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The Childhood
of the Human Hero*

Science fiction is an, attitude about today and what tomorrow could become. Nothing definite, nothing more than an attitude. We think, rationally enough, that in: twenty-five years we will be turning another century, the glorious year 2001. will be upon us. But who will be the ' men of that period? How are we molding them today to play their parts? Here is a glimpse of a boy who will then be a man. Your fingers are in the reality-clay, as are mine; together we are shaping his world. This then is "The Childhood of the Human Hero," the boy who will inhabit the world we are creating for him with the passing of each day.

'From Joseph Campbell.

A little bit of you in him and a little bit of me and a little bit of him in you and I see a bit of my youngest brother. He's coming in, going out, coming in, going out, and it's another world outside which might be inner space which is outer space to him. "Captain, your ship is approaching a doomed planet at twice the speed of light."

He wants to order a pair of handcuffs at \$2.95

A book on ventriloquism at 98 cents

He wants a realistic, plastic, plucked chicken, \$5.99

A pair of sunglasses with one-way mirror lenses

A "patented 3-D hypno-coin" that comes free with 25 lessons in hypnotism

And one hundred stick-on stamps of the scariest movie monster

Mild-mannered boy wonder looks like any other average boy, but there's a trick to it. There's more than meets the eye and good deeds are being done every day in spite of appearances.

He has a secret identity.

Going into orbit around one hot world too many, he breaks pencils with a flick of the fingers of one hand and doesn't know he's doing it. He straightens paper clips trying to remember that France has a population of 51,400,000; that the major cities are: Paris, Lille, Bordeaux, Marseilles; highest point, Mont Blanc, 15,781 feet; principal language, French.

He's the one with the new boots, just the kind he'd

always wanted; wide belt, black turtleneck sweater. Next year his hair will be even longer because that's the only way you can tell the kids in the Common Concern Club from the Young Americans for Freedom.

When he grows a mustache (this much later), it'll be the long, yellow/brown kind that curls up at the ends and he'll be smiling.

Say, did you know there's a new method that can give you powerful muscles you'll be proud to show your friends in just ten minutes a day? "Carry your great strength with prudence and humility," I say, but you've broken another ballpoint pen writing the answer to the problem of Farmer Brown who plows half an acre in twenty minutes and Farmer Jones who has plowed thirty-two acres in seventy-six hours.

He's coming in, going out, coming in, going out. It's another world entirely outside and that waltz is really the original motion-picture soundtrack from 2001.

I know you. I was a boy once myself, mother though I have become, and I know it might as well be, maybe ought to be Chichen Itza instead of Betelgeuse or some place with a lot of moons. You'll lose all that, you know, Captain, next year or the year after, but there will be greater losses, and that sonic blast was just a stalling tactic to keep you busy while they roll in this monstrous world. You have yet to face the bureaucratic creatures that crawl through rocks and can hold you

helplessly imprisoned in megaliths even Though you may be in telepathic contact with the big brained friends of this universe. There are things you'd never suspect out here in reality land, and your night terrors are nothing compared to them.

You won't recognize him. I mean that man with the yellow/brown mustache coming in for a landing on some different planet farther in the future than you ever thought possible. He's of the next century, you know, and will be at his peak by 2001. Did you realize that yesterday when you asked me, "What does `existential' mean?" and I couldn't answer so you knew? "Forget it," you said and I can't forget it, because without your existential super self you will certainly perish in wars of the future out among the satellites, overcome by cosmic thought patterns too convoluted for the human brain to contemplate, or, if not that, torn apart by humanoids in the death throes of their own identity crises, or exploded by technological advances available not only to the future but known already to the present and, if not one or more of the above, inevitably coarsened by Earthlings of your own kind. I can't save you, because even though thunder sends the cats under the bed and still brings you into my room where there can be no ghosts, no tigers, and monsters still shrivel up and die when I turn on the lights, my powers are fading. But I'm not-repeat, not-waiting for you to grow up, because that's another thing entirely.

"What's the size of a shark's brain?"

"What's the capital of Colorado?"

"What's the longest book ever written?"

"What's green and warty and lives at the bottom of the sea?"

For Mother, on Mother's Day, draw space ships.

Learn it, Dummy. 8 X 7, 8 X 8. "You're making me hate arithmetic," he says. Odd numbers, even numbers, two by two down school's light-green halls and he's been at it seven years. Even when there's a death, you know, we all go on more or less as though nothing had happened. Go back to those same old circumferences of circles, parallel lines down the middle of, and follow instructions. I'm telling you, you can do as you wish, see the dead laid out on display the old-fashioned way with a \$50 blanket of roses just as Grandma wanted it, or not. It's up to you. But don't come to me after five o'clock because there's no changing your mind. There's a death deadline, but it's not what you think-falling down and losing your memory, getting up and falling down again, the

suden zap, zap, zap of ray guns. You've lost some of your best men, but you're miraculously safe. Captain, you're always so miraculously safe except in the dark.

"Slide inner front sprocket wheel (# 17) over sprocket shaft, then place wheel retainer (# 13) over end of shaft. Apply a drop of cement to end of shaft adhering retainer to shaft. Then cement outer front sprocket wheel (# 18) to inner sprocket wheel by applying cement at notch on outer wheel."

"Look, Ma. Look, Ma."

(Don't bother me now.)

"Look, Ma, drop these seemingly innocent pellets into a glass of water and magically a worm will appear."

By 2001 I'll be dead.

No more "Look, Ma."

Inferno, mad inventor of instruments of torture and destruction, all your tricks are useless. They can't make him tell where his mother is hidden.

For those who dare! Surprise Package. Only fifty cents. Are you willing to take a chance on a secret? Listen then, the mother has both breasts and penis sometimes. She - has to. There's no

other solution to some of those knotty little problems of sexual identification; face them every day and see who wears the blue jeans. (Everybody does.) We won't tell you what you get, but because you're willing to gamble we'll give you much more than your money's worth. Satisfaction guaranteed. Are you willing to face the real green slime? Well, let's get this straightened out once and for all. Maybe the penis is just a realistic skincolored spooky hand with red fingernails and big knuckles (ninety-eight cents). Imagine it poking out of your car door at sixty miles an hour, or out of a suitcase on the train. Imagine it on the piano keys, on the window ledge, peeking out of a grocery bag, opening a door. Comes with special adhesive. Sticks anywhere. Can be reused over and over and over and over.

What's green and squashed and lies in the gutter? That's a girl scout run over by a truck.

There are still some wishes left and crazy laughter and a secret handshake. But after a while you face life at your own risk.

When, in the course of human events, evidence comes to light of evil forces overpowering the good, give that boy three impossible tasks to do to restore the world to its proper place among the respectable planets. Steadfast and true. Honorable unto the death, of course. Helper of the helpless. Kind to animals. Honesty his best policy. Oh, incorruptible boy, I see the faint new moon float past your head one midafternoon. The clouds hardly moving and you, blasting off into one of those lazy Sundays with an Estes rocket. "Gentlemen, we're limping back to Aldebaran. We've slipped out of space warp and into real time. We're lost in an out-of-the-way section of deep space -and who knows what evil lurks among the stars? . . ."

Back here we're waiting for all systems to be go, for all men to be safe and accounted for and in real time and serving a different purpose. It's another world going on outside and might be airless. Suit up, men, preferably in silver, then gasping (gasp, gasp), falling down. "Look, Ma, honorable unto the death."

What's green and squashed and lies in the gutter? Well, there's a war on and it's this world now and it could be you with your new yellow/brown mustache.

But that boy doesn't belong on this planet at all. Someday his real father and mother will come down to claim him and take him back where he belongs. He'll be homesick for his former Earth family for a while, but after a week or so it'll be all right. The new life will be hard, but rewarding. He will accompany his new father in a ship, preferably all in silver, and go from planet to planet doing one good deed every day, 365 good deeds every Earth year.

That last blast-off almost poked a hole right through the ceiling.

"I wouldn't do that in here again if I . . ."

Beaming down while the cosmic energy still burns within him, shouts, "Wait, I know just what you're t going to say and I don't want to hear it."

(But maybe it's just one of those imitation bullet holes at nine for fifty cents.)

Husband, ours is indeed an admirable boy, but don't expose his secret identity: "Seven toes to each foot and to either hand as many fingers; his eyes, bright with seven pupils. On each cheek he has four moles, a blue, a red, a green, a purple. Between one ear and the other, long yellow tresses that are as yellow as the wax of bees . . ."*