HAVENARRATIVE.COM

FRANCIS GEORGE RAYER

WISHING STONE

It isn’t very often that we have an opportunity of including a fantasy story by Francis G. Rayer in these pages as his backgrounds are invariably scientific and more suited to New Worlds. However, " Wishing Stone ” is quite definitely fantasy.

Flame leapt momentarily through cracks in the huge star-ship’s side, then she burst outwards. The fire became blue, then white, and in a single explosive moment the vessel was scattered into myriad fragments, each whirling outwards with the velocity of shards from a detonated bomb. Fire burned briefly, snuffed out in the vacuum. The scattered debris of the ship was gone, a thousand unidentifiable pieces of metal spreading in an expanding circle at ten thousands of miles a second. The stars shone sedately, remote from the tiny, abrupt spark of destruction that had unexpectedly interrupted the great ship’s voyage.

From : TELET-AR-ULOR to SUPREME ALL-COMMANDER.

SHIP UL7 REPORTED PROPULSION PILE RUNNING TOO HIGH OUTPUT, 1714. AT 1721 FISSION EXPLOSION DESTROYED UL7 COMPLETELY. SHE IS TOTAL LOSS. UL7 WAS CARRYING CONTROL. REPEAT UL7 WAS CARRYING CONTROL. ADVISE.

From : SUPREME ALL-COMMANDER to TELET-AR-ULOR.

ENDEAVOUR TO CALCULATE PROBABLE DIRECTIONAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DRIVE PILE AND CONTROL AND THEREBY DEDUCE PROBABLE DIRECTION AND VELOCITY OF CONTROL OR FRAGMENTS OF HULL CONTAINING CONTROL. VESSEL EQUIPPED WITH CONTINUUM DISTORTION DETECTOR WILL PUT UP AT 2017 AND CONTACT YOU TO HELP SEARCH.

Already half a light year from the explosion, a new darkness flitted across the face of the heavens, seeking as it had been conditioned to seek . . . The remote images of stars winked at its passing, hazed, went out, and returned, like lights seen beyond floating mist. No other sign arose to indicate the vast continuum stresses caused as the new darkness sped on, drawing to itself a strange whirlpool of the warp of space.

Barney Madrigal kicked despondently through the dust at the roadside, walking slow as a snail to school. He was sorry to have sworn at his father, slamming out of the house, knowing himself twenty minutes late. But his round, full-cheeked face was stubborn. That expression had distinguished it for over half the full eleven years of its owner’s existence.

“ Blowed if I’m going to be pushed around !” he said rebelliously, careless that no one was present to hear.

The trouble had begun the previous evening. Barney had been made to swop bedrooms. Out of the big room, overlooking the river, into the little room, with its limited space and view of the side of a neighbouring house. He had hated moving.

He kicked a stone, careless of his cleaned shoes. “ Don’t see why Joe should have the best room !”

But Joe was six years Barney’s senior, seventeen, and now back on holiday from college. Barney’s father had been determined. Barney had argued, had fought — but had carried his tadpole jars into the smaller room, swearing because he knew his father hated to hear him do that. In earlier years, Barney would have clung to his mother yelling. But he had out-grown that, and sometimes even forgot his mother was never there any more. Or that his father had a new, unamused, hard expression.

Keen-eyed, Barney could glimpse the distant church clock across a span of fields, and saw he would be vastly late. Being late fitted his mood. He had come out with unbrushed hair, tie all askew, and an unmended tear in his coat pocket, reminder of fighting another boy the previous day. His general appearance and air was of calculated braggadocio. Blow people, he thought. Most seemed to be in the world merely to make things uncomfortable for Barney Madrigal. If he got caned, he never cried. Once, one terrible day, he had remained toe to toe with the master, and sworn him into silence, until gripped by the collar and shut in an empty study, there to cool while the outraged master telephoned his father. Barney had broken a window and got out, but common sense had prevented the jump twenty or more feet down into the concrete-hard playground. He had been retrieved from the sill in ignominy. Somehow that had pained him more than the caning.

The day was sunny and warm, and suddenly Barney began to hurry. Such a day was meant for swimming — and there would be precious little swimming if he were kept in for being late. At eleven, he could associate cause and effect, delinquency and punishment. The latter, so often unreasonably imposed by adults, had to be taken into account.

He began to run; ,had taken scarcely a dozen steps when his eyes caught something in the dust by the roadside. He stopped. He had an acquisitive instinct which gathered oddments of no apparent value — shells, coloured stones, anything pocketable.

At first he thought it was a mirror, lozenge shaped with square ends, and small enough to rest in his palm. But it was disappointingly dull, and fused near one point as if by great heat. It was thicker than a mirror, too — more like the slabs of rock and crystal

the science master showed them. He could not remember any name to fit this. It was some type of crystalline rock, he decided.

He rubbed it, trying to impart a gloss to the flat surface. As he did, the distant church clock began to strike nine. Resentment and dismay seized him. It was ten minutes to the school, at running speed. He wished he were already there, it would save being kept in . . .

A strange absence of light and space came out of the heavens, folding back cloud and atmosphere. Displaced air whistled, a momentary whirlwind. Barney blinked, screwing up his eyes. For a moment he thought someone had hit him from behind.

He raised his bunched fists to retaliate, opened his eyes, and found himself in the school yard.

Boys were pushing near him and into the doorway. There were two at the tail of the string, almost special enemies, and who seemed to have been waiting for him. They had been looking back at the gate, but now saw him, and their gaze was a silent threat as they went in, answering the clanging bell in the classroom corridor. Barney wondered what would happen. Physical violence because he had stolen their school pens just before class the previous day ?

He remembered the doctor’s letter. His father had let him read it just to show there was nothing wrong with him. Barney had been so glad about it that he could almost recall every word It was long-winded, in Barney’s view, but worth remembering.

From Dr. J. Macdonald,

Psychology Dept,.

City & Border Hospital.

Dear Mr. Madrigal,

I have now given full consideration to the electro-encephalo-graphs lately provided by Dr. Wilson of our Out-Patient Dept., and you will be pleased to hear that they fully bear out my own opinion of your son Barney’s condition. There is no insanity or actual abnormality. However, Barney has naturally suffered from the death of his mother, and is of very sensitive character. I would advise you to maintain a firm attitude with him when necessary, but to avoid any open conflict or argument with him, or to allow any contest of wills in which he must inevitably lose. His swearing and truculent conduct arise primarily from feelings of insufficiency, and are a childhood attempt to establish his own worth. He should engage in healthy outdoor sports as much as possible : should be encouraged when doing well at school or elsewhere, and outbursts

of temper should preferably be ignored, when practicable. He will grow out of his present phase, and will in a few years probably become a normal, co-operative member of school and society. His actions are signs of stress and uncertainty, not of mental unbalance or any similar defect. I recommend you talk this letter over with him.

Yours sincerely,

J. Macdonald.

To Barney, the morning dragged. Lessons took his mind off the strange manner in which he had found himself in the school yard, avoiding reproof for lateness. He determined to try harder, and applied himself to his lessons. The kind doctor at the clinic had pressed his shoulder.

“ You’re O.K., Barney !” he had said. “ Do your best. Work well and don’t blow your top. Everybody feels irritated at times.”

The half hour before break was devoted to music. Barney hated it, and hated the thin, white-haired master whose voice had the whispery sound of a flat g-string. Ashleforth was weak, and tried to get the boys on his side by providing scape-goats. Barney dimly comprehended this, and despised him for it.

The class was barely ten minutes old when the joke came.

“ I expect you to sing better than that, Madrigal.”

Several tittered. The joke was expected, usual — old and spiteful, but they always did titter. Barney flushed, his ears feeling hot. His fists were knots under the desk. A name like Madrigal, coupled with a complete inability to sing, made him fair game. And it was subtle enough to pass. He had complained to his father, but his father had not understood, merely thinking it a normal reaction against being ticked off.

The master came along the row, and Barney noted how the white hair stuck back over his collar. Ashleforth smirked.

“ Madrigals are usually musical.”

The titter was louder. Barney’s teeth clamped like iron, his lips compressed. Bloody old hen, he thought fiercely. Only the hope of the cool, tree ringed pool by the brook, where he would swim, kept him silent. But he could not control the expression in his eyes — the hate, contempt. A trace of colour came to the master’s cheeks, but he moved on, returning to his board to chalk up dotted notes.

When the class was dismissed, Pike and Brown were indeed waiting for Barney outside the school door. Pike walked a few steps imitating Ashleforth.

“ Sing up, Madrigal.” His voice wavered on a falsetto. “ Madrigals are never, never untuneful ! Simple poems of joy and love — ”

Barney hit him. Brown sidled up and thumped Barney low down on the back. As Barney turned to defend himself. Pike backed a few steps.

“ Barney is barmy !” He made it sound like the line from a popular song. “ Barney is barmy — ”

Barney fought the two, bitterly, roughly, kicking, clawing, until a master issued from the school and stopped them. Pike was mopping a lip, carrying pink upon his handkerchief.

“ Madrigal hit me first, sir !”

“ Yes, he hit him first, sir,” Brown said . . .

From : TELET-AR-ULOR to SUPREME ALL-COMMANDER. VESSEL WITH CONTINUUM DISTORTION DETECTOR HAS REACHED US. INITIAL CALCULATIONS SUGGEST CONTROL LOCATION FRAGMENTS PROBABLY DRIVEN BY EXPLOSION TOWARDS GALAXY SOME LIGHT YEARS REMOTE BY FIRST ORDER SPACE. UL7 WAS IN SECOND ORDER SPACE WHEN DESTROYED. WILL PROCEED IN CALCULATED DIRECTION WITH DETECTOR SHIP AND WILL REPORT IMMEDIATELY ANY LOCATION OF CONTINUUM DISTORTION SUSPECTED AS REVEALING THAT UL7’S ENTITY IS FOLLOWING THE LOST CONTROL.

School had reached its eventual end. The head had listened to Pike and Brown, but seemed rather unimpressed, and fifteen minutes after classes finished Barney set off home. He ate a sparse tea under the watchful eye of his father’s housekeeper, who always reminded him of a nun without her hood, then went alone to the pool.

Sun slanted through the trees and the air was hot with summer. Scarcely anyone ever came here. Sometimes he read, and a book hung in a pocket. But now the water was inviting, cold and sparkling at the end where the brook overflowed into the pond. He undressed, standing naked on the grassy bank, and dived in.

He had been swimming ten minutes when he realised that he was observed. A girl stood on the bank, amid the reeds, tall, quite slender, and with long, dark hair. He swam over, holding to a willow root, chin at water level.

“ Go away,” he said. “ I don’t want girls here.”

“ It’s not your pond.” She sat on the grass and began to unbutton her shoes. Her dark eyes returned to him. “ Chari said you hit him this morning.”

“ He deserved it.” Barney decided both were equally objectionable — Charley Pike, and his sister Mary, two years Charley’s junior, but inquisitive and bossy for a girl of eleven.

“ Clear off,” he said.

“ Who’s telling me to ?”

She was obviously undressing. He grunted in disdain, and swam away across the pool. Reeds came right down into the water here. He kicked up mud, wilfully making the pool unpleasant, hoping she would go.

“ There are frogs in the water,” he called.

Mary stood on the bank a moment, clad in her knickers, then jumped in. Barney felt his peace finally evaporate. Her splashing was somehow an insult.

“ You can’t even swim,” he yelled derisively.

Her head bobbed momentarily higher, her dark hair all draggled over her cheeks, but she grinned. “Who showed you how to swim here, Barney Madrigal ?”

It was undeniably true that she had. He swore, swallowed water, and decided to get out. His clothes were at the end of the pool by bushes. He put on his pants, wiped himself with his handkerchief, letting the warm air dry him. The peace of the sunny evening had gone. Splashing noises came from the pool, with yelps of delight. Silly damn girls, he thought.

Dry, he dressed. When he stuck his sodden handkerchief back in his pocket, he felt something hard, and remembered the queer, flat object he had picked up that morning. He took it out, his fury at being driven from the pool momentarily forgotten.

It might have been a mirror, if it were not so thick. Polish it as he would, he could not make it clear. His reflection was only dim, a round image lacking detail.

“ Chari says you’re barmy, Barney.” Mary Pike trod water.

He ignored her, polishing the object on a coat sleeve. She had seen his action, and pulled herself up to shoulder level in the water, clinging to the grass.

“ What you got, Barney ?”

“ Mind your own business !”

Her woman’s curiosity was aroused. “ Let me see.”

He placed the object in his pocket, holding it against some unexpected rush for possession.

“ It’s my business.”

She seemed to seek an opening. “ Bet you stole it !”

He knew the words to be a trick to gain information, if only by his denial. Instead of defending himself, he attacked.

“ Why come here interrupting a chap’s swim?”

“ I haven’t.” She was wheedling, now. “ Let me see what you’ve got.”

Barney nearly swore, but did not. Somehow, he never used such words directly to Mary.

“ You have interrupted, then.” His sarcasm was biting. “ Who wants to swim with a girl ?”

“ But I thought you’d like to — ”

“ Bah ! Like to !” He felt a small triumph at being cruel, in purposely hurting her. “ Not with you, anyway. Be better if you left a chap in peace. Far as I’m concerned. I’d rather you hadn’t come. Far as I care. I’d be glad if you drowned, and then I could swim in peace in future — ”

He turned on a heel, striding back among the trees, the flat piece of rock clasped protectively in a hand. He did not see the darkness that came out of the heavens, pressing a wriggling form back into the engulfing waters.

The two mighty ships slid across the space between neighbouring galaxies, their captains in constant communication with each other, and reporting regularly back to their remote base. Upon one vessel a parabolic reflector spun, scanning the whole circle of the heavens. A probing electronic finger knowing no limitation in velocity searched a sphere many million miles in diameter, flashing back information to watching technicians. The race of which Telet-ar-Ulor was a member was old in science and great in attainment. Once, thousands of years before, and distant beyond

the edge of their familiar universes, they had located powers so much greater than their own that they had been shocked with fear.

But in a hundred years they had emerged again — and with a means of controlling the ebb and flow of nearly infinite power they had discovered. After thousands of years, doubt as to the source of that power still remained. They controlled it, but did not know how, or where it arose. They observed its manifestations, using it charily. Its origins were somehow beyond the limit of their comprehension. They employed it like a primitive could employ a complex machine, the workings and motive power of which he did not understand. But they had more intelligence then a primitive, and were very cautious. The means of control, lost from UL7 in the moment of explosion, was jealously guarded, probably irreplaceable, and employed only after wise discussion.

The detector beam twirled, hesitated, made a second circuit and ceased to turn, oscillating over a narrowing segment of the heavens. At the extreme limit of range was an apparent hole in space, a dark emptiness from which came back no echoes of suns or planets, nor the criss-cross of meteorites, or the haze of stardust. Space seemed distorted, continuum drawn on continuum like bundled strands of thread that somehow crowded into non-existence, before spreading again into normal juxtaposition.

The two ships changed course slightly, the detector beam locking on the remote spot of emptiness. It was receding at near their own velocity, but seemed to be in fairly stable position to a moderately sized sun. Grave unease ran through the technicians as they realised the significance of this fact. Orders passed rapidly, and a new fire of increased drive flickered blue rings behind both ships.

“ That’s definitely the last I saw of Mary,” Barney said again. “ I didn’t want her to come swimming there — I told her so.”

The police officer did not appear antagonistic. He had seated himself on the lounge couch with a friendly air, and had listened quietly to all Barney said, only interjecting occasional questions. He rose.

“ You didn’t see anyone else by the pool, or in the trees ?”

“ No.”

“ Charley Pike didn’t see anyone else, either. You may as well know that, so don’t worry.”

Barney heard the man talking in the hall with his father, as he left. “ The poor kid seemed caught in weeds. Her brother saw your son leaving. No, we don’t for a moment imagine your son knows any more, or even that there was foul play.”

The door closed, and Barney was alone. He nibbled his lips, walked half to the door, then changed his mind and took up a position by the window, his fists thrust deeply in his pockets. He was extremely sorry for Mary. Somehow the fact that she was dead had not sunk fully home. He could not believe that he would never see her again, or hear her mischievous laugh as she made a joke or scored off him.

Joe came in. Six years Barney's senior, he looked very adult, very neat in perfectly creased flannels. He sat on the couch, leaning forwards, elbows on knees, his face serious.

" You didn't try ducking Mary, or anything?"

" I've said I hadn't, didn't I ?"

Barney felt angry, staring into the eyes which were so light blue, so like his own. He had always seemed to live in a state of unending competition with Joe — a competition he could never win. As he grew, so did Joe. It was a race with no end. Joe was always taller, always ran faster, could always make more at cricket.

" I'm not trying to accuse you," Joe said. " But everyone knows Mary was as good swimmer. I believe she taught you, years ago."

She had. But Barney instinctively caught the criticism in the words. Somehow Joe was suggesting that he, Barney, was at fault. The thought made him clench his fists. Something hard lay in his right hand. It brought memory. With the memory came a queer, twisted sense of having done wrong. He had wished Mary drowned — or at least said it would suit him if she were.

Memory of that wish made his eyes drop. He thought for a moment he would cry — but pride forbade it. Instead, when emotion became too strong, he swore, roundly, adultly, using every word he had ever heard the other boys employ, and those of the men down by the riverside, when he could remember them.

Joe saw the look on his face, the dropped gaze. His cheeks grew a trifle thin.

" Look Barney, if you were larking about, or anything, and gave her a push, tell me — "

Barney trembled. " I didn't ! I never even touched her ! I wanted her to go away, I only said — "

He could not repeat what he had said. The exact wording eluded him, and it seemed unkind to repeat it, now she was drowned. Instead, he summoned up the new iciness which had come to him first after his mother had gone for ever, and which was a mask

be maintained against anyone who strove to penetrate his defences.

“ I’ve told what happened,” he said, quelling emotion. “ I didn’t know Mary was — was drowned until Chari found her and started hollering.”

They left it at that.

Barney did not sleep well. It still seemed impossible that Mary had gone. He lay for a long time staring at the illuminated patch on the ceiling where light spilled across from the house opposite. He felt resentful that Joe had seemed to disbelieve him. From there, his recollections strayed logically enough to his last words to Mary. He had wished she were drowned, during that brief annoyance of finding his swim interrupted. It was surely a strange coincidence that she had afterwards somehow failed to reach the bank.

An odd feeling he could not define suddenly swept over him, and he sat up abruptly in bed. Once before, that day, he had wished something, and found it happen ! He could not remember traversing the road to school, yet had arrived there — and in time. Old Ashleforth, and the plan to go swimming, had almost made him forget, then Mary’s death had left no space for other thoughts. But now that memory had fully returned, it burned with such bright vividness that it crowded out all else.

He strove to recollect everything associated with the day’s happenings, but found little. He had often played at make-believe, had often “ wished ” when defeated or frustrated. Why two apparent desires should have been fulfilled that day eluded him.

Finally he settled down to sleep, the problem — if problem there was — unsolved. At eleven years, Barney had grown accustomed to taking apparent miracles as he found them, not asking questions when there was obviously no answer.

From ; TELET-AR-ULOR to SUPREME ALL-COMMANDER.

THE DETECTOR SHIP HAS LOCATED A CONTINUUM STRESS SIGNIFICANTLY IMMOBILE RELATIVE TO A MIDDLE PLANET OF THE SYSTEM WE ARE APPROACHING. WE BELIEVE THE CONTROL LOST FROM UL7 RESTS ON THIS PLANET. WE ARE NOT YET AWARE OF CONDITIONS ON THE PLANET BUT RADIO SIGNALS INDICATE CIVILISATION OF A TYPE. I NEED NOT UNDERLINE THE UNSPEAKABLE DANGERS WHICH COULD ARISE FROM WRONG, WILFUL, OR UNWISE USE OF THE CONTROL, OR SUGGEST WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN IF THE CONTROL WERE FOUND AND USED. MANY RACES EMPLOY HOPEFUL OR ANTICIPATORY MENTAL IMAGERY WHEN STRESSED OR FRUSTRATED AND CHANCE OPERATION OF THE CONTROL IS THUS HIGHLY LIKELY.

From : SUPREME ALL-COMMANDER to TELET-AR-ULOR.

LOCATE AND RETRIEVE CONTROL AT ALL COSTS.

The next day at school was outwardly almost normal. But a new repression had descended on Barney and the others. Pike and Brown came as usual, but did not rag him. Instead, they watched critically as if he were responsible for Mary. Barney found the silent criticism vastly more trying than open conflict.

He thought the masters also seemed to watch him, and once he found Ashleforth's gaze unexpectedly curious and condemning. A new external appearance of self-control and coolness possessed Barney, but he knew it was thin — a shell of self-defence ready to crack under no great impact.

During early break he sat on the playground wall, studying the flat piece of rock with new interest, and pretending not to notice that no one wished to play with him, or even fight him. The object was too regular in shape to be natural. If it had not been damaged at one end, it would have been an exactly symmetrical lozenge. He tried the surface with his penknife, but found it too hard to mark. Nor did his teeth make any impression on it. When held to an ear, it seemed to hum like a sea-shell, but with a murmur infinitely more remote.

The playground was unusually subdued. Most of the boys had gathered round Pike and Brown, and Pike was talking quietly. Barney did not doubt what they discussed. His ears burned ; his cheeks flamed, then an icy coldness came into his limbs.

He slid from the wall and approached them. They grew silent, looking at him.

" How can I help it if — if Mary got — drowned ?" he asked helplessly.

They looked at him, not speaking, eyes somehow condemning him. His knees trembled with the injustice of it.

" Naturally I'd have stopped and saved her if I'd have known !" he stated.

They all stared at him. One small boy's mouth hung visibly open. Barney saw he was failing to establish any kind of relationship.

" I — I'm sorry she — drowned," he whispered.

His voice was breaking with the emotion of it all. The curiosity and condemnation remained. Charley Pike whispered something, and the group began to fade away. Barney found himself standing nearly alone at the end of the play-ground.

" Your housekeeper told Ma you'd been to a loony doctor," Charley Pike stated.

Barney was stunned into silence. He had not supposed the boys would ever know. Denial sprang to his lips, but Charley had gone.

Barney almost wept. He felt their attitude was frantically wrong and unjust. Then his self-pity changed to anger. His teeth snapped shut, and his fists clenched, as when he went into battle.

Very well he thought, he didn't care ! He could fight them all, half a dozen at a time, if they wished. He hadn't done anything wrong, that he knew of ! He swore under his breath. Silly lot of kids. Picking on him, as usual. To hell with them. Weak-kneed lot of silly devils . . .

He was still swearing inwardly when they returned to the classroom. When he caught any other gaze fixed on him, he returned it with equal stoniness. He was a tiny, isolated island of acute feeling, maintaining itself against attack from all sides. He knew the sensation of old — knew, also, that it was either this, or tears.

Ashleforth looked aware of the tension in class, and was anxious to dispel it. He progressed with the lesson, speaking a trifle more rapidly than usual. It was history, and Ashleforth was on his hobby-horse when it came to forms of song and music used in by-gone times. The name "madrigal " came out first time with no particular inflexion, but one boy tittered self-consciously, and two cleared their throats. Ashleforth paused momentarily, as if reminded of his old joke. Then he went on.

Barney's attention wandered. For the tenth time he re-lived the scene by the pool. It was not his fault ... He wished, devoutly, that he had not gone swimming — or that he were someone else, perhaps capable and content, like Joe —

He came back to awareness of the class with the knowledge that the master had asked him something.

" You were not attending !" Ashleforth tapped his desk.

Barney stared at him, not comprehending. He would have saved Mary if he could . . .

" Did you hear what I asked you ?" Ashleforth was flushing as always when he suspected a boy was ignoring his authority.

Barney had not heard. Instead, he wished he had stayed to watch Mary. Then he could have saved her. But he always seemed to do the wrong thing . . .

" Speak up, boy !" The voice had a rising note.

Barney looked him in the eye, seeing him for the first time.

“ I was thinking that it’s not always a song to be a bloody Madrigal, sir,” he said.

Ashleforth almost choked. A weak titter, against the master this time, and acknowledging Barney’s courage, swept the class.

“ What ?” The master overhung his desk in anger. “Kindly repeat what you said !”

Barney did, word for word, without omission or apology. The titter was louder this time.

“ Disgraceful !” Ashleforth’s face was white, with pink spots on each cheek. “ I have never heard anything so insulting. You will stay in until the Head has decided what shall happen to you. I will not have my boys contaminated by such defiance !”

Barney stood up. He had reached the end of his ability to resist. Mary. Being an outcast among his companions. Joe turfing him out of his bedroom. Joe thinking he had hurt Mary. Chari saying he was loony. Now this. Very slowly, almost deliberately, he walked along in front of the desks. He had almost reached the door when Ashleforth awoke from his astonishment.

“ Boy, come back ! That is an order !”

Barney walked on, slowly, driven by the will which would never admit defeat. A hand came on his shoulder, swinging him round. Lips quivering, he saw red, and struck. His blow was weak, but it took Ashleforth on the chest, and the master stepped back, face like mottled chalk, more astounded than hurt.

“ I’m damned if I’m coming back !” Barney shouted. “ Why the devil should I come back when all you want to do is laugh at me ? I’ve had enough of it. You can go to the devil, and the Head too.” Tears streamed down his hot face. His fists clenched in his pockets. In one was his handkerchief, in a tight ball ; in the other, a lozenge shape with hard edges that cut his fingers. The way the men swore down at the river-side came vividly to his mind. He could not remember all their words, but did his best, though Ashleforth tried to stop him once.

At last he stamped the floor. “ I heard Pike say Dad had me taken to a head doctor. What the hell do I care if he has ! What the devil do I care what any of you think ?” He breathed deeply, almost hoping with the constriction in his throat. “ What do I care what you think or do ? Far as I’m concerned, you could all be dead this moment. Fact, I’d be glad if you were — I wish you all were, then I’d have peace ! And the head too, and everybody, far as I care . . .”

Immeasurable, mindless forces sped into action from their state of stressed rest, encircling the planet. A great darkness that was a lack of time and space came into being, billowing out of the heavens, impelled into action by the same controlling agency that had acted as a magnet across space. The forces released were great enough to encompass a whole solar system, but now they concentrated on one planet, brushing away life like a great hand could brush ants off a raised sod.

From : TELET-AR-ULOR to SUPREME ALL-COMMANDER.

PLANET LOCATED VERY SHORTLY AFTER CONSIDERABLE CONTINUUM DISTURBANCE IN VICINITY. ONLY ONE LIVING INTELLIGENT BEING FOUND. APPARENTLY A YOUNG OFF-SPRING OF THE PREDOMINANT INTELLIGENT RACE. WILL SEARCH FOR OTHERS OF THE SPECIES BUT DOUBT IF ANY REMAIN. AM RETURNING WITH YOUNG OFFSPRING BUT HE SEEMS UNABLE TO GIVE ANY INTELLIGENT REPLY TO OUR TRANSLATED QUESTIONS. HE HAD IN HIS POSSESSION THE LOST CONTROL FROM UL7. MESSAGE ENDS.