

Fantasy and Science Fiction

MARCH *Including Venture Science Fiction*

Seven Day's Wonder	EDWARD WELLEN	3
The Day After Saturation	D. K. FINDLAY	18
The Sky of Space (<i>verse</i>)	KAREN ANDERSON	24
The Question	LARRY M. HARRIS and DONALD E. WESTLAKE	25
The Importance of Being Important	CALVIN W. DEMMON	28
<i>Books</i>	AVRAM DAVIDSON	31
Ferdinand Feghoot: LX	GRENDAL BRIARTON	36
The Journey of Ten Thousand Miles	WILL MOHLER	37
Captain Honario Harpplayer, R. N.	HARRY HARRISON	53
Game For Motel Room	FRITZ LEIBER	63
<i>Science: You, Too, Can Speak Gaelic</i>	ISAAC ASIMOV	72
Zack With His Scar	SYDNEY VAN SCYOC	82
Hunter, Come Home (<i>novelet</i>)	RICHARD MCKENNA	91
<i>In this issue . . . Coming next month</i>		17
<i>Editorial</i>		127
<i>F&SF Marketplace</i>		129
<i>Cover by Emsb (illustrating "Hunter, Come Home")</i>		

The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, Volume 24, No. 3, Whole No. 142, Mar. 1963. Published monthly by Mercury Press, Inc., at 40¢ a copy. Annual subscription \$4.50 in U. S. and Possessions, \$5.00 in Canada and the Pan American Union; \$5.50 in all other countries. Publication office, 10 Ferry Street, Concord, N. H. Editorial and general mail should be sent to 347 East 53rd St., New York 22, N. Y. Second Class postage paid at Concord, N. H. Printed in U. S. A. © 1963 by Mercury Press, Inc. All rights, including translations into other languages, reserved. Submissions must be accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelopes; the Publisher assumes no responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts.

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We once saw, honest-Injun, a motel on the outskirts of Long Beach (Cal.), which bore in big letters the neon-lit legend, Morally Clean. We did not stop to see if its linens were, too . . . Historians, some day, will devote as much attention to motels as they now do to coaching-inns and caravanserais, and no doubt will see them as equally rich in glamor and romance. Perhaps it will even be possible to pin-point the actual court where our courtly Mr. Leiber has laid the scene of this tale of noncourtly love, madness, sanity, and hate. And then again, perhaps not.

GAME FOR MOTEL ROOM

by Fritz Leiber

SONYA MOVED AROUND THE warm, deeply carpeted motel room in the first gray trickle of dawn as if to demonstrate how endlessly beautiful a body can be if its owner will only let it. Even the body of a woman in, well, perhaps, her forties, Burton judged, smiling at himself in lazy reproof for having thought that grudging word "even." It occurred to him that bodies do not automatically grow less beautiful with age, but that a lot of bodies are neglected, abused and even hated by their owners: women in particular are apt to grow contemptuous and ashamed of their flesh, and this always shows. They start thinking old and ugly and pretty soon they

look it. Like a car, a body needs tender constant care, regular tune-ups, an occasional small repair and above all it needs to be intimately loved by its owner and from time to time by an admiring second party, and then it never loses beauty and dignity, even when it corrupts in the end and dies.

Oh, the dawn's a cold hour for philosophy, Burton told himself, and somehow philosophy always gets around to cold topics, just as love-making and all the rest of the best of life make one remember death and even worse things. His lean arm snaked out to a bedside table, came back with a cigarette and an empty folder of matches.

Sonya noticed. She rummaged in her pale ivory traveling case and tossed him a black, pear-shaped lighter. Burton caught the thing, lit his cigarette, and then studied it. It seemed to be made of black ivory and shaped rather like the grip of a revolver, while the striking mechanism was of blued steel. The effect was sinister.

"Like it?" Sonya asked from across the room.

"Frankly, no. Doesn't suit you."

"You show good taste—or sound instinct. It's a vacation present from my husband."

"He has bad taste? But he married you."

"He has bad everything. Hush, Baby."

Burton didn't mind. Not talking let him concentrate on watching Sonya. Slim and crop-haired, she looked as trimly beautiful as her classic cream-colored, hard-topped Italian sportscar, in which she had driven him to this cosy hideaway from the bar where they'd picked each other up. Her movements now, stooping to retrieve a smoke-blue stocking and trail it across a chair, momentarily teasing apart two ribs in the upward-slanting Venetian blinds to peer at the cold gray world outside, executing a fraction of a dance figure, stopping to smile at emptiness . . . these movements added up to nothing but the rhythms and symbolisms of a dream, yet it

was the sort of dream in which actor and onlooker might float forever. In the morning twilight she looked now like a schoolgirl, now like a witch, now like an age-outwitting ballerina out for her twenty-fifth season but still in every way the *premiere danseuse*. As she moved she hummed in a deep contralto voice a tune that Burton didn't recognize, and as she hummed the dim air in front of her lower face seemed to change color very faintly, the deep purples and blues and browns matching the tones of the melody. Pure illusion, Burton was sure, like that which some hashish-eaters and weed-smokers experience during their ecstasy when they hear words as colors, but most enjoyable.

To exercise his mind, now that his body had had its fill and while his eyes were satisfyingly occupied, Burton began to set in order the reasons why a mature lover is preferable to one within yoo-hooing distance of twenty in either direction. Reason One: she does quite as much of the approach work as you do. Sonya had been both heartwarming and straightforward and remarkably intuitive at the bar last night. Reason Two: she is generally well-equipped for adventure. Sonya had provided both sportscar and motel room. Reason Three: she does not go into an emotional tailspin after the act of love even if her

thoughts trend toward death then, like yours do. Sonya seemed both lovely and sensible—the sort of woman it was good to think of getting married to and having children by.

Sonya turned to him with a smile, saying in her husky voice that still had a trace of the hum in it, “Sorry, Baby, but it’s quite impossible. Especially your second notion.”

“Did you really read my mind?” Burton demanded. “Why couldn’t we have children?”

Sonya’s smile deepened. She said, “I think I will take a little chance and tell you why.” She came over and sat on the bed beside him and bent down and kissed him on the forehead.

“That was nice,” Burton said lazily. “Did it mean something special?”

She nodded gravely. “It was to make you forget everything I’m going to tell you.”

“How—if I’m to understand what you tell?” he asked.

“After a while I will kiss you again on the forehead and then you will forget everything I have told you in between. Or if you’re very good, I’ll kiss you on the nose and then you’ll remember—but be unable to tell anyone else.”

“If you say so,” Burton smiled. “But what is it you’re going to tell me?”

“Oh,” she said, “just that I’m from another planet in a distant

star cluster. I belong to a totally different species. We could no more start a child than a Chihuahua and a cat or a giraffe and a rhinoceros. Unlike the mare and the donkey we could not even get a cute little sterile mule with glossy fur and blue bows on his ears.”

Burton grinned. He had just thought of Reason Four: a really grown-up lover plays the most delightfully childish nonsense games.

“Go on,” he said.

“Well,” she said, “superficially of course I’m very like an Earth woman. I have two arms and two legs and *this* and *these* . . .”

“For which I am eternally grateful,” he said.

“You like them, eh?”

“Oh yes—especially *these*.”

“Well, watch out—they don’t even give milk, they’re used in esping. You see, inside I’m very different,” she said. “My mind is different too. It can do mathematics faster and better than one of your electric calculating machines—”

“What’s two and two?” Burton wanted to know.

“Twenty-two,” she told him, “and also one hundred in the binary system and eleven in the trinary and four in the duodecimal. I have perfect recall—I can remember every least thing I’ve ever done and every word of every book I’ve leafed through. I can

read unshielded minds—in fact anything up to triple shielding—and hum in colors. I can direct my body heat so that I never really need clothes to keep me warm at temperatures above freezing. I can walk on water if I concentrate, and even fly—though I don't do it here because it would make me conspicuous.”

“Especially at the present moment,” Burton agreed, “though it would be a grand sight. Why *are* you here, by the way, and not behaving yourself on your home planet?”

“I'm on vacation,” she grinned. “Oh yes, we use your rather primitive planet for vacations—like you do Africa and the Canadian forests. A little machine teaches us during one night's sleep several of your languages and implants in our brains the necessary background information. My husband surprised me by giving me the money for this vacation—same time he gave me the lighter. Usually he's very stingy. But perhaps he had some little plot—an affair with his chief nuclear chemist, I'd guess—of his own in mind and wanted me out of the way. I can't be sure though, because he always keeps his mind quadruple-shielded, even from me.”

“So you have husbands on your planet,” Burton observed.

“Yes indeed! Very jealous and possessive ones, too, so watch your step, Baby. Yes, although my plan-

et is much more advanced than yours we still have husbands and wives and a very stuffy system of monogamy—*that* seems to go on forever and everywhere—oh yes, and on my planet we have death and taxes and life insurance and wars and all the rest of the universal idiocy!”

She stopped suddenly. “I don't want to talk about that any more,” she said. “Or about my husband. Let's talk about you. Let's play truths, deep-down truths. What's the thing you're most afraid of in the whole world?”

Burton chuckled—and then frowned. “You really want me to give you the honest answer?” he asked.

“Of course,” she said. “It's the first rule of the game.”

“Well,” he said, “I'm most afraid of something going wrong with my brain. *Growing* wrong, really. Having a brain tumor. That's it.” He had become rather pale.

“Oh Poor Baby,” Sonya said. “Just you wait a minute.”

Still uneasy from his confession, Burton started nervously to pick up Sonya's black lighter, but its black pistol-look repelled him.

Sonya came bustling back with something else in her right hand. “Sit up,” she said, putting her left arm around him. “No, none of *that*—this is serious. Pretend I'm a very proper lady doctor who forgot to get dressed.”

Burton could see her slim back and his own face over her right shoulder in the wide mirror of the dresser. She slipped her right hand and the small object it held behind his head. There was a click.

"No," said Sonya cheerily. "I can't see a sign of anything wrong in your brain or likely to grow wrong. It's as healthy as an infant's. *What's the matter, Baby?*"

Burton was shaking. "Look," he gasped reproachfully, "it's wonderful to play nonsense games, but when you use magic tricks or hypnotism to back them up, that's cheating."

"What do you mean?"

"When you clicked that thing," he said with difficulty, "I saw my head turn for a moment into a pinkish skull and then into just a pulsing blob with folds in it."

"Oh, I'd forgotten the mirror," she said, glancing over her shoulder. "But you were really just imagining things. Or having a mild optical spasm and seeing colors."

"No," she added as he reached out a hand, "I won't let you see my little XYZ-ray machine." She tossed it across the room into her traveling case. "It would spoil our nonsense game."

As his breathing and thoughts quieted, Burton decided she was possibly right—or at least that he'd best pretend she was right. It was safest and sanest to think of

what he'd glimpsed in the mirror as an illusion, like the faint colors he'd fancied forming in front of her humming lips. Perhaps Sonya had an effect on him like hashish or some super-marijuana—a plausible enough idea considering how much more powerful drug a beautiful woman is than any opiate or resin. Nevertheless—

"All right, Sonya," he said, "what's *your* deepest fear?"

She frowned. "I don't want to tell you."

"I stuck to the rules."

"Very well," she nodded, "it's that my husband will go crazy and kill me. That's a much more dreadful fear on my planet than yours, because we've conquered all diseases and we each of us can live forever (though it's customary to disintegrate after forty to fifty thousand years) and we each of us have tremendous physical and mental powers—so that the mere thought of any genuine insanity is dreadfully shocking. Insanity is so nearly unknown to us that even our advanced intuition doesn't work on it—and what is unknown is always most frightening. By insanity I don't mean minor irrationalities. We have those, all right—my husband for instance, is bugged on the number 33, he won't begin any important venture except on the thirty-third day of the month—and me, I have a weakness for black-haired babies from primitive planets."

"Hey, wait a minute," Burton objected, "you said the thirty-third day of the month."

"On my planet the months are longer. Nights too. You'd love them—more time for demonstrating affection and empathy."

Burton looked at her broodingly. "You play this nonsense game pretty seriously," he said. "Like you'd read nothing but science fiction all your life."

Sonya shrugged her lovely shoulders. "Maybe there's more in science fiction than you realize. But now we've had enough to that game. Come on, Black-Haired Baby, let's play—"

"Wait a minute," Burton said sharply. She drew back, making a sulky mouth at him. He made his own grim, or perhaps his half-emerged thoughts did that for him.

"So you've got a husband on your planet," he said, "and he's got tremendous powers and you're deathly afraid he'll go crazy and try to kill you. And now he does an out-of-character thing by giving you vacation money and—"

"Oh yes!" she interrupted agitatedly, "and he's such a dreadful mixed-up superman and he always keeps up that permissible but uncustomary quadruple shield and he looks at me with such a secret gloating viciousness when we're alone that I'm choke-full of fear day and night and I've wished and wished I could really get some-

thing on him so that I could run to an officer of public safety and have the maniac put away, but I can't, I can't, he never makes a slip, and I begin to feel I'm going crazy—I, with my supremely trained and guarded mind—and I just *have* to get away to vacation planets and forget him in loving someone else. Come on, Baby, let's—"

"*Wait a minute!*" Burton commanded. "You say you've insurance on your planet. Are you insured for much?"

"A very great deal. Perfect health and a life-expectancy of fifty thousand years makes the premiums cheap."

"And your husband is the beneficiary?"

"Yes, he is. Come on, Burton, let's not talk about him. Let's—"

"No!" Burton said, pushing her back. "Sonya, what does your husband do? What's his work?"

Sonya shrugged. "He manages a bomb factory," she said listlessly and rapidly. "I work there too. I told you we had wars—they're between the league our planet belongs to and another star cluster. You've just started to discover the super-bombs on Earth—the fission bomb, the fusion bomb. They're clumsy oversize toys. The bombs my husband's factory manufactures can each of them destroy a planet. They're really fuses for starting the matter of the planet disintegrating spontaneously so that it

flashes into a little star. Yet the bombs are so tiny you can hold one in your hand. In fact, this cigarette lighter is an exact model of one of them. The models were for Cosmos Day presents to top officials. My husband gave me his along with the vacation money. Burton, reach me one of your foul Earth cigarettes, will you? If you're going to refuse the other excitements, I've got to have something."

Burton automatically shook some cigarettes from his pack. "Tell me one more thing, Sonya," he rapped out. "You say you have a perfect memory. How many times have you struck that cigarette lighter since your husband gave it to you?"

"Thirty-one times," she answered promptly. "Counting the one time you used it."

She flicked it on and touched the tiny blue flame to her cigarette, inhaled deeply, then let the tiny snuffer snap down the flame. Twin plumes of faint smoke wreathed from her nostrils. "Thirty-two now." She held the black pear-shaped object towards him, her thumb on the knurled steel-blue trigger. "Shall I give you a light?"

"NO!" Burton shouted. "Sonya, as you value your life and mine—and the lives of three billion other primitives—don't work that lighter again. Put it down."

"All right, all right, Baby," she

said smiling nervously and dropping the black thing on the white sheet. "Why's Baby so excited?"

"Sonya," Burton said, "Maybe I'm crazy, or maybe you *are* only playing a nonsense game backed up with hypnotism—but . . ."

Sonya stopped smiling. "What is it, Baby?"

Burton said, "If you really do come from another planet where there is almost no insanity, homicidal or otherwise, what I'm going to tell you will be news. Sonya, we've just lately had several murders on Earth where a man plants a time-bomb on a big commercial airplane to explode it in the air and kill all its passengers and crew just to do away with one single person—generally for the sake of collecting a big life-insurance policy. Now if an Earth-murderer could be cold-blooded or mad enough to do that, why mightn't a super-murderer—"

"Oh no," Sonya said slowly, "not blow up a whole planet to get rid of just one person—" She started to tremble.

"Why not?" Burton demanded. "Your husband is crazy, only you can't prove it. He hates you. He stands to collect a fortune if you die in an accident—such as a primitive vacation planet exploding. He presents you with money for a vacation on such a planet and at the same time he gives you a cigarette lighter that is an exact model of—"

"I can't believe it," Sonya said very faintly, still shaking, her eyes far away. "Not a whole planet . . ."

"But that's the sort of thing insanity can be, Sonya. What's more, you can check it," Burton rapped out flatly. "Use that XYZ-ray gadget of yours to look through the lighter."

"But he *couldn't*," Sonya murmured, her eyes still far away. "Not even *he* could . . ."

"Look through the lighter," Burton repeated.

Sonya picked up the black thing by its base and carried it over to her traveling case.

"Remember not to flick it," Burton warned her sharply. "You'd told me he was bugged on the number thirty-three, and I imagine that would be about the right number to allow to make sure you were settled on your vacation planet before anything happened."

He saw the shiver travel down her back as he said that and suddenly Burton was shaking so much himself he couldn't possibly have moved. Sonya's hands were on the other side of her body from him, busy above her traveling case. There was a click and her pinkish skeleton showed through her. It was not quite the same as the skeleton of an Earth human—there were *two* long bones in the upper arms and upper legs, fewer ribs, but what looked like *two* tiny skulls in the chest.

She turned around, not looking at him.

"*You were right*," she said.

She said, "*Now I've got the evidence to put my husband away for ever! I can't wait!*"

She whirled into action, snatching articles of clothing from the floor, chairs and dresser, whipping them into her traveling case. The whole frantic little dance took less than ten seconds. Her hand was on the outside door before she paused.

She looked at Burton. She put down her traveling case and came over to the bed and sat down beside him.

"Poor Baby," she said. "I'm going to have to wipe out your memory and yet you were so very clever—I really mean that, Burton."

He wanted to object, but he felt paralyzed. She put her arms around him and moved her lips towards his forehead. Suddenly she said, "No, I can't do that. There's got to be some reward for you."

She bent her head and kissed him pertly on the nose. Then she disengaged herself, hurried to her bag, picked it up, and opened the door.

"Besides," she called back. "I'd hate you to forget any part of me."

"Hey," Burton yelled, coming to life, "You can't go out like that!"

"Why not?" she demanded.

"Because you haven't a stitch of clothes on!"

"On my planet we don't wear them!"

The door slammed behind her. Burton sprang out of bed and threw it open again.

He was just in time to see the sportscar take off—straight up.

Burton stood in the open door for half a minute, stark naked himself, looking around at the unexploded Earth. He started to say aloud, "Gosh, I didn't even get the name of her planet," but his lips were sealed.

