

# *Astounding* **SCIENCE FICTION**

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## **COVER BY WELKER**

Illustrations by Orban, Pawelka and van Dongen

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**NEXT ISSUE ON SALE DECEMBER 17, 1952**

# THE IMPACTED MAN

BY ROBERT SHECKLEY

*A contractor on a big job is apt to have many headaches. Little things can go wrong—minor flaws that mar the whole work.*

Illustrated by Orban

TO: CENTER

Office 41

ATTN: Controller Miglese

FROM: Contractor Carienomen

SUBJ: ATTALA Metagalaxy

Dear Controller Miglese:

This is to inform you that I have completed contract 13371A. In the region of space coded ATTALA I have constructed one metagalaxy, incorporating 549 billion galaxies, with the normal distribution of star clusters, variables, novae, et cetera. See attached data sheet.

The outer limits of ATTALA metagalaxy are defined in the accompanying map.

Speaking for myself, as chief designer, and for my company, I am confident that we have done a sound construction job, as well as a work of great artistic merit.

*We welcome your inspection.*

*Having fulfilled the terms of our contract, the agreed-upon fee is payable at any time.*

*Respectfully,*

*Carienomen*

Enclosed:

*1 data sheet, installations*

*1 map of metagalaxy ATTALA*

TO: Construction Headquarters

334132, Extension 12

ATTN: Chief Designer, Carienomen

FROM: Asst. Controller Miglese

SUBJ: ATTALA Metagalaxy

Dear Carienomen:

*We have inspected your construction, and have held up your fee accordingly. Artistic! I suppose it's artistic. But haven't you forgotten our prime concern in construction work?*

*Consistency, just to remind you.*

*Our inspectors discovered large amounts of unexplained data occurring even around the metagalactic center, a region one would think you would build with care. That can't go on. Luckily, the region is unpopulated.*

*And that's not all. Would you care to explain your spatial phenomena? What in chaos is this red shift you've built in? I've read your explanation of it, and it doesn't make any sense to me. How will planetary observers take it?*

*Artistry is no excuse.*

*Furthermore, what kinds of atoms are you using? Carienomen, are you trying to save money with shoddy materials? A good percentage of those atoms were*

*unstable! They break down at the touch of a finger, or even without the touch of a finger. Couldn't you figure out any other way of lighting your suns?*

*Enclosed is a data sheet, outlining the findings of our inspectors. No payment until they're cleared up.*

*And there is another serious matter, just brought to my attention. Evidently you weren't watching too closely for stresses and strains in your spatial fabric. We have detected a time-flaw near the periphery of one of your galaxies. It is small, at present, but it could grow. I suggest that you take care of it at once, before you have to rebuild a galaxy or two.*

*One of the inhabitants of a planet*



*impinging on the flaw is impacted already; wedged into the flaw, due entirely to your carelessness. I suggest that you correct this before he moves out of his normal time-sequence, creating paradoxes right and left.*

*Get in touch with him, if need be.*

*Also, I have word of unexplained phenomena on some of your planets; items such as flying pigs, moving mountains, ghosts, and others, all enumerated in the complaint sheet.*

*We won't have this sort of thing, Carienomen. A paradox is strictly forbidden in the created galaxies, since a paradox is the inevitable forerunner of chaos.*

*Take care of that impaction at once. I don't know whether the impacted individual realizes it yet.*

*Miglese*

*Enclosed:*

*1 complaint sheet*

Kay Masrin folded the last blouse into the suitcase, and, with her husband's assistance, closed it.

"That's that," Jack Masrin said, hefting the bulging case. "Say good-by to the old homestead." They looked around at the furnished room where they had spent their last year.

"Good-by, homestead," Kay said. "Let's not miss the train."

"Plenty of time." Masrin started to the door. "Shall we say good-by to Happy Boy?" They had given Mr. Harf, their landlord, that nickname because he smiled, once a month, when

they handed him the rent. Of course, he immediately reshaped his mouth to its usual prim line.

"Let's not," Kay said, smoothing out her tailored suit. "He just might wish us luck, and what would happen then?"

"You're perfectly right," Masrin said. "No use starting a new life with Happy Boy's blessings. I'd rather have the Witch of Endor curse me."

With Kay following him, Masrin walked to the head of the stairs. He looked down at the first floor landing, started to take the first step, and stopped abruptly.

"What's wrong?" Kay asked.

"Have we forgotten anything?" Masrin asked, frowning.

"I checked all the drawers and under the bed. Come on, we'll be late.

Masrin looked down the stairs again. Something was bothering him. He searched quickly for the source of the trouble. Of course, they had practically no money. But that had never worried him in the past. He *did* have a teaching job, finally, even if it was in Iowa. That was the important thing, after a year of working in a bookstore. Everything was going right. Why should he be worried?

He took a step down, and stopped again. The feeling was stronger. There was something he shouldn't do. He glanced back at Kay.

"Do you hate leaving that much?" Kay asked. "Let's go, or Happy Boy'll charge us another month's rent. Which,

for some strange reason, we haven't got."

Still Masrin hesitated. Kay pushed past him and trotted downstairs.

"See?" she said from the first floor landing. "It's easy. Come on. Walk to Mummy."

Masrin mumbled a few subdued curses and started down the stairs. The feeling became stronger.

He reached the eighth step, and—

He was standing on a grassy plain. The transition was as sudden as that.

He gasped and blinked. The suitcase was still in his hand. But where was the brownstone? Where was Kay? Where, for that matter, was New York?

In the distance was a small blue mountain. There was a clump of trees nearby. In front of the clump was a dozen or so men.

Masrin was in a dreamlike state of shock. He observed, almost idly, that the men were short, swarthy, thickly muscled. They wore loin cloths, and carried beautifully carved and polished clubs.

They were watching him, and Masrin decided it was a tossup, who was the most surprised.

Then one of them grunted something, and they started moving toward him.

A club bounced off his suitcase.

The shock dissolved. Masrin turned, dropped the suitcase and ran like a greyhound. A club whacked his spine, nearly knocking him over. He was fac-

ing a little hill, and he bounded up it, arrows showering around him.

A few feet up, he realized that he was back in New York.

He was at the top of the stairs, still in full stride, and before he could stop himself he had run into the wall. Kay was on the first floor landing, looking up. She gasped when she saw him, but didn't say anything.

Masrin looked at the familiar murky mauve walls of the brownstone, and at his wife.

No savages.

"What happened?" Kay whispered, white-faced, coming up the stairs.

"What did you see?" Masrin asked. He didn't have a chance to feel the full impact of what had happened. Ideas were pouring into his head, theories, conclusions.

Kay hesitated, gnawing at her lower lip. "You walked down a couple of steps and then you were gone. I couldn't see you any more. I just stood there and looked and looked. And then I heard a noise, and you were back on the stairs. Running."

They walked back to their room and opened the door. Kay sat down at once on the bed. Masrin walked around, catching his breath. Ideas were still pouring in, and he was having trouble sifting them.

"You won't believe me," he said.

"Oh won't I? Try me!"

He told her about the savages.

"You could tell me you were on Mars," Kay said. "I'd believe you. I saw you disappear!"

"My suitcase!" Masrin said suddenly, remembering that he had dropped it.

"Forget the suitcase," Kay said.

"I have to go back for it," Masrin said.

"No!"

"I must. Look, dear, it's pretty obvious what happened. I walked through some sort of a time-flaw, which sent me back to the past. I must have landed in prehistoric times, to judge by the welcoming committee I met. I have to go back for that suitcase."

"Why?" Kay asked.

"Because I can't allow a paradox to occur." Masrin didn't even wonder how he knew this. His normal egotism saved him from wondering how the idea had originated in his mind.

"Look," he said, "my suitcase lands in the past. In it I've got an electric shaver, some pants with zippers, a plastic hairbrush, a nylon shirt, and a dozen or so books—some of them published as late as 1951. I've even got Ettison's 'Western Ways' in there, a text on Western civilization from 1490 to the present day.

"The contents of that case could give these savages the impetus to change their own history. And suppose some of that stuff got into the hands of Europeans, after they discovered America? How would that affect the present?"

"I don't know," Kay said. "And you don't either."

"Of course I know," Masrin said. It was all crystal-clear. He was amazed that she wasn't able to follow it logically.

"Look at it this way," Masrin said. "Minutiae makes history. The present is made up of a tremendous number of infinitesimal factors, which shaped and molded the past. If you add another factor to the past, you're bound to get another result in the present. But the present is as it is, unchangeable. So we have a paradox. And there can't be any paradox!"

"Why can't there?" Kay asked.

Masrin frowned. For a bright girl, she was following him very poorly. "Just believe me," he said. "Paradox isn't allowed in a logical universe." Allowed by whom? And he had the answer.

"The way I see it," Masrin said, "there must be a regulating principle in the universe. All our natural laws are expressions of it. This principle can't stand paradox, because . . . because—" He knew that the answer had to do with suppressing the fundamental chaos, but he didn't know why.

"Anyhow, this principle can't stand paradox."

"Where did you get that idea?" Kay asked. She had never heard Jack talk that way before.

"I've had these ideas for a long time," Masrin said, and believed it. "There was just never any reason

to talk about it. Anyhow, I'm going back for my suitcase."

He walked out to the landing, followed by Kay. "Sorry I can't bring you any souvenirs," Masrin said cheerfully. "Unfortunately, that would result in a paradox also. Everything in the past has had a part in shaping the present. Remove something, and it's like removing one unknown from an equation. You wouldn't get the same result." He started down the stairs.

On the eighth step, he disappeared again.

He was back in prehistoric America. The savages were gathered around the suitcase, only a few feet from him. They hadn't opened it yet, Masrin noticed thankfully. Of course, the suitcase itself was a pretty paradoxical article. But its appearance—and his—would probably be swallowed up in myth and legend. Time had a certain amount of flexibility.

Looking at them, Masrin couldn't decide if they were forerunners of Indians, or a separate sub-race which didn't survive. He wondered if they thought he was an enemy, or a garden-variety evil spirit.

Masrin darted forward, shoved two of them aside, and grabbed his suitcase. He ran back, circling the little hill, and stopped.

He was still in the past.

Where in chaos was that hole in time, Masrin wondered, not noticing

the strangeness of his oath. The savages were coming after him now, starting around the little hill. Masrin almost had the answer, then lost it as an arrow sped past him. He sprinted, trying to keep the hill between himself and the Indians. His long legs pumped, and a club bounced behind him.

Where was that hole in time? What if it had moved? Perspiration poured from his face as he ran. A club grazed his arm, and he twisted around the side of the hill, looking wildly for shelter.

He met three squat savages, coming after him.

Masrin fell to the ground as they swung their clubs, and they tripped over his body. Others were coming now, and he jumped to his feet.

Up! The thought struck him suddenly, cutting through his fear. Up!

He charged the hill, certain that he would never reach the top alive.

And he was back in the boarding house, still holding the suitcase.

"Are you hurt, darling?" Kay put her arms around him. "What happened?"

Masrin had only one rational thought. He couldn't remember any prehistoric tribe that carved their clubs as elaborately as these savages. It was almost a unique art form, and he wished he could get one of the clubs to a museum.

Then he looked at the mauve walls wildly, expecting to see the savages come bounding out of them. Or per-

haps there were little men in his suitcase. He fought for control. The thinking portion of his mind told him not to be alarmed; flaws in time were possible, and he had become wedged, impacted in one. Everything else followed logically. All he had to do—

But another part of his mind wasn't interested in logic. It had been staring blankly at the impossibility of the whole thing, uninfluenced by any rational arguments. That part knew an impossibility when it saw one, and said so.

Masrin screamed and fainted.

TO: CENTER

Office 41

ATTN: Asst. Controller Miglese

FROM: Contractor Carienomen

SUBJ: ATTALA Metagalaxy

Dear Sir:

*I consider your attitude unfair. True, I have utilized some new ideas in my approach to this particular metagalaxy. I have allowed myself the latitude of artistry, never thinking I would be beset by the howls of a static, reactionary CENTER.*

*Believe me, I am as interested as you in our great job—that of suppressing the fundamental chaos. But in doing this, we must not sacrifice our values.*

*Enclosed is a statement of defense concerning my use of the red shift, and another statement of the advantages gained by using a small percentage of unstable atoms for lighting and energy purposes.*

*As to the time-flaw, that was merely a small error in duration-flow, and has nothing to do with the fabric of space, which is, I assure you, of first-rate quality.*

*There is, as you pointed out, an individual impacted in the flaw, which makes the job of repair slightly more difficult. I have been in contact with him, indirectly of course, and have succeeded in giving him a limited understanding of his role.*

*If he doesn't disturb the flaw too much by time-traveling, I should be able to sew it up with little difficulty. I don't know if this procedure is possible, though. My rapport with him is quite shaky, and he seems to have a number of strong influences around him, counseling him to move.*

*I could perform an extraction of course, and ultimately I may have to do just that. For that matter, if the thing gets out of hand I may be forced to extract the entire planet. I hope not, since that would necessitate clearing that entire portion of space, where there are also local observers. This, in turn, might necessitate rebuilding an entire galaxy.*

*However, I hope to have the problem settled by the time I next communicate with you.*

*The warp in the metagalactic center was caused by some workmen leaving a disposal unit open. It has been closed.*

*The phenomena such as walking mountains, et cetera, are being handled in the usual way.*



*Payment is still due on my work.*

*Respectfully,*

*Carienomen*

*Enclosed:*

*1 statement, 5541 pages, Red Shift*

*1 statement, 7689 pages, Unstable Atoms*

*TO: Construction Headquarters*

*334132, Extension 12*

*ATTN: Contractor Carienomen*

*FROM: Asst. Controller Miglese*

*SUBJ: ATTALA Metagalaxy*

*Carienomen:*

*You will be paid after you can show me a logical, decently constructed job. I'll read your statements when and if I have time. Take care of the flaw-impaction before it tears a hole in the fabric of space.*

*Miglese*

Masrin recovered his nerve in half an hour. Kay put a compress on a purple bruise on his arm. Masrin started pacing the room. Once again, he was in complete possession of his faculties. Ideas started to come.

"The past is down," he said, half to Kay, half to himself.

"I don't mean really 'down'; but when I move in that apparent direction, I step through the hole in time. It's a case of shifted conjoined 'dimensionality.'"

"What does that mean?" Kay asked, staring wide-eyed at her husband.

"Just take my word for it," Masrin said. "I can't go down." He couldn't explain it to her any better. There

weren't words to fit the concepts.

"Can you go up?" Kay asked, completely confused.

"I don't know. I suppose, if I went up, I'd go into the future."

"Oh, I can't stand it," Kay said. "What's wrong with you? How will you get out of here? How will you get down that haunted staircase?"

"Are you people still there?" Mr. Harf's voice croaked from outside. Masrin walked over and opened the door.

"I think we're going to stay for a while," he said to the landlord.

"You're not," Harf said. "I've already rented this room again." Happy Boy Harf was small and bony, with a narrow skull and lips as thin as a spider's thread. He stalked into the room, looking around for signs of damage to his property. One of Mr. Harf's little idiosyncrasies was his belief that the nicest people were capable of the worst crimes.

"When are the people coming?" Masrin asked.

"This afternoon. And I want you out before they get here."

"Couldn't we make some arrangement?" Masrin asked. The impossibility of the situation struck him. He couldn't go downstairs. If Harf forced him out, he would have to go to prehistoric New York, where he was sure his return was eagerly awaited.

And there was the over-all problem of paradox!

"I'm sick," Kay said in a stifled

little voice. "I can't leave yet."

"What are you sick from? I'll call an ambulance if you're sick," Harf said, looking suspiciously around the room for any signs of bubonic plague.

"I'd gladly pay you double the rent if you'd let us stay a little longer," Masrin said.

Harf scratched his head, and stared at Masrin. He wiped his nose on the back of his hand, and said, "Where's the money?"

Masrin realized that he had about ten dollars left, and his train tickets. He and Kay were going to ask for an advance as soon as they reached the college.

"Broke," Harf said. "I thought you had a job at some school?"

"He does," Kay said staunchly.

"Then why don't you go there and get out of my place?" Harf asked.

The Masrins were silent. Harf glared at them.

"Very suspicious. Get out before noon, or I'll call a cop."

"Hold it," Masrin said. "We've paid the rent for today. The room's ours until twelve midnight."

Harf stared at them. He wiped his nose again, thoughtfully.

"Don't try staying one minute over," he said, stamping out of the room.

As soon as Harf was gone, Kay hurried over and closed the door. "Honey," she said, "why don't you call up some scientists here in New

York and tell them what's happened? I'm sure they'd arrange something, until . . . how long will we have to stay here?"

"Until the flaw's repaired," Masrin said. "But we can't tell anyone; especially, we can't tell any scientists."

"Why not?" Kay asked.

"Look, the important thing, as I told you, is to avoid a paradox. That means I have to keep my hands off the past, and the future. Right?"

"If you say so," Kay said.

"We call in a team of scientists, and what happens? Naturally, they're skeptical. They want to *see* me do it. So I do it. Immediately, they bring in a few of their colleagues. *They* watch me disappear. Understand, all this time there's no proof that I've gone into the past. All they know is, if I walk downstairs, I disappear.

"Photographers are called in, to make sure I'm not hypnotizing the scientists. Then they demand proof. They want me to bring back a scalp, or one of those carved clubs. The newspapers get hold of it. It's inevitable that somewhere along the line I produce a paradox. And do you know what happens then?"

"No, and you don't either."

"I do," Masrin said firmly. "Once a paradox is caused, the agent—the man who caused it—me—disappears. For good. And it goes down in the books as another unsolved mystery. That way, the paradox is resolved in its easiest way—by getting rid of the

paradoxical element.”

“If you think you’re in danger, then of course we won’t call in any scientists,” Kay said. “Although I wish I knew what you were driving at. I don’t understand anything you’ve said.” She went to the window and looked out. There was New York, and beyond it, somewhere, was Iowa, where they should be going. She looked at her watch. They had already missed the train.

“Phone the college,” Masrin said. “Tell them I’ll be delayed a few days.”

“Will it be a few days?” Kay asked. “How will you ever get out?”

“Oh, the hole in time isn’t permanent,” Masrin said confidently. “It’ll heal — if I don’t go sticking myself in it.”

“But we can only stay here until midnight. What happens then?”

“I don’t know,” Masrin said. “We can only hope it’ll be fixed by then.”

TO: CENTER

Office 41

ATTN: Asst. Controller Miglese

FROM: Contractor Carienomen

SUBJ: MORSTT Metagalaxy

Dear Sir:

Herein, enclosed, is my bid for work on the new metagalaxy in the region coded MORSTT. If you have heard any discussions in art circles recently, I think that you will see that my use of unstable atoms in ATTALA Metagalaxy has been proclaimed “the first great advance in creative engineering



since the invention of variable time-flow." See the enclosed reviews.

*My artistry has stirred many favorable comments.*

*Most of the inconsistencies—natural inconsistencies, let me remind you—in ATTALA Metagalaxy have been corrected. I am still working with the man impacted in the time-flow. He is proving quite co-operative; at least, as co-operative as he can be, with the various influences around him.*

*To date, I have coalesced the edges of the flow, and am allowing them to harden. I hope the individual remains immobile, since I really don't like to extract anyone or anything. After all, each person, each planet, each star system, no matter how minute, has an integral part in my metagalactic scheme.*

*Artistically, at any rate.*

*Your inspection is welcomed again. Please note the galactic configurations around the metagalactic center. They are a dream of beauty you will wish to carry with you always.*

*Please consider my bid for the MORSTT Metagalaxy project in light of my past achievements.*

*Payment is still due on ATTALA Metagalaxy.*

*Respectfully,*

*Carienomen*

*Enclosed:*

*1 bid, for MORSTT Metagalaxy project  
3 critical reviews, ATTALA Metagalaxy*

"It's eleven forty-five, honey," Kay said nervously. "Do you think we

could go now?"

"Let's wait a few minutes longer," Masrin said. He could hear Harf prowling around on the landing, waiting eagerly for the dot of twelve.

Masrin watched the seconds tick by on his wrist watch.

At five minutes to twelve, he decided that he might as well find out. If the hole wasn't fixed by now, another five minutes wouldn't do it.

He placed the suitcase on the dresser, and moved a chair next to it.

"What are you doing?" Kay asked.

"I don't feel like trying those stairs at night," Masrin said. "It's bad enough playing with those pre-Indians in the daylight. I'm going to try going up, instead." His wife gave him an under-the-eyelids now-I-know-you're-cracking look.

"It's not the stairs that does it," Masrin told her again. "It's the act of going up or down. The critical distance seems to be about five feet. This will do just as well."

Kay stood nervously, clenching and unclenching both hands, as Masrin climbed on the chair and put one foot on the dresser. Then the other, and he stood up.

"I think it's all right," he said, teetering a little. "I'm going to try it a little higher."

He climbed on the suitcase.

And disappeared.

It was day, and he was in a city. But the city didn't look like New

York. It was breathtakingly beautiful—so beautiful that Masrin didn't dare breathe, for fear of disturbing its fragile loveliness.

It was a place of delicate, wispy towers and buildings. And people. But what people, Masrin thought, letting out his breath with a sigh.

The people were blue-skinned. The light was green, coming from a green-tinted sun.

Masrin drew in a breath of air, and strangled. He gasped again, and started to lose his balance. There was no air in the place! At least, no air he could breathe. He felt for a step behind him, and then tumbled down—

To land, choking and writhing, on the floor of his room.

After a few moments he could breathe again. He heard Harf pounding on the door. Masrin staggered to his feet, and tried to think of something. He knew Harf; the man was probably certain by now that Masrin headed the Mafia. He would call a cop if they didn't leave. And that would ultimately result in—

"Listen," he said to Kay, "I've got another idea." His throat was burning from the atmosphere of the future. However, he told himself, there was no reason why he should be surprised. He had made quite a jump forward. The composition of the Earth's atmosphere must have changed, gradually, and the people had adapted to it. But it was poison for him.

"There are two possibilities now," he said to Kay. "One, that under the prehistoric layer is another, earlier layer. Two, that the prehistoric layer is only a temporary discontinuity. That under it, is present New York again. Follow me?"

"No."

"I'm going to try going under the prehistoric layer. It might get me down to the ground floor. Certainly, it can't be any worse." Kay considered the logic of going some thousands of years into the past in order to walk ten feet, but didn't say anything.

Masrin opened the door and went out to the stairs, followed by Kay. "Wish me luck," he said.

"Luck, nothing," Mr. Harf said, on the landing. "Just get out of here."

Masrin plunged down the stairs.

It was still morning in prehistoric New York, and the savages were still waiting for him. Masrin estimated that only about half an hour had gone by here. He didn't have time to wonder why.

He had caught them by surprise, and was twenty yards away before they saw him. They followed, and Masrin looked for a depression. He had to go down five feet, in order to get out.

He found a shelving of the land, and jumped down.

He was in water. Not just on the surface, but *under*. The pressure was tremendous, and Masrin could not see

sunlight above him.

He must have gone "through" to a time when this section was under the Atlantic.

Masrin kicked furiously, eardrums bursting. He started to rise toward the surface, and—

He was back on the plain, dripping wet.

This time, the savages had had enough. They looked at him, materialized in front of them, gave a shriek of horror, and bolted.

This water sprite was too strong for them.

Wearily, Masrin walked back to the hill, climbed it, and was back in the brownstone.

Kay was staring at him, and Harf's jaw was hanging slack. Masrin grinned weakly.

"Mr. Harf," he said, "will you come into my room? There's something I want to tell you."

TO: CENTER

Office 41

ATTN: Asst. Controller Miglese

FROM: Contractor Carienomen

SUBJ: MORSTT Metagalaxy

My dear Sir:

*I cannot understand your reply to my bid for the job of constructing MORSTT Metagalaxy. Moreover, I do not think that obscenity has any place in a business letter.*

*If you have taken the trouble to inspect my latest work in ATTALA, you will see that it is, take it all for all, a beautiful*

*job, and one that will go a long way toward holding back the fundamental chaos.*

*The only detail left to attend to is the matter of the impacted man. I fear I shall have to extract.*

*The flaw was hardening nicely, when he blundered into it again, tearing it worse than ever. No paradox as yet, but I can see one coming.*

*Unless he can control his immediate environment, and do it at once, I shall take the necessary step. Paradox is not allowed.*

*I consider it my duty to ask you to reconsider my bid for the MORSTT Metagalaxy project.*

*And I trust you will excuse me for bringing this oversight to your attention, but payment is still due.*

Respectfully,

Carienomen

"So that's the story, Mr. Harf," Masrin said, an hour later. "I know how weird it sounds; but you saw me disappear yourself."

"That I did," Harf said. Masrin went into the bathroom to hang up his wet clothes.

"Yes," Harf said, "I guess you disappeared at that."

"I certainly did."

"And you don't want the scientists to know about your deal with the devil?" Harf asked slyly.

"No! I explained about paradox, and—"

"Let me see," Harf said. He wiped

his nose vigorously. "Those carved clubs you said they had. Wouldn't one of those be valuable to a museum? You said there was nothing like it."

"What?" Masrin asked, coming out of the bathroom. "Listen, I can't touch any of that stuff. It'll result in—"

"Of course," Harf said, "I could call in some newspaper boys instead. And some scientists. I could probably make me a nice little pile out of this devil-worship."

"You wouldn't!" Kay said, remembering only that her husband had said something bad would happen.

"Be reasonable," Harf said. "All I want is one or two of those clubs. That won't cause any trouble. You can just ask your devil—"

"There's no devil involved," Masrin said. "You have no idea what part one of those clubs might have played in history. The club I take might have killed the man who would have united these people, and the North American Indians might have met the Europeans as a single nation. Think how that would change—"

"Don't hand me that stuff," Harf said. "Are you getting me a club or aren't you?"

"I've explained it to you," Masrin said wearily.

"And don't tell me any more about this paradox business. I don't understand it, anyhow. But I'll split fifty-fifty with you on what I get for the club."

"No."

"O.K. I'll be seeing you." Harf started for the door.

"Wait."

"Yes?" Harf's thin, spidery mouth was smiling now.

Masrin examined his choice of evils. If he brought back a club there was a good chance of starting a paradox, by removing all that the club had done in the past. But if he didn't, Harf would call in the newspapers and scientists. They could find out if Harf was speaking the truth by simply carrying him downstairs; something the police would do anyhow. He would disappear, and then—"

With more people in on it, a paradox would be inevitable. And all Earth might, very possibly, be removed. Although he didn't know why, Masrin knew this for a certainty.

He was lost either way, but getting the club seemed the simpler alternative.

"I'll get it," Masrin said. He walked to the staircase, followed by Kay and Harf. Kay grabbed his hand.

"Don't do it," she said.

"There's nothing else I can do." He thought for a moment of killing Harf. But that would only result in the electric chair for him. Of course, he could kill Harf and take his body into the past, and bury it.

But the corpse of a twentieth century man in prehistoric America might constitute a paradox anyhow. Suppose it was dug up?

Besides, he didn't have it in him to kill a man.

Masrin kissed his wife, and walked downstairs.

There were no savages in sight on the plain, although Masrin thought he could feel their eyes, watching him. He found two clubs on the ground. The ones that struck him must be taboo, he decided, and picked one up, expecting another to crush his skull any moment. But the plain was silent.

"Good boy!" Harf said. "Hand it here!" Masrin handed him the club. He went over to Kay and put his arm around her. It was a paradox now, as certainly as if he had killed his great-grandfather before he was born. "That's a lovely thing," Harf said, admiring the club under the light. "Consider your rent paid for the rest of the month—."

The club disappeared from his hand. Harf disappeared.

Kay fainted.

Masrin carried her to the bed, and splashed water on her face.

"What happened?" she asked.

"I don't know," Masrin said, suddenly very puzzled about everything. "All I know is, we're going to stay here for at least two weeks. Even if we have to eat beans."

TO: CENTER

Office 41

ATTN: Asst Controller Miglese

FROM: Contractor Carienomen

SUBJ: MORSTT Metagalaxy

Sir:

Your offer of a job repairing damaged stars is an insult to my company and myself. We refuse. Let me point out my work in the past, outlined in the brochure I am enclosing. How can you offer so menial a job to one of CENTER'S greatest companies?

Again, I would like to put in my request for work on the new MORSTT Metagalaxy.

As for ATTALA Metagalaxy—the work is now completed, and a finer job cannot be found anywhere this side of chaos. The place is a wonder.

The impacted man is no longer impacted. I was forced to extract. However, I did not extract the man himself. Instead, I was able to remove one of the external influences on him. Now he can grow out normally.

A nice job, I think you'll admit, and solved with the ingenuity that characterizes all my work.

My decision was: Why extract a good man, when I could save him by pulling the rotten one beside him?

Again, I welcome your inspection. I request reconsideration on MORSTT Metagalaxy.

PAYMENT IS STILL DUE!

Respectfully,

Carienomen

Enclosed:

1 brochure, 9978 pages

THE END