



BARRY N.
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***HEROVIT'S
WORLD***

THE JOHN W. CAMPBELL
AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

Barry N. Malzberg

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For Lee Wright and Robert P. Mills

The sphere darted to the surface with an awful rush and as Mack Miller regarded it he knew right away that he was dealing with something absolutely new in the experience of the Survey Team with this sphere. He was dealing, in fact, with something which was possibly so alien and bizarre that it could defy the knowledge of anyone on Earth!

Nevertheless, he thought, as he proudly stepped forward to greet the aliens, he would do the best he could. That was all that was ever asked of a Surveyman. That was usually enough.

Would it be enough now? Or was it too late?

Kirk Poland: Survey Starlight

There's A Long Way Between Declining and Death. Isaac Bashevis Singer

Herovit's World

At the second annual cocktail party of the New League for Science-Fiction Professionals, Jonathan Herovit finds himself accosted by two angry readers who also despise his work. "You stink, Herovit. You've been doing this damned crap for so long it molds, and you'd better get yourself out of science fiction before we throw you out," the taller and stronger of the readers says ... and, quite possibly drunk, hurls more than half a glass of scotch and soda into Herovit's thin, querulous face. Then, realizing the apparent seriousness of the action, he apologizes suddenly and backs away, his face now fallen to sadness, looking just like Mack Miller's when the Team came across a seemingly insoluble problem. "But then again ..." the boy says. "Well, then again, I guess everybody has a right to live."

The other reader, a girl similarly dressed, touches Herovit by her vague expression of concern. "You shouldn't take this too seriously, Mr. Herovit," she says. "Bill's just so involved with all of your writers and science fiction, but the fact is that you are losing your grip just a little, don't you think?" Then she leaves the room quickly, dragging the trembling Bill by the hand.

No one seems to have noticed this. All of the Science-Fiction Professionals are off in corners with editors or antagonists, promoting their careers, renewing old hatreds. Herovit takes a handkerchief from a rear pocket, shakes it open in spurts, and begins careful work on the stain which is already congealing rather thickly in places on his suit jacket. After a time of hopeless patting, however, he decides to leave it be.

It is a symbolic stain. He will wear it as a badge. Events in the room continue. Perhaps all of this occurred only in his mind or was otherwise hallucinative. This is what comes of having been a science-fiction writer for twenty years: it is difficult to take oneself altogether in earnest.

It is all typical of the kind of trouble he has been having recently and for quite a while back. He finishes his drink, wondering exactly how in hell readers were able to get into this party anyway. He was described in all of the mailings as a meeting for only the most serious editors and writers in the field, those who were central to science fiction and who, each in his own way, were completely dedicated to its advancement.

That night, after the party, Herovit has a dream about the boy who threw scotch in his face, and wakes from it in a series of terrified gasps, realizing that it is the first real critical feedback he has received in many years—or at least since two of his novels were reviewed favorably in the month's science-fiction department of a West Coast newspaper (“... also sure to be on your favorite s-f buff Christmas list would be these two latest by the ubiquitous Kirk Poland ...”). He reaches for his wife beside him, resolved to tell her what has happened to him and thus inaugurate a serious discussion of this life which he has shaped, but he realizes at the last moment as his fingers graze the girl beside him that he has been engaging in casual adultery for many years and that the young fan, now sleeping peacefully in his hotel bed, could react only with surprise or rage if she awoke to find Jonathan Herovit groaning out confessions of inadequacy into the small of her back. Word would quickly get around certain circles that he was losing his grip.

Herovit rears in the bed and turns the other way. He resolves that over the weeks to come he will carefully consider his place in the field, and if things continue to look as bad as they do at the moment, he will most definitely begin to think about considering the possibility of perhaps getting temporarily out of the game. He will. He will. He sleeps.

More and more as he edges forty—now thirty-seven, nothing quite as it used to be biologically and otherwise— Herovit feels like a main character in one of his old serials for Tremendous Stories. Events press upon him; utterly alien and bizarre forces impinge. His grip, like Mack Miller's, is loosening through too many bad episodes. The very fabric of his existence is rent; still, what else is there to do? His public depends upon him. He must press on in order to resolve matters and bring a good report to Headquarters.

The trouble is—he is beginning to admit that he has trouble—that the characters in his serials always had machinery. In the hold, in some abscess of the ship or available by plans to one of the engineers, was a device which could be used to disperse the aliens once they got it going; failing that, else, the alien forces menacing old Mack (he wishes that he

could meet old Mack so that he, Jonathan Herovit, could kill him) would turn out to have had benign motives from the start. It was simple: put it together at 15,000 words and sell it to Steele; string it up to 60,000 and go for the book rights. Or both. Why not? Usually both. You could always get book rights on something Steele bought if you were willing to sink low enough.

But Mack Miller's case—always remember this—is not his own. Herovit can hardly use machinery to escape the circumstances surrounding, and whatever the nature of those mysterious forces, they are hardly benign. (At odd moments he can feel them clambering inside; benignity is not their custom.) Nevertheless, like Mack Miller, he must press on, if for different reasons.

Press on. He is one of the ten to fifteen most prolific science-fiction writers in the country, with an audience of somewhere between seventy to eighty thousand for the paperbacks—to say nothing of the magazines. How many truly serious writers had that much of an audience? Did seventy thousand read Stanley Elkin? Evan Connell? There they are, stuck in hardcover—where ten thousand was a remarkable sale and paperback came late, if ever— while Herovit is a mass-market writer. People read him on buses and in public rest rooms. It could hardly be the fault of his career that all of this was happening to him; rather, he must look elsewhere, into the root causes. Still, it was hard to do this kind of job; most of his characters were not at all introspective. Introspection would only hold back the plot.

In his more surreal moments, Herovit feels that the West Side of the city itself has become an alien planet, populated by archetypes or artifacts speaking languages he does not know with gestures which can only terrify ... but he has a wife and now, damn it, a child; he is committed to Manhattan since it is central to his life, to say nothing of his work, and he pushes off these moments as neurasthenia. Once he had looked it up in a medical dictionary. It was a great word. It gave dignity to his situation.

Herovit pushes on past page forty of his new Mack Miller Survey Team novel, which Branham Books hopes to publish under his pseudonym of Kirk Poland. Originally, he had wanted to write science fiction exclusively

under his own name, but John Steele, the venerable editor of Tremendous Stories when Herovit broke in, had advised him that Jonathan Herovit did not have the right sound for the image of the magazine being developed, and it would be best to use a pseudonym with which the engineers and disturbed adolescents who read Tremendous could fully identify.

“You see, son, Jonathan Herovit sounds too urban, uh, too European and cosmopolitan for this book,” Steele had said, winking madly and lifting his enormous arms toward the ceiling as he expanded his large chest with cigarette smoke. “It has a very New-Yorkish type of ring, if you follow what I’m trying to say here, and our magazine goes nationwide. We even do nicely in the South, and then the Army picks up thousands of copies for overseas distribution through regular channels.”

Herovit—no fool he—guessed that he had gotten the implication. “Sure,” he said, “I guess that you could shorten it, then, to something Germanic like John Herr once I start selling. Or even—”

“Now what you want, son,” Steele said, “is something which is all-American.” He had a very bad habit, Steele did, of continuing a line of discussion no matter what the response, but this, Herovit had decided, was one of the elements of the man’s greatness. Why should John Steele listen when his circulation was in the high sixties and everyone else’s in the low forties or worse? Sure he was being pushed a little by the newer magazines like Thrilling or Thoughtful, but he was still the grand old man of the field, always would be. “Maybe just a little trace of the peculiar on the edges, something exotic, you know, but never threatening for the guys. If you can’t think up a good one on your own I’ll decide for you like I’ve done for a lot of the others, but first you’ll have to sell me a yarn, of course. That always comes first, doesn’t it? I’m a little overstocked now but you’re certainly welcome to try. Anyone’s welcome to try, got to keep on pushing for the new blood,” Steele had said and then sent Herovit—at that time twenty-two and single—on his way from the gigantic chain of pulp-magazine offices in which Steele’s cubicle had been in an insignificant place, wedged between the mailroom and a messenger’s comfort station.

Herovit had at the time been extremely anxious to break into science fiction, so he had listened to everything Steele had to say. This was not only a matter of achievement: he had just then been fired from a probationary position with the New York City Department of Welfare, and at this period in his life saw absolutely no way of generating the fast income he needed unless he could work into the pulp market, which no

one knew was then on the verge of complete collapse.

Thus he had settled—too much pride to let Steele pick his name—on Kirk Poland both because of some kind of trouble in the damned Gomulka government was making the newspapers at that time and his landlord, a creditor at that time, had been named Joe Poland. Under that name—Kirk, not Joe—this was—he had sold Steele his first novelette only a month after their conference. Kirk was a good

first name. Nothing insoluble could ever happen to a man named Kirk once he put his mind to things

Subsequently, Herovit had sold five hundred and three additional magazine pieces as well as ninety-two science-fiction novels, all of them by Kirk, whom he had visualized from the start (perhaps in a dream, although origins had never been his strong point) as a tall, thin guy, fairly wiry, with devastating hands and huge sunken eyes. A guy who never had trouble coming, be it fast or slow. Sex stuff, on the other hand, Kirk had never been able to write; it gave him (or at least it gave Herovit) cold sweats and a livid feeling of embarrassment—a sensation that his mother-in-law, for instance, was inspecting copy over his shoulder as it came from the typewriter. Now that the sex market is gone and it is entirely too late to crawl from under the pseudonym to find another identity, however, Herovit regrets following Steele's suggestions so unquestioningly. On his own, he might have been a fine writer.

But then again (and he reminds himself of this all the time), there are many thousands, if not millions, of people who have tried and failed to make full-time careers as writers, so he certainly has a lot to be thankful for, even if he only made eleven thousand, four hundred dollars last year, and only a very few sophisticated fans and readers in the field know that it is he, Jonathan Herovit, who originated Mack Miller's Survey Team. Not Kirk Poland. In seventeen years of professional writing, Kirk has received exactly twelve fan letters and one sexual proposal from a woman who said that she was forty-one years old but devoted to machinery and, thanks to Process Training administered in the middle 1950's, still quite ready to go.

"Lothar, go down below and examine the table of elements. Check it out thoroughly to find out how tanamite can be found on it. Do this right away, crewman," the Captain said determinedly in his quiet voice, Herovit now writes and then comes again to a dead halt in this accursed ninety-third novel. He must establish the physical-science basis for the plot at this point. The thing to do—he has been there the way so many times before; why then is it bothering him so?—is type a long scene between the Captain and his first mate, Lothar, both of them highly unsympathetic aliens,

explaining the mysterious substance that one hundred and fifty-nine pages later will signal their doom ... but Herovit, looking at the twenty-first page in the typewriter, realizes that he cannot do it. Not yet again. Is there such a thing as tanamite or is it a fool's construct? Lothar wondered idly as he then scurried off in loyal slave's fashion to do his captain-master's bidding. He is not up to this really, not at all. He cannot face one more line of exposition, nor is there any way in which he can take either of these characters seriously, Lothar and the Captain being individuals who under various names have already been included in at least seventy-three full-length, never-before-published adventures. Someday he would take his revenge upon the Captain and it would be terrible, restoring the balance between them, but it could not be on this expedition, Lothar feared, listening to the hum of those giant engines as tirelessly they brought them ever closer to their destination and the inevitable conflict which awaited. He simply cannot do this kind of thing any more.

The trouble is (and he might as well face it; he will not be a self-deceiving man) that he is falling apart. Through the clear and dark portholes, shaped like abscissa, he could see the constellations of a different galaxy, sense a thousand new suns and the adventures which would follow. The thought of them filled him with humility and awe, low-rated as he was. The psychic strain of production, the insularity of the field of science fiction, and the difficulties in his own personal life have closed

around him within recent months; now Herovit is not so sure that he can take himself, let alone his work, seriously. It was something to think about, the look of those stars. Few had gazed upon them, fewer still would return to the familiar galaxies to bear the tale. The novel which he is supposed to be writing is number twenty-nine in the Survey Team Conqueror Series. For this, his agent has negotiated a standard advance of two thousand dollars as against four and six percent of paperback royalties payable one thousand upon signature and another thousand on delivery. He needs that second thousand desperately and is already forty-five days late (compulsively he counts everything) on the delivery, but he finds that the very thought of plowing on with this novel, to say nothing of actually finishing it, makes him quite ill. Twenty-one pages completed (of course he never rewrites) and a month and a half late. This is pitiful, no doubt about it.

This is pitiful. Truly pitiful, Lothar finds himself thinking and thinking then for the twenty-ninth time that if only Colonial Survey had not been so authoritarian he would have had his last slave voyage several moons ago. He hopes that this thinking is not an omen of worse things to come but suspects that as always his mood is a good barometer of what will follow.

Heat sneezes in the pipes of Herovit's office. He hears his wife of a decade again cursing their sixteen-month-old daughter. Herovit can make out some of the words. Lothar thought that he could make out some of the words the Captain was saying in relation to his slave-status, and he tried to block all of them out of his mind. He did not want to hear them.

He decides to leave the Captain, not to say Lothar, to their own devices for a time. The bottle of scotch is on his desk. He drinks.

That night he tries again rather reluctantly but persistently to get things started again in the sex department with his wife, but Janice turns from him deftly, talking, inexhaustibly talking, as he tries to fondle her breasts and finally, in disgust, quits.

“I won’t have any of that,” she says in a high voice, protecting herself, “and who do you think you are anyway, Jonathan? I’m at the end of my patience, you know. You can’t ignore me during the day and treat me like some kind of housekeeper—some kind of housekeeper, that was the word I wanted to use, and you’d better not miss it—and then expect me to be passionate on your demand, can you? Is this normal thinking? Do you really think that you’re being quite rational? You have some sensitivity left in you, I hope, so you must think that I’m really quite stupid or that I’ve got such lust for you that I can’t resist, but that isn’t a good way of looking at it. I gave up everything for you and all that you can do is think that I’m an object for your desires. I’m a slave without any pay, that’s all I am!”

Since the pregnancy and subsequent birth of their daughter Natalie, which forced Janice’s resignation from the product division of a second-rate public relations agency, she has been quite nervous and hard-edged, and most of her conversation sounds like this. Janice was never (Herovit, in his senescence, now admits everything) what one might call an accessible or highly sympathetic person, but now, in her discovered role as the thirty-five-year-old mother of an ill-tempered, bottle-fed, cereal-spitting infant, she seems to have collapsed into a set of attitudes which were probably always waiting to absorb her. Also, she hates science fiction. This is strange, considering that Herovit met her at a convention fifteen years ago when she was chairlady of the Bronx Honor John Steele Society and Steele himself was the guest of honor.

“You think about me only when you want something and you never know I’m alive any other time,” she says, rotating and shoving her buttocks at Herovit... but not at all invitingly. Mack Miller would never have to take this shit. Of course Mack Miller, at least on the record, had never been laid yet, but if he had been laid you could be sure that he would be in the dominant position.

“I’m sorry,” he says mildly. He is not Mack Miller. Increasingly these days he seems to be apologizing and, what is worse, meaning it. Herovit’s regrets and sense of culpability are real: he knows that he, and no one else, has made his life. “I only thought that I might, uh, hold you, you know, like that. Nothing else. I know that you’re tired, what you’re going through, but of course, as you should know, I’ve kind of got problems myself and—”

“You don’t know anything. You can’t know anything if you think that I care for your problems with that crap. Do you know what I’m going through? Do you know what the bitch is doing to me?” Janice refuses to call the baby by her name; it is always the bitch, the kid, the thing, or at best, the infant—thus, Herovit supposes, depersonalizing the situation somewhat and thus protecting her emotions. Herovit does not know an awful lot of psychology—that not being the strong point of his writings, which focus on the hard sciences—but he can make an assumption or two, or so he guesses.

“No,” he says, not wanting the discussion which is now coming but knowing with ten years

cunning that this discussion may be his only pathway into her and that if he has any interest in his wife at all he must discuss his way into sex. Hear her complaints one by one as a means of penance advance. “Tell me what she’s doing to you. Did she do anything bad to you today, for instance?”

“What do you care anyway? What difference does it make? I’m a fool to think that you’re even interested in any of this.”

“But I am interested. I really am. She’s our daughter, the two of us together, right? It can’t be one or the other but both.” These are certain ritual matters to attend to before there is even the possibility of sex. Herovit sighs and wishes, not for the first time, that he were a more industrious adulterer. As it is, he is little more than a dilettante, a hobbyist, picking up scraps where he may, but this is not the correct approach for the serious-minded. Still, even at the level of science fiction, adultery can become very expensive, so he may have less complaints than he thought.

“You. All day you’re locked up like a rat in that office of yours, typing up your crap and getting drunk. Mostly getting drunk, you’re not even that busy any more. I can’t hear the typewriter most of the time; you think I

don’t know what’s going on in there? I’m aware of everything. But what do you know of my life? Can you understand what this thing is costing me every day now?”

“Oh yes,” Herovit says. “Oh yes, I think I do. I do know what it’s costing you. It isn’t easy, not easy for me either,” looking through the ceiling, past the screen of smoke from the cigarette he has been working on, thinking—thinking somewhere there must be a glade, somewhere there must be flowers, somewhere there must be animals bleating contentedly throughout the night and ships whisking over the water. Somewhere at this very moment such a place exists, and these things are happening there or not at all, and I must get what comfort I can from the knowledge that while they are there they could be for something ... someone somewhere is getting laid and it must be good.

Three stories beneath, a fire engine, sirens like imploded rockets, staggers past, and the odors of the city sweep like moths to nibble over him. What did he do to deserve this? All that he wanted was to make an easy buck. Simple Jonathan Herovit to come to such an end as this as he listens to his wife listen to his wife, listens to his wife—

Talking.

In the morning his agent calls to say that the publisher is now beginning to press hard for delivery of the overdue Survey Team novel and that he (the agent that is, to say) also finds himself upset about the way things are going with Herovit. What has happened to his career? Where is the old sense of discipline? What does Herovit think: That just because he has sold ninety-two novels the world now owes him a living? Mack Miller would not have to take this shit; he would scream back at this bastard over the phone and tell him a few things, but Herovit, owing six hundred dollars, merely listens. The world does not owe him a living. Perhaps he should quit novel-writing if this is all the responsibility that he can show in his late thirties. Get himself some kind of a job instead. Unless he is unemployable, which is most likely the case by now.

Herovit's agent is named Morton Mackenzie. Morton is fifty and represents more than half of the full-time science-fiction writers in the country, but considers himself more famous as a result of a short article

about himself in a newsmagazine four years ago. This article included Mackenzie's photograph and noted that he had the largest collection of sixteen-millimeter science-fiction horror films in the world. There are intense rumors—have been for a long time—that Mackenzie, who is also an alcoholic, has never read a word of science fiction in his life and in fact hates it, but the field is full of gossip like this. Many people who write science fiction do not like the form, and why the hell should they? Still, and all, Mackenzie is a grand old fellow. He has been at the center of the field, representing his writers in good times and evil, since his fifteenth birthday in 1937 or so, and Herovit at this time does not have the heart to further upset this important figure, who is in an excellent legal position to drop him as a client and sue for recovery of monies owed.

"I mean," Mackenzie says in a high bleat, causing the receiver to shake reciprocally in Herovit's damp palm two full miles uptown, "I mean this, I mean to say that I can't put up with this pressure any more. You're getting yourself quite a reputation for backing out on contracts, Jonathan, and if it ever comes right down to the wire I'll have to let you go. Business is business. There's a whole client list I've got to protect, not to mention my integrity and reputation for honesty in the field, and I can't have one client fucking me over like this. No one fucks me over! Although in the personal sense I'll always remain fond of you, remembering the man you were."

"I never backed out on a contract in my life," Herovit lies. "Excuse me," he then murmurs and pauses to light his fifteenth cigarette of the morning from the candle he has set burning to the left of his typewriter and the thirty-third completed page of Survey Sirius. Halfway down on the thirty-fourth. Eight thousand words in the can; perhaps he can get away with forty-two thousand if he uses wide margins and lots of dialogue, filling out the pages so cleverly that a stupid editor might take them for a full-length book. "I've been late five or six times. Okay, I'll grant that I take my time on this work, but it's always been for a good reason like having other commitments or wanting to do a careful job for its own sake. You have no right to say that and it isn't fair. It just isn't fair to me, Mack; have a sense of justice."

He realizes for the first time—how could he have missed this?—that the protagonist of the Survey

books and his agent have the same nickname. Shouldn't he have noted this years ago? But then ~~would have to be some kind of pure coincidence; Herovit prides himself on the way in which~~ he manages to keep his personal problems and his copy far apart. Only amateurs carry things over; professionals suppress personality conflicts mercilessly. And anyway, lots of characters and writers in science fiction

had been named Mack; if he picked it up from the outside, it could as easily have been from there. Pure coincidence. He should not worry about this any more. Forget he ever brought it up.

"Always these goddamned rationalizations," Mackenzie screams. "Nothing's fair! Nothing's even right for you! But what really isn't fair is having Branham Books jumping down old Mack's throat and accusing him of handling an unreliable client who sold them a novel in bad faith. I mean, I don't want to upset you or anything like that, Jonathan, but they're saying that if you don't get this book in no time by the end of the week, they're going to void the contract and demand the advance back. This is a very important market and I'm not going to lose them on your account."

Quite against his will, Herovit finds himself nodding. He knows what Mackenzie means here and the wonderful old fellow does have a point. Branham Books is not truly a publisher of science fiction but a large house primarily interested in reprints of best sellers and sex manuals for the intellectual. Only a few months ago, Branham contracted for a very few science-fiction novels to "investigate the exciting new market," one of the people aiding in the investigation being the deft Kirk Poland, whose agent had offered them the latest in the famous Survey Series. Now, if the editor at Branham had been one of the five or six familiar figures in the paperback field, Herovit would have been able to deal with him on his own: wheedle the man into a little more time, say, or play up the matter of their personalities, make him feel guilty or try blackmail ... but the very gender, let alone personality, of this editor is unknown. He signs himself/herself H. Smythe. It would be impossible to even attempt a direct approach toward H. Smythe if there wasn't even a sex angle from which to approach it. ("H?" Herovit imagines himself saying. "H, can we discuss this on a personal level of appeal, H?" No, this would not work at all.)

At the time of the sale Herovit had been very pleased, presuming that a house as large as Branham might go on for years before they noticed that a contract novel was undelivered, but this had been a mistake. Obviously they were so big and important because they pursued deliveries, even two thousand-dollar deliveries, with vengeful passion. He will have to realign his thinking about this in the future.

"Oh, all right," he says, meanwhile. "Now the book happens to be coming along fine. In fact, right at this minute I'm carefully finishing up the final draft, and it ought to be in your hands by Thursday of the beginning of next week, anyway, by the very latest. They aren't going to get us in trouble—a big house like that, an editor no one's ever heard of—for a matter of just a few days. This isn't an amateur they're threatening, you

know, it's Kirk Poland." He tries to pace his voice, modulate, italicize, be as soothing and confident as possible, knowing better than almost anyone the wonderful old fellow's tendency to disintegrate under stress and to begin mumbling about the terms of his will, under which the Library of Congress itself is scheduled to receive his film collection and forty-three-year (so far) diary.

“Don’t give me that crap!” Mackenzie is shouting. “You’re not finishing up any second draft, you’re not doing any polishing. You haven’t done a second draft in your whole life! You’re probably stuck on page thirty of some piece of crap, with a bottle on your desk and a dirty sheet in the typewriter. You know something, Jonathan, you’ve got yourself a little bit of a serious drinking problem on your hands. I’ve been meaning to point this out to you for months, and finally I don’t want to hold it back. I’ve had a little trouble with booze myself in my time ... well, maybe more than a little trouble, but anyway it just makes me sensitive to your trouble. You’d better watch that stuff or it could be the end of a fine career—or at least a career. Now Jack Craggings didn’t think that anything would happen to him either, but, well now, you just think of Jack Craggings, a brilliant talent—”

“No, I won’t,” Herovit says loudly. “I won’t think of Craggings.” He does not want to hear again (Mack always brings this one out when he feels confidential and is a little drunk himself) about poor Jack Craggings, who after a single brilliant Tracer Tour novella which appeared in the third issue of *Thrilling* and became the basis for a novel, a movie, a television series and a Los Angeles production of a full-length play, disintegrated due to overindulgence on the fifteen thousand dollars he had netted from all of this. Herovit himself had known Craggings vaguely and doubted if the trouble was drinking. Rather, it seemed to be a wife problem or, more specifically, a third-wife problem that had finished him off.

“Everything’s under control, Mack,” he says reassuringly, knowing now that if his luck runs well he will be able to harmonize with Mackenzie’s solicitude and drive straight through to the end of the conversation without a reply. “Believe me, I know what sauce has done to a lot of the guys; anyway you’re too smart for me. As a matter of fact, I’m on page thirty-four, not thirty, but I’m just starting to really hit, and I’m going to settle down now for real and get this book out. A hundred pages a day, just like the good old days; ten pages an hour right out of the typewriter, really pouring out. Sixteen hours work; I’ll stay right here and finish it up by three in the morning. You’ll love it and so will Branham Books,” Herovit says and very quickly hangs up on his agent. His hands, in fact, begin to

flutter only after the phone is safely back on its hook. He yanks the phone jack out of the wall with uncontrollable hands or whatever, determined to avoid the fast ring back that is one of Mackenzie’s specialties when he is in a certain mood ... and then confronts the typewriter. Sighs deeply, a sigh which turns slowly into a nauseated growl as he expels air, looking at what he has done, at what he has made of his life.

Well. Nothing to do but go on with it. No one is going to get him out of this. The capsule spun wildly and uncontrollably in its tight orbit, and for a moment, Mack felt disorientated. True disorientation sped through him and made him feel very weak. Then, with a shudder, he willed himself to discipline and grounded himself to the apogee.

Outside of the porthole he could see the rising hues of Meldeberan VI. It was a tough planet Meldeberan was. A brutal planet, one which had sent the best of the regulars to destruction necessitating that Survey be called in, as always, to bail headquarters out. So that meant it was a planet which a Survey man could overcome... if he only had the strength, the will, the fire.

One of these days, Mack thought, if his luck ran out, they were going to catch up with him. And what would happen then?

End of chapter.

He lights yet another cigarette, takes a bubbling sip from the full tumbler of scotch that he—a good intentions—had brought into the office at eight, determined to make the most of the morning. When this is done he will have to go to the bottle itself and it is going very fast. In the good old days of course, scotch seemed to act merely as a conductor, a set of filaments through which the writing could charge; now it seems, rather, to be loosening connections... but he needs it more than ever. No shame in it.

New chapter.

The powerful, loping stride of the Meldeberanin brought the beast ever closer to the small, dim shape on the edge of the plains. As it ate up the ground with surges of pure physical energy, flashes of power volting from its brutal and strangely shaped head. The Meldeberanin was five kilometers away maybe a little less than that, closing the ground quickly, crackling ferociously when Mack took the laser out of its silicone case and zeroed in on the alien.

“Might as well,” Mack muttered to himself, thinking of what he had to do. A Surveyman, unlike the regulars, always prepared himself for the worst: killing was a necessary part of the job and he had no guilt. No sense in taking chances on a strange planet with its record of brutal slaughter, and if he were not willing to kill the aliens on sight he had no business making himself a Surveyman. The fools and clerks in headquarters, organized

scientists most of them, would try to cloud over the issue with their liberal euphemistics, whining and shouting at the corpse of any alien (when the corpses of a thousand Earthers would be judged only a “unfortunate accident”). But Mack knew danger when he saw it. He was not an Establishment member, had no truck with sociology, and could recognize danger when he saw it.

Also he could recognize malevolence. Now through the amplifiers of the ship he could hear the hoofs and greenish spurs of the Meldeberanin hitting the ground as it drew closer and he shouted into his own amplifier the galactic signal to halt which should be known to even the most backward races since it had originated on earth.

The Alien did not halt as Miller knew it would not and therefore he shot it to death.

It occurs to Herovit that he had wanted to be a literary-type writer. Why not? He'd had important things to say, and the few Foley and O. Henry collections that he had looked at in his early twenties were obviously full of crap.

Anyone could do better than this stuff if he had the right connections. But the science-fiction market at that time had seemed so accessible, the magazines so easy to hit at the time he broke in (there were fifty of those magazines and anything typed cleanly in English with the word “space” in somewhere could get placed, if only at a quarter of a cent a word on publication), that he had felt it was foolish to pass up the easy money on that account alone. He'd had it all figured out: what he was going to do was write science fiction for a couple of years, just to build up a good reputation in the simple field and some kind of financial backlog (if he could make, say, even seven thousand dollars

year he could save like crazy, living as he did in a furnished room), and then he would head out to the serious hardcover markets with a long novel of Army life that he had all blocked out in his head. Ju had to put it down. The novel was so completely available to him that even now he could write tomorrow. But who would give an advance?

So what he would do would be to raise a little margin on which to get to work. Even the individual scenes and characters were already cold. But the Meldeberanin did not stop, although the shot that had taken was surely fatal. In fact it increased its speed, moving with frightful force over the darkening plains. Its features were cast in those of complete evil, and even though Mack was Surveyman he felt the first tingling of what might have been fear.

Getting it down on paper would be nothing, but it would have been

stupid to have passed up, just when he was getting started, a nice and enjoyable dollar. Had he at last met a challenge beyond him, a challenge which he could not overcome? Mack did not know.

Herovit looks at his daughter sleeping in the crib which had been the only baby furnishing the room that Janice and he had bought before the birth. (Oh, well; if they didn't prepare for it, it might not, despite all the visible indications, happen. That was the way they were thinking. Surely no harm in it; there was a little superstition in even the best of people.) The child is as alien as anything he has ever conceived, as mysterious as the surfaces of the sun ... but in the slow curl of palms and toes, in the twitching, absent smile which Natalie gives a dream, Herovit sees himself, and something churns. He feels a connection to the child, but this he does not even want to consider at the moment. He has a novel to do.

He leaves the baby's room quickly and quickly passes his wife without a look. Exhausted, she is sitting in the kitchen watching television—a quiz show he guesses—smiling as if in coma. Her body heaves. Herovit strides alertly downstairs into the West Eighties in determined search of an early evening edition. It is noon, and certainly he deserves some kind of a break after all of the good work he has done this morning.

He receives a phone call from the girl with whom he slept in the hotel the evening of the League of Science-Fiction Professionals' cocktail party. She feels slightly embarrassed about calling him home, knowing how busy a professional writer must be (probably turning out another one of those novels right this minute), but would like to know nevertheless if he would attend a meeting of the developing Staten Island Wonder Association, of which she is still the corresponding secretary and second chairman.

"Now you don't have to come if you don't want to," she says rather bitterly. "They only put me up to this job because they thought you might say yes if I asked, but if you don't want to come, it really doesn't mean a thing to me either. I don't care about any of that fan stuff—it's still for the kids. Why, I haven't even been active for over two years and I'm much older than the rest of them—too old for those meetings—but if I can do them a favor, well then, why not?" Her voice is hurt; Herovit feels that he has come into the middle of something quite complicated.

"Most of these people have no life outside of talking about science fiction, which is a rather sad thing when you think about it, but still, someone has to buy the stuff and read it, isn't that right? They put up the money."

Herovit recalls listening to this as he has not recalled for several days what it was like to be with her. (Sex departed is best forgotten; why get yourself all upset, although now and then you could come up with an image that you could jack off to.) She'd had resilient breasts and had not, even in the late throes of sex, made a sound. Maybe being a Wonder reader conditioned you against ordinary novelties. Also, she does not seem to have read a word of his, not ever, which on that basis alone means that he owes her some affection and a sense of obligation. People who have never read his work have done Herovit, he supposes, a rather large favor.

Fundamental detachment, however, must remain. It is the only quality which has made his adulteries possible through the years, not that there have been many of them and not, as he thinks back upon them randomly, that they have been very good at all. Most of the girls have been querulous and demanding. "You must understand, Gloria," he says—her name is coming back to him along with, of God, just about everything else—"that I'm a happily married man. Well, fairly happily. Anyway, I can't really be called at home like this too frequently; it could lead to problems, you see, and furthermore—"

"Oh, that's all right. I know all about that part of the deal, and anyway I'm involved with someone who's just sort of into town. I know how these things work and believe me," she adds with a mysterious giggle, "I wouldn't want to get that whole thing started up again, if you follow what I'm saying. Once was enough in the relational context we established, two would press it out of context. Yes, most of his adulteries talk this way. "Look, if you don't want to make a meeting on Staten, that's okay too. I explained already that this thing wasn't even my idea. They just sort of asked me to call."

One of the problems with these people under twenty-five, Herovit has noticed, is their incessant vagueness. It seems to him that when he was

younger (once he must have been younger, although this is a chronological statement only) I struggled to find a certain precision in his speech and thinking, aided very much by John Steele, who told all his writers to think clearly. Yet not only do these people seem perfectly content with the rhetoric, they appear to understand one another while he has trouble. “Sort of,” the girl says again, and there is a hanging pause during which Herovit is able to contemplate more of his adulteries; they a jumble together, but an overriding impression of dullness remains. “Well,” she says finally, “of course if that’s all that I really meant to you—”

“Oh no,” he says. He senses her retreat and with it the possibility of blackmail. Even the receiver now seems to be withdrawing subtly from his left ear, quite unlike its conduct with Mackenzie, where it seems to grow tendrils and go poking for latent cysts. “Don’t be embarrassed about anything. It’s perfectly all right.” He may meet this Gloria at another party or convention someday, science fiction being such a confined world, and if that is the case, why not? He has probably been seeing but not noticing her at conventions for years before he ever took her to bed. It is always pleasant to maintain a sense of opportunity, strands of possibility to dangle from his progressively delimited life. “I don’t mind making an exception in this one instance. It’s just a general—well, you know—kind of policy—”

“I don’t care about policies. What do policies mean to me? I don’t even understand what you’re talking about. A group of them were just suggesting that I should call. They said, ‘Gloria, why don’t you phone the guy and try him,’ so I said, ‘Okay, he seems like a pretty nice guy.’ The actual truth is that I haven’t been an active member for a really long time. This corresponding secretary job is just a kind of an honorary one because of what I mean to the group, but I don’t have to do a thing. Well, anyway—”

Ah, God, he cannot stand this any more. He really cannot. It is one thing to have hovered over the girl in the blissful hotel night, her body protecting him in its density from all of those unfriendly elements outside prone to tossing scotch in his face or something similar... it is quite another to deal with this girl in the more practical sense of conversation.

He has always made these kinds of misjudgments. The original and most serious error had been with Janice: he had actually believed that there would be some carry-over from the fucking to the relationship. What a mistake that had been! He must try to guard against this kind of thing in the future, although there is very little likelihood, at thirty-seven, that Herovit can truly change his life, although he would like to try. “I’ll

come,” he says meanwhile, leaving life-changing out of it. “I promise. I’ll come. With a set speech and something for your group. But I won’t take any questions, you understand—I want to make that clear in advance. I have a kind of general approach to these meetings which I’ve developed over the years and I pretty much have to stick to it. For everyone’s good. You’ll see what I mean when I do it.”

“That’s no problem.”

“And it definitely couldn’t be for a couple of weeks ... Well, not until the end of next week anyway; it would have to wait until then. What I’m doing, you see, is wrapping up this big novel for a major publisher and—”

“Oh, that’s all right,” Gloria says, coming in so quickly after “big novel” that he inhales in surprise. ~~takes a sickening amount of scotch directly into his lungs and coughs.~~ “That doesn’t bother them me at all. I’m not really talking about anything so soon. They’re just trying to set things up for the winter after next on this long-range schedule being drawn up.”

“Long-range? Schedule?”

“Actually, they have quite a few people lined up already for this kind of thing, and they’re just trying to get possible replacements if any one of them should fall through, you dig? Anyway, we know how you stand now and that’s the important thing. Thanks for taking an interest in us,” Gloria says in businesslike, detached tones and cuts off the conversation. Maybe she did not hang up so abruptly. Maybe just at that moment, by coincidence, the connection failed. Sure. That is the only reasonable explanation.

Herovit is left breathing into the mouthpiece on the solitary. In the even curl of his breath, he perceives the rhythms and little interruptions of sex, and this is so stunning a perception that he resolves to make peace at any cost with Janice this afternoon so at the very least he will have something to which to look forward tonight. Why not? She is not the best lay going—never was even in her prime—but she is something at least, and he can hardly plow ahead on this miserable novel without the thought of something to even out the edges of the day.

Child or no child. The child has nothing to do with this situation. He is still entitled to some satisfaction. He has rights under the marital contract. Procreation is not the sole basis of sexuality now is it? Regardless of your religion.

But Janice will not listen. She will not listen even when he tries to appeal to her better nature and sense of fairness. He goes to sleep, petulantly and tumescently alone, while she stays in the kitchen and watches television.

Sleep overtakes him immediately. (He has never had insomnia, the only nervous tic he has somehow missed. He can fall asleep anywhere, anytime, sometimes against his will. He loves to sleep.) In that sleep he dreams that Kirk Poland tentatively knocks at the door of the bedroom (He would know that knock anywhere) and then enters, ready at last to greet him and discuss important matters of identity ... but Herovit is not yet ready for that. No. He cannot take on this kind of thing now.

Maybe never. In his dream he leaps from the bed and leans his full weight against the panels to keep, at whatever cost, this confrontation away. He seems to have mixed Kirk up in his mind with a lot of other people, some of them dangerous types.

“Come on,” Kirk says, wheedling through the door, speaking with a smooth, level reasonableness, his nifty little hands gesturing away like a mute’s. “Come on, let me in; let’s discuss this. Let’s talk things over reasonably. You’ve been waiting for a long, long time for this; now we can have it out man to man. You’ll like it, you really will. You’ll enjoy what I have to say, and you’ll learn something too. Why not? Let me in. I won’t force you to do a thing against your will that deep inside you don’t want to do anyway. I have ideas how you and I can clean up this mess together; I’ve been turning out the science-fiction crap for twenty years and this could make a man thoughtful. We can change your life, and you will never be the same again. Just like you always hoped, if you’ll let me in.”

“No!” Herovit shouts in the dream, turning his face from the door, inclining his face into the bedframe, feeling the metal curl around his cheeks as he presses wood with his fingernails. “No, I won’t have this. I can’t take it any more. Just get out of my life, Kirk, let me manage all this myself. I don’t want any part of you. Get away from me! I’ll resolve this on my own or not at all.”

He is afraid that Poland will, if allowed in the bedroom, crash into the walls shrieking accusation, and no matter how he rationalizes this he will never be able to justify his position to the active and evasive Kirk, who has stored up so much hostility, righteous hostility, for so long. Kirk is no

Mackenzie. How could he be? He will not be talked out of confrontation, and ultimately Herovit would not have the will. He has caused Kirk suffering and given very little in return. Poland’s case is clear.

Dreaming, Herovit decides that if he is only given time enough, perhaps he will think of some way to get Kirk off his back before there is real ugliness. The thing is that he really needs time. Time is the key. He dreams that he awakens and as he does so, it is the start of yet another day.

Breaking for some air at midday as he has made his habit (he cannot stand to be in the apartment continuously; not only is the situation untenable, but he feels a loss of vigor, a sense that he might faint if confined to his reeking office), Herovit is again accosted by a beggar in the street. This has happened often. It is one of the West Side beggars with bizarre clothing and a developed, focused philosophy of life which the beggar is eager to disclose.

“Give me all your money,” the man says, waving a cane dangerously and placing his glowing teeth in juxtaposition to Herovit’s belt—a tiny, menacing beggar this, whose own eyes seem to rake far distances, vast horizons—“Give me every cent you have or I’ll break your head. I don’t have to put up with this forever, you know. There are limits. Face me, man!”

“I don’t have anything,” Herovit says. “I only go out with twenty-five cents during the day.” He reaches in a pocket and offers the quarter to the beggar—the hell with the newspaper. “Take it,” he says. “Fuck it, if you think that it’ll make any difference.” Talk their language, get at their level.

“Don’t get metaphysical with me, you stupid son of a bitch,” the beggar says. He backs off two paces, then adjusts his height so that he confronts Herovit at chest level by straining to his toes. “I don’t have to put up with this libertarian crap. All I get is wise answers from people who think that they’re smart. I want your money.”

“I don’t have any money,” Herovit says. “I really don’t; you have it all.” No one seems to be watching this dialogue, which is unusual. On most days, conversations like this will pick up five to ten amused witnesses making side comments, but it is a day of clouds with penetrating cold and

perhaps people are too absorbed in their own errands. There certainly are a good number of them—people, that is—several hundred passing them by the minute; traffic is pouring through the intersections and a nice howl of sirens is rising a few blocks down as an ambulance separates traffic and moves on its demented way. Could the ambulance be for him? “Just what I offered you, that’s all there is; take it or leave it.” He is tired of these West Side beggars, who are more and more defiant nowadays, although the problem, he understands from the papers, is even worse in the Village. Mack Miller would not have to put up with this shit. He would shoot the beggar—all of the beggars—dead as a necessary action. “Excuse me,” Herovit says, thinking of what Mack would make of the West Side, and moves to push himself through all of this.

“Not so fast, friend.” The beggar uses his cane to give Herovit a warning tap on the instep, then raises it to threaten his forehead. “Just stay in place until we arrive at a solution.” Looking at him in this fashion, Herovit comes to understand that the beggar is quite demented, but for all of that not a coincidence, no, indeed: he surely must be a symbolic figure. The beggar is an outward extension of all the forces which have made Herovit’s life so recently intolerable, a pure abstraction equipped with a cane, which cane bears down dangerously toward his skull and then at the last instant—like a sudden royalty check in the mail staving off another dispossession—swings out of track and clatters to the sidewalk. The beggar looks at it with disgust. “Everything,” he says, his assurance seeming to dwindle. “I want everything you’ve got.”

“No,” Herovit says. “I won’t do it, I won’t.” He dodges to a side. Mack Miller would not be caught evading. Mack Miller would have long since lost his temper; if this were an alien planet and the filthy beggar a native, Mack would have attacked the creature straight on, with weaponry or even fists, and the alien would have slid from his path, mumbling, dissolved. But Herovit is not Mack. He must remember this. The courses which Mack finds so easy to take are simply not, well, reasonable when applied to the daily order of Manhattan’s West Side. “I won’t give you anything now, you see, and you could have had a quarter,” he says and bolts toward freedom, moving thus to a small area between a subway kiosk and newsstand where several scraps of old paper twirl absently in the freshening breeze of a bus. “It isn’t fair,” Herovit mumbles. “It isn’t right, it shouldn’t be this way.”

“What isn’t fair?” the beggar shouts, pursuing. “What are you talking about anyway?” Herovit does not know whether the creature is determined or merely making a gesture for the hell of it, but as the beggar’s voice

fades and ripples, he gathers that the beggar is running out of his class. “Everything’s fair if you make it so! This is your life. We make the world! Cheap bastard son of a bitch, you should go to hell.”

“Go to hell yourself,” Herovit says. “Just fuck off,” but he says this very quietly, not wanting to further antagonize the beggar, who is obviously sensitive. (Herovit has already given more pain than he can really bear in his unfortunate condition, and anyway, he can imagine what the impact of the cane would be if flung squarely toward the back of a skull.) “Not that I mean it personally, of course, in the impersonal sense we’re all in hell,” he whispers in penance and lunges into Broadway. He gets across the street without incident.

He thinks he hears the beggar still cursing, but when he risks turning at last, now across the street, peering through the haze of traffic and pedestrians, Herovit does not see him. Now with distance established, he realizes that he wanted to see the man, inspect the source of the confrontation, possibly even try to grasp the creature from a newer and more meaningful perspective when aided by distance ... but no, the man is gone. Merged into landscape, like some of Mack Miller’s more difficult antagonists.

Herovit reaches in a pocket and finds without surprise that the bills in the left rear are gone. Thirty-five dollars or so, his escape money if he ever gets to the point where he must dive into a furnished room and inaugurate divorce proceedings. “Goddamn it,” he says, “they can’t do this to me.”

“You see what I mean?” Kirk Poland says. He leans easily against a lamppost and twirls one leg behind the other, a picture of ease and confidence as he deftly lights a cigarette. “Do you understand what I’ve been trying to get over to you, Jonathan?” He winks and his complexion shifts, taking on the color of the post. “You’ve got to see,” he says. His tone is as reasonable as would befit any author of ninety-two published novels. “You’re incapable of managing your life. You’ve lost control, you can no longer assume responsibility, and I’m here to tell you that it must stop.” Kirk blends in well with Broadway. A certain shabbiness which has always been at the rim of his personality works in convincingly against the background.

“Come on,” Kirk says, reaching toward him, “let’s make a little agreement now and be done with it. You don’t want to go back to the house and face that crap all over again, do you?”

Herovit backs away with a shriek. The hell with what people will think

of him; anyway people in Manhattan do not think, this being their only salvation. He turns and runs down the full length of Broadway, no longer concerned with his thirty-five dollars. "Please," he is babbling, "please, please, please, give me a break, will you?" Pedestrians turn to look at this fleeing Herovit as if he were a miracle, mingled awe and suspicion on their faces, their hands deep into their pockets to protect folding money. Who knows what guises the beggars are taking now? Who knows what he might, on an impulse, do to any of them? He accelerates.

Finishing off page forty-six he decides that he cannot take this any longer. No matter what the penalty he must vault past the situation, seize some breath. In easy stages he moves back from the desk, then stands, flexing his buttocks. Lower back syndrome. Herovit has had instances of lower back pain increasing in severity and duration over many years but he cannot really afford an orthopedic survey and has an ancient horror of chiropractors whom he takes to be the science-fiction writers of the medical profession.

“Take that,” Mack Miller then shouted triumphantly and leveled the alien yet again with three steady spurts from the laser fire. At last he had penetrated the mystery of the beast’s invulnerability, responded to thought waves, being sensitive to telepathy as he should have known from the start and he broadcast hatred at it along with the laser fire it would crumple. Their sensitivity then would be their destruction ... if Mack only could bring the word to lies before him and ends the page; as he scans it quickly, routinely, he thinks that he really will have to do something about this. All of it seems vaguely ungrammatical, like the babblings of some kind of idiot, and it is not even maintained in character in the bargain. This page at least should go through the typewriter again tomorrow, he knows.

But he tries never to revise. It was an old policy settled from the beginning. Once you start revising there was just no end to any of it: first it was a line here or there, then a paragraph or shred of dialogue that didn’t quite work; soon you were up to whole scenes that didn’t work, and in no time at all, like old Jack Craggings, if you got deep into the revision question, you might never be able to write new stuff again. Hunks of novels and short stories, like dismembered limbs, would be fed through

the typewriter over and over and nothing would ever be right. That was the problem once you started looking at this stuff critically: it never could be right; it was already rotten to the bottom. Standing there looking at his words crawling around the page, Herovit seems to recollect hundreds, maybe thousands, of pulp writers stretching back to antiquity— or at least to the mid-1920’s—who had been brought to their finish by a belated instinct for revision and now stood (or lay) mute, their voices now to say their incomes vanished to be unrecovered.

Never revise, he mutters, an old credo. It doesn’t make any difference; the people who read the crap wouldn’t know a literate sentence from an illiterate one, and come to think of it, kid, neither would you. He stumbles through the office door in vague pursuit of his wife.

Their schedules interchange, if never quite mesh. Tonight it has been she who went to bed early while he has stayed in the office to work Mack Miller through, lunge through at least a hundred pages and get the novel well in hand. (“That’s great,” Janice had said. “I think that you should definitely work through the night and all day tomorrow—just like the old days—so that you can finish it up, and then you can go to bed for a couple of days straight. I won’t bother you, I promise, and it’s a good plan. I mean, I won’t feel deprived of your companionship or throw it up to you that I’m being squeezed out of your life, and that is a definite promise.”) Here it is only midnight, and all he has accomplished is five pages. Five pages! In three hours! Where are the hacks of yesteryear? Enough

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