

This story concerns a contest, a contestant and a beautiful wife; also, perhaps, that ancient Biblical quotation that says "take therefore no thought for the morrow; for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself".

The Contest

By Gavin Hyde

Illustrated by Orban

CYL MAR walked toward the center of the city in the yellow early afternoon, increasingly annoyed by the intrusion of unimportant domestic memories that his mind relived, not without embarrassment, and a sense of his own failing. Today, when he had turned to her at the door, he could have said, "Goodbye, I'll see you in an hour or so." There were many things he could have said which would have freed him from his conscience during his walk down. But he couldn't. He tightened up and could say nothing of how he felt. For his mind was tense with the anticipated combat to soon take place in a cubicle behind the great hanging thought-transmission screen. The cubicle and thought-transmission screen had been in use continuously until yesterday, but now they were idle, along with the

two TT machines, waiting for the last round in the contest.

She should understand—on today, of all days! He never spoke to anyone before a match. Speech disturbed the strength and color of one's thoughts because it was more difficult than thinking. It also involved the acceptance of another personality.

In the contest, acceptance was a very bad thing. So was this memory analysis, Cyl thought. Asking himself why he hadn't spoken to his wife! This slipping back in the train of thought would never do in the contest. That was the theory of Jons, the foremost analyst of developments, anyway. What was it he said in the Thought-Transmission Annual? "The contest consists of the conflict between two imaginations. Each must analyze the interest and logic of the other, trying to



possess the resultant theme through complex development of thought. The drive, the momentum of the imagination is the telling factor in the contest."

Cyl had *studied* that statement! It had been released by Jons after his tragic retirement. Like other philosophers who had dreamed of perpetual control and championship, he had been eliminated soon after the birth of the contest—when the powerful and mercenary sponsors moved in, bringing with them their strange assortment of thinkers.

One year the contest was won by a barber who could maintain the most powerful (and infinitely boring) thought train based on current events, suicides, wrecks, filibusters, sports, and scandals. Rumor said that his simple training consisted of a glance at the morning paper.

Then there was the fisherman who could turn from the most delicate winding of a gold silken thread on a trout fly to the baleful glare of a giant squid, almost, it seemed, "faster than the transmission of thought."

People had only heard about the new and exciting thought-transmission device when a last holdout of the decadent "Quiz" show M.C.'s decided it would be a good gag to get a married man from the audience, put him on-stage with a beautiful girl, and telecast the interchange of ideas. It was imperative his wife be in the audience. Oh, yes! That was half the fun, watching her reaction to her husband's futile attempt to avoid what might be called a public mental infidelity.

Well, the booming growth of the

contest was past, but even now Cyl never knew what to expect during the first rounds of elimination. Three months before this final day, Cyl had been faced with hopeful after hopeful, never knowing what sort of attack was coming with the sound of the buzzer. A roller-skater had thrown a scare into him with that infernal organ giving off its regular, unconquerable squeals, plus the sound of all the skates the pudgy boy could muster into his mind, rolling and rolling!

Every time Cyl began to get the upper hand by, say, increasing the speed until it was impossible to imagine that one was on skates and then switching to skis, or something like that, the boy would project a sign saying ALL SKATERS or COUPLES ONLY and there Cyl would be, back in the rink.

However, by a stroke of luck Cyl had broken his leg once in his amateurish attempts to go backward, and he was able to bring back the terrible ring of hot, over-sympathetic faces that immediately surrounded him. He just continued the idea of the injury, the ride in the copter-ambulance, the hospital, ether, blood. Rather a rude way to treat a child, but what was one to do? To Cyl this was a business. Children had to take their chances with the rest.

Cyl remembered the semi-finals, and one of those people who continually turned up at the contest, experts in a certain field, like glass-blowers, taxidermists, diamond cutters, even orchid fanciers. He almost paid dearly for his love of the strange, the beautiful. When the buzzer sounded he had found

himself submerged in a light-green place, in a struggle with what seemed a tremendous piece of carved jade. It had four paddles sticking out which waved, pushed and scratched. In all his life his opponent had had but one job, that of removing tortoises from the canneries' holding-tanks by turning them on their backs. Cyl had diminished the size of the shell, transforming it laboriously into a girl's bathing suit. Then he had started at top and bottom developing her body, and had managed just in time to gain dominance. The judges' decision had been long in coming even though they were experts at perceiving the telltale "unexpected metamorphosis of a thought", as Jons called it.

BUT NOW, on this day, there was only Cyl's brain against one more. He looked at their pictures on the program. It was funny, those two heads, awkward-looking things, being capable of waging a battle against each other. Cyl knew what was in the head on the right. That was his. The other one was his opponent. He would have to be powerful to have come so far.

Cyl, for his part, had worried about every opponent. He must have the sure sweep of dreams to hurl at his last adversary. He had to win for his wife. He kept telling himself it wasn't prestige he was after. He had to do it for Lin, because he felt he must somehow pay for the gulf that had widened between them because of his preoccupation with the contest. He had practically stopped talking alto-

gether! He loved her. He knew it as he watched her moving around the house. But he could not afford the distraction involved in giving her his love. There he was, night after night, his mind rising to a point of secure joy in having her and then receding into the problems of the contest. Cyl knew that everything had to be sacrificed.

A few weeks before, in a state of exasperation at the thought of facing a chess champion, he had taken his chess pieces out to try to figure some way to foil his opponent. Chessplayers and scientists in specialized fields had a quality called conformance. It helped them, but it was also a weakness. Every time these people won by the use of the same image. From one round to the next, they projected the one idea that obsessed them. What they hoped for was that they would draw either a sequence of men who could comprehend their theories, or that those who didn't would be too stupid to distract them. Cyl had to break down the chessplayer's conformance, somehow, think of something that would wreck the precision of a chess game. The answer had come to him. He decided he would simply create a physical experience here and now which he could bring to mind during his mental struggle with the master. So he scooped up the chess pieces and walked to the kitchen, savoring the experience as much as possible. He dropped the little dolls into the disposal unit, one by one, as if he were supposed to be absolutely sure of their death. It was evident from the gritty, staccato whine that the appliance was not made for grinding

plastatron. It soon stopped dead. That had been unfortunate, but to Cyl's joy, he found it enabled him to retrieve the chips and dust that used to be chessmen. This treasure he carried back to the board. He played a couple of mock-serious games with the rubble. He pushed a little bit of dust here, captured a chip there, and finally checkmated a beheaded King. The crazy thing about it was that when he had finished and jumbled the remains off onto the floor, he had felt sure his idea would be a success.

It was understandable that Lin would take a dim view of the insane operation, but Cyl had really been surprised at her that time. She became very emotional, cried, said he didn't understand her. What a peculiar thing to say! Anyway, he couldn't worry about something like that now. If he won there would be lots of time to make up for the strain.

CYL bent close to the picture on the program again. What he knew about his opponent wasn't going to be of much use because this man was one of those frightening dark horses. Hardly anyone went to see him. Why? Everybody liked Cyl's projections. They were varied, subtle. He liked them that way.

Sometimes they were full of the conversation of things that had never talked before, almost going out of control as though he were just a loudspeaker, through which one could hear, at last, the sound of a clam working its way into the sand, or a goose's bill rattling at

the corn in some far and frosty field.

And the other man? His name was Grus. Those who had been curious enough to watch him at work had come back with an old story. Surely it could not be true that he had come so far on some sort of sexual pitch! But they all assured Cyl there was nothing out of the ordinary about the man. Each time he started the round with a very dull series of transmissions, identified by most people as being connected with the mechanics of common machines. That was plausible. The paper had said Grus was a home-appliance repairman. Anyway, they went on, Grus would continue these occupational ramblings until his opponent overpowered them. Then he would switch to the image of a woman, the switch being effected with apparent ease. From that moment on Grus' competitors had little power over the development of the thought. The most peculiar quality in the women Grus imagined was the plain, unexciting appearance—no beautiful bodies or come-hither looks. These were just old or young, bored or sad, forgotten or unloved women. Many of his opponents had been questioned after the round. Who was the woman? What was the power of Grus' thought? Not one of the men had an answer. Naturally the beaten ones didn't feel much like talking to reporters and curious contestants, but from what they did say it was definite the woman on the screen was no acquaintance, living, dead, or dreamed.

A voice from the instrument over

the door said, "Mr. Mar, you have five minutes."

Then he heard his wife's steps click-clicking down the smooth, white hall. She came into the room and sat down, with her purse, as though the setting-down of the purse was just as important as the seating of the body. She knew she mustn't speak. . .

Cyl would either have to invent TT machines that could be carried by husband and wife or quit the contest. He wasn't worried about himself. He could live among the suspended splinters of his mind. Reactions were conversation. But then there was love, which could never be kept within the safe confines of the mind. Love was too frantic. It broke through the skull and left its hard cloven hoofprints everywhere, never forgetting, though, to return to rest, to sleep, and to play its surprising part in the drama of dreams as a young African girl swimming, or a red-skirted maid who has lingered a moment too long in the garden, who stops just once on the walk under the ivory wall, to look into your eyes.

Cyl walked past Lin. He almost said something to her as he paused before stepping out into the hall, but he knew she would have released a flood of words. He couldn't afford to think about what she said now. Her white-gloved hand was lightly closed on the orange front-row ticket.

There was no cheering when Cyl walked across the stage and sat down. The Contest Board had asked that noise be kept to a minimum. But there was always a heavy murmur, feet scuffling and cough-

ing. It was soothing to Cyl. He had been a favorite in his long fight and he knew they wanted to see him crowned. Especially since most of them had seen Grus at the projection and had developed a firm dislike for him.

Grus seemed to be calm, had his helmet adjusted, and was chatting with one of the technicians.

THE RED LIGHT was on. The audience quieted. Cyl thought of the hum of bees working in a group of white, weatherbeaten hives. He hoped this would emerge well on the screen after the buzzer and also attack at close quarters by the white enamel kitchen that he expected from Grus. There was the buzzer.

It was chaotic, like the beginning of every round between strong imaginations. Cyl worked to establish two levels of thought. One dictated his course of action. The other was the actual, projected thought which would affect the screen picture. This was usual, because if one's strategy got mixed up with one's projection he would become easy prey to the simplest idea from his opponent.

He had guessed almost right. Grus started with the inner parts of the hamper of a common laundry system. It was sorting the clothes into different groups, delicate rayons one way, denim work-clothes another. Cyl's hives were petrifying the cloth and his bees were becoming more and more numerous, so that when he had thought them all out of the hives there was a cloud of humming,

walking, flying, seething bees that was shutting out the whiteness of the laundry. Grus backed his clothes down through the machine until they reached the washing element and began turning Cyl's bees into dirty suds, flowing and pushing. It was time for Cyl to make his play for dominance.

The sea. He was looking back over the stern of a ship. The water was boiling away from him with the ferocity that only the sea has. The clothes became translucent eels, falling over each other in their effort to feed on the remaining bees. They leaped out and slimed against each other. They dove in the white froth.

Grus was trying to bring back the precision of his machine. He tried to ram Cyl head-on with the image of black pistons and sharp cogs soaking and dripping in oil. The machine parts became obvious only at intervals, in the dark lines that surrounded the white foam, but the viscosity was ruining Cyl's spray, and his eels were flowing together into a conveyor belt. So out of the sleek pistons Cyl made darting sharks with black, black fins that slashed among the eels, dividing them and throwing their mauled, bloody bodies aside into the greener brine. Cyl relaxed, but realized moments later that Grus was not the pushover he had seemed so far.

For Cyl's sharks, which had promised to be unapproachable in speed and ferocity, had, with perfect subtlety, been turned into a group of men in tails enjoying a Christmas party. The dazzling foam was a swirling snowfall, the

blood a spray of holly berries here and there among green spears of pine and fir. Grus was doing his best work in black and white. His stiff, black men were like dolls, perambulating around a Christmas tree. Grus was not sympathetic with the green and red that had been left over from Cyl's image, for those colors were suffering a snow change, becoming colder, whiter, crisper as the winter fell in upon them. The walls disappeared into the gloomy whiteness, the tree was heavier with snow, but the men who before seemed festive took on a funereal quality. The slow flakes passed them, for they were just visiting. The background remained a dark void. The tree never reached the formless stage, but shook itself and weaved from side to side. It was a huge white bear. The men stopped their slow traveling at this and as though at a signal filed into the dark cave. The animal turned, hunched and shook himself once more, and followed them.

As a man wakes who has been forbidden to sleep, Cyl escaped the other man's mind with a feeling of total fear, mental and physical. He looked apprehensively at the clock. Grus had managed only to catch up what he had lost in the beginning of the round. But why did he stop? He must have tired his mind, until his thoughts just fell from the peak of imaginative power into that shaded opening, fatigue.

Cyl was reassured of this as he let his mind slip back to the projection. Grus had returned to a sleek, silent home-freezer. Cyl threw himself into the effort to reach Grus with some thought that

would be familiar to him. He had to do that before he could metamorphose the idea for his own purposes. By imagining the storage contents of the box, Cyl brought into the projection a lot of waxed cartons of ice cream. As he reveled in their cold, sweet smell he saw himself as the head on a coin, buried in a large, square, white birthday cake. He heard the muffled voices of the children singing "Happy Birthday to You," the girls fairly well oriented to the words and rhythm of the song, the boys lagging behind or forging ahead, as well as the voice of one misguided child who was familiar only with the words, "Home, Home on the Range," for he used these lyrics for each line.

THE SONG was finished now and he could hear the candles snapping and fluttering above him. Suddenly there was noise. The table shuddered, forks and knives clanged together, fists pounded on the crepe tablecloth and pieces of gum were pressed against the underside of the table with a faint squashing sound. The knife hissed through the airy cake, but contrary to tradition, it caught Cyl on his serrated edge and rolled him out on the plate, bared. All that remained was the knife which lay beside him and his wife's face. She looked down at him from above with gray indifference.

Cast out of dominance by his wife's image? It *was* she! Yet it wasn't. She didn't look like that, walking down the street. That wasn't the way she looked when she sat and watched him perform.

He glanced quickly at her seat. It was empty.

The projection now showed her lying on their bed. For an instant Cyl felt embarrassed at the idea of her being held up in front of the public, but then he realized that to them it was just any old mid-morning housewife.

Cyl looked down again, searching the auditorium seats. Then he saw her. She wasn't out yet. But she was walking quickly away, a small back in the shadows of the great hall. All the faces were turned to him except one. She moved toward the little door so far up the aisle. There was a flash of white light.

She was gone.

Gone? The word echoed in his mind like the bell on the door of a grocery store. It rang. Someone had left, left him among the sweet smells of coffeecake and wheat crackers. So much alone, here. He wanted to run to the jingle door and yell, "Come back! What about all these wonderful things? These wonderful things we are going to have? Lin! These . . ." But the bell had tinkled. It had already said, "gone."

Cyl's mind wandered, crazed, over the events of the last few moments. Grus. Grus. What had he done? Something like the chessmen. That's what Cyl and Lin were like now, wasn't it? Grus had picked them up before, sliced them up. Then he had strewn the pieces. Grus, come a-riding to Cyl's door on one of his cement mixers. See this! You have a silver candlestick, mister? He'll make dimes of it, and for half price!

Grus dominating the screen, for Cyl could no longer focus on the

contest of thoughts . . . his thoughts were now only of Lin. No reason to go on trying, nothing down here in the ashes, in the obsidian loneliness where the flowers, once so red and yellow, are black and painful—for the lack of the lovely eyes to look upon them. Lin's eyes.

And when he saw her eyes again for that fleeting moment, he saw a light. It was a light of memory only, now that everything was over, but he had to cling to it. Anything to save him from the utter darkness. He saw a plain with stars overhead, and down below the myriad lights of a festival. For Cyl, a beginning. A beautiful memory, Lin, the first time he had looked at her.

She was a young girl standing near the crowd that had gathered to watch one of those rocket launchings. They were all jabbering. The danger. The chances one took! Oh, the bravery. Except for the children, of course, who were stealing things to take back to their bedrooms. The police were working their way around the circle trying to keep people from breaking into the flash zone. She was standing near the knot of pilots, who were attaching to their bodies the equipment they could put on outside of the rocket. It was obvious she wanted to go nearer but was too self-conscious to do so, or perhaps afraid she might touch one of them strangely, on the shoulder, and thus enchant him forever. Yes, she was afraid that some part of her might go with these heroes and yet she was loath to believe she could give them nothing. Then one of them said, "Take a good look, wonderboys. That may be the last chick

you'll see, let alone get close to." At this she turned away with a look of infinite pity and resignation that left her eyes burning in the night, there on the plain, and walked back into the city.

Once more. Cyl saw her eyes, luminous. Springtime.

Springtime, and the contest had ended for the year. He was in one of his favorite haunts, the Museum of Natural History, in the room of the luminous minerals. It was wonderful to stand there, in the dark, with thousands of eternal eyes looking at you, all impassive. There was no accusation there; only a silent, heavenly atmosphere of immortality.

Someone was standing on the other side of the room. Silhouetted against pale green stones etched with fantastic pink lines, was the girl he had seen the year before. He couldn't see her features, but he knew from the shock to his senses that it must be she.

Soon Cyl stood very near her. He wanted to go on, really, go on around and out into the sunlight of the courtyard. It would be much simpler than marrying this woman, after all. But it was too late to go on.

He looked past her hair, a last time, at the doorway. But his eyes returned to her face. Now he had to take her with him. He had to find out what she did all day. He was unaccountably afraid to look at her as he said this, so he squinted at his watch and said, "Why don't we have a drink somewhere? It's time."

Lin had made flowery days of the summer. Intense, electric eve-

nings sprang fiercely into the sheltered heart of the dense foliage outside Cyl's window. The nights slid away from the circle of the week as quickly as the delicate balance of midnight was disturbed.

In the fall, when Cyl looked out and saw the ice-cream man and the children and the shoppers running before red leaves in the wind, he told Lin that he was determined to marry her immediately. Every day Cyl discovered that he was wrong when he decided that one or another part of her face or body was most beautiful. One morning he was convinced her lips were so cool and fragrant that the rest of the day must be evil to soften them. And that night as he watched sleep invade that same flesh he was sorry to see the effects of the day's experiences erased. . .

THE BUZZER and the last rude noises in the great Thought-Transfer machine were unwelcome in Cyl's life now, because there was no life. None that he wanted.

The loud speakers were blaring the name of Cyl Mar! The Board had written his name on the blank check and had cast a huge picture of it on the back wall of the auditorium, for the spectators to see on their way out.

The contest was over. He had forgotten all about the contest. Grus? He had forgotten all about Grus. There was only memory and Lin. Stunned, Cyl heard himself being asked for a few words and he felt his lips say the same things he had always said.

They let him go, he stumbled

past Grus, who was collecting all his certificates, credit cards, and prizes for runner-up. The crowd was leaving in a vast, swelled murmur. He wanted to get away, lock himself in his cubicle and rave at himself as a fool screams at a fool, louder, louder! Make faces at himself, feel his face with his hands, as though the physical world which he had seemed to reject would believe this sort of proof that he recognized it. But all the indirect, mystic, or magical tricks would never bring her back. Exhausted, he stood on the edge of the stage, where the gray seats stretched away from him like waves in a sea. The crowd was gone, the auditorium empty. The technicians behind him were testing the equipment, before switching off. One of the mechanics wore the thought helmet, projecting plush leather, red wine, and ivory women on the screen, smiling.

Cyl did not move. He looked up and yet further up through the empty auditorium. It was not quite empty.

His breath tightened, and his heart moved in the hollowness.

A single person sat alone in the very last row. The person did not move. The person looked back down over the emptiness, reaching as Cyl was reaching. She was very beautiful.

Lin.

She had decided to go, had walked out forever, because she had thought Grus was right, because she was ashamed. But once outside, she had paused, thought Cyl, and gone to the balcony to watch, to see all of it, to know the rest.

Lin. Lin. She sat above, quiet.

He did not trust himself to call out to her. He turned to the machine, the technicians, the helmet. Quietly, he took the helmet, placed it on his head. He closed his eyes. He knew what he could, what he must, paint there on the screen.

And there it was for her. There it happened for her eyes.

On the screen, a picture of himself walking off the stage and up the aisle. And a picture of her getting up from her place in the balcony and walking out through the door and down the quiet stairs. Himself

coming out into the lobby, their meeting. And now they were taking each others' hands, warm and belonging, and now they were kissing, now moving silently past the cool fountains, out of the theatre.

He opened his eyes and removed the helmet. A glance told him that, in the balcony, Lin was already suiting action to the image. She rose. She was smiling. She turned and walked.

Cyl stepped down from the stage. He started up the aisle. Then, he was running.

———— THE END ————

SAY "HELLO" FOR ME

(Continued from page 103)

ly don't know."

But the two spacemen, though they didn't refer to it—were not concerned with the body so much as the aura of completeness, the radiation of contentment which came from somewhere within.

And it was passing strange that nothing more was said about the Professor returning to Earth. No great revelation, suddenly arrived at, that he would not go. Rather, they discussed various things, that three gentlemen, meeting casually, would discuss.

Then Professor Pettibone arose from his chair and said, "It was kind of you to drop off and see me."

And one of the spacemen replied, "A pleasure, sir. A real pleasure indeed."

Then the Professor left the ship

and watched it lift up on a tail of red fire and go away. He raised an arm and waved. "Say hello for me," he called. Then he turned away and, from force of habit, he began again to polish the hull, knowing that he would keep it shining, and be proud of it, for many years to come.

Almost beyond reach of the planet, one of the spacemen flipped a switch and put certain sensitive communication mechanisms to work. So sensitive, they could pick up etheric vibrations far away and make them audible.

But only faintly, came the pleasant voice of a contented man:

"Good morning bright sunshine,
We're glad you are here.
You make the world . . ."

———— THE END ————