

David Lake

Creator

Professor David Lake is a faculty member of a university in Queensland, Australia, and the author of several science fiction novels. "Creator" was presented as one of the year's "top ten" in Donald A. Wollheim's *The 1979 Annual World's Best SF*.

It was a fine morning as usual on the planet Olympus, and Jay Crystal was just finishing breakfast in his private palace when the robot butler announced the arrival of the Installer.

Jay rose at once, and almost ran to the cleared room. He had never been so excited in all his immortal life. When he reached the room—yes, there it was: the gleaming machine, like a medium-sized light-smell-sound concert organ, was being rapidly assembled by the red-and-green painted robots of the Creation Corporation; and there beside them—not supervising, for the robots knew their jobs perfectly, but as it were giving them his blessing—stood the Installer.

The Installer was a dark Olympian, as dark as Jay was fair. His thick eyebrows were now bent in a slightly quizzical smile.

"We took the liberty, sir, of starting before you arrived. We thought you would like the job finished as quickly as possible."

"Yes, yes," said Jay. "Fine. How long will they be?"

"Another minute or so; and then—Mr. Crystal, we are so glad you decided to have one. I do admire your work for the public kinematron—those delicate, civilized sketches—but you know, the creatron represents the future in the entertainment industry. Besides, using this you can really get inspiration for your kine work. Ah—"

The robots were drawing aside . . .

"—they've finished. There now, sir, you have your creatron! Would you now please throw the master switch yourself? That's not just a piece of ceremony: it's essential for the working of such a personalized machine . . ."

Jay moved to the red button-switch on the wall. He touched it lightly with his right index finger, knowing as he did so that the switch was picking up his personal emanations, as it was designed to do: and in milliseconds the creatron sprang to life. There was a faint but profound humming sound, and on the display screen high above the console there appeared a jagged track of greenish light.

"That's your brain monitor," said the Installer, smiling gently. "It's basically an insurance device. We don't anticipate you will have any trouble, sir, but just occasionally a client gets so emotionally involved in his creations that we have to—er—assist. All creatron monitors broadcast to our company headquarters, where they are under constant surveillance. At the moment, all the monitor is showing is that you are pleasurablely excited. As you should be! You want to have a session at once? Yes, naturally. I'll send the robots out, and then . . ."

. . . And then they were seated together at the creatron; or rather, the Installer was seated, but Jay lay forward, comfortably semi-prone, his body supported by the harness, his hands lying lightly on the control panels, his head nested in the sensitive helmet. Before and below him, through the great window, lay the void that would be his world—when he created it. At the moment it was only a grey amorphous chaos. The Installer was explaining the controls.

"Under your left hand, sir, you have the fundamental-law dials and buttons. Those four in the bottom row are the dimensors, for length, breadth, depth—and the larger graduated knob which you twist is for Time. Above is the row for forces—analogs of nuclear, electro, weak, and gravitation; and above those again is the pseudo-mass setter. It'll all be clearer if you create a world now, for practice . . ."

"Er—can I erase it afterwards?"

"Surely," smiled the Installer. "There, on your extreme bottom left is the annihilator. Yes, the red button. Or, if you don't want to destroy your world without trace, above that is this amber button marked "Store". That will remove your universe from the working area, but with its whole history recorded, so that you can re-play it or return it to the working area for further development. Using "Store" you can create several different universes . . . The corresponding button on your right hand—the one marked "Hold"—that merely suspends Time while the working is in progress. The creatures in the world don't notice a thing, of course, because there is no time for them to notice *in*. Among other things, "Hold" lets you insert a special move if you want to. And the graduated knob below "Hold" is the Limited Time Cancel—it erases the recent past, and lets you insert a whole new sequence. And those buttons nearby on your right are the initiators, for just such insertions . . ."

Jay frowned. "I've heard of them. Miracle buttons, they call them, don't they?"

"I believe some people do," said the Installer. "Very popular they are, too, with some of our customers. They make creation as easy as sketching with a pencil and rubber . . ."

"And about as artistic," said Jay scornfully.

"Quite so. I see you are a bit of a purist, Mr Crystal: well, I like that; so am I. You can get some quite comic effects with the miracle-buttons,

but it *is* more satisfying to let a world be self-consistent. That's like not cheating when you're playing patience. You lay down the laws at the start, and then you abide by the consequences. You will have enough degrees of freedom anyway, through the wills of your creatures; or, put it another way, they'll be self-willed enough to surprise and amuse you. Now—would you like to start?"

Jay set the Time control, then pressed "Run" and one of the dimensors. At once there was a white line running across the world-space; or rather, space now existed as one dimension of length isolated and lonely in the midst of chaos.

"What happens if I don't press any more dimensors?" he asked.

"Then you get a one-dimensional universe. That's quite possible; indeed, you can have an amusing, rather classical world with One-D. Of course, all your creatures will have to be line-masses, and they won't be able to cross or pass each other . . ."

Jay hurriedly pressed the second dimensor. At once chaos vanished, and the world became one vast sheet of pale grey.

"Now you have Flatland," said the Installer. "One of our clients, a Mr Abbas, achieved a notable creation in two dimensions—"

"With circles and squares for characters," said Jay. "Yes, I've heard. But all that's a bit limited. Lacks human interest." He touched the third dimensor.

The pale greyness changed subtly. He felt a thrill of vertigo: it was as though he were looking down an infinite height, frightful, fathomless, utter emptiness forever. He clutched desperately at his armrests.

"Realistic, isn't it?" said the Installer. "Don't worry, you can't possibly fall *into* it. That space is totally unreal in our terms—it has no more existence than a space described in a work of fiction. Or, to put it another way, it is *inside* you—in your mind. It will be less frightening when you've filled it with something. Now, go on, Mr Crystal—give your world some laws. May I suggest, if you want something realistic, the following settings, just to start with . . .?"

Jay followed instructions, and punched the buttons. The next moment he couldn't help shouting with amazement. All at once, through the window, there were shining sparks in a blackness, like a silent firework display.

"There now," said the Installer. "You have just created light and matter, and your universe is exploding. If you turn the Time control anti-clockwise, the explosion will become a sedate expansion—yes, so. Those sailing blobs are galaxies. Now, if you want a close-up view of one, this View control above the depth button . . ."

For half an hour of real time Jay manoeuvred, fascinated. He seemed to plunge into the heart of a galaxy, which was now condensing into stars. He watched a solar system form about a young yellow star, and then he followed a small planet through its evolution until the asteroids

stopped falling on it, and the cratered surface spewed out air and water, and nearly the whole surface was a steaming, cloud-wreathed ocean.

"Now is the time to create life," said the Installer softly.

"Doesn't it arise automatically?" asked Jay, surprised.

"Nothing really arises 'automatically', Mr Crystal. The whole machine only works because your mental impulses are being implemented. And there are certain crucial stages which require a special impulse from you. This is one of them. But all you have to do is *will* it, and it will happen. Say "let there be life", if you like—the verbalization is sometimes a help."

"Let there be life," said Jay.

And there was life. At this setting of the Time control, a billion years passed by in a minute. In two minutes there was a fringe of green around the shores of the growing continents. In four minutes, there were vast forests, and amphibians floundering through them. Then Jay touched a control under his left hand, and slowed down created Time with respect to the Olympian viewers.

Now it took a few minutes to ~~evolve giant reptiles; birds, mammals. And Jay began to feel increasingly strange—uncomfortable. He squirmed.~~

"T—" he began.

"Not to worry," said the Installer, one eye on the monitor-screen, one hand on Jay's arm. "This is normal, sir. You are creating higher life-forms, aren't you? They are beginning to have clearer and clearer consciousness. And of course it's *your* consciousness in every one of them. Tell me how it feels to you."

"As if I'm being torn apart. Divided in a million pieces. And being stabbed with a million needles."

"Quite so. You can control that two ways. First, mechanically—that grey dial on your right, marked "Empathy"—turn it anti-clockwise and the pains will fade. But so will the involvement. Experienced creators damp the pains without losing involvement, by a technique of mental relaxation. I can show you that, if you like, but it will take a bit of time. We'd have to have another session, perhaps several. There's no extra charge for that, if you wish it. It's part of installation service. I always use relaxation myself, I may say."

"You mean, you—you practise creation too?" said Jay.

"Of course, sir. I have my own 'tron at home. I have to be an experienced practitioner, you realize, otherwise I could hardly advise clients—"

The next moment, Jay uttered a yelp. The Installer leaned across and twisted the grey dial to the left.

"Pardon me, sir: you can turn it up if you like, but I wanted to shield you from emotional insult. What *was* that, if I may ask? My guest viewer here is not so finely adjusted as your master one."

"A primate," said Jay shakily. "It was caught and slowly crushed by a huge constricting snake. I could feel its fear, its horror, its pain." He pondered. "Say, this is *my* creation, isn't it? *My universe!* Why do I have to have pain in it? Isn't there a setting, or something, that I can introduce to stop all that kind of thing?"

"Well," said the Installer, with a slow, dark smile, "if you feel that way, you have several possible strategies. Number One: you can slightly alter the fundamental laws. With a different ratio between the four forces, you could make sentient life impossible anywhere in your universe—hence no pain. But a bit drastic, eh? Lacking in human interest, as you said. Strategy Number Two: use one of the miracle buttons. Actually, you can insert a set program, so that life develops with no sensory nerves, hence no pain—but no pleasure either. That way, you'd have to program for another series of miracles, to keep the things alive at all—because of course with no pain they'd always be getting killed. They'd have no incentive, you see, to avoid falling over cliffs and so on. Wouldn't you agree, sir, that that would be, well, rather an inartistic universe? Your creatures would be zombies; and you couldn't get any kind of kick out of them. Believe me, I know: I tried that once myself, as an experiment. It was only good for laughs. Well, there remains Strategy Number Three—discreet miracles.

"What do you mean?" asked Jay.

"You can punch the Hold button at various critical moments—for example, you could have saved that primate by pressing Hold and then annihilating that snake. That button on top left—the orange one—that's the Selective Erase. You can even program the machine to make that happen every time, in defined situations, so that you don't have to sit up all night working a billion separate miracles an hour. And you can even interfere with evolution along the same lines—this is a little more complicated, but I'll show you how—and wipe out the breeding stock of reptiles which would develop into snakes. And so on."

"Inartistic," said Jay dully. "Isn't there any other way?"

"I'm afraid not. There is no way to have pleasant things without unpleasant things except by miracles." He paused, and half rose. "Well, sir, if you'll excuse me, I have another appointment in half an hour—another installation. Business is booming, you see. But if you like I'll come round tomorrow to see how you're making out . . ."

"Yes, yes," said Jay absently. He had pressed the Hold button, and his universe, though it didn't know it, was in stasis. For one of his primate species had descended from the trees; and now he was thinking about the creation of Man.

Next morning, when the robot butler emitted a discreet electronic cough, Jay was deeply engrossed in the creatron. At the third cough,

which was as loud as that of a large carnivore in the world of his private creation, Jay finally looked up.

"Mr Harriman, sir?"

"Who?"

"The Installer, from the Creation Corporation . . ."

"Show him in, show him in right away," said Jay irritably. "I need him now . . ."

Harriman glided in with his usual faint dark smile. "Well, Mr Crystal, how are you making out?"

"Not too well," Jay admitted. "In fact, I'm having trouble developing a humanoid species at all. I—I've tried with likely primates on several planets, and—well, I've had to use some miracle buttons—I thought that mightn't matter just for practice. I picked the likeliest-looking species, and then killed off—I mean, annihilated its nearest rivals—"

"What, individually? That must have been a colossal task . . .!"

"No, I looked at the instruction tapes and I—er—set up a program. The program identified any over-violent, over-aggressive primate species—giant carnivorous gorillas and suchlike—and automatically wiped them out."

"That was clever handling, I must say," said Harriman. "I thought I would have to explain to you about programming, but I see you've beaten me to it. Well, sir, what happened after you wiped out those monster primates? Can I—er—inspect?"

"Sure," said Jay; and they both bent over their viewers. Harriman showed Jay how to increase the specificity and magnification of the guest viewer; and now they both got a good look at a sylvan scene.

The planet was much like Olympus, with a yellow sun and a blue sky, but of course much wilder, with huge forests and tropical savannahs. And there, on the fringe of a warm forest, they saw a troop of primates. There were some fifty individuals of both sexes and all ages, a good deal hairier than humans, but with bare flat faces and delicate features. A few were strolling among the trees, unhurriedly foraging for fruit, some on all fours, others on their hind legs. They were clearly able to walk bipedally, but they were not being purists about it. It sometimes happened that two foragers came up to a luscious fruit about the same time: when this happened, each blinked at the other, and then backed away with a curious little simper. Neither got the fruit: both went off to look for pickings elsewhere.

All of a sudden another troop of the creatures emerged from the depths of the forest.

"This should be interesting," said Harriman in Jay's ear. "A crisis situation. Now, in my worlds I've always found—hey, what's wrong with them?"

The "crisis situation" was resolving itself very simply. The invading

troop infiltrated the earlier arrivals, who blinked at them and simpered. The invaders simpered back. Then they took one look at the wide savannah ahead, whinnied or whimpered a little, and melted back into the deep forest.

"Well!" said Harriman. "Is that what always happens, when two groups meet? No battles, no defence of territory?"

"No," said Jay sharply. "I'm happy to say, my people are not violent types. I chose the most peaceful species I could find. I wanted to avoid the unhappy history of our own early development . . ."

"I see. And do your peaceful 'people' never go out onto the savannah?"

"Never. You see, there are large carnivores out there . . ."

"Aren't your people carnivores themselves? I should have thought—"

"Certainly not," said Jay. "They're strict vegetarians! I want to develop a decent civilization, without all that outmoded barbarism. You know that's the kind of ideal I have been promoting in my kine sketches—civilized interaction between individuals and species. Surely it's important to start right?"

Harriman took a deep breath. "Yes, it is," he said. "Tell me, how long in their terms has your species there been living at that evolutionary level? Semi-bipedal forest-living fruit-eaters, with no weapons—er, perhaps I should say, tools?"

"Twenty million years," said Jay disconsolately. "And in that time, on this planet my program has eliminated four cousin-species, all savage hunters."

"Well, Mr Crystal," said Harriman, "that was your mistake. You have obviously, through your program, eliminated four very promising candidates for full humanity."

"Humanity?" cried Jay; "they were murderous beasts—"

"So were we all, once," said Harriman, with a gleam in his dark eyes.

"And the beast still lurks in us: our civilization is just a veneer, necessary perhaps, but at bottom, for many of us, rather *boring*. Hence, largely, this boom in the creatron business. The big Box allows very many people to indulge harmlessly in delicious savagery. Wait till I've shown you the full scope of the empathy techniques, Mr Crystal! Then perhaps you'll change your ideas a little as to what's desirable and undesirable in a sub-world. Wouldn't you like to *be*, say, the savage leader of a mighty horde of magnificent barbarians, roaring through the jungle and the desert, the mountain and the plain, sacking towns and cities, holding at your mercy your cowering enemies and their equally cowering but much more attractive women—?"

"I would *not*!"

"Oh, never mind," sighed Harriman. "But look, sir, whatever your ultimate ideals, let me tell you that you'll *never* create a human-type

species this way, out of these nice guys. Nice guys come last. In fact, they don't even run at all. Two things you need: meat-eating, for a start; and aggression, selfishness, sheer death-take-the-hindmost competition as well. Hunting skills sharpen brains, and the competition with other members of the same species—that makes for real *ambition*. Ambition is what got us to Olympus in the first place. You remember how space travel began? It was a space *race* that put our race in space."

"There must be another way," said Jay stubbornly. "Look, Harriman, we may have made it to Olympus, but—I've read history too, you know—but we wrecked our original planet doing it, and damn nearly exterminated ourselves in the process. The damage we did to the universe—I'd like to explore a better way—to see if I can't create a race without our evils. This is not just a game: if I succeed, I may have some vital message to give to all of us in the real world."

"All right—try," said Harriman, shrugging. "I'll teach you all there is to know about the machine—all the techniques of programming, empathy, and so on. And then—it'll be up to you. I might make one suggestion, though."

"What's that?"

"If you have to use the miracle buttons to favor one subhuman species over another, pick the meanest, the most cunning, the most bloody-minded one that the planet offers. That way, you'll speed up the evolution of true humanity very much. Oh, all right, all right, I know you won't—in that case, why not merely let things take their course? Keep off the miracle buttons, and see what evolution throws up. When they're wearing clothes—and swords—then you can take them in hand, and try to tame them. There are techniques for tampering even with intelligent species, you know, to make them milder or fiercer. For instance, you do this . . ."

By the end of that session Jay was handling the creatron so expertly that Harriman decided he could be left to get on with his experiments for several days. In fact, it was a whole week before the butler announced him again. Jay had not been actually on the creatron, but pacing beside it. When Harriman entered, he went forward, almost running, to meet him.

"Harriman, I—it's overwhelming—" he flustered.

"It is rather exciting, once you get into it, isn't it?" said the dark visitor, smiling. "Well, tell me all about it. You know, Mr Crystal, we will soon be able to drop the professional relationship—in a few more days, I think, I'll be able to cross you off my list of *new* clients, and then the Maintenance department of the Corporation will be officially in charge of you—not my team. After that, I hope we can be just fellow-practitioners of the great art; and—why not?—friends. Well now, Mr Crystal—"

"Call me Jay," said Jay. "Please."

"All right, Jay—if you'll call me Sam—short for Samael. All my friends do."

"Sam—I've created Man."

"Congratulations, Jay. What did you do?"

"Nothing, really. I let evolution take its course, and—humanity arose! They became very like us—"

"What, those silly good-natured ape-men in the forest?"

"Oh, hell, no," said Jay, waving his hand as though brushing away an insect. "I got rid of them. In fact, I decided not to cheat any more—no more miracle buttons—so I started from scratch. I erased my first universe—"

"Your whole *universe*! Why not just the planet?"

"I had messed about too much," said Jay contritely. "I wanted to start over, clean. So I did. Set up the four laws, and the mass-constant, and ran up the new universe at top speed. Then I chose a middling-sized galaxy, and began to watch various promising yellow suns. I just *watched*. Many of them developed the right sort of planets, and I created life over and over, just by willing it, as you showed me. And then I let the life behave as it wanted to. I used the middle empathy band—it was a really weird sensation—"

"It sure is," said Harriman, with a reminiscent gleam in his dark eyes. "You feel it coming out of your gut, don't you? All of them—the sharks, the snakes, the dinosaurs, the tigers. I like to use the micro-focus sometimes, and feel myself giving birth to the little fellows, the bacteria, the viruses. Hell, I've fissioned myself into a billion bugs—syphilis, rabies, cancer cells, and also into the leukocytes that go for them. I've killed myself, eaten myself on all levels. There's no kick like it."

"Yes, well, it's certainly disturbing," said Jay, passing his hand dazedly over his fair hair. "So much horror, so much evil—it becomes evil, after all, when you reach the highest animals—and every bit of it was *me*! Out of the darkness of my mind, the things I hate took form. To be frank, I nearly went crazy from time to time: I had to fight hard not to reach for the miracle buttons and exterminate monster after monster. But I didn't touch the buttons—I let those nightmares do what they wanted to do!" He paused, shuddering—

"You *did* practise the relax-withdrawal, didn't you?" said Harriman anxiously. "Things might get rough if you didn't."

"Oh, sure, I withdrew," said Jay flatly. "What else? Do you think I could stand deep empathy—or even middle empathy—with a *massacre*? When I was all the victims and all the killers at the same time?"

"Okay, okay," said Harriman. "So—what did you come up with?"

"Civilizations," said Jay, "many civilizations, on many planets. Not all were of humanoids—great Olympus, I've been centaurs, I've been

dolphins, kangaroids, octopoids. . . but in the end it was the humanoids who fascinated me most. So like us!"

"And were there any meek-and-mild races among your civilizations?"

"Not one," admitted Jay sadly. "All carnivores and killers, like you said, Sam. I suppose it has to be that way at the start. Paradise was never lost—but maybe it can be found. That's what I want to work towards. Meanwhile—meanwhile, I must say, some of my races have done the most astonishing things! Why, they've even produced *literature*!"

"They frequently do," nodded Harriman, smiling. "In fact, a lot of the kine-writers plagiarize from the works of their own creatures. You might think of that yourself, Jay. It's not really cheating. After all, your creatures are *you*. They're a part of your mind which you're liberating, putting to use . . ."

"I never imagined I could write anything like *this*," said Jay. "I transcribed it onto tape." He flicked a switch. "Listen! Of course, this is only a translation into our language, from one that my creatures invented. It sounds much better in the original, which—great Olympus! I understand perfectly. It's from a huge long poem . . ."

The remote, impersonal voice of the speech-synthesizer began to chant:

Full well I know in my heart that the sacred city will fall,
The day shall come when Troy and her king will be laid low,
Priam and Priam's people, the folk of the strong ash spear:
Yet not for them do I grieve, the queen, the king nor my brothers
Many and brave, who will fall in the dust before the foemen,
But for you, dear wife, in the day when some bronze-coated Akhaian
Shall lead you away a slave weeping for your lost freedom.
Then in some foreign land will you bend to your master's will
At the hard toil of the loom, or under the burden of water,
Bearing your load from enemy streams to enemy houses.
Some man shall say as he sees you, 'Why, that was the wife of
Hektor,
The best of heroes in war, when men still fought about Troy.'
So shall one say, and bring fresh grief to you, friendless and
widowed;
But let me be dead in that day, and let the heaped earth hide me
Before I hear your cries, as they drag you into slavery.

The voice passed into silence, and Jay switched off the tape. He said: "They don't write poetry like that nowadays—not in *our* universe."

Harriman shrugged. "Of course not. How can they—how can we? We have a comfortable civilization, and the immortality pill, and wars are banned by the United Planets Organization. Just look at what makes up great poetry—for instance, that extract you taped, which I agree is pretty good: death, war, slavery—the blackest of evils. Sheer tragedy.

Without that, no brilliant poetry. And no kicks . . . You have to go to your sub-universes now for those. Say, by the way, what race produced that poem? They must be pretty good, even by *my* standards . . .”

Jay shuddered. “They’re the most frightening of all my humanoids. Not much to look at—in relative measurements rather small, in fact nearly all specimens are well under eight feet—”

“The runts!” said Harriman, grimacing.

“—but they make up for that in their fierceness, in grim determination, in sheer ingenious *cruelty*. When I realize that they’re *me*—” He shook his head. “I must do something about them. They’re a challenge to all I love and believe in.”

“Why not just press a certain button?” said Harriman. “Jay, it’s not worth upsetting yourself—”

“No—no more annihilations,” said Jay firmly. “I promised that to myself. These people are mine—I must help them, change them. I’ll think of something.” He seemed to change the subject. “Sam, can you tell me one little thing? What’s that knob for, on the extreme top right of the control panel?”

“What knob?”

“This,” said Jay, touching it. The thing was a small projection, apparently a useless metal hump screwed down to the main body of the panel.

“That—oh, nothing,” said Harriman, with a quick little laugh. “That shouldn’t be on there—in one version of the machine there was an extra control there for a special kind of empathy, but we found it too dangerous, and the control was discarded. It’s surely not functional on yours.”

“Dangerous?” said Jay slowly. “*Can* the creatron be dangerous? In the real world, I mean?”

“Not if you use it sensibly,” said Harriman, “but in the early days of the development we had a few accidents with people who *weren’t* sensible. In one of the worst accidents—well, we never could find out *exactly* what happened, because you know if the creator *dies*, all his universes are automatically erased. Their being is his being, and when he goes, so do they.”

“Somebody died?” said Jay, huge-eyed. “On *Olympus*? How is it that didn’t make the newscasts?”

“It wasn’t on Olympus—luckily,” said Harriman. “It was on Ametet, which is practically owned by our Corporation, so luckily we were able to hush the matter up. Anyway, it was the guy’s own fault—he got hooked by the Box, and we didn’t have enough experience at that time to read the signs of addiction. He was a Corporation employee, name of O. Siris, I believe—he kept muttering that he was being torn apart, and then finally he *was* torn apart. He had been bleeding from more than a dozen wounds when they found his body, still strapped to the machine. You see, some dreams can be deadly, if you let them take hold of you. Now, Jay,

you have been warned. These present models are much safer than the early ones, but—that monitor is not there for nothing. And if you feel you’re getting into any kind of trouble, don’t hesitate to get me on the laserphone.”

“All right,” said Jay.

The fine Olympian days went by. Jay was now thoroughly absorbed by his hobby, his creatron: no longer did he write for the big 3-D screen, but then he didn’t need to: he had an adequate income from his royalties on former work plus the basic salary paid by the United Planets to all citizens as of right, the Existence Benefit. The cut-down in his work hardly mattered: he felt that he was deepening his understanding of human nature so much with his new dream-box that when he returned to kine-writing he would produce masterpieces. What was perhaps more serious was that his absorption in the sub-world was sapping his social life in the real universe. His current girl friend, Aphra, complained about it. One early morning, as they lay on Jay’s anti-gravity bed, Aphra swallowed the pill which rendered her at once immortal and sterile, washed it down with a shot-glass of nectar, and said:

“Jay, I’m leaving.”

“Yes,” said Jay vaguely. “I suppose it’s time.” He slipped off the other side of the bed and reached for his robe, his eyes unfocussed.

Aphra sat up sharply on the foam-force-field, her long yellow hair waving like angry snakes, her usually soulful blue eyes for once contracted in irritation.

“No,” she said, “I mean, I’ve had enough. Pay attention, will you? Your mind’s not on it when we make love any more. Well, you aren’t the only fellow who—Sam, for instance, now: he’s more fun to be with, there’s a bit of spice to *him*! And he can take that box or leave it. If you want to see me again, Jay, give me a lase at his place.”

Jay let her go, nodding absentmindedly. He was not jealous. Besides, Sam was now his best friend. He would take good care of Aphra.

And Sam came round almost every day now, to swap yarns about sub-universes. Their dealer-client relationship was now officially at an end: they were merely two fans together. Sam seemed to be much more relaxed about the possible dangers of the creatron.

“I checked with the Corp.,” he said, on one of these visits. “The Total Empathy control is *not* functional on your machine—for some reason the button’s still there under that metal cap, but the technicians assured me that there’s no connections under it. All new models, from now on, will have no button there at all. Anyway, I know you can’t do anything foolish like that guy Siris.” He smiled, and nodded at the creatron. “How’s it going in there, Jay?”

“Terrible—and wonderful.” Jay swallowed. “Whenever I take it off ‘Hold’ I’ve got the Time control set for scanning at a year an hour on that

planet I mentioned to you. Yes, I know that's slow, but I'm following their civilizations in detail now. I've moved on about two centuries from the time of that poem I quoted, and—strange things are happening, Sam. They're developing philosophy, religion—"

"Yeah, they usually do," said Harriman, grinning. "I always enjoy my creatures' religions. Every one of them involves humanoid sacrifices—some of them very ingenious in their methods—and quite often the sacrifices are offered to Guess Who? Me, yours truly, the owner and maker of the universe, Samael Harriman himself!"

Jay shuddered. "There's some of that in my world, too. It's horrible. But—I have hopes. It's decreasing, especially in a belt about the middle of my world's greatest continent-complex. Over the last two centuries, there have been some brilliant men arising, in several different cultures. One little tribe gave up human sacrifice long ago, and substituted animals. Then, recently, one of their best men denounced even that. Curiously enough, he claimed to speak in my name. He told his people that I wanted 'mercy, and not sacrifice'. And in other countries, other men have been saying much the same thing. Look: let's get on the machine, and I'll show you."

When they were at the viewers, Jay swept the scanner down through the clouds of that blue-and-white planet. Below them lay the peaks of a towering mountain range capped with ice and snow. Jay swept southwards, at decreasing altitude, until they seemed to be hovering with an eagle's-eye-view over a wide river-plain—a warm area, with jungles and narrow clearings where a brown-skinned people were growing rice. Here and there the clearings became wider, and in their centres, on the banks of the rivers, rose walled cities—cities that looked well laid out, with busy markets, gorgeous palaces, richly adorned temples, and spacious parks.

Finally, Jay narrowed the view to one city, and in that city to a beautiful park. In the distance, tame protected royal deer were wandering over lawns and between flame-of-the-forest trees. Closer up, between the scattered trees sat, squatted, stood, or strolled a large crowd of all kinds of people—little clusters of bejewelled nobles and merchants, with their bodyguards and slaves of both sexes; shaven-headed priests; and a large ragged rabble of common folk, men, women, and children, with a fringe of dirty and diseased beggars. Towards the centre of this crowd was a cleared space around a great green-leaved tree. Before the tree, in the front rank of the crowd, sat a handful of gaunt men in yellow robes: and facing these and the whole crowd, there sat under the tree another yellow-robed man—a man less gaunt, with an imposing presence and handsome, composed features.

That, at least, was the scene as Harriman saw it. For Jay, it was different: for he not only *saw* the scene, he *was* it. He was that hot earth, that grass, and his were the branches and green twigs that swayed in the

warm breeze. These sensations were relatively dim; much more strongly, he felt the life of the deer browsing in the distance, and of the crowd milling in the foreground: he was proud and well-fed in the nobles, he was seductive in their dancing-girls, he was lusty in the young farmer come into the city for the day, he was in dull pain in the old beggar with the crippled knee.

But above all, he was in the man under the tree.

He felt a vast compassion rise in him, as he looked through the man's eyes at the crowd. Suffering—all the world was suffering: birth was suffering, old age was suffering, sickness was suffering, death was suffering. Contact with unpleasant things was suffering, parting from what one wanted was suffering. And now only he knew the cure, only he could teach that best way out, the Middle Path . . .

And so he, the Enlightened One, taught them. The Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, the Five Precepts. All life was sacred: therefore abstain from injuring any living creature. And all life was *one*: the idea that you had an individual, eternal soul was the great illusion from which you had to break free. If you clung to that illusory self, you would remain bound on the wheel of suffering existence.

"*Sabbe sankhāra dukkha.*" The words of that warm country's language came fluently out of his mouth, sonorous but not strange, since he had the gift of all his creatures' tongues. "All compounded things are suffering . . ."

The crowd were impressed. A few of the people plucked up courage to ask him questions. A priest:

"How should one sacrifice to the gods, O Enlightened One?"

"The best sacrifice is that of right moral action, of mercy to all living things. . . . As for the gods, they too are fellow creatures: they too need enlightenment."

"O Holy One!" cried a woman suddenly. She was a new arrival; she bore on her hip a baby which—no, not a baby: the only life in it was on the microscopic level of decay. The corpse of a baby. To this personal grief she clung; and was therefore bound. "O Holy One, you know all secrets: grant me a charm, a medicine to bring my son back to life!"

And he answered her: "Go, woman, to every house in the city where there has been no death, and ask of them one mustard seed . . ."

"But," said the woman, stricken, "the city is old: in every house there has been death."

"That knowledge," said the man under the tree, "is the only medicine for death."

At this point Jay began to withdraw from the scene, his viewpoint rising till he was looking down on the deer-park through the eyes of a brown hawk that glided and soared, uttering mournful, tinkling cries as it scanned the earth in hopes of prey. He pressed the Hold button.

As they both got off the machine, he translated for Harriman the

message of the man under the tree. He felt astonished and elated. He finished:

"I didn't know I had any such things in me! Me, the Enlightened One! Why, Sam, on the strength of that I could set up as a philosopher in *this* world!"

Sam yawned. "I could tell it was *your* world all right, Jay. My bright boys don't come up with teachings of that kind. Currently, my people are going strong for Zapism."

"Zapism?"

"Yeah. The First Noble Truth of Zapism is stated like this: Zap a rat before he zaps you. Thus spake my Zapathrustra. However, Jay, I'll hand it to you: your world there is brilliant, complex, *artistic*. I liked your whole crowd—the beggars, the prostitutes, the bully-boys, the nobles. You've really got tremendous talent—no, that's too weak—I should say, genius. My worlds are cruder, simpler . . ."

"Sam," said Jay, "What did he mean by saying 'the gods are our fellow-creatures, they too need enlightenment'? He was talking about us, wasn't he?"

"I guess so," said Harriman. "Why not?"

"But—but he sounded as if he *knew* about us—as if we were on the same plane of reality as himself!"

"Again, why not?" Harriman smiled darkly. "After all, that guy is really a part of your mind, Jay, so in one sense he *is* on the same plane. And our creatures *do* get inklings about us—that's a thing we fans discovered pretty early in the game." He laughed, shortly. "Before he had that accident, that guy Siris said something that gave us all in the Corp. a bit of a jolt: See what you make of it, O Enlightened One! He said, 'We made the sub-worlds, but who made *our* world? Maybe the sub-worlders did. We invent them, they invent us. You scratch my essence, I scratch yours. Mutual make-believe! It's creative writing that makes the worlds go round . . .' How about that, huh?"

Jay muttered, "Herakleitos!"

"I beg your pardon," said Harriman. "Is that a new swearword, or something?"

"No," said Jay. "Herakleitos is one of the philosophers of that planet in my sub-universe. He has ideas very like the one you mentioned. He lives in a country a bit to the north-west of the one we were looking at—they're a brilliant people too. You would like them: very artistic, but very bloody-minded. Herakleitos is one of the bloodiest-minded and the cleverest of them. He says that gods and men live in a mutual relationship—each produces the other. He also says that all existence depends on conflict, strife, war—if conflict were to cease, the whole universe would disappear."

"He's dead right," smiled Harriman. "At least, he'd be right in *my* universe, because if the battles stopped in my world I'd press the erase

button. Eternal peace is just too boring to be endured. Jay, I like the sound of your Herak guy much better than the one you just showed me: he's really on the ball."

"I must prove him wrong," muttered Jay. "Oh yes, I've learnt now that *some* aggression is necessary, in the early development of humanity. But not so much, not what is actually going on in most places of my world! War, massacre, slavery, torture—surely that *doesn't* have to go on—"

"Oh yes it does," said Harriman crisply. "It has to go on *somewhere*, Jay, or we'll go nuts. You don't realize it, but we of the Creation Corp., we really saved our civilization from a general breakdown. Before the Box was invented, you should have seen the figures for intakes into mental hospitals, attempted suicides, even *murders*. People must have kicks, you know. Now they get 'em in their private boxes, that's all—that's why we can afford peace and painless living in the big world, the real world."

"The other worlds are real, too," said Jay. "You've already admitted that. And I know it's true. When I am *in* there, it's as real as here. To think that I once annihilated a whole universe!" He shuddered.

Harriman laughed. "Why, that's the biggest kick of all. Only, it's best not to erase it all simultaneously—if you do, they're all gone without knowing about it. If you erase selectively, *then* you can have fun, as the poor saps see their suns and moons disappearing, and then the next county, and so on. I always end a game that way."

Jay looked at Harriman, appalled. And from then on, their friendship was not what it had been.

For many days after that, Jay buried himself completely in the world of his creation. He did not leave his palace—he did not even leave the room that housed his universe, but had his robots serve his meals right there, on a small table beside the great machine. He ate hurriedly, and then returned at once to that terrible and wonderful blue-and-white planet.

He still kept Time going at a year-an-hour, which allowed him to cover a sub-world generation in a couple of Olympian days. Subjectively, when he was in middle or deep empathy, his time was the time of the sub-world—which meant that his solid dreams packed what seemed to be the experience of a lifetime into three or four "real" days.

Gradually Jay concentrated his attention on the culture which had produced the terrible philosopher Herakleitos. These people were rising to a peak of glory. Few in numbers, they nevertheless defeated a huge eastern empire: and Jay was there when they did it. He entered the brain of a fully-armed warrior, in a sea-flight by a rocky island—and felt the exultation of his host-creature as he leapt ashore and drove his spear again and again through the cowering enemies. It should have been

horrible, but it was not—the man was in love with what he was doing, namely exercising one of his best skills, and doing so without personal hatred in defence of his beloved city. And, as the fight ended with the enemy all dead or in chains, words were forming in the hoplite's brain—for, Jay found, he was also a great poet. He would write a tragedy for the next festival, and this fight would be in it. But it would be no boast of his city's prowess: rather, it would be a poem of awe at the justice of the gods—how they smote down overweening pride, the lust for conquest; and the enemy king would be the tragic hero. But their own war-song would have a modest place:

O children of Hellas, onward! Now make free
Your fatherland, your children, wives, your fathers'
Gods and graves: now the fight is for all things . . .

Jay was also in the theatre on the day when the play was given. It was a great play. Best of all, the audience wept for the sufferings of the *enemy* . . .

Yes, thought Jay, there is a greatness in this people. Perhaps they will transform this world into something better . . .

He followed them for one, two generations. And now the city which had fought so nobly was itself an empire, with all the overweening pride and lust for conquest which the old hoplite had denounced. Quarrel after quarrel they picked with their neighbours, until they roused a whole coalition of enemies against them. Any friend of these enemies they attacked; even neutrals . . .

Jay watched with horror as, in time of peace, the forces of the city besieged a small neutralist island town. Traitors within opened the gates; and then the invading army rounded up the whole population, women and children in one great herd, men in another. Then the soldiers began methodically cutting the throats of the men. The women and children were screaming; but the soldiers made them wait there till the massacre was over before they drove them down to the ships and the slave-markets . . .

One of the city poets made a play after that business, too. But this time the play was bitter and ugly with horror. It was set in legendary times, but the story was much the same: the burning town, the killing, the captive women. The enslaved queen cried:

O God, our maker, begetter: do you see?

And the other slave-women replied:

He sees, but the flames still burn . . .

Jay hurriedly pressed the Hold button, and withdrew. He even with-

drew from the creatron room, and for several hours lay in a stupor on his luxurious bed.

When he arose, he had given up all hopes of salvation from the cities of Hellas; and he was also suffering from a profound sense of guilt. He was the callous god to whom the slaves cried in vain; he was also all the killers, all the slavemasters, all the torturers. Somehow, he must expiate. He thought of the miracle buttons; then shook his head. No, that was merely cheating. And it solved nothing. The evil was in himself; in himself he must destroy it. He would save his world, if it killed him . . .

He felt a burning desire to get down in there, to do something effective, to commit himself utterly. Then he remembered something. No, it wouldn't work—Sam had said there were no connections. But it was at least worth investigating . . .

Back in the room, he searched round the back of the creatron, and found the instruction tapes. He had never played them right to the end: now he did so. And finally the robot voice said, tonelessly:

"Total Empathy Control. Extreme top right, colored purple. Not, repeat not, to be touched unless an assistant is at hand to watch the brain monitor and if necessary to impose Hold and end the empathy.

"Total Empathy produces total illusion. The operator will lose all consciousness except the consciousness of the host-creature: subjectively, he will be that creature until the creature dies or until Hold is imposed. It is advised that the operator should select a host-creature which is in good health and safe from external dangers; and also arrange with the assistant to have the Hold control activated after a very limited period. The operator should also check that he himself is in perfect physical condition before attempting total empathy.

"Repeat: Total Empathy Control. Extreme top right, colored purple . . ."

Jay switched off. Then he summoned his butler.

"That metal cap," he said, pointing. "Can you remove it for me?"

"Certainly, sir," said the robot. He put his metal fingers to his metal chest, opened the small window there, and took out an instrument which had hardly changed in a thousand years—a screw-driver. Then he bent over the creatron. A minute later, the butler straightened. He was holding up a small, rounded piece of metal.

"Order executed, sir."

"All right—now leave me," said Jay.

"Sir." The butler left.

There it was—a purple button, no different in size or shape from many others on the great machine. It wouldn't work, of course, Jay told himself, but it might be a help psychologically. When he was in middle to deep empathy, and had selected a worthy host, he would press it—and then follow that man through his life of striving for justice and mercy. It would have to be someone like that great Enlightened One, but perhaps

more active, more impassioned. Not in the East, not in Hellas. How about that little tribe in the area between, whose prophets had so long ago denounced sacrifice . . . ?

He pressed the "Run" button, and history resumed. Jay located the tribe he wanted. They had passed through various tribulations, but they seemed to have emerged from them: and their faith was firmer than ever fixed in a just and merciful God. Now the Hellenes were expanding all over the middle of the planet, and they were lording it over that little tribe, too. They were trying to turn *them* into imitation Hellenes, acceptors of the world as it was, in all its sensuality and cruelty.

But the tribe resisted fiercely. Persecution merely spurred them on to greater effort; and now the Hellenes were overthrown by a power from the West. These new overlords were a grimmer people. At first they favored the little tribe, but—surely this could not last. For the newcomers, now a great empire, were thoroughly infected by Hellene values. They were the biggest slave-masters of all time, rich, arrogant, merciless. The massacre of the island town was repeated again and again, all round the coasts of that middle sea, until the Empire was unbeatable, and Jay was thoroughly sickened.

It was now late at night. He pressed the Hold button, went to his bed-chamber—and did not sleep well that night.

Next morning he rose a little later than usual, had a light breakfast, and threw himself upon the creatron. He pressed the Run button, and found his favorite little tribe. Yes, it was as he had expected: they were seething with righteous anger against their masters, the holders of cruel Empire.

And everywhere among them was the feeling: the hour is at hand.

On the bank of a river stood a wild man, a prophet. A stream of pilgrims was coming to him, and he was ducking them in the river, pouring water over their heads, in token of purification.

"Prepare ye the way of the Lord!" he cried.

Jay explored the prophet's personality. Fire, yes, and indignation—but a certain narrowness, a lack of balance. Could he not find . . . ?

The next moment a pilgrim approached the river bank—a young man with a short neat beard and shoulder-length hair, poorly but cleanly dressed.

Jay did not need to explore. Already he felt the attraction—the greatness of soul, the burning pity.

He reached out his right hand, and pressed the purple button.

The room was bright with the light of Olympus' noon when they found him. Aphra was in the room a little ahead of Sam, and when she saw the inertness of the body stretched out on the machine, she uttered a shriek and rushed forward.

"Sam, he's bleeding!" she cried.

"Hope so," muttered Harriman. He ran to the right side of the creatron, and punched the Hold button. Then he turned to look at Jay.

Blood was running along his forearms. Aphra was feeling his chest, touching his lips.

"He's alive!" she whispered, brightening. "Oh, Sam, what happened?"

"I can guess," said Harriman grimly, looking at the exposed purple button. "Those idiot engineers assured me—but never mind that now. Let's get him off of that—but carefully: he might have some bones broken. Damn lucky thing you insisted on coming today—I don't believe they even had anybody in the Corp, watching the monitor. No, don't try to move him yet: I'll call the help."

The robots came, and, following Sam's instructions, got Jay onto a stretcher and finally onto the soft anti-grav bed. At this point he groaned, and opened his eyes.

"What—where—"

"Take it easy," said Harriman. "You'll be O.K., Jay. You had a little accident—but we got here fast, you were much luckier than that guy Siris. You've got some wounds—the one in your side is the worst, but it seems to have missed all the vital organs. Don't talk yet. We'll get the auto-doc onto you in a couple of seconds, and then—"

They did just that. Jay's wounds healed in seconds, and after two minutes he was through the sedation period. He breathed deeply, and sat up.

"O.K. now, spill it," said Harriman, eyes wide and eager. "In one way, Jay, I'm glad this happened. We've never had such a chance before—no one who got into a really dangerous, physical-effects emergency in T.E. has lived to tell the tale. What did it seem was happening to you?"

Jay told them.

"Say!" breathed Harriman. "You know, that's one method I never dreamed up? Jay, you have the most *creative* ideas! Now, of course, I'll be able to use that in my worlds . . . Pity it had to happen to *you*, though—subjectively, I mean. Well, I hope you've learnt your lesson. Mind you, I've already lased to the Corp, and they've got a team in your Box room already. That purple button is coming off right now—that's as a public precaution. After that, if you like, we'll give you a new Box. We owe you at least that—after all, it was our carelessness that landed you in this mess."

"No," said Jay. He scrambled off the bed. "Tell your men to stop—"

He was rushing for the door. Harriman blocked his path.

"Take it easy. What—"

"I don't want them to erase my universe!"

"They won't," said Harriman. "That's your privilege. I guess you'd like to erase it slowly, beginning with those guys who—"

"No," said Jay, "I'm not going to erase it at all. I'm going to continue it. Oh, I won't try Total Empathy again—I don't need to. I know what it's like now to be a man in a world of pain and death and cruelty. I also know that you can't eliminate pain and death and cruelty—we haven't eliminated them even from *our* world, we've just tucked them away from our godlike selves, into such places as these box-universes. The pain and the evil has to be—because pain sharpens pleasure, and evil brightens good. What's important, though, Sam," he said, looking at Harriman steadily, "is to know which side you're on."

From that day onwards, Jay's life on Olympus became more normal. He once more wrote for the kine-screen: and the art circles hailed the appearance of a new master dramatist, no longer a writer of delicate little sketches, but a poet of such passion as had not been seen on Olympus before. Some of the Olympians were puzzled; but others acknowledged his greatness. Jay, in short, was a success; he was even popular socially.

And Aphra was once more sharing his bed.

"I like you *much* better than that Sam," she said, with a shudder. "Jay, I had to find out the hard way. You know what? He's a *sadist* . . ."

And Jay also spent many hours at his creatron, though he was no longer addicted to it. He watched the Empire crumble; and then, to his astonishment, he watched himself being hailed as a god, and a new sort of Empire rising in his own name. An Empire that paid lip-service to universal love and mercy, and at the same time embarked on crusades, on massacres of unbelievers and heretics . . .

Jay smiled sardonically, a little wearily. It was always the same story: all victories over cruelty quickly became cruel themselves . . .

And that new sort of Empire passed, too. Now the planet was split among several great nations, all making progress in physical science, all beginning to devastate their world.

"At this rate," thought Jay, "they'll soon be turning into us! Then who will be the gods, and who the creatures?"

From time to time, he had company at the guest viewer—not Harriman, now, but Aphra. Aphra hugely enjoyed all of Jay's world—she was the perfect audience. She loved the sinners as much as the saints, the villains as much as the virtuous. She had a special weakness for world-conquerers.

"Isn't he *cute*?" she breathed, gazing down on a young artillery officer who had made himself an Emperor, and was tumbling old kingdoms as fast as his men could march . . .

"Do you think he's cute *now*?" said Jay, as the great army died in the snow, while the Emperor fled at top speed for his distant capital.

Aphra tossed her yellow locks.

"Not any more," she admitted. "Besides, he's *middle-aged*, and getting a paunch. The young emperor on the other side, though—and that funny stiff general—they're really fun!"

Jay smiled. He was getting used to Aphra's point of view, as she presided like a spirit of beauty over his world. Yes, pain and evil had to be there: and many of the beasts of prey had a certain terrible beauty—even the human ones. You still had to choose goodness—but you could choose it wholeheartedly only because goodness could never win out completely. And so the great game went on . . .

Did this make perfect sense? He wasn't sure. At times he thought it did—but at other times he was overwhelmed by the mystery of it all.

And he still sought for wisdom among his sub-people on the blue-and-white planet. Their science was crude, but their philosophy and theology often quite subtle. They had a good deal to say about Jay's nature—things that thoroughly surprised him.

Finally, nearly two thousand years of sub-time after the accident with the purple button, a new idea had arisen among the philosophers and the churches. In medium empathy, Jay entered the minds of his former worshippers, and heard them think it and say it. Gravely they repeated:

"God is dead!"

Jay smiled as he pressed the Hold button.

"How wrong they are," he murmured to Aphra, "luckily for them! But it's true, they and I had a close shave once. . . ."

Questions

1. Discuss the concept of miracles as described in the "Creator." How is it consistent and inconsistent with modern beliefs?
2. Discuss the validity of the impossibility of a "meek-and-mild" race. What does this say about human nature? The undesirability of a passive race is an extremely common subject in SF. Why?
3. Who is Samael Harriman symbolically? Who is Jay Crystal? To what extent is it valid to draw the relationships?
4. Is "Creator" fantasy or SF? Why?