

A haunting memory of his childhood came to rest on a star

The Deep
Black Thou
Wingest

By Robert F. Young

THE *Magellanic* had landed.

There was no tangible evidence to substantiate the fact; there had been no noticeable change in equilibrium, no detectable deviation in gravity. It was objectively impossible for a passenger in the sleeping compartments to know that the ship had paused in its rapier flight to the Greater Magellanic. Yet Seldon did know it, and he knew it with a certainty beyond question. He twisted on his pneumatic berth.

Milk run! The bearded metaphor crystallized in his mind. An era of galactic travel and there were still ships that broke trajectory for no apparent reason at all, that came out of transphotic to land on every backwater planet in the galaxy! And when your vacation was beginning, when every cherished hour counted, it was just your luck to get on one of them! And then he thought of where he was going and of all the wonderful things he was going to do, and his irritation ran away like a reprimanded child.

He thought of the blazing Magellanic suns, and the planets of happiness with their ancient love-goddess names; of *Lana* and *Ava* and *Rita* with their pure white cities, their idyllic valleys, their deep sapphire lakes; of *June* and *Joan* and *Jane* with their pleasure palaces, their love-gardens, their aphrodisiac fountains tinkling through long warm afternoons and soft evenings, through wild, starred nights. . . .

He sat up in his berth and swung his feet to the deck. Sleep was a distant star.

He stepped from his stateroom into the corridor and walked down the corridor to the mist-rooms. The aseptic air of the ship washed coolly around him. From far below came a deep purring of machinery. He stood for a long while in blue scented spray, letting cool drops coalesce upon his white body, then increasing the pressure until the mist disintegrated into sharp neutrons that bombarded him into sudden, vigorous awareness.

In his stateroom again, he dressed in the wan glow of his berth light. Then he returned to the corridor and went to the air-lift. Inside, he dialed "Lounge."

The lounge was deserted. At 0230 ship's time that was not surprising. He typed STD on the servo panel. While he waited for the steward he served himself a bourbon and water at the crystalline bar. Bourbon, he reflected, was a far cry from the rainbow nectar he was shortly going to be drinking on *Lana*, but it might serve to alleviate some of the tension still remaining from his six months bout with routine existence.

HE SHUDDERED when he drank it. It had a raw uncouth taste. He was not a drinking man, except on vacations; the complicated Hub society of which he was a micro-organism was not congenial to morning-afters; living in it at all demanded all the wiles and subterfuges even the clearest mind could improvise.

"Can I help you, sir?"

Seldon faced the correct young man in the neat white uniform. "Yes," he said. "You can tell me why we've interrupted trajectory."

"Nuclear storm, sir. We're laying over until it passes."

"How long will that be?"

"I don't know, sir, but the passenger deck is accessible."

Seldon swore. The passenger deck was never accessible unless planetfall exceeded an hour.

Suddenly he hated the immaculate steward standing apathetically before him. He hated the ship. He hated space and time. He hated nuclear storms and all other things that perversely contrived to ruin a man's vacation. He sensed the precious minutes sifting through his fingers; the irretrievable minutes, the sweet vacation minutes.

He caught himself, forced the resentful thoughts back. "Suit?" he asked.

"No, sir. Atmosphere's up to specifications, and then some. You'll need a coat, though." The steward went over to the wardrobe and took down a lightweight parka. He helped Seldon into it. "I'm afraid there won't be much to see, sir. We're standing in the pre-dawn belt."

"Just so there's fresh air to breathe." "There's plenty of that."

The locks were disengaged. Seldon pushed his way through them, breaking the safety circuit, making it impossible for the ship to space until he had re-entered it. He stepped out upon the narrow deck that girded the ship's bow.

Momentarily he was astonished. For there *was* fresh air. It was the freshest, sweetest air he had ever breathed. Permeating it was a damp planet smell—a smell compounded of forests and meadows, of brooks and rivers, of lakes and seas. He filled his lungs hungrily. Above him, the *Magellanic's* dark prow tapered to a lofty pinnacle. Below him the bulk of the ship curved out of sight to its tripod cradle.

He was leaning on the rail, looking down upon a multi-shadowed mass that was probably the crest of a forest. He raised his eyes. Beyond the wooded shoulders of low hills he made out the tentative grayness of dawn. His throat tightened. He had not seen a sunrise since he was a small boy with time to spare for sunrises. He raised his eyes still higher and beheld an almost starless sky. For a moment he was frightened. He was conditioned to the star swarming firmaments of the Hub worlds. This world must be much farther out on the perimeter of the lens than he had thought.

And therefore closer to the Greater Magellanic, and the planets of happiness. He began to feel better. Perhaps morning would see him disembarking after all, in the flower scented port of *Lana*; the hostesses would be there waiting in long rows to seize his bags; the garlanded aircars would be hovering just above the tarmac, waiting to whisk him to the first gleaming city. The suns would be warm upon his back and he would be off in ecstatic pursuit of the pleasures he had found on his last holiday, only to lose when the locks of the returning liner had swung implacably shut behind him.

Suddenly an old, old memory stepped into his mind.

It concerned an incident so incongruous to his conscious train of thought that he was at a loss to understand what quirk of reasoning could have triggered it.

WHEN he was a young man an itinerant group of players had visited the village adjacent to the lyceum he was attending. They were members of a vanishing cult called Critens—or was it Christians? He could not remember. Anyway, the prospect of such an anachronistic form of entertainment (for centuries the drama had been confined to the tridiscopes) must have beguiled his tutors, for they had attended the play and had taken him with them.

The performance took place in an unused field bordering the village. The profuse stars supplied the lighting, lending the players and the meagre props a peculiar unreality, giving the impression that the play was the mass dream of the spectators. He remembered all that well enough. What he could not remember with any degree of clarity was the play itself. Possibly because the essence of it had escaped him. But he did remember that it had been long and monotonous and had concerned the fanciful adventures of two peasant children looking for—of all things—a bluebird.

Now why in the galaxy had he thought of that? Here, now, on this backwater planet, on the eve of his vacation? I must be getting old, he thought. An old memory like that, walking across my mind, trampling on what I was thinking, and I could not even stop it, I did not even consciously recall it.

But forty-three wasn't old. Not in an era where average life expectancy was over a hundred.

He shrugged, returning his attention to the sunrise. The sky was brighter now: there was a tinge of pink permeating the gray. The stars were fading out, one by one. On the highest hill, black and gaunt against the nascent day, rose what appeared to be the ruins of a tall building. Seldon's interest quickened.

Perhaps, once upon a time, this world had been inhabited. Millenia ago, probably. He knew that it could not be inhabited now. It was too remote from the spaceways, too far out on the thinning perimeter of the lens.

But the thought of life having once endured here was intriguing. What manner of life had it been? Human, probably, since that had always been the prevalent galactic life form. Human beings living in an ethnocentric society of towns and villages, maybe even cities. People like his remote ancestors, possibly, stumbling one day on space travel, becoming star-crazy and migrating to the rich Hub worlds to become a part of the nucleus of the Galactic State.

Dawn was a pale curtain hanging in the east. Seldon could see his breath now, in the morning light. The rail of the passenger deck glistened with dew. The ship was standing in a great forest; the treetops formed a vast meadow that filled a valley and climbed a hundred hills, a meadow of a million branches each jeweled with countless emerald embryos of new leaves.

In the distance he could hear the singing of a thousand birds. With a start, he realized that it was spring.

Spring. He repeated the word in his mind., Spring on a backwater planet. It was winter where he had come from—it was summer where he was going. Unknowingly, he had almost missed a season. He was suddenly glad that he hadn't.

The hem of the dawn curtain reddened and burst into flame. The rim of the planet's star began to show above the highest hill. The ruin was a ragged charcoal mark made vertically on clean canvas, terminating in the charcoal smudges of its detritus.

Light poured over the land. It set the treetops ablaze with pale fire; it turned the dew pearly *Magellanic* into a silver flame. Seldon looked up at the sky. He found it suddenly hard to breathe. His throat felt dry, there was a dull aching in his chest.

He had never before seen a blue sky. . . .

MIST began rising from the forest, softening the contours of the hills, making the morning light translucent. The ruin was less distinct now, and somehow less hideous. There was a tragic note about it. What had happened to its builders? Why had they left? Why in the galaxy would anyone ever want to leave a world like this? Oh, yes, he remembered. It was a backwater planet, too remote from the spaceways, too remote from the glittering Hub civilization. There were thousands of others just like it, forsaken by man, wheeling their quiet ways about their suns, their forests on the march, rearing the new kingdoms, the green kingdoms; the kingdoms of trees. . . .

His ears were ringing. That shouldn't be, he thought. This atmosphere was far richer than any of the manufactured ones he had ever breathed. He shook his head: The ringing persisted. He came to with a start. Of course; the space bell!

Planetfall hadn't lasted an hour after all, or had it? He couldn't be sure. Anyway, he would arrive on *Lana* in the morning just as he had planned, and his vacation would be practically intact. He waited for the recrudescence of exultation to flood him; he waited for the heady vacation thoughts.

He waited in vain.

He gazed over the forest. He raised his eyes, then quickly dropped them before the proud yellow star ascending the dais of the highest hill.

He looked up at the blue sky:

He remembered the way champagne tastes after it has stood too long in the glass. Flat. Lifeless: That was the way his vacation tasted.

This is absurd, he told himself.

The bell rang insistently. It sounded angry, impatient: He was keeping the *Magellanic* grounded. He was holding up trajectory. A ship's officer appeared in the lock behind him. "Sir," he shouted, "you'll have to come aboard! We're spacing in two minutes."

Seldon looked up at the sky once more. Then he turned. "All right," he said. . . .

THE ship's clock said 0335. The lounge was still deserted. Seldon typed STD on the servo-panel and went over to the bar and served himself another bourbon and water. The *Magellanic* spaced just as he drank the bourbon. There was no way for him to know it; there was no sensation of motion, no increase in gravity—yet still he knew it. Hyper-technology went to fantastic lengths to conceal a physical fact, as though it were an obscene thing, but hyper-technology failed to consider the subconscious mind. The subconscious mind had an awareness all of its own; it understood, in a jumbled sort of way, phenomena the conscious mind could only grope at.

He wondered what his subconscious knew now that his conscious didn't. He tried to black his thoughts, tried to trick it into yielding a clue, a fragment, a word. Something more than a blue sky had spoiled his vacation.

"Can help you, sir?"

The same correct young man stood there before him. "Yes" Seldon said. Then he paused, embarrassed. He was about to ask an absurd question. An unconventional question. Properly adjusted galactic citizens did not ordinarily evince curiosity over such passé objects as perimeter planets. But he was determined. "What is the name of the planet we just left?"

"Perimeter planets no longer have names, sir," the steward said. "The Galactography Society considers it more practical to indicate them on the galactic chart simply by a letter appending their star's spectral classification and catalogue number. Thus, the one we are spacing from now will be recorded in the log as Go-219-CC. In this instance we have a double letter since the planet is part of a binary."

"I didn't know it was part of a binary."

"The second, smaller companion was in approximate opposition when we landed, sir. Naturally it was impossible for you to see it. However, we should be able to pick both of them up on the viewer now, if—"

"Maeterlinck," Seldon said suddenly.

"Pardon, sir?"

He could feel his face burning. The word had come from nowhere. It had materialized on his tongue and he had spoken it. What's the matter with me; he thought. The steward was regarding him oddly. Seldon gripped himself. "Let's see if we can pick it up," he said. "I've never seen a planetary binary before."

He followed the steward into the adjoining viewdeck and watched the man focus the great gleaming square of the viewer. "We're spacing perpendicular to the ecliptic," the Steward explained. "Our perspective therefore corresponds to the perspective we would have were we looking straight out from the *Magellanic's* stern."

The planet lay millions of miles below them on a crazy quiltwork pattern of stars: It lay half in darkness, half in light. The bright silver of its companion was clearly visible far out on its dark side.

But Seldon had forgotten the companion.

He stared at the planet's light side. The color was not quite pure; there was a tinge of green paling it. But the predominant hue stood out, beautiful, revelatory, unforgettable.

"The bluebird," he said.

"Pardon, sir?"

"I've found the bluebird!"

"The bluebird?"

"Never mind. It got away."

The steward was staring at him. "Are you all right, sir?"

"Certainly, I'm all right," Seldon said. "Look, you can see it yourself! See! It's flying away now. . . ."

It dropped swiftly below them. The last Seldon saw of it was a blue wing tip disappearing into the awesome stygian immensities. . . .