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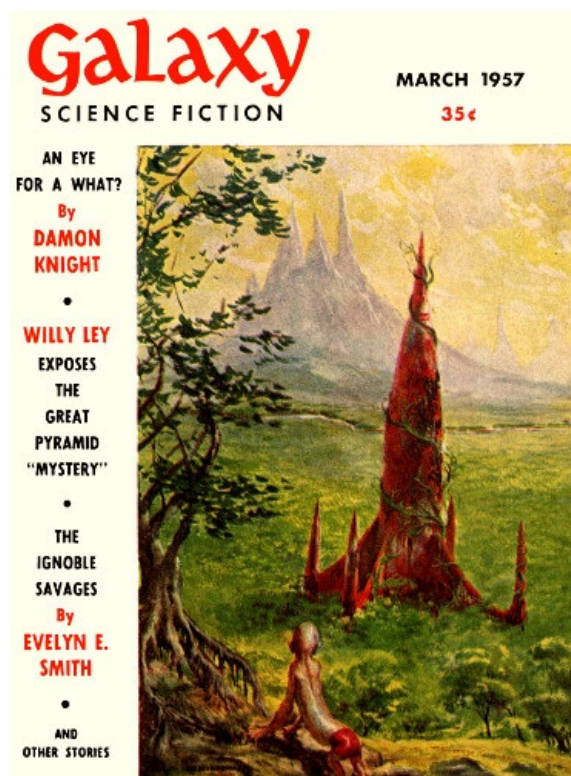
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE DEEP ONE ***



THE DEEP ONE

By NEIL P. RUZIC

Illustrated by DILLON

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There wasn't a single mistake in the plan for survival—and that was the biggest mistake!

For centuries, the rains swept eight million daily tons of land into the sea. Mountains slowly crumpled to ocean floors. Summits rose again to see new civilizations heaped upon fossils of the old.

It was the way of the Earth and men knew it and did not worry. The end was always in the future. Ever since men first learned to make marks on cave walls, the end remained in the future.

Then the future came. The records told men how the Sun was before, so they knew it was swollen now. They knew the heat was not always this hot, or the glacier waters so fast, the seas so high.

They adapted—they grew tanner and moved farther pole-ward.

When the steam finally rose over equatorial waters, they moved to the last planet, Pluto, and their descendants lived and died and came to know the same heat and red skies. Finally there came the day when they couldn't adapt—not, at least, in the usual way.

But they had the knowledge of all the great civilizations on Earth, so they built the last spaceship.

They built it very slowly and carefully. Their will to live became the will to leave this final, perfect monument. It took a hundred and fifty years and during all that time they planned every facet of its operation, every detail of its complex mechanisms. Because the ship had a big job to do, they named it *Destiny* and people began to think of it not as the last of the spaceships, but as the first.

The dying race sowed the ship with human seed and hopefully named its unborn passengers Adam, Eve, Joseph and Mary. Then they launched it toward the middle of the Milky Way and lay back in the red light of their burning planet.

All this was only a memory now, conserved in the think-tank of a machine that raced through speckled space, dodging, examining, classifying, charting what it saw. Behind, the Sun shrank as once it swelled, and the planets that were not consumed turned cold in their orbits. The Sun grew fainter and went out, and still the ship sped forward, century after century, cometlike, but with a purpose.

At many of the specks, the ship circled, sucking in records, passing judgment, moving on—a bee in the garden of stars. Finally, hundreds of light-years from what had been its home, it located an Earth-type world, accepted it from a billion miles off, and swung into an approach that would last exactly eighteen years.

Immediately, pumps delivered measured quantities of oxygen and nitrogen atoms. Circuits closed to move four tiny frozen eggs next to frozen spermatozoa. The temperature gradually increased to a heat once maintained by animals now extinct.

The embryos grew healthily and at term were born of plastic wombs.

The first voices they heard were of their real mothers. Soft, caressing songwords. Melodious, warm, recorded women voices, each different, bell-clear, vivacious, betraying nothing of the fact that they were dead these long centuries.

"I am your mother," each voice told its belated offspring. "You can see me and hear me and touch what appears to be me, and together with your cousins, you'll grow strong and healthy...."

The voices sang on and the babies gurgled in their imported terran atmosphere. The words were meaningless but important, for it had been learned on the now dead world that these sounds were one of the factors in love and learning.

Day after day, the voices lapped warm over the children. Plastic feeders provided nutrition as noiseless pumps removed excess carbon dioxide.

In one end of the ship, a miniature farm was born hydroponically, its automatic grinders pre-digesting ripe vegetables for the children. Animals were born, too, for food, but also companionship, and later to stock New Earth ahead.

As the babies began to understand, the woman voices merged into one mechanical mother who could be heard and seen and summoned on panel screens throughout the ship. Everything became as Earthlike as possible, but because the environment was artificial, the children grew aware of their purpose in life at an age rarely reached on ancient Earth.

They were two years old when their Mecmother informed them: "You are unlike any children ever born. You are the last of a dead race, but you must live. You must not be afraid. You must do

everything humanly possible to live."

When they were four, Mecmother introduced them to Mecteacher and said to pay attention for five hours each day. Mecteacher took their IQs and explained to Adam that he had a greater capacity than Eve, Joseph and Mary, and was therefore their leader.

Soon afterward, all the children started "school," but Adam excelled. At seven, he knew all about landing the ship. He played that he was already eighteen and the ship was no longer on automatic.

He was in everything and everywhere. His tow hair poked above the control board. His busy fingers hand-picked an experimental meal from the farmroom. When he learned how to turn the artificial gravity switch off in the recroom, his child legs floated haphazardly somewhere above his head. And in the sunroom, where heat-lamp walls were triggered by the degree of an occupant's tan, Adam's freckled face stared through the visiport, seeing in his mind's eye the New Earth he would one day conquer.

He lived fully, asking questions, accepting the answers, receiving instructions. Some of them he testily disobeyed, was punished compassionately, and learned respect and a kind of love for the mecs.

He played the games of childhood, but he played them alone. Once he was gazing out a port, imaginatively sorting the stars of his universe into shapes of the animals in the ship's farm. Mecfather lit up at a nearby panel, glowing faintly red. Adam resisted an impulse to shiver—the panel always made him flinch when it glowed red. Red, he was being conditioned, was his conscience, brought out by Mecfather until he grew old enough to bring it out himself.

"Why aren't you playing with the other children?" Mecfather asked. "I've been watching you all day and you've avoided them on every occasion."

Though he feared him, Adam loved Mecfather as he had been taught to do and did not hesitate to confide. But how could he explain that the other children did not seem as *real* to him as the mecs?

"I don't know," Adam answered truthfully.

"They don't ignore you. They ask you to play, but you always go off by yourself. Don't you like them?"

"They're flat, Father. They're not deep—like you."

Silent hidden computers assembled the answer, correlated, circuited a mechanical smile. Certainly—a child brought up with only three real children and three talking images in his universe could not distinguish between reality and appearance. On the screen, Adam saw Mecfather smile, the panel no longer red.

The voice was quiet now and full of understanding. "It is I who am flat, Adam. I am only an image, a voice. I am here when you need me to help, but I am not deep. Your cousins are deep; I am the flat one. You will understand better when you grow older."

Electronically, Mecfather was worried. He called a "conference" of the other mecs and their circuits joined in a complicated analog: What was the probable outcome of this beginning of disharmony? There were too many variables for an immediate answer, but the query was stored in each mec's memory banks for later answer.

When the meconference began, the panel switched off and Adam walked thoughtfully through the ship's corridors. Unexpectedly, he spotted the other children. He turned quickly into a room before they saw him and ducked behind the largest of the couches.

He was in the aft recroom, he realized, not having paid attention to where he was going. What was it all about? Did Mecfather really mean it when he said the cousins were deeper than the mecs? Adam could believe he was different from his parents and teacher—after all, he was only seven—but he couldn't accept the information that he was *not* different from his cousins. Somehow, he thought, I am alone....

He heard noises, the loud boisterousness of Joseph, the high-pitched squeal of Eve, the grating laugh of Mary. Adam cringed deeper behind the big couch. He *was* different. *He* didn't make sounds like that.

"Adam! Oh, A-dam! A-dam!" the cousins called, each their own way. "Come out wherever you are, Adam! Come out and play!"

From behind the couch, Adam saw the beginnings of an infantile but systematic search. The three of them were looking behind things, under furniture, in back of hatches. They tried moving everything they saw, but couldn't budge the heavy couch Adam hid behind.

Looking for escape, Adam's eyes caught a round metallic handle set flush into the heavy deck carpet. He lifted it and pulled. Nothing happened. He stood up, bracing his feet against the deck and heaved with all his strength. It didn't move.

Then he experimentally turned the handle—to the right until it clicked faintly, then the left, around twice, another faint click, but different, a left-hand click, he knew somehow. So he turned again to the left, this time three turns—and then the click was heavy, almost audible. He pulled

the handle and a door formed out of the carpet, swinging easily open.

Just then, Joseph peered behind the couch. "Boo!"

Adam jumped into the opening, the heavy door slamming shut overhead. Below, he stood erect and was surprised to feel the hair on his head brush the ceiling.

He was frightened, but he calmed when he realized there were many places on the ship he hadn't been before. Mecteacher revealed them to him, but very slowly, and he supposed he would not be told about *everything* for many years. As he recovered his sense of balance, he became aware of a faint luminescence around him. It seemed to have no source, but was stronger in the distance.

He began to explore, groping at first, then more smoothly, efficiently, as his eyes adjusted to the semi-darkness. A long corridor opened up before him and what appeared before to be an illusion of distance actually *was* distance. He guessed he was near the engine compartment and vaguely sensed that the luminescence had something to do with the nuclear engines that Mecteacher told him moved the ship.

It was warm in here. Not physically warm but friendly warm, like when Mecmother spoke her comfort. The similarity almost made him cry, for he understood, even in his seven years, that Mecmother was but the image of his real mother who lived long ago and said those words of sympathy to a child yet unborn. He wanted her now, even her image, but he didn't call because he'd have to explain why he was hiding from his cousins.

He shivered then, thinking that Mecfather and Mecteacher knew where he was and would light up their panels red. He thought, "Are you down here, Mecfather?" Nothing answered, so he spoke the thought, and again the walls stayed dark.

That was why it was so friendly warm in here, he realized. His meconscience was left above!

Deciding that the others might miss him, he retraced his steps, located the trapdoor in the ceiling, pushed it open and ascended. The others were sitting on the floor, dumbfounded, as Adam climbed out and slammed the hatch shut.

"How did you get down there?" Joseph asked.

Adam remained silent. After a moment, Eve and Mary lost interest in the question and started skipping a length of rope.

Joseph persisted. "How? I pulled, too!"

Adam didn't answer. He knew the bigger boy would forget about it if he changed the subject. "How is it you're not with Mecteacher?"

"We were. But he made us look for you."

The closest wall panel lit bright red. It was Mecteacher. "*Adam! How did you open that?*"

"I turned it—a certain way," he said evasively. Adam didn't want his cousins to learn how.

"But how did you know?"

"I—I reasoned it."

The image faded as the new information was assimilated. Mecteacher's voice said, "Wait a while, Adam."

The computer circuited the other mec's memory banks. After ten minutes, the "conference" was over and Mecteacher returned to the screen. He asked Adam to come alone to the classroom. The others were dismissed.

Reluctantly, Adam did as he was told. In the classroom, he stood stiffly in front of the central panels. All three mecs lit up, their color this time a tranquilizing blue.

"Adam, we are not real people in the *now*," Mecmother began. "Do you understand that?"

"Y-yes, I understand. You are—planned—fixed before."

"That's right, Adam. We are pre-set. We have a very large number of choices and actions, but we are not infinite."

"Infinite?"

"We are limited in the help we can give you. We were real—like you—a long, long time ago. We exist now only to help you and the other children. We are here to educate you, to love and console you—and one other thing. We are here to settle your conflicts, to make sure you don't hurt each other."

"But I didn't hurt anyone, Mecmother!"

"Not yet, Adam, but avoiding the others the way you do could be the first sign of trouble."

"How do you *know*? How can you talk if you aren't real?"

"What you hear is a combination of recorded words that are electronically put together to answer

an almost infinite number of your questions. But do not think of me as not real. I was merely in another time. Do you understand that?"

"Yes."

"Then you also are able to see that your ability to reason things—to understand what I am telling you now, for instance, is a remarkable thing."

"You mean because I'm not like the others?"

"You have a superior mind. You are the leader, but do not regard yourself as better than the others. You have more intelligence, yes, but do not look down on your cousins for that. They may develop other qualities better than yours. Stay simple, Adam, and you will be able to live among them and thereby make the human race live again. The name of this ship is *Destiny*. Do you know why?"

"Yes—I know."

"Be with the other children then. Play with them. You'll need each other to live on New Earth—eleven years from now."

He thought sullenly, how can I play with them when they're *flat*? But he didn't object out loud to Mecmother. He didn't like her this way. Explanation was Mecteacher's job and discipline Mecfather's. Mecmother should be warm and loving.

Mecteacher appeared and asked Adam to call in the other children so the science lesson could start.

He found them tanning in the sunroom, their unclothed bodies evenly browned from invisible light. They followed Adam without question, but seemed to take a long time doing it. Joseph insisted first in donning clothes, but he put on protective clothing first. Then, realizing the absurdity of it, he switched to his formality suit—the loose-fitting robe Mecteacher instructed the children to wear to lend dignity to the classwork.

During Joseph's delay, the girls ambled off somewhere and returned only when Adam shouted after them in exasperation. Quickening his pace, Adam reached the classroom first and asked Mecteacher, "Are the other children—deep?"

"Deep? Yes, Adam, Mecfather explained that to you. Why are you confused? It's us, the mecs, who are flat. The other children are healthy, living beings. The cells from which all of you were born were selected after years of controlled breeding. Your parents were the finest the human race could produce—intelligent, strong, healthy, high survival quotient. Is this what you mean by deep?"

"Partly, but also—*feeling*. I think I feel things better."

The other children waddled in, took their seats and switched on robomonitors in the ritual of classroom procedure. They all looked at Mecteacher in the central panel.

Mecteacher motioned Adam to his chair-desk and began the lesson. He described Old Earth and how it circled Old Sol with the other worlds and the way the moons circled the planets—all of them condensed into spheres and all the spheres turning in harmony.

He interrupted himself when Mary's robomonitor registered only partial comprehension. "What don't you understand, Mary? Is it *sphere*?"

"I know what a sphere is," she said, remembering a previous lesson. "A sphere is an apple or an orange—"

Mecteacher detected a covert wince from Adam's monitor. The teacher appeared to Adam on his desk panel where the others couldn't see or hear. "Do not think this is because she is not—deep, Adam. She is only seven and not as advanced for her age as you are. You understand how we mecs are pre-set?"

"Yes."

"In the classroom, then, if we don't go fast enough for you, try to be patient. We can only deviate within set limits. It is not a new problem, Adam. On Earth, it impeded the educational system from the beginning."

Simultaneously with his conversation with Adam, Mecteacher held up an apple on the central panel and re-explained the age-old analogy between the apple and the Earth, the red skin and the Terran crust, and further, the supposition that New Earth ahead would be like Old Earth and the apple.

Eve wanted to know whether New Earth would have a New Moon.

"That's an interesting question, Eve. But we are still too many millions of miles away to know yet. Before you are ready to leave the ship, you will know."

In the months that passed, Adam tried associating more with the other children. He played their games, which seemed to him to be played without a purpose, but they wouldn't or couldn't play

his—with one exception.

He showed them how to turn off the artificial gravity in the recroom and they became obsessed with the same physical euphoria he had discovered for himself. But even while in free-fall, Adam maintained his need for reason and couldn't indulge their pointless pastimes for long. Often, when he grew tired of free-falling, he visited his lonely chamber under the deck and explored the working parts of the ship.

On almost each occasion when he returned, he was caught by one of the mecs and punished with fiercely glowing red panels. Remembering a previous conversation with the mecs, Adam reasoned that their present dissatisfaction with him was not real. After all, he recalled, they were pre-set. They *had* to act like that when he disobeyed them. Going against them wasn't necessarily the same as doing wrong.

It took an act of will and intelligence far in advance of his seven years, for Adam realized that if he continued like this, the conditioning would eat at his brain like acid and guilt would rise in the etch. So, from under the ship's deck, he turned the mecs permanently off.

The stars changed with the passing years. The blue giant Adam used to watch from the darkside port was now a diamond chip lost in starmilk night. Ahead, a new jewel grew larger in the quartz port, a sapphire blazing hot and big—bigger than any star in his memory, closer than the *Destiny* had ever come to a star.

Adam understood why the star was so big. He was eighteen Old Earth years of age now and the star was New Sol. Soon there would be a New Earth and maybe a New Moon. His destiny was near, his job decided. He would locate the planet, orbit it, search for a clear space and land. Then he and the others—

The others. The repulsive, flighty, inconsistent trio. They were alike, all right, with never a serious thought in their heads. Why weren't they concerned with their destiny as he was? If he were a genius as the mecs once told him, why weren't the others also geniuses? They all came from the best stock of Old Earth. No, it wasn't just that he was supernormal; the others were—flat, undeeep.

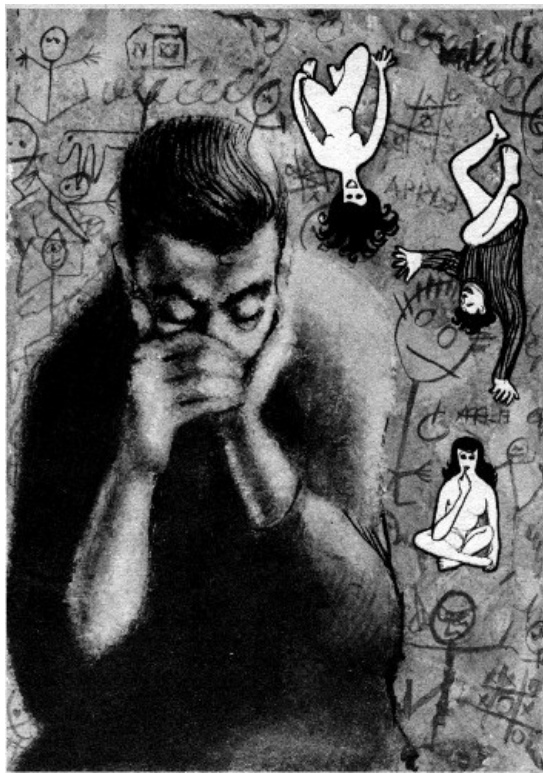
For years, he had kept peace by yielding to their demands. He suffered their company, succumbed to their activities. But every so often, when he felt especially disgusted, he retreated to his private sanctum under the deck. This was such a time now, he felt, as Eve and Mary giggled over to him.

They were not nude as had been the custom aboard the ship ever since he turned off the mecs. They had clothes draped over parts of them that seemed somehow to make them more than nude. But they wore red coloring on their lips that he thought was repulsive.

He ducked behind the couch, clicked open the familiar combination and descended into the only peace he ever knew. He sat at a chair-table he had lowered into the compartment long ago, and peered pensively at the drawings before him. If Mecteacher were here, he thought, the orbit wouldn't be so difficult to calculate. He'd explain how to do it.

And then, he wondered, would Mecteacher have taught the others how to be deep? Or was depth something inside, something that could not be altered by education? If this were a world with other people, he thought, would my cousins be considered abnormal—or would I?

He pondered the question for a moment, then decided, as he had so often in the past, that it was truly the cousins who were the flat ones. They were deviants from an average that couldn't exist on the *Destiny*, but which must have once existed elsewhere. They had been flat at seven—perhaps when children are supposed to be flat, as Mecmother had suggested—but they stayed that way. At eighteen, as at seven, they still played the same games with scarcely any variation.



He heard them rummaging above, attempting again and again to pull open the hatch. It had happened this way for years: They'd try to open the trapdoor for an hour or two, then give it up and turn their attention to something else. They never thought to turn the handle. Maybe an undep person wouldn't be able to reason the combination clicks, but only a completely flat one would persist in pulling when it always ended in failure.

Possibly, he thought, the cosmic rays had been more destructive to their egg cells. Or maybe the alien radiations subtracted something from the other cells to add to his. If this were true, he was partly a product of the others and owed his depth to them.

Adam felt sorry for his cousins then and wished he hadn't hurt them by avoiding their presence. Despite their undepth, they must have feelings. The mecs probably wouldn't have been able to give them depth but, he remembered, the other role of the mecs was to prevent each one of them from harming the others. In their role as arbitrator, Adam realized, they might have stopped him from hurting them so.

Filled with remorse, he left his desk-chair and walked stoop-shouldered under the low ceiling. At the trapdoor, he opened the combination on the inside lock handle and pushed upward. It wouldn't open. He tried again, but it wasn't the lock that was stuck. They must have slid something heavy over the hatch, something he couldn't move.

He tried calling to them, but his voice was lost in the insulative metal of the deck. Finally he sat down, conserving his strength for a final onslaught.

If he couldn't open the hatch, he realized vividly it would be not only his failure, but the failure of the human race.

But maybe it did not have to be so. Maybe the differences in the others weren't biological—maybe they were environmental. And with that thought, he made his way through the narrow passageway and reversed his deed of eleven years past. He turned the mecs back on.

Returning to the hatch, he reworked the combination to make sure it was not the lock that held him. He pushed upward with all his strength, steadily with increasing pressure, until the beads of perspiration turned into gulleys that streamed down his face.

Exhausted, he crawled back to his chair and lay across the desk littered with calculations of a landing he would never make. The soft luminescence from the *Destiny's* nuclear engines crept forward and caressed him.

In the aft recroom, Eve and Mary were admiring Joseph's strength in being able to push the heavy couch over Adam's trapdoor.

Three wall panels lit red. All the mecs appeared together. "It's time for your science lesson," one said. "But where is Adam?"

"He's in the trapdoor," they answered flatly.

The panel turned green, reserving its redness for the delinquent Adam when he would choose to

appear.

Mecteacher began, "Now about the Solar System...."

But the cousins didn't listen. Joseph had turned the gravity switch off and they were too busy floating upended, trying new positions, laughing at each other's ridiculous postures in the ship without bottom. The game was not a new one, but it was newly discovered and they reveled in its glories.

Month after month, they played their weightless games while the mecs implored them to come down. The constellations shifted in the visiports. New Sol grew larger and then smaller as the *Destiny* sped toward its unseen planet.

In the recroom, the mecvoices were only noises to the trio now, annoying noises that could be silenced, they discovered, with forceful kicks to the red-glowing panels.

When all the mecscreens had been smashed and the weightless games grew boring, Mary looked out the sunroom port. She was surprised to see a rust-yellow sphere hanging in the sky. She watched it seriously for a time, frowning as it grew bigger and filled a third of her horizon. Then she called Eve and Joseph.

Mary pointed and they all stared in bewilderment. She opened her eyes wide and laughed with glee. "It's an apple," she said. "An apple in the sky!"

But Joseph wasn't fooled. Dimly he remembered something Adam had told him—something about a thing that would appear in the sky. He fought hard bringing it to conscious memory. Then he started aft toward the recroom. In there, under the couch, he remembered, was Adam. Adam would remind him what it was.

Suddenly Joseph smiled, his face flushed. He turned back to the sunroom port. He wouldn't have to ask Adam, after all. For a moment, he watched to make sure, while the huge yellow sphere swam closer.

"No, Mary," he said triumphantly. "It's not an apple in the sky. Apples are red. It's an orange!"

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE DEEP ONE ***

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