
Unthinkable

Rog Phillips



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Title: Unthinkable

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Illustrator: Bill Terry

Release Date: December 11, 2008 [EBook #27491]

Language: English

*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK UNTHINKABLE ***

Produced by Greg Weeks, Stephen Blundell and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <http://www.pgdp.net>

The doctor did a very strange thing; he pulled out a gun and shot himself through the head.

UNTHINKABLE

By ROG PHILLIPS

If Nature suddenly began to behave differently, what we consider obvious and elementary today might become—unthinkable.

IN the story THE DESPOILERS in the October 1947 *Amazing Stories* I raised the question, "Is there anything absolutely beyond human comprehension?" In that story I gave humanity a thousand years to give birth to one man who could comprehend the incomprehensible.

The incomprehensible is harder to portray in a story than is merely the unknown. If we denote anything incomprehensible by the symbol X, we can describe what X is to a certain extent by knowing what it is not. We can, gradually, gain a certain insight into what it is by comparing it to what IS comprehensible.

In the last analysis the universe of normalcy is incomprehensible. We have made progress in comprehending it because we have isolated it into small bundles of events that can be dealt with by the human intellect.

We have arrived at certain basic pictures of the behavior of the incomprehensible. We have found a certain stability existing in the picture we have built up. We have searched the heavens and found that stars are made up of the same elements as the Earth—with a few exceptions. And with those exceptions we have brought them into the framework of our picture of the Universe by postulating "dense matter."

We have, slowly, come to the belief that the same laws operate throughout the entire Universe, just as they do here on the Earth. This is the Uniformity Postulate.

In that story THE DESPOILERS the Uniformity Postulate was not denied. The incomprehensible in that story was the mind of a Despoiler. It, to the human mind, was incomprehensible; and to the Despoiler, the human mind was incomprehensible.

Each viewed the Universe differently due to a difference in whatever lies at the foundations of the thinking processes. In other words, uniformity of the principle of thought was denied there.

Both the Despoilers and Man had mechanical civilization and science, but due to their different minds neither could comprehend completely the viewpoint of the other ON THE SAME THING. Each had applied his REASON to the disorder of nature and constructed what to him was a REASONABLE PICTURE.

The type of mentality I attributed to the Despoiler may be impossible. It may be that if the human race eventually reaches out and encounters other intelligent races it will find that the basic principles which result in thought as we know it are the ONLY basic principles that can give rise to thinking intelligence, so that wherever we find civilization we will find creatures that think the same as we do, and have seen the same pattern in nature that we have.

There is another possibility besides the encountering of incomprehensible minds. That is the possibility of encountering incomprehensible "islands" of reality.

One thing we have discovered about nature that makes such "islands" possible—or that makes it possible WE are living in such an "island"—is that matter has a habit of "reacting" to some types of energy patterns, and "totally ignoring" others.

Perhaps you can better understand what I mean by the following analogous position: Kah is an intelligent entity fixed at a certain point. He can only derive a picture of reality from what he sees. He can only see a foot in front of him. In all his existence he has seen only one type of thing—rocks about an inch in diameter. He therefore concludes that all reality is rocks an inch in diameter.

He is unable ever to learn that he is situated at a place where the one-inch rocks leave a screen with seven-eighths-inch holes that let every smaller pebble and all the sand through, and that seven-eighths-inch screen is the catch-all for a higher screen with one-inch holes that kept everything larger from coming through.

His Universe is brought to him by selective screening. He rationalizes what his Universe presents him, and postulates that ALL reality is identical to what he can experience. He can NOT conceive of

what is utterly beyond his range of experience and imagination—which is merely the re-arrangement of reality or of thoughts derived from reality.

We are perhaps in much that same position. To be sure, our telescopes bring us data from stars that are so far away the human race will never reach them—but is not our telescope a "screen" that brings us only the one-inch rocks?

There may be and probably is a vast realm of reality co-existent with the reality we know, right around us; but it is "screened" from us. It may be possible that we know less than ten percent of actual reality around us due to the screening of our senses and our instruments that blocks completely, or permits to pass completely, every energy pattern that can't pass through the "holes" of our "screen."

Going back to Kah, the one-inch-rock-universe observer, suppose that in one batch of dirt dumped at the head of the screening system there happened to be no one-inch rocks at all? Or, more closely to the story you are about to read, suppose, with his mind deeply grooved with the tracks of the one-inch rocks, he were to move to a vantage point where there were no one-inch rocks, but larger or smaller ones?

He would immediately find nature behaving according to an utterly strange pattern, BUT he could only sort the incoming sensations according to the neural grooves already built up in his mind! In his mind he could only see one-inch rocks or nothing, and since what he would see would obviously be something, it would either seem nothing to him, or one-inch rocks behaving strangely.

His instruments and his mind would interpret by the old gradations and scales and concepts. His Universe would still be made of nothing but one-inch rocks, to him, but its behavior would be strange.

Perhaps slowly, like a newborn child making sense out of its surroundings, or a foreigner slowly making sense out of our language, he would penetrate to the new reality with his mind. Perhaps in the very process his being would change its structure.

In the end he would be in a unique position. He would have the memories of one Reality, and the experiences of a new one. He would have the language of the old with which to describe the new to his old companions. Could he do it so they would comprehend it?

It would do him no good simply to invent new words to describe something beyond the experience of his old companions. He would have to describe something beyond their experience with words and sentences they had created to describe only what they had gained from their own experience! How could he hope to make them gain a true understanding of it?

He might tell them simply and truthfully everything he experienced—and it might come out utter nonsense! It probably would. Unless he could bring back some of the evidence, either intentionally or unwittingly.

At first that evidence might present a pattern of utter nonsense and contradiction with known thought patterns and concepts. It might present seemingly normal events in nonsense sequences. It might present impossible events in seemingly normal sequences. It might even present disjointed events in sequence.

What it would present would be only what the screen of the senses and the screen of the mind could accept. Underneath would be a perfectly orderly pattern of events of some sort, behaving according to different natural laws in conflict with those we have existed under. Slowly we might penetrate to an understanding of them, but not at first, because at first they would be completely UNTHINKABLE.

In this story, UNTHINKABLE, an attempt has been made to depict such a conflict of nature and human mentality. It is not the ordinary science fiction attempt. It is not new laws working in harmony with old, or new discoveries that fit into the old pattern. It is, if you please, an utterly alien bit of reality in conflict with the old.

The story cannot but be inadequate. It is the froth and foam of the struggle. It is the parts that fit into the words and phrases and sentences. You won't like it at all—unless you have the type of mind that can reach a little way beyond experience. And though what you may "see" may have no counterpart in all reality, if this story serves to expand your mental horizons, it has at least found an excuse for being written.

—ROG PHILLIPS

DR. NALE HARGRAVE tossed his spotless grey hat expertly across the six feet of space between him and the coat tree, humming the while a currently popular tune whose only words he could remember were "Feemo fimo fujo, the flumy fwam to fwojo."

His eyes rested self-congratulatingly on the hat after it came to a safe stop, then turned to beam an instant at his receptionist before he continued on to his office.

She smiled after him with an affectionate, indulgent look, gave him as long as it took her to powder her nose and tuck a few stray hairs into place, then pressed the buzzer that signaled to quarantine that the doctor was ready to screen the crew of the *U triple S Endore*.

The *Endore* had arrived during the night. Usually crews that had to wait hours before passing through psych raised a big fuss. Quarantine wasn't exactly designed for comfort. A man couldn't be expected to enjoy sitting on a bench and reading a worn-out magazine after looking forward to visiting his old haunts on Earth after months or years in space. His only thought was to get through the red tape and step through the door on the other side of which lay freedom of expression and freedom from space discipline—and girls.

That was the usual result of forced delay in quarantine. The crew of the *Endore* hadn't let a peep out of them.

Martha Ryan, the receptionist, glanced knowingly at the closed door. She knew that Nale was sitting at his desk, his legs crossed carelessly, his long fingers holding the report on the *Endore* and the report of the psych observer. He was probably frowning slightly over the unusual behavior of the crew.

She had her own list of names of the crew on the desk before her. Heading the list was the name, Comdr. Hugh Dunnam. Dr. Nale would ordinarily call him first. Next would come any of the crew that the commander reported unbalanced, followed by the rest of the crew.

Sometimes when the psych observer's report was unfavorable to the whole crew he called some crew member at random before calling the top name.

It didn't surprise her, therefore, when the intercom came to life and Dr. Nale's voice pleasantly asked for a name two-thirds of the way down on the list of forty names—Ren Gravenard, spaceman/2d cls.

Martha's pencil followed the list down, making a light check after the name while she dialed quarantine to send in the man.

In her mind's eye she could visualize the lifted eyebrows of the day shift guards as they glanced over the huddled crew. She could see their suddenly changed attitude toward the crew, their new caution as they opened the heavy wire door and led the man out. She could see, too, the worried frown of Comdr. Dunnam, whoever he was, as he realized what that meant—to have a crew member precede him.

She could see, too, Dunnam's probable warning look to spaceman Gravenard to keep mum and play his cards close.

That was the trouble with crews of ships when they thought they might be held up by psych over something. They invariably overplayed their innocence right from the start.

The side door from quarantine opened. Two guards entered, preceding and following the first victim warily. Martha sized Ren Gravenard up closely while her face assumed the careful, welcoming smile that often brought attempts at dating.

Ren Gravenard was no different in appearance than a million like him. He was average in everything including his type of character.

"You are Ren Gravenard?" she asked.

He nodded without speaking.

Martha pressed the button that told Doctor Nale the first one had arrived, got his O.K. signal, and motioned Gravenard and the guards toward the inner door with a sweep of long yellow pencil in perfectly manicured fingers.

As the three passed into the private office she made a slow dash after the spaceman's name preparatory to writing his destination when he came out. It would be "obs" or "O.K."

Then she glanced at her wrist watch. Its hands pointed to six after nine. Two hours and fifty-four

minutes later Ren Gravenard had still not come out. And in her two years as receptionist for Dr. Nale Hargrave, Martha Ryan had never known him to spend more than twenty minutes with any subject....

Her manicured nail pressed the buzzer three times to signal she was going to lunch. Giving Dr. Nale a full minute to make any request, without receiving any, she opened the door to the corridor and left.

WHEN she returned an hour later she was surprised to see the door to Dr. Hargrave's inner office open and Dr. John Bemis, the chief of the psych staff, at the desk.

"Come in, Miss Ryan," Dr. Bemis said, accenting his invitation with a wave of his hand.

He waited until she had come in and closed the door behind her before continuing.

"There's something's happened," he said gravely. "I don't know just what, and maybe I don't exactly WANT to know."

Dr. Bemis spread his hands in an all inclusive gesture.

"The universe is a big place," he said. "I suppose we should have expected that sooner or later we'd run into something a little outside normal experience."

He shook his head slowly, looking up at the ceiling as though trying to pierce it and see beyond. When he continued, his voice was sharp and businesslike.

"Tell me exactly what you saw, thought, and felt this morning. Every detail, however unimportant you might think it."

"There's really very little to tell," Martha said, surprised and alarmed. "There was this crew of the *Endore* in quarantine when I came to work this morning. They were unusual in that they didn't complain about having to wait, indicating a guilt feeling in the crew. Dr. Hargrave asked to see a common spaceman first. That proved he recognized this. The name of the spaceman he saw is Ren Gravenard, who was brought in at a little after nine and was still in there when I left at twelve."

She looked keenly at Dr. Bemis. Something was so radically wrong somewhere that she didn't have the courage to even ask him. She just waited.

"Dr. Hargrave has been taken to observation," he said without warning. "So has the crew of the *Endore*. I—ah—believe you may take an indefinite leave from the office until further notice. With full pay, of course."

"Dr. Hargrave?" Martha asked, not hearing the last.

"Yes!" Dr. Bemis's voice changed from harsh tenseness to contriteness. "I'm sorry, Miss Ryan, but I feel it inadvisable to discuss it just now. All I can say is that full quarantine measures are now in force as of fifteen minutes ago. There will be no landing or taking off from Earth until it is lifted; and within this area the same quarantine applies."^[1]

Martha Ryan hesitated, then turned and left. Dr. Bemis watched her go. After the door closed behind her he did a very peculiar thing. He took a gun out of his coat pocket and shot himself through the head. After that he went to a mirror on the wall, dressed the wounds carefully, wincing at the bite of the alcohol in the raw flesh, and, after drinking several glasses of water, returned to Dr. Hargrave's desk.

HE sat there, drumming his fingers on the walnut surface, his eyes closed as if he were listening to something very far away. A buzzer under his desk gave three short buzzes. He reached over and deflected the toggle on the intercom.

"Back already, Martha?" he said cheerily. "Any more left on your list for the *Endore*?"

Martha checked her list. There had been two left when she went to lunch. They had been checked off, too, while she was gone.

"That's all, Dr. Nale," she said.

"Good," came his voice through the intercom. "Think I'll go out and have something to eat myself."

The click of the intercom was followed at once by the opening of the inner office door. Martha's eyes

watched Dr. Nale Hargrave as he walked through the office and out into the corridor.

Her eyes remained on the exit after he had gone, a faint frown creasing the smooth skin above her eyes. She had an IRRATIONAL impression that she had seen Dr. Bemis, the super, instead of Dr. Nale, and with his head bandaged clumsily.

She dismissed this with a pout and took a book out of a drawer to do her afternoon reading.

The buzzer on her desk buzzed a warning. She laid the book flat as the inner office door opened and Dr. Nale escorted Ren Gravenard out into the waiting room.

Martha glanced at her watch. It was ten after nine. Four minutes! She expected the nod from Dr. Nale. Her pencil wrote an O.K. after the dash she had drawn four minutes ago.

"Thank you doctor," Ren Gravenard was saying heartily. The two guards left by the side door back to quarantine.

Dr. Nale went over and bent close to Martha's ear.

"As your psychiatrist," he said pseudo-seriously, "I can advise you that unless you kiss me I am going to feel quite frustrated."

"Oh, that would never do!" Martha laughed, and kissed him.

She jerked back, startled. There was the sound of a shot from the inner office. The door was still open. Martha and Dr. Nale looked through the door, horrified.

Ren Gravenard was standing in the middle of the inner office dropping a flat automatic into his side pocket. There was an ugly wound on either side of his head from a bullet that had passed directly through his brain.

He smiled at them disarmingly, "It's quite all right. You see, it couldn't possibly do me any harm because I'm waiting for the elevator."

"Oh," they said, relieved. They bent and kissed each other again while Ren Gravenard went over to the mirror on the wall and dressed the wounds, wincing from the raw touch of the alcohol on wounded bone and flesh.

The outer door opened and two men came in with a wicker basket.

Dr. Nale pointed over in the corner where one of the guards lay dead.

"What happened to him, Doc?" one of the men asked.

"He got shot through the head," Dr. Hargrave explained. "One of the men off the *Endore* did it. They're all being taken over to observation. I think I'll have to go over with them. I'm beginning to get an inkling of what's going on, and I'm very much afraid of what I think it is."

The two men set the basket down and lifted the wicker lid. Dr. Bemis came out of the inner office and laid down in the corner. The two men waited until he had settled himself, then lifted him into the basket.

Dr. Hargrave held open the outer door for them. He returned to the desk beside Martha and took a gun out of his coat pocket. He pointed it at her, frowned in indecision, then slowly, with perspiration standing out on his forehead, pulled out the clip and emptied the barrel of the gun.

"Good for you," Martha said. She picked up her book and started reading. Dr. Hargrave put the gun back in his pocket and went to the door.

"Take a few days off starting tomorrow," he said before going out. "I'm going to be slowly going crazy trying to figure this mess out. That's why I insisted to Dr. Bemis that I be confined *with* the crew of the *Endore*—just in case."

His heels made loud noises on the marble floor of the corridor. He pushed through the revolving doors to the sidewalk.

There was an argument going on between a small newsboy and an elderly gentlemen type of man.

"I tell you there's only two pennies," the boy insisted.

"There's four," the man insisted just as strongly. "See?"

He pried open the boy's fingers and looked.

"Sorry," he said. "You're right." His hand went into his pocket to make up the deficit.

"Hey! Wait a minute," the boy said. "I was wrong. You gave me two pennies too much."

A small pudgy finger took two of the pennies. The boy glanced at the others to make sure the right number were left.

Nale was close enough to see what happened. He saw the pennies taken from what seemed to be seven or eight in the boy's palm. When the two were taken away there seemed to be a slight blur—and there was only a solitary penny left.

He didn't wait. The paper boy and the customer were still patiently arguing as he climbed into his car and drove away. He drove slowly with his foot close to the brakes.

Although his eyes were warily watching each car on the street, his mind was busy. *He was trying to figure out who had been shot.*

"It might even have been me!" he thought. And there was no way of knowing.

He drove the car another block. There was doubt growing in his mind. On a sudden impulse he pulled the car over to the curb and stopped the motor. Getting out, he started walking rapidly. There would be three miles of walking before he reached observation, but it would be safer to walk.

A block further he stopped abruptly in surprise. The spaceport observation hospital was just in front of him.

"I should have guessed," he muttered as he pushed through the heavy doors. "The speedometer, of course. Naturally it would go first."

MARTHA RYAN saw the door close on Dr. Hargrave, then started reading again. She finished the page and turned it over. The first few words of the opposite side of the sheet showed the continuity to be difficult.

Thinking she might have turned two sheets by mistake, she turned back one. It was still wrong. She sighed exasperatedly. She distinctly remembered that she had been on page twenty-five, so the next page should be twenty-six. Since it hadn't been, she would have to look for twenty-six.

She looked through the book, page by page, and it wasn't there. Getting over her exasperation she made a game of it. Finally she developed to the stage where she would open the book at random, note the number of the page, close the book, and then try to find that page she had just seen.

It was a very peculiar book. She found that, (a) she could find any page number she wasn't looking for, and (b) any page number she looked for was not in the book, even though it had been a moment before.

Resting thoughtfully for several minutes on this achievement of deduction she decided to try another experiment. She counted the number of sheets of paper in the book and wrote the number down. It was one hundred twenty-four.

Then she counted them again. There were one hundred eighty-six. She counted them five more times, making seven times she had counted them. She got nine different numbers of sheets in the book. She decided she couldn't get nine different numbers after counting only seven times, and counted the numbers. There were five. She closed her eyes and counted to ten rapidly, then counted them again. There were fourteen.

She held out her hands. She had seven fingers on her right hand and three on her left. She chuckled dryly and thought, "Well, anyway there are ten altogether." She counted them to be sure, and there were thirteen.

Pursing her lips stubbornly she held up two fingers and counted them. There were two. She held them rigid and closed her eyes, counting rapidly to ten. Opening her eyes she looked cautiously at the upraised fingers. There were two.

She raised a third finger to join the other two, and there were five upraised fingers. Not only that, there were seven of them clenched. She closed her eyes and counted to ten quickly, then opened them. There were three upraised fingers. She counted the clenched ones and there were two. Relieved, she checked on the upraised fingers again—and there were seven.

She gave up in disgust. Deciding she ought to go home she stood up and started to cross to the coat tree.

The door to the corridor opened and Ren Gravenard stepped in.

"Hello!" Martha said in surprise. "I thought you were sent to observation."

"I was," Ren said. "That's where I am now, but when there are forty of you, you can sort of get lost in the group and wind up anywhere you want to."

"Well, I'm glad you're here," Martha said dryly. "Maybe you can explain a few things."

Ren grinned crookedly.

"Suppose I do the explaining over something to eat," he said. "I almost stopped and had something on the way over here, but I wanted to wait and eat with you. Do you mind?"

"Of course not," Martha frowned. She was taking a closer look at this spaceman second class. He had a nice way of smiling at her. His eyes had depths she hadn't noticed before.

THE illogical thought came to her that maybe now that things didn't behave the way they should, maybe he and his fellow spacemen were the only ones that knew what it was all about.

"All this," Martha waved her hand vaguely. "It must have been caused by something about the *Endore*, mustn't it?"

Ren nodded, holding the door open for her. They walked along the corridor to the revolving doors, his hand tucked protectively under her arm.

"Is it mental?" Martha asked when they were on the sidewalk.

"No," Ren answered. "But let's wait until we eat. I'm starved to death. If you run into any trouble I'll help you out. You see, I know how to work things."

"Like finding page twenty-six in the book I'm reading?" Martha asked.

"That's simple," Ren said. "All you have to do is look for page twenty-nine and you'll run across page twenty-six right away. Things like that are mental, partly. I mean, you have to have the right attitude to get results you want."

"I don't understand," Martha said.

"Well, it's like this," Ren explained. "If you're looking for page twenty-six it won't be one of the first two pages you look at, regardless of where you open the book. But after you've looked at three of them you've passed the page you want unless you're not looking for it. If you're not looking for it you REACH the right page."

"But why page twenty-nine to find twenty-six?" Martha persisted.

"It has to do with the new arithmetic," Ren said.

"Oh," Martha said dully. "So that's the whole trouble with everything."

"No, that's only part of it," Ren said. "But here's a good place to eat." He guided her through the door.

An hour later Ren lit a cigarette and took a long drag on it, his eyes looking longingly into Martha's. He exhaled the smoke in a long white plume. Then he began talking.

"I don't know whether you read it on the report sheet or not, but the trip of the *Endore* began from this same spaceport two years ago. The observatory on Pluto had reported a free planet passing within two hundred quadrillion miles of the solar system. The *Endore* was assigned the task of landing on it, if feasible.

"I had been a member of the crew for only four months when the *Endore* turned outward from its position just the other side of Mars' orbit."

Ren smiled apologetically.

"I hadn't exactly planned on being a spaceman, second class. I don't know whether you know the system, but whether you do or not, it should suffice to say that I had studied for five years to become a research scientist, and failed. I decided to take out my disappointment by joining up for two years. I planned on making another try at research when I got out.

"Everything went along fine on the trip out. We were a very congenial crew with a fine, human commander. He made it a point to get personally acquainted with every member of the crew eventually. He seemed to take a particular liking to me for some reason. By the time we were half-way out to Metapor, as we found out it was called later, I was an unofficial first mate or something

with free run of the pilot room and the instruments.

"I had guessed by now that when I enlisted they looked up my record and passed the word along to Commander Dunnam to sell me on the idea of a career as a spaceman.

"At any rate, I was in an ideal position to see all that went on first hand. We were within three hundred thousand miles of Metapor when we got the first indication of the change in metaphysics. I discovered it myself. I was helping the astrogator get the constants for the planet ..."

"TAKE a look at the gravity board, Ren," Ford Gratruck, the astrogator said. "What's she say?"

Ren looked at the fine black pointer on the gravity potentiometer. It pointed to a spot just two marks above the number ten on the dial.

"Ten and two tenths," Ren read.

"That can't be right," Ford frowned. "At this distance that would make this baby a super."

He came over and looked himself. While he was looking the pointer moved up to twenty and then down to six tenths.

"Must be out of order," Ford muttered. "Well, this'll give you experience with emergency equipment. Break out the manual gravity dish, Ren."

It was a fine coil spring in a glass tube. Other glass tubes fastened on, to make the length almost ten feet. At one g the spring with its weight would stretch out to the bottom. From there to a ten thousandth of a g the spring rose up to a point half-way.

Ren put it together speedily, placing it in the wall clamps designed to hold it. The glass itself was graduated with the scale of gravity strength. The cylindrical weight at the free end of the spring had a line on it that would coincide with the proper reading.

In practice it vibrated up and down so that it had to be read by estimation of the half-way point of the up and down motion.

Ren and Ford watched the red weight with its black line. It moved slowly and uniformly from the bottom to the top of the scale, from a full g to ten thousandth of a g, and back down again.

Meanwhile the gravity potentiometer (gravity board) was changing its reading constantly and erratically.

Ford licked his lips nervously and said, "Don't know what the old man'll say about this, but it looks like all we can say is that the thing *has* gravity."

"Why not call him and let him see for himself?" Ren asked.

Ford looked out the viewport at the round object in the distance and shook his head.

"I've got a hunch he knows it already," he said slowly. "The ship is probably on a nonsense track and the automatic tracker is either trying to find out what the law of gravity is, or is exploring for clues to light aberration. One gets you ten he'll give me a buzz in another minute."

He was right. The phone rang almost at once. It was Hugh Dunnam himself, asking for the gravity reading.

"You'll have to see it to believe it," Ford Gratruck said over the phone. "The manual swing is uniform over the whole range. The gravity board can't make up its mind where to settle at. It tries this and that reading."

He listened briefly. "Yes, sir," he said, and hung up. "He wants you in the pilot room, Ren," he added.

Ren started out of the central instrument room through the axis tube.

"Better be careful," Ford shouted after him. "No telling how this gravitation will behave. Don't let it slam you against anything."

Ren heard his words. He had a sudden, crazy thought that it was his own voice, and that he, as he sped along through the ship, was in reality Ford Gratruck. The thought startled him. He promptly forgot it.

There was a frown of concentration on his face. He was trying to visualize a gravity pull whose intensity was not a single-valued pressure but a uniform continuum of pressure values from a minimum to a maximum.

It was like—well, like having an air pressure in a car tire that wasn't thirty pounds or thirty-two pounds, but every value from zero to thirty-five pounds.

It was like transforming the points and intervals on a line to a domain where there had previously been only points!

HUGH DUNNAM was waiting for him when he arrived in the pilot room. His iron grey hair was mussed from exasperated hair-pulling. He jabbed a finger in the direction of the automatic pilot without speaking.

Ren saw that it had been cut out. The first mate was controlling the ship manually. The robot mechanism was still turning out its data sheets, however. In five minutes Ren saw that the only consistent detail was the distance of the ship from the planet.

Commander Dunnam watched him silently for several minutes. Finally Ren laid down the data sheets and looked at him with a slow smile.

"Well?" Dunnam asked.

"It reminds me of a kid I knew quite well when I was in grade school," Ren said. "He was an incurable liar, so you could never take anything he said, but always had to figure out the truth yourself and act on it regardless of what he might claim to be the truth."

"You mean the instruments have all become liars?" Hugh Dunnam asked, amazed at the idea.

"No," Ren replied. "I don't think that. I think nature is the liar, in a way. I mean she is according to our standards. We'll have to outguess her, that's all."

"Now you're cooking," Hugh exclaimed. "What would you suggest?"

"We know this planet has gravity," Ren replied. "There's no way of knowing how much or how little. Suppose we kill our tangential speed and just fall in? The gravity will take care of that, regardless of its value or set of values."

"But we'll crash!" Hugh objected.

Ren took one of the report sheets and figured rapidly on its back.

"Unless I'm radically wrong," he said, "our speed of impact will be every speed from zero to a thousand miles a minute. Not only that, no matter how we try to land that will be the set of values for our speed. Naturally the thousand miles a minute will smash us flat, but the zero speed will let us down easy."

"And so?" Hugh asked suspiciously.

"No matter how we go in," Ren smiled, "we'll smash the ship and kill everybody—and we'll land safely."

"Are you crazy?" Hugh snorted.

"I—I'm not quite sure," Ren said seriously. "I think that we've run across a bit of matter that works from different basics than what we are used to. You might call it a different metaphysics. That's what it really amounts to."

A pain of remembrance appeared on his face.

"That's why I didn't get my degree," he said softly. "I insisted that it might be possible there were no absolute rules underlying all reality, but only relative rules that might be changeable. In other words, I questioned the validity of asserting that natural law was universal. They flunked me in stability."

"Yes, I know," Commander Dunnam said sympathetically. "One of the most unjust rules of modern education in the opinion of many, but no way of changing it unless the educators themselves did it. Since they all passed O.K. in stability, they think everyone else should. Maybe they're afraid they would be considered unstable if they wanted to make such a major change."

REN glanced toward the screen that showed the magnified image of the interstellar wanderer, and back again to the commander.

"Of course," he said, "I'm trying to use ordinary basics transposed onto the basics of this system,

which is wrong. Or it may be right. It might be better if we just turned around and went back. There's no way of knowing ahead of time whether we'd be killed on landing or not."

"Look, Ren," the commander said seriously. "I like you. You—you're just about like my son would have been today if he had lived. I'm just a spaceman. I depend on instruments. They don't work here. All of us are just as helpless as if we didn't know the first thing about our trade. We can't go back without landing on this stray planet. If we tried to tell them the reasons, I'd be retired and the whole crew would be stuck on various routine tub runs. Suppose you unofficially take charge. If we get killed—we all expect to end that way in our trade. If we don't, we'll be able to take back something with us to prove what we've run into. Maybe it will vindicate you and make you a reputation. You'll get all the credit I can turn your way."

"Thank you, sir," Ren said, his voice choked with gratitude. In his heart he knew that he would have sold his soul to the devil for this coming experience that had been given him without his asking.

He had spent years preparing for this—years that his teachers had felt were wasted. He had explored all the crazy systems of logic abandoned in the march of progress. He had even devised systems of his own, synthesized from undefined symbols according to strange patterns outside the field of logic.

Yes. He felt that even if the basics of natural law in operation here were purely nonsense laws, he would be able to penetrate to a rational manipulation and control of things. Perhaps he might even set up the pattern operating, and join it in some way with so-called normal science.

Commander Dunnam came to attention, a twinkle in his eyes.

"At your command, sir," he said, saluting.

"Not that," Ren objected. "Let me just play the part of a scientist under your command, whose part it is to advise only."

"No," Hugh Dunnam said. "Until we leave this part of space you're in sole command. Call it what you want—a hunch maybe; but I feel that there is a purpose in things, and it wasn't chance that gave you the type of mind you have and threw you under my command on this trip."

"Very well, sir," Ren said, returning the salute. He smiled. Behind his smile his analytical mind was working rapidly.

"The commander's reactions are not normal," his thoughts said. "They could not be dictated by anything in his past. Therefore they are dictated by something outside him—something on that planet below!"

It was a wild conjecture. The more he thought of it the more certain Ren became that there was some *intelligence* down there that had already made contact with the minds in the ship.

Strangely, this didn't alarm him. He felt that "it" was friendly. He felt that "it" had plumbed the minds of all on board and chosen him to take over and lead the others.

Eagerly he "listened," but no faintest whisper or flavor of thought came to support his feeling of an alien contact. In spite of this he went ahead with his study of things with a confidence that "something" was watching and would see them through all right.

HIS eyes turned again to the image of the cold planet below. That image returned his stare blankly, its inscrutable surface devoid of any hint of mystery.

"I'd suggest we keep circling the planet until I have a chance to form a few definite conclusions," Ren said. "If that can't be done I'd suggest we retreat far enough so we can."

"Yes sir," Commander Dunnam said quietly. He repeated the suggestion in the form of an order to the first mate.

Ren studied the image of the planet. He left the pilot room and wandered over the ship aimlessly. He talked to the members of the crew he ran into.

He slept at his usual time. He ate his meals as usual. He stopped talking to the crew and just wandered about, occasionally going to the pilot room and studying the strange sphere of matter.

After three days he ordered the ship dropped to an orbit about five thousand miles from the surface. Almost as soon as the ship reached its new orbit changes began to be noticed.

Ren had the commander issue an order that every crew member was to report all unusual

happenings within the ship. Twenty-four hours later he issued an order that each crew member was to write out a brief report of his movements during the past twenty-four hours as he remembered them.

Ren studied these reports. And gradually he was building up a picture that was wilder than the wildest of fantastic imaginative creation.

He and Commander Dunnam had grown very close to each other. Finally Ren broke his long silence and talked to him about what he was discovering. They were in the dining room. Crew members were eating their "evening" meal. They listened as Ren tried to explain.

"I think I've formed a few permanent conclusions about things here," Ren began. "They aren't an EXPLANATION of things, but just a description of the way things are behaving. I'll try to make it clear as I go along."

He chewed his food slowly while trying to think of a good way to begin.

"Take any number, for example," he said. "Take the number five. Back on Earth you can count five apples and say there are five apples. You can count out five eggs and place them in a box, and say there are the same number of eggs as there are apples. There are five of each. Actually that isn't true. There aren't five of either. There is no such thing as the number five. The number is a mental thing, a concept. The apples have a basic property which would more accurately be called a 'fiveness'. The eggs also have a basic property called a 'fiveness', and the fiveness of the eggs and the fiveness of the apples are NOT the same. They are peculiar to each group. The human race invented a concept called the number five, and formulated a theory that all fivenesses belong to a class, called the number five. In nature this theory acted as though it were true. If you have five apples and five eggs you have ten objects. A fiveness placed with another fiveness makes a tennesness. So arithmetic merely describes the behavior of a basic property of reality in a consistent manner. Arithmetic is NOT a basic law. It's merely a DESCRIPTION of a basic law.

"That basic doesn't seem to hold where we are now. But there are other basic things that seem to be violated here, too, and will probably be violated even more when and if we land on this planet.

"I've pretty well concluded that number doesn't exist here in the same way it does ordinarily. Take the strength of gravity, for example. Instead of being a single value it is equally a broad range of values, and is all of them at the same time. How that can be I don't know.

"I T'S the same way with the number of objects. Instead of having five fingers I have three, four, five, six and so on, fingers all at the same time. But my mind can't see that. It can only grasp a single number. My eyes look at my fingers and see the many simultaneous numbers of fingers, but my mind can't grasp that, so *it conjures up a single number at random*. It RATIONALIZES what it gets, and so we have a real problem—the devising of some method of helping the mind deal with what it can't grasp because it hasn't the equipment to grasp it as it really is.

"There are sixty of us on board—or rather, there WERE sixty. Now there are three, four, and so on, to some number above sixty. The last report handed in by the crew shows eighty-three men on board! I can't prove it, because if I handed you the report sheets you would count more or less than that number.

"So what we must realize is that now there isn't any NUMBER of crew members, but a 'something else' that is different than a number, corresponding to an INTERVAL of numbers. It is real. It's a metaphysical basic for this part of space around this planet.

"It's subtle, too. For example, right now there may be more than one me on this ship, depending on whether there are more than sixty people on board or not. I don't quite understand about that yet. There are a lot of things I don't understand about it. If there is more than one of any person on board, is it a reality, or is it a trick of rationalization of the mind to fit something utterly incomprehensible into at least a semblance of something comprehensible? If it is the latter, then why do the two who are supposedly the same person hand in DIFFERENT reports on what the supposedly one person did, and why do the reports check with other reports?

"I have a theory which might account for part of all this. Our ship and all in it belongs to the universe of the metaphysics we know of and use as the thought process. It is hovering on the borders of a region containing this planet we are to land on—a region operating on other basics. In some way both sets of basics operate in either conflict or compromise. Besides mental confusion there is actual physical confusion.

"But maybe it's better that way. If we make the transition in steps the actual noumenal confusion may guide our minds correctly into a correct understanding of the new basics of this system by the

time we land."

Ford Gratruck had come into the dining room unnoticed at the beginning of this. He spoke now.

"Then you claim that the laws of nature are different here than we are accustomed to, and that our minds are not equipped to deal with them?" he asked.

Ren frowned. Not at the words but at something he had not mentioned, about people and identities.

"They are different, yes," Ren returned. "But as to our minds dealing with them—human minds have dealt with things without truly comprehending them since the dawn of time."

"Things that were sane," Ford said.

"These are sane, too," Ren said, studying Ford keenly from hidden eyes. "They're just sane in a different way."

"So is a crazy man," Ford almost sneered openly. "I think we've seen enough to make it obvious we should get away from here while we can."

There was a murmur among the men at the tables that agreed with what Ford had said.

"We may do that," Ren said, ignoring the signs of almost open defiance patent in Ford's tone and manner, and in the men's muttered approval of what he had said. "But we won't until we're sure it's suicide to go down there and land. Don't you realize that we have something here which may be unique in the universe? This space wanderer won't be close enough to the solar system for exploration more than two or three years. Then it will be gone. There may never be another opportunity to study something like it."

"Which is a good thing," Ford snorted. "If you decide to drop the ship any closer to this mad planet you're going to have trouble with the men."

"Meaning you've been talking to them?" Commander Hugh Dunnam asked softly.

"Talking WITH them," Ford Gratruck said, matching Hugh's softness. "Don't try to put me in the position of being a leader of any rebellion that might develop. I'll confess quite frankly, though, that I want no part of landing on this God-forsaken hunk of matter, and a good many of the crew agree on that. It's suicidal. Frankly, sir, I think you must be under some kind of spell to turn your command over to a spaceman second class as you did."

REN'S scalp crawled. This had been exactly what he himself had felt! So others besides him had "felt" that alien contact from below! On impulse he made up his mind.

"Before anyone says something they might regret later," he cut in, "let me say that I've made up my mind that it's too dangerous to land. The effects we experience up here would probably be increased beyond conception down there. Our thought processes are being affected in ways we can't understand. It's possible that if we landed the ship would behave so differently that it would be impossible to get away. So, give me another two days of study in this orbit and then we'll go back to the solar system."

While Ren was talking he had a curious feeling, far back in the depths of his mind. It was as though a section of the bank of a stream had broken off and dropped into the stream.

Irrational. There had been so many such feelings that crept to the borders of consciousness and faded away without meaning anything.

Time! Ren felt that time was all he needed to get to the bottom of it. He compared himself to a newborn babe coming into the world. For the first few months things come and go in meaningless fashion. Slowly the mind makes order out of them. The oft-repeated patterns become clear first, then more obscure ones. Finally the baby is able to understand the apparently senseless sequence of events.

Ren felt that the results would be the same here if he were given half a chance ... but Ford Gratruck was right, too. It concerned more than the mind. It struck at the roots of reality that had been used in the principle of the ship's operation—and there was no way of knowing the ship would operate once it landed.

REN GRAVENARD flicked the ashes from the end of his cigarette off the edge of the table onto

the floor. Martha's eyes took this in and slowly lost their faraway look.

"I'm trying to make clear, Martha," Ren said gravely, "the emergence into consciousness of the things going on around us. There was no way yet for us to suspect their full activity—their inroads. Things were going on that we simply could not see or sense in any way because we didn't yet have the faculty of grasping them. They made their impression and were lost in a hodge-podge of neural channels already deeply grooved in the normal way, so that when they got close enough to the conscious mind to be sensed, they were distorted beyond any semblance of the true reality."

"I can see that," Martha said, her eyes brooding. "But DID you find a living, intelligent creature or race on Metapor?"

Ren nodded. "I'm coming to that later," he said. "Be patient and let me take things in order. That's the only way you can understand when I tell you about—her."

His eyes studied the glowing coal at the end of the cigarette. He lifted the white cylinder to his lips and sucked in. Dropping the cigarette on the floor and stepping on it, he let the grey smoke seep from his mouth and nostrils.

Traffic sounds came through the window. A murmur of voices drifted over the two as they sat there, quietly.

"I've tried to bring you up to the point where I began to suspect," Ren continued. "I described the feeling I had that was something like watching a large chunk of the bank of a stream break away, starting first as a jagged crack in the turf, with it widening slowly at first, then faster, until the broken chunk becomes a separate THING, dissociated from the bank. It breaks away, drops into the stream—and vanishes; while the bank itself remains, enclosing and containing the rushing stream.

"I didn't realize then what that feeling meant. I had felt it in varied shades before. It rose almost into consciousness, then, like the broken section of the bank itself, it would drop away and dissolve in the swirling stream of mind.

"Sitting there at the table in the ship's dining room, suddenly I suspected what that feeling really sprung from. I got my first inkling of what intervalness instead of numberness really meant.

"For an insane period I was two people, both the same person and yet not a person—and even not two, or even one, but a 'something' that *contained* in the logical sense all of those, as a class contains the members of the class.

"Remember that I said I was making a little speech, sitting there, that assured Ford Gratrack and the members of the crew present in the room that we weren't going to risk landing, but get away in a couple of days.

"At the same time, while I was talking, I was experiencing this strange feeling. It was quite clear, for a few seconds. I was two Ren Gravenards, saying two different things. The two of me were very close. But while I talked they separated distinctly as the bank of the stream and the chunk are suddenly not one, but two.

"It was not me alone. Every man in that room was doing the same. The ship itself was doing it—and suddenly ..."

"**B**EFORE anyone says something they might regret," Hugh Dunnam, the commander, said in a quiet warning voice, "get this straight, all of you. This is a government ship. I'm an officer of the Earth Space Fleet and my command is law. I have a right temporarily to promote any member of my crew to complete command of the ship with power equal to mine or even greater than mine. If Ren Gravenard says we go down, we go down even if it seems certain we'll all be killed. You have a choice of certain but honorable death, and equally certain but dishonorable death. Or you have a choice between an uncertain but honorable death if death it is, and certain but dishonorable death as a coward and a traitor. Let's not have any more thoughts of insubordination. You, Ford Gratrack, under a stricter commander, would already be on the way to the brig."

Ford looked at Hugh Dunnam through slitted eyes, his face expressionless. Suddenly he smiled.

"You forget, sir," he said smoothly. "Under a less human commander I would have kept my thoughts to myself."

"**I** WAS sitting there, Martha," Ren said. "Trying to grab hold of the strange 'split' in things. It's

even more mixed up than I pictured it. I had a feeling of BEING both Hugh Dunnam and myself, and also of being myself on a 'something' drifting apart from all I could see. At the same time there was a feeling of two separate things now existing on the ship. Those two things might be called a composite of each of the two forces that began their existence at that moment—the forces obedient to the commander, and me; and the forces that were to side in with Ford Gratricks."

"In a way numberness in any group depends on the independent unity of each member of the group. Put a thousand drops of water in a glass and you don't have a thousand drops of water but a teaspoon or so of water. It would be impossible to take a drop of water out and definitely say that it was one of the drops you had put in. And if you changed all the water back into drops you might have more or less than the thousand you put in.

"But water is a fluid. A human being is not. In some inexplicable way, however, I was becoming more and more like the drop of water after it is dropped into a large volume of water. I was 'spreading', while all the time seeming to be just my normal self.

"I think I was beginning dimly to see the new metaphysical basics that were to make the whole thing sensible and manipulable. At least, I had already realized that it was different than would be, for example, the difference in operational principle of a gas engine and an electric transformer.

"If you've ever studied any abstract mathematical system you'll be able to understand how the changing of one basic axiom can alter the whole structure almost beyond recognition. Suppose that change in a basic axiom were not a clean change, but that for a time both the axiom and its alternative were to be used interchangeably and unpredictably. You would have results that were double-valued. You would have contradictory results following from whatever you began with until the old axiom got weeded out entirely.

"Perhaps you can see that well enough to understand everything. I hope so, Martha. If you can I can skip the landing. We DID land. We crashed, and we landed safely. We also did something else. I think that when they check the records they'll find that the *Endore* also came back to Earth and reported that it hadn't actually landed on Metapor. It did all those things—returned over a year ago, landed safely, and was crushed in landing. If you could see HOW it could do all those things—it's like the page in a book; you pass it if you look for it, and find it if you don't look for it.

"It's happening here on Earth right now and will keep on happening until the old basics that contradict the new ones are no longer operating. You see, Martha, we knew that would happen. That's why we came back. The new system is so much more perfect than the old. SHE taught it to us when we landed. Ford Gratricks and his fellow objectors were killed in the ship that crashed. They also were on the ship that came back to Earth. They're alive and they're dead."

Martha's face was a mask of confusion. She was trying to understand and not knowing how. Ren saw this and tried again.

"Suppose we try from this angle," he said patiently. "If a car is going ten miles an hour it will be ten miles farther on at the end of an hour. If it goes twenty miles an hour it will be twenty miles farther on. But suppose it goes both ten miles an hour and twenty miles an hour. At the end of an hour it will be ten miles and twenty miles along, and according to what the Earth is used to it would have to become two cars to do that.

"If it went every speed from zero to twenty miles an hour it would have to become an infinite number of cars, and occupy every position from the starting point to a twenty-mile distance at the end of an hour. That would be the conventional conclusion to the abstract problems. With the new basics it does just that—except that it is still just one car, and yet never was just one car and never will be. It CAN'T be, because there is no such thing, in the new system, as a one thing.

"I myself am not Ren Gravenard, only Ren Gravenard, or anything else that your old ideas can conceive of. You'll see, Martha. The whole world will see soon, just as I did after we had been on Metapor a short while and had gotten the contradictions out of my mind and my structure."

"Then what are you?" Martha asked tensely.

"I'm the crew of the *Endore*," Ren said softly. "I'm Ren Gravenard here and now because that is the only thing you can accept at present. I'm—Her, the incomprehensible."

A question rose in Martha's mind. She drew back from the question as from the brink of the Abyss, yet felt drawn magnetically toward it. Ren watched and knew what that question would be. She opened her lips.

"Who—am I?" she asked.

"Look at your hands," Ren said.

Martha looked down at her hands resting on the edge of the table. They were large, gnarled, strong—the hands of a man. She flexed them. They were smooth and skillful.

Wonderingly she raised her eyes to look at her companion across the table. Her companion was—herself and she was Ren Gravenard. Anything else would have been—unthinkable.

THE END

FOOTNOTES:

[1] In 2027 A.D., just seventy-five years after the first space flight, a dangerous disease was brought to Earth which wiped out almost a million lives before a cure was found. Immediately an elaborate quarantine procedure was developed to take care of any possible eventuality. This also included the psych screening routine to check on the sanity and normalcy of returning space crews.

One feature of emergency quarantine was the creation of the spaceport zone, an area with a radius of fifty miles about the spaceport, which during quarantine was to be blocked off with nothing permitted to go either in or out.

For all-out quarantine as in this present case, a temporary planet quarantine was to be imposed, preventing the landing or taking off of any space ship at all.

Other measures would take effect if and when they became necessary, such as national quarantine, continent quarantine, and even harsh measures if they became necessary.—ED.

Transcriber's Note: This etext was produced from *Amazing Stories* April 1949. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed. Minor spelling and typographical errors have been corrected without note. Variant spellings have been retained.

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