

THINKING ABOUT VANCE, *by Paul Rhoads*

THE MYSTERY OF THE MYSTERIES 1
 POLEMICAL VANCE 2
 THE SVU, VANCE'S MARXIAN STRATUM 2
 INVESTMENT HORIZON, *a story by Greg Hansen* 6
 THE MAGNETONIC WIGHT AND TWO OTHER STORIES,
 BY JOEL ANDERSON, *reviewed by Tim Stretton* 10
 ISLAMOPHOBIA
 THE JUDGEMENTS OF IMAM PEDALA SEZZ 11
 LAST AND LEAST 11



THE MYSTERY OF THE MYSTERIES

The VIE project had several noble goals—in particular creation of an archival edition to preserve and promote correct texts—and several motivations, particularly admiration and gratitude; but the primary impulse, by which I mean the initial one, was desire to share Vance, to help make him known. In this regard I had occasion to remark, as early as six years ago, upon the difference between promoting Jack Vance and promoting science fiction. That this remains a problem is seen, for example, in the current edit of my brief overview of Vance's work on Wikipedia,* which cuts out the remarks on the mysteries to create a separate section, as if this aspect of his work were a sort of annex or aberration worthy of only secondary attention.

But Vance published no less than 14 mysteries. The VIE includes outlines for 2 others (*The Genesee Slough Murders*, *The Telephone Was Ringing in the Dark*). Another remains unpublished: *Fat Hannah*. These 17 novels and potential novels constitute a considerable mass of work, which, considered chronologically, show that Vance persisted in writing mysteries into the mid-1960s, simultaneous with work on such stories as *The Moon Moth*, *The Star King*, *The*

Killing Machine, *The Palace of Love*, as well as *The Dragon Masters*, *The Last Castle* and *Cugel the Clever*. Consider also that Vance persisted in this work, despite having learned already, in the late 1940s, *the first lesson of a successful freelancer: write what sells*—as David B. Williams notes in his 'biographical sketch and literary assessment'. Vance's claim, one must conclude, that he would rather have been a mystery writer, should be taken seriously. Furthermore, given that the Demon Prince stories, to say nothing of *Araminta Station* or *Night Lamp*—to mention only these works—seem to have as many mystery elements as science fiction elements, I, at least, conclude, that Vance cannot be properly understood without taking this aspect of his work into full consideration.

It is sometimes said that the mysteries are not as good as the science fiction. I even agree, to an extent. I have written that Vance, to be fully himself, needs scope for his imagination. But, by this reasoning, his mode of rocambolesque fantasy would be the essential Vance; this will not do. Vance cannot be reduced to his most comic and baroque aspects. An element of his style, of his artistic personality (and ultimately his greatness) is his reserve. The importance of this quality is seen in how it colors even his most outrageous comedy. This reserve is expressed to a high degree not only in, say, *Ports of Call* or *Durdane*, but also in many of the mysteries, particularly the Joe Bain stories. Another element is whimsicality; Vance's delight in inconsequentiality, or moods of quiet alertness, undramatic

but saturated. The mysteries often exemplify such vancian moments, and in some cases even seem a more apt vehicle of them.

So, while I do think it is unjustified, from an analytical point of view, to isolate and neglect the mysteries (particularly on sites like Wikipedia)—to put undue emphasis on Vance as science fiction author—I also consider it counter-productive with regard to the promotion of Vance to a wider readership. That this wider public is notoriously anti-science fiction—motivating certain science fiction readers to a defensive and closed posture—is not what motivates my concern. I do indeed think a greater awareness and promotion



BODILLE MOSMAN

*See original: EXTANT 16, page 25.

of the mysteries by Vance readers would help counter the anti-science fiction prejudice, which I believe is an essential blockage. But what is crucial is that such awareness would be a sign of a deeper understanding of Vance by his readers. That deeper understanding, I say, is important to promoting Vance not because it dilutes the SF aspect, but because what one learns about Vance by taking his mysteries properly into account is not simply better awareness that he does not fit into pigeon-holes, but more about what makes him a wonderful artist, important and appealing to everyone.

If there were a group of mystery fans, uninterested in science fiction, who discovered Vance, the exact same phenomenon we see with his science fiction would occur: their enthusiasm about Vance, as mystery writer, would fail to translate into wide and general popularity among mystery readers—just as Vance the science fiction writer has failed to gain a commanding popularity among science fiction readers. This hypothetical situation is unlikely because, of Vance's 17 mysteries, three remain unwritten, and others are among his early work, leaving only about half a dozen mature works susceptible to form the basis of an enthusiastic mystery readership.

This is not hypothetically impossible. There are limited oeuvres which are popular, like Jane Austen's 6 books.* But most of Vance's mature mysteries had very small distributions. In some cases the VIE run, of a mere 600 copies, is larger than the commercial runs, and no one is going to publish these books in any commercially robust manner any time soon.

The mysteries are wonderful books. I have written about several of them in COSMOPOLIS, and *Bad Ronald* exerts a perennial and ineluctable fascination. It is also the only Vance story to have been turned into a film—which must say something about the relation of Vance's mysteries to his potential popularity. These works, like Vance's science fiction, break the molds and impose their own logic. They are often visionary, and when they are not horrifying can be touching, though always in Vance's refreshing mode of restraint and glorious lightness of touch.

POLEMICAL VANCE

The following remarks were culled from a discussion on the VanceBBS on *The Domains of Koryphon*:

G. M. Frame wrote:

Back when I first read The Domains of Koryphon . . . I thought to see in it a parable of the social situation in South Africa of the time, with conflicts between the Apartheid regime of the Boers and the Native Tribes, with the well-meaning bien-pensants from outside offering their solutions and criticisms. I had yet to visit the "Indian Country" of the American Southwest . . . and read more of that history which would suggest a another basis of comparison closer to home.

I always felt that this story had a lot of depth and nuance, and deserved a better reception than it has received from many critics (who perhaps have been biased against it by some of the non-PC elements), who seem to dismiss it as no more than a polemic. I consider all the Gaean Reach/

* Steve Sherman points out that Austen is to be credited with 8 works, but the 2 in question would be juvenalia.

Alastor Cluster novels to be some of Vance's best work . . .

Carrasco wrote:

I thought the novel was too one-sided in favor of colonialism. And the finale revealed that [Jorjol in fact did not help save Kelse from] the erjin attack [which] was a cheap way to resolve the dilemma posited by the debt of gratitude.

Ed Winskill wrote:

I've never paid too close attention to the occasional "political" criticism of this book, but one does see it from time to time. I think the reasons are two: first, it does in fact have a few more possibly polemical elements than Vance books usually do, and second, its themes ran smack into the political orthodoxy of the time it was written . . . To the degree the book is somewhat polemical it is a bit imperfect. Jack could have done a better job of a one-sided book in favor of colonialism with a somewhat less overtly political flavor.

I have written extensively on this subject, and will not repeat myself here, but some of these remarks underline my contention that the critical failure of this book is largely based on ideology. The innovative structure, which is facile to label 'poor plotting', provides a cover for this ideological objection, and it is refreshing to see that this structural objection is not renewed here, but it underlines the fundamental nature of the ideological aspect.

The alleged 'pro-colonial' 'flavor' of the book is a canard. It is not pro-colonial, it simply fails not to be anti-colonial, a totally different thing—except to ideologues, for whom those who are not with them are against them.

Finally, I am glad to quote a certain 'DocGeorge', who added this to the conversation: *The Gray Prince, and Emphyrio, and the Alastor series, etc., are the particular reasons why I think that Jack Vance deserves the Nobel Prize in Literature . . .**

THE SVU, VANCE'S MARXIST STRATUM

Vance is considered politically conservative, but as I have had the occasion to point out his political stance is that of a typical Democratic voter of the 1950s. In other words, from a certain point of view, one could say that Vance is politically more on the left than the right. He himself, I know, finds such distinctions tiresome and meaningless, but the label game is important. I have contended that Vance's lack of wide popularity in the science fiction field is, to a certain important extent, a consequence of his being perceived as anti-left—his perceived failure to endorse and support what some might call radical orthodoxy, the credo of the intellectual-artistic class which has been in vogue since the late 1960s.

But whatever the literary watchdogs think of Vance, surely they regard Marx with a favorable eye—or, if not, would tax him for a more or less pardonable excess of leftwardness. Which brings me to the SVU.

* Once again, here is an on-line conversation I would have been grateful to join; impossible, of course—I am one of the 2 or 3 individuals, among the dozens of millions of Internet users, deemed un-fit to post on the VanceBBS.

I recently read the transcript of Leo Strauss' seminar on Marx.* As a result something I have always found extremely odd in Vance was at last made clear; the business of the Gaean monetary system, which turns out to be not merely flavored with Marxism, but as Marxist as possible, more Marxist than most self-styled Marxism. And Vance's receptivity to this thinking can be documented right into the 1980s; thanks to TOTALITY, and the VIE index of titles, it is easy to list and date all Vance's relevant statements. The 'Standard Value Unit' is first mentioned in *The Star King*, in 1960, but without detailed explanations. The meaning, however, was already clear, because what is 'standard value'? Vance only started adding explanatory notes when, as it seems to me, he began to suspect the concept needed support:

Domains of Koryphon, 1972, and Freitzke's Turn, 1974:

SLU: Standard Labor-value Unit; the monetary unit of the Gaean Reach, defined as the value of an hour of unskilled labor under standard conditions. The unit supersedes all other monetary bases, in that it derives from the single invariable commodity of the human universe: toil.

Dogtown, 1973:

SVU: Standard Value Unit; the worth of one standard man's unskilled labor under standard conditions for a period of one Gaean hour; the single and only commodity of unalterable value.

Wyst, 1974

Ozols: a monetary unit roughly equivalent to the Gaean SVU: the value of an adult's unskilled labor under standard conditions for the duration of an hour.

Araminta Station, 1986

The value of the sol is fixed at the worth of one hour of unskilled labor, under standard conditions.

The qualification 'under standard conditions', takes some of the Marxist bite out of the concept, and each subsequent explanation seems to carry less conviction. Still, Vance never abandons the concept, and terminology like 'commodity', and 'labor' betray not only its Marxist origin but the persistence of a certain Marxist strain in his thinking.

These quotations suggest something else; as I have often claimed, Vance is not an 'intellectual'. He toys with, or tastes concepts more than he explores or thinks them through, and he is essentially unconcerned with ideology. This is why he did not trouble to become more than vaguely aware of the gravely problematic quality of his standard labor unit of value.†

* Chicago University, 1960, unpublished.

† I cannot resist adding here, that there was an almost bitter controversy when the VIE was working on volumes 32 and 28, over standardizing SLU to SVU. To me this was a non-issue from a literary angle, but a real one regarding the development of Vance's thinking. I consider myself vindicated, since only now am I aware of the full implication of this difference; were the trace of it washed out of the definitive texts it would be as regrettable as I only feared, at the time, it might be.

This problematic quality is not merely a function of the Marxist origin. Leo Strauss, the alleged guru of neo-conservatism, does not denigrate Marx. Strauss does teach that Marx's theories are, generally speaking and ultimately, untenable, but he praises Marx for the breadth and quality of his reading, and notes that certain 'capitalist' objections to Marx are invalid. Strauss insists, for example, that a planned economy is not doomed to failure.*

Before broaching the Marxist essence of the SVU concept, I want to emphasize the problematic and even somewhat desperate character of Vance's qualifications of his 'hour of labor'. In 1972 this 'hour', previously presented without any adjectives, becomes 'unskilled' and occurs 'under standard conditions'. To effect an essential change in the concept however, these qualifications must mean something. But what is 'unskilled'? Is it digging a ditch with a standard shovel? If so, what about heftier workers, or ones who are faster by virtue of much digging experience? There can never be a standard of 'unskilled labor' which could be always equal, within less than one centum of value, because there is simply too much variation among individuals.

As for working conditions, they are as much affected by local as by global circumstances. The conditions in a Chinese office building in Shanghai, with respect to tables, chairs, heating and air-conditioning, as well as carpets, computers and telephones, are probably more or less identical to those in Chicago or Berlin, but other conditions are radically different. The result is that the Chinese worker, for equal work, is paid a tiny fraction of the salary of his American or German colleague, as measured in purchasing power. It does not take a degree in economics to realize this sort of thing, and see its implications, and indeed, the Gaean Reach, despite its globalized economy, is notable for a heterogeneity which takes exactly such factors into account. One thinks of slave planets where wages are not paid at all, of poor Jantiff Ravensroke digging clams in icy water to scrape up enough ozols to pay passage back to Alastor Centrality, of the fiscal contrast between the Lords and the Recipients of Halma, or Kokor Hekkus gathering millions from his wealthy kidnap victims.

One must wonder why Jack Vance, notoriously adept at imagining his way into all sort of situations and their ramifications, left his standard value unit alone. Obviously he is not unaware, in a narrative way, of the problematic character of his 'standard conditions' (i.e. that they do not exist) but conceptually, or theoretically, it escapes him.

Probably as a student at U.C., Vance was exposed to, and, like so many others, impressed by, Marxist concepts. Again, this is nothing to sneer at. The concepts in question, as already mentioned, and as history demonstrates, can carry much conviction.† What I am interested in, is trying to understand what impressed Vance so deeply that it stayed with him for so long, and why he rectified his theoretical understanding so slowly.

* This is demonstrated by the 60 year survival of the soviet economy, and the ongoing viability of certain European economies. The weakness of these economies is another matter. 'Capitalist' economies, even if they are stronger, also have weaknesses.

† As Abraham Lincoln said: you can fool some of the people all of the time.

I will only attempt to resume Strauss' exposé of Marx to the extent it can help us understand Vance's experience with Marx's ideas with respect to the SVU, but even this limited goal must carry us a certain distance into theoretical and historical considerations.

Marx, influenced by Rousseau, believed that Man was deformed by society, or that evil and vice are not a function of human nature but a distortion worked upon human nature by society. This idea remains robust today. It is, for example, the concept behind leftist harping on 'social conditions', 'discrimination' and 'economic inequality' as the cause of crime.* It is likewise the root of the idea that American intervention in Iraq is the cause of mounting Islamist terror, rather than that American intervention is a response to an autonomous rise of Islamist terror. Such ideas equal the conviction that if only discrimination and inequality were eradicated, what right-wing moralists call 'evil' would also disappear.

Adepts of this position, however, are also adept at moral hectoring. They regard the misery of the masses as inflicted by a small group of heartless egoists. Marx, by contrast, reasoned consistently: if 'evil' is a function of a dysfunctional society—of discrimination, exploitation and inequality—then 'morality' is likewise a function of social structure. In other words the problem is simply not moral. Exploitation is not a violation of morality, but a structural effect. The exploiter exploits for the same reason that the exploited are exploited: society makes both effects inevitable.

Since Marx believed that society evolves in a manner which is inevitable, and therefore mechanical, he could not condemn these effects. In fact, since the stage of 'capitalist exploitation' must inevitably lead to the final stage, namely Communism, in which exploitation would cease, capitalism is even a good thing. It shows that a society had moved beyond even more primitive stages, such as feudalism, toward the utopian goal of communism, which will bring universal happiness through the fulfillment of man's nature.

Marx saw this in economic terms. Economy is the crucial structural aspect of society because property is the fundamental element of social hierarchy. One can imagine exceptions or variations, but it is hard to contest this; even an illustrious aristocrat or revered saint will end up receiving fewer invitations to fancy dinner parties if he falls too far into poverty.

Now, the reason there is exploitation is because of injustice (read: 'inequality'). Some people have more, some people have less; this is unjust because there is no good reason for it. It is a situation which only arises out of violence. This, by the way, is the underlying thesis of *The Domains of Koryphon*.† It is almost odd that so many readers fail to see that Vance's agreement, or acceptance of this thesis, the basis of the story, is already a large step towards Marx, and thus towards the very position—objection to domination and exploitation based on unequal property ownership—which underlies anti-colonialism. That the story ends up making an elementary point—one with no essential relevance to the moral status of colonialism—namely that those able to defend what they

* "We're depraved 'cause we're deprived," as the Jets quipped to officer Krupkie in *West Side Story*.

† See EXTANT 16: Some Theoretical Aspects of *The Domains of Koryphon*, page 18.

have will be able to retain it—if anything argues that Vance disfavors colonialism, since it emphasizes colonialism's basis in violence.

Vance is seen as favoring colonialism because he points out something which is simply a logical inevitability, namely that the anti-colonialists are no better, from this point of view, than the colonialists. The French took Algeria from the Arabs, but the Arabs took it from the Kabiles, and etcetera, so how can the Arabs blame the French, without admitting their own guilt towards the Kabiles? Vance's more basic point is that, if a region is being well run, so much the better, and good men will do well to rally to the cause of a benevolent ruler—but this, again, is neither pro nor contra colonialism, even if it is contestable on other grounds. It is notorious that the French ran Algeria well and the Arabs run it badly. But stating this fact is still regarded as deplorably pro-colonialist. There are, no doubt, colonies which are better run now that the colonists are gone, but that accords perfectly well with Vance's point.*

In a desperate struggle to remain coherent, anti-colonialists blame the disaster of contemporary Algeria on colonialism, which screwed things up so badly nothing can go right ever again. Anti-colonialism depends on this sort of paternalistic sophistry, which reduce contemporary Algerians to puppets without volition or talent, jerking at the end of a string pulled by the coming and going of French colonialists. But what about the French colonialists? Are they, like the poor Algerians, jumping at the end of some string? Do they have any volition or talent? Apparently yes, since it is absurd, and even cruel, to condemn people who are not responsible for, or capable of their alleged acts.

Marx does fall into such contradiction—like the anti-colonialists, for all their reliance on him. He regards everyone to be jumping at the end of a string (except, perhaps, himself).

These considerations bring us to this point; Marx was, in most respects, a materialist.† Materialism explains his rejection of moral considerations, his view of people as puppets on the string of society. In the materialist view human emotion, and even intelligence, is not a different order of phenomenon from any other natural phenomenon; it is merely another sort of chemical, and ultimately molecular or atomic interaction. Now mathematics is the ultimate model for the modern version of sciences such as chemistry and physics. Sociologists—particularly when they are materialists—likewise seek to make the study of history and human society as mathematical as possible; and the closest approach to a mathematical understanding of human behavior is economics.

To bring out the full flavor of Marx's economic view, we should start by contrasting it with Aristotle's. Aristotle's

* Multiculturalists refuse to distinguish between better and worse regimes. Non-indigenous rule, even if would forestall mass murder, is excluded on the Heideggerian ground that each society is based on radically incompatible 'verities'. Still, this does not make Vance's point pro-colonial, because the benevolent rule might be that of the indigenes.

† His hegelian belief in historical progress, being teleological (i.e. comporting a 'plan' or 'inner force' which determines its course, namely its goal of fulfilling human nature, or achieving human happiness) contradicts his materialism, in which there can be no goals or 'ends', since the evolutions of matter are arbitrary, and only predictable on the basis of physics.

thinking is like the thinking of those who claim to use common sense. Aristotle says that the important thing about labor is production. In other words value is generated by labor, because the labor produces something people need. So labor, as such, has no value. It becomes valuable by filling a demand, or by feeding consumption. When it does not fill a demand it is without value.

Marx's view is not common-sensical; for Marx, labor *equals* production.* To understand this apparently strange concept we must return to the remarks above. Again, I do not want to burden this demonstration with a more general explanation of Marxism, therefore, regarding the historical process, it must suffice to remark that while the historical process, rather than human evil, generates inequality and injustice, it will also persist, passing through the capitalist phase, until communism, the end of the process, is realized.

I will not attempt to clarify the link between Marx's concept of social justice and the historical process,† but to understand the idea which impressed Vance—the concept of a standard, or absolute and constant value, in labor, as labor—I must discuss Marx's concept of social justice. Man is obliged to labor to achieve basic sustenance. In Man's original condition, when society was unorganized, each man had to provide everything he needed for himself. But, even though nature is generous, this is inefficient. Each man is not good at providing all the various things he needs. Some men are naturally good at hunting, others are naturally good at spinning and weaving—or if this is not true by nature, it is at least true by nurture. Social organization is, therefore, essentially about labor specialization. When specialization occurs, production becomes more efficient and increases generally. Thanks to specialization they do not do the same jobs; and therefore each man depends upon the others. The farmer and baker need shoes; the shoemaker needs bread; the baker needs grain. If each had to provide his own shoes, grain, and also bake his own bread, Man, thrust back into autonomy, would be reduced to the original state of unorganized society where great prosperity and plenty could not occur. Human potential would not be fulfilled. For this reason the inequalities generated by specialization are 'unjust' because the prosperity gained through specialization depends on everyone. Everyone's labor, everyone's contribution, is of equal value because social organization *requires* the participation of all, and thus must recognize the contribution of each.

* Steve Sherman points out that the labor theory of value was conceived by the economist Riccardo.

† To merely give a hint at this link; when a society becomes capitalist, and wealth spreads thanks to increased production and social order, there is scope for the spread of many things beyond mere physical survival—such as morality, in the form of Christianity for example. At this stage in the historical process it is no longer possible, for example, when one tribe enslaves another, to silence their complaints of 'injustice' by pointing out that, were the situation reversed, they would do same thing to them. But in the capitalist phase, where Christianity, for example, can flourish in a more profound and wider way, the position of the exploiters is structurally undermined, because they are simultaneously exploiting the poor and preach charity and equality in the eyes of God to them. This evident hypocrisy creates a tension which, Marx claims, must eventually transform capitalism into communism.

The idea is not far-fetched. So called 'social progress', in the form of public health care and other state redistribution programs, have indeed transformed early capitalism of the 19th century into the more or less socialistic forms of the 21st century. Marx's idea that capitalism must inevitably give way to communism may be wrong, but his analysis of the transformatory tensions within economic/social arrangements is not without pertinence.

The injustice of capitalism is not different from other sorts of injustice, it is merely more blatant. Thanks to capital, the famous differences between rich and poor are greater, and the fact of exploitation more evident.*

In the capitalist phase, 'demand' (or rather lack thereof) can render some product, or the labor that generated it, 'worthless'. But there is nothing natural about this. The purpose of specialization is the rise out of pre-social autonomy, to a condition of general prosperity, thanks to organization. If organization is rejected, all fall back into original autonomy. All must accept specialization, cooperation and organization so that supplementary wealth, the essence of society, is generated. Proper sharing of the fruits of society (i.e. justice) is the natural, and even the inevitable situation. Its opposite is counter-evolutionary.

In this perspective each hour of labor is equal to every other hour of labor, because the 'labor is the product', or to put it in less esoteric terms: each man's contribution is equally important to the fulfilment of the goal of social organization, and thus to the fulfilment of each individual's needs, both highest and lowest. The equality of production and labor (i.e. the constant value of labor, no matter what is produced, or how efficiently) is not an actual condition, but a basic or juridic one. It is in this perspective, one which looks beyond the punctual, transitory and developmental quality of the capitalist phase of the historical process, that labor is seen to equal production.

The equivalence of labor and production is utopian. To Aristotelian eyes those who come back into the real world from the Marxist indoctrination, distributed in American universities since before WWII, retaining the idea that labor actually does equal production, and could therefore, even at the age of 57, like Jack Vance, call labor *the single and only commodity of unalterable value*, must be naive, at best, if not loopy and/or brainwashed.

In Vance's case I do not think such reproaches are justified. Vance is neither naive, nor loopy, nor brainwashed, but he is also neither reflective (in a ratiocinative sense) nor intellectually rigorous. He is not, once again, any sort of intellectual—even if, with his interests in, say, physics and anthropology, he can appear to have certain pretensions in that direction. Fundamentally Vance is curious, enthusiastic, and instinctive. He understands human economic relations perfectly well, but not in a systematic or logical way. There is something gracefully natural about Vance's way of understanding. I do not mean to imply that Vance is unconscious, that he acts instinctively like an animal. I mean that there are genuinely different ways of understanding, and the best ones are not necessarily 'intellectual'. The result, however, is that a striking concept, like Marx's equivalence of labor and value, can penetrate deeply into a highly impressionable mind, and subsequently generate some peculiar, if interesting, effects.



* In feudalism, for example, exploitation is less evident, or less onerous, because the relation of the peasants with the lords who protect them, by risking their lives in battle, is different than the relation of desperately dependant factory workers, cut off from the relative autonomy of country life, to fat-cat capitalists wallowing in a luxury allegedly generated by investment, but which in fact falls totally on the backs of the workers, who are therefore simply exploited. There is no reciprocity.

INVESTMENT HORIZON

by Greg Hansen

Skidbett Larsen was a confidence man, and a good one. He had all the requisite tools: nimble wits, a machine-like memory, impeccable taste, an open and honest face, animal cunning and boundless greed. He even had, at age forty-seven, a fine head of wavy gray hair.

But most valuable to his trade by far were his eyes. Light green and perfectly spaced they could at one moment radiate forgiveness and understanding—inspiring trust, confidence, when all reason and logic implored otherwise—and the next moment burn like twin pricks of irresistible green fire. They were magical eyes and few indeed could resist them.

So Skidbett was a good con man. Not a great one, as he'd yet to make the Big Score that would cement his status as such. But as he stood at the foot of the gang-ramp and studied the city's skyline, he had a feeling that was all about to change.

The planet Varfleet was a long way from anywhere even by relativistic standards. Circling its amber sun well into the Galactic Periphery, it had evaded human notice until a mere three hundred years gone, and the descendants of those original colonists still controlled the government and most of the planet's wealth. Recently discovered tetracite deposits in Varfleet's equatorial hills, however, had brought a more general prosperity to the population, and had created a class of nouveau riche with the means and determination to close the privilege gap.

Varfleet's ruling class held court in a cluster of gleaming mansions perched on a hilltop overlooking Varfleet Town. The city itself staggered across the valley in a vain attempt at order before giving up and dissolving into a mass of smoke-shrouded factories. Over and around it all, orange- and black-hued vegetation showed against the green-tinted sky: a stomach churning display of evolution gone wrong.

Varfleet was remote. It was racked with class envy and strife. It was arguably the ugliest planet in the Galaxy. It was perfect.

"Stars, what an awful place you've got here, Lyle," said Skidbett, wrinkling his aristocratic nose.

"What do you mean 'I've' got here?" Lyle replied, walking heavily down the ramp with an overfilled valise in each hand. "I left this rock as soon as I could and you know it." Lyle, unlike Skidbett, was not a good con man. He was bright enough and suitably nondescript, he was half Skidbett's age, and he'd worked hard at his apprenticeship, now in its third year. But he was cursed with the one thing a con man could not afford to possess: a conscience. Not a large one, but a fatal fault nonetheless. Lyle set the suitcases down and tested the ammonia-rich air.

"You know, I had serious reservations about this trip," Lyle said as he released his breath with a satisfied sigh. "But now that we're here I confess I feel a bit of affection for the old place." Lyle's affection had been augmented by yet another rough landing, and by an ominous rattle from the Renard's retrofitted relativistic drive that had grown steadily worse

over the last two parsecs. The old spacecraft was truly on her last legs. She seemed to sigh with relief as her pressure valve vented unneeded steam into the air.

Skidbett scoffed and started out across the tarmac toward the customs hut. Lyle picked up the suitcases and hurried to catch up. "So Skid, what's it going to be this time? The Dahlgren Dangle and Snatch? Houlihan's Cash-o-Matic? The Amazing Disappearing Bank Book?"

"Watch and learn my friend," Skidbett replied, sotto voce and with an enigmatic smile. "Watch and learn."



A week later, they'd secured adequate office space and spent the last of their Scyrillian take on elegant office furniture and a few discreet yet provocative advertisements (the receptionist they'd hired had, unwisely, not demanded payment in advance.) Lightspeed Investments was born.

On the morning after the ads appeared, Lyle and Skidbett settled down in front of the closed-circuit monitor to watch their receptionist interview applicants. They rejected the first two, but gave her a green light on the third. A few moments later she opened the door to their opulent office and announced the visitor. "Mr. Bassi is here to see you, sirs."

Bassi marched into the office, six feet of vanity in a five-foot three-inch frame. His clothing was expensive and poorly laundered. His eyes blinked behind thick glass lenses. Skidbett, standing behind his expansive desk, swallowed his glee and greeted him coolly.

Bassi ignored him and slapped a newspaper on the desktop. "What is the meaning of this?!" he demanded, his voice a bit too shrill to take seriously. Skidbett arched an eyebrow, gave Bassi an icy stare. "Ah, that is, I'm interested in learning more about your services," Bassi temporized.

Skidbett stared silently for another moment, then spoke an abrupt dismissal: "Thank you, sir, for your inquiry; however we cannot serve your needs at this time." He gestured to the door and resumed his chair.

Bassi's arrogance wilted at the unexpected rejection. He blinked through his spectacles for a few surprised moments. "Why not?" he implored, suddenly crestfallen.

Skidbett looked up at him and reclined in his chair. "I'll be frank with you Mr. Bassi. We provide specialized wealth management services to a very select clientele. In my view you simply do not meet our standards."

Bassi gasped. "But you don't even know me! I'm sure I'd meet your standards if you just gave me a chance!"

Skidbett looked across at Lyle, who occupied a chair at the side of the desk. The two shared a long grim glance. Lyle let the suspense build, then shook his head slowly in the negative. Skidbett nodded and turned back to the visitor. "I'm sorry, Mr. Bassi, but we . . ."

"Wait! Please, I'd make a wonderful client for you! I've got loads of money, and I'm willing to pay for good advice!"

Skidbett looked at him skeptically. "Is that so?"

"Yes! I own two functioning tetracite smelters and a third will be on-line next month. I've got mining rights, real

estate, gemstones, lots and lots of cash . . ." He fumbled in his jacket pockets as though to prove his claims.

Skidbett cut him short. "Please, Mr. Bassi, we believe you." He stared at the anxious man for a few more moments, calculating. "Very well," he said, reluctantly, "perhaps we can take a few minutes to explore the possibility."

"Oh thank you!"

"Please sit down." Bassi seemed surprised to realize he was still standing and settled quickly into a nearby chair. The chair was low-slung, and Bassi was forced to look up more steeply than usual. He squinted across the desk at Skidbett. A large picture window in the wall behind the desk provided a very useful glare, and a view of the glittering hill-top colonial enclave looming over the office building.

"Tell me, Mr. Bassi," Skidbett began, "how you feel about money." The question caught Bassi off guard and he stammered for a few moments, searching for an answer.

Lyle rescued him. "What do you like about being wealthy?"

"Oh, okay! I like how I can buy anything I want. Well, almost anything," Bassi added, with a dark look out the window.

Aha! thought Skidbett. "Certain items remain . . . out of your reach?" he prodded.

"Yeah," Bassi answered, sullenly. "I tried to buy a home on Colony Hill but they wouldn't sell to me, because I'm not of the first blood. There's laws against that kind of thing you know!"

Skidbett nodded, his eyes and face suddenly full of sympathy. He seemed to consider for a moment, then took on an expression of benevolent determination. "Mr. Bassi, I believe I judged you too quickly. I think we can help you after all."

"Really?"

"Yes. You've been the victim of 'Consumer Discrimination', an evil we've sworn to eliminate." Skidbett looked over at Lyle again. Once more Lyle let several suspenseful moments pass before nodding three times in affirmation. Skidbett smiled triumphantly at the man in the low-slung chair. "Mr. Bassi, I would like to propose a client partnership!"

"Oh, wonderful! Yes, please!" the little man giggled. "When do we start?"

Skidbett reached into a desk drawer and retrieved a one-page document. "We employ proprietary, highly secret wealth management techniques," he said seriously. "Before we explain our philosophy to you, we require that you sign this non-disclosure agreement." Bassi reached for the paper, scanned it, and scribbled his name at the bottom. He handed it back with an eager smile.

"Very well!" Skidbett declared, relaxing into his chair. He sat quietly for a moment and pursed his lips. "Mr. Bassi," he began, "do you know what the difference is between you and the 'Children of First Blood'?"

"They have more money than I do?" Bassi ventured.

"That's right!" Skidbett replied. "Do you know why?" Bassi was stumped, shrugged. "They're not smarter than you, are they?"

"No."

"Better businessmen?"

"Don't think so!"

"More daring, talented, deserving?"

"Of course not!"

"Then why are they so much richer than you are?" Bassi blinked, once more at a loss for words. "I'll tell you why." Skidbett leaned forward significantly and Bassi followed suit, his eyes wide. "It's because they've had their money longer." Skidbett leaned back from this revelation with a satisfied smile.

"Ah," Bassi murmured, not quite understanding but trying to show enthusiasm. "So how . . ."

"Do you know what this is?" Skidbett interrupted, drawing a large photograph from behind the desk and passing it to Bassi with a flourish. Bassi glanced and then squinted at the photo.

"Some kind of antique spaceship . . .?"

"Wrong!" Skidbett declared. "This isn't just a spacecraft. It's a time machine."

"Ah," murmured Bassi again.

"She's the Renard," Lyle supplied, "a fully functioning, pre-relativistic cargo—er, pleasure craft. Before relativistic technology came along, mankind relied on simple velocity to travel large distances, and so they built spaceships with powerful engines capable of approaching the speed of light.

"Their problem—and our opportunity—is that high velocities are accompanied by time dilation. The faster a spacecraft travels, the slower time moves within it. Or, to look at it another way, the faster time elapses on the craft's home planet." Bassi, concentrating intently, still wasn't getting it.

"Think of it this way," Skidbett purred. "When you sign a contract with our firm, we book you for a pleasure cruise on the Renard. We jump you to a nearby system, boost you up to eight-tenths lightspeed, and you spend a relaxing six weeks circling a lovely white dwarf star. Meanwhile, your money grows here on Varfleet, not for six weeks," Skidbett dialed his eyes up to maximum power, "but for sixty-five years."

"Ah!" Bassi clapped his hands with delight. "Brilliant!"

Skidbett nodded. Isn't it? he thought. Lyle passed a thick client agreement and a pen across the desk. "Simply complete pages three, five, seven and ten, and your place will be reserved."

Bassi carefully picked up the contract. "I generally have my attorney review all legal documents before signing," he allowed.

Skidbett clucked his tongue. "Remember the non-disclosure!"

"Yes, of course." Bassi grasped the pen in his suddenly sweaty fingers. "How much should I . . . invest?" he asked, hesitantly.

"The contract minimum is one million shekels. Of course you're welcome to invest as much as you like."

"And your fees?"

Skidbett smiled. "One percent per annum. One point five if you elect first class accommodations on the Renard."

Bassi hesitated. He looked down, then up, then across the desk at the two swindlers. He furrowed his brow; Skidbett felt a sudden pang of uncertainty. "I just don't think . . ." Bassi began.

"With all due respect, Mr. Bassi," Lyle interrupted, "when you return from this little vacation you'll have enough money to buy the whole of Colony Hill. Every last, stony square inch of it."

Bassi turned his troubled gaze to the window and the sight of the towering metal and glass monuments. He suddenly stiffened. "I'll do it!" he declared. "I'll sign. I've got almost two million and I want to invest all of it." Skidbett and Lyle relaxed as Bassi scribbled away. They stole a triumphant sidelong look at each other.

"You're a wise man, Mr. Bassi," Skidbett crowed. "Not only is this a foolproof investment strategy, it is also an excellent way to escape a bad marriage, or outwait any statute of limitations!"

Bassi looked up sharply at this, alarm in his eyes. Skidbett froze. Lyle, however, kept his head and began a reassuring laugh. Skidbett recovered and joined him a split second later. After a few anxious moments, Bassi joined in the laughter, entered his bank account number on page ten, and added the last signature.

At the doorway Skidbett clapped Bassi's shoulder and shook his hand. "I hardly need stress the importance of secrecy," he said. "Opportunities like this come along just once in a lifetime, and that's why we're so careful who we do business with." Bassi swore complete discretion and left with a spring in his step.

By late afternoon, Skidbett and Lyle had four 'client agreements' in hand and were way ahead of schedule. They settled in smugly to watch the day's final applicants on the monitor.

Ten minutes before closing time, the front door flew open and a procession of seedy characters filed into the lobby. They expanded in the small room like a solar system; the center of gravity was a dapper, silver-haired old gentleman in a dark double-breasted suit. Hovering in the outermost orbit—and looking slightly sheepish—was Mr. Bassi.

Skidbett frowned and turned to Lyle, only to find his partner's face pale and frozen with shock. "No . . . oh, no," Lyle murmured, his gaze riveted to the screen.

"What's the matter?" Skidbett asked.

Lyle tore his eyes from the monitor. "That's Omar 'The Undertaker' Callahan," he hissed, "head of Varfleet's most notorious crime family!"

Skidbett shrugged. "Then he's got a lot of money floating around."

"What are you, crazy? We can't con Omar the Undertaker!"

"Of course we can." Skidbett, intensely competitive, hated to be told what he could and couldn't do. He gazed at the monitor with growing interest. Two goons were haranguing the receptionist, who so far had refused to buzz the inner door open.

"Skidbett, please!" Lyle's eyes were wide with fear. "This guy has an army of killers working for him!"

"Surely not an army, Lyle."

"Oh yes he does! He even has killers to kill his killers, so the first killers don't squeal!"

"An exaggeration, I'm sure." Skidbett studied the small

screen. One of the goons had displaced the terrified receptionist and was searching the desk for the door release button.

"We can't do this!" Lyle was nearly hysterical. "Please, my . . . my parents used to tell me stories, when I misbehaved as a child . . . Skid, Omar is the bogeyman!"

Skidbett, mildly exasperated, looked back to his partner. "Come on, old friend! This is the perfect con! You saw those guys today, they were falling all over themselves to give us their money. There's no way I'm laying down for 'Old Man Omar,' or whatever you call him." Lyle was trembling with fear, Skidbett could hear him sweating.

"Besides," Skidbett continued, "we'll finally be getting the bad guys for once! This ought to make up for all those widows and grandmas we've taken over the years. You know, restore some balance to your moral universe. Remember those grandmas on Onario-3? The cooking club, or whatever it was?"

Lyle's mouth snapped shut, his eyes seemed to glaze over. Skidbett heard the inner door latch snap open and turned back to the screen. The solar system in the lobby condensed, heading for the hallway.

"Tell you what," Skidbett suggested, thinking suddenly of one hundred percent instead of just seventy-five. "Why don't you take the rest of the night off, go think this over." Without a word Lyle sprang from his chair and scampered out the back exit. Skidbett sat down behind the desk just as the first goon threw open the office door and stalked in, searching the room for danger.

The rest of the group followed, reverently shepherding Omar the Undertaker to the low-slung chair in the center of the office, where he established himself regally and smoothed his pin-striped trousers. Everyone else—roughly a dozen men—remained standing in a protective semi-circle around their leader.

When Omar spoke, the sound of his voice was a strained, grunting wheeze, as though his larynx had been crushed at some point (which in fact it had been.) Half squeal and half growl, it somehow managed to sound silly and sinister at the same time. "Mr. Larsen."

"Mr. Callahan." Skidbett felt himself rising—expanding—to meet his professional moment of truth. The perfect con, the perfect quarry, his chance for undisputed greatness. He felt an almost euphoric confidence settling over him. "How can I help you today?"

"My nephew told me about your investment program," Omar began. Skidbett glanced at Bassi, who shrugged apologetically. "Now I want to hear it from you."

So Skidbett told the story of Lightspeed Investments, using all his considerable powers of persuasion in the process. He mesmerized them, captivated them. He finished his tale to a general murmur of approval.

There was one man, however, who looked decidedly unhappy. He'd worked his way through the crowd until he was standing next to Omar. "Mind if I ask him a few questions, boss?" he said.

Omar looked at Skidbett, smiled and shrugged. "My accountant," he wheezed, and gestured the man to continue.

Looking at the accountant, Skidbett felt a strange sort of

familiarity, almost as though he'd met the man before, as though he ought to know who the man was. He was feeling a faint glimmer of recognition when the accountant broke in. "May I see a record of your past investment performance?" he asked shrewdly.

"Certainly!" Skidbett blithely replied. He pulled open a desk drawer and retrieved a glossy performance report. It had been forged earlier in the week against just this possibility.

The accountant scowled at it. "Just as I thought," he spat, tossing the report back onto the desk top. "No Commercial Court seal! In fact, I've checked with every government agency on Varfleet and not one has so much as heard of 'Lightspeed Investments.' No articles of incorporation, no securities license, no prior tax returns . . . nothing." The point was a telling one, and a dangerous rumble went up from the assembled gangsters. The accountant folded his arms triumphantly and all eyes turned to Skidbett.

But the wily old con man didn't panic, he didn't flinch. Instead he leaned forward in his chair, fixed the Undertaker in his gripping, green stare, and said: "Exactly."

Skidbett allowed the group a few moments' surprised silence before continuing. "Mr. Callahan—Omar—you don't really want the government poking through your finances while you're away, do you? And besides, what the government doesn't know about, the government can't tax."

Omar the Undertaker locked eyes with Skidbett for several long moments while the wall clock played a tense, one-note solo. Then he narrowed his eyes, and began to laugh. Soon all of the gangsters were snickering appreciatively, except for the accountant, who glared at Skidbett in angry defeat.

Their mirth was interrupted when a police siren blared into life nearby. Immediately, anxious looks replaced smiles around the room, and the group didn't relax until the siren disappeared in the distance.

"Alright, we'll do it," Omar announced, "on two conditions. One, the ship leaves at midnight tonight. Two, we aren't gone sixty five years, we're only gone . . ." Omar turned to a well-dressed associate, who whispered into his ear, ". . . five years, two months and thirteen days."

Ah, thought Skidbett, statute of limitations. He made a show of considering the proposal. "Well, the Renard is undergoing a cosmetic re-fit as we speak," he lied. "Leaving tonight will mean accommodations that are somewhat more rustic than you're used to." The second part, at least, was entirely true. Omar frowned and nodded his acceptance.

"We'll also need to add twenty basis points to our management fee for an exclusive engagement." Omar frowned even more deeply. "We have several other clients who will be most unhappy to find that they've missed the boat . . ." At last Omar nodded again in agreement.

"Very well then, welcome to the Lightspeed Family!"



Lyle stood alone on the darkened sidewalk in front of the hotel, watching the Renard lumber up through the atmosphere. He showed no sign of his earlier anxiety; in fact he was completely relaxed.

The old spaceship's autopilot was nearly as erratic as Skidbett himself, the random flaring of stabilizer jets bespoke another turbulent take-off. On board were twenty hardened men bound for—at best—a very uncomfortable few days in deep space.

As Lyle stood gazing up into the sky, a man approached from behind. As the man drew nearer the streetlights revealed him to be Callahan's accountant. He stopped next to Lyle and joined him in watching the rocket's glow disappear into the night sky. Side by side, the resemblance between the two was unmistakable.

"How'd things go?" Lyle asked.

"Just like you said they would, little brother," came the reply.

Lyle grunted in satisfaction. "How much did Skidbett get?"

"Twenty million."

"And Omar turned the balance over to you?"

"Yep. Two hundred sixty-five million shekels."

Lyle's heart skipped a beat, it was much more than he'd expected. Just then another vessel lifted off from Varfleet Spaceport, this one sleek and fast, a late-model Huntington Starswift or some similar craft. It arced quickly and surely toward the horizon. At the helm was a jubilant Skidbett Larsen, with a cargo hold full of shekels and a five-year head start. The two men watched it depart.

"Why doesn't he just program the Renard's auto-pilot to pile that crew into the nearest star?" the accountant mused. "Seems like it would save a whole lot of trouble down the road."

Lyle bristled. "Skidbett is a con man, not a criminal!" he snapped. "Besides," Lyle continued in a calmer tone, "to him the chase is part of the fun of it all, part of the challenge." Skidbett probably didn't need to make special arrangements anyway, he thought, remembering the Renard's ominous-sounding relativistic drive and the acrid odor emanating from the re-oxygenator.

"You say so," said his brother, bemused. "So what now?"

"We play it straight," said Lyle. "I'm tired of looking over my shoulder everywhere I go, and I've thought for a long time that my skills would translate nicely into investment management. I believe we'll make out quite well on one percent per year of Omar's fortune!"

"And your first investment will be . . .?"

"We'll build an old folks' home," Lyle said definitely, "the finest one in the galaxy." The two men locked arms and strolled down the sidewalk toward home.



THE MAGNETONIC WIGHT AND TWO OTHER STORIES, BY JOEL ANDERSON

Reviewed by Tim Stretton

Vance aficionados who feel that most contemporary speculative fiction is written by and for sub-literate buffoons will be delighted to learn of Joel Anderson's collection published by Tower Hill Books. Joel was a stalwart of the VIE project, composing many of the volumes subscribers see on their shelves; and he has used his familiarity with Vance's work to good effect in presenting these three novelettes. All three tales treat a time when civilisation has receded from its technological peak, leaving a residue of artefacts imperfectly understood by the rural population.

The first, "The Vaults", is reminiscent of "Dodkin's Job" in taking as a protagonist a junior executive in a vast bureaucracy which operates in a way none of its denizens

understand. The hapless Erik Osrud blunders from one calamity to another in an attempt to restore his terminally-stalled career, contending with colleagues and superiors intent on wringing every advantage from his misfortune. More by luck than judgement he emerges triumphant. A cameo appearance by a Vancean termagant is sure to delight.

In the title story, the eponymous wight takes possession of the hapless youth Billa in a curious fashion and resists various charlatanic expedients to cast it out. The solution is ingeniously low-tech and, in a way Vance readers will recognise, turns to pecuniary advantage for the hero, who is more Magnus Ridolph than Adam Reith.

In the final story, "The Haunt in the Cellar", Rodney Bench finds himself beset not only by an alarming presence in his basement, but his wife's increasingly tedious religious practices. Vance readers will relish the way in which the pompous Revered Gamble is satirised and enjoy the revelation as to the nature of the 'haunt'.

The stories are related with an understated humour. The protagonists are ordinary men who solve their problems through reflection, experiment, and good fortune. The Vancean influence is obvious, but to this reviewer at least, the respect and affection for the rhythms of rural life is also reminiscent of Ray Bradbury.

The reader who prefers elegance and craftsmanship to mindless pyrotechnics is sure to enjoy Joel Anderson's work.



The Magnetonic Wight and Two Other Stories is available from <http://www.lulu.com/content/416531> and retails at \$8.95 plus p+p. Two of the stories were previously published in the CLS, which can be accessed though FOREVERNESS, at integralarchive.org.



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LAST AND LEAST

Thanks, as usual, to those who have helped with this issue of Extant:

STEVE SHERMAN

GREG HANSEN

HANS VAN DER VEEKE

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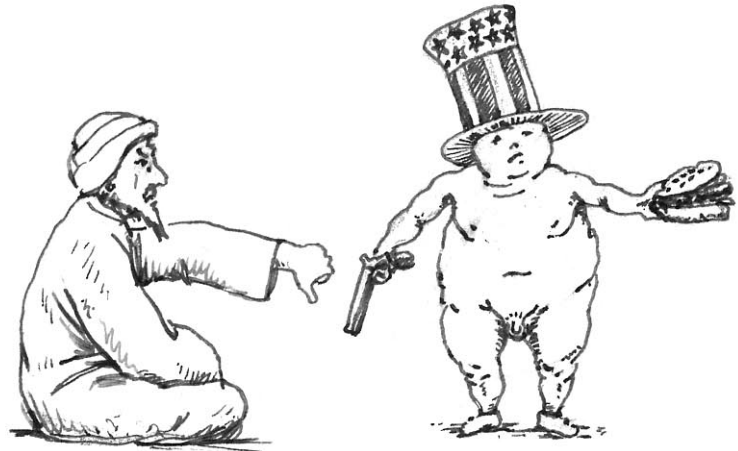


The portrait of Bodille Mosman, on page 1, was painted this summer, at her request, in France. Bodille is an 11 year old Dutch girl who lives in Blaricum, Holland.



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NOT GOOD



NOT BAD



PERFECT