

THE LAST LAP

by Christopher Priest

SCIENCE FICTION is again at one of its turning-points. It has passed through, and survived, the early days of thought variance and cardboard characterization. It has ridden the forties on a proud wave of true scientific and sociological extrapolation; and boomed its way through the fifties on gimmickry and experimentation. But that last boom finished several years ago, and sf is now in the doldrums. It is like a racing car that, having shown its paces around the track, now rests in the pits, its engine ticking over, waiting to show its true potentiality.

In years to come, when the sixties are dissected and examined by the sf fans of the time, these years will come to be known, I fear, as the period when sf was read by many but noticed by few. The paperback novel, at one time reckoned upon to be the death of publishing, now provides a stimulus to the reading of all kinds of literature. Sales in the region of twenty thousand copies are no longer unusual for even the most mediocre of novels, and sf, which has always had a minority appeal, finds itself sharing this heartening market. A new phenomenon, the original paperback novel, has made its debut, and although it is more common on the other side of the Atlantic at the moment, I feel that it will become more and more accepted in this country.

Much has been spoken and written lately about the growing trend towards a contemporary mood in sf. The death of the space story is upon us, following in the wake of time-travel and end-of-the-world. Some writers, looking for new horizons to scan, add extra lenses to their insight; others narrow theirs, exploring private worlds of 'inner' space and subjective illusionism. Whichever way they are to turn, all writers must acknowledge that sf, in its present state, is doomed as an individual branch of literature. Eventually it will congeal, and join crime and love stories in solidified routine. It will become 'pop' and mundane, lowbrow and insignificant. Just as the romantic tale has a stock formula, so too will sf acquire its own little set of cliché-plots.

Science fiction depends for its impact on two basic elements. First, it is the quality of surprise, the never-before-visited feeling of originality. And secondly, it is the much-maligned sense of wonder, whose mention alone is sufficient to provoke alternate reactions of argument and apathy. A better definition of this might be the sublimation of a writer's imagination into the narrower confines of the reader's.

It is these two traits that sf has now lost. There is no more power behind the punch; nor vice versa. To escape from the morass into which it has started to sink, sf must become more ready to change its image. The advent of surrealism and imagery into sf has been greeted by a pretence that it doesn't exist. This somewhat escapist attitude is now being replaced by shrill voices, claiming that sf is no place for obscurity, and that a story is preferable to symbolism. Change is like that—it provokes and shifts the lethargic, shatters old ideals and sets up uninformed resistance.

Symbolism is a passing fad in sf, but I feel sure that it is itself a symbol of things to come. Wherever it is that a writer searches for his plots, on a far planet or in the deep shallows of his mind, from now on he has an added problem. No longer must his plots rest in a conventional and wearisome style, no more must he think in terms of purely human response related to the situation, never again can he add that extra twist to the long, long tale. His writing, in terms of technique, style and conception, must be new. It isn't a case of seeking another aspect to an old vista, nor another angle to the eternal polygon.

Science fiction is supposedly a fiction above the general run. Its assimilation into that run is close, frighteningly so. To regain that sublimation—call it 'sense of wonder' if you will—sf must become first of all literate, then imaginative, and then experimental. When these qualities have been recovered, and they are something that *have* been lost, then sf will find itself possessed of a new and invigorating element: originality.

That lap is still waiting for the racing car. The engine hasn't yet stalled. Science fiction hasn't run out of fuel, nor is it short of drivers. This next lap could be the most important in the history of speculative writing, and we are in at the beginning of it. Does it take all that much to get it started?

[We should welcome more articles on sf from members.—ED.]

WANTED AND FOR SALE

MR P. H. STANLEY, 57 Leamington Road, Congleton, Cheshire, would like to buy SFBC titles 1-43 and 49, 52 and 53.

Mr J. Head, 18 Gloucester Road, Bournemouth, Hants, would like to obtain SFBC past titles Nos. 36, 38 and 42.

Mr G. Hudson, 55 Heathway, Northumberland Heath, Erith, Kent, is interested in obtaining a copy of *Lord of the Rings*.

Mr William Douglas, 46 Ashvale Place, Aberdeen, is anxious to buy the following books: SFBC titles 1-21, 23-5, 29, 31 and 32, 36-40, 42 and 43, 45 and 46, and 49.

Mr R. Thompson, 20 Dorchester Close, Dunstable, Beds., wishes to buy or borrow James Blish's book entitled *A Clash of Cymbals* and *The Life of the Stars*. Or, alternatively, *All Cities in Flight*.

Flt-Sgt A. Barker, 17 Birdview Square, Feltwell, Thetford, Norfolk, wishes to sell his collection of SFBC past titles, Nos. 1-100 inclusive. They are all in excellent condition.

Mr Phillip L. Grieson, 46 Clarence Crescent, Sidcup, Kent, has for sale 20 SFBC past titles.

Mr Richard Osborne, 15 Jarrow Street, Barrow-in-Furness, Lancs., has for sale the following sf magazines: *Astounding SF/Analog*, 1944 (Feb.), 1945 (Sept., Nov.), 1946 (Jan., July, Dec.), 1947 (Jan., June, Aug., Oct.), 1948 (Feb., April, Oct., Dec.), 1949 (Oct.), 1950 (Jan., Aug., Oct., Dec.), 1951 (Feb., Aug., Oct., Dec.), and all issues between Feb. 1952 and Aug. 1963 inclusive. Also *Nebula* Nos. 1-41 (complete) and *New Worlds* Nos. 5, 7, 10, 12, 13, 20, 22, 23, 25, 29, 31, 34, 36, 38, 47, 48, 57-9, 61, 62, 64-76, 78, 80-93, 97.

Forthcoming Optional Books

HERE are details of the RU December Optionals:

A GENERAL HISTORY OF THE SCIENCES

Volume II: The Beginnings of Modern Science:

From 1450 to 1800

Edited by René Taton

The December Supplementary volume

'THE material is presented in four parts. In Part I the science of Renaissance times is considered, under the appropriate divisions of mathematics, the Copernican revolution, fifteenth-century physics, and the geology, chemistry, biology, medicine, zoology and botany of that period, now much more interesting than it once was. Part II is concerned with the seventeenth century, with its physics, mathematics, mechanics, astronomy, electricity, magnetism and chemistry, together with the biology, medicine, botany and geology of that great age. Similar treatment of eighteenth-century science forms Part III of the volume, and here are described the great advances in mathematics and mechanics, in our knowledge of the solar system, in the modern foundation of the sciences of heat, electricity and magnetism, light and sound, and of chemistry, with the concurrent developments in biology, physiology, medicine, botany, geology and mineralogy. Finally, in Part IV we are told of the developments in science outside Europe, namely, in the Far East, in India and in colonial America, which is a valuable and welcome innovation in a general history of this kind; for, while modern science arose in western Europe, it had other and older roots which were not entirely Greek, and it is important to know how science developed both in the older civilizations and in the New World during these centuries of fundamental change in scientific thought.

'Bibliographical details are adequate without being heavy, and the other books and sources referred to will prove helpful to the student. There are forty-eight plate illustrations and thirty-six text figures, all well chosen, and there are good name and subject indexes.' *The Times Literary Supplement*.
665 pages. 48 plates. 36 figures. Bibliographies and Indexes.

Thames & Hudson £6 6s; SFBC 75s, post free

JOURNEY TOWARDS MUSIC: A MEMOIR

by Victor Gollancz

The December Additional

'He has the amateur music lover's freedom from inhibition; no critic would dare to indulge in the subjective impressionism of the passage in which he attempts to pin down the unique quality of Chaliapin's singing ("... something of the look of a flame rising high and steady but with a little smoke about it"), but any critic might wish he could. It is perfectly natural to him to relate music to the rest of life and to see musical experience as part of all transcendental experience. There is an admirably forthright frankness, devoid of exhibitionism, in the way he writes of the moments of peace and total benediction that music has brought him.

'But with all this energetic and absorbing talk of himself and the visions of reality, para-reality, metaphysics and communion that he has had through listening to operas and concerts, the book's title, a journey *towards* music, reflects a real humility; and its most lasting impression is not of him but of the music which he has lived and now so unpretentiously and vividly illuminates.'

Observer.

238 pages. Plates. Index.

Gollancz 25s; SFBC 19s, post free

DEAREST CHILD: Letters between Queen Victoria and the Princess Royal

Edited by Roger Fulford

The December Extra

From Queen Victoria to her daughter:

Windsor Castle, April 20, 1859.

'I HAVE this very moment received your dear letter of the 18th and thank you much for it. I am glad you bear out what I said about our dear correspondence. It is an immense pleasure and comfort to me, for it is dreadful to live so far off and always separated. I really think I shall never let your sister marry—certainly not to be so constantly away and see so little of their parents—as till now, you have done, contrary to all that I was originally promised and told. I am so glad to see that you so entirely enter into all my feelings as a mother. Yes, dearest, it is an awful moment to have to give one's innocent child up to a man be he ever so kind and good—and to think of all that she must go through! I can't say what I suffered, what I felt—what struggles I had to go through—(indeed I have not quite got over it yet) and that last night when we took you to your room, and you cried so much, I said to Papa as we came back "after all, it is like taking a poor lamb to be sacrificed". You now know—what I meant, dear. I know that God has willed it so and that these are the trials which we poor women must go through; no father, no man can feel this! *Papa* never would enter into it all! As in fact he seldom can in my very violent feelings. It really makes me shudder when I look around at all your sweet, happy, unconscious sisters—and think that I must give them up too—one by one!! Our dear Alice has seen and heard more (of course not what no one ever can know before they marry and before they have had