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infinity

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"THE STAR" by Arthur C. Clarke was by all odds the most popular story in the first issue of INFINITY, and probably one of the most popular science-fiction stories to be published anywhere in 1955. It was also highly controversial, and in "Rebuttal" Betsy Curtis presents the other side of the question—plus an idea that seems to be totally new. The result, we think you'll agree, is one of the outstanding science-fictional events of 1956.

Rebuttal

by BETSY CURTIS

Immortality? Like anything else, it may be a matter of definition, or just of the point of view . . .

Illustrated by GIUNTA

THEY BROUGHT Father Philip Burt to St. Luke's as our "share" of the research project on the mysterious disease which afflicted most of the crew of the recently returned Phoenix Nebula expedition. News of the disease, of course, was not spread beyond the research teams, as the public seems to fear a plague worse than damnation itself. And it didn't seem to be a very serious disease: Father Phillip was easily the worst case of all; and although several members of



the expedition had died, their deaths could be evaluated as due to secondary infections of common enough earth origin. Very few of the crew members were in actual pain; but Father Phillip was in constant agony which no amount of sedation seemed to calm.

I ran the customary tissue cultures and biopsies, including those on internal organs not customarily available. We were given an excuse for getting internal samples of tissue when Father Phillip's appendix flamed into infection. And although I did not find a general infecting organism, what I did find was enough to send me trotting up to his room on the double.

I suppose I should explain here that I, Father Niccolo Molina, am head research pathologist for St. Luke's and that I don't, therefore, meet the patients personally very often. But Father Phillip I had to meet.

His day nurse, Sister Mary Felicia, met me at the door in her crisp white teflon overall.

"Father is very uncomfortable today," she told me. "The incision is not healing at all and he keeps trying to talk and then breaking off in the middle of a sentence with the pain."

"Talking about anything in particular?" I asked suspiciously.

"The merest chit-chat. The weather . . . pleasantries about the hospital . . . jokes about doctors in particular. He doesn't have a very high regard for doctors, it seems. Thinks they are notable atheists, I gather." She smiled.

"Many thanks for the diagnosis, Sister," I told her gravely. Then I added, "I suppose you are having to maintain a considerable quarantine and decontamination routine as Father's nurse?"

"Oh yes. In this wing, you know, we are all in solitary, approaching no persons other than our patient and the doctors . . . sometimes for as much as three months after the end of a case. It provides excellent time for a retreat, which is why most of us apply for such duty." She pointed to the small *prie-dieu* in her tiny cubicle, which stood as a buffer between the contagion room and the hallway of the ward.

"If I am right about the nature of Father Burt's disease," I told her, "you will soon see the end of this case, and without any three months' decontamination, either."

She smiled again. "You couldn't say a happier thing," she said, "even though I shall probably apply for a leprosy case if I am relieved of this one. I've become very concerned about Father Phillip."

"Good. He needs your prayers as no man probably ever needed them before. I'll see him now." I crossed her small room and opened the inner door and went in.

FATHER PHILLIP was lying flat in the narrow white bed, his arms lying listlessly on either side of the slight hump of his body under the sheet. The big bulge halfway down was his knees over a pillow, the usual position for post-operative appendectomies.

He squeezed out a smile with an effort. "Morning, doctor," he said.

"Father Nick," I smiled back. "Father Nick Molina of Pathology, Father."

His wasted body jerked as if with a knife thrust. Then he said, "Excuse me. I had forgotten that there were doctors who were not laymen. I'm sorry." He drew up a shoulder against his cheek in a curious gesture, then shivered.

"Sorry for what?" I asked.

"Just sorry, I guess . . ." He winced and was silent.

"Sorry for me?"

"Well, yes."

"That I'm not a layman?"

"You could put it that way."

"That's a very interesting statement, Father, and one about which I want to know a good deal more after I've asked you some other questions. You see, I think I know what's the matter with you, and it's definitely curable."

"It is not curable." His voice had a flat finality, and his lips drew into a thin firm line.

"Let me ask you the questions anyway, Father," I said. He gave no other sign. "Have you ever looked through a microscope?"

"At the little beasties? Yes, in college."

"Well, that's what I have just finished doing with a number of slivers of living tissue from your body. Do you know what I saw that would bring me up here?"

"I might," he answered warily.

"What do you think?"

"Cancer, maybe."

"No, cancer cells have their own pattern of behavior which is very pretty and, of course, no longer at all deadly. You do not have cancer; but the cells of your kidneys, for instance, are doing some-

thing I've never seen live kidney cells doing."

"And what is that?" he said, as if he really couldn't care less.

"Nothing in particular. This is unheard of indeed. Kidney cells are busy little widgets doing a tremendous job night and day. Like the individual muscle fibers of the heart, they work on year after year with no vacations, no coffee breaks, secure in the knowledge of their purpose."

"No pseudo-sermons, please, Father!" Father Phillip's voice was stern. "You don't have to Peter Rabbit up biology for me."

"A scholar indeed to have heard Peter Rabbit," I laughed but he did not smile. Then I asked, "Do you want to see how real kidney cells—yours—are behaving? I have a projecting microscope in the basement. Do you want to see what's going on?"

"Not particularly. If you think you can cure me, go ahead and try."

"Are you willing to pray for your own recovery?"

"No!" He spat out the word with a ferocity that seemed to surprise even himself.

"Then I am going to sermonize indeed. And you are going to listen, my dear little kidney cell."

"Oh, go ahead. But I warn you that I know something that will cancel it all in advance." He had developed more force of personality than he had showed since I came in.

"Oh? Then suppose you tell me about that. I always do better in rebuttal."

AND HE blurted it out . the whole story of the Phoenix Nebula expedition and its discovery of the memorials of that beautiful race which was destroyed utterly in the explosion of its star the supernova which was our own Star of Bethlehem. "So you see," he concluded, "we found out that ultimate dreadful secret of the cosmos, that there is no plan, no purpose, no good God who watches the fall of the sparrows with tender concern. To whom could I pray for my recovery? To the random spin of electrons or planets? To a petty tribal totem? To nothing!"

"We found out? You and the crew?"

"I gave them what answers I could."

"They asked *you* . and for a fish you gave them a stone, is that it?"

"Scold away," he said tonelessly. "I would not lie to them."

"The poet Dante I began.

"Spare me the poets," he said bitterly.

"The poet Dante," I repeated firmly, "in his recounting of the vision of Paradise, came at last to the Outside. He had pressed on just as you of the expedition had pressed on, ever outwards, looking for The Purpose. He was fortunate, of course, in not actually making his expedition physically, in spite of pretending that he did so. Because space seems to be too big for man to make anything of while he's in the flesh. Anyhow, when Dante got Outside, the whole universe did a strange flip-flop. If you can imagine a tennis ball really turning inside-out and every other atom of the universe being compacted at the center and the atoms of the original ball rarefying outwards, you may have his Rosa Mystica. At any rate, you can understand that the further out you go, the more you look at the same thing no matter in which direction you look . . . like every direction being South from the North Pole . . . so you might as well say that you are looking at a Center when you have reached the periphery and look farther out."

"For the purposes of anal-

ogy, I suppose?" He was still bitter.

"For the purposes of making it clear what I want you to do. I want you to turn inside out. I want you to be God, so to speak, for a few minutes."

"Indeed?"

"Indeed. For those minutes, at least, you have done with searching for Him further and further out . . . where you must have thought He was (and He is, of course) or you'd probably have been a nuclear physicist or a cytologist like myself. Consider yourself, then, the deity of yourself, your body, of each personality-packed cell within it. Those cells respond more or less well to your purposes and your plans. You love them all and they love you, whether or not they know it very well. Now think back . . . how did you explain it to your baby incisor when it first felt the pushing of a second tooth underneath? That it was expendable? That it was no longer part of your purpose?"

"I don't suppose I felt that I was accountable to my teeth." Grumpily.

"But at any rate, your purposes had not changed, had they?"

"I suppose not."

"Now listen closely, God.

Suppose you actually told your teeth that you didn't need them any more . . . and your heart cells that had been contracting along so bravely . . . and your marrow cells that had been making blood . . . and your stomach and your spleen . . . you told each and every cell that it was probably a good enough cell but that really there was no purpose in their doing anything as you yourself had no purpose and probably didn't exist anyway. Then what?"

"They'd go right on working. What a man tells his cells can't affect them. You know that." Truculently . . . as if to say: *you can't fool me.*

"They would begin to quit right then and there. A man *might* not be able to tell his cells much, but remember, a god can. Now let's go a step further in. Let a cell be God and let its individual molecules be its creatures. And this God tells His creatures that it's all over — no more purposes, no more action because there's no reason for it . . . what then?"

"The molecules break down?" Facetiously.

"Exactly. And the atoms disperse and the electron shells fall away and what happens after that, I'm hardly prepared to say."

"Hardly." Amusedly now.

"Now back to man as man, not God, for the next. While you and your eager predecessors were pushing outward to the stars, I and mine were exploring cells. And we found cells dying from simple lack of faith . . . or, you might say, from an excess of faith in purposes which had been abandoned. 'Our God said so and so' they insisted, long after their God had revised his plans to such and such."

"Changeable gods do not interest me." Boredly.

"I'm glad to hear it," I told him. "That's fairly important. The discovery part of this investigation, however, is that man does act as a god to his cells, can tell them things and know that they hear his still small voice. And among other things which man has to say to his cells is his promise of immortality to each and every one."

"That's going too far, I think," Father Phillip objected seriously. "The body dies."

"Man has a Precedent," I said quietly. "But," I added, "you have just told me that it was a number of bodily deaths which destroyed your faith in all pattern and purpose."

"Is that comparable?"

"Not only is it comparable . . . it is, you might say, one

of the myriad identical petals of the Mystic Rose. And it is the one I know something important about. You see, I have witnessed the immortality of the cell. That's *my* contribution to the journals, if not to the instruction of the world which doesn't read them."

"Oh, I know . . . every cell that's alive is merely a daughter cell of one original cell, so that cell is immortal."

"I don't mean that at all, even though that's true. You might say that I mean I have seen the souls of 'dead' cells in heaven."

INCREDOULOUSLY: "Through the projecting microscope in the basement?"

"No, you don't see them with eyes or hear them with ears," I assured him.

"I thought not."

"But that doesn't mean they're not there. The first time was in a placenta from the garbage can. We had been culturing polio viruses in human placentas (very interesting personalities viruses are, too) and I'd been sent a whole placenta more than I needed. What can a mother tell a placenta which has been doing its work and is still in excellent shape, just like that civilization in the Phoenix Nebula some two and a half mil-

lennia ago? Does she say, 'There's nothing more for you in time or space; the baby is born, I abandon you to utter nothingness'? Very rarely. And even then she doesn't mean it. But the life does go out of the cells. And disperses to God, glorifying Him in no uncertain terms. This is what I heard and saw, with a God-given perception which is not in my eyes and ears."

"You don't mean intuition, surely," he objected disgustedly.

"Let me put it another way with another question. With what ears do you hear the music of the spheres?"

"You are too much the poet. I don't follow you." He was puzzled.

"To be very prosaic, then, how do you sense the 'turn-over' or change in energy level of the lone electron of a hydrogen atom in interstellar space?"

"By deduction from whatever type of recording is made from a radiotelescope."

"You have no physical nerve endings to sense this directly?"

"Of course not."

"But you are quite sure, nevertheless, that so gross a creature as man may be aware of so slight an emission of energy?"

"Yes."

"And that what man can be aware of, God is also aware of?"

"It follows, if God is aware at all."

"If there is a God, then, there wouldn't be much chance that He didn't know about such gross creatures as the men of the Phoenix? Excuse me . . . I've gone far afield. You said the radiotelescope. Well, a few other doctors and I have been working on an instrument to measure cellular action currents—in living cells, of course; and I had added an auxiliary component which was supposed to find out what became of certain suspected possible energy emissions not accounted for or required by chemical processes in the cell. Where there's smoke there's fire, you know . . and where there's energy there's apt to be more energy. And here was a nice piece of fresh dying tissue in beautiful condition.

"I put a tiny sliver into the infrascope just as a young child will put anything that comes his way into his mouth for analysis . . and I saw the scintillations on the plate which I knew signalled the ascent of the souls of the cells, the binding energies . . one flash for each dying cell body,

calculated later . . one quantum of binding energy, one soul!"

"And so they were gone . . . done . . . dissipated into your machine . . . souls no longer." Father Phillip's sigh was one of infinite disappointment.

"Binding energy to light . . light to mass, maybe . . and mass to energy again . . or is there anything but energy in the final analysis? You astronomers profess to know something of this. Why is it, then, that when you bump head-on into life you suppose it to be mysteriously something else? Something capable of complete extinction, of contradicting the laws of the universe?

"But I digress again. I am sorry. I have not said what you are waiting to hear."

Father Phillip drew in a long breath.

"In a frenzy of spirit I worked for months to refine the instrument and to make more precise the registering and recording, daily trying various tissues in the original machine . . getting re-acquainted, too, with the personalities of various types of cells in the big projecting mike. Today I can show you, or any interested person, the endurance of personality in the energy quanta after the

cell body is dead. Does this make a difference?"

Father Phillip's sigh this time was a relaxation of his whole being. "Somehow it does," he said, "but I don't know why."

"You know," I assured him, "that the crux of the Phoenix matter was the question of personal immortality. If the souls of the Phoenix folk are in the hand of God, what does it matter to you or to me where their bodies are? Suppose, just before the end, God told them that He would bless their physical passing and set it for a sign to a younger people that their savior was at hand? You have no way of knowing that He did not. You *do* know that He said: 'Other sheep I have which are not of this flock.' And when your own body dies, you may even meet your beloved folk of the Phoenix Nebula and there shall be 'one flock and one Shepherd'."

Father Phillip's hand reached out and I grasped it. He returned the pressure firmly. "Thank you, Father," he said gravely. "I have been in mortal danger of making a mistake. You have been sent to me."

"As you were sent to the crew of the expedition, and have not yet wholly failed

them. How do you feel at this moment . . . in your body?"

His look became abstracted and he seemed to be searching himself internally. Then he looked back at me with a shade of a grin. "My incision itches like fury," he said, "and I need the bedpan."

"So, you are healing already? Now try to tell me a man can say nothing to his cells." I drew back the sheet and observed the drying of the serum at the edges of the incision.

"How soon can I get out of here?" he asked eagerly. "I must go to the other members of the crew at once!"

"First to confession," I reminded him. "And then, depending on God's will, it may be weeks or even days. I cannot predict the speed of a miracle."

AND IT was well I did not try. It was a scant ten hours later that the figure of Father Phillip Burt was wheeled in a chair to a waiting ambulance that was to take him to the first of the hospitals where a member of the crew lay in desolate quarantine. His body was still frail, but his smile was of radiant health. He waved to me.

"One flock . . ." he called, and was borne away. 29