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(Space ship in trouble with meteor swarm; Europa and Jupiter in background)

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We have a high respect for, and just a little dread of, our friend, Mr. Philip MacDonald. We respect him for taking time out from a very lucrative career of screen-writing to write such stories as these, purely for the fun of it. And we're not a little scared by what develops from his idea of fun. Not that Philip MacDonald writes about headless shades that clank in the night or tentacled monsters that titter; he shuns anything so obvious. He prefers the more subtle, and more frightful, terror of situation. (Do you remember Private, Keep Out! in our first issue?) Situations so reasonable, so subtly plausible, that we're too easily convinced that we might find ourselves in the same plight . . . and one day probably will.

Solitary Confinement

by PHILIP MACDONALD

THE light is grey, not so much light indeed as alleviation of darkness. It oppresses you, and as you walk mechanically on, you begin to wonder what time it is.

It must be much later than you've thought. Or have you thought? Perhaps it is earlier; it must be earlier, because the greyness can't mean anything except the approach of dawn. Can it?

You walk a little faster, trying to sort out the foggy swirling in your head. You think — on top, as it were, of all the other jumbled thoughts — that it is a good thing you know your way, because you certainly haven't been paying any attention to where you are going. . . .

You stop. *Where you are going.*

The four words — the feeling of the four words rather than their shape — vibrate all through you. The awful hollowness of fear tugs at the essence of you. You know now, but to cushion the shock of the knowledge thrust it from you and for the first time study your surroundings: the surroundings which are so familiar that you haven't needed to look at them as you go along.

You are in a street. That you have known all the time. But now you study it, to analyze its familiarity.

And find it is no street at all but a depthless, almost formless simulacrum. While you were moving, wrapped in the fog-like uncertainty of your

thoughts, it loomed on each side of you correct and possible. But now that you try to embrace it in your consciousness, its grey misty outlines waver and melt and come together again in new shapes defying space and time — so that what you have thought was the half-timbered and ivy-colored frontage of the school becomes the shadow of a stone-and-iron façaded barracks; the white railings of your friend's house the ruby-tinted steps of some brothel; the stucco of that well-remembered cottage the glass-and-brick unfriendliness of an office building. . . .

The knowledge will not be kept at bay. Your gaze goes inward — and you know it is useless to fight against it any more. This is not life. For you there is no more life as you have known life. This is death and the unknown existence.

The existence you have constantly doubted in secret and completely denied in public. The existence which, you know now, does indeed bear relation to what you have called life — and must therefore contain some sort of reckoning for deportment in that life.

Just as the religions taught. As your mother believed. As was held by a few of even your more intelligent friends.

Fear possesses you. It is no longer an aching hollowness trying to pull you into its void; it has become the core of you.

You know there is no possibility, yet you contemplate flight. And as you do so, the shifting simulacra which surround you begin to fade. They came from greyness, and now the greyness swallows them and moves in on you, impalpable, invisible, but there.

It makes walls. A wall behind you, which you can sense without turning. A wall upon either side of you, reaching forward into more greyness.

A corridor along which you must go, inevitably.

You find yourself moving along it, the fear pervading you like overpowering fever. Through your mind course memories of deeds and thoughts and omissions which must count against you on the reckoning. They come in no rational or time-chart sequence, but fast and hard and real, so that it is as if you were reliving each incident rather than remembering it. But it is worse than mere reliving, because you yourself are divided. You are objective and subjective at the same time; the actor and the observer too, not only performing the actions and thinking the thoughts and failing to do what you should have done, but watching yourself while you think and act and deliberately refrain from acting; seeing from outside exactly in what proportion of wrong, of evil, stands each deed and thought and omission. . . .

The grey walls seem to narrow as you go on between them. As if they are fining down to the point at which you must stop. The point is not near,

but it is somewhere. It will inevitably be reached. You can neither slacken nor increase your pace; you cannot stop — although, the memories over, you are now all fear again.

You fight against the fear as you always fought against fear when you were alive. But this fear is infinite and unconquerable; it seems to have no counteractive possibilities on which you can force thought to dwell. It is so great that it seems insupportable. It seems that it must destroy you utterly — and yet you know paradoxically that here there can be no such end as destruction; that in fact there can be no end.

You find yourself, as a new step in this catharsis of terror, face to face with the dread and hitherto unthinkable fact of personal infinity. And the very contemplation of this awesomeness applies such a spur to the emotion that it shifts to a plane where the now impossible word *unbearable* takes on a sharper shape. . . .

Until a vision comes to your mind, and by its implication eases the agony. Now you see your impalpable grey-walled corridor as a hollow spoke in a vast, illimitable wheel along whose countless other spokes countless other men are moving down the lines of formless perspective toward the infinite inescapable hub.

Fear doesn't leave you. Perhaps it doesn't even lessen — but, rather, concentrates to make room for the new and therefore analgesic thought that you aren't alone.

Of course you aren't! How could you be? What wild incredible egotism can have made you think that you are? You are one of hundreds of thousands, one of millions upon millions.

And your balance sheet, among the myriad other balance sheets, will total far from the worst. Surely it must be less — less wrong than many, many others, less *evil*? Why, even among the men and women you yourself have known in life, you can think of several who were worse than you; crueller, more selfish, less truthful by any standard, more ruthless in their pursuit of self-advantage.

You try to strike a balance for yourself, forcing your thought to dwell upon the other side, upon those in your memory who were as much above you as the others below. You find you can remember more of these — but not so many more. . . .

Ahead, the grey walls narrow yet more sharply. Even beside you they seem to press closer.

The hub is nearer; so near that once more terror surges in you, trying to swamp all other thought and feeling.

But not succeeding, because nothing now can rob you of the solace of the mere thought of companionship. Your spoke may be narrowed nearly

to the hub, but so are all the other spokes — tens upon tens, hundreds upon hundreds, thousands upon thousands, millions upon millions.

The fear contracts again. Now the alleviation is as deep-rooted, as permanent as the terror. This is mercy. However awful the unknown, however severe the reckoning, it will be shared by countless others, who will regard with compassion the myriads whose plight is worse, with envy the host which has no plight.

You have been striving uselessly for slowness, for postponement, for any degree of delay, however minute — but now you begin to hope that the hub will soon be reached —

And it is. The grey walls aren't pressing close any more. Perhaps they aren't there at all. There is a — a *roundness*. . . .

And ahead, somehow expected and inevitable and completely congruous despite all your formless expectation, is a man seated at a desk.

From somewhere, light shines on his bent head, and on the papers over which he is working. He does not look up.

You go forward. You stand at the desk. You wait — until you can bear waiting no longer.

You force out words. "Please," you say. "Please — where are all the others?"

He looks up at you, inquiringly.

"What others?" he says.

