

SCIENCE FICTION • FANTASY

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Herein a moment in the life of Moderan, where the people have learned how not to live with themselves . . .

A GLANCE AT THE PAST

DAVID R. BUNCH

Illustrated by DAN ADKINS

BECAUSE THEY had much leisure time in automatic New Processes Country, and also because the Rollgos, those fast expensive conveyor roads of the kingdom, would certainly have been inadequate for such a pilgrimage, the people came walking. Under the red-brown vapor shield of hot July they swept across the yards and fields, bunched, like locusts going toward wheat in the old days. Tap-a-tap tarrump-tarrump tap-a-tap they came on their metaled feet, many all together, until the sound of metal striking plastic was a steady and ominous roar.

Word had spread fast that morning in mid-July. In less than two hours everyone knew of the curious thing's arrival and shortly thereafter almost everyone was in headlong movement toward it. At the request of the Green Council, airmen from Olderan had flown it in during the very early hours of morning, down a transglobal air corridor under cover of darkness, to the very gates of the Building of Ancient Customs. They had moved it carefully in its cushioned case, from the controlled climate of the ship from Olderan. And they established it, in its specially prepared glass display ball, on a black plastic dais in the Building of Ancient Customs. Then solemnly the

Green Council pushed the buttons that advertised the display on all the picture walls in the land, and they declared a week in the queer thing's honor.

Across the yards and fields the hordes of the curious swept on, in their peculiar iron-on-plastic roar, toward the doors of the Building of Ancient Customs. And Conversations were heard among the mighty metaled folk of New Processes Country. One sturdy lady of 'replacements' that were mostly of the fairly old alloy known as iron-x was heard to remark to a younger thing of the new gold-seal alloys that according to the stories handed down and handed down her great-great-great-grandfather's father had been possessed of a little monster gadget much like this they were going to see, and had made constant good use of it too.

"As recently as that! Imagine!" she honked and squawked out of her iron throat that had been worked in iron-x against cancer long ago. She exhibited that universal good feeling common to women everywhere when they are able to impart some fairly scandalous bit of information to another woman.

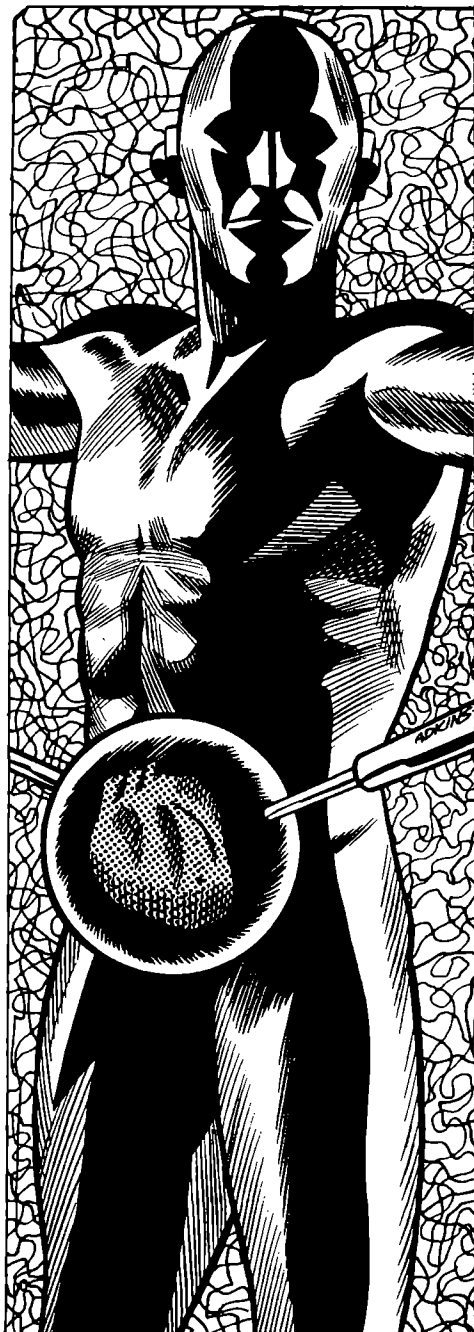
"As far back as we've cared to search," the other replied, all in haughty good fellowship, "we're clean as a flame on that score. But of course I want to see this

thing anyway. You know some of my ancestors, 'way 'way back, in the space age probably, must have had these things, must have depended on them. *How awful!!*"

"Well, they say my ancestor got awfully good service out of his, took it wherever he wanted to go, employed it all the time," iron-x lady remarked in a gesture at ancient family loyalty. "But I guess he would have had it 'replaced' as everyone else was doing then, except he was out of the country so much of the time, on space service, to the Million Saucer Battles on Mars, and that awful purple thing on Venus, you know, where they stopped our boys with sheets of purple dust. Just never had time for the change-over, it seemed. And 'tis said he was heard to remark once that because of the things he'd seen, at battles and places, I guess—probably that awful purple thing on Venus, especially—he didn't want to live forever anyway. Can you imagine anyone saying a thing like that?"

The other one couldn't imagine it and said so with appropriate honking and ticking and clucking from her gold-seal larynx.

"But of course that was before people had things like we do here in New Processes Country," the iron-x one kept on, bent still on explaining things for her ancestor. "Imagine not having beautiful and sanitary plastic yards with color-change and a live-alone house-ball for each person to dwell in. Think if you can back to a time before the time of universal daisies, when it wasn't possible to bloom a whole metal garden through the yard holes just at the flick of a button. My ancestor probably never even saw one of the beautiful mechanical flowers, such as we take for granted today. And he didn't have the tin mandolin men nor even one



of the great plastic trios that I can have in my music grotto tonight just at the whim of a beam. The air he breathed was not conditioned unless he was in a room, and then, nine times out of ten, it wasn't flavored. He didn't know the glories of the shape men with their nightly panoramas, nor the color throwers we find so diversionary. He didn't have the different colored vapor shield each month that makes such a pretty world for us. For him it was always blue sky and that awful yellow sun, unless he had clouds, and then gray. *Ugh!* He didn't even have a sex machine! Just think how much we have that he didn't have, and maybe you'll understand."

"Oh, yes," the other agreed, wishing to mollify her companion, "and at the time your ancestor lived no one thought much about living forever anyway. Probably. 'Replacements' were just then getting well started, I imagine. Why, I'll bet at that time no one in the whole world could have claimed for more than fifty percent 'replacement.' And if he did, it would probably just have been some rebuilt battle victim, or a haphazardly put back together auto-wreck case. And not scientific. But look at you and me. You're about up to ninety, aren't you? And scientific!"

"Ninety-one," her companion amended. "And with these new quick-seal alloys that fuse with the flesh so easily I may be able to go higher. But even now, with only nine percent of me flesh-strip and human blood, I don't figure there's much chance I'll die."

"I should hope not," the other agreed. "Of course I'm ninety-two and one-half myself, and I'm starting new treatments tomorrow!"

Tap-a-tap tarrump-tarrump tap-a-tump they walked on without talking more, toward the Building of Ancient

Customs, part of a horde that swept on all day until very late in the afternoon the vanguard came to the outer gates of the building. Officers from the Society for the Better Understanding of Ancient Customs allowed them to go in single file through an entrance gate that was hung heavily with ersatz moss and tin ivy. They passed on into a room where a small round shell of clearest glass rested on an ancient black velvet cover. And each of the curious folk of New Processes Country was allowed to stare a few seconds at the glass ball and its queer occupant that, in a carefully controlled climate, was alive and slaving diligently away at a task that was unreal now, real to it maybe over a hundred years ago. Next week or so the Society for the Better Understanding of Ancient Customs would write the letter of thanks and appreciation for the loan of the old-fashioned display. And a generous check would be enclosed for Oleran, that little mountain-and-sea-locked country whose devout queer people clung to ways of flesh and the past.

As they stood side by side watching the quaint outmoded little battler staunchly pound away for their amusement, the iron-x lady was heard to read from a pamphlet describing the unique display: "Today, after viewing this monstrosity, you and I must feel great pity for all our ancient ancestors. It was their poor fortune to be born so long ago and inhabit a world where such a thing as this was everyone's common danger, not the clowning mutant exception, but the common sober rule. No wonder they were wavery and unsure, mushy and vulnerable, scared half to death most of the time and prone to be soft-headed. Let us forgive them, the weak-hearted. Think of the lurking terrors, the anxieties, the insecurities, the *deaths!* they had to endure—when the little monster decided

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 86)

to have a *bad* day."

"Yes!" gasped her gold-seal companion.

Then, in a great outpouring of good feeling and good fellowship, and poignantly aware of their common bond of good luck, they decided, right there in the late afternoon, to recite the Morning

Pledge, the early morning salute, a thing usually reserved for day-start. Together they intoned: "From this day forward, and forever, I truly thank that great iron and plastic idol we have raised in our own image and set to circle our world always on a red and yellow satellite—I thank him truly for my iron and plastic—my everlasting—*heart!*" —David R. Bunch