

alfred bester
the computer connection



INTRODUCTION BY HARLAN ELLISON

ALFRED BESTER

THE COMPUTER CONNECTION

Alfred Bester was born in New York in 1913. After attending the University of Pennsylvania, he sold several stories to *Thrilling Wonder Stories* in the early 1940s. He then embarked on a career as a scripter for comics, radio, and television, where he worked on such classic characters as Superman, Batman, Nick Carter, Charlie Chan, Tom Corbett, and the Shadow. In the 1950s, he returned to prose, publishing several short stories and two brilliant, seminal works, *The Demolished Man* (which was the first winner of the Hugo Award for Best Novel) and *The Stars My Destination*. In the late 1950s, he wrote travel articles for *Holiday* magazine, and eventually became their Senior Literary Editor, keeping the position until the magazine folded in the 1970s. In 1974, he once again came back to writing science fiction with the novels *The Computer Connection*, *Golem 100*, and *The Deceivers*, and numerous short stories. A collection of his short stories, *Virtual Unrealities*, was published in 1997, and his final novel, *Psychoshop*—completed after his death by celebrated author Roger Zelazny—was published in 1998. After being a New Yorker all his life, he died in Pennsylvania in 1987, but not before he was honored by the Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers of America with a Grandmaster Award.

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THE COMPUTER CONNECTION

ALFRED BESTER



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FASTER THAN THE SPEED OF BESTER:

*A Few Words of Introduction to One of the Most Fecund
Writers the World has Ever Spawned*

by Harlan Ellison

Once upon a time, when the world had less rust on its pinions, when it sang the *Missa Solemnis* less off-key in the shower, when a good idea could beat both the tortoise *and* the hare to the tape, there lived in this enchanted land a creator of ornate and filigreed dreams whose talent was a Catherine Wheel showering wonders in every direction.

His name was Alfred Bester, and he died in 1987, and even if some of you parvenus are scratching your heads—on which that little squishy place, the fontanelle, has not yet congealed with puberty—asking yourselves, “Well, if this Bester dude was so awesome, like why haven’t I heard of him?”—you had better believe the world is a less sumptuous banquet because of his absence. You are worse off than you might have been, even if you don’t know it.

You had to love Alfred Bester.

Or, wait a minute, writing it in Besterese, y’hadda *luv* Alfie!

Some people think and speak and sometimes write in a left brain way; and some people think and speak and once in a while write in a right brain way; but Alfie was the only

writer who ever existed and spoke and sure as hell thought and wrote in a WonkBrain way. It wasn't left or right or centrist or doublethink or pig Latin, it was so Bizarre City, so dearly skip-logic, so all-encompassing of concepts and extrapolations and surmises and impossible mountain goat leaps from what-is to what-might-be, that it seemed he was almost as one with his character in this novel, the 13-year-old seductress Fee-5: he heard it all, on neurasthenic telepathic cross-lines (you could look up the term on page 20-something).

Alfie's great aptitude was a mutant chameleon's talent for learning other writers' tricks—perhaps only partially unearthed or explicated—maybe just a cornice edge protruding from the muck or loam of style, perhaps just the whisper or nuance of that ecstatic note trembling midst the cacophony of hack verbiage—and yanking it out, dusting it off, hosing it clean; reifying those tricks; distilling them; turning them on their axes; standing them on their heads, and wildly reconstituting them in a dementedly brilliant newAlfie way. The caprices and conundra that Alfie got from writers he admired, like Charles Harness and Henry Kuttner and A. E. van Vogt and Robert Heinlein, were aided and abetted by the even stormier knavery he had picked up from Dumas and James Joyce and Laurence Sterne.

And, of course, for all of his daring and singularity and purely American literary cozenage . . . he was never included in an annual O. Henry best-of-the-year, or *Best American Short Stories* volume. When the Burkes and Hares of modern belles-lettres stitch up the final borders of the last patch in their quidnunc quilt, nowhere will you find mention of *The Demolished Man* or *The Stars My Destination* or the hundred great short stories. And *that*. Is. Why. You. Ain't. Heard. Of Alfred Bester. You dummy.

So I am here, today, right now, to tell you that Bester was an 8-lane turnpike interstate freeway running full-tilt-boogie North *and* South, at the same time.

Never his like before; never his equal since.

But hark: I pause in mid-essay, during the raw copy retype (yes, Virginia, I still work on a manual typewriter, my raven having moulted and ceased producing broad-nib quills), to share a few pages of juicy prose with that estimable editorial icon Howie Z., and he vouchsafes as follows: “Aren’t you being a bit unfair to the potential reader? Aren’t you presupposing a lack of familiarity with Bester’s work on the part of an audience not dumb, but merely untutored?”

Curse you, GrandSavant Z. You tweak me in my weakest place: my theantropic obsession for evenhandedness, that fastidiousness of regimen that simultaneously I despise and to which I pay obeisance. (“An artist trying to create a powerful atmosphere can’t be expected to embrace the banal method of tv documentaries, which always illustrate both sides of a situation—and leave you nowhere.” *David Denby*, 1979.)

So, okay, I’ll jam back into the closet of memory that incident two summers ago, when I was teaching a writers’ workshop in imaginative literature, and idly mentioned Bester as d’bomb, and this teen-aged student, nice kid, came all over cloudy and said, “Who?” and I was shocked that he didn’t know Alfie’s name and *oeuvre*, and I began to have this creeping (and creepy) epiphany, and I asked the class of twenty-five or so men and women of varying ages, “How many of you have never read Bester . . . and how many don’t even know the name?” So okay, I’ll jam that creepy memory, that recalled moment of so many hands in the air. I’ll pretend Howie Z. inveighs against rank prejudice *a priori* in

a world that slathers homage on *Pokémon*, *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, and Britney Spears while *Little Nemo*, Stanley Elin, and Jane Green recede at light-speed into the Terra Incognita of cultural amnesia where the only citizenship is that of the non-person.

So okay, you all know Bester intimately; you've all read and delighted in *The Demolished Man* and *The Stars My Destination*; and you know that the Science Fiction Writers of America, that noble and humane organization, finally got around to awarding Alfie their much-vaunted Grand Master Nebula award—the winning of which was conveyed to Alfie as he lay in a coma on his deathbed in a nursing home in Pennsylvania; and you know the short stories by heart, particularly “Fondly Fahrenheit,” which is one of the best short stories produced in this last half-century, though you won't find it in any *Best American Short Stories* anthology . . . aw, but there I go again, being cynical and unfair, sorry Howie. I'll straighten up, and give y'all the benefit of the barest, that you *do* know Bester, and that is why you're here, wasting your time with my blather, rather than getting on with it and reading *The Computer Connection*.

Which may not be the absolute best thing Alfie ever set down on paper—at least that's the general consensus, having been reiterated chitteringly since it was first published in 1974–75. (Come with me, if you will, to page 114 of *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, a 1993–95 variorum reference work, where we find the following: “. . . while full of incidental felicities, did not quite recapture the old drive in its ornate story of a group of immortals and an omniscient computer; perhaps it lacked a natural ‘Besterman’ as focus. The pace and complexity were still there, but somehow looking like self-parody.”)

But that's like saying we ought to level and sub-divide Mt. Kilimanjaro because it ain't as high as Everest.

Alfie wrote *Tiger! Tiger!* (which was the other title of *Stars*) in 1956. *The Demolished Man* in 1953. They were novas in comparison to every other bright star in the genre. They blew everyone away. But Alfie wrote to amuse himself; he used to say it was for therapy. And when he felt right with the world, he packed it in, the writing, and he went off and did other things, such as working as a Senior Editor for the then-enormously popular *Holiday* magazine, or writing for television, or working on *Green Lantern* for DC Comics.

When he came back to the novel length—he'd kept on writing the occasional brilliant short story without any protracted lapse of endeavor—it was twenty years later. The story was serialized in *Analog* as "The Indian Giver" in '74, in England as *Extro*, and in hardcover in the U.S. by Berkley Putnam as *The Computer Connection*, 1975. And, no, it wasn't Everest, it was merely Annapurna, a measly 26,493 feet.

As I write this essay, we're about a month and a half shy of that arbitrary chronological goose-egg called The Millennium (and even *that's* commercial self-delusional bullshit, as we all know damned well that the 21st century doesn't truly begin till January 1st, 2001) and every moron media venue is inundating us with "Best of the Century" lists. Best athletes, best movies, best rectal suppositories; most significant men and women of the last hundred years, the hundred top entertainers of the 20th century, the top ten toys, the top fifty inventions, the best this and the best that.

Playing this "best" game is rankest hokey-pokey, a scam, a *mot injuste*, a waste of time, a debasement and demeanment of anything and everything good and worthwhile that

has slipped out of fashion or is simply white noise to a generation that actually lays out money to watch Adam Sandler. Memory is as capricious as the fad frenzies of the Great Wad. Al Jolson, Glen Miller, Lightnin' Hopkins, Carl Perkins and Stevie Ray Vaughn could carve Garth Brooks, Ricky Martin, and the Backstreet Boys a collective set of new assholes if talent were the criterion, but the former are no-price with institutionally ignorant audiences who have been dynamited into believing that the latter rock and rule. So, no, *The Computer Connection* isn't *The Demolished Man*. It is only a terrific book, filled with ideas and "incidental felicities" that will make your mouth gape.

It is a wild ride, as deranged as a fruit-bat, a demented science fictional transmogrification of the chaotic and hilarious household of the Kaufman & Hart Broadway hit *You Can't Take It With You* (later a famous Capra-directed film). This novel is pure Screwball Comedy!

Bester wrote a locked room traditional mystery with *The Demolished Man*, and a straight action-adventure revenge rewrite of *The Count of Monte Cristo* with *The Stars My Destination*, but *this* goofy, deliriously tasty book you hold, this was Alfie's Hollywood sitcom *manqué* tribute to all the hijinks he'd seen and dealt with and chuckled over and suffered while working in the TV and film business. Not the straight mainstream view he presented in his novel *Who He?* but a revived, gussied-up lampoon of the Ultimate Dysfunctional Family, with all the sibs and aunts and uncles writ huge as Immortals, not the least of whom are Jesus, H. G. Wells, Samuel Pepys and . . .

Oh, hell, why go on like this!?!

The Computer Connection is an unsung treasure of Alfie's later years. It is a great book to read, a couple of evenings of delight, best imbibed while some elegant rinkytink

music is playing in the background. So throw on a little Scott Joplin—I suggest the *Red Back Book* collection—or some of Ernesto Lecuona’s piano music—try Thomas Tirino playing the *Rumba Rhapsody* and the 19th century Cuban Dances—and settle back. Kick off your shoes, kick off your mundane workaday cares, kick off your inhibitions, and let one of the most fecund writers of the century massage your risibilities.

I assume you know Bester, because Howie Z. implores me to assume so; but if you don’t, and if you miss this chance, I will seek you out, I will take you down, and I will—as the great philosopher Savanarola said—open a can of whup-ass on you. And did I, by the way, tell you that I knew Alfred Bester as a friend, that his Grand Master Nebula resides here in my home because there isn’t an appropriate museum or archive setting for it, and that you are far worse off than you know because Alfie is gone? Oh . . . I told you that, did I?

So go on and read the book, dummy, and stop gawping at me. I’m just the road-sign pointing into the town.

Bester is the road. And Bester is the destination.

I tore down the Continental Shelf off the Bogue Bank while the pogo made periscope hops trying to track me. Endless plains of salt flats like the steppes of Central Russia (music by Borodin here); mounds of salts where the new breed of prospector was sieving for rare earths; towers of venomous vapors on the eastern horizon where the pumping stations were sucking up more of the Atlantic and extracting deuterium for energy transfer. Most of the fossil fuels were gone; the sea level had been lowered by two feet; progress.

I was headed for Herb Wells' hideout. He's perfected a technique for reclaiming gold (which nobody wants these plastic days) and is schlepping ingots back into the past with a demented time-dingbat which is why the Group has nicknamed him H. G. Wells. Herb is making gifts of gold to characters like Van Gogh and Mozart, trying to keep them healthy, wealthy, and wise so they'll create more goodies for posterity. So far it's never worked. *No Son of Don Giovanni. Not even The Don Meets Dracula.*

Following the Thieves & Vagabonds road signs that Herb puts out for the Group, I went under a mound and tunneled through the salts, absorbing NaCl, MgCl₂, MgSO₄, calcium, potassium, bromides, and probably traces of Herb's gold which he'd grudge me. I came out at the bunker hatch.

Locked, of course. I hammered on it while the pogo bounced and thrummed overhead and it was six, two, and even they'd get me before Herb heard me, but he did; he heard me.

"Quien dat? Quien dat?" he called in Black Spanglish.

"It's Guig," I hollered in XXth Century English.

That's the secret cant the Group uses. "I'm in a jam. Let me in."

The hatch swung down and I fell in. "Freeze it, Herb. The fuzz may have spotted me."

He slammed the hatch and froze the grommets. "What the hell have you been up to, Guig?"

"The usual. I killed another guy."

"The fuzz making a fuss about murder? Don't put me on."

"He was the governor of the Corridor."

"Oh. You shouldn't kill the importants, Guig. People don't understand."

"I know, but they're the only candidates worth killing."

"How many failures have you had so far?"

"I've lost count."

"And no success." Herb meditated. "Maybe we ought to sit down and discuss it. The first question should be, is it a problem of perplexity or complexity? I think—"

A pounding made the hatch vibrate.

"There's goody two-shoes," I said without joy. "Can you shoot me timesome in your dingbat, Herb?"

"But you always refused to shoot a trip." He gave me a mournful look. "You hurt my feelings."

"I've got to disappear for a few hours. If they don't find me here they won't bother you. I apologize about the dingbat, Herb, but I was always scared of that thing. The whole Group is."

"So am I. Come on."

I followed him into the Chamber of Horrors and sat

down in the insane machine which looks like a praying mantis. Herb handed me an ingot. "I was just going to give this to Thomas Chatterton. You deliver it for me."

"Chatterton? The kid poet?"

"In the flesh. Committed suicide in 1770, greatly regretted. Arsenic. He was out of bread and out of hope. You're going back to London. He's holed up in an attic in Brook Street. Got it?"

"Neither rain nor snow nor gloom of—"

"I'll put it on a three-hour snatch. That ought to give you enough time. I'll shoot you to a prominent place so you can get your bearings. Don't wander too far or the thing won't be able to grab you."

The pounding got louder and more peevisish. Herb did things with calibrations and switches and there was a crackle of french-fried power (which I'll bet he never pays for) and I was sitting in a mudpuddle in the rain and a George Washington type on a chestnut horse nearly rode me down and bawled hell out of me for obstructing a public road.

I got up, backed off the road, and someone kicked me in the brain. I jumped and turned around and it was a pop-eyed corpse hanging from a gibbet. Herb had shot me to a prominent place, all right—Tyburn. I hadn't been in London in years (rotten with fallout residues) and certainly never in 1770, but that gave me my bearings. Tyburn had been turned into Marble Arch. I was on the outskirts of eighteenth-century London. No Bayswater Road, yet; no Hyde Park; just fields, trees, meadows, and the little Tyburn creek meandering. The city was on my left.

I walked down a path that would someday be Park Lane and turned left into the fringe of houses. They became thick and crowded when I reached a cow pasture that would be-

come Grosvenor Square. A Saturday-night market was in progress. Hundreds of barrows and stalls illuminated by flaring torches, grease lamps with flags of flame, humble tallow candles. Roars of hucksters: "Eight a penny! Stunning pears!" "Chestnuts all 'ot! Penny a score!" "Beautiful whelks, penny a lot!" "Fine walnuts, sixteen a penny!" I was hungry but I didn't have any current coin; just two pounds of refined gold.

I remembered that Brook Street led off the north side of Grosvenor so I took that route asking for a writer named Chatterton. Nobody ever heard of him until I came across a Flying Stationer hung with broadsheets offering "The Life of the Hangman," "Secret Doings in Soho," "The Treacherous Servant," that sort of thing. He said he knew Chatterton. The kid wrote long-song poems for him at shilling ea., and he pointed out the house which had no business to be standing.

I ran up the crumbling stairs, convinced I'd fall through at every step, and burst into the attic with a merry, "Gold! Gold! Gold! Bright and yellow, hard and cold!" (Thomas Hood, 1799-1845) The kid was writhing on a pallet in the last agonies of arsenic poisoning. "Ah-ha!" I thought.

"He's dying. He knows he's dead. If I can save him maybe we've got another Moleman for the Group."

I did my best. The first thing to do is make them vomit. I pee'd into a tumbler and forced it down Chatterton's throat. No nausea. Too far gone. I ran down the stairs and banged on a door. It was opened by Betsy Ross' grandmother, complaining. I shoved past her, saw a jug of milk, took it and a clutch of charcoal from the cold fireplace. She had now graduated to screaming. I returned to my house call. Charcoal and milk. Nothing. He was gone, greatly regretted, and what the hell was I going to do with 24 oz.

(troy) of gold which was dragging the butt pocket of my coveralls?

Well, I had to stall anyway until the Mantis put the snatch on me so I went for a walk in the rain. At Fleet Street I turned off and went into the Cheshire Cheese to see if I could parlay the ingot into a drink and maybe dry off in front of the fire, which was eclipsed by a snorting whale and a simpering dogfish. The Grand Cham and Boswell.

“What would you do, sir, if you were locked up in a tower with a newborn babe?” dogfish was asking. The whale heaved and growled but before he could answer that monumental question I was yanked back to the dingbat, dripping all over the circuits to the anguish of Herb.

“OutOutOut!” he hollered. “They’ve left.”

I out.

“Why didn’t you give Thos, the gold?”

“Too late, man. He gone when I get.”

“Oh, drat.”

“Try again, a little earlier.”

“I can’t. The damn thing won’t shoot the same decade twice. To tell the truth, Guig, I think it’s a lemon.”

Maybe that’s why his Health, Education, and Welfare program never works. I thanked Herb, still using the Group XX English and returned to Spangland, the Gem of the Ocean. I know all this sounds kind of lunatic but I’m up against a tough proposition keeping these notes. I have to translate from Black Spanglish—Benny Diaz, gemmum, ah gone explain any pagunta you ax—which is now the official language of the country, and then go on from there. It runs: Spanglish XX English Machine Language. It’s one hell of a job, especially when it’s compounded by sorting out cen-

turies of memories. So I ax you to dispensar when I jumble. My damn diary won't. How many times when I compile data for it has the print-out snapped, "090-N. READ." which is machine language for, "I can't understand a goddamn thing you're saying."

We all have this trouble. Not remembering—our memories stick like graffiti—but placing events in their proper sequence. I have to compile notes and diaries because I worry about this. I'm the baby of the Group and I'm still trying to train myself to develop an organic filing system. I've often wondered how Sam Pepys manages. He's the Group historian and diarist and he tries to explain his system to me. It's perfectly simple for Sam. Like: $A^{1/4} + (1/2B)^2 =$ The breakfast I ate on Sept. 16, 1936, and Good Luck to Sam.

I've only been around since Klakatoa blew up in 1883. All the others have been on the scene much longer. Beau Brummel survived the Calcutta earthquake of 1737 in which 300,000 were killed. Beau says nobody back then would ever believe the mortality figures, and he's still sore because the honkies didn't give a damn about how many quote niggers unquote died. I'm with him on that. He—Oh, I'd better explain about our names.

The famous names I mention aren't the realsies. We have to move on and change our names so often—the Shorties begin to wonder about us—that nobody can keep track. So we stay with our nicknames in the Group, and we pinch them from real people. They reflect our crotchets and main interests. I've mentioned H. G. Wells and his time-dingbat. There's Tosca, an actress type; Beau, the epitome of the beautiful people; Sam Pepys, the historian; the Greek Syndicate, our financier; Bathsheba, the *femme fatale*; *und so weiter*. I'm nicknamed *Grand Guignol*, Guig for short, and I

don't like it. I don't think of myself as a Theater of Horrors. I'm sincerely trying to do good, through horror, yes, but it's a small price to pay for what I'm offering. Wouldn't you pay an hour of agony for eternal life?

But about our ages: Oliver Cromwell was buried alive in a mass grave during the Black Death and still doesn't want to talk about it. He says dying by suffocation is something to forget forever. Scented Song escaped the sack of Tientsin by the Mongols when they piled 100,000 severed heads into pyramids. Her description makes Dachau sound like a picnic. The Wandering Jew is Christ, of course. You can pick up the clue in Luke 24:3. A writer—D. H. Lawrence, I think—smelled the truth when he met Jacy in 1900 and turned it into a fantastic story about how Jacy might have lived a normal life if he'd only balled a bod. He didn't know Jace. We call Christ Jacy because if you use his real name it sounds like you're swearing.

There are many others whom you'll meet later on. The oldest, by far, is Hic-Haec-Hoc. He got that nickname because that's what his grunts sound like; he's never learned to speak any language although he can unnerstan simple signs. We think Hic may be from the late Pleistocene or early Holocene and got his charge in some cataclysm that was dramatic enough to make a Neanderthal aware. Who knows? Maybe he got clobbered by a meteor or trampled by a Hairy Mastodon.

We don't see much of Hic these days; people scare him and he's always pulling back from the edge of civilization. We used to wonder how he was going to adapt to the population explosion but the space explosion solved that. He's probably homesteading in a crater on Mars, Mother of Men; a Moleman can live on anything except nothing. Pepys, who keeps track of all of us, like Celebrity Service, claims that

Hic was spotted once, mousing around the snows of the Himalayas, and he swears that Hic started the legend of the Abominable Snowman.

I use the word “charge” advisedly when I try to explain our immortality. They call it “nerve-firing” nowadays. As near as I’ve researched, we all underwent identical traumas which destroyed or discharged the lethal secretions that are the crux of old age and death. If your cells accumulate lethal secretions you’re not forever for this world, and all creatures have been endowed with this metabolic suicide. Maybe that’s nature’s way of wiping the slate clean and trying again. I’m intensely anthropomorphic and I can see nature getting disgusted and closing the show on the road.

But our Group has proven that death doesn’t have to be inevitable. Of course we did it the hard way. Each of us knew we were going to die and received a psychogalvanic shock that wiped out our lethal cell products and turned us into Molecular Men; Molemen for short. I’ll explain that later. It’s a sort of updating of Cuvier’s “Catastrophism” theory of evolution. In case you’ve forgotten, he argued that periodic catastrophes destroyed all life and God started it all over again on a higher level. He was wrong about the God bit, of course, but catastrophes do alter creatures.

As described in each case (with the exception of Hic-Haec-Hoc, who can’t describe anything) the circumstances were almost identical. We were trapped in some natural or man-made catastrophe that gave us no chance of survival; we were aware of it; a psychogalvanic charge ripped through us as we toppled into extinction; then some miracle aborted the death and so here the Group is forever. The odds against this sort of freak are fantastic, but the Greek Syndicate says that even the longest odds are bound to come in sooner or later. The Greek ought to know. He’s been a

professional gambler ever since Aristotle kicked him out of the Peripatetic School in Athens.

Jacy often describes the wild surprise of death that shocked through him on the cross when he finally realized that he was not going to be rescued by the U.S. Marines. He wonders why the same thing didn't happen to the two thieves who were busted along with him on Golgotha. I keep telling him, "Because they weren't epileptics, Jacy," and he keeps answering, "Oh, hush. You're obsessed with that epileptic delusion, Guig. I wish you'd take a lifetime off and learn to respect the mysteries of God."

He may be right. I *am* obsessed with the belief that our Group is epileptic-prone and that there's an historic linkage between epilepsy and the unique. I suffer from it myself, and when that aura hits me I can encompass the universe. That's why we scream and spasm; it's too magnificent for the microcosm to endure. I've trained myself to recognize the epileptic type and every time I spot one I try to recruit him (or her) for the Group by killing them horribly, which is why they call me Grand Guignol. Bathsheba always sends me a Christmas card with a picture of an Iron Maiden.

That's not fair. I torture and kill from the best of motives, and if I describe my own experience with death you may understand. Back in 1883 I was an export factor, it says here, on Krakatoa, a volcanic island in the Sunda Straight. Krakatoa was listed officially as uninhabited and that was the swindle. I'd been established there secretly by a San Francisco firm in an attempt to muscle in on the Dutch trading monopoly. Did they say "muscle" back then? Wait a minute; I'll ask my goddamn diary.

TERMINAL. READY?

READY. ENTER PROGRAM NUMBER.

001
SLANG PROGRAM HAS BEEN LOADED.
LOC. + NAME. START COUNT 2000 N.P
SLANG HAS FINISHED RUN.
MCS, PRINT. W.H. END.
NO.

So all right, they didn't say "muscle" back then, and happy birthday to IBM.

Now only an idiot would have taken the job, but I was a twenty-year-old kid intoxicated by the Discovery Mystique and mad to make a name for myself. Headline: NED CURZON DISCOVERS NORTH POLE!!! Like it was missing. Or, NED CURZON, THE AFRICAN EXPLORER. "Dr. Livingstone, I presume?" Only M'bantu says Stanley never said that, and I take M'bantu's word; he was there with a bindle on his head. Bindle? Bundle? McBee was there with a crate of four-buckle arctics on his head.

I was alone on the island in a bamboo warehouse with nothing but a terrier for company, but the locals sailed over to trade. They asked for the damndest things and offered me the damndest things, including their women, who would bounce into bed for a gill of trade whiskey. Ah! Those fabulous tropical beauties immortalized by Stanley! Not Sir Henry Morton Stanley of Africa; Darryl F. Stanley of Hollywood. Their skins were crocodiled with ceremonial scars and they cackled when you balled them, displaying teeth blackened by betel nut. Bring back Dorothy Lamour.

The natives knew that Krakatoa's Mt. Rakata was an active volcano, but it was so small, compared to the boss jobs on Java and Sumatra, that it never prevented them from visiting. Rakata would complain and steam up pumice

occasionally but you got used to it. There were earthquake grumbles now and then, so slight that I could hardly distinguish them from the pounding of the surf. Even my idiot dog didn't have the sense to be alarmed. You know, the dumb friend barking to give warning of the unseen menace.

The big blowup came on August 26 and I did receive a rather odd warning. The day before, old Markoloua sailed over with his young men and women and a boatload of *bêche-de-mer*, which I loathe, but the Inscrutables love. They cook with 'em. The locals were all chattering excitedly about fish. When I asked Markoloua what the fuss was, he told me that there were devils in the deep blue sea; when they landed on Krakatoa they were chased by great shoals of fish. I laughed at this but he led me to the beach and pointed. By God, he was telling the truth. The shore was littered with fish, gasping and flopping, and every comber brought in hundreds more, all of them bursting out of the water as though they were pursued by the devil.

Many years later I discussed this phenomenon with a vulcanologist at the Mt. Etna station. He explained that the heat building up at the base of Rakata must have spread across the ocean floor and raised the temperature so high that the fish were driven onto the land in their attempts to escape. That was much later. At the time I thought it was some sort of pollution.

Markoloua left, having traded the *bêche-de-mer* for ten (10) tin mirrors. Next morning the first blowups came, four of them in succession, and it was the ending of the world. I didn't hear the noise, it was too loud to hear, I felt it, an accoustical battering that made me scream. The entire north end of the island went up in a mushroom of lava. The main cone of Rakata was split down the middle, exposing the

central shaft. The sea poured into the molten interior, was instantly transformed into live steam, and blew up in another series of explosions that crumbled the rest of the cone.

I was hammered by the noise, blinded by the smoke, suffocated by the livid vapors, slammed out of my senses, and there came that tidal wave of lava creeping toward me like a swarm of red-hot caterpillars. I could feel nothing but the wild incredulity of death shocking through my body. I *knew*. I knew what nobody believes until the extreme moment. I knew I was dead. And so I died.

Actually it was the vibrations of the explosions that produced the miracle. They burst the withes that bound the bamboo walls of my warehouse and twisted the stems into a birdcage, a logjam with myself inside incorporated with wooden debris; and then the quakes must have blasted me out into the ocean. I was not aware of it at the time; I only realized it later when I was reborn, floating in a caul of bamboo on the surface of the sea.

Krakatoa was gone. Everything was gone. There were new reefs thrusting up, black and stinking of sea bottom. There were black clouds of volcanic smoke and dust rumbling with thunder and lightning. I was in shock for five days, which might have been five eternities, until I was picked up by a Dutch freighter. They were sore as hell about the disaster, which had delayed them by three days and acted as though it were all my fault, like I'd been playing with matches. That's the history of my death and the miracle that saved me. That's what turned me into a Molecular Man.

Now the hell of it is that it's pretty tough to arrange a volcano or a Black Death or a Hairy Mastodon when you want to recruit a man into immortality, and it's even tougher staging a miraculous save from the catastrophe. I'm pretty good at cruel killing but when it comes to the rescue

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