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science
and
anti-
science

by . . . John Christopher

**Passion rejected meant
passion turned to hate.
In years to come he'd
remember this moment.**

IT IS not often realized how idealistic a bunch the science-fiction writers are. Wrecking, as they commonly do, a world in a sentence, a galaxy in a paragraph, they are thought to be cynical and despairing. Edmund Crispin accuses them of having rediscovered Original Sin.

I used to share this common view until the occasion, a few years ago, when I was one of a number photographed and interviewed for a popular magazine feature. What, we were asked, did we think the proper function of science-fiction to be? It all came out in a rush. Not a word about First British Serial Rights, the terrors of the future, or the horrors of the human heart. We (except for me) believed in Science and (with the same exception) in Science-Fiction as the handmaid of Science.

Now although I quite often find myself on the outside peering in, I have never been reconciled to this condition. I am a natural born conformist, and it distresses me no end to be unable to share the innocent hopes and ideals of my colleagues. And if I cannot share them, I want to know why not. It is not enough

Those readers who look back, nostalgically, on the glittering never-never quality of much of SF in the thirties, where scientists would often be mad and power-hungry men, as Lester del Rey pointed out last month, will welcome this autobiographical article by a prominent British Science Fiction writer.

to say I would not trust a scientist any further than the gentleman in Charing Cross Road who once sold me $3\frac{1}{3}$ rd playing cards as a means of performing the three-card trick. I realized very quickly where I had been had on that. Science is altogether too majestic for the comparison to be sound.

My defect must be traceable, and I believe I have finally run it to earth. A point to bear in mind is that, in my life, science-fiction predated Science. At the age of ten, I loved Science for science-fiction's sweet sake. Now let us examine the scene.

At my school, both Greek and Chemistry were held over till the second year. In the first year, we did Physics, but few right-minded schoolboys equate Physics with Science. There is little ecstasy in rubbing bakelite sticks with artificial silk or setting up rows of pins between mirrors. Science is Stinks.

I spent a year longing for that exquisite moment when I should enter the Chemistry Lab. My other studies suffered. (My conjugation of 'sein' in an end-of-term German exam is still, I believe, remembered: Ich seine, du seinst, er seint . . .) When September again hove to, I grabbed a seat in the front row, and trembled as I touched a test-tube. Spaceships were just around the corner.

The Chemistry master was a small neat man who, perhaps as an extension of his small neatness, gave marks out of 5, not 10. It

distressed me when, in those early blissful weeks, my own marks were 1, $1\frac{1}{2}$, and occasionally 2; but I adored the chastening rod. Nearly a term went by before the grim truth dawned.

He handed back our books. "Christopher," he said with desiccated passion, "I have been in the habit of subtracting 3 marks from you because of your disgusting handwriting. Your most recent effort demands a penalty of 4, and I am still being generous. As, in addition, I partly disagreed with what I could read of your work, your mark this week is minus $\frac{1}{2}$."

It took me some while to realize he wasn't joking. Illegibility, I had always thought, was a sign of the scientific genius. Even if I were wrong about that, surely blots and a wild scrawl would not bar the doors of the Royal Society to the eager mind? But he was in deadly earnest. I tried, for a time, to appease him. I strove to write well or, if not well, with some semblance of neatness. But those were the Bad Old Pre-Chancery Days. Failure succeeded failure, and despair stole into my heart. I wound up 31st, in a class of 32. (The one below me had been away three months with a broken leg.)

At the end of the second year, the School split into streams labeled Science and Literary. My Greek marks were not brilliant, but they served. After a bare ten months, the Chemistry Lab door clanged behind me,

In my last year at school, I entered it again. With a shortage of accommodation, the Upper Sixth Greek set (three boys and a moribund master) were allocated the Lab once a week. I found before me the familiar bottles and jars. And, Satan entering along with a weary distaste for Thucydides, I began to play with them. Surreptitiously I tipped the contents of one jar into the next, mixed hydrochloric with nitric acid, set the magnesium smoking. There were some pretty effects, but even when noth-

ing visibly happened, I savored the joy of sabotage.

I wonder how many years it was, after I left, before Chemistry in that school became predictable again?

I need no psycho-analyst to lay bare my ambivalence. Passion—passion rejected—passion-turned-to-hate—and so Guilt. How could I ever hope to be one of the happy brotherhood who rap Pandora's Box to smarten things up? I have been faithful to thee, Science, in my fashion.

