

FUTURE

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Editor

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THE TWICE-TOLD MAN

A Fable of Futurity by Maurice Raboïd

After centuries of torment, came temptation!

THE HEAT of the blue white sun beat down with flesh-searing incandescence; sand stretched a thousand times as far as the eye could see in four directions, the desert unchanging. The only respite given the timeless sands was from occasional low-strata thermal storms that swept down from the poles, with aggravating infrequencies.

In the geometric center of the gigantic sea of sand a tower reared more than a mile into the air—an obelisk of unchanging, immutable ebony. The tower of blackness tapered to a slender platform no more than a dozen yards across at its peak; at its base, an inscription read, *Let no creature defile this tower. It is not a monument, nor a crypt, but is a prison. Shun this tower for it contains an evil that destroyed half a galaxy!*

On the platform of the impressive spire stood a man of classic proportions, a mane of shaggy golden hair falling about his shoulders. His massive arms hung downward, almost touching his sides, but prevented from doing so by shackles. No ordinary bond, these, but shackles of energy. The man was clad in a tunic, plain and unfestooned; his head was bowed but his knees were unbent. His eyes were open but they saw not; his ears listened though they heard not. He looked to be about thirty-five years old.

The planet was so massive and its gravity considerable, but the man stood tall and straight as if he were the center of gravity in the cosmos

and the ponderous planet with its white hot sun paid him fealty rather than the reverse. This man ate not and slept not. That he was weary was obvious, but the scintillating bands of energy permitted him no respite. He had not been there very long as the stars measure their lives, but man does not measure his life-span by that of the stars.

He had not heard the telltale drone of a spacecraft in so many thousand years, that, at first, he did not credit its sound to anything more than the idle buzzing of his brain. As it came closer, however, it assumed the deep throaty roar of a craft operating on the ordinary second-order drives that were so familiar to him. He did not raise his head. Why? What use to seek out the alien craft and follow its delicate trajectory through the pink sky till it reached the level of his platform and the beings could stare and gawk? Why watch strange life-forms labor at deciphering the inscription at the base of his prison, then scurry back into their ship and blast off under full acceleration, as if all the devils in hell were pursuing them?

The drone turned to a muted mutter and coughed into nonexistence. He could hear the creak of an extension walk as it crept out of the side of the ship. What manner of fools were these? No one had left the safety of their ship to approach since—since he had been incarcerated, so long ago.

He could hear hesitant footsteps approaching. How many legs had they?

How many eyes, if any? He wondered; he felt a slight twinge of curiosity seep through him; but he would not open his eyes, or give them the pleasure of being noticed. He did stand more erect and take his chin off of his collar bone though.

A SOFT, lilting, feminine voice came, "Is he dead?"



"She is here of her own free will, Gobi, and she shall stay . . . if we get what we came after!"

Is he dead? Someone had spoken in the universal tongue! This was no exploring alien. Yet—it could not be a fellow-human; he had no fellow humans. Not even the eons he had spent on the tower were enough to make the human race forget, much less forgive!

"No, he is immortal!" This time a man's voice spoke. He could no longer keep his eyes closed; he wanted to talk to a human once more, even if only to hear curses, hear himself damned for a hated and evil thing!

Standing in front of him, on a slen-

der extension walk protruding from a gigantic spaceship, were three humans—two men and a woman. The race had progressed some since his day; the two men were both taller and heavier than he—though both were very pale of skin. The girl was a hand shorter than he, and while she was also pale, it was extremely becoming. Humans! He was elated to see people again; then a little of the old bitterness returned and he drew his lips into a sober scowl.

"Look he's awake!"

"Be still, Adetl. I see. Don't worry;

he won't harm you," said Estes with a wan smile that belied his self-assurance.

Control said, "I am Control; this is Adell; and this is Estes. We are all citizens of the Island galaxy you call Retreat. And you are—?"

The great bronze man shrugged his golden hair back from his face with a twist of his neck. "I am Death!" He paused, letting his words sink in, searching for the contempt in their eyes that he knew they held in their hearts.

He repeated, "I am Death; I am the Destroyer; I am the Purge; I am the most hated man in all of creation. Welcome to the Tower of Eternal Penance, my humble abode on a planet that always keeps the same face toward the sun, so that I may not ruminant in shadow or in darkness. A planet with three times my normal gravity so that I may not move too freely, so that my heart must labor knowing that it may never stop, so that my lungs must strive like a colossus knowing full well they may never seek rest or relief in death. Welcome to the planet Grief. I am Gobi Waituck."

"Yes, you are Gobi Waituck," said Estes, "and we have come to do something we never contemplated necessary—to ask a favor of you."

Gobi winced. "You are mad. I am despised by all mankind and I fervently return that hate a hundred-fold. You forget. Man put me in this living tomb!"

"You destroyed half a galaxy," said Estes matter-of-factly.

"That I did, and, by the great and mighty gods of all creation I would accept twelve times this torture to be able to do it again."

"Precisely why you were penned up like a wild beast. It took three trillion people, many of them technicians and scientists, to accomplish it, too," said Control.

Gobi grunted disgustedly, "They devised a way to hold me, not to trap

me." He stared fixedly at his chains of pulsing energy. "It was a woman, of course; it had to be—even though I knew then, as I know now, that the greatest of masculine frailties is woman."

"Nevertheless, you committed the most deadly crime in existence, the methodical destruction of the human race."

"Human, you call them!" Gobi shook in a paroxysm of fury. "I had ample cause to hate you all; you killed every mutant on my planet—including my parents—and this mass-murder was fully sanctioned by the Galactic Government and the Federated Planets. My planet was my own macrocosm, my own sphere of existence. When that was destroyed—am I to be blamed?"

"You were not killed," interposed Control.

"Hah! No! I was not killed, but it was not for lack of trying. I was not decayed by your virus not contaminated by your radiation. You did not suppose that some mutant would find the highway to immortality and tread its length so quickly. Nor did you suppose that he, one puny, sentient creature, could invent the mythical disintegrator that great powers had spent their entire resources seeking for ages. I relished the last sight of every planet that dissolved beneath the pressure of my thumb; and while I could not hear the final screams, I could remember the death-knell of my own world.

"Now you return—you who called me filth, pigmies who slew the elephant, maggots that feed on the lion's carcass! Well," Gobi roared, "which is it you seek, the disintegrator or immortality—or perhaps, both?"

The three of them stirred guiltily at having their purpose guessed so easily.

"Ho! Come now, you're not surprised that I knew? What greater urge could there be to make human beings defy the ancient covenants,

and plunge through the intergalactic abyss into the heart of the Dark Nebula to the planet of Grief circling the Sorrowful Sun, to confront the greatest menace in the universe, who dwells unwillingly atop the Tower of Penance? What incentive could there possibly be greater than that of immortality—or the power of the disintegrator?"

ADDELL STOOD in awe. Could this magnificent creature be the most hated being of all creation? Could he be the bogeyman of a thousand civilized worlds? Millennia atop this somber pinnacle, with the omnipresent sunlight beating mercilessly upon his brow, and still he stood there with his superhuman vitality and hurled fire and brimstone at his captors! Proud, defiant, unbroken, every inch alive and every ounce a demigod.

"We want no part of immortality," said Control, irritated.

"Ah! It is the disintegrator then. And what would you do with it—destroy the remaining half of the galaxy?"

Estes and Control said nothing, waiting for the refusal they knew was bound to come and had prepared for.

Gobi's eyes narrowed speculatively. "Obviously, you not only receive, but expect refusal; therefore you, no doubt, have brought enticement. This enticement, what might it be?... Wait let me guess."

Estes and Control both had a feeling similar to that of a very small mouse about to be pounced upon by a very large cat. Adell seemed too engrossed to feel anything.

"Freedom? Absurd. Gratitude? Ridiculous. Entrance to the living-quarters built into the tower, instead of this eternal platform? Perhaps—but my sentence is a living death and not merely exile. Companionship? Hmmm. Quite possible. Yes, I'm sure that's it; you've brought me a companion, haven't you?"

"Yes, in return for a working-model of your disintegrator."

"You, Estes, are a greater ass than I supposed. How long would a human last me?" Gobi snapped his fingers. "A human lifetime this long, to me."

"We assumed you would give her immortality," Control purred.

"Her? What are you prating about? Have you forgotten? I am Gobi Waintuck. Little children scream, and women faint at the mere mention of my name. I am a spectre, and I am in prison; who might you find that would willingly share my perpetual anguish?"

Estes and Control turned as one and stared fixedly at Adell. Without hesitation she stepped forward and put her cool palms on Gobi's shoulders.

Gobi furrowed his brow in deep concentration. "This does not ring true; I smell duplicity. What prompts her to this?"

It was Estes' turn to seem puzzled. "Her motives are strange to us, also; she is a throwback, an anachronism. One of the last of a sect called romanticists. She is here of her own free will, and here she shall stay... If we get what we came after.

"We will let you into the tower which is huge enough for eons of diversion and enjoyment. You will no longer have to stand beneath the harsh heat of the Sorrowful Sun."

"Why?" asked Gobi, cryptically.

"Why?"

"Why must you have the disintegrator at the price of alleviating any small amount of my torture?"

"It is the old story of intergalactic invasion by the alien hordes. They come from an island universe hitherto unexplored by man; they are sweeping down upon our periphery suns in an inexorable phalanx of incomparable technology. We are beaten back at every point. Another ten years and we will be nomads in space, scrounging the waste planets of the Adelphi systems, with naught to show for our once intergalactic culture but feudal

wars and the remains of a barbaric heritage."

"There is no turn of events I relish more."

"Doubtlessly; but don't you see what you might gain?"

"Gain?"

"Restitution," said Estes. "Perhaps even amnesty."

"If I spurned these things a million years ago, what makes you think I'll want them now?"

Again, as in answer, they both turned to look into the deep hazel eyes of Adell.

Gobi let his breath out in a long sigh, almost inaudible in the vast confines of the desert. His chin dropped back to his chest. "All right—release me."

"No, not until you complete the disintegrator. You may direct the work from the platform. How long will it take?"

"How long? Maybe a month, sidereal time," said Gobi, his eyes glittering intensely.

THE WORK started in earnest from that moment forward. Gobi drove the countless technicians who swarmed from the ship at a killing pace, amongst a myriad of strange electronic and chemical field-patterns. Gobi had them constructing complex organic molecules and fissioning strange inorganic ones; each was kept busy at a specialized task that contributed to the complex machine that was gradually taking shape—a machine that none fully understood save Gobi. Every fifteen hours he would give them a brief respite for the rest that they needed, but that his immortal body did not.

Gobi had them construct a repolarizer that turned day into night for a twenty mile radius. During the short rest-periods he would tremble ecstatically as Adell ran her fingers through his yellow mane and kissed him with

a passion he had not known for a millennia.

The disintegrator took shape rapidly under Gobi's expert direction; the years had dulled his genius, and he showed it at every turn with his innate ability to grasp the use of machines and technology millennia in advance of anything he had ever experienced before.

IT WAS finished in three weeks time, and Gobi stood once more confronted by Estes, Control and the lovely Adell. Gobi's gray eyes fastened themselves upon them intently.

"Now you will release me." It was a flat, convictionless statement.

Estes smiled. "Gobi, in our mythology we have a fable that is older than yourself. You probably know it well; it's called 'The Twice-Told Man'. You will remember that the twice-told man was very very bad to his relatives and friends, so his guardian angel punished him by making him spend the rest of his life as a monkey in the forest. Then, one day, he had a chance to save the life of his guardian angel; but he was determined to exact his freedom as a reward for doing so. The angel promised him his freedom and he saved him. But as soon as the angel was saved, he vanished with a derisive laugh, breaking his promise. Unfortunately the twice-told man did not know that his angel was Satan in disguise!"

The three of them laughed uproariously. Gobi fought back his rage. "What of Adell?"

This sent them into new paroxysms of mirth. Estes sneered, "Adell is an android! A stupid, unfeeling, unthinking android, conditioned to make smothering love to you while you gave us the secret of the disintegrator."

"Then there are no intergalactic hordes, no fiends from outer space clanging their battleaxes against the bastions of the Retreat?"

"Slime!" spat Control. "Of course not. We need the disintegrator to invade Wihlehaus, the nearest of our galactic neighbors. They want only to be left alone, but we need more room; we are still expanding, and they have many green worlds ripe for the plucking."

Estes broke in, "We shall make gypsies of the lot of them with this—" gesturing at the disintegrator which was just disappearing into the side of the ship.

"You do not intend to let me into the tower?"

"Let you into the tower!" said Estes in utter scorn. "You seem to forget, you are the twice-told man." So saying, the three of them spun on their heels, reentering the ship which hesitated only seconds before blasting off. It was an odd time for Gobi to smile, but smile he did.



IT WAS hardly two months later that Gobi heard the roar of another rocket. He had not moved a millimeter; he stood tall and firm like an ancient Norse deity carved in granite. The roar dwindled and ceased. Gobi opened his eyes to see six small amphibians from Wihlehaus emerge from

their spacecraft and waddle their round little green bodies toward him.

"They came?" asked Lun Lun, in a halting facsimile of universal speech.

"They came, just as you told me they would, two hundred years ago. You were right about what they wanted also."

Gobi paused momentarily, "I gave it to them."

The six pudgy emissaries from Wihlehaus looked at him as if he had just told them a badly off-color joke.

"You gave them... what?" queried Lun Lun.

"The disintegrator," Gobi told them remorsefully. "I know what you're thinking, exactly. But you are wrong; when they activate the disintegrator, the Retreat will cease to exist. I have not done a halfway job this time, my friends; this time I have killed an entire galaxy!"

"Come," said Lun Lun with compassion for the suffering that was evident in Gobi's eyes; "we will release you, and take you to the verdant, quiet worlds of our peaceful galaxy."

Only once on the long, tedious trip to Wihlehaus did Gobi speak, and then it was only to chuckle, "The only thing they did not consider was my having known the story of the twice-told man!"

