

Dynamic Science Fiction

Volume
One
Number
Five
October
1953

Cover by Alex Schomberg
(illustrating "Snail's Pace")

ROBERT W. LOWNDES, Editor

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Illustrations by Luros, Murphy, Orban, and Sibley

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DYNAMIC SCIENCE FICTION, October 1953, published bi-monthly by COLUMBIA PUBLICATIONS, INC., 1 Appleton Street, Holyoke, Mass. Editorial and executive offices at 241 Church Street, New York 17, New York. Entered as second class matter at the Post Office at Holyoke, Mass., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Single copy 25¢; yearly subscription, \$1.00. Stories contents copyright 1953 by Columbia Publications, Inc. Printed in U. S. A.

W. Malcolm White

*without once taking his tongue out of his cheek, here relates
the fascinating instance of*

THE POETESS and the 21 GREY-HAIRED CADAVERS

(illustrated
by Paul
Orban)



... A man stepped into the hall from the unknown room beyond, stopped before them, and nodded slightly.

MARIJANE BRAZENOSE was a delicate soul, as befits a young lady poet. She was subject to drafts, bruised easily, and suffered sniffles at appropriate times and seasons. If there is a heroine to this tale, it ought not to be she, for the credit must go to Mother Nature. Nevertheless, this is the tale of Marijane's experience with the Cannery World.

They called it the Cannery World afterwards of course; the name fitted. Imagine if you can, a world of one huge metal city, a city sprawled over continents and oceans—a world-sized city without parks or squares; simply

hundreds of stories high, and dozens of stories deep beneath the ground; million-cubicle blocks of houses divided from each other only by mile-deep narrow metal canyons; lit eternally by artificial blue lights.

Imagine every room in every building housing at least one family. Imagine no room differing from any other room; no pictures on walls; no furniture save for sleeping-mats; and no cooking utensils. Imagine eating only the one food—the universal cereal-nutrient mush. Imagine everything metal, everything greyish.

That is the Cannery World. A planet-wide mass of canned humanity, a world corresponding exactly to the planet Earth, whose space it occupies. For the Cannery World is a vibrational twin to this Earth of ours—possibly one of many—separated by a gulf of vibrational and supra-atomic strictures, entirely comprehensible to scientists, and students of the occult, but baffling to the uninitiate.

Marijane Brazenose had no more suspicion of the Cannery World's dull existence than anyone else in the world had at the time she accepted her friend and patron's invitation to a summer weekend at his estate. For you see, Marijane Brazenose was also a very pretty and desirable young lady of twenty-two, whose three slender volumes of delicate verse had been "sponsored" financially by young Edward Fitzhugh—in the hope she would get the poetry out of her system long enough to say "yes" to his pleas. The Fitzhugh family were rolling in the long green, and Edward could afford to indulge a pretty young thing's fancies.

So Marijane rode out to the Fitzhugh estate on an air-conditioned train; was driven to the sprawling country home set in the middle of the wide Fitzhugh greenery; and ensconced herself for the weekend in the luxurious manor house, so con-

veniently air-conditioned for her special benefit.

Marijane did not like to travel in August. She preferred her penthouse in Greenwich Village, but she had promised Edward one last visit before she immured herself until October.

There were no other guests that weekend, and the servants were carefully trained to keep themselves out from under foot. Marijane and Edward could sit in the wide, glassed-in conservatory and gaze out towards the acres of flowers and shrubs, while giving out the ecstatic sighs of youth and love. They could also have enjoyed the powerful Fitzhugh television-sets and radio-cabinets, except that something was wrong. Every time they turned one on, they got simply awful static, weird snow, and ghastly blurs. There was an electrical demon loose in the house, as Marijane put it; nothing was working right. Big static sparks leapt up from the imported rugs and hit Marijane's hand when she touched the furniture.

It was all most upsetting, and Edward promised to call in some men to check the house-wiring. Fortunately the air-conditioning was not affected.

THE TROUBLE with Cannery World started shortly after lunch, that Saturday. They were walking along the main hall on their way to the library, when Marijane noticed a strangely-discolored spot on the wall, right on the rich panelling. She stopped, pointed, "Why, look—it's all blue!"

Edward looked, and indeed she was right: There was a round bluish circle on the wall, right on the polished wood. As they stared at it, they both gasped, for the spot was growing before their very eyes.

"It looks like a blue spotlight against the wall, rather than a stain," said Edward peering closely.

"Oh, dear," Marijane grabbed his arm. "Don't get too close."

She was right; clearly, it was growing brighter and wider, and getting a bit crackly as well. It seemed to flicker slightly as it spread outwards over the wall. There was a scent of ozone in the air. Then, before either of them could jump, the spot flared out into a brilliant blinding blue; there was a sharp explosion; and...the light was gone. There was a hole in the wall where it had been.

The hole was perfectly circular and large, about seven feet in diameter. Through it, they could see into a room, with bare metal walls and a bare metal floor. They stared, and as they stared, there were footsteps; a man stepped into the hall from the unknown room beyond, stopped before them, and nodded slightly. "Welcome," he said in a flat monotone, "to Sector Seven, Quadrant Sixteen, Level Nine, Extended."

They stared at him, while he glanced around the hall. He was pale, with a translucently-whitish skin. His eyes were a yellowing gray; his thin hair was gray; his features were sharp; his lips thin and colorless; his chin pointed. His clothing consisted of a single-piece coverall, grey-blue in tone. The only decoration was a small line of ideographic markings across his chest, presumably indicating a name. He carried a metal box in his hands, propped like a weapon.

"My name is Lekto cal-Magima tul-Anamagar cum-Lektor. I have been directed to assist your assimilation."

"What are you doing in my house?" said Edward regaining his tongue. "What do you mean by cutting holes in my wall, and where did that room come from?"

Edward was an assertive young man; as heir to the Fitzhugh fortunes, he never felt that he had to take lip from characters like the one before him.

However, Lekto did not change expression. "You are to come with me. I will direct you until we start our

emergence preparations." He pointed his little box at Edward and Marijane, and ennui seemed to fill their bones. They felt unable to disagree with him; they followed him meekly through the hole into the metal room.

DURING THE next twenty-four hours, they learned about the Cannery World and its relationship to ours. They ate the One Food, found it edible but thoroughly dull. They learned that it was made in universal factories, that it was all-complete—nothing else in the way of nourishment being required. They learned that on all this earth—which had once been quite similar to ours—there was not a green thing growing—not an animal, fish, or bird; that it harbored something over a trillion people, who had reached the limits of their artificial world. They also learned that the Central Manager of this particular Sector and Quadrant and Level had worked out the principle of breaking down the barriers between the two worlds and was "extending" his sector (unknown to his managerial colleagues) to cover our world. This was their initial break-through.

By the next day, a file of twenty men joined the couple in the room by the entry-hole. These were the men who were to set up the device outside the Fitzhugh house that would permit unlimited immigration. They differed from Lekto in no fashion whatsoever. Grey hair, similar eyes, features, pallidness gave Marijane the shuddery feeling that it would soon be a horribly colorless and dull world to live in, when several billion of these characters had come through.

She was thoroughly depressed by the thought. For a young lady poet, truly this was to be an unpoetical future. She gazed out of the one square window into the deep blue-lit canyon of a street, faced with tens of thousands of the same unshaded and unopenable windows, upwards, downwards, in all directions as far as the eye could see.

Not a flower in bloom in this whole wide world, she thought.

Edward walked up and down the small metal room, glancing anxiously every now and then into the section of his home visible through the circular gap. Two greytopped guards were watching it. Once in a while, he would see one of the twenty patrolling the corridors of his home. Evidently the Cannery men had not shown their heads outside yet, and were playing it very cautiously.

Marijane was very upset over her visions of futurity. She kept repeating to Edward her distress. "The flowers, the birds, the great wonderful trees ... all doomed! Oh, how could we live in a world like this, this cannery!"

They caught snatches of sleep on dun-colored floor-mats. At long last, Lekto announced that the time had come for their return—to guide the squad that would set up the permanent interworld door.

Followed by the twenty men carrying pieces of machinery, strange boxes, coils of wire and tools, the two—preceded by Lekto—marched again through the entryway. Lekto turned when they were all through, pressed a button on one of the boxes, and there was another terrific flash of blue light. When their eyes cleared, the hall in the Fitzhugh mansion was complete again. There was no trace of any hole. But there were twenty-one strange grey-haired pallid men to prove that their weird experience had happened.

Lekto herded Marijane and Edward through the air-conditioned rooms, the men following. They reached the main doorway. Lekto opened it and all of them trooped out onto the green and flowering lawn.

IT WAS AUGUST, and the heat of the summer beat down on them suddenly. The air was filled with the warmth and buzzing of insects and

the smells of the growing plant world.

Lekto and his men seemed disconcerted. Their own Cannery World was as unchangingly air-conditioned as the luxurious Fitzhugh mansion. It had probably never occurred to them that the world outside might not be similar. They exchanged uneasy glances at each other, and started slowly on across the lawn.

Marijane felt her eyes watering. "Oh dear," she said, "I've got it now. I—I'm going to sneeze!" She did so, violently, and again. Her eyes watered and her nose began to run. Edward whipped out a handkerchief. "Ugh, it's my hay fever. This must be the day it starts. *Ahh shchew!* I was afraid of this!"

Suddenly Marijane looked up from the handkerchief in astonishment, forgetting her own discomfort for a moment. "Why," she exclaimed, "look! Look at them! They have it worse!"

And so it was. The twenty-one men from the artificial metal-cited world were smitten mightily. As one, they were rolling about on the lawn, choking, gasping, scratching, turning blue and rashy. As Marijane held the linen to her nose, she and Edward watched in amazement.

Within a matter of minutes, the helpless men were all unconscious. Within a few minutes more—by the time that Edward had made up his mind to touch one—the twenty-one grey-haired men were dead from strangulation.

Bred for countless generations in a world totally free of pollen, and the myriad-myriad microscopic life of our teeming vegetable world, the men from the Cannery Land were totally susceptible to all the allergies of the air. They had died, one and all, simply of acute hay fever—just as would any who tried to follow them.

THAT, IN brief, is the story of our world's one great invasion from a parallel sphere. Marijane is still

writing poetry about the beauty of the flowers and trees, even though she herself cannot stand them, personally, without suffering tears and sniffles. She is fairly sure now that she will marry Edward, for how else could she be certain of always having air-conditioning during August and September, the hay-fever months?

As for Edward, he can surely afford to sponsor more volumes of her verse, because the Fitzhugh fortune is going to be augmented several times

over by the discoveries his father's engineers are making on Lekto's abandoned machinery.

As for the twenty-one grey-haired cadavers, they are buried in a corner of the Fitzhugh estate, with a charming sonnet, signed by Marijane Brazenose, carved in granite above their communal grave.

I hate hay fever season myself, don't you?

