

THE CRISPIN AFFAIR - A JACK SHARKEY NOVEL

fantastic

JULY

SCIENCE FICTION STORIES

A ROUND-ROBIN NOVELETTE BY 5 AUTHORS

Anderson • Asimov • Sheckley

Leinster • Bloch

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James Gurney

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Science Fiction Stories

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Editorial

WE'RE rather proud of the literary relay race that features this issue. A "round-robin" story—in which different authors write different parts of the same plot—is not an original idea. It has been done before; but not for a long, long time. And not, we think, with the wizardry of our five writers.

In planning this event, we tried to choose five top s-f authors whose styles both of plotting and of writing are widely different. Then we commissioned artist Leo Summers to design a cover that had no seeming connection with anything. Then we tossed the cover to our writers and sounded the starting gun.

The result is more than an exciting and original story. It is a revelation into the way the minds of the writers tick. Poul Anderson, creating his bravura characters and situations; Isaac Asimov, grounding the conflict in a framework of theory-in-action; then Bob Sheckley ripping the fabric by going to the ends of the galaxy for complications; penultimately, Murray Leinster beginning the fusion of story strands with ideational adeptness; and finally Bob Bloch taking the wildly disheveled story and tying it up in a brilliant job of plot-resolution, down to the patly ironic last sentence.

This is more than a great story. It is a lesson-in-action in both the craft of science-fiction writing, and in the individual approaches to the field which make it the live and lively one it is.

We welcome your comments.—NL

Five famous science-fiction authors pool their talents in this "round-robin" novella that stretches man almost to the breaking point on the rack of Time and Space. Here is a rare pyrotechnic display of writing skills and styles.



THE COVENANT



Part One

By Poul Anderson

POUL ANDERSON
ISAAC ASIMOV
By ROBERT SHECKLEY
MURRAY LEINSTER
ROBERT BLOCH

ILLUSTRATOR YARGA

TIME," she said.

Ban stirred, uneasy in this dim and rustling air. From outside, he would not have thought The Oracles wide enough to hold as many rooms as now appeared to stretch, doorway beyond arched doorway, further than he could see. Or was this a single great many-vaulted chamber? He didn't know. It was too dark to tell. Too many wings moved under the invisible ceiling. He wondered where the light came from, what little there was of it.

"I beg your pardon, prophetess?" His voice sounded strange in the bones of his head. "I don't quite understand."

"It is as well," said the one who sat across the black table. Her face was not veiled, and he should have been able to see what she looked like. But somehow he had only a blurred impression — eyes which caught more light than they should, so that they became blind luminous ellipses — perhaps, he guessed confusedly, more than somewhat afraid, it was because he could not stop watching her hands. They lay palms down on the table, relaxed, but with strength in every line. They had less taper than a woman's hands commonly do, but he

thought he had never seen any so beautiful.

"If you understood," she said, "you might not dare to act."

That touched his pride. He sat up straight, clenching his gun, and answered: "Prophetess, the Cloud People killed friends of mine. Also, I am the son of the Warden—I have duties—" He faltered beneath her gaze. Something scuttered across the dusky stone floor. Pompousness drained from him. Almost wryly, he finished, "If the Cloud People take the City itself, what Wardenship will there be for me to succeed to?"

Did she nod? "Yes," her low tones replied, "there will be nothing then but the Heaths . . . a few lonely huts where men huddle and mutter, forgetting they ever raised a City . . ." After a pause: "Time is the strength of the Cloud People, even as Space is the strength of man. What you must overcome is Time itself."

Ban sat in twilight, and the rustlings and whisperings seemed to go around and around his head, but he could only see the hands of the prophetess. He fumbled for comprehension: "A man may walk or ride or fly in Space—from here to there—but no

man can swim Time's river. Unless you—What is an Oracle? One who has mastered Time, ever so little perhaps, but not altogether helpless before it?"

She made no answer. "Forgive me," he said. "I am surely wrong. I didn't mean you were merely human, prophetess."

"There was an age once, which may come again if the last men flee out onto the Heaths, when lightning destroyed where it would," she told him. "Now, a hundred times a year, the highest towers of the City are crowned with lightning, and unhurt. That is one force which men have come to understand a little; and so they are not its pawns. There are others. Once, it may be, there were many others. But the world is very old, and much has been forgotten."

Then the silence lengthened so unendurably that he got the courage, or the desperation, to remind her: "Prophetess, I came to ask on behalf of the City—of all mankind, maybe —how the Cloud People can be overcome. For none of our weapons has served. You have not replied to my question."

"Not yet," she said. "Not ever, in full. For there is no destiny. Time is not a single river, sweeping from the birth

of the stars to their last cinders. It is more akin to a huge many-branched delta."

She sighed. "Armies have been broken. So by now, Captain Ban, you should know the uselessness of armies. One man alone, though—"

Her words were like fingers closing on his heart. But he found the strength to say, "Myself."

"I can tell you nothing." The shakiness in her voice was the most unnerving thing of all. "I can promise you nothing. I can only say, go secretly and alone to the island. Remember that Time is the strength of the Cloud People, but Space is the strength of man, and remember that in the end Time and Space are the same. More than that, I cannot say. It is too dark."

The beautiful hands rose to cover the face he had never quite seen. "It has always been too dark," she screamed. "Go!"

Ban rose. He didn't even stop to make obeisance. He almost ran, stumbling over his feet and his gun. For a moment the room echoed with his noise, then he lost awareness of the echoes because his own heartbeat grew so loud.

When he emerged on the

THE COVENANT

terrace—never quite sure how he had done so—it was like waking from nightmare. He spent a while simply leaning on the rail, breathing hard. Piece by piece, he began to recognize familiarity. He looked a thousand sheer feet down the black side of The Oracles to an incongruous park where clipped trees and formal flowerbeds made star patterns. Several other towers were visible, though even at this height the City stretched too wide to be encompassed in a glance. He saw the colonnaded tiers of Alpha, graceful against a deep blue late-afternoon sky; the startling red slimness of The Needle; the shifting polychrome which rescued the massive facade of Arsenal from monotony. The sun was low, striking long rays between those walls, flaming off windows and making parks, forests, gardens, crop fields glow an impossibly intense green. Here and there the light flashed off wings, bird or human. And far on the eastern edge of the world lay a blinding silvery gleam of sea.

It was quiet up here. A breeze ruffled Ban's sweat-dampened yellow hair. He shivered, drawing the tunic closer about his big young body. From somewhere, freakishly borne across a mile or

two, he heard faint merry strains of music. Hard to believe that anyone could dance to a ballad while the Cloud People laired on this same planet. But he had done it himself, a few days ago. (Only days? It felt like centuries, now.) Life persisted unto the final destruction, and life was not a single thread. It was war and defeat and misery, yes, but it was also eating and sleeping and lovemaking and playing games to pass idle hours and looking at the stars with wonder and disputing with your blacksmith neighbor whose shop got too noisy and—

Urmuz came from behind one of the weeping willows which, with stone seats and an intricately playing fountain, ornamented this terrace. He looked out of place here, his great frame squat and hairy in a black tunic, his face battered beneath a military helmet. "What did she say, sir?" he rumbled. "Any help at all?"

Ban blinked, stared around him, clasped his gun as if to draw strength from iron. He felt dimly surprised, through all the turmoil within him, that he should reply with coolness, "I don't know. I did get some advice. But who ever heard of an Oracle making a straight answer?"

Urmuz spat. "Old Mother Grotta, on the twelfth floor, she'll speak plain. I told you not to monkey around with these here upper-level seeresses. Let's go find Mother Grotta right now."

Ban actually chuckled. "I don't need homely common sense, Urmuz, or a fake love philtre—"

"Dammit, captain, her love philtres work! I know!"

"The situation has gone beyond that." Ban's smile vanished, though his lips remained tense. "I suppose it was always beyond that, though we realized too late what the coming of the Cloud People meant."

"What good are these upper-level prophetesses?" persisted Urmuz. "They're frauds, captain, that's what they are. Their words're so bloody vague that after things've happened, they can always claim that's what they meant. Me, I'll waste my money on blondes and booze."

"Be quiet!" Ban yelled. "What do you know about it, you mud-brained sub-level mechanic? Go back to school and learn about the prediction paradox, at least, before you start quacking—" He saw the ugly face stricken, and knew he was only venting his own fear. Urmuz had stood with

him in the last battle, when others fled and the Cloud People laughed unseen. Urmuz had guided his first baby footsteps, and taught him to handle a gun, and carried him home from youthful nights when they drank down stars and moon and sang the sun awake . . . "I'm sorry," said Ban. "Nerves."

"Nothing to be sorry about, captain," said Urmuz. "Part of my job, being cussed out. Well, so what did she tell us to do?"

Ban looked away. "I have to do it alone," he said. "Secretly."

Another emerged from the willows. She was as young as he, and her light white robe did not much hide fullness and suppleness. The loose hair streaming down her back was the color of a sunset after storm, and her eyes were great and gray in a sweetly shaped face. "Ban," she said, making his name beautiful to him. "Captain Ban—"

"Yes?" He turned with eagerness to watch her, thinking that he would probably not have many more hours to watch anything at all.

She stopped before him, flushing, and they stood a while in mutual awkwardness.

Finally she sighed. "May

you reveal what the prophetess told you?" she asked.

Ban shook his head. "Best I don't."

"He has to go somewhere secret," blurted Urmuz. "Why don't you wait here, captain, and I'll get our kit and we can start right out?"

"At once?" breathed the girl.

"I think so," said Ban. "No way to tell when the Cloud People will attack next, but it will be soon—and that next attack will bring them to the edge of the City."

She looked seaward and shivered. "Mists out there," she said, "and cold, and thin singing. Is that how it will be?"

"If we don't stop them," he said. "Yes, I'd better leave at once."

Before I become so afraid I can't leave at all, he thought.

"I'll get our kit, sir," repeated Urmuz.

"You stay here," said Ban.

"Sir!"

All at once Ban had no strength left to argue. "Very well," he said. "Go fetch the stuff, then, and come back here."

"Yes, sir!" Urmuz snapped a salute.

"Don't tell anyone," said Ban. "Not even my father."

"No, sir. Of course not."

Urmuz touched the flight stud on his brass belt. The wings unfolded from the flat pack under his tunic, catching the light in a gauzy metallic shimmer. The noise of his takeoff resounded loudly among the willows.

When he was out of sight, Ban took the girl's hands. She tried to withdraw them. "Please," she whispered. "Don't. I am her attendant—"

"And someday you'll be her successor," he said bitterly, not letting go. "Oh, yes. But still, if the Covenant allowed me to come up here, again and again, and allowed you to sit by me and talk in the moonlight, surely I can touch you when I say good-bye!"

She gulped and stopped pulling. Her head drooped.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"I haven't any," she said in a hurt, uncertain tone. "You know that."

"You must have had one once, before your mother gave you to the prophetess. What was it?"

"Please," she begged again.

He released her. One hand smacked against his bare thigh, the other clamped on his gun. "All right," he said harshly. "As you will. Good-bye."

"You aren't—your man won't be back till—"

"I sent him off to get rid of him," said Ban. "Someone has to go, and alone . . . she told me. It may as well be myself."

"No!" she cried. "Someone else, Ban!"

"I am the Warden's son," he declared, "and you won't tell me your name. So good-bye."

He opened his wings with a savage blow on the belt control, and whipped off the terrace while her mouth was still parting to speak.

After a moment he realized how childishly melodramatic his exit had been. A mature man wouldn't have sped off like this—the very absence of farewells underlining his self-sacrificing heroism and similar egotistic noises. But it was too late now. Stubbornness, resentment, the fear of looking foolish, were stronger than survival instinct.

His wings rotated hard and steadily. He must squint into the speed of his own passage, and felt cold in a mere tunic. The brass belt contained, in its various compartments, basic field equipment and a few days' emergency rations. But he should have gotten full kit. A helmet, at the very least—

Well, he thought with sudden excitement, well, he wasn't really about to embark on

any one-man campaign of reconquest. The prophetess had only said to go secretly to the island. Doubtless that meant nothing but a spying-out expedition—closer, to be sure, than anyone had yet dared approach a stronghold of the Cloud People, but still, just a quick investigation. He might be back before dawn, and Ur-muz would make him a stiff drink and— He shook his head, as if to clear the last of that oracular twilight from it, and tried to look sanely out on a sane world.

Once or twice he passed a hovering citizen, and they hailed him, but he continued and soon had left them all behind. No one ventured far out over the sea any longer.

Nonetheless, the realization broke through his thoughts with a shock: that he was now above the water. He looked behind, seeking a final view of home. The sun exploded in his vision. For minutes that burning after-image remained. When he could see again, there were no towers, no beach, only dark choppy waves.

He didn't need map or compass to tell him he was bound due east, cutting across the Gulf of Orea toward Mwyrlan. He had flown this way often enough, in boyhood years before the Cloud People

came. (Where now were the green Mwyrlan hills, the cottage of Ilbur the Robot with smoke lazing up from its chimney, the girl who shyly brought him milk in a wooden bowl? He remembered the sound of bells, and the belling of hounds when he hunted, but now there was nothing there but fog, gray fog and the Cloud People flitting and singing in a cold formless gray—where had Mwyrlan gone? Indeed Time was a mystery which men did not comprehend.) He had usually passed over the island which marked the halfway point. Even then it had been a swart volcanic desolation; now the mists had reached that far westward and the island could no longer be seen. Scouts flying close thought they had glimpsed black towers on it, through an occasional rift in the fog, but they were never sure—

There!

The vapor bank rose like a mountain. Ban swallowed panic and slanted downward. This was as close as those scouts who returned had ever ventured. A few had tried to fly into the swirling thick mass of the cloud itself, but they had not come home.

It was very silent here.

When he landed, retracting wings through his tunic slits into the unit on his back, Ban felt the water chilly around his knees. A few streamers of fog curled and smoked; the waves were stilled. The sun was directly behind him, already blurred. Ahead was no sharp demarcation. The air simply grew murkier, until at last blackness loomed from water to sky, cutting off half the world.

Ban hefted his gun and started wading.

That was the idea which had sprung into his head, when the prophetess said to go alone to the island. Anyone else would approach from the air—would he not?—and the Cloud People would see him (or hear him, or whatever they did for awareness) and destroy him. But the island shelved very gradually toward open water. There were places where, at low tide, you could walk knee deep for miles until you reached shore. In fog and night, would even the Cloud People know of a single man walking through the sea?

The water splashed with his passage. Its cold stung him. The air was frigid, too, with a dank taste. Despite all need for caution, he cherished his own little noise, for otherwise he was totally alone.

Grayness thickened; the sun was a blur at his back, heatless and cheerless, toppling toward the night only minutes away now. Ban unclipped the flashlight at his belt and tested its beam. Already it helped him: Hard to tell without it where water left off and the bleak, eddying air began. Mist streamed through the cone of light. Somewhere out in the unseen, he thought he heard dripping, as if the bowl of the sky were chilled and wet and dripping into the sea.

The sea felt heavy. He was getting higher all the time, now the water was hardly above his ankles, but it was an effort to shove it aside. He began stumbling more and more often on the irregular bottom, nearly dropping his gun. Seen by flashbeam and the last daylight, the weapon looked rusty. And it weighed in his hand. How it weighed! The flashlight, of thin inert metal, remained itself; but the gun barrel grew dull. Was there really a faint patina on his brass belt?

And when had he torn his clothes? Ban squinted through deepening gloom at his tunic. It hung from his bent shoulders, damp and rotten. He jerked a hand in startlement. The sleeve ripped apart and hung in rags. His belt certain-

ly was tarnished, no, it was corroded, close to crumbling from his waist. The air was like ice; as it entered his lungs he coughed and cleared the rheum from his throat. His legs hurt, the knees weren't quite steady and he wanted to stop and rest but there was no place to rest. Was the sun down yet? Or had his eyes blurred on him? He rubbed them with the back of the hand that held the flashlight. He couldn't see so well. His legs were twin blotches. But his gaunt liver-spotted hand

was still visible, if he held it close. He stroked it down his wet white beard—slowly, ever so slowly.

Time, he thought wearily, Time was the strength of . . . of who had she said? And with every step forward— His thoughts trailed off incoherently. He was too tired now to think, or be afraid, or anything except sleep. When he reached the black shore, maybe he could lie down and sleep. There had been something he meant to do there, but— He waded onward.



Part Two

By Isaac Asimov

THE land tottered under his feet, the last of the wavelets gone. Maybe— Maybe—
To sleep—sleep—

* * *

It was like the soft sound of chimes in his dull ear, the distant sound of thin singing.

Where had he heard something like that?

A battle? A tall, rough man at his side? What was—his—name? Music—

Like thin sweet wind-torn words.

"There! He was almost gone!"

Ban heard that. His eyes

flickered open and suddenly he knew he was Ban. Of course What was wrong? Where was he?

He could breathe more easily somehow. He lifted his hands and the tawny, yellowing hair of his chin caught on them and he stared foolishly at it, uncomprehending.

"Help me hold him," said the girl's voice.

How did he know it was a girl? There were no words, only a singing in his mind, and yet there were words and they were girl's words.

A different voice—different in what way?—but a boy's, said, "He's not that timevy."

"Timevy enough for me. Get under."

Ban struggled to his feet and stared about him. No one was holding him. No one was lifting him. The fog stretched out, luminously gray, not quite as dank as he remembered.

The sun, he thought suddenly. The sun must be gone by now. Why was it not night? The fog was still gray, as gray as the Prophetess' blank eyes. He remembered the Prophetess? What had she said?

The girl's voice sang, "I never saw one before."

"I did," said the boy. "I came out once where the fog

closes in and saw one on—on — like — change — like — different—come and go."

Fly, thought Ban, catching the dim thought intuitively. The boy had no proper expression for it. We fly, he thought, we fly. He whirled around and spoke for the first time since the fog had closed him in. "Who are you?"

There was nothing, at first, just the voices, and as he turned and tried to beat the fog aside by force of eyes alone, there was a short smothered chime without words.

Then, "Here we are, Changeman."

They were like two coagulations, two clottings in the cloud; two shrouds with nothing inside.

He felt a chill and the hairs rose on his arms, so that he could feel their pressure against the sleeve of his tunic.

Oddly, his mind jumped backward. Hadn't the tunic been torn, shredded? He remembered feebly for it was all as foggy as the fog. He shone the flashlight on his sleeve and it was whole, thinned and worn with age, but whole.

Suddenly, he flashed the light in the direction of the Cloud People and there was nothing there. Musical wordless chimes in his ears was all.

He moved the light away and the shrouds were there again.

He said, "What has happened to me?"

The boy's voice said briefly, "You fell." Then, "You Change People always fall, don't you know that?"

"Fell?" He looked down, shrinking automatically from an unseen and non-existent cliff.

"Fell," said the girl. "You are so silly."

"They don't know," said the boy.

"Tell him," said the girl.

"I don't think we ought to."

"Who cares? I want to watch his top move when he talks. Do you see it in among the fringe, there?"

"The fringe came when he fell. It always does."

Ban stared, feeling worn with the accumulating strain. They were discussing him and by fringe they must mean his beard.

It hit him with the shock of cold water colliding after a dive. His *beard*. He had no beard. He felt it and it was there and was yellow but it had been white.

He said, "Even so, I've grown old." He felt the brittleness in his knees, so noticeable against the lithe strength he remembered.

"You fell," said the boy, explaining.

I fell, thought Ban, and I grew old. He said, certain, "I fell through time. How?"

"I don't know. You Change People always fall. You can't lift up."

Again Ban was remembering: Time is the strength of the Cloud People.

She had said that. The Prophetess had said that. Hadn't she said more?

But he wasn't as old now as he had been. His beard was no longer white. His uniform was no longer in shreds. *They* had held him, the boy and the girl. They had gotten under.

"Are you holding me now?" he demanded.

"Of course," said the boy, "or you'd fall."

"Lift me higher, then."

"Why?"

"So I can talk."

It was like feeling air come into clogged lungs, or slowly straightening a cramped muscle. The beard shrank to a yellow inch and his gun was almost glossy. He looked at it and at his jagged fingernails, then pointed the gun in the direction of the figures, automatically.

The girl's voice said, "What's that, _____?"

(She concluded with a clear

musical triad which did not resolve itself into words. Was it the boy's name?)

The boy said, "It throws a piece of metal. It can't hurt, but if he tries I'll drop him at once."

Ban put the gun down hastily. He had to find out. He might get back. The Prophetess had sent him to find out. And if he didn't get back, even so—He might not get back—He would not—

Drearly, he thought that after all he might not die in some flaming instantaneous holocaust or under the crush or cut of steel, but peacefully of sleep and old, old age.

He was young enough now to laugh shortly. He said, "Why do I fall here? I don't fall back there." He jerked his head, not knowing in the least if he were gesturing in the right direction.

The girl said, eagerly, "The fog holds you up."

"No, it doesn't," said the boy at once. "Keep quiet, ——————, you know nothing about it."

The girl made a spiteful little discord, a sound that resolved itself into nothing in Ban's mind.

The boy disregarded it. He said, "You do fall. Slowly."

Ban said, "Fall?"

"In your world," said the

boy, "everything is a gentle slope, isn't it?"

"No," said Ban.

"Yes, it is," said the boy. "Our Knower has told us. Your world is a slope and you roll down it all the time. Down and down until you wear out and die."

Time, thought Ban, the inexorable flow of time. What had he said to the Prophetess? No man can swim Time's river. Or climb up Time's slope. One could only roll downward, or slide and slip downward, or, if one were at complete peace, walk downward.

"Time," he said aloud, as the Prophetess had said to introduce their recent meeting.

"And here," said the boy's chiming voice, "there is no slope. Here it is free and we can move as we wish, up and down—"

No, he didn't say "up and down." Ban caught at the nuances of the chimes. This was different. His mind seized on "up and down" because the musical tones put the thought in his mind, but the thought was not quite "up and down." The words were different; the meaning—

"Up and down in time," said Ban, breathlessly.

"Up and down," said the

boy, with again that difference.

"And I fall down, only down."

"It's the only way you Change People ever move. So if you come here, you fall."

Because here there is no slope, only a precipice; a plunging gap into which all life and matter fell, changing and aging and falling apart and dying. Rock might survive unchanged and water and air and all the fundamental fabric of the universe, but metal would rust and fabric disintegrate and—all living things would die.

Ban's heart beat faster. No wonder men penetrating the fog never returned. No wonder armies and arms were useless. How hit a creature or how beat one who could evade you by moving in a direction you could not even conceive.

He could go back now and tell them there was no victory.

But could he go back?

They were holding him now, the boy and the girl, and under him was the black remorseless pit of eternity.

He said, "How do you move upward?"

"You just ——————
—————."

They went on and on but the chimes were chimes, not

words. He lacked the ability to make meaningful concepts out of meaningless ones. As well, he thought bitterly, ask a fish how to breathe water or a tree how to live on sunlight.

"Teach me," he said earnestly, desperately. "Teach me."

Teach me to breathe water, fish, for I must or drown. Teach me to live on sunlight, tree, or I starve.

"I'm showing you. See, you are moving. See, up and down."

Ban held his breath, closed his eyes. Was there any sensation at all other than what he felt in the way of strength. Now he felt his muscles harden, then slacken. There was no movement, no feeling of up and down. He was simply standing on the beach; he could even hear the faint noise of the surf. There was only the change within, the physiological concomitants of old age coming and going. That was all.

He said, "Isn't there any way I can see better?" What good would seeing do?— He didn't care, seeing was man's chief sense. While the fog closed in, nothing could be clear.

"See?" asked the girl.

"See!" said the boy, changing the word too subtly for

Ban to catch the nature of the change.

"You mean he's so used to the fog that—" began the girl.

"I want no fog," said Ban, with a sense of physical loathing at the very word. "I want it clear."

"But it is clear. Your people have the fog."

Ban fell silent. Here was a world in which all levels of time were commingled, in which people could move up and down—NO, he wondered if the words they were trying to say were "pasted" and "futured"—in such a world with up and down and past and future all commingled, surely all would be a fog to a man condemned to an eternal soft travel down a slope.

He pleaded, "Hold me. Hold me."

He had to work it out in case—in case he could get back. And on earth, with Time a mere slope that bound all creatures and all matter to a limited inexorable downward wash, it was fog to them, to the Cloud People.

Earth was a world in a universe of open space and bound time. Space is the strength of man, had said the Prophetess.

Had she known all this? he wondered suddenly. Had she understood? Then why had she not said so?

And did she know how to fight them, the Cloud People, as the Cloud People were fighting us?

His youngish heart leaped. But it was hard for them, too. It was for that reason that they, irresistible as they were, unfightable, undefeatable, didn't take over at once. The time-limited universe fought them and they advanced only slowly.

If men could only help the universe. If he could get back—

He said, "Teach me to fly in—in time."

The girl's voice said, "He means — — — — —."

The boy interrupted. "I know what he means, but how can I show him?"

"Show me," insisted Ban, desperately. "Show me."

"I am showing you. I'm up'n'downing you." (And behind the words, Ban could now hear a dim and simultaneous "past'-n'futuring you.")

The girl said suddenly, "Lift him all the way up—Let's see what happens."

"No," screamed Ban.

He felt the lifting as though something, not air, not matter, but something, pressed against him with the speed of his passage. His cheeks were

downy with unrealed fuzz and his legs were spindly. The pants came down over his shoes and then he seemed to shrink together.

He remembered his wings. He reached for the flight stud but it was gone and the wings themselves had fallen off his back a dull lump of reddish rock.

"No," he screamed in treble, and started to run across a fog-shrouded beach on short legs that entangled themselves in strands of raw wool that was turning to fleece. He fell and kicked chubbily, drooling and conscious of nothing more than a vague hunger. His lips moved in response, sucking—

Then his legs stretched out, and he rose tottering, unsteadily, to his feet. He was thin, about a foot less in height than he dimly realized he ought to be.

A voice said, and he recognized it all over again, as a girl's. "He changed. Did you see that? He changed."

"Of course." It was a boy's voice. "He's one of the Change People. What do you expect. —He isn't as timevy as he was."

Timevy, thought Ban's boy-mind. Time-heavy.

He remembered. And he didn't remember, too. He re-

membered the past and his own future when he would grow up; no, when he had grown up. It was madly confusing. He was twelve years old. Just a moment ago, he had been on Mwyrlan and Ilbur the Robot had told him stories out of his long, long memory of a time when men crowded the earth and built cities on power unthinkable—dim myths and legends coming out of the crowded mechanical consciousness of a deathless robot—

And then he had been twenty-two and then ninety-three and then fifty-one and then twenty-nine and then a half and then twelve again, in inextricable confusion.

Yet how could he understand it better now? It made more sense.

Even the fog—The fog!

It was still there, but thinner. He could make out a glimpse of flatness, of gleaming smooth evenness and of infinite gap and sparkle and, in the distance, moving patches of shininess. The Cloud People?

He turned to bend his glance at the two who were with him. They were shrouds still, but sparkling shrouds now.

The boy said, "He's — now. When we lifted him up high, he got ——."

Ban almost caught that. The young were intimate with time. Time stands still for them and flows oddly, commingled and intermingled. It is only in maturity that the convention clamps down.

He had felt the movement through time just there at the end. He had felt something rushing past them.

"Teach me," he said, "teach me now how to move through time."

"Put out _____, _____, _____," said the boy's chiming voice.

Ban tried. He tried. He tried to let his mind intuit if it could not understand. Almost he thought he had it. He put out something—something—

"No," said the boy. "Like this."

Ban felt something wrenching at him and something of him had moved. Nothing anywhere on his body. Something deep in his mind. It had moved and even fluttered.

"Now," said the boy. "I'll let you down-easy."

Ban felt himself swelling and filling out, lift up and grow broad across his shoulder. The uniform was on him, fitting snugly, and the comfortable weight of furled wings was on his back.

The boy said, "No. You don't get the right _____. It's out, but you don't use it."

And a new voice interrupted. A deeper voice of chords that were incredibly beautiful. A mature voice, a subtle one.

"Younglings, It is long past time you were home. And you have been asked not to stray so near the fog banks."

The boy's chimes, thin and subdued, said, "Yes, Knower."

But the girl said, "We have one of the Change People."

"I know that, youngling. And you have been amusing yourself with him, which is not kind. And I see you have been trying to teach him to _____ also."

"It was wrong," said the boy, humble.

"Have you decided it was wrong?" said the Knower, without anger or reproof, merely questioning.

Ban cried, "Knower. Wait." But when he cried "Knower" he felt the thought shoot across the gap between himself and the Cloud People in a different form.

"You wish something?" There was a third shroud next to the two he had seen earlier, and it did not glitter. Even in the thinned fog, it did not glitter.

Ban had to bring his new knowledge to the City. He said,

"Send me back, Knower. Let me return."

"Ought I?" The Knower said nothing more than that to him. The next words were addressed to the boy. "You are holding him."

"He's not very timevy," said the boy.

"I understand that. Let him go."

"But I'll fall," cried out Ban. "I'll die. Don't let go."

The third shroud clarified itself. A face, something very like a blank, formless face, came mistily into view. Something like blind, luminous ellipses formed themselves to gaze with infinite compassion down upon him.

"Let him go," said the Knower, and Ban knew that the boy must.

And he also knew the thought into which his word "Knower" had transmuted itself. He cried out, stranglingly, "Prophetess—Prophetess—Are you one of them?"

And the boy let go and, in his despair, Ban let himself fall, uncaring. The beach was under him, steady, motionless, but he fell and his aching muscles slackened.

And when the desire for life overwhelmed him, as it must to the end and he struck at his flight-stud to unfurl wings and race old age to the City, the rusted remnant came off in his trembling fingers and his cheeks fell in over disappearing teeth.

He struggled with fading fierceness against the end.

"Prophetess—" he wailed.



Part Three

By Robert Sheckley

DESPERATELY he fought time. Wisps of fog curled around him like pale headless snakes, and the sand far be-

neath his feet shifted and crept like an army of malignant ants. Ban winged through the fog bank, etern-

ally falling, and saw his rifle barrel corrode and crumble to fine dust before his eyes. He flew, and a part of him watched with fascinated horror as ropelike blue veins corrugated his emaciated arms, and his head, unsupported by the wasted muscles of his neck, drooped on his chest.

"No man wins a race against time."

Who had spoken? Was it the Knower? Or had the prophetess shrieked into his ear. Whoever spoke the words, Ban knew they were true. Even before reaching the far edge of the fog bank, Ban knew himself as old, too old. He could feel the sluggish blood pounding in his brittle veins, could sense the threadlike beat of his heart threatening momentarily to stop.

He knew then that he would never live to reach his city. Even now he was dying, dying . . .

Uselessly.

With an old man's petulant anger he turned back. What had the Cloud People taught him? Could he remember it now, when memory had grown dim? Could he check his fall through the unplumbed depths of time?

Ban fought his way upward, swimming like a tired fish against the rushing river of

time. He remembered concepts without words, he sensed his heaviness in time. A new direction seemed to open for him. He struggled toward it singlemindedly, and someone was singing a song without words. He fought for knowledge. Truly were his people called the Change People! For now Ban discarded everything he had learned, believed or felt before entering the fog banks that marked the furthest ramparts of time.

He attempted to lift himself in time.

In part, he succeeded.

He could feel the bone-wrenching jar as his body struck the sand. The blow would have shattered an old man's frame; but Ban was old no more.

Neither was he young.

He lay helpless on the sand, and realized that his stupendous effort had been based upon an incomplete knowledge of time's processes. He had held back death; but his present state was perhaps worse.

Stretched out on the sand was the heroic trunk and head of a middle-aged, yellow-bearded man. Beside him was his gun, the barrel deeply pitted, the wooden stock turned green and beginning to sprout. The hand that held the gun

was a talon with brown-spotted parchment skin stretched tightly over frail bones. The other hand belonged by rights to a chubby boy of perhaps twelve. His legs could be judged at about four years old; but there from those small, fat legs hung a man's colossal feet.

Ban had learned the use of time—partially.

"Listen to me, Ban. Can you hear me?"

"I can hear you," Ban said, and realized that the Knower had spoken to him.

"You must become again what you were, Ban. You must fight again with time. You must —— yourself."

"Impossible!"

"You must do it," Knower said. "For your own sake, and for the sake of all others. Because now we are all in deadly peril."

"I do not understand," Ban said.

"You still comprehend yourself only spatially. You must think temporally, as well. You must realize that you have stretched yourself to an immeasurable distance across time. How can I explain to you? Ban, your temporal elongation has created a flaw, a fault, a discontinuity in time. Now you are a ——."

"I still do not understand."

"Do you know what a fuse is?" Knower asked.

"Yes."

"You are a fuse. You are a connection. You are a conductor. A sea-wall holds back the ocean; you are a hole in the wall. A single tree on a barren plain attracts the lightning; you are a tree. Two elements may be stable until a link has been made between them; you are a link. Now do you understand why you must become as you were?"

"For whose good?" Ban asked.

"For the good of your people and mine," Knower said. "Ban, our people are not truly at war. Instead, we are both warred against. We push you because we ourselves are pushed, by the chaos that seeks to engulf the ordered universe. We must quarrel no longer. We must cooperate, your people and mine."

"How can I believe you?" Ban asked. And after a moment, he heard a cool, lucid voice behind him.

"What he tells you is true," the voice said, and Ban recognized it as that of the prophetess. "I myself tell you, Ban, you must become as you were. That is the first step."

Ban listened in an agony of indecision. Here in the thin mists, a man could be led to

believe anything! Was this the prophetess speaking to him, or had the Knower adopted new form? What was happening, what was time going to do?

He decided. He fought to become as he had been. The heroic middle-aged trunk and head grew years younger; the parchment right hand started to fade, to take on size and strength. He fought to retain it, and suddenly his boy's legs grew three years younger. Desperately he aged his legs, and felt his arms grow thin and old. He made them young again, and felt his feet shrink hideously in his boots.

"It's impossible!" Ban screamed. "I can't do it all at the same time!"

"You must!" the prophetess told him.

"I need help!"

"No one can help you. Only you can do it. And Ban—there is very little duration left to do it in!"

Now Ban could hear a vast roaring in his ears. The sand beneath him seemed to mutter and shrink. He heard the Time children wail suddenly.

"Quick, Ban, quick!"

Staring wildly, Ban saw a strange entity before him, a creature of blind, luminous ellipses, beautiful, unhuman hands, a sparkling shroud. It

was Knower. It was the prophetess. For a moment, Ban thought that they were standing side by side. Then he realized that he was staring at a single hermaphroditic entity, neither male nor female nor neuter, combining essences of all. Surely not human, yet perhaps benevolent. And Ban could not fathom the purpose of this Janus-natured creature, though he knew that purpose had to be there.

"Ban! For your own sake and for the sake of your people! *Become what you were!*"

Ban stared at the entity. Barren knowledge flooded his mind. Suddenly he understood the important yet ambiguous nature of the Time children, and what they would do to him, and he to them. Almost, he could understand the nature of the Knower-Prophetess.

"Ban!"

He blocked all thought from his mind. He made a massive effort, pitting all his strength and concentration against the baffling task before him. His hands became a man's, and his feet grew large again, his legs stretched. He ground his teeth together, concentrated . . .

Space and time recognize no differences, no difficulties, no

separations. Near and far, past and present, are terms for men to use; but the forces of space and time are not contained in terms.

So, in another part of the galaxy, at another time and place, an event was taking place whose meaning was crucial to Ban and also to his people.

On a planet named by its inhabitants Hiallo, a small red crustacean dropped to the sandy ocean floor. Far from his burrow, he moodily contemplated the mysterious ways of love. He considered the reasons for his rejection by the brood-queen. He thought of his position in life, the honors he had attained, the chances he had missed. He wondered about the ocean of air far above him, distant, hidden.

He finished thinking. With one powerful claw he pinched off his head, thus committing the eight thousandth suicide for that year upon Hiallo.

His act was in no way remarkable. Rejection by the brood-queen was normally followed by suicide upon Hiallo. And yet, this one particular act was crucial to Ban and his people.

In another part of the galaxy, at another time and

place, an event was taking place whose meaning was crucial to Ban and his people.

A biped named Marcellus, of a planet called Terra, sat beneath a huge oak tree. The sun was hidden, and the gloomy forest somewhere in Germania was chilly, so Marcellus pulled his woolen cloak tightly around him. He looked around and tried to figure out where he was. Everything looked the same in these damned woods; one tree looked like another tree, and all the avenues of the forest led in different and unknown directions.

Marcellus and ten others, under the command of a centurion, had marched out from the forward command post at Legae to check on the movements of the barbarians. They had penetrated half a day's march into the forest, had been about to turn back when the tall, pale-skinned man had fallen upon them. It had been a slaughter. At the end, Marcellus had fled; and now he was lost.

He was an unimportant man; and yet, it was very important that he get back. For he, a common foot soldier, had glimpsed a sight in the forest that might change the destiny of Rome itself.

Marcellus got to his feet, stifling a curse when he put

weight on his slashed leg. He looked around at the identical corridors of the forest. From what direction had he come? He didn't know; but it was unlike a Roman to stay indecisive for long. Marcellus chose a direction and struck out, limping.

After half an hour's march, he stopped. There were faint sounds on either side of him, sounds that no bird or beast would make. Marcellus peered around him into the gloomy woods. It was almost night. He was very hungry, thirsty, and weaponless.

The whispering sounds came closer. Marcellus listened for a moment, then broke off a branch of a tree. Quickly he stripped it of twigs. A Roman soldier would die fighting, no matter what he had to fight against.

His only regret, as the whispering drew nearer, was that he would probably not live to tell the others of the strange and marvellous thing he had glimpsed in the woods of deep Germania.

Death in battle was a common fate for soldiers of the Roman Empire, and Marcellus himself was in no way a remarkable man. And yet, what he had seen in the dark German forest was crucial to Ban and his people.

In another part of the galaxy, at another time and place, an event was taking place whose meaning was crucial to Ban and his people.

On a planet whose discoverers called it 3Bcc, two explorers were having an argument. They were at present four-legged and two-handed. For the purposes of the argument, each had extruded a triple tongue. Enormously simplified, their argument went like this:

"It was your fault!"

"Yours!"

"You took the gravity readings wrong. You left out an entire decimal point. You gave me this misinformation, and in that way our ship was wrecked."

"I will admit that the dials did not read correctly. But *you* were landing the ship. You should have felt the gravity fault and corrected for it in spite of the readings."

"You shouldn't have trusted the dial. You should have *become* a dial."

"I was sleepy. Besides, if I had become a dial, who would have been on standby?"

The two explorers stared at each other. At last, good humor reasserted itself. They flowed into friendlier shapes and contemplated the planet upon which they had crashed.

"It is a good land."

"A very good land."

"We will stay here, we will propagate, we will increase."

"And lose capability for our journey?"

"It is intended for journeys to have an end. And when the end is reached, the capabilities for journeying are no longer needed."

"That is true. This is a good land, and you have made a good answer. We will not be as we are . . . Still . . . Tell me, which of us will bear the children?"

"You will. After all, I piloted the ship."

"No, *you* will. For through me we came to this place, and the next task is yours."

The two explorers thought for a time. Then one said, "So important a decision cannot be argued. We must let another decide."

"That could be dangerous!"

"Not to us."

So they constructed a hermaphroditic machine to select fairly and randomly who would be the mother and who the father. And when that was done they turned with a good will to the land, and let the machine do as it desired, and where and when it desired.

The machine lived. With hideous self-awareness it knew itself and its destiny.

Not even desire was spared the machine; not even a strange and absurd destiny connected inextricably with the act of a red crustacean creature, with the courage of a Roman soldier, and with the final decision of two explorers.

"The machine is dangerous," the female explorer said.

"Not to us," said the male explorer.

"Then to our children, or to their children."

"Would you have me destroy the machine?"

"No. Limit it, confine it, dedicate it!"

"Very well," the male explorer said.

The machine, which no longer directly perceived itself as a machine, accepted the limit and the dedication with good grace. It could not blame the explorers, for the machine recognized its own danger inherent in its qualities of randomness. The built-in limit almost took care of that; but made much more difficult the task to which it had been dedicated. Perhaps now the task would be impossible; but the explorers didn't care.

"Where is the machine?" the female explorer asked after a while.

"It has left us," the male explorer answered. "It has gone in order to do its work."

"And it didn't even say goodbye," the female explorer said thoughtfully. "I wonder if that means anything . . ." But then she had to take care of her two children, and there was no more time to think of the machine.

And Ban, lying in the coiled sea-mists, was dimly aware of all this. A red crustacean, a Roman soldier, a hermaphroditic machine . . . He fought to become as he had been, struggled, cursed. Slowly, in-

exorably, he began to succeed. He was becoming Ban again . . .

And then he heard the despairing wail of Knower, the simultaneous shriek of the Prophetess. It was too late. The lightning had struck, the sea-wall had collapsed, the last fraction of the fuse had flared. Just before unconsciousness struck him, Ban could feel the forces of chaos engulfing him much as storm clouds engulf the sky.



Part Four

By Murray Leinster

HE DID not exactly return to consciousness. Later, it seemed to him that he had not really become unconscious, but that the things he saw and heard and felt were so completely preposterous that his mind rejected them. Because it appeared that chaos had engulfed the universe and that time and space and reality had ceased to be. On the whole, that was a reasonable assumption.

Nevertheless he saw. He felt. He even heard. The hearing was a thin singing which did not form words at all, but muted wailings. The feeling was that the cosmos had turned askew, and the horizon had tilted so that what should have been the east was up, and what should have been the west was down—and he tended to fall toward it—and the beach was merely before him and the sky behind.

The seeing was unexpressable distortion of the beach. He saw it, but in a manner he could never have explained to anyone. An artist's portrait of the beach and the waves would be something like it. But it would have to be a portrait, which differs from a photograph because a photograph is a picture of an instant and the sitter happens to be in it. But a portrait is of a person, and the moment is only a convention.

So Ban saw the beach, not as of this minute and second, but as a portrait shows a person. Somehow he saw it, all at once, shrouded in the fog that had come upon it since he was a boy, and also he saw it in bright sunshine. It was merely a pretense that he saw it between two breaths—at a given moment—because he could look inland and see smoke coming from the chimney of Ilbur the Robot, and he could see the beach empty as it was before there were either Cloud People or men. And he could see it as it would be aeons from now—.

No. What he could see changed, even as he looked. He saw it, after a fashion, as a man in flight, and thousands of feet high, would see a winding highway in all its turnings in the same seeing. A man on foot on the same highway

would see only a few hundred yards before him, and only remember what was behind. Ban saw the beach in such a strange perspective. He saw the beach from that dimension which is time. But it changed. There was an ending, which drew nearer. It was not unlike a highway seen from far above, with a cloud-mass moving to blot it out. Ban saw an ending of the beach, in time. There was a thing which was like a wall in the direction he knew to be the future. Nothing existed beyond that wall. The beach came to an end. There was no time beyond the wall. It was the end of everything,—the solid world of men and the cloudy mist of the Cloud People alike. And the Cloud People wailed.

Ban could not actually see the wall because it was nothingness. Only nothingness could bring an end to time. And nothingness cannot be seen. Yet Ban knew it because it did not reflect the light that fell upon it, not yet absorb it. Nothingness cannot do either. It cannot do anything. If it could act it would not be nothingness, but something. Yet Ban knew that yonder real things ceased to be. Beyond that spot in time there was no time. There was a moment be-

yond which there was no next second. And this was what had made the Knower and the Prophetess cry out in horror, because Ban had brought it about.

Back in the city of the tall towers and living people, folk were apprehensive, but they feared the Cloud People. They did not fear this. But here with the east overhead and the west underfoot Ban knew that the Cloud People wailed because they could perceive what men could not, save Ban.

But how could he know? What had happened to him? The Knower had said bewildering things, each one specific but all of them confusion. The Knower said that Ban had stretched himself across an immeasurable distance of time. He had made a short-circuit, a discontinuity, perhaps a hole or a puncture in time, rather, a gap in time and space together. While the different parts of his body were child and man and doddering ancient all at once, he had created a weakness in the fabric of the universe. And somewhere, somehow, reality began to collapse. These things were the only possible explanation, but Ban found himself objecting. A thing cannot collapse unless by so doing it releases energy. A thing is not

destroyed unless its destruction releases some tension. Yet it was old, old knowledge that the universe of suns and stars and matter—and of Cloud People and men—exists only because it is held in existence. It did not create itself, and it does not sustain itself. And in some strange fashion Ban's blind fumbling had broken one small spot in the fabric of being. It could be likened to a puncture. And it spread.

But why could he see through time as the Cloud People did? And why was the east now overhead and the beach before him and the west beneath his feet? He noticed, suddenly, the tugging which pulled at him. He tended to fall. Downward. Toward the west. He fought the fall automatically, struggling to sum up this experience to know what to do. But he did not incline to fall toward the beach, any more than a man beside the Needle or Alpha or the Arsenal would be drawn toward those vast structures. Down, to Ban, was westward.

Why? There had to be an explanation.

He struggled to grasp his situation to do battle with it. In his absorption he unconsciously lessened his conflict with the westward pull. He re-

minded himself of a bird that had flown against a window in one of the City's towers. All windows and all outer doors were screened by force-fields like bubble-films, which allowed air to pass in or out gently, but resisted any fast-moving solid object or any strong wind. Sometimes a bird in full flight struck such a screen. Then the screen which was meant to act gently became violent. The bird was flung away, spinning and reeling and toppling helplessly. Sometimes the circuit-breaker clicked off and the bubble-field ceased to be unless someone restored the circuit. Yet one could reach a hand gently through the field, and the field ceased until the hand was removed. A man could walk through. But a running man would be flung back with violence.

That was it! Normally a man travelled slowly through the bubble-films which were instants of time. They let him pass slowly and gently through to the future, and age, and death. The boy and girl of the Cloud People had transported Ban through innumerable such films. Where the mists of the Cloud People hung, there was less impediment to time-movement than where clean sunshine shone

upon the City. But when Ban became partly capable of time-motion, yet erratically; when Ban's legs were in one time-film and his body in another; when his body violated the laws of time and space, he shorted out the time-films as a hand through the bubble-screen destroys the screen until the hand is removed.

In effect, his body thus impossibly stretched through time acted as a man's body across an open screened doorway. It would destroy the screen; so that tornado-winds might roar through with nothing to stop them. And those tornado-winds would beat with terrific violence upon the man. He might be flung crazily away, like a bird trying to fly through a window.

This would explain everything. Partly instructed and partly capable of motion through time like the Cloud People, Ban had destroyed the time-films of unguessable centuries. And this caused the terror of the Knower and the Prophetess. Some part of him, some trivial part perhaps, remained remote from its proper place in time. There was a connection between it and now. There could be no time-films between while that connection lasted. So there could be no time. And through that gap

came nothingness, to spread as a break in a soap-bubble spreads . . .

And Ban was beaten upon by the forces of the cosmos, trying to hold to what held it in being, like a force-bubble with a man lying across a door while a tornado raged. He was flung crazily about like a bird which has tried to pierce a window's bubble-field. He moved in no normal direction; he had no secure link either to space or time, and therefore the east was up and the west was down—but where was the past and future?—and the sky was behind him and the beach before. At least that was so.

But the beach was not before him! There was water, rippling like a vertical wall. There was stone. He looked ahead and saw down upon the rocky pinnacles of that small island halfway between Mwyrlan and the City. There was no mist upon it now. He had forgotten to resist the pull upon him, and he fell, but not toward ancientness and death, nor toward the ground or sea, nor even skyward.

He fell toward the west. He gazed downward and saw that his motion was a retracing of the path he had flown, from the Oracles to Mwyrlan. He fell headlong.

And then he noticed his body. It had changed again. He was a gangling boy of fifteen. He cried out angrily, and his voice broke. It was partly treble and partly the discordant croak of early adolescence, and then Ban realized what the tugging at him was, and what was its consequence. He was not only in a new relationship to the things of space, but of time. He no longer had an inherent tendency to fall toward the future and increasing age. Now he fell toward infancy. And the direction of infancy was the west.

He checked his fall by a terrific exercise of will, to look at his hands. They were not thin as a youth's hands are. They tended toward chubbiness like the hands of a child. The first phalange of each finger was rounded. His finger-joints were smooth.

It was exhausting to hold himself still, and not to fall toward the west. The pull was not as strong as it had been at first. He was a boy now, and the Cloud People children had said of him as a child that he was not as timevy—as time-heavy—as an old man. But as a boy he had not the strength of manhood. Yet now it was a man's mind that demanded the impossible of a child's body.

And that man's mind despaired, while still he fought the pull of time toward infancy, which lay to the west. He needed help. He needed knowledge. He raised his face toward the beach and cried out shrilly for the Cloud People to come and help him, however great their desperation.

Again there was a change. He still saw the beach as from time, but the distance through which he could look futureward had dwindled. The wall-which-was-not-a-wall was nearer. The end of existing things was closer. As a standing forest grows small while a forest fire rages across it, time-to-come grew less as nothingness swallowed it. Yet nothingness cannot swallow anything. The beach and the sky and the sea were not devoured, but bit by bit they ceased to act; to reflect light or absorb it, to pull together or push apart, to move or to resist motion.

They ceased to be real. They became one with all those things which are merely possible and are not actual. There remained, in theory, a link to actuality in that they could exist if they could affect each other, if they could do anything, if they could perform any action of any sort. But for

a thing to operate there must be time. Time is the arrangement by which things are able to happen. Without time nothing can occur. And there must be space. Space is the arrangement by which things can consist of parts which are side by side. But time and space were broken and breaking together like a punctured bubble, and the universe grew smaller.

There was no longer a cloud-bank over Mwyrlan. Ban had gone back to a time in his childhood before the Cloud People formed their mist over Mwyrlan and slowly, slowly, slowly deepened it until ageing men and women fled their homes and the war with the Cloud People began. But though Ban went back toward days long past, he still could see the vast encroachment of nothingness upon all things that were.

He knew very bitterly that he had brought the catastrophe about. He'd not intended it, to be sure. He hadn't done it alone, even, two Cloud-Children really began it, and the Knower was aware and thought their behavior only unkind. There had been no awareness that there was danger in the playful investigation, by Cloud-Children, of the nature of mere man. Yet the Cloud-People could travel back

and forth in time from past to future. They could see the future. Then there had been a future, but now it grew less and less, so that there must be some dimension beyond the three of space and the fourth of time in which alterations of those four could come about. And of this dimension neither the Knower nor the Prophetess had any inkling. So there was a limit to prophecy.

And now he understood his present estate and the topsyturviness of up and down and past and future. The universe attempted to use him—who had begun it—to bring an end to its destruction. The cosmos strove to heal itself. Had Ban died on the beach as an incredibly aged and futile dodderer, the sun would not shine on Mwyrlan, to be sure, but it would still shine on the City, for a while. Had Ban not extended himself through time, there would not now be a gap blocked by his still-displaced body in which time could not exist as bubble-films which make the endless succession of seconds and minutes and hours and years. If Ban could restore himself to what he had been— withdrawing every atom of himself from any other time but the present—the crack in the cosmos would

heal itself, like a force-bubble across a door or window. But it was impossible. He could not do it. There was only one thing he could do, which would have the same effect. He could repair the fabric of reality by not ever having been.

It was this that he must consent to, in yielding to the westward tugging. His body was fourteen years old, now. Perhaps thirteen. To him, childhood lay to the west and maturity to the east. He was drawn backward through a displaced time toward infancy. This tugging, this pull, was the result of the laws of existence, because existence could not continue while his body contravened the laws of existence. If he let himself fall past ten years of age, and six, and two, and infancy itself . . . If he let himself fall back into the time before he was, then there would no longer be a break in the unity of time and space. He who had never been could not create a flaw. His body which had never existed could not short-circuit time. There could not be a break where he had never existed to make it.

Ban raged. It is not too bad a thing to die. All men face it sooner or later, and there is a secret knowledge which comes

to every man at such moments. The knowledge is that it is not the end. But Ban was required to make a greater sacrifice than death. It was demanded of him that he surrender ever having been. He was required to embrace extinction.

He raged. But he was the Warden's son, and the City must be defended. He could not survive, but he could make extinction count. With somehow an air of scorn, he let himself fall. And it was dramatic, as he fell, to remember bitterly such unrelated things as a girl who shyly gave him a bowl of milk in the home of Ilbur the Robot, and Urmuz scolding him respectfully for some unrecalled fault, and the Prophetess with the strong hands and strangely indefinite face beneath her hood, and the girl who was to be her successor, who denied that she had a name and yet looked wistfully at Ban when he was in the prime of his strength and arrogance.

He remembered innumerable things, and now not one of them would ever have been real. Because he would never have been, and Urmuz would not teach him soldier-craft, nor his companions ever sing or drink with him, nor his

father try to hide his pride in a swaggering son who would be Warden after him.

These things would be worse than forgotten. They would never be thought of. They would go into that limbo of possible things from which so few ever emerge to become actual. When Ban had never been born — why — things would start fresh. Perhaps his father would have another son, whom Urmuz would guide and scoldingly cherish. His friends would not miss him. How could they miss someone who never was? Perhaps they would choose another in his place, not knowing that it was a place that could have been filled otherwise. The girl at the Oracles would not think of him. How could she? She would think wistfully of someone else entirely. The Prophetess would not guide him, nor the Cloud-People children.

Then Ban revolted. In mid-air, he abruptly fought his own descent to infancy. His mind was still a man's mind, in a body perhaps four years old. The disparity, in fact, was very probably the reason for the disaster to all things. But he was required to make a greater sacrifice than any other man was ever asked to make. And it was not a reasonable bargain. He would ac-

complish nothing worth the sacrifice if he ceased to exist.

He fought the pull that dragged at him. He ceased to fall. Above him was the east and below the west and behind him there was the sky and before him the very shore-line of the Gulf of Orea. But he would not fall farther. He would not! Because there was no reward for his falling.

His non-existence would not keep the Cloud-People from forming the thinnest of mists above Mwyrlan, in which people aged overnight, when the mist was thin, and then between sunrise and even-fall, when it grew thicker, and then in fractions of an hour when the cloud was at its densest.

If he were not ever born, the army of the City would still sally forth valiantly to do battle with the Cloud-People, and never return. The mist over Mwyrlan would spread slowly out over the water, and cover the rocky volcanic island halfway to shore, and move forward to the City.

If he were never to exist, still someone—not he, but someone—would desperately demand counsel of the Prophetess on how the Cloud-People could be vanquished, and she would send him to Mwyrlan as she'd sent Ban, alone. And

he would die and ultimately the towers of the City would be filled with mist. Then the Cloud-People with their singing voices would drift about the wetted structures and only a few men would remain out on the Heath, forgetting that men had ever built cities or flown among the clouds.

These things would happen despite his sacrifice. But Ban had ventured greatly in defense of the City, because he was the Warden's son and it was his obligation. He was still the Warden's son, and it was still his obligation to defend the City. This sacrifice would do no good to the race of men. He would not sacrifice himself to extend the dank domain of the Cloud-People! He would not!

He cursed, and wept with rage because his curses were in a shrill treble voice, and he was a small and naked child in whom a man's mind inexplicably functioned, and because he stood alone against time and space and destiny and there was no one to help him in what he must accomplish. Must!

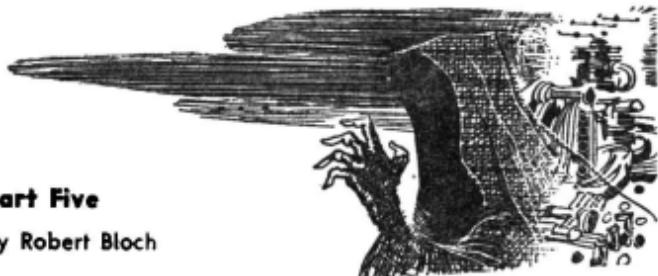
"I won't do it!" he cried in his child's high voice to the world and the sky and the sea about him. "I won't do it!" he cried fiercely to the galaxy. "You can't make me!" he

cried to the universe itself. "Unless you make it save the City I won't do it!" he cried to all creation. But oddly enough he thought of a girl in the Oracles, who had looked wistfully at him when he was

a tall, virile young man.

There was no reply. He clenched his child's fists and pipingly defied all time and space and destiny:

"I won't!—won't! won't!—won't!"



Part Five

By Robert Bloch

THE warp was widening. Time and Space had lost coalescence in a disintegrating cosmos. The Prophetess had predicted, the Knower suspected, but only one man had full knowledge, full realization. And shrilled his ultimate defiance against the ultimate extinction of all things—Ban, in his child's body, tangled in the loosening web of Time and Space, keening, "I won't, I won't, I won't!"

Only one man, and he helpless.

One man—and one *other*.

It was not man, nor beast; neither male nor female, but both and more than both. The machine which had been cre-

ated on 3Bcc and vanished, was dedicated to a mission. And that mission involved neither instinct nor emotion. It was the pure, objective goal of cosmic survival.

Unfettered by tri- or quadri-dimensional laws of Time and Space, it moved freely through the universe as a random entity. All choice was its portion, all sentience and sensation was there to sample. But the machine was seeking the focal point, the focal point of weakness wherein it must function.

And its initial data was limited.

Perceptivity came slowly. First came the knowledge of weakness—a learned acquisi-

tion, for the machine had no initial referents. Then came the dimly-intuited associations.

The cosmos was a maze. Somewhere in the maze there was a flaw, threatening the entire structure. *Problem:* find a way through the maze to the flaw. *Clue:* personify awareness of distress.

On these vague premises the dedicated entity acted, and localized isolated instances; computing and discarding on the basis of intensity, probing for full comprehension.

Two images emerged, two clues to aid in the search. The machine established them as voices.

"I won't, I won't, I won't!"

First the voice was an interior echo. The machine sought to personify it. The only data which came through was ambiguous enough, and in the form of a single, simple impression—*redhead*.

Redhead.

Where in the universe was the redhead in distress? Another mechanism moved into full operation—and the machine found itself foundering upon the sandy ocean floor of the planet Hiallo, contemplating the red head of a crustacean which rested there, snapped clean from the lifeless body.

The cry had not come from here.

And yet it echoed, was still echoing, for in the Oracles the nameless neophyte who loved Ban could hear his call; she pressed her hands to her head, tangling her fingers in the red locks as his cry came to her. *"I won't, I won't, I won't!"*

The machine sensed her presence now, but simultaneously a stronger image came—not the echo-emanation but the source of the call itself.

A yellow-haired man.

The machine blurred and left the ocean bed of Hiallo. It was on Terra now, in Germania's tangled forest, perceiving the battle. Perceiving, and perceived. For yellow-haired Marcellus glimpsed it.

Marcellus—was this the entity the machine sought? It sensed no danger to the cosmos here, only individual destruction, and yet it could not be sure. There was more data to be gleaned. It followed Marcellus, waited for him in the wood. And it assumed substance and beckoned Marcellus with a whisper. Marcellus awaited it, armed with a puny branch.

The machine probed. Here was fear and courage, mingled in defiance. Marcellus did not want to die, but his

thought was wholly self-centered. It was his danger and his alone which prompted him. And "*I won't, I won't I won't!*" had not emanated from this yellow-haired biped.

So this was not the area of threat.

The machine moved from Terra, probing again. The keening cry existed. The keening crier existed. Existed in an area of almost non-existence.

Images and impressions multiplied. A fog, and a singing. A hairy, ugly man pacing the entrance to a tall edifice. A cold-eyed female in prayer. A moist-eyed female (*redhead? yes!*) in supplicating agony. An amorphous presence, a Knower, drained of all but dread.

All of them caught, caught in the maze. And the maze itself disintegrating. Yes, the cosmic threat was here, in this area. In this *non-area*. For that was what it was becoming, as Time and Space twisted and tore, and only one faint voice defied eternal termination with "*I won't, I won't, I won't!*"

The voice of a *yellow-haired biped*.

On land?

On sea?

In the air?

The machine probed. Prob-

ed land that was scarcely land, as Space sundered. Searched a sea that was now sky and mist and fog commingled. Roamed air that was truly empty—empty of all dimensional inter-relationship.

The machine sought the source of the sole remaining strength; the awareness of extinction which still rebelled against the knowledge of its own ending.

And it came to Ban; came to the ridiculous child-body twisting and turning in a loosening Limbo where north, south, east, west, down, up, forward and back whirled free of all relationships.

The machine sensed the problem and the solution. It communicated with Ban using neither word nor image, merely direction in the form of reinforcing Ban's own survival-urge.

Suddenly Ban felt the strength surge back to implement his defiance. He began to move, to grow. He would become *himself* once more. And give *himself* up to the gap, to heal the breach between Time and Space. When he was properly timevy, he would be fixed in the balancing-area, forever, so that the universe could stabilize.

There was no right, no

wrong, no alternative at all to consider. This was his purpose, his function. Where the new-found resolution came from was not even a question; nor was the source of his sudden power to act.

He became Ban.

And being Ban, he had only to remain fixed, forever fixed in this Limbo beyond Space and Time, so that the balances he had disturbed would be restored.

It meant an end to living, an end to consciousness, and end to self-awareness. But it was meaningful sacrifice, and worthy of the son of a Warden. Even if he would no longer know himself to be the son of a Warden. Even if he would no longer retain consciousness of squat Urmuz or the beautiful nameless one who waited (would wait forever, now, and in vain) inside the Oracles.

Ban was the sacrifice, his was the dedication. He felt consciousness spin away. For a moment there was a physical twinge of regret, but then the physical awareness left him, and the regret was purely psychic. He would cease to be, and that was right; yet he had lost the final battle. For in the end, this wouldn't alter the inexorable course of events. The cosmos would persist, but for how long? Only

until the Cloud-People invaded his city and the Heaths beyond. Then the extinction would proceed until all was engulfed in nothingness. For Time would devour Space.

So it was a delaying-action, at best, this sacrifice he was making. But it must be done. He must surrender himself, lose himself in the whirling, for he was dedicated—

Dedicated.

The machine observed, registered. Something was wrong. *Ban* was not dedicated. Dedication was the machine's function.

Ban must not usurp its place.

The machine could heal. And it must communicate, quickly, establish a relationship with Ban before he was irrevocably lost in the elemental Limbo.

"Ban—come back!"

Then the directive came, implemented by action. The machine lifted, grasped, transported.

Ban awoke to blinking awareness, standing upon the terrace beside the black bulk of the Oracles. He felt the firmness beneath his feet, sensed his proper physical-temporal relationship with Alpha, The Needle, the distant Arsenal.

He was *himself* again.

But for how long?

Something had snatched him from the jaws of sacrifice. But the jaws still gaped. Far away was the sea and the mist. Beyond that the Cloud-People hovered. Hovered closer and closer. Nothing had changed.

Nothing had changed, because he had failed.

Urmuz emerged from the shadows, breathless.

"You left me behind, sir—I was looking everywhere—" His face worked. "She told me—"

The girl with the great gray eyes stirred in the shadows behind the burly man.

Ban faced them, nodding slowly. "Yes, I went alone." He shrugged. "And to no avail. There is no way to conquer the strength of the Cloud-People. Man cannot conquer Time."

"But I don't understand, sir—tell us what happened—"

Urmuz stared at Ban helplessly. Then his eyes fell. "I suppose it's no use talking."

Ban nodded. "No use talking," he echoed. "The end will come soon."

The girl stepped forward. She walked proudly, bearing a gift in her great gray eyes. Ban saw it there, and found the exultation of ecstasy even

in despair. His hands went out to claim the gift, and she was in his arms, her hair enveloping his shoulders in a red caress. So we die, Ban told himself. *But first, even for a moment, we live—*

"Hold!"

The voice that was not a voice came from the face that was not a face.

Ban stepped back, releasing the girl. She turned to stare, as he and Urmuz stared, at the apparition of the Prophetess.

"I heard," she said.

Ban squared his shoulders. "Then what does it matter?" he countered. "You know time has run out for all of us. Let the girl be. Give us the last few moments that remain."

"Captain Ban." The beautiful accents were measured. "You spoke of failure. Of this you need not be ashamed, for I am aware that you fought hard, even to the point of giving up the ultimate essence of identity."

"I tried," Ban murmured. "I failed."

"To fail is one thing. To surrender, another." The tones were even. "You are a soldier. Even now, with the battle lost, you cannot capitulate. You cannot flee, as you seek to flee, into the oblivion of momentary sensation. This girl is dedicated to the Cove-

nant of the Oracles, just as you are dedicated to Wardenship of this City."

"I cannot stop the Cloud-People," Ban replied. "Time is too strong."

Urmuz stirred restlessly. "What do you want us to do?" he grumbled.

The Prophetess faced him. Something in her face—or what radiated from it and obscured it—caused the squat man to bow his head.

"I—I meant no disrespect, Prophetess," he muttered. "But the Captain's right. We are finished. What can we do now?"

"We can function as we were meant to function. We can observe the enemy. Watch and wait." A beautiful hand rose and beckoned. "Come with me."

Together they moved into the many-vaulted vastness of the Oracles. Together they sank down before the table as the Prophetess took her place behind it and bowed her head. For a moment, silence. The long, meaningful silence which is a prelude to extinction.

Almost Ban could see the clouds gathering and moving towards them; the Cloud-People were swirling before the sea and city, as Time moved forward to devour Space. Al-

most Ban could sense the death of the world as he knew it.

And then he *could* see, *could* sense.

For a cloud was with them now; the Prophetess, Urmuz, the girl could see it, too. It hovered in the vaulted archways above, and it emanated from the lovely hands upon the table-top.

The Prophetess had conjured up the final vision . . .

Once again Ban gazed upon the desolate shores where the shimmering clouds hovered. He thought he recognized the shape he had come to think of as the Knower, but he could not be sure. For there were thousands of shapes; thousands upon thousands of swirling semi-solid shadows, lambent and yet unillumined, obtuse and opaque. They were not merely hovering, they were converging now—converging upon a common goal.

It might have been a machine there in the sky, but it was not an artifact Ban recognized. It might have been a gigantic ship, designed to transport those who had not mastered flight by wing. It might have been a living entity, functioning to attract the Cloud-People.

Ban and the others did not

know. But they could perceive what it was doing—incredibly, inexorably, it lured the cloud-shapes to its side. And a myriad whirring slits opened and engulfed them. The cloud-shapes disappeared, incorporated into the shining, shimmering sphere. The object was now a gigantic, blinding blur, and Ban could not look upon it, even in prophetic image.

He wrenched his eyes away, stared down at the Prophetess, seeking to fathom her face.

And now, suddenly, her *face* was a blinding blur, mirroring the machine.

The non-voice spoke.

"Fear not. Time is conquered. The Cloud-People, as you know them, are willing to depart. For they know that there is no future for them here. Their Time can devour our Space, but by the very nature of the act, the cosmos will be destroyed. I have told them so, and they have agreed that their place is in a cosmos of their own. I shall transport them there. That is my purpose, the function to which I am dedicated."

"But—who are you?"

"An instrument. An instrument serving one purpose—survival. I have served here in many ways. As Knower of the

Cloud-People. As Prophetess, to your humanity. Now my service here is ended."

Ban glanced upwards and away. The gigantic vision was fading—and within it, the gigantic machine was blurring, too—

He tore his eyes from the incredible and searched the features of the Prophetess. *The features that were fading now as the machine faded.*

The lovely, lulling voice was fainter, too. But Ban could still hear it as it spoke.

"You thought you had failed, Captain Ban. But you did not fail. My mission was to save the cosmos, but I could not function until I found the focal point. And that focal point was in your strength, your human defiance of all destiny. It was your voice, crying, "*I won't, I won't, I won't!*" that guided me, brought me here. I go now, forever from your cosmos and your consciousness. But there is no need for me any longer. The Covenant is ended. I leave you with all you require to survive—your humanity, which is your strength."

The voice blurred, the vision blurred, the Prophetess blurred.

And then there were only the three of them—the squat,

shaken man, the quiet, trembling girl, and the yellow-haired warrior in an empty, vaulted chamber.

"I don't understand," said Urmuz.

"I do," murmured the girl.

"I'll try," said Ban.

Together, the three of them walked back into the garden.

The sun was shining, as far as the eye could see.

"Dream?" muttered Urmuz.

"Reality," the girl affirmed.

"Perhaps both," Ban nodded. He paused. "If, somewhere, sometime, someone perfected a mechanism dedicated to saving the universe—and if it directed itself to us—"

"Foolishness!" Urmuz was scowling.

"But the Cloud-People are gone. We're safe. You know that, don't you?" the girl persisted.

"Yes. And I'm going to do something sensible about it—in the nearest tavern." Urmuz turned. "Coming, sir?"

Ban shook his head, moving closer to the girl.

Urmuz shrugged and moved down the dappled sunlight of the path.

For a moment Ban stared down into the great gray eyes—so cool a contrast to the red radiance of the haloing hair.

"You heard what she—it—said," he whispered. "The Covenant is ended."

She nodded gravely.

"That means there is no need for the Oracles. The future need not be foreseen; it is in our hands."

His hands reached for hers and she did not draw away.

"You are now destined to be a prophetess. You are a woman now."

Again she nodded. "And mine to claim."

She gave him her lips willingly enough, but Ban sensed no surrender. And when she was at last free to speak, her voice was firm. "Claim," she echoed. "But not to conquer. For I am a woman, as you are a man, and that is a struggle which never ends."

"You're joking," said Ban, with all the instinctual arrogance of the commander and future Warden.

"Perhaps," said the girl.

"Be serious for a moment, my darling. Remember, it is permitted now—tell me your name."

Slowly she raised her great gray eyes to his, and in them he read the forecast of his future.

"Your name," he commanded.

"Time," she said.

THE END

FANTASTIC