

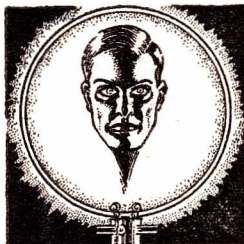
STARTLING STORIES

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An Amazing Complete Novel



The Kingdom of the Blind

By **GEORGE O. SMITH**

Psychologists said that James Forrest Carroll had lost his mind—but they were forced to admit that he alone could save the Solar System from fearsome outer menace! 11

Short Stories

- THE RING BONANZA**.....Otto Binder 57
Prospectors may some day comb relics from Saturn's rings
- THE LIFE DETOUR**.....David H. Keller 64
A Hall of Fame classic reprinted by popular demand
- DREAM'S END**.....Henry Kuttner 80
Dr. Robert Bruno risks his life to cure a patient's psychosis
- PROXY PLANETEERS**.....Edmond Hamilton 88
A pair of scientists fall under a radio-active hypnotic spell
- SUPER WHOST**.....Margaret St. Clair 97
If you ever want a free trip to Mars, here's what to do!

Special Features

- THE ETHER VIBRATES**.....The Editor 6
A department for readers, including announcements and letters
- OPERATION ASDEVLANT**.....Lt. Comdr. Warren Guthrie, USNR 71
In a future war, our greatest menace may be undersea raiders
- SCIENCE FICTION FAN PUBLICATIONS**.....A Review 109

Cover Painting by Earle Bergey—Illustrating "The Kingdom of the Blind"

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THE LIFE DETOUR

By DAVID H. KELLER

Henry Cecil thought he was benefiting his fellows when he was ordered to install a new type of water for them—but his fiancée awoke to what the rulers really had in mind!



THANKS!" "No need of thanking me," insisted Primus. "There is only one reason for your being invited to come over the bridge, and that is your own ability. The Upperons are always ready to advance any of the Otherons who show ability to add to the welfare of our city. Our pro-

motion experts have had you in mind for some time.

"Your work in Electrochemistry has more than excited our admiration—in fact we are slightly envious of your ability to do things that most of us can only imagine in our dreams. Here is your permit to cross the Bridge and stay across. Congratulations! I believe that still greater honors are in store for you."

The young scientist looked out of the window. He was on the upper story of a tall building erected on the top of a mountain. Far below him, across a chasm, was the other part of the city, the home of the Otherons. Connecting the two sections was a Bridge, hung like a spider's thread, glistening in the sunlight, beautifully clean, as all the city was.

It was the Bridge.

Every Otheron child was taught that perhaps some day he might cross that bridge. Every Otheron mother hoped that her son would be found worthy of such an honor. Now and then some one did—not often, but frequently enough to keep hope alive in the hearts of the workers.

Slowly through the decades, each filled with more advancement than past centuries, cities like Victorius had developed. Slowly there had come a cleavage between the workers and the rulers, the voters and the politicians, those who made wealth and those who saved it.

Increase in knowledge had brought freedom from disease, machinery had liberated

muscles and abundant leisure had given opportunity for interesting hours of study and happy hours of play. The city was clean, all lives being relatively luxurious. But in spite of everything the Bridge had been built, first as a symbol, then as a concrete idea, at last as a shining, shimmering reality.

The slaves and nobles, the workers and the merchants, the voters and the politicians had slowly, by a process of social evolution, changed into the Upperons and the Otherons. There was not much difference between their physiological existences, but their spiritual lives held nothing in common. The only bond between them was the Bridge.

Henry Cecil walked back across the Bridge. It was the law that when the Otherons were called to Primus they had to walk. The young inventor, living in the shadow of the Bridge all his life, had not been on it till that day. Till then it had been only a thing of beauty, rainbowed across the sky.

He had dreamed of crossing it. He had even daydreamed of the time when he would become an Upperon. Now he was actually

EDITOR'S NOTE



SOME stories are forgotten almost as soon as they are printed. Others stand the test of time.

Because "The Life Detour," by David H. Keller, M.D., has stood this test, it has been nominated for SCIENTIFICTION'S HALL OF FAME and is reprinted here.

In each issue we will honor one of the most outstanding fantasy classics of all time as selected by our readers.

We hope in this way to bring a new permanence to the science fiction gems of yesterday and to perform a real service to the science fiction devotees of today and tomorrow.

Nominate your own favorites! Send a letter or postcard to The Editor, STARTLING STORIES, 10 East 40th St., New York 16, N. Y. All suggestions are more than welcome!



Henry Cecil drew a picture and handed it to the old man

on it, going back home, back to his family, back to the girl who had inspired him upward in his electrical researches.

He was happy. It was not only a rainbow with a pot of gold at the other end but he had crossed and found the treasure. Now he was going back to tell how the almost impossible had become reality.

From the office window Primus watched the boy, just a speck moving along the top of the Bridge. Primus was smiling. He had reason to smile. Something that he had been waiting for a long time had happened. Not having the intelligence to force the answer, he had to wait till someone else found it for him.

Once found, he had imagination enough to use the information. It was information that had made him Primus, in fact, it was just that psychological quality, the ability to keep one jump ahead, to see what was going to

come before it did come, that enabled the Uppersons to become what they were.

HE PUSHED a few buttons, calling the Decimals into his office. These ten, with Primus at their head, ruled Victorus. Up to the present time the wisdom of their rule was shown by the fact that they were still rulers. Otherwise they could not have survived.

"The time has come!" he said briefly, with a smile. They all knew what he meant. It had been their dream for years, not often spoken of, rarely discussed, yet never far from their consciousness. Now, with opportunity in his grasp, the instrument in his hands, Primus felt that there was no longer need of hesitant speech or delayed action.

"Modern machinery has so simplified the mechanics of life," he began, "that there is no longer any real need for the Otherons in

the future social structure. Yet there they are. We have looked after their every need, safeguarded their health, provided for them so amply that they have simply survived.

"Contraception might have served our purpose, but we did not provide for the survival of the maternal instinct. The old-fashioned ideas concerning love and family, home and children, survived rather, much as the old ideas of magic and religion. Thus we had the unique experience of seeing a part of life live on when it really had survived its usefulness.

"Unfortunately for us, the moral code was so much a part of our personality that no one could consider wholesale murder for a moment, deliberate race destruction. I am sure that none of you would entertain such an idea for a second. Yet there was always the danger that some one of them would tire of a life of perfect social servitude and long for one of imperfect social freedom, if you understand what I mean.

"Can you imagine the thought of all the Otherons wanting to cross the Bridge at the same time? So far, they have had the intelligence to do so if they wanted to but none of them have had the imagination to see what would happen if they did. The thought has at times caused me insomnia. Now I have the solution. The time has come for action!"

"What is the method?" asked one of the Decimals.

"Very simple," was the quiet answer. "All the luxuries, all the necessities, clothing, food, entertainment, even the conditioned air used in the twenty-four-hour day of the Otherons, come indirectly from us. As humanitarians, as philanthropists, we want to see them well cared for. We have allowed them to benefit from every new invention, every scientific attainment. I intend to do just this—once more."

"Do you mean that you are going to be kind to them?" asked a Decimal.

"Exactly. I am going to give them a better form of water to drink—heavy water. Since you are not real scientists, that will have to be explained to you. Today I issued a permit to Henry Cecil, a brilliant Otheron, to cross the Bridge. He will meet with us tomorrow and tell us all about it.

"This wonderful young man has intelligence but no imagination—so he has not the slightest idea as to what it is all about. That will be all for today. You can spend the next day trying to imagine what life will really mean to us if our problem is solved."

"I suppose there is no other way," whispered a Decimal. "Still there are nearly one hundred thousand of them, and some of them seem interesting personalities."

"But they are not Upperons!" retorted Primus sharply.

"No, I admit that—just Otherons."

"They have ceased to fight," cried Primus. "They have become contented. All contented life has to die. And remember this. Some day the decision has to be reached. Either we die or they do. Victorius is not large enough for both of us. The Bridge is not strong enough to save us if they develop imagination."

"It looks strong to me," answered a Decimal, "but I suppose if they all had the same idea at the same time anything might happen."

"To us!" cried Primus, finishing the sentence. "Tomorrow at two we will meet here with Henry Cecil and listen to his lecture on his new discovery."

THE young inventor was warmly greeted by Primus and the Decimals. They welcomed him as a new Upperon. One Decimal patted him on the back. Another prophesied that some day he would be found worthy to become a Decimal.

The young man knew his history. He thought that his present position was almost equal to that of an old-time United States Senator—when there was a United States and Senators.

Everybody was seated comfortably. They even made the young inventor occupy a chair.

"Now tell us all about it, professor," said Primus, jovially. "Put it in simple language, something that can be understood by the sixteen-year old mind. You see we are not highly educated as you Otherons are."

"There is not much to say," replied the inventor. He really looked like a boy in comparison to the eleven hard-faced business men who faced him. "Water, as you all know is simply two parts of hydrogen and one part of oxygen. One day some of us found that there was a hydrogen of double atomic weight and we called that substance Deuterium.

"It combined with oxygen just as the light hydrogen did and produced water, only it was heavy water. If we use D for the symbol of the new hydrogen, then the formula for the new water would be D_2O instead of H_2O . Still water, you understand, but different.

"Naturally, we wanted to find if this new water existed in nature or was only a laboratory novelty. We found that in every five thousand gallons of ordinary water one gallon could be separated of the heavy water. When water was taken from different places, the proportion was different.

"Sea water from the depths, half a mile

under the surface, contained much more than rain water. Of course, we could make it in the laboratory, but it was expensive—about six thousand dollars to produce one pint. We even found that there was a water containing three parts of hydrogen. There was one gallon of that to every billion gallons of water.

"After the work was finished I sent in the usual report and almost forgot about it till the order came to find some method of manufacturing it in large amounts. It was a little intricate, but I was finally able to tear some Deuterium into two parts.

"One part I used as a target and the other, converted into duetons, served as bullets to fire at the target. That speeded the process up, increased the amount of heavy water and lowered the cost. I have a machine in mind that can be attached to the water plant of Victorius so that all the water can be converted into heavy water as it flows into the distributing pipes."

"That is fine!" commented Primus. "And who are the 'we' you speak of as doing all this work?"

Cecil laughed.

"As a matter of fact," he replied almost bashfully, "I did most of the work myself. There are very few men in our laboratory that have cared to bother much with these higher types of electro-chemical study."

"Just as I thought. You are the one who deserves all the credit and I am glad that you were recognized as being worthy to pass over the Bridge. Now what will this heavy water do if a person drinks it all the time?"

"I don't know. I have been so busy working out the scientific side of its manufacture on a large scale that I never thought of its use. I suppose it is just like any other water, but much—I know what it will do! It has powerful germicidal properties."

"Fine! Wonderful! The very thing!" almost shouted Primus. "A water that is a powerful germicide, circulating through every part of the body, destroying germs of every kind, killing all new growths, a panacea that will prolong life. You will go down in history as one of the great benefactors to mankind."

"You go back to the water works and build your apparatus so that the water can be changed. For the time being only use it on the supply going to the Otherons. They are our special responsibility. The welfare of Victorius depends on their welfare."

"For the time being, we Upperons will drink the old-fashioned water. Now, is there anything we can do for you? Any special favor you want to ask?"

The young man blushed as he almost whispered his answer.

"Indeed there is. You see, I am in love.

Wonderful young woman. Perhaps you gentlemen know what it is to be in love? If I cross the Bridge and leave her on the other side it will be the end of everything. I cannot do my best work, thinking she is unhappy. I wonder if you could let her cross the Bridge? Then we could both be Upperons, happy Upperons."

Primus smiled. "We will think it over. In spite of our age, the Decimals and I were once young. The idea is unusual but it may be arranged, my boy, it may be arranged. Now hurry back and give the Otherons their supply of heavy water as soon as you can. And we will be seeing you soon."

They waited till he had left the room, kept silent till they saw him hasten across the Bridge, waited till he vanished, a little speck on the other side.

Then they started to laugh—just hearty, masculine laughter.

"A perfect fool!" cried Primus between his gales of merriment. "He thinks that the world is his oyster and all he has to do is to open it."

SUDDENLY one of the Decimals stopped laughing. He looked almost sober.

"What would happen if he found out your intentions, Primus?" he asked.

"He won't!" sneered Primus, laughing on. "He hasn't enough imagination."

Henry Cecil began to work in earnest. He worked all day and part of the night but found time to see a little of Ruth Fanning, the young woman he wanted some day to take over the Bridge with him.

Instead of love he talked to her about his work. Instead of kissing her, he drew pictures of his new machinery on the tablecloth. Finally she did not know whether he was in love with her or heavy water. But that did not stop his enthusiasm for his laboratory or his love for her. He even brought her a four-ounce bottle of his new product.

"Look at it, Ruth," he said. "Just a little there but do you know what it means to us? Suppose you try to imagine a lot of it, a river of it, and on that river will float a little boat on and on till we finally live with the Upperons. It is not a Bridge that will take us there, my dear, but a stream of my heavy water."

"I am not sure that we will be happier as Upperons," she sighed.

"Nonsense! Why, everybody is happier when they are Upperons."

"Why are they so anxious to change the water they give us?"

"So that we shall be healthier, live longer. It is an ideal medicine, almost a panacea. You ought to see it kill germs in a test tube."

"Are they going to drink it?"

"Certainly, but Primus told me to give the first supply to the Otherons. There is a grand man, Ruth; I want you to meet him. You know, he is really a human being. We Otherons have had a wrong idea about him and the Decimals. They are doing everything they can to make life pleasant and sweet for everyone in Victorus.

"I must be going. I will be over tomorrow evening. In about one week the rush will be over and then we can talk about that boat trip—you know—symbolic trip on the stream of heavy water. We will amount to something when we are Uppérons."

Ruth Fanning smiled a little sadly as she watched him leave the house. She wondered if the Upperon ladies played good contract bridge and just how they dressed. She had never been over the Bridge.

A week later Primus and the Decimals visited the water works of Victorus in company with Henry Cecil. The inventor explained everything to them. The machinery to make heavy water in large amounts was complete. All that was necessary was to start it by pressing a button.

Primus thought that there should be some public ceremony in which Cecil could be thanked for his contribution to the health of the city. Cecil begged to be excused. It was finally decided that nothing should be said.

The inventor on a certain day should press the button and keep still. Proper recognition would come in time. He was to press the button and then marry and go on an extended honeymoon, after which he and his bride were to cross the Bridge and stay across.

Back in the private office of Primus one of the Decimals took him to one side and asked, "What will Cecil do when he comes back at the end of the month and finds out what has happened to the Otherons?"

"I imagine that he will kill himself," was the smooth reply. "If he fails to do it something else will happen to him. I will think it over."

Ruth Fanning had two kittens. That was one of the atavistic traits of the Otherons—they remained fond of pets. She also had imagination. That was something that was not suspected. Hardly any of the Otherons possessed this peculiar psychological trait. It was almost unknown. Generation after generation had led such perfect mechanical lives that the idea of looking forward to see what might happen rarely occurred to them.

Ruth Fanning had two kittens, imagination and four ounces of heavy water. As soon as Henry Cecil left she began to combine the three things. She took one kitten

and placed it in a cage in her bedroom and she took the other kitten and placed it in another cage in her bedroom.

She treated both kittens alike but three times a day she mixed with the milk one kitten received a teaspoonful of heavy water. The first dose was given when the family was away from home. It was a good thing. The kitten was certainly a happy little thing. It jumped, played, turned somersaults and had the best time a kitten could possibly have.

It had energy enough for ten kittens, and it made a lot of enthusiastic, melodious noises. Ruth had never seen a kitten act that way. Even the other kitten was astonished at the unusual feline conduct. Ruth made notes on a tablet. She was more than interested. But she did not tell Henry Cecil.

Five days later he told her the final details of his plan. The machinery was finished. The room it was in was locked and sealed. Everything was automatic and would run for one month without human interference or supervision.

Two days later he would press the button, lock and seal the room, marry her and they would go to Asia for twenty-eight days of pleasure. On their return they would become really, truly, Uppérons for the rest of their lives. Primus was going to pay all the expenses for the month.

It was then that Ruth said, "Do you remember my two kittens?"

"Yes, I do seem to remember that you had two, but I have not been seeing them lately."

"I have them in cages up in my room. Come up and look at them."

IN ONE cage Cecil saw a kitten, just a little, playful kitten, but rather unhappy and lonely and not enjoying the confinement. In the other cage was a cat, and old cat, that looked as though she had lost eight of her nine lives.

"I thought you said you had two kittens, Ruth?" he asked.

"I had, five days ago, but something has happened to one of them. Here are my notes. The poor thing has aged ten years in five days."

The inventor sat down and read the notes. He read the entries made three times a day; he looked at the cats. Then he read Ruth's notes all over again. Suddenly he jumped up and shouted,

"Well, I'll be—"

"Don't swear, Henry," pleaded Ruth. "That will not help any. Just try to think what it means. Use your imagination."

"It is too late. What a fool I was! Decimals patting me on the back and telling me what a great mind I had. Primus offering to

pay for our wedding trip and urging me not to hurry back, suggesting that I have the door to the machine-room locked and sealed and take the key with me. Do you know what they intended to do to the Otherons?"

"What happened to the cat?"

"They cannot do this to me!" cried the enraged man. "Make a fool and a murderer out of me! I am going across the Bridge and tell them a thing or two."

"No. You will do nothing of the kind. You would never come back. Go on with your plans, only change something or other, so they will be disappointed."

He banged his fist on the cage so hard that the senile cat jumped.

"I have it!" he shouted. "Everything will go through just as it has been arranged for. We will even have our trip. Just you go on sewing and leave it to me, Ruth—leave—it—to—me."

"I knew you would be able to think of something. You are a real inventor, Henry."

"I'll say I am," he replied, kissing her, then dashing out of the room.

Two days later Henry Cecil and Ruth Fanning walked across the Bridge. They went directly to see Primus. He was waiting for them, alone.

"I have come to report, sir," said the inventor, "that all of your orders have been carried out. The machinery to make heavy water has been started, the room locked and sealed. I have the only key and am taking it with me. Now if there is nothing more, we will be married and start for Asia. And thank you very much for your kindness to both of us, sir."

The great man fairly beamed his happiness as he folded his effusive benevolence around them like a cloud with a golden lining.

"You have deserved all we have done for you and your beautiful bride, my dear boy," he said. "And one thing more—one of the Decimals is thinking of retiring from public life. You are being spoken of as being a proper person to take his place. How does that suit you? Mrs. Cecil will be in her proper place then."

"Lots of the Upperon ladies will be glad to entertain her. She is Upperon class, my boy—I can see that at once. Call on our treasurer for funds and do not stint yourself. I want you to have a wonderful time. Good-bye and good luck to you."

They left him after expressing their thanks.

"A wonderful man. He certainly has imagination," whispered Ruth.

"Not quite as much as you have," answered Henry, also in a whisper, "but I think that we had better start for Asia just as fast as we can."

Thirty days later they returned to Vic-

torus and went at once to Ruth's home. Her parents welcomed her.

"Anything new?" she asked. "You certainly look well."

Mrs. Fanning insisted that she had never felt better. Mr. Fanning said that there was no special news except that the Upperons were somewhat quiet and keeping to themselves, but that the Otherons were taking care of their part of the city with their usual efficiency.

No one had crossed the Bridge—so there was no news. One of Ruth's cats was dead but the other was growing nicely.

The young people looked at each other.

The next morning the young inventor suggested to his bride that they take a walk. She was ready for a little exercise but was somewhat surprised when she found where she was going.

"I have to go," he insisted, "and you have to go with me. I never like to start any experiment without finishing it. I suppose it is my scientific complex. I not only want to know what has happened to the Upperons—I *must* know. It may be dangerous but I doubt it. Somebody has to go and who else should it be but the two of us?"

They reached the Bridge and walked without a pause till they reached the center. There, poised over the chasm, they stopped and leaned over the guard rail. It was a beautiful spring morning. Far below, a mountain stream complained of its having to keep on dashing aimlessly to the sea. Just above them a robin had built a nest in the heavy wires. Around them was silence, thick, intangible, peculiar.

"It is so still here," whispered the woman.

"It is always still but today it is oppressive," replied her husband.

THEY went into the city of the Upperons. No one was on the streets. No one seemed to be in the magnificent castle, the upper floor of which served as an office for Primus. No one answered the push button calling for the elevator.

"We shall have to walk," at last explained Cecil. "I know where the steps are because I ran down them once. I was so anxious to see you and tell you that I had my pass and was going to be an Upperon that I could not wait for the elevator. Come on. It is only twenty-five stories."

No one was in the waiting room, no one in the inside office and then—at his desk sat Primus.

"He was an old man—in fact, a very old man. Everything was old about him except his eyes. They had the hatred of youth in their venomous gleam.

"So you have come back, Cecil?" he asked.

"I knew you would."

"Yes, sir," answered the inventor. "You see, the vacation was over, so I had to come back and go to work again. I am reporting for duty and there seemed to be no one to report to but you, sir."

"I was waiting for you," whispered the shaking senile sullenly. "I knew you would come. I was waiting for you. The others all died but I kept on living on bottled grape-juice and crackers, waiting till you came back. If you had stayed, you would have laughed as loudly as the rest."

"It was a madhouse for the first few days. Every Upperon was laughing. They were as happy as human beings could be. They were so happy that they could not be serious and find out what they were happy about. Uppérons who had never laughed were splitting their sides over nothing at all."

"For a little while I tried to give orders, tried to make them stop drinking the water after I had suspected what you had done—but they thought it a great joke. Laughing water, that is what they called it. They stopped their alcoholics and got a better kick out of the water."

"And then they went back to their houses and lost interest and grew old and died. Think of it! Every Upperon died of old age in a month, all except me, and I guess I am done for. What did you do to us, Cecil? You didn't have time to do much. My experts inspected the machinery just before you started it. It was all right then."

"What did you intend doing to the Otherons, Primus?"

"Whatever it was it was not to happen to us. Did the Otherons die as we did?"

"Oh! No indeed," answered the woman. "You see, they kept on drinking plain water."

"It was this way, Primus," explained Henry Cecil and there was a certain sympathy in his voice. "Ruth had imagination and she put that and four ounces of heavy water and two kittens to work and then we saw what your idea was. You must have thought you could get along without the Otherons."

"I had to keep quiet. If I had told my friends they would have become excited and might have tried to cross the Bridge, and then someone would have been hurt, maybe killed. And I did not want to be killed my-

self just when Ruth was expecting me to marry her.

"But I had to do something. Under the water works, in the basement, there are two twelve-inch water pipes, one furnishing the water to one side of the Bridge and the second to the other side. Of course, as soon as the heavy water machinery was turned on it would supply the pipe leading to the Otherons' homes."

"I went down there and put on a double detour. I crossed the pipes. Then, after I started the heavy water machinery, the new water started to supply the Uppérons. Of course, I was not sure what it would do to you but I knew what it did to Ruth's cat."

He paused long enough to draw a picture.

The old man took the picture and held it close to his near-sighted eyes so he could see it better.

"We were wiped out by a detour," he sighed. He tried to sit up in his chair. "What are you going to do now? With the Decimals and the Primus dead, what are you going to do? Who is going to run Victorus?"

"It seems to be doing pretty well without you," answered the woman. "After all, you were only great and powerful because none of the Otherons had imagination to see you for what you really were—or that none of the Uppérons were really necessary to the life and welfare of the real city. Henry and I will go back and if there is a need for leadership, I think my husband and I have enough imagination to take charge of things. They may some day call him Primus."

But the old man had died in his chair.

Back they went down the stairs, through the city of the dead and out on the Bridge. Ruth took a visiting card and stuck it under a robin's nest. On it she had written:

NO THOROUGHFARE
CLOSED FOR REPAIRS

"And now I guess I will have to get a new job," sighed the inventor.

"You have one," answered Ruth. "You are going to be the first mayor of Victorus and I am glad it all happened as it did. I do not believe I should have liked living with those Upperon ladies. I bet they played rotten bridge."