any more practical a means of travel.

I spent a lot of time talking to Norton, trying to get the whole thing down pat in my head.

Geography was also a major consideration, it turned out. The Wayback let you travel back through time but not through space. So let's suppose you wanted to visit the pyramids to watch them being built due to the fact that, like me, you were a big fan of the movie *Land of the*

Pharaohs and you wanted to take a gander at what it had been like back then. Now the matter of boredom aside—having to stand there with the Wayback in your hands for fifteen years, just waiting to arrive—when you finally did get there you still wouldn't see much of anything except maybe a forest and a sparkling blue lake and, if you were really lucky, a tribe of Indians squatting around a fire, roasting a squirrel. Because you'd still be in Ohio—in what eventually was to become Cleveland. And the pyramids were nowhere near. Instead, they were off where they were meant to be, namely in Egypt, getting built. And so in order to see that you'd have to go there first—to Egypt—and then travel back through time.

So it wasn't going to be easy. Nothing really tremendous ever was, it seemed to me. And traveling back through time—since nobody had figured out how to do it pre-N.B. Norton—well, that had to be a pretty tremendous event.

For our first planned trip through time I had no need to leave good ol' Cleveland anyway. It was going to be a fairly lengthy jaunt, though. All the way back to December 1929 to be precise. Arbogast and I had picked out the date between us.

So how come December 1929, you probably want to know.

That was something Arbogast and I had decided that first night after we'd visited Norton and discovered that his Wayback actually damn well worked. Take all of history—and all of pre-history, too, for that matter—and put it at one's personal disposal. What to

do? Fulfill a need, of course. But what, really, was our single greatest mutual need? Money. That was as brutally honest as we could put it. We were flat, full out, fucked up, totally, completely, entirely broke. Busted. So money it had to be. For the time being at least, forget historical research. Forget sightseeing. All that was fine and dandy as a duck in mink but if you were in serious danger of starving to death, it was also a luxury, like a gold mine in the sky. Now science fiction—that was our game. It was the one and only thing either of us really knew diddly shit about. So we travel back through time. To the earliest days of science fiction. To when certain publications now worth hundreds, even thousands of dollars can be plucked hot off the press for a handful of pennies each. Arbogast was already a renowned collector. Nobody would think twice if he started selling off an occasional valuable item. They'd just figure it was a duplicate.

I've got to admit the dollar signs like angels on wing fluttered through the firmament of my wild, maddened dreams that night. Arbogast's, too, I'll bet.

We decided to start with the first—January 1930—issue of *Astounding Stories of Super-Science*.

Now we both realized a number of early SF books were worth even more than the first few magazines. To name just one, H.P. Lovecraft's 1939 posthumous collection *The Outsider and Others*, published in an original limited edition, could fetch upwards of \$2,500 on the open market. But Arbogast pointed out something I

hadn't thought of. Limited edition meant just that—limited. Every single one of those copies of *The Outsider and Others* had eventually belonged to somebody. What if by going back in time and buying up, say, twenty copies of the first Arkham House edition Arbogast and I thus deprived twenty real people of copies they ought otherwise to have owned? Now chances were, if we did that, no big deal. But what if, just say, we grabbed a copy of *The Outsider and Others* that was otherwise destined to be owned by a man named Horton Finkletter and this Horton Finkletter had a son named Buddy who needed an operation to cure his failing liver, and in 1954 Horton Finkletter reluctantly unloaded his personal copy of *The Outsider and Others*, then valued at \$500, to pay for the needed surgery and little Buddy lived and thrived and grew up to become president of the United States or maybe just shot one in the head but, anyway, did something important to alter history in a significant way.

Time travel was risky business. As dangerous as a snake in a seer-sucker suit. But I'd already read enough science fiction to know that. History could be changed, altered, rearranged like the pieces of a kaleidoscope. Norton fully agreed on the possible problems. Hell's bells, he mused, maybe it already had been changed. There'd be no sure way of knowing. It was like chaos theory. Kill a butterfly in Australia and cause a hurricane in Florida. It was as scary as a hyena on a bad drunk when you thought about it.

So I tried hard not to think.

But we forgot about *The Outsider and Others*, even though it would have been an easy snatch.

We set our sights instead on that first pulp *Astounding*, cover by Wesso, a single copy of which in tiptop condition might fetch upward of a cool \$1,000 in the current collectors' market.

"Let's try for fifty copies," Arbogast ventured.

I did the math in my head: fifty copies! Fifty times one thousand equaling fifty thousand!

In the end, without anybody along to help with the load, twenty-five copies was the most I could tote back.

Twenty-five copies at twenty 1930 and earlier cents each (pennies surreptitiously acquired from various coin dealers around town) and you still had one hell of a sweet profit: twenty-five thousand bucks!

Give or take a few.

Now another thing you're probably wondering is how come Norton, a real Grade A asshole as I've painted him here, was so accommodating in letting Arbogast and me make use of his Wayback whenever and however we pleased.

Well, it was because of Hapgood Snails. Norton still wanted to meet the man. He was that much of a fan.

I guess you could say we strung him along. We assured him—like a spider blowing kisses at a moth—that we remained in continual intimate contact with Hapgood and the very minute he finally finished the first draft of his *Intolerance/Human Condition* script he'd be birddogging it to Cleveland to meet up with Norton and shake



Faint vertical text on the right edge of the page, possibly bleed-through from the reverse side. The text is mostly illegible but appears to contain names and dates, such as "DAN STEFFAN" and "1954".

his hand and see for himself what a wonderful incredible marvelous invention the fabulous Wayback Device really was.

And on and on. All pure murky bullshit. We actually hadn't said another word to Hapgood. He was rich enough already. We were the ones in dire need of dough. We figured we'd save it up for a surprise.

"You know, hoss," Norton said, that last night as I was preparing to leave, "I ain't made mention of this before but I've written a few stories of my own."

"No shit," I said. "SF?"

"Why, sure."

"Time travel?" Arbogast guessed.

"Nope. Space adventure. Action stuff. But realistic. Like Doc Smith crossed with one of those New Wave weirdos like Ellison or Spinrad. You know, it sure would mean a lot to me to have Mr. Snails's opinion."

"And I'm sure he'll be only too happy to give it," I dissembled. "When he's got the free time, that is."

"And then maybe help me with finding a publisher. Or an agent maybe. I ain't been having much luck on my own."

"That too," Arbogast agreed. "I'm certain, knowing Hapgood, he'll be pleased to help."

Norton? A writer? Like the man said: everybody wants to get into the fucking act. (And his maiden aunt, too.)

"We'll be sure to mention it to Hapgood when we next talk on the phone," I lied.

For those twenty-five January 1930 *Astoundings* we ended up raking

in a total of slightly more than \$28,500 after costs and expenses, enough for the two of us to live on for a year.

I looked at Arbogast. He looked at me.

We were both grinning.

Backwards in time went I again. This time a shorter jaunt. To the late winter of 1940. The first issue of *Captain Future*. Arbogast's second all-time favorite magazine. (His first: *Planet Stories*.)

Being as it was a largely sentimental trip, we ended up clearing less than \$2,000.

So for my next trip it was back to 1929 again and another armload of twenty-five first issue *Astoundings*.

This time we barely made \$9,700.

The price was dropping like a fat toad on a lily pad.

"They're catching on," Arbogast said, when he returned from the latest Midwescon in Cincinnati, a glum look on his face as if he'd swallowed a horse turd.

"Who, what, when, where?" I asked.

"Other collectors. They're starting to wonder where I'm getting all these January 1930 *Astoundings*. The word's getting around I've got an closet full of them squirreled away."

"But that's not true."

"One dealer from Detroit told me the second issue of *Astounding* was now worth more than the first. He said it was thanks to me."

"Then I'll go back in time and snatch a bunch of the seconds," I said.

"No, Charlie. That won't work for long, either. We need something else, something different."

"Like the first *Amazing*? Or how about *Weird Tales*? You know how few of those are still around. You can get four or five thousand per copy for the first issue easy."

"No, not that either. It would just depress the market all over again and we'd be right back where we started. No, we need something better. Something truly rare. Something unique." His voice dipped in tone as if he were speaking in a cathedral. "Something truly one of a kind."

"Like what?"

He folded his hands in his lap, beaming like a toaster.

"You've got something in mind?" I said.

"Charlie, I do indeed."

"Tell me."

"Something that'll make us rich forevermore. Something that'll set us up for life."

"But what?"

"*Scientifiction*," he said.

14

Which was how it happened.

Arbogast quickly filled me in on the skinny, a fabled bit of science fiction lore, how Hugo Gernsback when he'd first come up with the idea of a separate magazine entirely devoted to the sort of fiction he'd been running in his scientific publications wanted to call his new mag *Scientifiction* in honor of the term he'd personally concocted for such tales.

He'd even done up a dummy issue.

But then someone—presumably a distributor—had objected to the title, saying it was about as commercial as

dog manure in a jar. "Nobody knows what the hell scientifiction is," said this man, whom I envision with a black cigar jutting out of the corner of his mouth, lips fastened around the stub like a hankie around a wet nose. "Nobody gives a shit. You need to call it something that's going to interest people, Hugo—that'll intrigue them."

"How about *Amazing Stories*?" said Gernsback.

And there you have it.

But there was still the matter of that dummy issue of the original *Scientifiction* title.

"According to what Gernsback confided to Moskowitz when Sam was editing *Science Fiction Plus* back in the fifties," Arbogast said, referring to Gernsback's final, belated venture into science fiction magazine publishing, "and what Sam told me himself at the Clevention in '55, there was only the one single dummy issue and one dummy copy of that. There was a full color cover by Frank R. Paul—not the same cover that later appeared on the first *Amazing*—and an entirely different line-up of stories. Supposedly, there was something by Burroughs, too—not just Wells, Verne, and Poe—but Gernsback couldn't remember what the story was, whether it was a reprint or an original."

"And only the one copy," I mused.

"Which ultimately vanished. Pulped and destroyed, said Gernsback. But you, Charlie—"

"Me, traveling back through time—"

"You could recover it."

"Steal it."

"Snatch it and bring it back here."

“To be sold for—”

“Tens of thousands,” he finished dreamily. “A truly one-of-a-kind item to fetch a one-of-a-kind price.”

“If we could find a buyer.”

“I’ll find one,” Arbogast said, his voice as grim as a horsefly at a ball game. “You can trust me on that, Charlie. I give you my bonded word.”

I took it from him, exuding trust. Arbogast may have been a shit and a moral crud but he knew the science fiction collector’s market like nobody’s bare behind.

So I made a whistling sound.

Arbogast summarized: “You go back to early 1926—or perhaps late 1925—visit Gernsback’s office, locate the dummy issue of *Scientifiction*, and spirit it away. It’s the one best chance the two of us have, Charlie, of setting ourselves up comfortably for the rest of our natural lives.”

I agreed. Unhesitatingly. (And thus I share his guilt.)

“First thing,” Arbogast said, “you have to go to New York.”

“I hate New York,” I said. “All those feuding fans.”

“Forget the fans. It’s where Gernsback is.”

“Was,” I corrected.

“Precisely,” said Arbogast with another of his nova-like beams.

15

So we bullshitted Norton some more and in the end, ultimately, he ended up agreeing to accompany me and the Wayback Device to NYC via an Amtrak out of Chicago. (Like Bradbury, Asimov, Kubrick and Arbo-

gast—giant figures four in the history of futuristic speculation—N.B. Norton refused to fly. “Till somebody can show me with evidence good enough to satisfy my own two eyeballs what it is that keeps a plane from falling out of the sky like a wet turd, then, no sir, count me out. I’m taking the train.”)

We took the train.

Norton spent the time catching up on antique issues of *Startling* and *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, fabulous gifts bestowed from the Arbogast collection. (Yes, you could say we were bribing him with his own favorite reading matter.)

New York City bound! 1925!

We picked out a spot in Central Park in back of the pond in between some thick weeds and shrubbery and made that our jumping off point. Not only were we concealed from casual view but it would provide quick and easy egress to the midtown offices of Gernsback’s Experimenter Publishing Company once I arrived in 1925.

And so there I went, there I saw, there I did not conquer.

Hugo Gernsback, the Father of Science Fiction, as nutty as a chipmunk! Grey-bearded managing editor T. O’Conor Sloane, PhD, running the show! A porno magazine, the Brooklyn loony bin, a blizzard to beat all holy hell!

As previously narrated earlier in this document.

When I got back, my ears frozen like popsicle slabs, my toes as numb as rock candy in a box, my eyeballs protruding from their sockets like eggs from a hen’s asshole, I shakily filled Norton in on everything that had

occurred as we knelt among the dank stentorian weeds of Central Park. My chest heaved like a hungry snake. I knew I was only inches from bursting into a waterfall of hysterical tears and snot.

Norton gazed at me languidly, glancing up now and then from his 1948 issue of *Thrilling Wonder Stories* with a Leigh Brackett Mars story on the cover.

"So what you're saying, hoss, is that this Experimenter Publishing Company ain't all that it's cracked up to be."

"It's a front—for a goddamn pornographic publishing ring."

"And old Gernsback himself?"

"Insane," I confirmed.

"So these other folks told you."

"No," I corrected. "I visited him myself. In Brooklyn. Why do you think it took me so long to make it back here?"

"Can't say that it did, truth to tell."

"Well, it did, goddamn it. I had to walk there. All the way across the Brooklyn Bridge. The whole damn way. In a snow storm. A blizzard. I didn't have enough 1925 money for a taxi, even if there'd been any running. The Murgatroyd and Malloy Psychoneurotic and Resting In Facility, it was called."

"Now you're putting me on, hoss."

"Do I look like I'm putting you on?" I held up my hands so that he could see them shake. "I got them to let me in to see him. I said he was my uncle. Gernsback. Hugo Gernsback. With my own two eyes. He was just the way Sloane said. Crazy. Mad as a mutton. They had him penned up in a

padded cell. I..."—I held up Arbogast's Kodak Brownie—"I've got a photograph."

"Sounds serious." He looked suddenly sly. I could see the gears whirling behind his pearly white eyes. "So you gonna tell Hapgood Snails about this?"

"I suppose he might want to know."

Norton slammed shut the pulp mag. "And high goddamnit time, too. Sounds to me like you really done went and screwed the pooch this time, hoss."

"Me?" I exclaimed.

"You."

"How the fuck do you get that, you dumb hayseed?"

"You went and changed history."

"I did not!"

"It's changed, ain't it?"

"Well...yes."

"Then who did it?"

"I...I...I..."

"Damn straight, hoss. You screw, you pay. That's life."

He went back to his *TWS*.

And we went back to Cleveland.

When we got there I let Arbogast have it all. It turned out to be a real first for me: I'd never before seen a man turn literally white as a sheet.

But Burton T. Arbogast did.

He flopped back into the nearest chair. More precisely, his body folded into one like a goose seeking a gander. He ended up perched on a stack of the first twelve issues of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*.

And he didn't seem to care that he was crushing the shit out of them.

His voice, when it finally came,

was like the last rasping wail of a dying caribou. "We'd better call Hapgood," he said.

"Well, if you really think—"

"You don't realize what this means, do you, Charlie?"

"It means we're out one hell of a lot of fucking money."

"It also means the end of science fiction as we know it."

"Huh?"

"History, Charlie. It's been altered."

"Not by me, damn it. I was careful."

"Not careful enough, apparently. If you had been, this—this corruption would not have occurred."

"Goddamn it, I didn't drive Gernsback loony!"

"Then who did?"

"How should I know?"

"Think, Charlie, think. You need to recall. What specifically was it that you—or someone—did that brought about this—this dreadful horror?"

Norton, who'd been sitting silently the whole time, gazed up from his 1949 *Startling Stories*. "It's a hurricane in Florida," he said.

"What?"

"And you ain't never going to find no Australian butterfly."

"Chaos theory," Arbogast said grimly.

"You got it, pal."

Arbogast nodded, rising from his chair on knees as wobbly as marmalade crutches. "I'm calling Hapgood now."

"What are you going to tell him?"

"That it's the end of the world, the end of everything."

"The end of science fiction, you mean."

"There's a difference, Charlie?"

16

Less than twelve hours later, Hapgood Snails was there. Like a cavalry colonel leading a charge, he came blazing into Cleveland-Hopkins at the controls of his own private jet plane. The bulk of his travel time, he later explained, was expended trying to entice a cabby into driving him to a neighborhood as seedy as ours.

Dawn was piercing the eastern sky like a straw penetrating a drink when the taxi hurtled up to the curb, disgorging its lone passenger like a dog vomiting into a bag.

It was Hapgood, all right. Hapgood in his customary black leather fringed jacket, designer blue jeans, pineapple-and-pink-sunset Hawaiian shirt, and filter cigarette in a long ivory holder.

Hapgood Snails, reigning King of Hollywood!

Hapgood Snails, former boy genius of the science fiction world!

Hapgood, alive and well and in person in Cleveland goddamn Ohio!

I raced out to meet him in the street and guide him through the front gate. There was a denim baseball cap perched on the crown of his head, the bill pulled down low, almost concealing his fierce black eyes.

"I didn't want anybody at the airport to recognize me," he explained.

I nodded. "Down, Ralph," I said. "Down 124C."

"Or think I was that talentless

schmuck, Warren Beatty.”

I nodded again.

“So,” he said, as we swept through the front door, knocking over a huge stack of World War II bedsheet *Astoundings* as we did, “the end of the world as we know it or what? Well, let’s see what we can do to change that, eh, Charlie boy?” He reached up and slapped me on the back.

I grinned down at him. His can-do all-American fucking optimism was infecting me like a virus of hope. Hanging around Arbogast and Norton all night had dropped me about as far down the ol’ totem pole as a pile of second-day doggy-do. But with Hapgood now on the scene I was already feeling a thousand percent better. He was the kind of person who could do that to you. It was his particular charm. One of them, anyway.

We marched into the cramped kitchen. Arbogast and Norton waited, faces about as long as the slow freight out of Youngstown.

Hapgood ground out his cigarette on the linoleum floor and then pitched himself forward into Arbogast’s waiting embrace. It gave me a warm feeling like peeing my pants on a cold day seeing the two of them reunited like that. A couple veritable giants—each in his own way—of the ever-lovin’ blue-eyed science fiction field.

That is, assuming that such a field still existed outside the dirty, badly lit interior of our dank little home.

I hastily dried my eyes as the two of them broke apart.

Norton was on his feet now, gaping like a giraffe who’d swallowed a whistle.

“Goddamn it clear to my daddy’s grave,” he remarked. “but you sure do look just like that Beatty fellow.”

Hapgood twisted his head, looking a bit grim. I knew it wasn’t something he liked being reminded of.

“The genuine spitting mirror image,” Norton rubbed it in.

I’d spotted something clutched in Norton’s fist as he edged nearer to Hapgood. A sheaf of papers. A manuscript.

“No, goddamn it,” I whispered, sidling up to him, “Not now, for Christ’s sake.”

But there was no more stopping Norton with his story than a hog on slippery ice. “I was wondering, Mr. Snails, sir,” he cajoled, “if you’d mind looking over this little tale of mine and telling me whether you think it’s got a possibility of selling?”

Hapgood’s eyes darted evasively from side to side. “Is it science fiction?”

“You bet your buttons it is.”

“Then maybe,” said Hapgood, evading the proffered script with a sudden, artful feint, “we ought to first be sure that science fiction still exists.”

That stopped Norton cold in his tracks.

“You have to figure,” Hapgood said, smiling sweetly, “you can’t sell the story if there’s no place to publish it.”

Norton jerked a thumb over his shoulder back at me. “It’s all that little jack straw’s fault.”

“Now we don’t know that for certain,” Hapgood said smoothly. I appreciated the defense. “And does it really matter anyhow? Isn’t the impor-

tant part to set things right again?"

Norton looked unconvinced. "Ain't going to be that easy to pull off."

"No," said Hapgood, "I'm sure it won't be. But you've got to keep one point in mind: if we fail, if science fiction falls into some kind of limbo of non-existence, then there won't be anywhere anyplace to publish that story of yours."

"Guess not." Norton nodded ruefully.

"And now, Burton," said Hapgood, turning and calling Arbogast by his rarely used given name, "how about putting on some coffee so we can all sit down and thrash this thing out?"

Arbogast put on the coffee. The rest of us found places to sit. I ended up perched on the edge of the stove as far from the one lit burner as I could get.

Looking at Hapgood, I was struck by an errant thought: if Warren Beatty had only been half as self-assured and debonair and downright cool as Hapgood Snails he would have been elected president of the United States long ago, no problem whatsoever.

But you've got to remember at that time I'd never met Beatty.

"Okay," said Hapgood once he had a cup of coffee in his hands. He lit a cigarette to go with it. (He was the only person Arbogast ever let smoke in his house—with all that paper, the combustibility level was frightfully low.) "Let's brainstorm. Anybody got anything they want to contribute? Ideas, concepts, questions, anything?"

There was a long loud silence like

an opera singer with a furball caught in her throat.

I was the one who finally broke it. "Don't you want to hear the tape first?"

"What tape?"

"Charlie made a tape," Arbogast said, "of Hugo Gernsback. You can, ah, hear him pretty clearly."

"Sure, Charlie," said Hapgood, "play it."

I played the tape. At first there was just a lot of hissing. Then Gernsback came on. The sound was far from clear—it wavered like a beach ball full of sand. But you could hear him.

"*Pussy*," said Hugo Gernsback, the Father of Science Fiction. "*Cunt. Prick. Big hairy balls.*"

There was a moment of silence. More hissing.

Then he said it again.

"*Pussy. Cunt. Prick. Big hairy balls.*"

"That was Gernsback?" said Hapgood, when I shut off the recorder.

"Yes."

"And he didn't say anything else?"

"Well, sometimes he said shit. Or fuck. But mostly it was just what you heard. I've got a photograph, too."

"Never mind."

Hapgood looked suddenly thoughtful.

There was one thing that was still bothering me. "If history really has been changed," I heard myself blurting out, "then how come none of us knows anything about it?"

There was yet another long silence.

Hapgood broke this one: "Good

question, Charlie. Mr. Norton, you have an answer?"

He was slow in replying. "Ain't nothing about time travel ever for sure"—I noticed he was still clutching his manuscript—"but one thing might maybe explain it. You got to think of a pond in a forest. You toss in a rock. The rock goes *kerplash* in the middle of the pond. Ripples spread. But slow. Gradual. Like a mule hauling a hippopotamus. In concentric circles. It may take a hell of a time for that first circle to lap the farthest shore."

"Which is," Hapgood said, "us?"

"It's right now," Norton agreed.

Hapgood nodded, as if this were something he'd already thought out. "In other words, Mr. Norton, what you're saying is that history doesn't necessarily change all at once. It's more a gradual process. Which means that we may well have—if you'll excuse the term—time. Time to sort things out. Time to make a correction."

Norton nodded slowly. "I guess so."

Hapgood beamed. "I was hoping you'd say that."

"But Charlie doesn't know what he did wrong in the first place," Arbogast put in. "So how can we correct what we don't even know?"

I started to raise an objection, saying it hadn't been proved that any of it was my fault, when Hapgood shushed me silent. "I think I've got an idea," he said softly.

"You—you do?" For an instant I didn't even recognize my own awe-struck voice.

"Yes. First, we need to go back to

1925. You and me, Charlie. The two of us this time. I believe we need to revisit the Gernsback offices."

"And then what?"

"And then," he said, dragging the words out, "together we'll fix everything."

"But—but how?"

He shook his head slowly. "I'd rather not get into that right now."

"Oh," we all said in unison.

I was reminded of an old Warren Beatty movie I hadn't seen in years, one from his early pretentious phase, *Mickey One*. That's the one where Beatty plays a nightclub comic on the run from some hoods and if that movie ever makes the slightest sense it's something I must have missed.

But it makes a good movie anyway. It's worth sitting through. You can't hardly pull away.

That's pretty much how it was with Hapgood and his idea of us going back in time again and making everything okay. On the surface it didn't make a hell of lot of sense. But I couldn't pull away.

Only later did I discover he'd been lying through his teeth the whole time.

17

That same evening the three of us—minus Arbogast—and of course including the Wayback Device—piled into a taxi and headed out for Cleveland-Hopkins airport and Hapgood's waiting plane.

We were New York City bound!

1925! (Well, eventually anyhow.)

I sat up front next to Hapgood, strapped comfortably into the co-

pilot's seat. Norton slithered into the back. Ten minutes later, when we were airborne, Hapgood turned and looked at me quizzically. "What's that funny sound?"

I'd been hearing it, too. "I think it's Norton," I said.

"What's he doing?"

"He's murmuring."

"Murmuring? Murmuring what?"

"His prayers, I think."

"Oh."

Neither of us look back. "He's afraid of flying," I explained.

"But he's here."

I shrugged.

"And that's something. It means he cares enough about what we're trying to accomplish to push aside his own cowardice and go along with us anyway."

"I think he just thinks you'll help him get that story published."

"Well, maybe I will," said Hapgood.

But somehow I didn't think so. Somehow I thought the story stunk so bad that nobody—not even Hapgood Snails—could force somebody legitimate to publish it.

But I could have been wrong.

Norton's murmuring grew softer.

Ninety minutes later we were in New York City.

On the way Hapgood really only talked to me once. It was a conversation that afterward I was never totally able to put out of my thoughts. It reverberated, like a crack on the forehead.

He was talking about the science fiction field, about how much it had meant not only to him and me and

Norton and Arbogast but to every other person of our time. It was a perspective I'd never thought of before.

"You need to try to conceive it, Charlie," he said. "Picture it. A world without science fiction. More important, a world where science fiction not only isn't but where it never has been. You know what truly makes science fiction important, essential? It's not the stories themselves. Most of them, including mine, stink like day-old owl shit. Oh, there are some good ones—Sturgeon and Wells and Alfie Bester—but compared to the world of literature as a whole they're like worms crawling up slopes of Everest. That's why I sometimes end up feeling sorry for you fans. Not for kid fans like I used to be, where it's just a phase, like masturbation. But for all you grown-up lifetime fans. It's not because of anything inherently wrong with the ingroup itself but because of how much you end up missing in the outside world."

"But the outside world sucks," I said.

"Well, maybe so." He shrugged. "I won't argue with you on that. But as I was saying, the real question is, what makes science fiction essential, why is it something we dare not lose? I'll tell you what I think. I think it's because science fiction is the stuff of our dreams, of our collective dreams, and it has been ever since Gernsback. It's been the stuff that's kept us plunging ahead."

Through the plane's sloping windshield I could glimpse nothing beyond except the sheer blackness of the nighttime sky. There may have been a

thick blanket of glittering, gleaming stars somewhere out there, but if there were I couldn't make them out. The weather had seemed clear when we left Cleveland. But apparently no longer.

All I could see was the blackness, darker than a sunset on Pluto.

From the back of the plane Norton's murmured prayers echoed distantly. The sound had taken on an oddly reassuring air.

"What kind of dreams are you talking about, Hapgood?" I said.

"All dreams, really. The good dreams, that is. The dreams of progress. The better angels of our gentler nature, you might say. Scratch a successful scientist and nine times out of ten you'll find a science fiction fan lurking beneath. I don't mean a fan like you or Arbogast. Not somebody who breathes and sweats the stuff. I mean somebody who used to read it when they were a kid and moved on. But it's all still there, Charlie. It's implanted in the brain, embedded in the subconscious. Some things don't fade. We all dream on. And without science fiction—given the condition of the world the last eighty years—since Gernsback—you tell me: where would we be? I think it's only because of those magical collective science fictional dreams of ours that we haven't all committed mass suicide and turned this planet into a smoldering ember."

"Isn't that kind of a bleak way of looking at it, Hapgood?"

"You follow the news, don't you, Charlie? You tell me."

I was looking through the windshield again. At the blackness beyond.

"So you're a science fiction reader, right?" he said, "You've read it since you were a kid?"

"Since I was eleven."

"Then tell me something, Charlie. Which has to come first? The image or the thing itself?"

The conversation was turning unexpectedly philosophical. But I tried to answer anyway. "The image, I suppose."

"Yes. Sure. That's the way I write, for instance. First I see the story in my head. In terms of images. Then I put those images down on paper, translating them into words and phrases. I imagine that's the way God must have gone about creating the universe. First the thought—the image—and only afterward, the thing itself, the universe."

"But what if there is no God?" Like most fans, both Arbogast and I were stone cold atheists.

"It doesn't matter. There is a universe. And what I said holds true for it and for everything in it—including the whole of the human race. Until we can somehow picture it—I mean, space satellites, atomic energy, television, electric toasters, travel to the moon—until that happens, it can't happen."

"You're saying science fiction predicted all these things?"

"No. It dreamed them. There's a difference, Charlie, a distinction. And if science fiction does die, if it ends, then everything else, everything that grew out of it, everything I just got through talking about—that may well die with it."

"Television?" I said.

"And toasters."

"But none of it's died yet," I said.

"Are you sure?" He smiled slowly. "We've been up here an awfully long time."

Twenty minutes later we landed at Idyllwild.

The first thing I did when I got to the terminal was look around desperately for a TV set.

I didn't relax until I'd found one. Playing CNN, of course. The world of our collective dreams.

18

Hapgood signed the three of us in at the Chelsea Hotel in Greenwich Village. He explained as he did that the hotel occupied a particularly exalted place in science fictional history.

"This is where Arthur Clarke stayed when he and Kubrick were writing the screenplay for *2001*."

"And it's also where Mr. Bob Dylan wrote his 'Sad Eyed Lady of the Lowlands,'" Norton put in.

Bob Dylan? Norton? I stood there a moment with my mouth hanging open but didn't utter a word.

What the hell. You go figure.

So we went upstairs to our individual rooms. Since I hadn't slept in about thirty-six and one-half hours, I was out like an albatross with an arrow through its neck the instant my head hit the pillow.

I didn't even bother putting out the light.

I didn't dream a single dream that night, either, in case you were wondering—collective or otherwise.

The next morning, after breakfast,

the three of us set out by taxi for Central Park. I could sense the cabby, the usual black-bearded Sikh with a purple turban, staring through his rear view mirror at the tangled mass of the Wayback Device squatting in Norton's lap.

"It's a sculpture," Hapgood said. "My friend's an artist. We're taking it to a gallery on Central Park West to display."

"Appears much like my little boy's erector set," the driver observed.

"Well, it's, ah, it's supposed to," Hapgood said. "That's the point of the work. It's about childhood."

The cabby looked unconvinced. On this point I had to agree with him. But modern art wasn't exactly my cup of elderberry wine, either. Science fiction forever! you know.

Central Park was more teeming with people than seemed common for a Tuesday morning but the bucolic spring weather may have played a part. We were stopped twice before we managed to wind our way to our established jumping off point in the high shrubbery back of the pond. Both times by tourists. The first spotted Hapgood Snails, the famous writer and Hollywood director, and demanded an autograph. The second recognized Warren Beatty and wanted his, too.

Hapgood scribbled both names without the blinking of an eye.

In the shrubs Hapgood and I stood with the Wayback Device between us, our hands cupped beneath. Norton for some reason I couldn't at first figure kept glancing at his wristwatch.

Then he started a countdown. "Twenty...nineteen...eighteen..."

I thought of ignoring him. But what the hell.

At zero I popped the red lever.

And away we zipped.

Bingo!

The trip back through time to 1925 was as uneventful as ever. The long tedious hours seemed (as always) to pass without actually passing. I figured that was just as well. Seventy-eight hours spent staring at the puckered physiognomy of Hapgood Snails could get old for just about anybody.

Not to mention the vice versa part of it.

The idea was for us to set down precisely on the day prior to my previous trip back to December 1925. That way, whatever I might originally have done that had turned poor Hugo Gernsback into a slobbering lunatic would end up being set right by our current activities.

At least that was the plan.

I didn't buy it myself. Not totally. But then I didn't buy that I'd done anything wrong in the first place, either.

We weren't carrying any cameras or taping devices with us this time, either. Hapgood had insisted. He wanted to be careful with what we carried back and forth through time. Anything and everything might be the culprit of change, Norton's Australian butterfly.

The good news was, when we arrived in December 1925, it wasn't snowing.

The bad news was, it was raining
To beat all bloody holy hell.

And while we'd been smart enough to bring along mufflers,

gloves, even overshoes, neither us had possessed the necessary foresight to bring an umbrella.

We left the Wayback Device sheltered as well as we could manage in the somewhat thicker foliage right down next to the pond. Considering everything, it didn't seem likely it would be readily damaged by a bit of bad weather. I was really only concerned about the possibility of rust and that mostly because I didn't want to have to listen to Norton whine when we got back.

I knew he took great pride in the physical appearance of his stupid goddamn time machine. (Excuse my attitude but it really was raining like a son of a bitch.)

Already about as soaked as bath towels at a pool party, Hapgood and I set off at as quick a pace as we could handle for the offices of the Experimenter Publishing Company.

Twenty minutes later, drenched past the bone, we hopped off the self-service elevator and went barging through the door.

Seated primly behind her big wood desk, Misty LaTour, as radiant and sparkling and Louise Brooks-like as ever, gaped at the two of us as if we were a pair of uninvited black rhinos crashing a wedding ceremony.

"We—we're writers," Hapgood managed to gasp. "We'd like to see Mr. Hugo Gernsback."

"I'm afraid you must—" She stopped suddenly, staring at Hapgood, jaw slack as a sturgeon in a lake. Her big blue eyes zipped past me without a flicker of recognition, not surprisingly, since the only time we'd previously

met was tomorrow. "Why, sir," she said to Hapgood, "aren't you just about the prettiest young man I've set eyes on since I left my daddy's home in old Alabama. Tell me, aren't you in the motion pictures or something?"

Not the goddamn Warren Beatty thing again? I thought. But no, of course not. That was being silly.

"No, miss," Hapgood said politely, doffing his denim baseball cap and sprinkling the carpet even further with rainwater. "You must have me mixed up with somebody different."

"But you could be in the movies, you surely could, I'm telling you."

"Gernsback?" I managed to butt in. "Hugo Gernsback?"

"Oh, that's just what I was just about to inform your gorgeous friend here about." I didn't recall her thick Southern drawl from my previous visit and got the impression she was putting it on for Hapgood's benefit. "We don't have anyone by that name."

I started to wheel triumphantly in Hapgood's direction but he beat me to the punch: "This is the Experimenter Publishing Company?" he demanded.

"It most surely truly-dooly is," Misty LaTour confirmed. She put her chin on her fist and stared openly at Hapgood, batting her eyes. I mean that literally. She genuinely did-so bat them.

"And you have no Hugo Gernsback here at all?" he persevered.

"No, sir, we don't." Grinning like a tuna fish.

"He's not the president and publisher?"

"Well, I guess he used to be, way

back before—"

"Who's the publisher now?"

"Oh, that would be—"

From the back office came a loud *thump!* The unabridged dictionary again.

"Sloane," I said. "Dr. T. O'Connor Sloane, PhD."

"Uncle Tommie," she finished.

Thump!

So nothing had changed—nothing! Just as I'd insisted all along, it hadn't been me who'd screwed things up. Here we were in 1925, one full day ahead, and Sloane was still in charge, Gernsback presumably still in the Brooklyn loony bin, and all else otherwise right and well with the world.

No! Wait a minute. I had that backwards. All wasn't right with the world. All was wrong. Totally, completely, thoroughly, abjectly *wrong*.

This wasn't just a world where science fiction was dead; it was a world where it had never been born.

And it was the real world! The world was as it was!

While I stood there, reeling like a dervish on a whirl, Hapgood grabbed my arm in both of his. The expression on his face, when I turned to look at him, was—to my utter amazement—one of total complete unmitigated triumph.

"I knew it!" he was saying. "I knew it all along!"

"Well, I did try —"

"Enough!" His grip on my arm was like the bite of a shark. He dragged me toward the door. "We've got to get out of here. Charlie, come on!"

"Come on?" I tried putting up a futile resistance. "Come on where?"

"To Brooklyn! To Gernsback!"

"But we don't need to see that old crazy coot!"

"It's imperative, Charlie. There's no time to waste!"

By then he had me halfway out the door. The last thing I remember is poor Misty LaTour's plaintive blood-curdling whine: "But when will I see you ever again?"

In about thirty-five years, I could've told her. Try keeping yourself together that long. You can see him in a movie called *Splendor in the Grass*.

But too late. The door flopped shut behind us. Just as it did I heard one final fleeting echoing *thump!* from the back.

Hapgood hustled me onto the elevator. The Irish doorman eyed us suspiciously as we dashed across the lobby like two bulls escaped from a china closet.

A stupid tune was playing in my head. I decided to put words to it.

*Charlie Frap is my name
Science fiction is my nation
Fandom is my dwelling place
The nuthouse my destination!*

19

Hapgood hailed a cab.

How he was intending on paying for it I didn't have a clue but it had to beat hell out of another thorough drenching.

Less than fifteen minutes later—crosstown traffic, 1925-style, a gentle

jewel you wouldn't believe—and we were there. The same sign I recalled from before (or was it after?) engraved in the same dirty gray stone wall, strands of barbed wire curled on top like a hair weave:

Murgatroyd & Malloy Psychoneurotic & Resting In Facility

It had stopped raining, too.

Hapgood paid off the cabby with what looked like a clean, crisp twenty-dollar bill.

"Keep the change."

The cabby looked the bill over front and back, our overall appearance still pretty scruffy from our earlier trek through the rain. Apparently satisfied, he tucked it away in a vest pocket. "You want me to wait around, bud?"

"I don't think that'll be necessary. We may be awhile."

"Not too long, I'm hoping." He lowered his voice. "I don't know if they told you, but this is a cuckoo bin."

"Oh, we know. My colleague's uncle"—Hapgood made a spinning sign next to his ear—"crazy as a coot."

"Too bad."

"It doesn't seem to run in the family, though."

"Well...good."

"So he tells me, anyway."

Hapgood gave the cabby a farewell wave.

As we passed through the asylum's big iron front gate and entered the rolling green lawns beyond, I leaned over and asked Hapgood, "How in hell did you get away with that?"

"With what?"

"With giving him that twenty."

"It's perfectly okay—a 1921 series."

"You brought that along?"

"And three more just like it. In my wallet. The trouble with you, Charlie, is you don't realize the critical nature of always being prepared."

Words to live by, I thought, just like the goddamn Boy Scouts. (My sole regret now is that I didn't listen better at the time. To the words. Hapgood was warning me. I genuinely believe he was. And I let it go fluttering right past me like a fart in the wind.)

There was a different—though if anything uglier—nurse manning the main front desk from what I remembered. There was also—naturally—no record of my previous visit (tomorrow), so we had to start over from scratch, talking our way in to see Gernsback.

Luckily, this time we also had Hapgood's gift for gab. And his good looks. I was only happy he hadn't given Misty LaTour as hefty a dose of his personal charm as he was giving the old bat nurse.

It might have killed her, poor thing.

Am I sounding jealous here? Well, maybe so. But I'd seen Misty Latour first. (Or had I?)

Ten minutes later and the nurse was escorting us personally down the dark, dank-as-a-swamp-with-mildew-encrusted-walls corridor to the cell containing the shattered remnants of the man who had once been Hugo Gernsback, father of science fiction.

Just like my visit before (or after, depending on your view), the smell was like a pig ranch on gelding day.

Gernsback squatted in a heap in a far corner of the cell, chewing on the edge of his frayed, filthy mattress. His slick mop of gray-blond hair lay matted across his forehead like a dirty kerchief and his pale blue, piercing, Germanic eyes darted crazily in his head like fornicating fire flies. Vaguely, I could hear him muttering, "Cock, piss, cunt, pussy."

His vocabulary of choice, it appeared, had not notably altered.

"Do you mind if we have a few moments alone with the patient?" Hapgood said. He'd handed the old nurse that same dumb story about Gernsback being my uncle and she'd bought off on it, wholesale. Rack up another for the benefits of charm. "Say, ten minutes, fifteen?"

The nurse glanced over at Gernsback as if he were a misplaced bag of manure. "You're sure you'll be all right?"

"Only if you're nearby," said Hapgood.

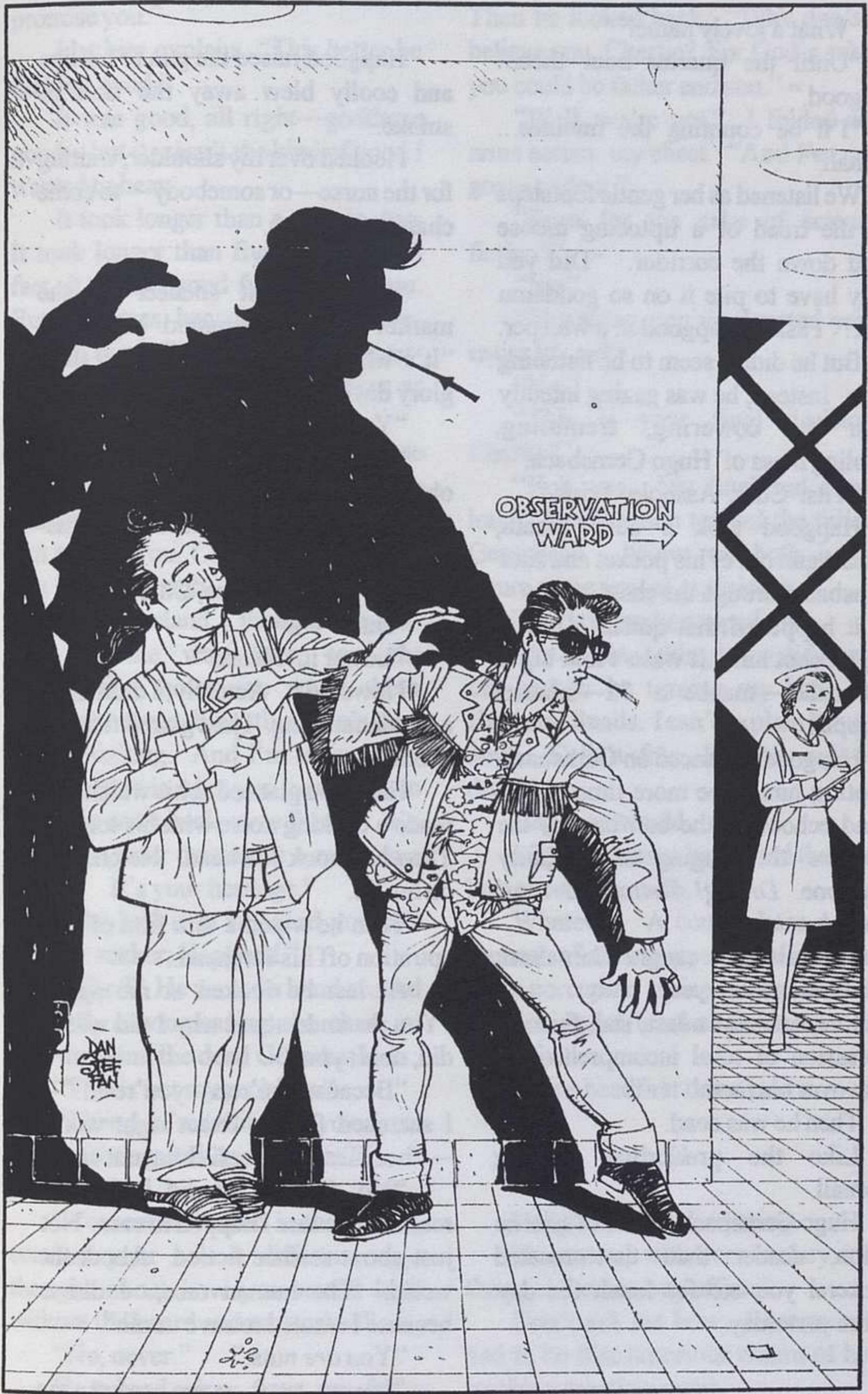
"I'll be waiting right at the end of the corridor."

"That'll be wonderful. Then if something happens, if he makes any kind of nasty move, we'll just give a yell."

"And I'll come running." She showed us her doubled-up fist. It was a big doubled-up fist too. "And see to the patient."

"I'm sure you will. My name is Hapgood, by the way. It would please me no end if you'd call me that."

"And I am Hannah."



OBSERVATION
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"What a lovely name!"

"Until the quarter hour then... Hapgood."

"I'll be counting the minutes... Hannah."

We listened as her gentle footsteps like the tread of a tiptoeing moose faded down the corridor. "Did you really have to pile it on so goddamn thick?" I asked Hapgood in a whisper.

But he didn't seem to be listening to me. Instead, he was gazing intently upon the cowering, trembling, babbling mass of Hugo Gernsback.

"Tits. Cum. Asshole. Prick."

Hapgood took a deep breath, pulled a gun out of his pocket and shot Gernsback through the chest.

It happened that quick. *Driing*. He just shot him. It wasn't that big a gun, either—maybe a .32—silencer equipped.

Hapgood advanced on Gernsback, shooting him three more times. The sound echoed in the confines of the cell like the ringing of a faulty telephone. *Driing! Driing! Driing! Driing!*

The last shot caught Gernsback dead between the eyes.

I swear I saw a last, sad, fleeting expression of total incomprehension wash over his face.

Then he was dead.

Like the proverbial fucking doornail.

Hugo Gernsback, father of science fiction, deader than that roasted mackerel you ate for lunch the day before yesterday.

Hapgood raised the gun to his lips and coolly blew away the trail of smoke.

I looked over my shoulder, waiting for the nurse—or somebody—to come charging in on us.

Nobody came.

"It's the best silencer on the market today," Hapgood explained. "It's what the CIA used during their glory days."

"You killed him," I said.

"Well...yes." As if it were obvious—which, I guess, it was.

"You killed Hugo fucking Gernsback."

"Lower your voice, Charlie."

"But I—"

"Lower it. Please."

I lowered it. Actually, I didn't say a goddamn thing. I just glared fiercely at him.

Hapgood glanced at his watch. He made a clicking noise with his tongue. Then he shook his head. He chewed on his lip.

Then he wiped a thin film of perspiration off his forehead.

At last he looked at me again. "You do understand why I did what I did, don't you?"

"Because you're a—you're a..."—I searched for the exact right words—"because you're a fucking nut case."

"No, Charlie. I did it for one reason: because I happen to care. Not just about science fiction. About the world. The human race, I did it because I wanted to save us all."

"You *are* nuts."

"Lower your voice. Let me

explain. It'll only take a minute. I promise you."

I let him explain. "This better be fucking good."

It was good, all right—goddamn good—but it wasn't the kind of good I wanted to hear.

It took longer than a minute, too. It took longer than five minutes. In fact, it took a good full ten minutes. But that was because I kept interrupting him. The reason I kept interrupting was he still sounded about as daffy as a rogue duck.

"I'm afraid there was simply no other way of pulling this off," he finished at last. "No other way at all. I'm telling you, Charlie, I've thought this thing through. All the way from L.A. to Cleveland, I thought about it. And all the way here, too—the seventy-five hours we stood there, holding that machine, that whole time I was thinking. And I'm telling you, Charlie, this is what you were born to do. You can't back away from it. It's your fate, your destiny as a man, as a human. It's your heritage."

"The hell if it is. Find yourself another sucker, Hapgood."

"Who?" He waved a hand around the cell, encompassing the three of us—me, him, the dead Gernsback.

"That's not my problem."

"Then you're telling me you never noticed the resemblance before?"

"Never."

"You never looked in the mirror, combed your hair a different way, thought about how you would look without the beard and mustache?"

"No, never."

He turned away from me for a

moment and stared at Gernsback. Then he looked back. "Why don't I believe you, Charlie? For God's sake, you could be father and son."

"Well, we're not." I folded my arms across my chest. "And I'm not going to do it."

"Even for the sake of science fiction?"

"No."

"The thing you've devoted your entire life to?"

"No."

"This is your final decision, Charlie?"

"Hell, yes. My final and absolute." I took a step toward the fallen Gernsback. "Now we both better figure some way of explaining—"

That's when he sapped me.

The dumbest thing I ever did in my life had to be turning my back on Hapgood Snails. I can't explain it even now. Call it fate, I guess, call it destiny.

Hapgood would.

I figure he must have used the gun butt to conk me with.

Whatever. A couple bare nano-seconds after he clipped me, I was out like a porcupine trying to steal home.

A big pool, black as doom, opened at my feet.

I dove headfirst down into it.

Hapgood fixed everything.

He came up with a cover story and then got them to buy off on it.

Don't ask me how. I suppose it had to be that notorious charm of his working overtime again.

Even after I came to, it took me a while to figure out what Hapgood's cover story had been, but the way it came together was this: Gernsback (or Uncle Hugo) had somehow managed to grab the gun out of my pocket and tried to kill himself with it. (The reason I had a gun was that I was a jeweler's assistant and often carried big bags of diamonds around with me.) (Don't ask me to explain any of this: like I said, it was Hapgood's cover story. And anyway, they bought it.) There was a fierce struggle. In the course of the struggle Gernsback managed to rap me over the head with my own gun. Then he turned the weapon on himself and put three bullets through his chest. Then he finished things off with a fourth and final bullet between the eyes.

All this while, Hapgood was screaming for help.

By the time the nurse reached the cell, it was too late to do anything.

Gernsback was dead and his nephew (me) unconscious.

I woke up flat on my back on the floor of the cell with the old hag nurse and three or four others who could have been her sisters (or maybe brothers) standing around.

There was also a little man with a Hitler mustache, holding a clipboard and fountain pen. Some kind of administrator, I gathered.

He was the one who kept tossing asinine questions at me. "Your uncle's occupation?"

"The father of science fiction."

"Excuse me?"

I tried to swallow a breath of air. With all the people crammed into the

tiny cell, not to mention the carcass of Hugo Gernsback, it was a struggle. "Publisher and editor."

"His place of birth?"

"Germany. No, Switzerland. I think it was Switzerland."

"Date of birth?"

This was one Arbogast had made me memorize: "1884."

"You can't you be more specific? You must know your own uncle's birthday."

"Uh, make it April 1."

And on and on.

After enough of this, it finally hit me: nobody really gave a shit that Hugo Gernsback was dead. Why should they? He was a crazed lunatic without a friend in the world and his only known relative (me), a nephew who didn't even know his own uncle's birthday. (Or the country he was born in. Luxembourg, not Switzerland.)

Which helped explain the incredible ease with which Hapgood's equally incredible cover story had been bought and paid for.

Speaking of which...

I sat up suddenly, as wide awake as a zebra at dawn. "Hapgood? Where the hell is Hapgood?"

"Who?"

"Hapgood Snails. The man I came here with?"

"Oh, he said he had an appointment. In Manhattan. At the Central Park, he said it was."

"Oh, my fucking God!"

I was more than wide awake by then. I was on my feet and racing for the gate. Incredibly, no one made the slightest move to stop me. Not even one of those big bruiser Amazon

nurses.

Like I said, Gernsback was dead and nobody cared.

Sad when you thought about it. Really truly goddamn sad.

But not half so goddamn sad as my own personal plight.

Do I need to fill in the tragic details? My frantic race (on foot—no 1921 twenty-dollar bills in my wallet) through the drenching rain to Central Park. My discovery, upon arrival, of no fucking Wayback Device to be seen. My admission then of the truth of what I had feared all along:

Hapgood had stranded me. In 1925. There was no way for me to get home.

For I don't know, let's call it five minutes, I stood there among the weeds and shrubbery, the azaleas and the bonsai trees, the ferns and the flowers, and I bawled my eyes out like a baby deprived of its rattle.

Baby rattle, my white ass. I'd been deprived of my whole entire life. By that no-good son of a bitch Hapgood Snails.

I wept on and on.

Luckily, with the rain, nobody could tell. And I had the place all to myself, anyway.

And back home it was spring! Wonderful, bucolic, all-embracing, all-entrancing spring!

That was the kind of thought that only got me to crying harder. Spring, wonderful spring, I was never to see spring again.

Wait a minute. That was stupid. Another four or five months and it would be spring here, too. An April 1926 spring, to be sure, but still spring.

That was when I got mad.

That son of a bitch! Hapgood Snails! There was only one explanation for all this.

Hapgood assumed that stranded here in 1925 I would have no alternative but to carry out the fullness of his designs.

Well, fuck him, I thought. I won't do it. I'll find something else to do instead. I'll become a bootlegger. A fandango dancer. I'll make a million bucks betting on Tunney over Dempsey. I'll make another million buying Coca-Cola short and selling the day before the market collapses.

Hell, there were a million possibilities. All I had to do was pick one of them and go for it.

I spent the night in a lice-ridden bunk at a Salvation Army flophouse in the lower Bowery.

In the morning I managed to borrow a razor, a bar of soap, and a pair of scissors from my fellow flophouse denizens.

I shaved my face and trimmed my hair.

Then I borrowed a jar of pomade and a comb from the sergeant in charge, telling him—half-truthfully—that I planned on going out and looking for a job.

I couldn't do anything about my clothes. But at least they were dry now.

In fact, it had begun to snow.

A blizzard was on its way, they said. Yeah, I could've told them. I know. Been there, done that.

I hung around the Bowery till late afternoon, swigging free coffee. The one thing I didn't want was to run into

my own other self. Not that I could have. Or else I would've remembered.

Right?

Still, I hung around.

When I figured it was safe I started walking.

It was hardly any more fun than it had been the time before. If anything, the snow was deeper, the wind colder, my toes and fingers more brittle and numb.

But I made it where I wanted to go.

The Experimenter Publishing Company.

I rode the self-serve elevator upstairs.

I walked through the door.

When Misty LaTour saw me, her jaw dropped six inches toward the floor. "Mr—Mr—" she sputtered. "Uncle Hugo, you're cured!"

From the back I heard *thump*.

"That's Mr. Gernsback to you, young lady." I let just a faint trace of a German accent waffle over my tongue.

"Yes, sir."

"And that upstart, Sloane? Where is he to be found lurking?"

"Uncle Tommie—Dr. Sloane—he's in his office, sir."

"That's *my* office, you mean," said Gernsback/me, marching straight ahead.

I hurled the door open and barged forward.

And so on.

Hapgood Snails had won the day, his well-prepared plans carried forward by me to final fruition.

Hell, a guy's got to eat, don't he?

And, tell me, what's so goddamn bad about being Hugo?

And so it came to pass like flies lighting on a turd.

In April 1926 the first issue of *Amazing Stories* hit the newsstands. For a while I'd intended calling it *Scientifiction* but a distributor with a big cigar clenched between his teeth talked me out of it.

"Nobody knows what the fuck that means, Hugo," he kindly said.

But with the second, May 1926, issue I started using the subtitle *Science Fiction* just to prepare the public for it.

And with each subsequent issue the subtitle increased in size.

With the April 1928 issue, the one carrying the first installment of Doc Smith's *Skylark of Space* and also the first ever Buck Rogers story, I dropped the *Amazing Stories* part and went over to *Science Fiction* as my main title.

Then I registered the title with the U.S. Patent Office as a legal trademark.

Ho-ha!

Circulation climbed past the 150,000 mark.

In 1929 my main competitor, the notorious health nut Bernarr MacFadden, tried to force me and my company into bankruptcy, but with the cash reserves I'd accrued betting on the Dempsey/Tunney fights and with the additional support of my considerable holdings of Coca-Cola stock, I was able to thwart his nefarious designs and hold on to my assets.

Meanwhile, I purchased two radio stations, WBHG and WBML. On one I broadcast nothing but what was then

called "race" music. (I'd decided to invent rock 'n' roll.) On the other I created talk radio.

In due time, I would be awarded New York City's first television broadcasting license.

In the spring of 1930, I successfully brought suit against the Clayton publishing chain for infringement of trademark over their new magazine, *Astounding Stories of Super Science*. In settlement I was awarded all rights to the title, including its complete backlog of stories.

I tossed the stories in the trash bin, renamed the magazine *Analog*, and folded it after one more issue.

The following year, I removed Frank R. Paul from his position as *Science Fiction*'s premiere cover artist and replaced him with a young man named Norman Rockwell.

I editorially assisted another bright young fellow, a writer I discovered working for the post office in Oxford, Mississippi, named William Faulkner, in putting together a four-part serial based on the concept of using fissionable Uranium 238 to build a bomb capable of flattening entire cities. I had to prune a lot of his long sentences but the story caused a sensation.

I sent copies of the pertinent magazines by registered mail to Albert Einstein, President Herbert Hoover, and Army Chief of Staff Douglas MacArthur. (In case they didn't have their own.)

In March 1933, with the Great Depression at its lowest ebb—an economic crisis which, thanks to my insistence upon preparation above all else, had impacted me little—I

launched a new magazine. I called it *Sexology*.

Rockwell did the first cover illustrating the lead serial, an unexpurgated version of D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*.

It was the first all-color cover on a nationally distributed magazine to show a woman's pubic hair.

Not to mention a penis erectus.
(But you had to look close.)

The magazine was banned in Boston and seized in Salt Lake City.

But it also sold 450,000 copies nationwide.

A sexual revolution has begun, I announced in issue number two. By then I was in contact with a promising expatriate writer in Paris named Henry Miller. Eventually, he became a top contributor to both my magazines.

In May 1935, I wed Misty LaTour in a simple civil ceremony performed at New York's City Hall. In keeping with the stated theme of sexual freedom, the bride was an obvious seven months pregnant.

In July Misty gave birth to twin boys I named Burton and Hapgood.

The August 1936 tenth anniversary issue of *Science Fiction* featured a special cover by Salvador Dali and stories by Faulkner, Hemingway, Thomas Mann, E.E. Smith, H.G. Wells (*Return of the Invisible Man*) and Edgar Rice Burroughs—*Tarzan in Heat*.

It sold in excess of one million copies.

Time magazine ran a cover story entitled, "Hugo Gernsback: The Man Who Sees Tomorrow."

And so on.

All of which is just ancient history now.

But what about Burton T. Arbogast? What about the ol' Number One Fan Face?

Glad you asked that

So what about nothing?

Arbogast was alive. On his birthday—December 8, 1932—I'd made it a point to check our mutual home town newspaper, the *Cleveland Plain-Dealer*, to be sure.

He was there, all right. Seven pounds, four ounces.

But he never became a fan.

He couldn't have. There weren't any.

I'd seen to that.

By altering the essence of the genre, I'd made science fiction instantly acceptable. And in the process I'd deliberately obliterated its traditional appeal for the lonely and isolated, the introverted and dispossessed.

To the Burton T. Arbogasts of the world.

Who the hell needed them?

I was doing plenty goddamn all right on my own.

In 1939 I checked the *Plain-Dealer* once again. Hapgood Snails, eight pounds, two ounces.

No fandom for him, either.

Ho-ha!

In the meantime *Time* did a second cover story on me: March 11, 1940: "The Man Who Makes the Future Work."

The April 1941 fifteenth anniversary issue of *Science Fiction* contained tributes from world leaders as diverse as Hoover and Gandhi,

Trotsky and Mussolini.

Oh, by the way, thanks to my efforts at promoting atomic energy, World War II didn't start until 1943.

But that wasn't what worried me.

What worried me was me.

I was about to be born.

As the critical juncture approached—10:37 a.m. Eastern Time, October 29, 1945—I put my affairs in order. On the day itself I left my Scarsdale home shortly after dawn, telling Misty, who had put on a little weight over the years but was otherwise the same Louise Brooks lookalike as always, that I needed to swing by the office early. I then had my driver drop me off at a secluded corner of the estate where I had taken the precaution of constructing an underground air raid bunker. I assumed it would be the safest possible place for whatever was going to happen to happen.

Was I ready? I'll answer that the only way I can: no. Hell, no. I wasn't ready to die.

But I didn't want to inadvertently harm anyone else when and if I did.

Norton's law, remember: two of the same body cannot occupy the same space at the same time.

But the time came—10:35... 10:36... 10:37... 10:38—and the time passed.

Nothing happened. I didn't blow up.

Later, I checked the AP wire and found a story about a mysterious explosion in the maternity ward of a Cleveland hospital. Four dead, including a doctor and two nurses.

Five, I felt like saying. You forgot the baby. You forgot me.

I was dead, yes. But it was the other I, the original.

I shed a brief tear.

Hugo Gernsback lived on!

Three days later President Dewey ordered the atom bomb dropped on Paris and we won the war.

23

So how did it happen?

I know you want to know. Coincidence is coincidence, you say, it can occur, but even Charles fucking Dickens wouldn't have tried to get away with this shit.

Hugo Gernsback and Charlie Frap, spitting images of one another, identical twins, brothers in blood under the skin. Put one in the other's place and nobody can tell the difference. Except Hapgood Snails. Who also spots the resemblance from the very beginning and makes it a key part of his nefarious plot to save the world of science fiction and so on and on and on.

Yeah, right, you say. Bullshit. You ain't buying it.

Welcome to the crowd.

I don't buy it either. Yes, me, Charlie Frap/Hugo Gernsback himself. Fuck, I thought, staring into the mirror in my Scarsdale bathroom, if I look like Hugo Gernsback, then former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger looks just like Bozo the Clown.

And I happened to know he don't.

Well, not that much, anyway.

And so?

So whatever will be will be. *Que sera, sera.*

You've heard that, right?

Guess fucking what?

It's true.

There was no corruption in time. There was no changing of the past. Time was always what it was and history was as it is.

Charlie Frap and Hugo Gernsback are one and the same person. They never were anything else. Charlie Frap was born in 1945 and lived until 2003 and then traveled back through time (twice) to 1925 and that was when he became Hugo Gernsback Number Two (after Hapgood Snails had plugged Hugo Number One) and that's just the way it was and is and always will be.

Time is like a rock. It's never changing, never altering. What is, is. What was, was. What will be—well, as Norton said, there ain't no will be. Not yet anyway.

Being Gernsback was not simply my destiny, my fate. Being Gernsback was always what I was. And from the very beginning, too.

Wait a second, you say. Where does that leave free will?

Where the hell do you think it leaves it?

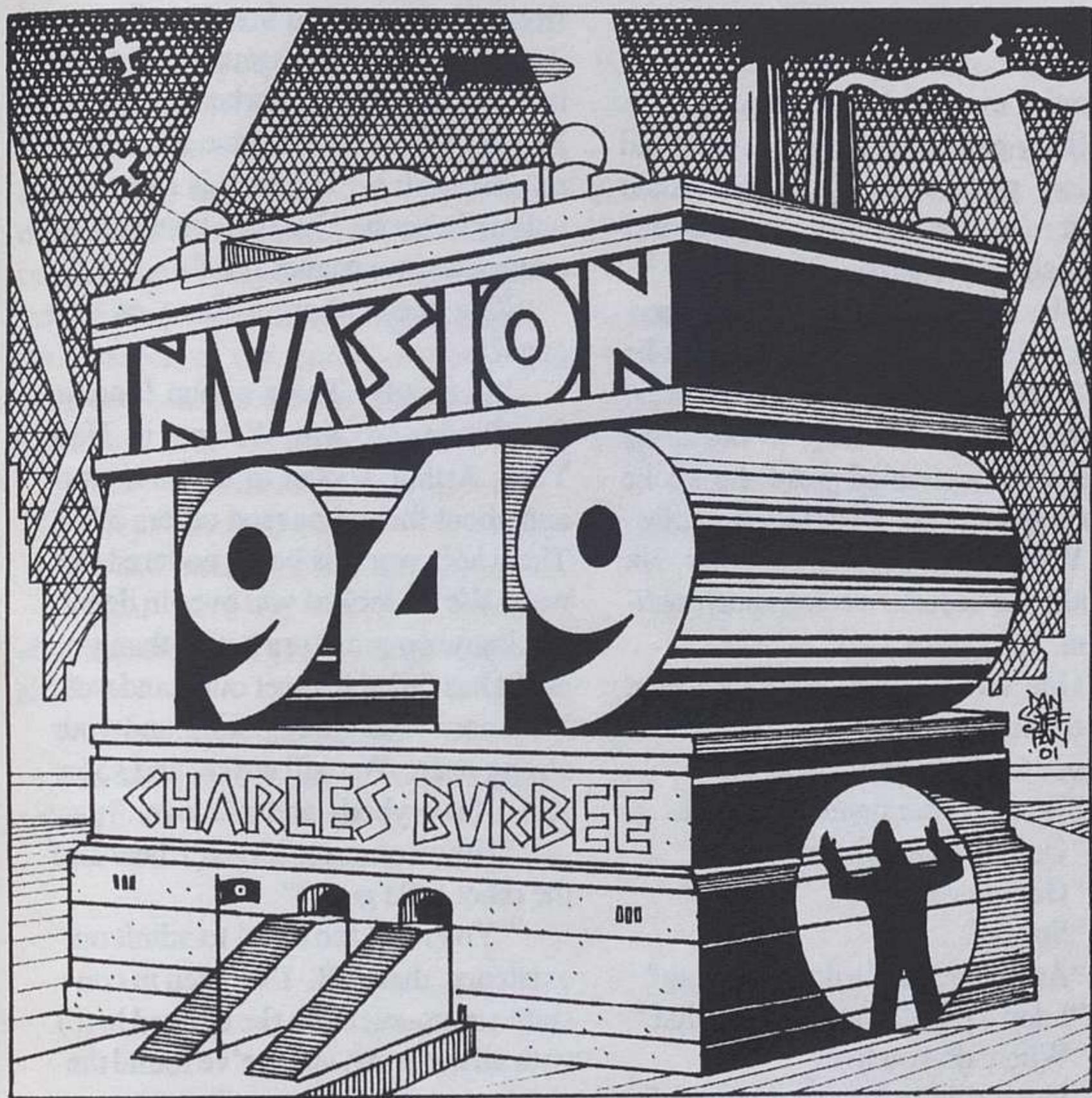
In the great big shit can in the sky.

So hooray for me, hooray for Hugo Gernsback, and hooray for the ever-loving' blue-eyed science fiction field.

If you don't like this story, then go out and write one of your own. Hell, if it's any good, I might even publish it.

As long as it's got that good old sense of wonder.

—Gordon Eklund



GERNSBACK-STYLE CLASSIC REPRINT

It was in the early spring of 1949 that the first odd event took place.

When the man, who stood eighteen inches high at the shoulders and an additional four inches when measured from the top of his head to his unshod feet, first began to walk the streets of Los Angeles, no one paid any attention to him at all.

He was the smallest man ever seen, and perfectly proportioned, too, but no one paid any attention to him. Angelenoes had all carefully cultivated an air of complete sophistication, and

merely passed him by with a glance. No one wished to make himself conspicuously naive by taking more than casual notice of the little visitor.

So he walked the streets unmolested, except that he was almost stepped on sometimes. He rode street-cars half-fare, and since the fare in Los Angeles was 7¢, casually dropped his 3½¢ piece into the coinbox, or sometimes a 2¢ piece and a 1½¢ piece. (The 1½¢ piece had been developed for people who wished to purchase one 1½¢ stamp.)

He was seen everywhere, but no one wrote him up for the papers. Secretly, everyone knew it was all a publicity gag for some super-colossal motion picture which some studio might release at any time, and they did not wish to be fooled.

The little man spoke to everyone. His English was excellent, though he had a tendency to swallow his words, and for fear of choking to death on some multi-syllabled word, he spoke only in words of three or less syllables.

When he'd been around for six months, he became a community institution.

One day a courageous reporter, full of rum, saw the little fellow and stopped to talk to him.

"What is your name?" he said.

"George," said the little man.

"George what?"

"Smith."

"And what do you do for a living?"

"I don't pay any attention to that."

"Where do you live?"

"In my ship in Pershing Square."

Here the reporter looked narrowly at his interviewee and then asked, "What sort of ship?"

"Why, my space ship, of course," said the little man whose name was George.

The reporter, who had a nose more for whiskey than news, thought of going away for awhile until he felt better, but thought he'd ask just one more question and then go away and lie down somewhere.

"Tell me all about it?" he said.

"Certainly," said the little man.

"My name is George Smith because you can pronounce that. I have come

from the planet you know as Saturn, the one with the ring around it. I came here six months ago, parked my ship in Pershing Square, and have since been reconnoitering. The time is ripe. We will strike soon. This is an invasion, of course, and we cannot fail."

"Ya mean there's more of you guys?"

"Certainly. There's John Jones in San Francisco, Jim Watson in New York, Arthur Tucker in Bloomington, and about three thousand others of us. The whole world is being covered this way. We've looked you over in detail. We know your culture better than you do. It has failed to meet our standards. We know your weak points and your strong ones. We will strike, and soon. Kill off everybody and take over."

"How come we haven't heard of the other little guys?"

"You're all too blasé to admit our existence, that's all. I've been in constant communication (he choked here) with all my army, and we've found the same condition prevailing everywhere."

"Brother," said the reporter earnestly, "either you and/or I should go somewhere and sleep this one off."

"You see?" asked George complacently. "You find yourself incapable of believing me. That is all to the good."

"Uh huh," said the reporter. "And just when is D-Day?"

"Today," said George. "Ten minutes from now."

"Aw, t'ell with it all," said the reporter, and staggered away. He'd walked a short distance when he thought he needed a quick one. He

tilted to the left and followed a tacking course which brought him up against a bar where he ordered a double rum. As the glass was placed in front of him, everybody, including the bartender, dissolved. He was alone in the bar. He ran into the street just in time to see the last of the people dissolving. Several cars careened off curbs or jumped them and came to sudden stops against buildings. Nobody at the wheel.

Pretty soon he saw George.

"Hey!" he shouted.

"Yes?" asked George politely.

"You were on the level, then, about all that stuff you were telling me, eh?"

"Certainly," said George.

"Then everybody's been dissolved?"

"Indubitably," said George, his face going blue as he choked on the five-syllable word.

When George had recovered, the reporter said, "Well, then, how come I'm still alive?"

"While you spoke to me you were enveloped in my protective aura, naturally." (He didn't choke on this one.) "Soon as it wears off, you'll melt away also."

"Ya mean I'm gonna dissolve like the rest of them?"

"Right," said George.

He did, too.

—Charles Burbee

(from *The Acolyte* No. 13, Winter 1946,
F. Towner Laney, editor)

	'02	'01	'00	'99	'98	'97	'96	'95	'94	'93	'92	'91	'90	'89	'88	'87
Australia	24	17	12	9	12	9	11	12	13	16	18	16	16	12	15	32
Canada	15	18	18	19	16	19	14	16	14	12	17	1	2	2	1	4
U. K.	52	39	61	65	64	58	47	52	60	51	50	44	30	61	51	33
U. S.	113	84	105	69	91	109	108	143	109	91	104	85	66	55	67	58
Others	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	2	2	2	1	5	0	4	3
Totals:	204	158	197	163	183	195	180	223	198	172	191	147	119	130	138	130

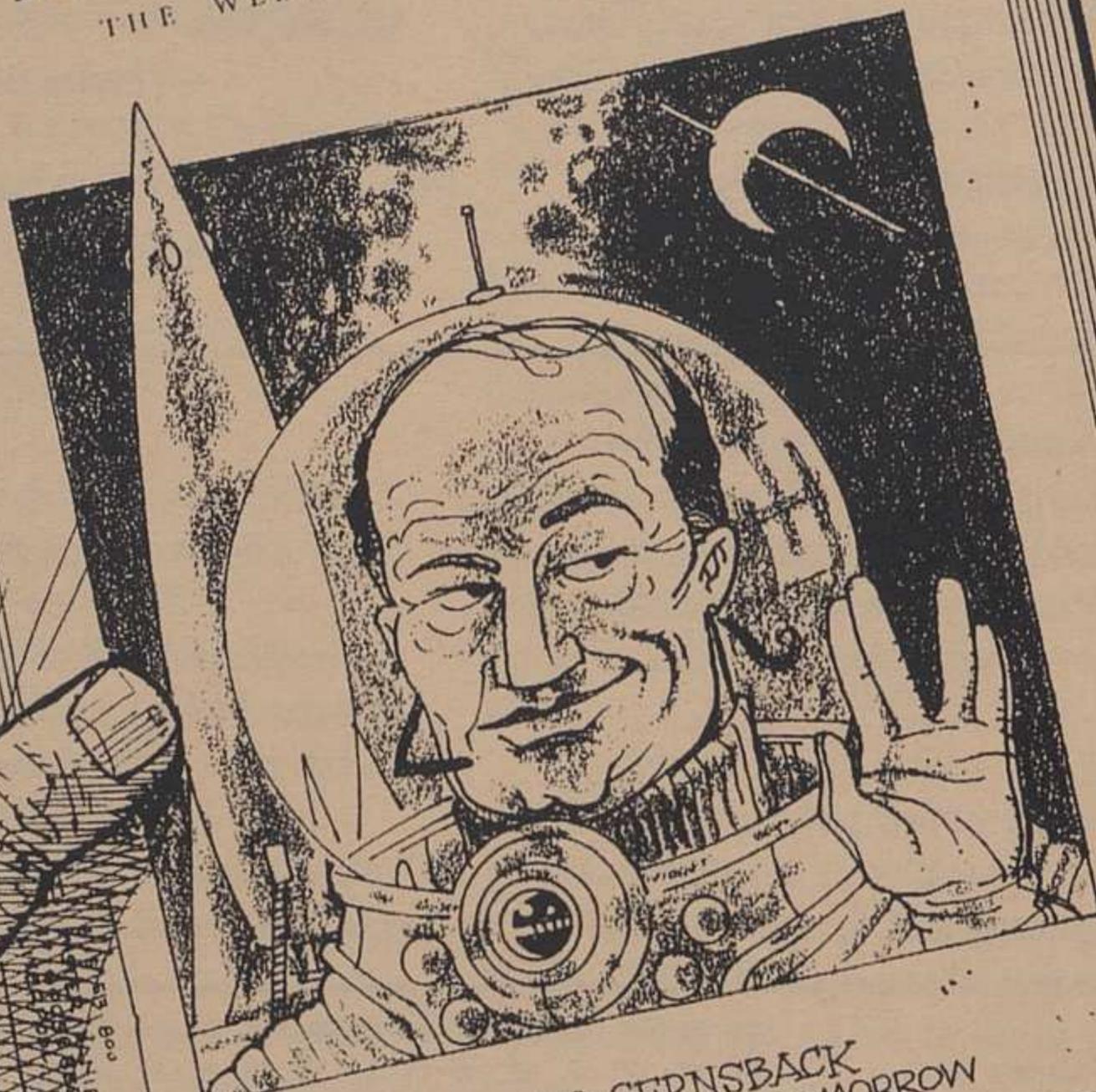
To a minor extent, 2002's fanzine output reflects publications posted on efanzines.com and other Web sites, but only the ones that I actually download and print. Paper fanzines continue to be the vast majority.

APRIL 10, 1936

FIFTEEN CENTS

TIME

THE WEEKLY NEWSMAGAZINE



HUGO GERNSBACK
THE MAN WHO SEES TOMORROW

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(REG. U. S. PAT. OFF.)

NUMBER