

FUTURE SCIENCE FICTION

No. 32

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Sometimes the premise behind a story isn't stated, but is just implied. Here we have the initial assumption that perhaps some unborn children are capable of thinking, and receiving impression.

THE MILE

by John Tara

THE MILE was about a hundred feet long, thirty high, and another thirty or so to the left. He rode it like a Roman emperor, reclining, his head on a soft pillow. It was the emptiest part of the whole thing, for, with the exception of one basic question, he had seen through it all, now. There were no more surprises left, and he had just about made up his mind.

It was all a fake, a furious fake. The damn thing wasn't worth the effort...any effort except the last, and that could easily be a crashing bore.

Noises pressed in on him; some he couldn't ignore. There was a persistent buzz, off to one side.

It was impossible not to listen, really. It came in crescendo.

"You're *sure*, Jake? You're *sure*?"

"How can I be sure. How can anybody be sure of anything? It's a gamble, ain't it? Ain't all life a gamble?"

"But Jake, can we afford the risk?"

"Leave it to me, little girl (he sensed a broad, toothy, genial smile) have I failed to bring home the bacon yet?"

"Bacon! Jakey you're a scream!"

A dry, medical whisper cut in, and droned. An old man with the beard of the learned. Something about Karma, the

First Three Books of Thoth, a side trip to a town not far from Peoria to look for wax-winged beetles, ten million years gone; excavations in the Libyan desert.

Libya? Ten civilizations had perished there, leaving only plastercasts of footprints in the sands of time. He tried to think of what had gone into ten civilizations: fuss, bother, feeding, bowing, scraping, commotion, drawing of wood and hewing of water.

COME TO think of it, it all boiled down to the hewing of water. You got that much of a grip on reality and your fingers went through it as though it wasn't there at all. Theoretically it wasn't; and that, too, was a joke, and a furious one. The stuff around you looked hard and felt hard, but you could subdivide it down to a terrible tickle of electricity. And what was that? Nothing. There were books on the subject, dead-center and both flanks. Millions read them. Had anybody drawn the obvious conclusions?

He knew of one group who had. And not one of them had ever seen a printed page. Maybe.

He wondered what the Greeks had used for toilet paper.

The carrier stopped, swayed,

ran a little, bucked, just like a coy colt. Doors opened and shut. *Click. Wumble. Click. Drop.*

Dead?

So that was humor. A waste of time.

Up they went again. It was a matter of curiosity why people took their hats off in elevators. There were five people in this one, and none of them talked. But he knew what they were thinking. Peas in a pod. And someone or thing would open and cook them, ultimately.

Some, of course, were never peas. Marble memories for them.

For Wug-Wug the Hunter who invented the first bow.

For Gug, son of Wug-Wug, who died by it.

For Sargon, with the press-agent *par excellence*.

For Alexander (who had walked a million miles on a carpet of faces to gain the same pleasure any man can get by drawing one card to a full house).

For Ozymandias J. Kilroy, unknown hero of a thousand campaigns.

But here and there, only a twig or a blessing stuck in the perishing sands for the half of a generation, to honor the real creators of the world, after God. *Sic transit gloria...*

IT DIDN'T make sense, or as much sense as expanding space pushing into places where space had never been.

He was wheeled out of the elevator, and there was the thunder of a jet plane going by. It sounded like a big marble, a child's marble rolling across a ceiling. When you hear a noise like a marble rolling across a ceiling, stow any corybantic invocations to the god of mere speed. *Duck, bury yourself in a lead coffin.* The latest style, again. They buried Washington in a lead coffin, and Henry the 8th, and possibly Richelieu, but not Dickens. *Bury your dead safely.* Defy worms and radiation.

A visitor walked by another one and said: "Where's the coke machine?"

"Downstairs."

"They oughta keep one on every floor."

"Yeah, old-fashioned slaughter-house."

A baby cried.

He had never heard a baby crying before. Now, why...?

Yes, why? It was doubly promised in the Beatitudes: *"The Meek shall inherit the Earth."*

But the meek, of course, could not keep it. Q.E.D.

He waited, and thought. In the Beginning was the Word. Nonsense. In the Beginning was the Hole. It either con-

tracted or expanded, according to which astrophysicist you prayed to. In physical appearance that was All Creation, with a stamped brass trade mark on it, reading: *Manufactured by Rufus T. Almighty.* The stacked decks laid out on the company's shelves, everywhere, were not mentioned in the advertising copy.

He had only a little time left, now, and there was still that one problem to solve. In the Beginning, he began again, there was the End. Ends are the means? The Beginning was Mean. Therefore...

THERE WAS a sort of jolt. One line out of twenty billion popped into his mind. *"Will ye no' come home again?"* Perhaps the mystery lay in poetry. Men died for nothing, but many men lived by some mysterious, dark lilt of sounds. But where was Home?

If he could have laughed, he would have laughed. "I will laugh my bitter laugh," said Gogol, and then he wrote *"Dead Souls"*. It was very difficult for him to move.

"The hell with it," a doctor said, referring to a half-poised can of anaesthesia. "This is easy as *deep-dish* apple pie."

There was a sudden, red-stained flash of light, and a

ripping sound, and a smell. Then a forceps came at him, bright, blinding, with a blue coating of metal, gaping like a hungry jaw, forcing open doors any fool knew well enough should stay closed forever. He'd be damned if he would. They were all damned anyway. The Stoics had it right.

He made a sudden, hot effort.

The little engine rocked to

a stop. The little engine *wouldn't*.

Consciousness flickered out, neither pleasantly nor with any note of Revelation to solve the ultimate problem.

He was born suddenly and dead and beautiful, in the last full flush of health, a broth of a boy, and growing colder.

The worried obstetrician violated the Third Commandment, under his breath, and was not too far wrong.

