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NEXT MONTH'S CHOICE

Time is the Simplest Thing

by Clifford D. Simak

'FINALLY there came a time when Man was ready to admit that he was barred from space. . . . He died too easily. . . . After many years, after great thundering in the sky, after a hundred million heartbreaks, Man finally gave up. . . . It was just as well he did. . . . There was a better way.'

This is the opening of *Time is the Simplest Thing*, and the 'better way' which Man has found to explore the universe and everything it contains is telepathy. In Mexico there is a vast organization known as Fishhook; it reaches out everywhere into space, not through elaborate machinery but through minds. It employs 'travellers', people who can travel by mental processes to other planets and return again with information about them while their bodies remain earthbound. Fishhook is the one storehouse of all this knowledge, the only organization with the power to turn it to practical use: it has given mankind new forms of literature and art, new kinds of entertainment, new drugs, new fabrics and foods and colours and scents; it has destroyed the possibility of disease in every form and has made life immeasurably more rich and comfortable, and yet it is hated and feared.

Shepherd Blaine, the central character in the novel, is a Fishhook 'traveller'. He has made many journeys; he is accustomed to his para-normal faculties; he enjoys being a part of the organization and he expects to go on living and working within it. And then, one day, his life is entirely changed. He returns from a journey across 5,000 light years to discover that he has brought back, within his mind, a separate alien intelligence, that he is no longer a single personality, but a combination of two. The alien being has said to him: 'I trade with you my mind.'

This strange exchange brings with it extraordinary powers, but at the same time it puts Blaine in great danger: Fishhook has ingenious methods of finding out when one of its people has 'gone alien' and of rooting out the strange mind; it does not allow independent thinking and action; it will tolerate only the forms of para-normality which it can control. Blaine escapes, to face unrelenting danger and fear and persecution in the world outside Fishhook.

Simak describes Blaine's tremendous struggle to keep his new identity and to stay alive. On this one level, as an 'escape story', the book has great excitement, keeping until the very end its pace and mystery and tension, but what makes it especially outstanding are the themes and ideas underlying the main plot and the skill with which they are handled.

One of the many enjoyable things about the novel is its style: the craftsmanship with which it is designed and written. Simak has a powerful and original imagination, but he keeps a rein on his ideas, working them out to their full value and no further. The story is a complex one, with several separate themes, and yet it never becomes sluggish with too much unnecessary detail; it is taut and clear and credible. In spite of his extraordinary powers, Blaine is a personality, not merely a mouthpiece for a jumble of pseudo-scientific jargon, and the alien presence in his mind is believable on its own terms as a living, intelligent being, not a comical zombie. Its relationship with Blaine is an imaginable one, and curiously touching. Even the secondary characters have this same depth of personality; each of them, no matter how cruel or dangerous or cowardly he is, has an understandable point of view, a comment to make on the main theme of the story.

Simak pictures a future which, from our own experience, we know to be possible, and therefore all the more frightening. At present science is treated with immense respect; even its failures are looked upon as a part of progress. In the world Simak imagines science has failed absolutely in its greatest undertaking; it