

science fiction news

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NEXT MONTH'S CHOICE

The Great Explosion

by Eric Frank Russell

ENTHUSIASTS for sf can always expect new ideas, original and startling themes; but experiments with style, with the approach to a subject, are still unusual. *The Great Explosion* is remarkable from this point of view because it is an extremely clever satire; Mr Russell's inventiveness as an sf writer is apparent in his humour too; he uses his sense of irony on two very different levels at once, drawing a lively and amusing picture of a ridiculous situation four hundred years hence, and making this picture a pointed comment on some of the assumptions by which we live now.

Suddenly, because of a zany invention, space travel becomes easy and cheap, and this sets off a 'great explosion', a mass exodus of all Earth's malcontents and misfits to other planets, to colonies in space.

Four hundred years later (when the book begins), men on Earth are making plans to bring these outposts back into the fold, to use them as military bases in case of attack from other galaxies. Out goes a special space craft, with a full complement of space sailors, soldiers, ambassadorial and civil staff, and orders to make contact with four of the colonies. The book is a sharp and very amusing description of each of the expeditions.

The spacemen, the military representatives and the diplomats cannot grasp the point that, in four hundred years, the space colonists have grown indifferent to their mother planet, that they have formed new customs and rules of life. Ordinary 'Terran' conventions like working, wearing clothes, using money, obeying authority, have become alien notions, and the men who still hold them seem either mad or ill, or simply pathetic. Far from regretting their long separation from home, all these prodigal sons find the idea of returning to the fold a ridiculous one.

Here is the 'expeditionary force'—the fat ambassador, the overbearing sergeant-major, the cautious colonel and the regulation-bound space pilot—disarmed either by pity or contempt, and forced to question the very ideas for which it exists.