

# UNIVERSES

by Robert F. Young

art: James Odbert

**The Sage of Silver Creek has sent us another story—quiet and deep. His new novel, *The Last Yggdrasil*, was published in May by Del Rey Books.**

Conversation ripples across the posh pavilion where the party is in progress. Nearby, a little inland lake has stolen the stars from the sky. I am an honored guest, and I stand in the midst of admirers listening to the voice of the girl with whom I have just danced. She is like a slender vase with sunflowers in it, and the sunflowers are her hair. The gentian blueness of the vase is the gown which shimmers round her in the soft pulsating light. She is talking lighttalk—the weather, the latest news, a new book she is going to read—and I am listening to her voice as though it were something above and beyond the conversational ripple of which it is a part; as though she were the only girl growing in the garden of girls around me.

It is all a marvel to me—the dance, the night, the sunflower girl. I am like the hero in the Scott Fitzgerald story who had been drunk for years (although I have not been drunk) and who at last with sober eyes finally saw the city again. The world has changed much since I left it and came back, and each aspect of its new face fascinates me. The lilt of the sunflower girl's voice is reassuring; it is like a song I heard often among the stars.

She does not talk lighttalk long; she interrupts the flow of her voice and asks, "Is it all over for you now? Is it past?" And I answer, "Yes, in a way it is," and the interjection creates an eddy and I go round and round in it, and there, almost at my elbow, is the black hole again—the pale accretion disk with its vivid black-eyed center—and we are falling toward it, Withers, Bannister, the spaceship, and I, caught in its terrible tide. And before my eyes Withers goes mad and hunches down in a corner of the module and clenches his drawn-up legs against his chest with rigid arms, and stares, stares, stares straight before him; and Bannister, insane with panic, suits up, and before I can stop him, jettisons. I blank out.

"You see," I tell the sunflower girl, whose name is Berenice, "the real problem for me all along has been that I can't remember, and sometimes I think that perhaps I didn't pull the ship free from the tide but that instead we were pulled inside the event horizon and somehow got past the singularity and entered another universe—one very much like the one we left. The possibility haunted me all the way back; and it was bad, because Bannister was dead and I couldn't discuss it with Withers, who, although he wasn't dead, was the same as being dead, and who really would have been dead if I hadn't forced food down his throat."

"But it's all right now, isn't it?" the sunflower girl asks. "You're certain now, aren't you, that you didn't go through the hole."

"No," I say, "I'm less certain every minute."

The orchestra, which is seated on a glittering dais suspended above the dance floor, strikes up an old waltz. Strauss has been resurrected. I find myself on the floor, the sunflower girl in my arms, awhirl to *Artist's Life*, and the music becomes a black hole pulling me back into a past I never knew. And the sunflower girl says, "I'm glad I came tonight, I wasn't going to," and I whisper into her hair, "Yes, I'm glad you came too."

The party is being thrown by Marcus Grenoble, who is a state senator. All of the guests are rich; I am the only pauper present, although I am not truly a pauper any more. I was invited because of my

black wings. I am pleased to be present. Like Fitzgerald, I am fascinated by the rich.

The sunflower girl has told me she lives upon a mountain. She must own it, for she says, when the Strauss waltz ends, "My mountain is over two miles high." She has left it temporarily and is staying at the nearby Susquehanna Inn.

I ask to see her home when the party ends, and she says goodnight to the two friends she came with. When I pull into the Inn's semi-circular drive she turns to me and says, "You must come to my mountain and see me. It's called Cold Spring Mountain. Everyone knows where it is."

I ask, "Do you live there all alone?"

"Yes. Right now. I'm returning there tomorrow."

Will it be like Fitzgerald's diamond mountain? I wonder. I have Fitzgerald on my mind. There was a micro-book library on the ship; and on my way back from the black hole, when I wasn't taking care of Withers, I read, read, read. But I know her mountain will not have a huge diamond under it; it will have coal, which is almost the same thing. I say, "I will be there day after tomorrow."

She leans over and kisses my cheek and says good-night. I am almost certain now that I am in another universe. Were I still in my own she would ask me in for coffee, and afterward we would bed. Yes, another universe, planted with flowers, chief among them a flower of the sun. I do not even remember the drive back to the cheap hotel where I and my memories live.

You see, it could have been this way. Two universes, next to each other, almost but not quite identical, joined together by an Einstein-Rosen Bridge whose temporal distortion constituted an integral part of the juncture. In each universe a NASA on Earth decided to make a manned flyby of a corresponding black hole. In each, the manned ship got too close and was drawn through the event horizon. Each ship then passed into an adjoining universe by way of the Einstein-Rosen Bridge, putting me in my other self's universe and him in mine.

Yes, it could have been that way.

I go to the sunflower girl's mountain. Her castle sits upon its crest. I drive through wild woods, the road climbing ever higher. Her driveway begins halfway up the mountainside; and it is as wide as the road, and winds among disciplined trees. The nascent leaves of the trees are pale green in the morning light. The wild cherry trees have been left untouched, and they are in blossom. They are like little girls standing by the roadside, dressed for school and waiting for the bus.

Up, up, I wind in my synthi-fueled rental-car, and the mountain is like one of Fitzgerald's buildings that his sobered-up drunk finally saw; but it is much, much higher; and in its springtime grandeur far pleasanter to the eye. Up, up, I wind; and there at last before me I see the castle gate; and it opens before me and I find myself in a land of lawns and gardens and hedges and little lakes. And before me the great house rises into the springblue sky, the sunflower of a girl blooming on its portico steps.

We go walking in the afternoon. Among the wild beasts of topiary, through latticed tunnels of rose vines, along paths among elevated parterres that are like the hanging gardens of Babylon. She says, "My father wants to meet you," and I say back, "I thought you were alone." She says, "Yes, but last night I called him in Spain. He will be back by this evening."

"What is your father in?"

She laughs. "In money."

"Doesn't your mother live here?"

"She's sponsoring an art exhibit in Paris."

"Doesn't she want to meet me too?"

"She doesn't know about you yet; I only called my father."

I point to a distant black mountain. "My grandfather helped turn it black."

"A miner?"

"He said he met the devil once in a mine."

"What did the devil say?"

"He only laughed. But that was in the universe I left."

"You still think you went through the black hole?"

"Yes. I'm certain now. Last night I had a drink in the hotel bar and the barmaid said thanks when I paid her."

"That never happened in Universe Number One?"

"Never once. But both universes are much alike except for certain special things. Like you."

"Am I not in the other one?"

"The other one has pigs for girls."

Her father is an imperious man. He strides into the house like Sardanapalus. He has white hair, which he has let grow all the way down his back. His brow and his jaw are marmoreal. His royal robe is a dark gray suit for which he paid more than my father earned in a year or my grandfather in two. But he is also democratic. He shakes my hand as though he as well as I were common clay. Leonard Lamarche. In money.

In coal.

The coal my father and my grandfather used to mine.

He does not mine it, he transports it. Coal is the way oil once was. He hauls it from colliery to synthi-fuel plant in leviathan copters. He is the Onassis of coal. "I keep their houses warm," he tells me at dinner.

I do not know what the waiter has served me. Pheasant? Perhaps. I do not dare to ask. The dining room is bigger than the house I was brought up in. Lamarche asks, "What was the black hole like?"

"Like the entrance to a mine."

"You saw the singularity?"

"I blanked out when the tide caught us."

"He thinks he went through it to another universe," Berenice says. Lamarche smiles. "But this is the universe that sent you." "The other universe could have sent me too."

"I see. But I thought black holes gave into white ones."

"Only theoretically."

"And this universe is identical to the one you left?"

"For the most part. But there are certain differences."

"Differences that could be the result, could they not, from your long—for us—absence?"

"It could be that way, but I don't think so."

Lamarche asks, "Are you still in the Navy, Commander?"

"I retired. The voyage contributed to my length of service."

"I have a proposition for you then. I need a man with judgment and good sense for my Dispatch Center."

"I don't know," I say.

"Two hundred thousand a year. You can start as soon as you like."

"I don't know," I say again.

"It'll be good for you. And good for me too—I won't deny it. Quid pro quo. The media will love it. Black-Hole Explorer hired by Eastern Coal."

"I will give it serious thought," I say.

I leave the mountain with the sunflower girl's kiss upon my lips. It is truly a Fitzgerald mountain, but I will not let the rich wreck me the way they did him. There is something important I must do. I must go home and visit my folks. I have only greeted them and said goodbye. I owe them more than that.

They live near the mine where my grandfather met the devil. It is a dead mine now. They are so much older than they were that they disconcert me. My father looks old enough to be my grandfather. My mother walks on spindly legs. My younger brother is old enough to be my father. The house they live in, the house I was brought up in, has aged too. It needs paint, and the deck of the back porch is sagging. Some of the roof shingles have blown away. I will fix all these things, but I cannot bring my father back to middle age, nor eliminate my mother's spindly walk.

My boyhood sweetheart has married and has seven kids. The oldest boy is taller than I am. Both of us knew it would be absurd for her to wait. She married my best friend, who is beginning to be an old man.

I do not tell my mother or my father or my brother that I passed through the black hole. They would find this difficult to understand. But I tell them of Lamarche's offer. They are delighted. "Just think," my father says. "My father mined coal and I mined coal. Now my son will transport it."

I will carry it over mountains. I will carry it over hills. I will convey it across valleys and over woods. I will transport it to the great synthi-plants that have re-engendered the birth of America. I will warm the people and feed their factories and fuel their cars. I will see to it that the lifeblood of this civilization is never diminished. I will measure up to the standards of this fine universe into which I have found my way.

I return to Cold Spring Mountain and tell Lamarche yes, and he smiles and congratulates me, and the sunflower girl kisses my cheek: Lamarche drives me to another mountain. Atop this one sits not a castle but a large rectangular structure that glitters like a huge oblong diamond. The glitter comes from a thousand windows in three of its walls and from a coping-to-coping skylight in its roof, and it is as bright inside as is the world without.

I stare at the vast room into which Lamarche has escorted me. An entire wall is preempted by a computer, and the room is empty otherwise except for a single desk upon which sit a transceiver and four phones and before which sits a wiry, gray-haired man whose eyes are fixed on a large, lighted map in the computer's center.

Lamarche introduces him to me. His name is Reeves. Lamarche then points successively to each phone. "The outside line, the cop-truck line, the repair-shop line, the colliery line." He points to the illuminated map. "The stationary white lights are collieries. Each is numbered, and after the number an A or a B indicates whether it is anthracitic or bituminous. The moving numerals you see are coptrucks. Each designated coptruck contains a highly paid crew. If the designating numeral is blue, the coptruck is loaded and on its way to the Eastern Synthi-Fuel Complex. If the light is yellow, the coptruck is empty, and available. When a colliery has a load ready to be picked up, its light will blink. And when a coptruck has mechanical trouble, its light will blink. Your job, Commander, will be to see to it that in the first case the nearest empty coptruck is dispatched to the colliery, and in the second to see to it that the coptruck proceeds at once to the nearest repair-shop branch."

Aerial coal transportation is not new to me. It began long before I left for the black hole. But it had been done by many separate companies. There had as yet been no Onassis on the scene.

I look at Reeves. After his introduction to me his eyes had returned immediately to the map. They are still fixed upon it. "I can't help getting the impression, Mr. Lamarche," I say, "that the job already belongs to Reeves."

"It is his job—and the job, too, of the men on the afternoon and midnight shifts. You're the overseer, Commander—the supervisor, if you like. You're where the buck stops. All difficult decisions are to be made by you. Your regular hours will be on the dayshift and you need be present only five days per week; but whoever is on duty can contact you at any time, regardless of where you are, should a real difficulty arise. You will be issued a beeper which you will keep always attached to your belt."

"You had an overseer before?"

Lamarche nods. "My nephew. I moved him up the line."

"I hope I don't disappoint you."

"You won't if you keep this in mind: We move coal. That is all we do. We move it as fast as we can and as cheaply as we can. If one unloaded coptruck is a foot closer to a load-colliery than another, that's the one you send." Lamarche divests his face of seriousness, and smiles. "Besides, how could a man who could escape from a black hole possibly disappoint me?"

I see the accretion disk again, and the abysmal blackness of its center. It is the devil staring with one eye out of hell. He pulls the ship down, down, down through the event horizon; but I elude him and find the Einstein-Rosen Bridge, and walk across it into this fine and shining universe.

Through the windows I can see a culm-black mountain. Smoke is rising from it; it is burning. I

remember my grandfather telling me how, long ago, a whole town began to burn from the mines beneath it. Was this true of this universe? I find it hard to believe.

"I'll have to find a place to stay," I tell Lamarche.

"No. No need. I have a house for you in the valley below. Tomorrow you can bring your things and take over."

I do not have many things. The house is a large one, but it is already furnished, and what do I need anyway but the few odds and ends that I have? The house is part of a town, and there is a market just down the street. Not faraway is a colliery. I see many men with black faces. The few I talk to tell me mining pays well. The houses of the town are all large and far apart. They aren't like the houses my great-grandfather told me about. Those houses were high and narrow and inches apart, and sometimes were joined together.

The sunflower girl drives to see me in my new home. There is a party upcoming in the castle, and she invites me. I buy new clothes to wear so she will be proud of me. They seem like cheap miners' clothes in the garden of her guests. She makes me feel at ease. Some of the guests stare at me; but it is the kind of stare reserved for celebrities, not miners' sons. I always thought the rich were snobs. These rich aren't. Girls ask me to dance with them. The sunflower girl does not like this. "He's mine," she tells a tall brunette, smiling. The brunette smiles back. "Don't be so selfish, Berenice." I dance with the sunflower girl. It is a fine, fine universe.

I do not make a play for her when she drives me home. In this universe you do not do such things. It is late when we reach the little town beneath the mountain where I live. We sit in the car talking before I go in. I feel her nearness, I want her, but I do not want to make a bathos of our romance. We kiss good-night and she leaves. It is a winsome May night. You can see the mountains rising darkly. You can smell the trees on their slopes. It is a sweet, green smell. You can smell wildflowers too.

I go to work each weekday. I have a small company car which I drive up the winding road to the Center. I have utterly nothing to do. Four men man the phones and the transceiver, their alternating shifts arranged so that each gets one day a week off. I stand and watch. It is a papier-mâché job. A sinecure. But it pays two hundred thousand a year.

I spend my weekends with the sunflower girl. One weekend we go boating. On the river. It is lovely on the river this time of year. We have brought a lunch and eat on the bank. She packed the lunch. There are items of food in it I do not know the names of. My great-grandfather used to live on potatoes. My great-grandmother fixed them all kinds of ways. But maybe in this universe they lived on something else. I wish my great-grandfather were still alive; I would ask him. But he is long dead.

After we finish the picnic lunch the sunflower girl and I spread a blanket and lie down beneath a tree. The river flows past at our feet. I have resolved not to make a play for her, but I cannot help myself. And I can tell she wants me to. I am ravenous after my long voyage. Once free, my passion knows no bounds. She understands how it must be. "Again," she says. "I want you, want you, want you!"

I work monotonous days on my new job, and nights the sunflower girl drives down from her mountain and we make love. I have bought a chair to sit in at work, and I sit in it and stare at the black and burning mountain. The media now refer to me as "The Collapsar Man," and often I have to chase reporters and cameramen away. I ask the sunflower girl if she would like to live with me, but she shakes her head and says no, that then both of us would wind up on 3V. But it is fine the way .it is: sometimes she arrives early enough to fix dinner, and when she does not she brings dinner in a wicker basket. We make love, and in the morning she drives back to her castle on the mountain.

She invites me to another party. I am not quite the novelty I was before, but girls are glad to dance with me when I ask. I dance infrequently with the sunflower girl, she dances most the night with a tall black-haired man she introduced as Gib Draksen. He is just back from France. It would appear they knew each other before. He is as marvelous a dancer as she, and they do intricate adagios on the floor. I am proud of her, proud that she is such a fine dancer and proud that she loves me. I have driven the

company car and she does not need to take me home, and we kiss good-night on the castle steps in the gentle light of a gibbous moon.

I go to visit my folks. I have already initiated repairs upon the house. My father is walking with a cane. I find it hard to believe he is my father. I find it hard to believe he used to crawl around in mines, like my grandfather did, and my great-grandfather before them. I wonder if my father ever saw the devil. If he did he has never said so.

Sometimes I wish that clocks did not radically slow down during velocities approaching that of light. Then I would be old too. Then I would not need to feel foolish when I look at my middle-aged younger brother. But were this true, the black-hole flyby could never have been made.

I return to my house in the valley. I am eager to see the sunflower girl again, even though I have only been away two days. I expect her to drive down to see me, but she does not. I wait for days. Finally I call her, and she says she has been very busy lately and just hasn't been able to get away and that she will come down to see me as soon as she can. I spend my evenings watching 3V.

This morning one of the colliery lights on the illuminated map turns bright red. Colliery 151-A. I call this to the attention of the dispatcher on duty. His name is Benton. "It merely means we should eliminate the colliery from our computations," he tells me. "Something's gone wrong and loused up their production."

"What could have gone wrong?"

He shrugs. "I don't know. It's not our business."

I call the colliery up. The voice that answers is half hysterical. "Cave-in."

"How bad?"

"Fifty-two men. If we had help we could probably get them out before there's another."

"What about your off-shift men?"

"They're on their way. But the mining town's almost forty miles away and they'll never make it in time. All I've got here is one man and a bunch of goddamn machines!"

I hang up.

I look at the map.

There are four coptrucks within a fifty mile radius of Colliery 151A. One of them is within ten miles of the mine. Each contains three men.

Three highly-paid men.

Benton is looking at me. I can feel his eyes. I turn slowly from the map. He does not say anything. Instead, I hear Lamarche's voice. "We move coal. That is all we do." Illogically, he adds, "Two hundred thousand a year."

I look back at Benton. "Like you say, it's not our business."

At noon Lamarche calls in and asks for me. Although he does not say so, I know he has heard about the cave-in. "Everything okay up there, Commander?"

"Yes sir," I say.

"No delays, reroutings, holdups of any kind?"

"No sir," I say.

"Good. Stay right with it, Commander."

"Yes sir," I say.

I stand staring at the black and burning mountain. I stand staring at it for a long time. Then I lay my beeper on the desk and walk out.

I drive the company car down the mountain to my house in the valley town. I park it in front of the house and go in and collect the things I brought, pack them and go back outside. I walk to the center of town to the bus terminal and buy a one-way ticket to the town where my mother and father live. When the bus arrives I board it and ride through valleys and around mountains and over hills.

My mother does not question me when I walk into the house. Neither does my father. I call the

sunflower girl. I want to explain to her the way it is with me so she will not think ill of me when her father tells her that I quit. The phone rings and rings. At length someone picks it up. A woman's voice says, "Yes?" It must be the voice of one of the maids. "I want to speak to Berenice."

"You can't right now, sir. She's at her engagement party."

I do not know what I said; but I must have said something, for the voice says, "Mr. Gilbert Draksen."

Soon they will be able, morally, to do intricate adagios in bed.

It comes over the radio that a second cave-in has doomed the fifty-two miners. I go out and sit on the front porch. There is still daylight remaining. You can see a black mountain from our town. There are black mountains throughout the land of coal. They are monuments to human progress. I do not know whether I passed into another universe or not, but if I did, this one is exactly the same as the one I left. The poor are no nobler than the rich, the devil always cuts the deck, and the girls I left behind me are no different from the one I met.