



10 STORY FANTASY

DONALD A. WOLLHEIM, Editor

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The world was getting tired of its own brilliance and nobody knew any longer where humanity was heading. But Edward Barnett alone cared enough to do anything about it, so he invented those . . .

SEEDS OF FUTURITY

By KRIS NEVILLE

EDWARD BARNETT removed all the charts from the control room; he placed them along with his more than six hundred books into the evacuation chamber. He closed the inner door and pulled the lever marked "A." A tiny section of the hull slid back and the released pressure swept all the written material out into space.

Edward Barnett turned, walked slowly along the corridor to the landing bubble, entered it, and prepared to ease the ship down. If he wrecked the craft in the attempt, it alone would remain to stir the curiosity of his children. There was no written record anywhere aboard. Now.

He swung the ship into the classic descending spiral. After a long time,

air friction began to pull at the ship with steel fingers. He maneuvered it with unsteady hands, and it bucked uncertainly. Finally it touched the ground, full astern, quaked, and rested. He clambered to the rear, his heart straining under the strong, new gravity.

One by one he carried his children out from the ship and placed them far beyond the blast radius. It took him a very long time, for he was old and frequently had to stop to lean against the steel hull to catch his breath. At the last, he worked with frantic speed, trying to complete his task before his children recovered from the anaesthesia he had injected into their quarters after he had pumped out the suspension gas.

Eventually he unloaded the last of his cargo: they all lay naked in the sun. He remounted the ladder of the ship wearily. At the port he turned

for a final look, and they seemed asleep there at the very edge of the cool, green forest. For a moment his resolve wavered, and he wanted to run to them.

He turned to enter the ship. For if he stayed, knowledge stayed with him. . . .

IN THE DAYS of Edward Barnett's childhood, the adult-peopled world felt neither one way nor the other about formal, academic training. Perhaps they held those who studied *The Philosophy* somewhat in awe, as beings almost beyond worldly understanding, but otherwise they were exceedingly neutral, if indifferent would be too strong a term. Consequently there was precious little learning abroad in the land. Whatever education a child achieved, aside from the simplest elements of reading imparted by a robot of limited scope, was due solely to individual inclination and initiative. Few youths, it scarcely need be added, were particularly adept at verbal gymnastics.

The young Edward Barnett was, however, an exception; he soon far outstripped his robot tutor and was roaming freely in the cavernous ancestral library. But lacking direction, he did little more than filter great numbers of huge tomes through the wide screenwork of his mind. At the age of fourteen he was an exceedingly widely read young gentleman, without an opinion of his own on anything.

He was frail of form, delicate. His huge eyes roved incessantly, seeing minutest details. His body surged with a high and unquenchable order of nervous energy that, in former days, was termed intellectual curiosity.

Eventually even his parents noted that he had great promise; such, in fact, was their enthusiasm that one day they called him to them.

"Son," his mother said, looking very

wise, "we—your father and I—recommend that you study *The Philosophy*. Accordingly, we have interviewed Dr. Burton who has kindly consented to supervise your future training."

Thereafter, for three years, he *did* study *The Philosophy*. But, being of unusual discernment and rare intellectual capacity, he abandoned it. And if he derived any benefit at all from that period it was this: that, taking a broad view, the hunt for knowledge is, in itself, a futile thing.

To verify that it was only necessary for him to look about at the world.

There were the physical and social sciences, or, more properly, there was the Leviathan of unorganized facts. There was a baffling array of data; there were giant stands of virgin statistics; there was chaos. No one could even be sure where past experimenters had left off; no one knew in which direction lay the unexplored fields and unseen vistas. In fact, in any scientific field formerly considered a meaningful specialty, a lifetime of study was needed to push forward to the frontier: all energy expended in encompassing the known, no residue remaining to supplement it.

THE specialties fell prey to a particularly insidious type of spontaneous decay. They became rotten with knowledge and burst like a ripe fruit scattering its seeds, or, perhaps more exactly, like incendiary bombs spewing flaming fragments, and the fragments, in turn, passing critical mass, themselves exploding. In the end there remained the dead cinders of once bright fields of human endeavor.

It was these sterile things that the lone research drone examined. They had one all sufficient virtue: they were small, and, at least, a man could tell, in a limited way, where he was going, although without knowing whether he was blazing a trail or fol-

lowing one. And these rare students, these latter-day scientists, continued, largely through inertia, or perhaps clouded sense of destiny, to explore fruitless bypaths, not seeing to what use the material discovered could be put, not divining what relation it bore to the vast accrual of kindred knowledge, not even realizing that it was only a further contribution to the process of fragmentation that had brought men to their knees before the incomprehensible.

And, at length, the student would emerge from the academic burrow to brandish before the satiated sight of mankind a gargantuan study of the effect of increased calcium content on Kentucky Blue Grass over 27 generations, the sex life of a sub-species of the tsetse fly, or a cultural analysis of the natives of the upper Ubangi during the fourth century, B.C., that would be stored on a sagging shelf to mould away, unread, unseen, unknown.

THE mathematicians were little better off. They frittered their time away on perpetually new systems—if they were new—to describe exactly the movement of billiard balls traveling over tremendously contorted surfaces. They amused themselves by concocting numerous expressions of fantastic worlds, of no practical application, where none, or few, commonly accepted axioms applied. At length there were worlds upon worlds, upon worlds. They derived the mathematical relationship between the curvature of light and the growth of the date palm. They pounced upon any series of phenomena no matter how ill-related in reality, and ordered them into one formula.

And, of course, the libraries were degenerate, shot through with the most colossal disorganization. Even libraries that attempted to accumulate material only of limited scope

were eventually inundated by the paper flood. No one knew how much was known or even where to look for it.

The number of works of fiction staggered the imagination. Writers broke off into "schools"; the "schools" subdivided like amoebae. Little cliques arose, usually geographically circumscribed, to carry the banner "*Art pour L'Art.*" And they, too, sank into the quagmire, and still the robot presses rolled. There were uncounted millions of volumes: none could or dared make a selection of the fifty, hundred, or even thousand best: there was no vest-pocket bookshelf guaranteed to produce excellence in all affairs human and divine. There were enough books of sheer genius to provide reading fodder for ten lifetimes. New ones were added daily, but who would bother to pull them out, even to scan the title pages?

And last of all there was The Philosophy: generally accepted as the last frontier; the only place where the human mind could escape from the shackles of the presses. But, alas, even it, too, was lost! The Philosophy, along with everything else, was stagnate. Denied the nourishment of creative thought, The Philosophy did nothing more than worry old bones and excavate theories. The only intellectual direction that the thoughtful gentlemen manifested was that curiously futile circling that comes from chasing one's own tail. But to the bitter end they persisted, carrying their tattered banner forward: "The Last Frontier of Knowledge!"

Edward Barnett knew all this. And he realized, almost from instinct, that there was very little to be done about it. That is not to say there were no "corrective measures," however; there were. They were almost as numerous as the sands of the shore. Two will serve to illustrate.

There was General Synthesis, familiarly known as G.S. But, of

course, things had gone too far for synthesis, and any attempt was foredoomed to failure. Any rational effort only dragged the student deeper and deeper into the peat bog of learning. In the absence of a rational method, the GS hit upon what might loosely be called the metaphysical approach. That involved, merely, a direct and intimate communication with the First Being. Having established such a channel, as their logic demonstrated, all things else must necessarily follow. It was fine cough medicine. But only the leaders were ever in on the direct two-way.

There was the "Burn the Books Club," as it was called by the opposition. Basically, the BBC was a political party of little or no consequence but of wide membership. The chief reason for its negligible influence was its diffuse and disunited nature. Its chief precept was: "Let's turn back the clock to the Golden Days when knowledge, if incorrect, was at least decently and respectably limited.

The question of how far to turn it back gave rise to the disputes. The left said: "Let's purge all the books and start over from scratch." The center said: "Let's purge some, save some." (But of course there was no general agreement on *which* ones.) The right said: "Let us not be hasty. Let us take all (or part) of them and bury them in deep vaults so that they will be available, from time to time, for future reference." These latter gentlemen were known as the "have your cake and eat it too" section.

Such was the state of human affairs. But the state of humans, themselves, was, if possible, even more distressing.

But from the confusion, Edward Barnett could discern one unalterable fact: that civilization and humanity were dying.

The reasons were as simple as reasons can be in affairs human: too

many metal servants, too little work, and absolutely no ambition.

The past bequeathed them a self-oiling mechanism to supply their wants; the past forwarded an immensity of knowledge that dragged them under. Every convenience was at hand. So was the period after which there is nothing.

The birthrate cascaded downward. Brutally, there was no longer any need for children.

Now, for the first time, humans could afford to be really selfish. They were. Since they didn't want to be bothered with children, they weren't. Fearing overpopulation, they destroyed the birth machines. As the politicians explained: "It is the easiest way to avoid another war."

The people, of course, after their various fashions, were sublimely happy.

Strangely, however, the energetic Edward Barnett was not.

He would point, with eyes agleam, to the far stars. And his friends would answer: "What for, fur gosh sake? We've got everything we want."

And Edward Barnett would shake his head sadly.

HE READ long and deeply in history, turning dusty pages rapidly, far into the night, seeing marvelous expanses pregnant with emotion unfolding before him. After reviewing thousands and thousands of years, he came to the conclusion that there was something noble about man's struggle to master the universe. It wasn't the goal so much as the progressing, not the reward, but the battle. There was, in the past, an amount of love, hate, excitement, glory, pathos, victory and defeat whose worth was impossible to balance against any transitory system. Something was in it too beautiful to be allowed to perish. In short, the future deserved the same glut of living that the past had enjoyed. And ob-

viously, under the present arrangement it wasn't going to get it.

He formulated his Plan, and he dedicated himself.

People, here and there, were still having children. Chiefly for the novelty of it. But, after a couple of years, the novelty usually wore off, and the children—as in his own case—were turned over to the robots for care and feeding.

He knew, this intelligent Mr. Barnett, that if he asked politely enough, he could usually get custody of the little tykes.

In a very few months he had over a hundred, all less than two years old.

Next he located an isolated island in the warm western ocean. It had been uninhabited for many years. It was a beautiful green gem set in a field of restless azure. Sparkling, diamond-like sand. Natural clearings, rich, black soil. Heavy jungle, hung with fruit. Clear, cool water, purling between mossy banks. Fish and small, harmless animals. Gay plumed birds.

He moved his children there and placed them in custody of a single robot whose speech mechanism he had wrecked with thoroughness.

In eight years there were only forty left. The powerful law of the jungle had taken its toll, even in such a lovely spot. Which, while unfortunate, was necessary; he needed only the physically fit, the strong, the vital. Over sixty had died, for a robot, unspecialized, is a poor doctor. And those who remained were self-dependent; for when a robot divides its impartial attention among many, none come to rely upon it.

When they were entering their eleventh year, he removed the robot and left them to their own devices. Completely unlearned, uncorrupted, and savage.

Getting the ship built was absurdly easy. What remained of the government indifferently authorized him to use whatever robot spe-

cialists and however much material that he needed. They neither asked nor cared for what purpose. He prevailed upon several obscure students, flattered that their talents should be recognized, talents that were the results of lifetimes spent burrowing slowly outward through the known, into giving him the necessary technical assistance. Within a year he was prepared for his journey.

Old astronomical tomes revealed his destination: a new world, much like the present one, with no highly advanced life forms, that, while undoubtedly harsher than the present island, would serve to nourish the race of men.

He blanketed the quiet western island with a harmless gas, collected his unconscious charges, placed them in their special room, lowered the temperature, pumped in the suspension gas, and was ready to depart.

He blasted off, to quit forever a world that would eventually be devoid of human life and would finally clank its aimless mechanical way into silence and rust.

The journey took twelve years. He had nothing to do but send the robot in occasionally to inject his children with prepared fluid. After the last injection, he put the robot in the evacuator and forced it out into the cold of space.

EDWARD BARNETT turned for the last time from his children. They, at least, would have an opportunity for a new life. And another race of man would work its slow way, nobly, from age to age.

A future that seemed as real to him as the past, a future filled with hate and love, victory and defeat, lay before them. He left that future behind him and sat down at the controls.

One of the children, hardier than the rest, had awakened in time to see

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SEEDS OF FUTURITY

(Continued from page 75)

a white-bearded old man enter a silver—something—that, after a moment, wavered crazily, erupting a rain of fire, danced upward aslant, shattering tree tops, and disappeared in a trail of brilliance.

The child shook his head in mute wonder.

Clear of the atmosphere, Edward Barnett set the controls. Having no place to go, he pointed the nose Outward and twirled the power wheel full open.

Looking back he could see the new world drifting lazily away.

“Another chance,” he muttered to himself. “Beginning all over again. Innocent. As innocent as babes.”