

**From the Podcast Forgotten Sci-Fi**

**by Craig Patterson**

**The Jovian Jest**

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I

Consternation reigned in Elsnore village when the Nameless Thing was discovered in Farmer Burns' cornpatch. When the rumor began to gain credence that it was some sort of meteor from interstellar space, reporters, scientists and college professors flocked to the scene, desirous of prying off particles for analysis. But they soon discovered that the Thing was no ordinary meteor, for it glowed at night with a peculiar luminescence. They also observed that it was practically weightless, since it had embedded itself in the soft sand scarcely more than a few inches.

By the time the first group of newspapermen and scientists had reached the farm, another phenomena was plainly observable. The Thing was growing!

Farmer Burns, with an eye to profit, had air ready built a picket fence around his starry visitor and was charging admission. He also flatly refused to permit the chipping off of specimens or even the touching of the object. His attitude was severely criticized, but he stubbornly clung to the theory that possession is nine points in law.

II

It was Professor Ralston of Princewell who, on the third day after the fall of the meteor, remarked upon its growth. His colleagues crowded, around him as he pointed out this peculiarity, and soon they discovered another factor—pulsation!

Larger than a small balloon, and gradually, almost imperceptibly expanding, with its viscid transparency shot through with opalescent lights; the Thing lay there in the deepening twilight and palpably shivered. As darkness descended, a sort of hellish radiance began to ooze from it. I say hellish, because there is no other word to describe that spectral, sulphurous emanation.

As the hangers-on around the pickets shudderingly shrank away from the weird light that was streaming out to them and tinting their faces with a ghastly, greenish pallor, Farmer Burns' small boy, moved by some imp of perversity, did a characteristically childish thing. He picked up a good-sized stone and flung it straight at the nameless mass!

III

Instead of veering off and falling to the ground as from an impact with metal, the stone sank right through the surface of the Thing, as into a pool of protoplasmic slime. When it reached the central core of the object, a more abundant life suddenly leaped and pulsed from center to circumference.

Visible waves of sentient color circled round the solid stone. Stabbing swords of light leaped forth from them, piercing the stone, crumbling it, absorbing it. When it was gone, only a red spot, like a bloodshot eye, throbbled eerily where it had been. Before the now thoroughly mystified crowd had time to remark upon this inexplicable disintegration, a more horrible manifestation occurred. The Thing, as though thoroughly awakened and vitalized by its unusual fare, was putting forth a tentacle. Right from the top of the shivering globe it pushed, sluggishly weaving and prescient of doom. Wavering, it hung for a moment, turning, twisting, groping. Finally it shot straight outward swift as a rattler's strike!

Before the closely packed crowd could give room for escape, It had circled the neck of the nearest bystander, Bill Jones, a cattleman, and jerked him, writhing and screaming, into the reddish core! Stupefied with soul-chilling terror, with their mass-consciousness practically annihilated before a deed with which their minds could make no association, the crowd could only gasp in sobbing unison and await the outcome.

#### IV

The absorption of the stone had taught them what to expect, and for a moment it seemed that their worst anticipations were to be realized. The sluggish currents circled through the Thing, swirling the victim's body to the center. The giant tentacle drew back into the globe and became itself a current. The concentric circles merged—tightened—became one gleaming cord that encircled the helpless prey. From the inner circumference of this cord shot forth, not the swords of light that had powdered the stone to atoms, but myriads of radiant tentacles that gripped and cupped the body in a thousand places.

Suddenly the tentacles withdrew themselves, all save the ones that grasped the head. These seemed to tighten their pressure—to swell and pulse with a grayish substance that was flowing from the cups into the cord and from the cord into the body of the mass. Yes, it was a grayish something, a smokelike Essence that was being drawn from the cranial cavity. Bill Jones was no longer screaming and gibbering, but was, stiff with the rigidity of stone. Notwithstanding, there was no visible mark upon his body; his flesh seemed unharmed.

Swiftly came the awful climax. The waving tentacles withdrew themselves, the body of Bill Jones lost its rigidity, a heaving motion from the center of the Thing propelled its cargo to the surface—and Bill Jones stepped out!

Yes, he stepped out and stood for a moment, staring straight ahead, staring at nothing, glassily. Every person in the shivering, paralyzed group knew instinctively that something unthinkable had happened to him. Something had transpired, something hitherto possible only in the abysmal spaces of the Other Side of Things. Finally he turned and faced the nameless object, raising his arm stiffly, automatically, as in a military salute. Then he turned and walked jerkily, mindlessly, round and round the globe like a wooden soldier marching. Meanwhile; the Thing lay quiescent—gorged!

#### V

Professor Ralston was the first to find his voice. In fact, Professor Ralston was always finding his voice in the most unexpected places. But this time it had caught a chill. It was trembling.

"Gentlemen," he began, looking down academically upon the motley crowd as though doubting the aptitude of his salutation. "Fellow-citizens," he corrected, "the phenomenon we have just witnessed is, to the lay mind, inexplicable. To me—and to my honorable colleagues (added as an afterthought) it is quite clear. Quite clear, indeed. We have before us a specimen, a perfect specimen, I might say, of a—of a—"

He stammered in the presence of the unnamable. His hesitancy caused the rapt attention of the throng that was waiting breathlessly for an explanation, to flicker back to the inexplicable. In the fraction of a second that their gaze had been diverted from the Thing to the professor, the object had shot forth another tentacle, gripping him round the neck and choking off his sentence with a horrid rasp that sounded like a death rattle.

Needless to say, the revolting process that had turned Bill Jones from a human being into a mindless automaton was repeated with Professor Ralston. It happened as before too rapidly for intervention, too suddenly for the minds of the onlookers to shake off the paralysis of an unprecedented nightmare. But when the victim was thrown to the surface, when he stepped out, drained of the grayish smokelike essence, a tentacle still gripped his neck and another rested directly on top of his head. This latter tentacle, instead of absorbing from him, visibly poured into him what resembled a threadlike stream of violet light.

## VI

Facing the cowering audience with eyes staring glassily, still in the grip of the unknowable, Professor Ralston did an unbelievable thing. He resumed his lecture at the exact point of interruption! But he spoke with the tonelessness of a machine, a machine that pulsed to the will of a dictator, inhuman and inexorable!

"What you see before you," the Voice continued—the Voice that no longer echoed the thoughts of the professor—"is what you would call an amoeba, a giant amoeba. It is I—this amoeba, who am addressing you—children of an alien universe. It is I, who through this captured instrument of expression, whose queer language you can understand, am explaining my presence on your planet. I pour my thoughts into this specialized brain-box which I have previously drained of its meager thought-content." (Here the "honorable colleagues" nudged each other gleefully.) "I have so drained it for the purpose of analysis and that the flow of my own ideas may pass from my mind to yours unimpeded by any distortion that might otherwise be caused by their conflict with the thoughts of this individual.

"First I absorbed the brain-content of this being whom you call Bill Jones, but I found his mental instrument unavailable. It was technically untrained in the use of your words that would best convey my meaning. He possesses more of what you would call 'innate intelligence,' but he has not perfected the mechanical brain through whose operation this innate intelligence can be transmitted to others and applied for practical advantage.

## VII

"Now this creature that I am using is, as you might say, full of sound without meaning. His brain is a lumber-room in which he has hoarded a conglomeration of clever and appropriate word-forms with which to disguise the paucity of his ideas, with which to express nothing! Yet the very abundance of the

material in his storeroom furnishes a discriminating mind with excellent tools for the transportation of its ideas into other minds.

"Know, then, that I am not here by accident. I am a Space Wanderer, an explorer from a super-universe whose evolution has proceeded without variation along the line of your amoeba. Your evolution, as I perceive from an analysis of the brain-content of your professor, began its unfoldment in somewhat the same manner as our own. But in your smaller system, less perfectly adjusted than our own to the cosmic mechanism, a series of cataclysms occurred. In fact, your planetary system was itself the result of a catastrophe, or of what might have been a catastrophe, had the two great suns collided whose near approach caused the wrenching off of your planets. From this colossal accident, rare, indeed, in the annals of the stars, an endless chain of accidents was born, a chain of which this specimen, this professor, and the species that he represents, is one of the weakest links.

"Your infinite variety of species is directly due to the variety of adaptations necessitated by this train of accidents. In the super-universe from which I come, such derangements of the celestial machinery simply do not happen. For this reason, our evolution has unfolded harmoniously along one line of development, whereas yours has branched out into diversified and grotesque expressions of the Life-Principle. Your so-called highest manifestation of this principle, namely, your own species, is characterized by a great number of specialized organs. Through this very specialization of functions, however, you have forfeited your individual immortality, and it has come about that only your life-stream is immortal. The primal cell is inherently immortal, but death follows in the wake of specialization.

## VIII

"We, the beings of this amoeba universe, are individually immortal. We have no highly specialized organs to break down under the stress of environment. When we want an organ, we create it. When it has served its purpose, we withdraw it into ourselves. We reach out our tentacles and draw to ourselves whatsoever we desire. Should a tentacle be destroyed, we can put forth another.

"Our universe is beautiful beyond the dreams of your most inspired poets. Whereas your landscapes, though lovely, are stationary, unchangeable except through herculean efforts, ours are Protean, eternally changing. With our own substance we build our minarets of light, piercing the aura of infinity. At the bidding of our wills we create, preserve, destroy—only to build again more gloriously.

"We draw our sustenance from the primates, as do your plants, and we constantly replace the electronic base of these primates, with our own emanations, in much the same manner as your nitrogenous plants revitalize your soil. "While we create and withdraw organs at will, we have nothing to correspond to your five senses. We derive knowledge through one sense only, or, shall I say, a super-sense? We see and hear and touch and taste and smell and feel and know, not through any one organ, but through our whole structure. The homogeneous force of our omnib substance subjects the plural world to the processing of a powerful unity.

## IX

"We can dissolve our bodies at will, retaining only the permanent atom of our being, the seed of life dropped on the soil of our planet by Infinite intelligence. We can propel this indestructible seed on

light rays through the depths of space. We can visit the farthest universe with the velocity of light, since light is our conveyance. In reaching your little world, I have consumed a million years, for my world is a million light-years distant ; yet to my race a million years is as one of your days.

"On arrival, at any given destination, we can build our bodies from the elements of the foreign planet. We attain our knowledge of conditions on any given planet by absorbing the thought-content of the brains of a few representative members of its dominant race. Every well-balanced mind contains the experience of the race, the essence of the wisdom that the race-soul has gained during its residence in matter. We make this knowledge a part of our own thought-content: and thus the Universe lies like an open book before us.

"At the end of a given experiment in thought absorption, we return the borrowed mind-stuff to the brain of its possessor. We reward our subject for his momentary discomfiture by pouring into his body our splendid vitality. This lengthens his life expectancy immeasurably, by literally burning from his system the germs of actual or incipient ills that contaminate the bloodstream.

## X

"This, I believe, will conclude my explanation, an explanation to which you, as a race in whom intelligence is beginning to dawn, are entitled. But you have a long road to travel yet. Your thought-channels are pitifully blocked and crisscrossed with nonsensical and inhibitory complexes that stand in the way of true progress. But you will work this out, for the Divine Spark that pulses through us of the Larger Universe, pulses also through' you. That spark, once lighted, can never be extinguished, can never be swallowed up again in the primeval slime.

"There is nothing more that I can learn from you—nothing that I can teach you, at this stage of your evolution. I have but one message to give you, one thought to leave with you—forge on! You are on the path, the stars are over you, their light is flashing into your souls the slogan of the Federated Suns beyond the frontiers of your little warring worlds. Forge on!"

The Voice died out like the chiming of a great bell receding into immeasurable distance. The supercilious tones of the professor had yielded to the sweetness and the light of the Greater Mind whose instrument he had momentarily become. It was charged at the last with a golden resonance that seemed to echo down vast spaceless corridors beyond the furthestmost outposts of time.

## XI

As the Voice faded out into a sacramental silence, the strangely assorted throng, moved by a common impulse, lowered their heads as though in prayer. The great globe pulsed and shimmered throughout its sentient depths like a sea of liquid jewels. Then the tentacle that grasped the professor drew him back toward the scintillating nucleus. Simultaneously another arm reached out and grasped Bill Jones, who, during the strange lecture, had ceased his wooden soldier marching and had stood stiffly at attention.

The bodies of both men within the nucleus were encircled once more by the single current. From it again put forth the tentacles, cupping their heads, but the smokelike essence flowed back to them this time, and with it flowed a tiny threadlike stream of violet light. Then came the heaving motion

when the shimmering currents caught the two men and tossed them forth unharmed but visibly dowered with the radiance of more abundant life. Their faces were positively glowing and their eyes were illuminated by a light that was surely not of earth.

Then, before the very eyes of the marveling people, the great globe began to dwindle. The jeweled lights intensified, concentrated, merged, until at last remained only a single spot no larger than a pin-head, but whose radiance was, notwithstanding, searing, excruciating. Then the spot leaped up—up into the heavens, whirling, dipping and circling as in a gesture of farewell, and finally soaring into invisibility with the blinding speed of light.

## XII

The whole wildly improbable occurrence might have been dismissed as a queer case of mass delusion, for such cases are not unknown to history, had it not been followed by a convincing aftermath.

The culmination of a series of startling coincidences, both ridiculous and tragic, at last brought men face to face with an incontestable fact: namely, that Bill Jones had emerged from his fiery baptism endowed with the thought-expressing facilities of Professor Ralston, while the professor was forced to struggle along with the meager educational appliances of Bill Jones!

In this ironic manner the Space-Wanderer had left unquestionable proof of his visit by rendering a tribute to "innate intelligence" and playing a Jovian Jest upon an educated fool—a neat transposition.

A Columbus from a vaster, kindlier universe had paused for a moment to learn the story of our pigmy system. He had brought us a message from the outermost citadels of life and had flashed out again on his aeonic voyage from everlasting unto everlasting.