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WIDE-OPEN PLANET

FEATURE NOVEL

by L. Sprague de Camp

THE LONG RETURN

FEATURE NOVEL

by Poul Anderson

FLIGHT FROM TOMORROW

THRILLING NOVELET

by H. Beam Piper



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Iteration

Cyril M. Kornbluth

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The soap opera is here to stay, radio and video versions. Ever consider the possible end-result?

I punched IIIAA24 and heard over my bonephone, wincing: “Darling—you’re. . .*back!*”

I cut the wince short and threw in the life lever. Joe Henderson, standing in the actor’s dock, said broodingly: “Yes, dear. . .” He registered worry, then gallantry and cheerfulness. I threw out the life lever and punched IVTG13, which was a young couple, summer clothes, seen walking into their suburban bungalow.

I could’ve played that score in my sleep; I don’t know how many times the soapies have used it—

I asked you not to interrupt me, damn it! You wanted to know why I ran out and I said I’d tell you—oh, dinner?

What’s this stuff—beep—oh, *beef?* ’S good. Hard on the jaws first time, though—I’ll go on with the story.

You want to know why they don’t punch it on rolls like a jacquard loom, do you? Once they used to, but even a weaving machine makes mistakes. When there’s a mistake they just rip it out and go on. But when the soapies go out—

Their pattern either got punched wrong or the machine slipped or something. So when Old Ma Whiddicomb came into the screen instead of lavender from the grill you got IXWQO9, which is used in stable scenes. And once, on *When a Man Marries Joan’s Big Sister* everything was going fine on a big renunciation scene—Joan was giving up David—she kept up a brave front and walked away smiling. When she turned the corner she was supposed to run for her bedroom and burst into tears, but instead of her bedroom door closing, the machine cut in a shot of a two-holer from *Uncle Eb of Gobbler’s Nob*.

That’s what the present system evolved out of, and it’s foolproof. I took three years at the Rochester Conservatory and did PG at the Julliard. Give me any score, one with a hundred sets, landscapes, weather, twenty actors in the dock, scents to match everything, mood music changing every two seconds—I can handle it.

Pay is right, brother—didn’t catch your name?—how’d’y’do, Mr. Osgood. I got two thousand a month and a pension plan for a twelve-hour week.

Okay, okay—I’m *telling* you why I ran out. In fact I’ve told you already. It was that line: “Darling—you’re *back!*”

It’s a dramatic convention, I suppose, like the property man in the Chinese theater, or a Chorus in the Greek, or asides in the big tub-thumping Victorian days. If an Athenian Greek didn’t have a chorus to explain what was going on he’d feel bewildered and cheated. If the housewife watching a soapie didn’t see the heroine say to her husband when he comes home: “Darling—you’re. . .*back!*” she’d think there was something wrong and worry about it.

No, don't ask me why they say it. I don't know why a dame who just saw her husband leave for work at ten should register surprise, delight and wonder when he comes back home at fifteen o'clock. They just do, in the soapiers.

Anyway, I was telling you about the day before yesterday. In a nice blend of canned shots by me and close-ups by Henderson and his babe we ground our way through the next ten minutes. It was established that Henderson had lost his job because of an inexplicable decline in his efficiency index; he groaned that he was no good and would run out because it would be better that way.

Then we cut to Henderson's mother-in-law and established that she'd slipped him some phenylethylbarbituric acid instead of his vitamins, so he'd lose his job and run out and she could marry her daughter off to a man she had her eye on. Some nice canned stuff in that sequence of her hands opening a capsule and changing the powder in it, all with the appropriate chemical scents.

Cut back to Henderson, making his will before running out. His wife shyly comes in and shows him a tiny identification tag she's been making.

"You don't mean—?" cries Henderson and she lowers her eyes. I step down hard on the benzedrine pedal, throw in the *Halleluiah Chorus*, set up Abstraction 17 for two seconds and cut to the announcer, who's been combing his beard and worrying about a blackhead he just noticed.

"Ladies!" he cries—big smile—"How often lately have you been making the FT?" He lowers his voice, winks a little and coos: "FT, as of course you all know, stands for the famous Cam Brothers Flatulence Test—"

Pete Laurie comes to relieve me on the console and I'm through for the day; I walk out on the Commercial and head for the *Olde Tyme Speake*, down the street.

I don't know if any of you are New Yorkers—maybe you know the *Speake*? It's a really quaint place with authentic atmosphere, early twentieth century—old oak rafters and red-leather bar-stools, a rack of shaving mugs, lots of chromium. They have mottoes on the wall from the period—*Landlord, Fill the Flowing Bowl, Nuts to You*, and things like that.

Can I have some more of that beep stuff? I mean *beef*. I'll learn, quit the kidding—I only ran out last night, fella!

Anyway, I met Sam Caldicott at the *Speake*. Could've knocked me over with a feather. We were classmates at Chicago Metaphysical before I went to Rochester. He was going to go in for dietetics or something.

"Hello, Sam!" I said.

"You too," he growled, looking up. "Go to Dachau." He was nasty-drunk, but

he finally recognized me. I got him a wake-up and had a buttered rum myself. When the stuff worked on him he apologized and asked me politely what I was doing with myself. I told him I was a soapie consolist; he gave me a funny look.

He had switched from dietetics to psychiatry pretty late and so had had to start learning almost from the beginning again. He'd been in practice only six years, but he said he was doing nicely.

"Well," I said, "if I'm ever tempted to run out I'll give you a ring and you can talk me out of it."

"Are you so sure I would?"

I shuddered at the thought. "If you're any kind of friend, you will; the hell with that Reserve stuff!"

"Ever been there?"

"No," I told him, "and I never will. A bunch of howling barbarians that couldn't stand the gaff, thought they were higher-strung than anybody else—sissies is what they are. They slip back culturally to the twentieth or fifteenth century and they think they're rugged he-men!"

"It could be worse," he said tolerantly. His eyes narrowed as he seemed to remember something: "I'm treating a woman now—pitiful case; hopeless, I fear. She'd be a hell of a lot better off if she'd been in the Utah Reserve for the past few years."

I gave him some stuff from a talk I'd had with Mr. Administrator Etterson. He'd had it absolutely first-hand that they were practicing human sacrifice in the Reserve. Caldicott just laughed; he simply didn't believe it. I asked him what he meant by that crack about the woman who should have run out. He said he'd show me. I had to get home to my wife, but he got me mad enough to forget about it for the time being. We took a flit to Bronnix, the Morrisania Hospital where he was Resident Psychiatrist.

He warned me outside the patient's room that I'd better keep my mouth shut—the least little thing could send her off into one of her spasms. We went in.

The woman was knitting, her eye on a soapie screen. She turned to us—not bad looking—and said to Caldicott: "Darling—you're. . . *back!*" Just like that. Then she registered alarm, apprehension and curiosity and said, batting her eyes at me: "But—won't you. . . *introduce me?*"

It was hard to keep from looking around for the mike and the console. I've played and seen that situation a thousand times and now I was meeting it in real life!

"This is my associate," said Caldicott ambiguously. He snapped off the soapie just as Vera Venable, the Alienist's niece, was pleading with Professor Sykes not to

fire her uncle from the clinic staff.

The woman went crazy—well, she *was* crazy, of course, but she began to act it then.

“Turn it on!” she screamed. “You’ve left poor Vera hanging in the ether! Call her back! Don’t leave her out there!”

Caldicott resignedly turned the soapie back on, and the woman said, arching her brows: “Why—*thank* you, darling! That was. . .very sweet!” Running the last two words together and simultaneously lowering her eyes with a shy little smile. The line was another oldie, used several times a day to cover everything from passing an ashtray to a diamond ring.

We left and went to the hospital refectory.

The refectory soapie screen was on of course, and I was alarmed to find I was alarmed at the number of people who were watching it. Caldicott read my expression, and gave a sour grin.

“She’s the first,” he said simply.

“Go to Dachau! I don’t believe it!”

“You will soon. I tell you, she’s the first. There are going to be more—and more—*and more*.”

“Consider: as long ago as the twentieth century there were housewives who never differentiated between real persons and the audio-performers whom they listened to daily. They worried with them, laughed with them, discussed them as though they were absent neighbors. With the slow development of the additional circuits—video, oleo, full-color and tactile for those who like it—the effect was magnified. With the Krebski Formula of the last century, which related the numerical quantities of music to the numerical quantities of the electro-encephalogram curves produced by the music, the effect was perfected.

“The housewife of today, frankly, has a soft touch. She dusts, washes dishes, waxes floor and so on by tapping buttons. With her spare time she watches the soapie screen, and she has a *lot* of spare time. I’ve drawn a graph—”

He took out a sheet of paper and smoothed it carefully. I don’t pretend to understand such things; I’m a consolist, not a tube-jockey, and I told him so.

“But look,” he urged. “Here’s the abscissa meaning ‘log-log of number of Caldicott Syndrome cases at one time’—”

“Caldicott Syndrome?”

“That’s what I call it,” he said modestly. “And this red circle indicates where we stand on the time-axis now. You see the rise—”

I finally looked and laughed at what I saw. “You really think,” I said, “that the saturation point’s been reached?”

“I predicted it a year ago,” he said solemnly. “I was actually waiting for the case you just saw to turn up. I believe that there will be five hundred cases tomorrow, two thousand cases the next day, and so on. Pfannkuchen’s studies in mass hysteria—”

I got up. “If you’re right,” I said, “I’ll be the first man to run out and join the wild-men in the Utah Reserve. But Caldicott, I think you’re all wet. That woman upstairs is weak-minded and that’s all there is to it. I work with the soapies; I can’t believe that any normal person, like my wife, say, could be knocked off the trolley by them. I’ve got to go now; I’ll be seeing you around.”

I left and took a flit for Linden, where I live. Pfannkuchen’s studies in mass hysteria, my eye!

But my wife met me at the door and said, with surprise, delight and apprehension: “Darling—you’re. . . *back!*”

Would you pass me some more of that beef stuff?

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.
[The end of *Iteration* by Cyril M. Kornbluth]