

Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW—NO REPRINTS

SEPTEMBER, 1946

Cover by Pete Kuhlhoff

NOVELETTE

- LOTTE Seabury Quinn 6
When a mystery presents itself it gnaws like a magot at the brain, nor can it be dislodged till the solution is found

SHORT STORIES

- DAY OF JUDGMENT Edmond Hamilton 20
Some day, some eternity away, there will be a last man and a last woman. And who will be their judges?

- ENOCH Robert Bloch 28
Have you ever felt the tread of little feet walking across the top of your skull?

- ALICE AND THE ALLERGY Fritz Leiber 36
It's only common sense to be scared of a killer—sometimes even after he has been apprehended and executed!

- NOT HUMAN Bert David Ross 41
A tulka does not really live—therefore a tulka is indestructible. It cannot die

- THE HORN Charles King 50
A goat's horn, marvelously endowed with strange virtues and an unforgivable future

- THE MACHINE Allison V. Harding 54
A machine, so sensitive as to be human, was the scientist's goal. What he got was as utterly unexpected as it was horrific!

- SIX FLIGHTS TO TERROR Manly Banister 66
The building's bizarre architecture was as though it had been lifted bodily and transported here from some haunted place deep in a mysterious Europe

- POLAR VORTEX Malcolm Ferguson 74
All alone on the night side of the world time moves at a snail's pace

- THRESHOLD OF ENDURANCE Betsy Emmons 82
What is, can be—what happens, can happen again

- XERKES' HUT Harold Lawlor 84
A small unpretentious hut, with an eternity of history and an unguessable secret within four walls of horror

VERSE

- THE PORT H. P. Lovecraft 65

- SUPERSTITIONS AND TABOOS Irwin J. Weill 73

- THE EYRIE AND THE WEIRD TALES CLUB 93

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The Polar Vortex

By MALCOLM FERGUSON



A curiously terrible experiment of blasphemous implications!

AMONG the effects of the late Leopold Lemming, multi-millionaire turned scientist and dabbler, was a small, battered old chest containing several hundred yards of wire on which had been

recorded sounds, and a two-hundred-page transcript of an experiment. Lemming had made his money in real estate, which is quite another thing from science, and in spite of his considerably advantageous investments

Heading by LEE BROWN COYE

in new scientific inventions, most people thought of Lemming as a shrewd businessman and only a dabbler in the sciences, or, as they put it, the pseudo-sciences.

This opinion continued throughout the estate's auction at the appearance of such fantastic objects as rune-hilted swords, waxen images of notables, volumes of Paracelsus, the *Book of the Dead*, and Cotton Mather, all copiously annotated in a cryptic shorthand, with now and then a vehement objection bursting into English as he disagreed with one or another of these. There were quite a number of these objects, some common, some very esoteric indeed, but all apparently appraised as to their validity. Then there were volumes on the sciences—astronomy, mathematics, physics, predominantly, all bearing this code of the modern Pepys, whose choice of objects was so strange.

The most curious acquisition made from Lemming's effects, however, was the battered old chest, which contained the manuscript in English, the dictaphone wire, and a small sheaf of notes, which turned out to be the case-book of an experiment Lemming had made in connection with his observatory at the South Pole. These effects gave evidence of a shocking ruthlessness, blindly idolatrous to the acquisition of scientific knowledge, revealing a curiously terrible experiment, which could be pieced together from the notebook Lemming used and the wire-reel—

THE CASE-BOOK OF DANIEL IMBRIFER

1 Feb.: I am opening this notebook with high hopes. I think Daniel Imbrifer will be an excellent subject. Clerk by day, student by night, he strives with the valor of Prometheus. He'll do.

And now, two years to the day since I laid the cornerstone of the glass-domed observatory at the South Magnetic Pole, I've met him in a bookstore, vastly hungering for knowledge and forasmuch as he could not buy both books and food. Just under six foot tall, raven-haired: that he was a fathomer of dark pools was reflected in his eyes. I hope to plumb the depths of those pools and stir them into a mad wrath that spews up the long-hidden debris of their deepest abysses. I want to whip up such a

tidal frenzy in his mind that all surface craft will be lost, and derelict thoughts be riven from their mud-moored deeps.

BUT not a bit of this eagerness could be seen in my casual introduction as we both groped for the same book. In a moment he knew me from various news photos and articles. We talked, I feigning interest in several odd volumes, he unfolding forthright views on science and myth alike under my discreet probings, proving with every word to be the man I wanted for my experiment. A noble mind, full of youthful energy, impatient to storm the gates of wisdom.

17 Mar.: Imbrifer and I sat late in my library, and over the third highball I showed him the model of my Antarctic planetarium. I had mentioned it often—now I was ready. I explained to him that there was to be a council of scientists there, and cunningly interwove names known to him and names known only to my mind. I spoke with regret of my unsuccessful attempts to get someone who could represent the layman, since all these men had pursued their theories so long that they were blind to all others. A good pupil demands clear expression from his teacher, and often finds the weak places in an exposition I argued. With such a student we could inaugurate a series of round-table discussions, of seminars, of papers and paper-chases.

How could he be anything but impressed by this, and by the model of the sheer-glass, double-thick hemisphere in the deserted waste of the Antarctic, whose winter is a perpetual night. I dissembled the model and showed him the subterranean dynamo, the storage passageways, enough devices to insure the safety of a dozen men for a year at least.

I showed him the telescope alongside the observatory, which, even in the model, could be raised cunningly from its garage just as coastal guns are brought into place. And Imbrifer saw that the telescope could fathom the skies, recording on the deep screen before him what it probed, as if on an oversized television screen. It's a delicate machine, yet especially made to withstand cold—with the advantage that in the

winter nights of the South Polar region there are a minimum of deflecting heat waves.

Imbrifer took it all in, and I've taken him in—he's hooked. I have yet to get him to take the custodianship of the place until the "conference" starts. Say a month from the time we leave him there, flying away; his eye fixed as a cyclops' on the sky. I have yet to explain to him the apparatus for projecting an artificial skyscraper in cloudy weather. Perhaps I'll leave that until he gets there.

Ah, but he's a prober—all concerned for the science of the thing; lured to look at the fascinating, and away from my magic-making skulduggery. Teasing his mind to reveal its secrets, catching himself in superstitions and intimations of mortality, and then perplexing himself with "Why?" Anon playing cat and mouse with a whim, letting it go and catching it again.

29 Mar.: It is agreed. Daniel Imbrifer will fly with me on the 14th of next month. I promised him the crop's cream of scientists, and so regaled him. He's to represent Everyman, or his equivalent in the Enquiring Man of Today, at this intellectual Olympiad. While most of this is secret, I have had his picture taken as "assisting me in research" and it's appearing in newspapers here and there. For one month, I told him yesterday, he is to be the sole caretaker at the polar observatory, relieving the four men now on duty there. He is to study the earth and the heavens, the vast deeps of space, and the tiny realm of man. I explained that as one goes to a foreign country to learn its language, here was his opportunity to study astronomy, to contemplate, with all the resources of modern science the stars and the space between the stars. But little does he realize, storming the gates of wisdom, that this may be too much; that like no other man on earth this world will be too little with him.

OF COURSE I've shown him that physically he will be quite safe. Physically, yes, as snug as a bug in a rug—auxiliary heating equipment, an emergency dynamo, and an oil-heating system if these should fail. A veritable anthill of tunnels stocked with more food than such a student as he was used to, rayed out, dry, cool, and air-

conditioned, into the ice and frozen earth below.

14 Apr.: *At the South Pole.* The giant plane landed on the rough ice outside, taxiing to within 100 yards of the polished dome, which had kept its perfect sheen under the combined protection of an oil which prevents blown ice-particles from forming and piling up; an invisibly fine-veined de-icing system raying throughout the sheer glass dome, and a judicious placing of the observatory at the bottom of a shallow bowl which is perpetually scooped by the winds themselves, yet is shallow enough to give the observatory an excellent horizon.

The four caretakers, on shift for a month, greeted us enthusiastically. I have to keep them as much out of Imbrifer's way as I can, and exert all care that they pack their books and cards and magazines and games with which they passed the time and beat boredom back. I hit on the scheme of opposing such "vain frivolities" for my student-friend with a sanctimonious air that was quite out of my character.

15 Apr.: *At the South Pole*—or, to be technical, at the hypothetical magnetic South Pole, diametrically antipodal to the magnetic North Pole. Today I leave Daniel Imbrifer to his studies, to burn the midnight oil in the uninterrupted Antarctic night. And with problems as ponderable as the night is long.

He and I checked the observatory's apparatus—its temperature kept evenly at a chilly 58.6 degrees Fahrenheit, its air-conditioning functioning perfectly, preventing heat-waves from piling up under the dome, but creating a steady, fountain-shaped current of air, and keeping sight of the stars undistorted. And below us purred this giant dynamo with a low, even pulsing which was barely perceptible.

The lighting in the dome has been cut down to three shielded stroboscopic lights. One casts a wan light over a study table; another at the head of the bed on a gooseneck to swing over the low bookshelf; the third by the apparatus for raising the telescope. This was the extent of the furniture under the dome, and the smooth, heavy, steel floor has only the trap-door leading to the underground plant, in the center.

'Around this is a steel ring, flush with the floor, which will reveal its purpose to Imbrifer in a short while. I checked its mechanism, as delicate as a watch, and found that when heavy clouds obscure the heavens the electric eye will release a jetty vapor to fill the empty air-space between the inner and outer layer of glass in the dome. The ring in the floor will become a band of light, projecting on the dome's vapid black an exact replica of the heavens as they would have appeared as the earth turns. And just as readily the cunning show gives way to the real one. Perhaps this device will ignite the powder train which will set fire to Imbrifer's brain, until he feels a tottery Atlas indeed.

This device I set in motion, and yet one more.

The dictaphone, whose wires will start with every sound and stop with every silence, catching every stirring above the pounding of the pulses in the brain's turbine. So.

(Extracts from the Diary of Daniel Imbrifer.):

16 Apr.: At 1350 hours by my watch, Mr. Lemming and his four caretakers left, having instructed me thoroughly regarding the equipment I will need to use here. It is strange that there is no communication with the rest of the world, or any reception of news of any kind. I objected strongly when he started to take the radio out, but he flew into such a rage that I finally let him have his way.

He has an outline study program prepared, with questions for me to ponder. Insolvable questions categorically stated—about dwarf stars, variable stars, comets, nebulae, gravitational pulls, orbits, the origin of the Milky Way and its present direction of movement.

The bookcase contains a dozen books on astronomy, celestial navigation, and mathematics, plus a strange typescript volume containing a collection of folk-lore and mythology concerning man's contemplation of the heavens. Selections from Pliny, Max Mueller, Sigmund Freud, Sir James Frazer, Oswald Spengler, Dean Swift, Fiona MacLeod, Andrew Lang, Novalis, and the literature of ancient Egypt and Arabia, all show-

ing man's perplexed fascination with the night sky.

BUT all my scrambling around is but the reflection of my loneliness. For immediately as the green Castor and red Pollux on the plane's wings grew dim against the less-colorful stars, loneliness rushed to my heart and took possession of my marrow. This tiny toadstool at the earth's Ultima Thule was to be my place of vigil. Well, I must stick it out now. If all goes well I can afford to try a few experiments of my own after all this.

18 Apr.: The sky being brilliant, I summoned the sentinel telescope and swept the heavens, the stars crystal clear in the Antarctic cold. Those of higher magnitude delineated as suspended in space. But what caught my eye as I followed the majestic sweep of the Milky Way across the sky was a void; an empty well in the sky—a sudden break in the spate of stars. This hole or blind spot is remarkably situated to catch the eye, being near the zenith, in the lower left quadrant of the Southern Cross. Find the Southern Cross—the cynosure of all navigators below the equator, and this void gapes before you. It is the Coalsack, gaping utterly devoid of stars from this hemisphere's most conspicuous spot.

20 Apr.: My calendar and my watch tell me it is the 20th of April, but my irregular hours will soon trample down the barriers between the days, since there's no daylight and dark to distinguish them. I find myself pacing the even surface of the steel floor. I linger over my meals, but the whole eating process can't be protracted over three-quarters of an hour, somehow.

I now know what the dour Scotch caretaker meant when he got wind of the fact that I was to spend a month here, alone. "It shouldn' be, mon. A young lad like ye. It's nae guid for ye to be withouten a roof. Ye canna keep yer skull's cap on withouten a roof. 'Tis agin Nature and God."

And with that he took two quarts of whiskey and with finger to lips he hid them in amongst the canned food. A little later he was about to give me a pack of cards but Mr. Lemming interfered.

Mr. Lemming is a strange figure. Com-

monplace enough in appearance, yet how he tramples beauty and life under foot in his search for truth. Doesn't he realize that truth should be cut in chunks man can swallow? That science, unless devoted to the orientation of mankind to this world, rather than to the bedevilment of mankind for your own satisfaction and perhaps even knowledge, is a perversion. Mr. Lemming's damni-the-cost attitude is too big for this world.

I thought today that I'd at last be able to turn my thoughts to earth, at least for long enough to get my breath. But I didn't count on the genius of Mr. Lemming, who produced an image of the heavens on the dome of the observatory. It's a clever thing, throwing every detail visible to the naked eye upon the glass dome. . . . I suppose he'd explain it as "for the guidance of the council" but I see it as an effort to sever my mental associations with the man-sized world and draw me out into the realms of space.

How little I realized when I came here. Is it really my imagination, or is Mr. Lemming trying to condition my thoughts? How? Why?

I REMEMBER a puppet-show in which a man suddenly appeared as a fearsome giant, after I had become used to the deft, graciously proportioned Lilliputians. Thus our premises of thought are altered, yet we are always human beings, not titans, nor want to be.

22 Apr.: I could not bring myself to write anything yesterday. I studied and made notes on the Southern constellations, examining the double stars all wound up in each other's fate, the dwarf stars looking what their name implies under the terrific weight of their bodies. I could not help but imagine attributes for the various stars, a childish trick firmly rooted in the mind of man.

23 Apr.: I'm still studying books on this world and this universe. I remember of a man studying the phenomenon of sleep for so long and so deeply that he inhibited himself from going to sleep—he "murdered sleep," and had to seek rest in a sanitarium.

24 Apr.: After writing the words above I went to sleep readily enough, but awoke in sudden fright, somehow startled, perhaps by a cramped position. The first thing I saw was that baleful emptiness, the Coal-sack, yawning like an ape's gape in the night, Dark in a world of dark.

25 Apr.: Tired. I had better not write. Brain fag. Sorry, Imbrifer, old boy, but the first person is not well.

26 Apr.: Today I took one of the books and went downstairs, but the lighting is bad. I could feel the stars above me if I could not see them. It was worse, as if the fourth dimension were lurking to swallow me into thin air. I had better stand and fight like a man. If I'm going to fear anything I want to find it out before it finds me out.

(Apparently at this point the noises transcribed on the wire do not reflect alarming aberrations. An inordinate amount of pacing back and forth restlessly, a good deal of talking to himself, though nothing as fascinating or understandable as the diary. Very little laughter except for a sardonic chuckle. At one point Imbrifer took to running around the observatory, but whether from nervousness or from a planned project to exercise, cannot be known.)

27 Apr.: Poking around in the below-surface regions trying to consume as much time as possible making dinner, yet at the same time subconsciously speeding up, teasing myself with my bodings, when I found a covered disk in the center of the floor inset in front of the hatch-ladder. I unscrewed the two screws that kept the cover in place and found a mariner's compass. I tripped the release on the compass, setting it in motion. The release somehow broke in doing so, but I soon overlooked this as I watched the strange action of the compass. It fluctuated, wobbled, and spun for a moment, and finally settled down to spin slowly but steadily. Deliberately and determinedly it set about to register All Points North. Around and round and round.

I suppose it sounds natural, but it was a possibility I had never anticipated. Ap-

parently set in the center of the building's foundation, it won't budge. It's the only compass here, too. Is this the reaction a compass should make when located as this one is? The earth's axis seems very real to me, as if it ran directly through the center of this building. I wonder if a plumb, suspended free, would swing round instead of back and forth. I wish there were enough space to try it.

I'VE been sitting here musing for three hours now. Here is empirical evidence that I am the Man in the Mulberry Bush, and all men grope around me. . . .

(Here is interpolated the first of the recordings from the wire, following a mad crescendo of laughter.)

"Laugh, damn you, laugh. It will steady your nerves. Now let me think this thing through. Here am I at the imaginary point around which this giant gyroscope whirls. This small compass is cogged to whirl about the same central point as does the earth, but, though concentric, it whirls faster, being somehow the center of a smaller circle. Only at this orbit is the spin registered, since everywhere else it's off-line. Even a mile off the distance absorbs the whirl, though the compass begins to act queerly. The laws of gravitation offset all centrifugal force. Well, they do here for that matter, but there's still all that extra 'whirl' left. No, it can't be. . . .

"Where is that whiskey the Scotchman left. Here if I can reach it. . . . I seem to be walking all right on this dizzying disk. If only that damned compass would stop acting like a weather-cock in the center of a cyclone. Ah, here it is. . . .

"Tell me why the stars do shine . . .
Say that's good; it's a long time since I sang that in church.

Tell me why the stars do shine

Tell me why the ivy twines

Tell me why the sky's so blue . . .

How about that ivy business? That's strange. North of the equator it spins counter-clockwise, just like a cyclone. South of the equator the vine twines clockwise, just like the cyclone. At the equator the effect is most dissipated. No crises there. But at the center of this little 'o', this orb, it spirals to beat hell. And that, as Kipling would say,

if he had been drinking, is why we have no ivy at the poles. It's also why you don't see streamers around the South Pole come Mayday. . . ."

28 Apr.: I awoke lying across my bed, feeling rotten, fully dressed. I am not a drinking man, and feel down at the edges. But perhaps it's a good thing. This place is getting me down—and I don't mean because it's down under here, either—that's a lot of imaginary nonsense. It is, truly enough one of the poles, though, and like only one other point in the world, its antipode, its nadir, its opposite.

I feel better now. Perhaps I can study again.

29 Apr.: Today I contemplated the space between the stars, looking first at our nearest neighbor, Alpha Centaurus, and then I found (with difficulty) the external galaxy in, or rather behind, the constellation of Centaurus. This is another Milky Way—this wee haze amounts to somewhere near as much as most of the rest of our horizon's view for size. From Alpha Centaurus light is supposed to take four years and four months dragging its heels at its usual speed in a vacuum getting around to us.

2 May: My precarious equilibrium has been maintained, largely by not asking myself too many questions and by "not thinking about anything." As I spun the telescope away from a variable star I was watching, stars of the Milky Way swam across my field of vision as so many motes. Many of them are larger than our sun and several thousand light years away. And then the bottom dropped out, as it were, as if this were too much for this mechanical contraption. It registered nothing. Nothing. A blank black. I looked up. Yes, the stars still shone. But the telescope's field was a blank. Fearfully and with moist palms I turned the dial. A star appeared at the lower right corner. I spun the dial away, up and to the left. Another star appeared. Then the troupe of the Milky Way, as if the celestial ballet had started afresh. I'm afraid I whimpered at this, and fell all a-tremble, like a puppy. I had accidentally stumbled on the Coalsack, and it had taken me unawares.

There is something about that celestial blind-spot that makes me want to cower in a corner, but this damned place is round.

3 May: My watch stopped when I slept. I can tell time roughly by the stars, but I might easily become confused and lose track of the days. Then I'd be afraid to reckon up for fear I'd lose a day, or a week, and have it here ahead of me. I wonder if my pulse stopped or whether it was some baleful influence here. Last night a terrible dream wrought me. A vine twined quickly out of space and seized my head. I awoke, screaming. And right above me was the lurking pit out of which the spiral spun. It seemed ages that I cowered in bed, cursing my cowardice, afraid of reality, afraid of dream.

4 May (I guess): Relief! Relief, damn Lemming! Something he hadn't thought of. A straw for me to clutch at as I whirl in the center of this polar maelstrom.

AN EARTHLY phenomenon. One he hadn't anticipated either. He who ruled out snow and the rushing balm of a frozen death from his little study of this poor student, Daniel Imbrifer. He who created the glassy image of the heavens to taunt me; who exposed me to the gaze of the deeps, to the hypnotic pull of this vastness of space, drawing me out as oil on water, in an element equally foreign and fearsome.

The phenomenon sheds more light rather than less, the Aurora Australis. This earthly phenomenon has helped me get my feet under myself at least for long enough to learn that my mind is that of a poor earthling and should not seek to soar too far. In this assurance I have won for, though I lose my mind, I have really gained it.

Life surges back and the pulses pace for a moment more sedately. At first the Aurora Australis marched slowly in crackling white radiance, as if the atmosphere were raining manna; then in colored energy, dancing from horizon to horizon, taking in its bounds at a Borzoi leap. Lord, once again to be an awestruck earthling and watch the hound of heaven, the leaping Loki, the frozen lightning, the shattered rainbow, energy snared and transformed by witchery, a hyperborean Ariel, an impersonalized nervousness which

drives out my own. My pen flows evenly, wiftly, as this phenomenon continues, because when it dies down my energy will begin to charge and leap up.

Later: The Aurora Australis has gone, but my mind is still in the ways of men. Though alone on the night-side of the world, I know the rest is there; that the sun greets most men the world around. That work and days go on I know, that men work at the vast drop forges, at the antiquated plows; that they ogle the women and test their strength with other men at games; that they are often cruel, but that there will always and ultimately be beauty and a warming of the heart; and though many are killed, some will see light and humility.

Later: Perhaps I can last out the month, though I doubt it. I'm afraid to compute the time and date by celestial means. I'm afraid that time has stood still or perhaps has crept at snail's pace, as if the snail had started at the back of my skull-bone and had not yet lumped up under my hair at the top of my head—but such thoughts spin into the abysses of madness. And yet even unaffected people use mad concepts, though they no more realize than they do the fact the earth is spinning, and time speeding with it, though they see that the sun rises and sets, while I do not.

This "morning" I awoke quietly, and kept a blanket over my head until I had my wits about me. Then boldly looked out at the skies sinking into infinity, suspended in infinity. I think I can stand it today, though. I tried to make a deck of cards, but fearing I would become superstitious as luck played tricks with me. I would have embodied luck as an unseen presence behind me, fearfully pointing a skeletal hand at a card. And there is enough behind me that I have to keep driving back mentally. Sometimes obsession rides my back like a twining corpse.

I WILL choose my thoughts carefully today (today being determined as the period until I grow sufficiently tired to seek rest). I cast about me for something to do, to keep me occupied. In this calm moment

I see that it is quite probable that Lemming did, wholly by design, plan to use me as his guinea pig. Since one man has willed that this be so, and since I cannot alter it, I will let this record continue as long as it will to express this emotional dispersement and end either when I'm rescued or as it will.

(From the wire dictaphone.)

"I am alone on earth.

"Once there were Adam and Eve and Pinch Me. Adam and Eve have gone off and left me here all alone. I make the world go round on course, on time. But what if I should fall asleep and it should stop, and the rest of the universe be spinning except the world?

"There's a good boy—crank the spit. If I could only really tell why I turn this world around. . . .

"It's all in your imagination, Danny—it's all in your imagination. Damn that blasphemous compass. I'll break it, that's what I'll do. I'll get something heavy and drop it on it. This chair will do. . . .

"There, that's better. But oh, it gapes like an empty socket! What have I done?"

(Now the diary again.)

Later: Yesterday I broke the compass. But I solved nothing by that. It still goes around in my mind. I was childish and I am just aggravating myself. I am sorry. It would be better if I left it undamaged. Then I could

see that things are as they are and get a foothold on facts that are fast eluding me.

(The wire record again.)

"Eieeaaah . . . stop, world. Stop whirling. That ape's hairy black arm grasping the world from that ebon emptiness of the Coal-sack turned inside out. Stop spinning me swivelling. Too fast. The world grasped as seaweed clenches a clam—but whirling as the ape's arm spins it, unkinking. No, no, grasping hand, pressing palm! Sweat pearly.

"It's me you want—wait—I'll stand at the nub's hub. I'll howl it down. Eiii-ah. . . ."

NOTES OF MR. LEOPOLD LEMMING

The body of Daniel Imbrifer was found at the foot of his bed, his feet tangled in bedclothes, his skull broken on the steel floor. He had apparently set out to stand astride this mad world. I wonder—

Fortunately I entered first, well expecting such a discovery. The crew of the ship is quite different from the one which took me away two and a half months ago. Both crews believe I left Imbrifer for only a week (though he anticipated a month's stay only), and no one knows the devices I have here—not all of them, or why. Now before they come in I will gather and put aside all the data on Imbrifer.

Here comes the pilot. I'll be shocked at my discovery. Within twenty-four hours we should leave here.