

MEGISTOTHEOS

AND MY

"Animula Vagula"

By

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I rode the world, like Noah, much annoyed
Because I knew not whence or whither bound;
And so anon I sent my soul to sound
The measureless, chaotic, unplumbed void.

My feverish doubts, with scanty hope alloyed,
Were soon confirmed. My soul through depths profound
Had vainly flown, around and yet around,
From star to star, until, with flying cloyed,

Wing weary, she returned to me and said:
"There is no whither, whence, that I can see;"
Then added with a smile and nod of head
(She has a way with her of wizardry):
"But I have found your human nesting zone!"
Herewith I make the tale she told my own.



MEGISTOTHEOS AND MY "ANIMULA VAGULA"

On one of the loftiest and most distant altitudes in the realm of Space, overlooking at comparatively close quarters a gorgeous spiral nebula, is the great *Laboratorium Ovarum Humanorum*, or, as we should call it, the Cosmical Human Hatchery. Biologists are a unit, I believe, in ascribing the variations and vagaries of human character, in part at least, to the treatment received by the *ova* at the hands of the Laboratory Chief, Megistothéos, and his corps of assistants.

One celestial day, a little over a half century ago according to mundane reckoning, I became aware quite suddenly of a sense of consciousness, although I was still in a partially ovoid state of being. The first words I remember hearing and understanding were those of one attendant to another: "Here's a little foetus about ready for a change; take it over to the Old Man and see what he wants to do with it." I was placed in a tiny box about the size of Job's Coffin, and carried across a courtyard, approximately a quarter of a light year in width, to the Private Office of Megistothéos.

As we were passing through the courtyard my attendant stopped by the wall to look at the nebula. I could barely see it myself over the edge of my box. I gazed in wonder at the sight. There before me, only a little way out in space, was a huge, whirling, sputtering, fuming mass of incandescence. What appeared to be great sparks flew off at short intervals; some of these sparks apparently faded out, while

others, uniting with one another, seemed to form small, red-hot globules, that began to circle majestically and circumspectly around the dazzlingly brilliant central core.

I asked the attendant to tip the box a bit that I might see better. As he obligingly did so, I heard him mutter something about "winning that bet sure." I asked him what he meant, but he was evidently embarrassed, and refused to commit himself. Then I heard him counting from one to eleven. "I win," he ejaculated, "unless another one comes off." Hardly had he spoken when a final spark of immense size flew out of the glowing nucleus of the nebula and began to circle about. "Holy Rigel," exclaimed my attendant, "I'm done!" He picked me up in haste, but not before I had managed to count twelve fiery globules now revolving around the center of the nebula.

As we proceeded my wonderment at what my guide could have had in mind grew steadily. In response to my repeated inquiries he kept putting me off with indifferent answers. "Oh, it's just a good-sized empyrean pin-wheel," he said; "we have them hereabouts frequently; you'll see a lot more before you reach your destination."

Just then I noted a huge sign hanging on a uranographical post, illuminated by a small star, a moderately flaming asteroid, which had evidently been captured and pressed into this special service. It traveled slowly around the sign lighting up the latter intermittently.

To distract my attention from the sign, doubtless, my attendant, assuming a deep interest, vouchsafed the information that that light had to be adjusted every day or two, since the Precession of the Equinoxes kept disarranging it and carrying it farther away from the sign. I learned later that what he meant by the term "day" was the sidereal day, a totally different thing in both length and quality from our terrestrial day. But my attention was not to be drawn from

that sign. Although my guide quickened his pace enormously, I was able to make out the words, which at once explained his strange conduct and remarks while stopping to gaze at the nebula.

The sign read as follows:

NOTICE!

TO ALL ASSISTANT HATCHERS, ASSOCIATE FERTILIZERS,
OVOCURATORS, SPERMHANDLERS, AND OTHER
EMPLOYES OF THIS LABORATORY:

YOUR ATTENTION IS CALLED TO SECTION RIGHT ASCEN-
SION 47 MINUTES, 32 SECONDS OF THE REVISED
STELLAR CODE, TO WIT:

All betting on the possible or probable movements, motions, development, evolution, or other changes of any and every kind, of astral bodies of whatsoever sort, spiral or amorphous nebulae, caudate or incaudate comets, incipient or senescent suns whether single or binary, calorific or gelid asteroids and satellites, constellations, galaxies, lacteal streams, or any other known or unknown body, substance, or matter moving in or through space, *is hereby strictly forbidden*. Violators of this Section, if detected, are liable to a fine of not less than one trillion nor more than five trillion Northern Crowns, and to thirty sidereal days' imprisonment in the Coal Sack of the Via Lactea.

By Order of

MEGISTOTHEOS,
Laboratory Superintendent

I began to muse aloud, unaware that my guard was listening. "That's a strange prohibition," I said; "sounds like a Federal Court Injunction. What's the idea, I wonder?" I ran over in my mind a number of possible reasons, but they seemed to have no validity. The guard, perceiving that I had read and comprehended the sign, at last broke out with ill-suppressed resentment: "It's nothing but a lot of firmamental tommyrot! They won't even let

us foetus-internes go swimming in our river Eridanus on a sidereal Saturday, because it contaminates Hercules' drinking-water, and because the whale Cetus might get us! Isn't that the cosmic limit? And as for wagering a bit on whether an extra planet or two will spill out of a nebula, what on Canopus is the harm? Everything's a chance, isn't it? It certainly is up in these parts, *you bet*—I mean-er—I assure you—subject, of course, to some fool Law that we don't know anything about—not even the Old Man," he added under his breath as an afterthought. "If you land where I think you are going to," he continued with a significant glance at me, "you'll see for yourself, although on a different scale. I suppose they think that a little betting interferes with our work—"

"What *is* your job here?" I interrupted; for, though I thought I knew, I wanted a specific statement. The attendant blushed and stammered, but soon recovering from his embarrassment replied steadily: "Why, preparing the so-called higher organisms, that is, human organisms, for the various and sufficiently cooled places in the Universe suitable for their habitation." "Well," I said, "that's an important job, isn't it? It would seem so to me, since I am, or am to be, one of those organisms." I was surprised at my own intuition. "Y-e-e-s, I suppose it is," he admitted. "We *do* get a little careless at times, I know, and spoil whole batches of embryos, and get called down by the Old Man; but we can't always do a perfect job; a lot of poor stuff gets by in spite of our best care. You'll see later down yonder—" He checked himself quickly, and I perceived that he thought he was speaking a little too freely. It was evidently not his province to discuss their destination with human foetuses. In a moment he reverted to the former phase of the subject. "You see, our Egg-selectors, and Sperm-pickers are the best to be had in the entire cosmic orrery, but they aren't infallible

by any means. Even with the best Universal microscopes they make many errors. *The two original cells tell most of the story.* Once an egg and a spermatozoön get mixed, it's all off, except for what our nurses and internes can do in a small way, in the matter of food and care, during the very earliest stages, and except for the conditions surrounding the organism in the place to which the Old Man sends it. And that's an awful gamble, too," he added sympathetically.

I saw that the Unknown and the Unknowable seemed to weigh upon his mind, without, however, awakening in him more than a passing interest, and, as I had never yet had time to give any thought to those things, I was getting a trifle bored. It was with some relief, therefore, that I heard my guide at last announce our arrival at the great Private Office of the Laboratory Superintendent, Megistothéos.

II

My memory is fairly good, but it is quite impossible for me to describe in any detail the simple elegance of that Executive Office Building. John's Patmos dream of a City on High compares rather unfavorably with my recollection of Megistothéos' headquarters, although the latter's beauty is not so garish, nor its effulgence so dazzling, nor its composition so diverse. A soft crepuscular glow of uniform and carefully modulated intensity, wonderfully restful to the eye, seemed to suffuse the entire place, and to enhance its quiet majesty. It was a place to be felt rather than examined, evidently the heart itself, silent but unmistakably working, of the great Laboratory. After the fuss and flurry of fertilization alembics, utero-genesis retorts, placental measurements, and the frank and generally vapid conversations of internes and nurses, all of which had been hitherto the chief part of my young life, the stillness and dignity of this great hall were strikingly refreshing. I had an agreeable

feeling that here I should learn something definite and positive touching the conditions of my destiny, notwithstanding an abiding conviction, subconsciously held, that nothing could either predetermine or alter what we are pleased to call Fate. I knew I was going somewhere, but *where*? A sense of futility seemed to accompany my pleasurable emotions as we entered the main corridor of the building.

In a low voice my attendant invited my attention to the marvelous lighting effects. "You see," he said, and there was wonderment in his tone in spite of his daily association with these exceptional phenomena, "You see, we use the Pleiades as a special chandelier when they are at perihelion—*helios* with us, of course, meaning the central luminary of the Universe—and then we shift to the Coma Berenices (Berenice's Hair) when the Pleiades are at aphelion. This happens about once a week—sidereal week, you understand. Nice, soft light, isn't it?" I had to admit that it was. Indeed, I was so impressed with the simple and solemn grandeur of the place that for a time I lost the power of articulation, and failed to ask my informant a question which I urgently wanted answered, namely, where that central *helios* was to which he had alluded. If I *had* asked him, I have no doubt now that he would have shrugged his shoulders and referred me to the "Old Man," as he called him, on the ground that it was not for him to discuss profound speculative questions with insignificant little fetuses like me.

We were now mounting a celestial stairway of transcendent magnificence, which wound around the inside of the structure in a vast elliptical curve. Far above towered, in a golden haze of star light, a huge but graceful dome, with a gallery running completely around its interior. The dome seemed to be wholly transparent, as if it were a solid diamond. Through it I caught glimpses, as I have since caught them through our largest telescopes but on a far less astounding

scale, of heavenly galaxies, immensely magnified, that stunned my perceptive faculties and left nothing whatsoever to my imagination. My attendant, seeing me staring upward agape, whispered, "If you have a chance, get the Old Man to take you up there before he starts you off. It's a nifty sight." I believed him, although objecting mentally to his commonplace language.

Reaching the top of the stairway I leaned out of my box and looked down the hollow well, from which a gentle heat seemed to be rising in regular waves. Never shall I forget the feeling of nausea and fear that overpowered me at that moment. I was on the point of falling when my attendant, seizing me between his thumb and forefinger, poked me back into my bed of prenatal cotton with the unfeeling remark, "You don't want to end it all right here, do you? You've hardly begun yet. Collect yourself now, for here we are at the main works." This last was in an awesome whisper.

He halted before a topaz door larger than the Gates of Gaza. On the door was a card brilliantly lettered, containing this announcement:

MEGISTOTHEOS

PH.D. (DOCTOR OF PHYLOGENY) ORIONIC COSMOLOGICAL
INSTITUTE, CO.D. (DOCTOR OF COSMOGONY), AND
T.D. (DOCTOR OF THEOGONY) UNIVERSITY OF
ANDROMEDA

ZODIACAL PROFESSOR AND HEAD OF THE DEPARTMENT
OF ASTROPHYSICS AND SIDEREAL CHEMISTRY IN THE
COLLEGES OF THE NORTHERN AND SOUTHERN CROSS
SPECIAL LECTURER ON THE PRIMITIVE STATE OF LIFE AND
CIVILIZATIONS ON THE TERRESTRIAL SPHERE AND
SIMILAR SPHEROIDS WITH NON-INCANDESCENT
SURFACES

MEMBER OF THE CELESTIAL THEISTIC SOCIETY FOR THE
IMPROVEMENT OF CEREBRAL FACILITIES IN "HOMO
MUNDANUS"

DIRECTOR OF THE COSMICAL HUMAN EMBRYO
LABORATORY

Laboratory Hours: Daily from 4004 A.M. to 1923 P.M.
(Sidereal Time)

Underneath this card, which covered a space of about fifty degrees of arc, was a smaller card bearing the legend,

THIS IS TERRESTRIAL DAY

After allowing me considerable time in which to decipher the larger card—for at my age I could not be expected to be familiar with all the words, although I seemed to get some intimation as to their general significance—my attendant whispered to me: "Some personage, eh? He's the berries all right, theologically speaking; nobody else up around here has anything on him. You see this is *Terrestrial Day*, that is, the day when the Old Man receives, examines, passes, destroys, or sends back to the Incubation Building footuses of your kind. On other days he takes care of chrysalides destined for other spheres. There's Poseidonian Day, Uranian Day, Saturnine Day, Jovial Day, Martial Day, Venereal Day, and Mercurial Day; and of course he has days for many other little worlds, the names of which would mean nothing to you. *Terrestrial Day* is always his busiest day, because your population is increasing at such an unfortunate and alarming rate, and his hardest day because so many of you can't pass even the Army Psychology Test, are afflicted with congenital megacephalitis and free-verse writing itch, and use no judgment whatever in the choice of your parents. The Old Man is working hard on those problems in his spare hours, and hopes some time, in a few celestial aeons—time or duration being nothing here—to bring about a little improvement. "I must say there's plenty of room for it," he added, with a pitying glance at my puny, naked, little self. "Now we'll go in," he said. "Going in always amuses the children. It gets them in good humor before they come up before the Old Man."

As he spoke he reached up and gave a pull at what looked like the Tail of the Dragon hanging from a hole in the door post. Without warning a dog began to bark fiercely in a

kennel beside the door. I shrank back in fear, but was reassured by my attendant, who told me it was only Canis Major, and not to take him Siriously. The huge double door swung slowly open on hinges as noiseless as a Transit of Venus; a group of morning stars sang together a melodious canticle; the eyes of Taurus twinkled mischievously; Aquila screamed; Capricornus made a feint of butting; the Pleiades shook in their sockets; Orion pulled his belt up a notch until three unoccupied holes showed; Leo roared; and the Charioteer took a mock swig from the Great Dipper.

Thoroughly enchanted by these friendly and agreeable constellational demonstrations, I was borne into Megistothéos' outer office, a lofty and pleasant room of great dimension and full of zodiacal light, a room which I cannot further describe because my guard sat down at once on a rather old-fashioned and uncomfortable Cassiopeian chair right opposite a door of the finest crown glass, through which I saw, busily engaged, the kindest-looking being it was ever my lot to behold. Thereafter my attention was almost wholly focused on that inner office. In response to an inquiring glance from me my attendant nodded. "That's him," he whispered in terrestrial street parlance, to my secret annoyance. Reaching over to a nearby stand he picked up a stray eocene copy of the *Cosmical Journal of Ontogeny, Published Epochally*, and with a prodigious and noisy yawn began to skim its pages. At last he settled down to the semi-serious perusal of an article by one of the young doctors of the Laboratory. I glanced up and noted with some indifference that the article was entitled: "*Possuntne Cellae Parentales Meliores Fieri?*" (Can the Parent Cells Be Made Better?) Why should I be interested in that? I thought; my bicellular period was over some time ago. I surveyed my diminutive, multicellular, well-rounded paunch with quiet satisfaction, and then resumed my observations of that fascinating inner office.

III

At a wide table, the top of which was a solid slab of chalcedony, surrounded by multifarious bacteriological paraphernalia, among which I noticed two or three powerful compound *macroscopes* (as I afterward came to know they were called), sat a dignified and benign personage. Wisdom, kindness, and nobility were in his face; character, firmness, and keen penetration shone from his eyes; and with it all was an inscrutable smile, a balanced compound of mockery, compassion, forbearance, and defiance. It was a smile that a lover and a cynic would equally envy, a smile both saintly and Mephistophelian. Evidently its possessor derided, decried, and defied Fate—unless indeed he were its master. "*Hodie mihi, cras tibi*," his smile seemed to say, "My time today, yours tomorrow." But it seemed to me that I could likewise read into that smile an unmistakable *amor hominum*, love for men, that seemed to suffuse me with a glow of confidence. Here was a being, man, superman, demigod, or god, I knew not which, whose knowledge and understanding of universal vitalism, that is, of life in all its shades and varieties, was clearly both prodigious and practical, but a being who none the less must needs stand baffled at times before inevitabilities, both supernal and terrene, which he could not check, alter, or control.

Then my eye wandered to the shining wall over the head of this thaumaturgical worker, and encountered there a series of aphorisms, neatly framed in star dust, and designed, I assumed, for the instruction and guidance of us transient foetuses. My recollection is not distinct, but I think some of these apothegms were substantially as follows:

"What we call Reality hath nothing to do with Solids, but hath to do with Energy, Tension, Stress."

Morals, that is, crystallized Customs or Habits, vary so widely that their Value and Importance are purely relative.

The Collision of Two Cells, or of Two Suns, giveth birth in each instance to a new and single System.

In doubtful Cases call Doctor Reason rather than Doctor Credulous. The former looketh for Causes; the latter doth merely administer an Opiate.

A healthy Pessimist is preferable to a sickly Optimist.

"What hath been good enough for my Fathers is good enough for me." PISH!

Nor lief nor loath came hither I;
But lief I stay and loath I go,
Nor know the reason why.

"All Education is Self-Education."

"Parents have sacrificed their Children. Once it was to imaginary Gods; now it is to Education; Fetish after Fetish, and none more reasonable than another."

"The Flower bloometh according to its Law; the Stars follow their Courses according to Law; everywhere thou lookest thou findest Law; but however much thou mayest seek, what lieth behind the Law escapeth thee."

We can think only in Terms of our own peculiar Environment; the broader we let that Environment become, the broader will be our Thought.

I wonder, I said to myself, if there are any limitations to environment? If so, then thought must have its limitations. I mused for a few sidereal moments on the many new and puzzling questions suggested by these disconnected fragments of sententiousness, but gave them up finally in order to watch Megistothéos, who seemed to be doing remarkable things. His repose of countenance and inscrutable smile had

vanished. He was all activity. An assistant was handing him box after box, exactly like the one in which I was reposing. Removing what was undoubtedly a foetus like me from each box, he quickly but carefully examined it. If it passed muster, it was at once placed on a slide, shoved under one of the macroscopes, and there subjected to a searching scrutiny. If this second test proved satisfactory, the Superintendent forthwith picked up the larva, made an incision in its side with a scalpel, and proceeded carefully to insert in the cut a small wriggling and remarkably animated something, which he culled with dexterity from a culture jar at his elbow. The larva was then passed on to a second assistant, who laid a healing hand upon the incision, and then placed the larva gently in a basket marked "READY FOR TRANSIT."

I noticed that not infrequently Megistothéos, after the first examination, and still less frequently after the second macroscopical one, would pick up a foetus, shake his head sorrowfully, and, crushing the poor atom in the palm of his hand with his fingers, toss it into a chute, which I concluded must empty into space somewhere outside. I wept at the thought.

Then again I noticed that at odd times Megistothéos would ask to have some foetus handed back to him after the surgical operation was completed, would set it up before him, and engage it in long conversation, with that same beneficent but paradoxical smile on his face. And once I saw him pick up a foetus with which he had been conversing, rise from his seat—how tall he was, and how majestic he appeared to my rudimentary sight!—then depart, and remain away for a sidereal quarter of an hour. Was I to be one of those favored ones, I asked myself, when my turn should come? And where did they go? To the dome? I profoundly hoped so.

Wavering between hope and fear, I was awakened from my reverie by the loud snoring of my attendant. He had

fallen asleep, very properly, I thought, over that magazine article; for of what special or general interest to him could be that fundamental question in Ontogenetics, the betterment of the parental cells? Although a creature of the supernal race, his chief interest seemed to lie in laying cheap wagers on sputtering nebulae; in pursuing a lowly and monotonous round of duties with his eye ever on the sidereal chronometer; and in idly explaining things, or trying to avoid explaining them, to inquisitive human larvae. Alas, I could not say that he was of the earth earthy, and a great doubt was in my mind as to whether I could properly say that he was of the heavens heavenly. At any rate he had ceased altogether to kindle my fancy. I was eager to touch a greater mind than his, and it was therefore with a tiny cry of joy, unheard by my blowzy keeper, that I saw the crown glass door open at last. The first assistant stepped into the room, glanced piercingly about, discovered my guardian, listened a moment to his stertorous breathing, smiled divinely, and stepped toward us with light feet.

Lifting my box and me away from my guardian's lap, a movement which caused me an exquisite thrill, he seized my former attendant by the shoulder and shook him. "Awake, Corporifer," he shouted in a clear, resonant voice. "Begone, ere the Master fine thee for thine indolence and untimely somnolence." What beautiful, old-fashioned phrases, I thought. I liked them instinctively. And so that was my erstwhile guardian's name—Corporifer! In the back of my attenuated brain I thought of *lucifer*, and *crucifer*, and *conifer*, and at once saw the meaning.

"I wonder what my *new* friend's name is," I pondered. In answer to the unasked question he responded aloud, as he shook Corporifer again, "Mine is Infantifer, and the other assistant's is Hominifer. We be all '-fers' here, of one kind or another; carriers of that which is good, whereat

we rejoice; bearers also, through necessity, of that which is evil, or pregnant with evil, whereat we do grieve in spirit."

I certainly did enjoy his choice language. To him Corporifer was as a street gamin to John Milton.

By this time Corporifer had roused himself from his stupor, and, seeing that I had been duly taken from him, tried vainly to straighten up the Cassiopeian chair, the back of which had bent forward as he slept (since which time, so I am told, it has been that way), grinned sheepishly at us, and slouched off toward an exit marked, "EMPLOYEES ONLY."

I was now conveyed by Infantifer into the inner office, while alternate waves of confidence and apprehension played over my pygmy frame like white rollers on a sand bar. Infantifer's presence, and his quaint words uttered in such kindly wise inspired me with hope; while the remembrance of that horrible chute of the still-born and unfit, opening out into bottomless blackness, filled me with dread.

Up to the chalcedony table we came, and my box was pushed not ungently in front of the great *Arbiter Mortalium*. It was one of the few supreme moments of my life.

IV

As Megistotheos took me up in his warm celestial palm, which seemed redolent with the fragrance that blows seaward from a tropical isle at twilight, I experienced an ecstasy such as I have never known since. It was as if I had leapt in my mother's womb, rejoicing unconsciously in a new vigor.

I shivered with delight. Seeing that the Master noticed the movement and seemed satisfied, I shivered again, but less spontaneously.

"The first time was sufficient, my dear homunculus. May I remind you that life's keenest joys come to us, and must come, unsought. The first sensation is ever the climax. Subsequent sensations during the same experience are inferior in quality."

Thus spake Megistothecos to me for the first time, in a beautiful, high-pitched voice, which, strangely enough, reminded me in advance of some great East Indian poet or philosopher.

I blushed for shame, wiped a drop of dewy perspiration from my unformed forehead with the back of my little paw, and made my best ovoid bow.

"At least you are tractable," said my Master; "so many of you are unreceptive of truth, averse to any presentation of it even through kindly and intelligent channels, that I should often despair of your future—your distant future, I mean, geologically speaking—were it not for my carefully nourished hope that the living torch of enlightenment will never be quite extinguished. That torch will waver, it has always wavered, and is still wavering, but I pray you and all your kind to keep steadily on.

"Avoid vagaries of thought, untested theories, and so-called 'revelations,' vacuous hypotheses based on nothing but the 'will to believe,' unintelligent and blatant preachments, superstitions, pseudo-prophets, whose stock in trade is mere words and a secret desire for self-aggrandizement. Grow away as fast as may be, though it take aeons, from those lingering primitive instincts that hinder intellectual development, such as blood-thirstiness, morbid curiosity, the magnification of the importance of the individual and his inevitable demise, the barbaric tendency to herd together in congested groups and to ignore the great spaces, fondness for idle, evil and unfavorable news, defilement of natural beauty, 'booming' and 'boosting'—whether of human prowess, populations, organizations, or of the great groves and valleys which are for those only that love them and would keep them unspoiled—

"But enough. Now I want to see how you look through this macroscope."

A far-away look of longing had crept into the face of Megistotheos as he spoke; but it vanished at once as he placed me on a slide and shoved me under the long barrel of his instrument.

I looked up through the lenses. The eye of Megistotheos was upon me, clear, searching, shining, alive with yearning tenderness.

Do you remember the white country church of your early childhood, and how the local artist, who was usually a better house painter than draughtsman, had drawn with colored crayons on the wall high over the pulpit a huge, human eye, staring and unblinking, and underneath had lettered the legend:

"THOU GOD SEEST ME"

and how fearsome you felt as you gazed up at it out of your little stiff collar and copper-toed boots? So I felt under that stern but benignant gaze of Megistotheos the Arbiter, save that there I had a supreme feeling that I was not so guilty as my forbears would doubtless have made me believe, and that I should receive fully as much mercy as justice. Extinction, if I were below the minimum standard, would be only my just deserts, and would have no terrors. There was no resentment in my poor little heart over the thought that a capricious "God" might damn me any moment for wholly insubstantial and unintelligible reasons.

In a language quite incomprehensible to me, Megistotheos, as he turned me over on the slide once or twice, dictated a few memoranda to a scribe sitting across the table. These observations were recorded in a book, I noticed, which was not the Book of Life of sacred lore, as a certain indubitably inherited instinct within me at first suggested, but merely a notebook designed for celestial laboratory use in the study of chromosomes.

I was beginning to feel a bit chilly on that cold glass slide, when I found myself deliciously warm in the odorous palm of Megistotheos. Over me was poised the scalpel. Suppressing a larval shriek I closed my eyes tightly and awaited the shock. There was none. Amazed, I opened my eyes only to see my Master rummaging with a pair of tweezers in that culture jar which I had noticed before, and now saw to be full of strange, anomalous, ever moving things, glowing each with its own light, and continually changing form, now shapely and unutterably beautiful, now unfashioned and ugly. Selecting one of these creatures, the one apparently for which he had been looking, Megistotheos transferred it deftly in my direction. As it drew near I felt a sense of recognition. I caught its eye. We both smiled. "Hello, Me," I said warmly. "Hello, Myself," responded the creature with equal warmth. In a moment it was tucked away inside of me, and I was quickly passed on.

The wound cicatrized almost immediately. It was indeed a weird sensation to be aware of another *me* inside of myself. I hardly knew what to make of it. I could not say that I was a case of multiple personality, for was I not still I? And yet, in some manner I felt supplemented, more strongly characterized, more individualistic. Impulses came over me, now to act generously and unselfishly and to nurse noble dreams, and now to scramble for first place at the banquet of life, to bid high thoughts be damned, and to make self-seeking my sole object. "If this sort of thing keeps up," I said to myself, "I shall be a regular human being in due time."

Anon I was handed back to Megistotheos. I suppose he must have asked for me, although I did not hear him speak, probably because I was so deeply engrossed in the contemplation of my newly acquired duplicity of mood.

This time I did not rest in the Master's palm. I was warm enough, apparently, because of the new glow within me.

Again that sad, inscrutable smile as Megistothéos caressingly smoothed my ruby-tinted skin, and untangled my umbilical cord, which had become snarled.

"Homunculus," he began musically, "you are now a full-fledged but still unborn *homo humanus*. The term *homo sapiens* is a misnomer, adopted and applied by your race in a moment of false pride and self-exaltation. There never was yet any excuse for it. It will be some time, in all probability, before you will find yourself in agreement with us in this matter, but you will come to it eventually, if wisdom shall be yours.

"Neither I nor any other can make you different from what you are, nor can we foretell what you are to be. The dictaphone brought to my ear a few moments ago, ere you came in"—here he pointed to a funnel of jasper projecting from the wall back of his head and emitting a continuous murmur—"what Corporifer told you on the way over"—I gave a sudden foetal start—"that once an *ovum* and a *spermatozoön* become united, to quote Corporifer's locution, 'it's all off.' We can and do place all possible environmental influences of a favorable nature in your way, but we have no means, so far as we yet know, of determining whether those influences will act. They do and they do not. It depends almost entirely upon the germ plasm resulting from the union of the two parent cells. My life work has been, and still is, to discover some means of causing cells only of the highest grade to unite, but success seems a long way off. Corporifer told you that it is all a 'gamble.' In a certain terrestrial sense that is true, but Corporifer is indifferent and no scholar; he regards what to me is a problem to be solved, though it take me a century of eras, or a law to be discovered after the lapse of epochs, as a mere something unknowable, and lets it go at that. I am opposed, therefore, to the use of the word 'gamble,' and the useless, not to say

degrading, acts which it connotes—as you have already observed.”

I began to take a new and enlightened view of that memorable sign I had seen and deciphered. I listened dreamily but with eagerness as Megistotheos went on. “We are learning daily, sidereally speaking, of course, a little of the *How's* in connection with some of the phenomena of matter and energy; but the *Why's* seem still to have no answer.”

At this point, with slightly mischievous intent, I ventured a question—my first. “Good Sir, if *heaven* cannot explain, how on *earth* are we to know?”

“Your sense of humor does credit to your *animula*—or shall I say to *you*, for you twain are now one,” he answered laughingly. “Another of my sorrowful problems is to discover a method of endowing every foetus with that peculiar quality of humor, ‘that bland, fructifying humor, with which genius chastises and heartens the beloved blunderer, man; a humor bred of the humanities, espousing no cause and enforcing no moral.’ If only I could! A *homo humanus* devoid of humor is a sad and pitiful object in the sight of everyone but himself, the unwitting cause of much human dry-rot, a lowering cloud over the waters of joy.”

That was news to me then, but instinct prompted me to agree. I nodded my misshapen head sagely. Then I remembered my tendency to laugh when that wiggling, wagging—what *was* it Megistotheos had just called it?—*animalculum*—yes, that must be it—of mine and I were brought face to face.

“By the way,” I asked, as if changing the subject, but well aware that Megistotheos was following my thought, “will you kindly tell me what that *animalculum* was, or is, that you transplanted into me just now?”

"With pleasure, my dear little anthropoid Sir," he answered. "But first note that you are slightly in error, though not much, as touching the appellation. You have diminutized a derivative of the root, while I treated the root itself directly with a diminutive.

He reached over to the jar of culture, turned it around, and bade me read the label. I did so. "*A-n-i-m-u-l-a-e v-a-g-u-l-a-e*," I spelled aloud with my best foetal accent. "Quite correct," he said approvingly. "We adopted the term as a scientific appellative, accurately descriptive, when your Emperor Hadrian passed through my hands. Later, at the end of his career, when about to part with his *animula*, he addressed some verses to it—a sort of autoepitaph, so to speak. I am very fond of them myself. They seem admirably to express an unanswerable longing, which you will find to be common to your race, and, I may add, not altogether lacking in us supernal beings. They contain also a marked intimation, by means of the diminutive endings, of the littleness of terrestrial things, a littleness that will emphasize itself more and more as your wisdom increases, and your years grow many. Would you like to hear them?"

I assented with all the gravity of a clodhopper suddenly asked on a Sunday by the minister to listen to a parable read in the original Greek.

Slowly and clearly Megistotheos repeated the unique lines, which I have since come to appreciate better, doubtless because of that first hearing.

*"Animula vagula, blandula,
Hospes comesque corporis,
Quae nunc abibis in loca,
Pallidula, rigida, nudula?
Nec, ut soles, dabis ioca?"*

I smiled vacantly in an abortive attempt to appear appreciative. Megistotheos saw my predicament, and was

In a burst of anguish I gave voice to a wail that caused Infantifer and Hominifer to look up. "Oh, Uncle Meg," I sobbed, raising my puny arms aloft, "don't let them take it away! I want it always." For a moment I was lost in grief.

There was a sweet radiance in the face of my new avuncular relative as he picked me up. "Its entering in was easy and painless, was it not? Equally so will be its going forth," was his reply.

"Far be it from me," he continued, "to try to tell you how in time You and Yourself may weary of one another and welcome a separation, or how your body will fail and cease to be a suitable habitation. These are matters which every homunculus must and will discover for himself. Live now, enjoy, face and accept your lot cheerfully, grow rich, if you can, in the things that have value, and think not of the day of farewell, for it hath no bearing on this present. Let Life and Love of Earth be all!"

He made as if to pass me to Hominifer to be placed in the Transit Basket, but I forestalled him with a tearful question: "Tell me, tell me," I wailed, "where does my *animula* go when—when I p-p-part with it?"

For a moment consternation reigned in that inner office. Infantifer blew his nose so loudly that one of the Pleiades went out, and the room became a shade darker. Hominifer jumped so quickly that he upset the Transit Basket and spilled several hundred duly certified and squalling foetuses on the floor, while Uncle Meg—if I may continue so to call him—started up from his seat and rushed with me to the lift, addressing, as he hurried across the room, another attendant whom I had not seen, in an evident attempt to divert my mind. "I think we will go up to the dome for a little, Anthracifer," he tried to say casually. "You had better throw a few more hot meteors into the furnace; it may be getting cool up there."

He rang for the lift, the room was hurriedly put in order, the babies were swept up, quieted, and replaced in the Basket, and Hominifer mounted a Jacob's Ladder to restore the Lost Pleiad.

Peace ruled again, and I wholly forgot my sorrowful and, plainly enough, embarrassing query, as the lift, a car of some beautiful, glittering material, appeared. Clearly, if the dwellers of heaven were nonplussed at so simple and easy a question, what would my earthly colleagues be? I might as well dismiss the matter at once as unanswerable, out of my ken, or altogether unimportant.

V

I shall say little of that most wonderful dome, for it is quite a separate story in itself. Many, if not all, of you probably saw it under the personal guidance of Megistotheos on your way hither. Do you not remember how he exclaimed, as he held you up to the diamond glass, which was a powerful, super-terrestrial telescope at all points: "*Ecce Universitas Rerum!*" in an awed tone of voice, just as if he were gazing out upon that broad expanse of endless skies and flashing suns for the first time? And how he explained to you, when you were puzzled at the apparently reversed position of some of the well-known constellations, that you were looking at them from behind? And doubtless you will recall how, pointing to a comparatively small but brilliant and steely blue ball of fire, he told you it was Sirius, that it had been six hundred of our centuries crossing the Via Lactea, and that a precocious human foetus, destined for earth, to whom he had shown this star not long before, had scratched with the point of a safety pin on the hard, vitreous varnish below the glass some lines, which he, Megistotheos, showed you with evident relish, the lines running thus:

"Since Sirius crossed the Milky Way
Full sixty-thousand years have gone;
Yet hour by hour and day by day
This tireless sun speeds on and on.

One surely must be moved to mirth
By Genesis, I do opine,
Which says Creation had its birth
For such a tiny world as mine;

And that whatever fashioned all
These solar systems tier on tiers
Expressed in little Adam's fall
The purpose of a billion spheres!"¹

And then, do you not remember, Megistotheos took you around to the yonder side of the dome, still carrying you in that mysteriously fragrant palm of his, and showed you a dull, distant, and inconspicuous sun, which even through that perfect telescope was scarcely of the fifth magnitude, and was surrounded by thousands like unto it in size and color?

"That," he undoubtedly said to you, as he did to me, with a certain sad kindliness, "is the luminary to whose Lilliputian system belongs the infinitesimal sphere upon which, by the will of Destiny, not mine, your further development is to proceed. I could not place you elsewhere, if I would. Each to his appointed place. Terrestrial you are, and terrestrial must you ever be."

I looked and looked and looked with all my eyes, but could make out nothing but that faint point of light in the infinite distance, which was so soon to be my sole and solar source of life and being.

"A strange state of things," I mused. "Why should I and all the others of my kind have to be side-tracked to that little insignificant, out-of-the-way spheroidal ball down there

¹ With apologies to the shade of E. W. W. for several changes.

on the very outermost edge of the Universe, when there are so many vastly larger and more beautiful suns nearer by, with doubtless much better planetary facilities?"

"'Outermost edge of the Universe' did you say?" queried my Master, answering my unuttered question, with a laugh that would have been sardonic had it not been inspired by pity. "The end of the Universe! Fancy!" he muttered to himself with that slow, dubious wagging of the head that implies a profound sorrow for hopeless ignorance. "How perfectly naïve and finite! It seems to you now, does it not, as if, from where we are at this present, we were at the very center of all things?" I assented, for indeed it did seem so. No matter which way I looked through that marvelously magnifying but invisible glass all about me, up or down or around, my eye was greeted by dazzling tiers of countless suns, ranging from enormous balls of fire the size of cart wheels, to the tiniest pin points of light.

"Very well," said Megistotheos. "Now then, when you reach your destination—I will not confuse you by trying to tell you even in terms of sidereal light periods or cycles how far away that is—when you reach your destination you will find that there too you will think you are at the center of all things. The same would be true wherever you might go, regardless of the distance, whether computable or incomputable."

I gasped for breath. "Is that what is meant by in-infinity, Uncle Meg?" I managed at length to ask.

"It is an approximation to a definition," he answered; "your comprehension can go no farther, and it is useless for it to try."

I had intended to ask him to explain what eternity meant, but I quickly reflected that if I could not grasp infinity, I could probably do no better with eternity, as the words seemed to be first cousins, if not more closely related, and so

I said nothing, becoming absorbed finally in watching the gyrations of that famous binary in Ursa Major of our so called Northern sky, Mizar and its fainter companion Alcor. Their movements around each other seemed very much like those of the balls of the governor on what I was to know later as a Corliss steam engine running at full speed. I was not only amused but deeply impressed by the sight. I have since discovered that one witnesses such glorified phenomena but once in one's lifetime—from that incomparable dome of Megistotheos during prenatal days.

I felt that it was now getting toward time to return. The physical strain of watching that ever changing panorama of Creation in the making and the unmaking was tiring my tender little body, and Megistotheos was manifestly eager to return to his macroscope and *animula* jar.

My departure from the Laboratory, the only home I had had thus far, must be near at hand. No more should I see kind Uncle Meg, the wisest being I have ever known, with his transcendental smile and incommunicable knowledge; Infantifer, the gentle of speech and manners; or even Corporifer, who knew so much more than I knew, albeit a heavenly scalawag. The thought of leaving was painful, and my eyes overflowed.

VI

We were now on our way back to the lift. I realized that my time was short. If I was to ask any more questions, I had to do so quickly.

A perfect jumble of things I wanted to know came crowding into my weary little mind; for instance: What are we human beings for? When I finish with life, would I go through it again on the same terms and conditions? Is the general mental average going to become higher as time goes on? Are succeeding civilizations better than their predecessors?

If certain beverages can be prohibited, why not the birth of morons?

But I durst not ask, remembering the confusion I had caused Uncle Meg and his office force only a short time before. To give ultimate replies to unanswerable questions evidently annoyed these celestial antenatal tutors of ours, and who was I to embarrass them further?

Could it be, I wondered, that they simply wanted to spare me, or that they themselves knew not the answers? I have been wondering ever since.

And that undecipherable smile so often on the face of Uncle Meg; was it based perchance on a great longing to do more for us helpless bratlings, to endow us more richly, to widen our intellectual scope, coupled, however, with sorrow at the limitations surrounding even him on every side?

I do not know, nor ever shall, for just then the dome became suffused with a weird yellow light, like that caused by the combustion in the dark of a mixture of alcohol and sodium chloride. The glow lasted for a few sidereal seconds, and then I saw what appeared to be a comet of vast size circling about the Laboratory confines.

"Ah," exclaimed Uncle Meg, consulting forthwith his pocket chronometer, which he found to be correct after a glance at the relative positions of Antares and Capella, "there is the last Terrestrial Express today. We must make haste."

He rang for the lift, which came forthwith and landed us once more at the inner office. I had given up all idea of gaining any further knowledge of things unknowable, and had lapsed into a state of lethargic indifference. Without doubt I must go it alone, face by myself whatever was to be, even dissolution, and make the best and the most of my lot, yet remembering what few things Megistotheos had felt able to impart.

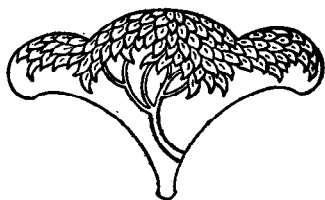
As Uncle Meg put me with many others into the Transit Basket, he waved us an affectionate farewell, bade us good speed and a safe arrival, smiled, Oh, so sadly, I thought, and placed in the hands of each one of us a card.

We were soon aboard and traveling earthward at incalculable speed. I have no recollection of the trip for I slept through it all.

Near the borders of this world we crossed the Pelvic Pass, and were at our journey's end—rather, in another sense, at its beginning.

I have always kept that card which Megistothéos, the ontogenetical and embryological expert, the greatest authority in Space on human genesis and human philosophy, my Uncle Meg in other words, gave me at the last moment. Not until recent years have I understood it, and then not wholly, though day by day its meaning grows clear and yet more clear. This is what it said:

“The troubles of our proud and angry dust
Are from eternity, and shall not fail.
Bear them we can, and if we can we must.
Shoulder the sky, my lad, and drink your ale!”



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