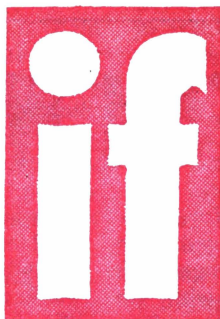


# worlds of



MARCH 1963  
All Stories New

# science fiction

Vol. 13, Number 1

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*Cover by Virgil Finlay from The Time Tombs*

*Next issue (May) on Sale March 14th*

IF published bi-monthly by Digest Productions Corporation, Robert M. Guinn, President, Vol. 13, No. 1, Main Office: 421 Hudson Street, New York 14, New York. 40c per copy. Subscriptions 12 issues \$3.60 in the United States, Canada, Mexico, South and Central America and U. S. possessions, elsewhere \$4.60. Second-class postage paid at New York, New York, and at additional mailing offices. Copyright by Digest Productions Corporation, 1963. All rights including translations reserved. All material submitted must be accompanied by self-addressed stamped envelopes. The publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited material. All stories printed in this magazine are fiction, and any similarity between characters and actual persons is coincidental. Printed in the U. S. A. by the Guinn Company, Inc., New York 14, N. Y.

# I, EXECUTIONER

BY TED WHITE AND TERRY CARR

**I am the executioner of the  
law, terrible in my majesty.  
The doomed felon is—myself!**

**I** always shook when I came out of the Arena, but this time the tension wrapped my stomach in painful knots and salty perspiration stung my neck where I had shaved only a little over an hour earlier. And despite the heavy knot in my stomach, I felt strangely empty.

I had never been able to sort out my reactions to an Execution. The atmosphere of careful boredom, the strictly business-as-usual air failed to dull my senses as it did for the others. I could always *taste* the ozone

in the air, mixed with the taste of fear—whether mine, or that of the Condemned, I never knew. My nostrils always gave an involuntary twitch at the confined odors and I felt an almost claustrophobic fear at being packed into the Arena with the other nine hundred ninety-nine Citizens on Execution Duty.

I had been expecting my notice for several months before it finally came. I hadn't served Execution Duty for nearly two years. Usually it had figured out to every fourteen

months or so on rotation, so I'd been ready for it. A little apprehensive—I always am—but ready.

At 9:00 in the morning, still only half awake (I'd purposely slept until the last minute), vaguely trying to remember the dream I'd had, I waited in front of the Arena for the ordeal to begin. The dream had been something about a knife, an operation. But I couldn't remember whether I'd been the doctor or the patient.

Our times of arrival had been staggered in our notices, so that a long queue wouldn't tie up traffic, but as usual the checkers were slow, and we were backed up a bit.

I didn't like waiting. Somehow I've always felt more exposed on the streets, although the brain-scanners must be more plentiful in an Arena than almost anywhere else. It's only logical that they should be. The scanners are set up to detect unusual patterns of stress in our brain waves as we pass close to them, and thus to pick out as quickly as possible those with incipient or developing neuroses or psychoses—the potential deviates. And where else would such an aberration be as likely to come out as in the Arena?

I had moved to the front of the short line. I flashed my notification of duty to the checker, and was waved on in. I found my proper seat on the aisle in the "T" section. It was a relief to sink into its plush depths and look the Arena over.

Once this had been a first-run Broadway theater—first a place

where great plays were shown, and then later the more degenerate motion pictures. Those had been times of vicarious escape from reality—times when the populace ruled, and yet the masses hid their eyes from the world. Many things had changed since then, with the coming of regulated sanity and the achievement of world peace. Gone now were the black arts of forgetfulness, those media which practiced the enticement of the Citizen into irresponsible escape. Now this crowded theater was only a reminder. And a place of execution for those who would have sought escape here.

Perhaps thirty people were sitting on the floor of the Arena, where once there had been a stage. They sat quietly in chairs not so different from mine, strapped for the moment into a kind of passive conformity. I looked at them with interest. Strangeness has as much attraction as the familiar at times. As usual, most of them were young—from about ten to the early twenties. But at whatever age, they were rebels. They were potential enemies of society. Criminals. Probably some of them hadn't yet realized it. But they were on the verge of anti-social insanity, and the brain-scanners had singled them out.

They were so young . . . How long does it take a boy to become neurotic, psychotic, dangerous?

A flurry of movement at the gates caught my eye. Apparently at least one of them was a full-fledged Reb-

el. He struggled furiously, and the three proctors were having an awkward time carrying him into the Arena without hurting him.

Then, as they moved into the floodlights, I saw with a faint shock that it was a girl.

She was dressed in man's clothing, but betrayed by her neurotic and unsanitary long hair.

Long, blonde hair. For a moment I forgot where I was, and allowed myself to revel in this nearly forbidden sight. The soft waves fell halfway down her neck, disarrayed now. The floodlights shined on it, a strangely gentle mockery of sunlight. Something within me stirred, and I almost remembered . . .

Then they were strapping her into one of the chairs, carefully pulling the soft leather straps with their attached metal electrodes around her, pinioning her. One set joined her arms to the armrests, another her legs to the specially devised footrests. Her tunic was opened, and a third set was passed around her chest, the metal plate fastened just under her left breast.

And then she was alone.

I stared at her, drawn at first to her hair, and then, as my vision focused across the distance, to her eyes.

Strange eyes; light blue irises, surrounded by a ring of dark blue, and flecked with gold. They were shining. She had been crying. Her eyes seemed to melt, like a pool of clear water growing deeper; I could almost see into them, into the darkness

beneath. I was no longer aware of the chair in which I sat . . . only of her, alone before me, so close.

Her eyes widened for just an instant when she recognized me.

"Bob."

"Hello, Roscbud."

"I knew you'd be here. I knew."

"It's been a long time . . . I think I was trying to forget."

"Don't," she said. "Don't ever forget."

Sun drenched me, and I was rocked back into time.

"Hey, you pushed me!" I shouted at her.

"Yes," said a faint voice, and then, "I'm sorry," the little golden-haired girl said.

I sat up. Mother was going to be mad at me again, I knew. I wiped the seat of my pants with my hand, and then stared at the muddy hand with interest.

"Look," I said to her, and showed her my hand. When she stepped forward to look closely at it, I pushed it at her, and smeared mud onto her face. Then I laughed . . .

★ ★ ★

My laughter faded, blending with hers . . . and then . . . and then we were no longer standing separately in the sun.

It was a dark night, the air fresh and cool to my skin, and the leaves of the trees which stretched over us rustled with a faint wind.

I laughed again, a soft girlish sound that brought discomfort to the boy's face before me.

"Your mother says. Your father says. Don't you ever say anything for yourself, Bob?"

"Look, Rosalie, I'm sorry. Maybe I just don't think the way you do. My father says sex at our age is just another escape from reality. You've got to face yourself as an adult first. He—"

"Your father is a bigger nincompoop than you are!" I shouted at him. "I thought you said you loved me. I thought you had some *feelings* buried under that so-called rational mind of yours! Or does your father say you're too young to *love* somebody?"

He tried to say something, but I was right. He pressed his lips together and looked away. I was almost enjoying it now; with deliberate coolness I buttoned up my tunic, feeling the soft fibers on my skin.

"How long does it take to love somebody?" I said, but my voice was beginning to tremble. I turned away from his still figure in the night, and began the slow walk back along the path to the house. Tears stung my eyes, and spilled onto my cheeks; I started to run through the dark.

I slammed the door when I ran in, and went directly to my room. At one end of it was a small studio, where an easel was lit coldly by a fluorescent light. Almost blindly I began beating my fists on the still-wet canvas, blurring and then ripping the nearly finished portrait of a young man.

I was crying quietly when the low, calm voice stopped me on the street.

"Just a moment, Miss."

I felt the sudden skip in my heart which signaled danger, and when I turned I saw the light green uniform of a proctor in the vague street light. My eyes were still blurred with tears. I couldn't make out his face.

"I'm sorry, but I'll have to ask you a few questions."

Shielding my face from the light, I tried to make my voice calm. I hoped my homesick tears were hidden, that my cheeks wouldn't glisten in the light. I wanted very badly for him not to see I had been crying.

"Yes?"

"I'll have to know why you're out on the streets at this time of the morning," the proctor said. "There's a curfew, you know. Unless you can show cause . . ."

Oh God; I had completely forgotten the city's curfew!

"I—I'm sorry, Officer. I'm new to the city and I didn't realize . . ."

"You're transient? Where are you staying?"

"The Statler Dormitory for Women," I answered meekly.

"And why are you out at this hour, so far from the dorm? That's down near 34th Street, almost thirty blocks south."

"I know. I couldn't sleep—" His eyes narrowed at that; had I made a mistake? I plunged on: "—and I wanted to see Central Park. I didn't realize there was any harm . . ."

"I guess not this time, Miss, but

you'd better get back to your dorm. Take this pass." He scribbled a few words on a pad and then detached a slip of green paper for me. "You can take a train down to 34th Street. Now."

"I'd just as soon walk, sir."

He stared at me for a moment and then I turned and started for the nearest subway entrance.

It had been horrible, those first few days in the Dorm. I'd never dreamed that a sane society could be so . . . not cruel, but *unthinking*. Back home in Woodstock we were all supposed to be sane too, but neither Father nor Mother had ever forced any rigid rules on me. They had let me roam the woods, scuffing the dry leaves in autumn, drinking water from the creeks in my cupped hands. They hadn't objected when I was gone for hours. Usually I was just sitting on a log and staring into the sky, and what harm was there in that?

They had encouraged my painting. "It's supposed to be a sign of escapism," Dad said, "but there are a lot worse ways of escaping." He made an easel for me, and I used tubes of house-paint tint-colors and stretched canvas and burlap over frames Dad made. He even gave me a book of reproductions of the Old Masters that he'd saved.

Life in Woodstock had been pleasant for me, I realized now, even if it had often seemed lonely. I couldn't have told the proctor that I'd really woken up from a dream about Bob before I'd gone out walking.

I'd seen Bob's face so clearly, standing in the night, unable to say anything to me. Suddenly it had seemed that my voice was stopped too, and I'd woken up gasping . . .

I boarded a local train, not caring that an express would be much faster, and began the trip back to my cubicle at the Statler Dorm. If only they hadn't taken my parents . . .

★ ★ ★

I had succeeded in setting up a makeshift easel in my room at the Dorm, and was working on a painting, wearing some of Dad's old clothes, when the proctors broke in.

One of them pointed a small indicator at me, glanced at it and nodded.

"She's the one. Instability and escapism. And look at the kind of clothes she wears."

"What are you doing?" I whispered. This was how they'd taken my parents!

"You're under detention as a criminal against society. Miss," one of the proctors said. "We're all sorry."

Another one stepped forward and held out a hand to me as one might a child. "Come along now."

"No!" I backed away from them, and when they trapped me in the corner I kicked and screamed at them. "Leave me alone, leave me alone! You're killers!" One of them grabbed me and held me around my waist, my arms pinned to my sides.

"We're not killers, Miss," he said, and his voice was incredibly calm. "We have nothing to do with it."

I twisted free and struck at him, tearing skin from his face with my nails. "*Weren't my parents enough?*"

One of them pointed another device at me, and I blacked out.

When I came to, I was being carried by three proctors through a door and down a hall. My head was fuzzy and throbbing. I caught a glimpse of a stenciled sign in the corridor, lettered nearly over an arrow pointing in the direction we were going. The words leaped out at me: *Execution Arena Floor.*

One of the proctors saw that I was conscious and looked down at me pleasantly. "No sense struggling now," he said. "It'll be over soon."

I stared back at him for a moment, not understanding. But then the kindness in his face became clear. He pitied me! The proctors were carrying me as gently as possible, as though I were a dog with a broken leg.

I felt incredibly sad, and so tired that I was sure I must suddenly weigh twice as much. But they carried me through the door and out onto the floor of the Arena, and there were a thousand people up in the dark waiting for me. There were floodlights on the chairs where the others of the Condemned were strapped. They sat quietly, dully, as though they were the Executioners and the people above were waiting for them to press the buttons.

But it was insane! How could they take it so calmly—were they dead already? Did they *want* to die?

Or was I really insane? Where *was* the sanity in this Arena?

I couldn't lie still while they carried me to that chair. I was frightened. I was terrified! They were all so silent, so calm, so kindly. As though nothing at all were happening—nothing at all!

I struggled, trying to fight my way free. I kicked and screamed; I had to make some noise in that black silence. But they held me, and strapped me into the chair. And still there was no sound in the Arena.

I felt a shock, a tension, and I looked up.

There, in the audience, sitting before his little panel with the blue light and the red Executioner's button, was a young man staring at me.

I could feel his stare, like a cool hand touching me. It drew me up, into the dimness . . .

I felt my eyes widen with recognition.

"Bob," I said

His reply sounded deep inside my mind "*Hello. Rosebud.*"

"*I knew you'd be here,*" I said, and then I drew him close to me.

"*It's been a long time.*"

"*Don't ever forget,*" I said, and opened myself to him at last.

The lights in the Arena dimmed, rose, dimmed again. The first signal I pressed against the straps, but they were firm and unmoving. Yet I—we—leaned forward, and watched the panel with its blue light. Our stomach was knotted like tight leather cords.

The blue light flashed. I reached out a hand to the small red button. The straps bit into our flesh. The panel was dim, ghostly beneath the glaring lights from the dark above.

A thousand hands touched a thousand red buttons.

One of them was the first to touch the button, the first to complete the circuit. No one knew who he was. No one even knew if every button was connected, but someone touched a button and somewhere the circuit was completed.

*Shock!* Pain jerked our body rigid! We *screamed*; our skin blistered as hair singed and fell away. And there was a greater shock, a pain somewhere else, as our images cleaved and I fell away from her. I reached out my hand to her, and almost felt her touch . . . but my hand was on the button, and she was slumped in her chair on the floor of the Arena.

I jerked my hand away from the button as though it were hot electricity. My whole body was moist with perspiration.

I stared about me, suddenly and deeply frightened. Which of us had screamed? I'd felt it surging up in me, felt it tearing at my throat, bursting from my mouth—but next to me the others were unconcernedly wait-

ing for me to rise from my seat so that we could file in an orderly fashion from our places in the Arena. They had noticed nothing.

When I stood up my legs were trembling. I could still feel where the leather straps had bitten into them. I stepped carefully up the stairs and went out into the morning sunshine. Though the floodlights had been bright in the Arena, still the sunlight hurt my eyes. I paused at the door, and looked at my ring-watch. It was nine-thirty. Only half an hour had passed.

How long does it take to destroy a few spoiled lives?

It was over. I forced my breathing into a more normal rate and stepped onto the sidewalk. Don't think about it, I told myself. After all, it had been years earlier that I had really lost her . . .

I had almost made it to the corner when I felt the tap on my shoulder, began to turn, saw the green-sleeved arm extending toward me a familiar black indicator, and heard the proctor say:

"This is the one. Definite case: schizoid condition, latent telepath."

"We're all sorry," said another of them.

And they led me away to face it again

END