

DAGON

#671, probably APA-Q #582

January-February 2016

A FEW MINOR DETAILS

This note is an expanded version of a letter which I sent to Mark Blackman for inclusion in **APA-Q** #581 (January 2016), explaining why I was not able to put a copy of **Dagon** in that Distribution of **APA-Q**. It started when the cursor of my computer refused to recognize that it was connected to the mouse or, indeed, to anything else. Karina, whose computer this originally was, drove up from Arlington to see what could be done about it, and at first was convinced that she could manage the job. Indeed, the cursor did respond for a few minutes but it gave up soon after she left for home.. Deirdre had originally suspected that the "brain" of the computer was too old to make the change, and that a new one had to be installed,. However, both daughters have numerous calls on their time. Deirdre got a more modern "brain" for the computer, but at present there seems to be no way to transfer the contents of the old "brain" to the new one. I am assured that this can be managed, but no one here seems to have the time or maybe the know-how to do it. Since the old "brain" currently has on it quite a number of things that I had intended to go into the January issue of **Dagon**, I doubted that I would be able to make transfers of them, and still get an issue of **Dagon** into the January **APA-Q**. This indeed proved to be the situation.

Since there seemed to be a number of different problems, some of which attend the printing of almost every issue of **Dagon**, I am beginning to wonder whether I will be able to continue its monthly schedule. If I can get access to the things I intended to put in the next **Dagon**, I will get them into this issue, send it to Mark Blackman for whatever **APA-Q** Distribution comes up next, and mail copies also to **Dagon** readers who don't get **APA-Q**. Anything I can't transfer to this issue will be in a later **Dagon** on some presently indeterminate date. Otherwise I will simply suspend **Dagon** indefinitely.

I realize that during the recent holiday season I received more cards than I mailed out. I plan to revise my card list so that in 2016 I send cards to everyone who sent me one in 2015. Oddly enough, two cards were addressed last year to my Frederick address, which I left for my present address in April, even though the people who sent them got every month an issue of **Dagon** with my new Clarksburg address in it.

I had originally planned to include a revised mailing list for **Dagon** in the February issue, but I will first have to go through the as yet unread mail that came in over the holidays for any corrections to addresses that may be necessary. Since the **Dagon** mailing list is on the old "brain", I do not now have access to it, and so the revised address list cannot be printed. until I can find out how to transfer text from the old to the new "brain"

As of present writing my computer is using its new "brain" but my daughters and I have not yet figured out how to transfer a number of items from the old to the new "brain". This will, I hope, be rendered a bit easier by the operation I plan to have on 21 January for the removal of a cataract on my right eye. This will apparently not be a very difficult matter, to judge from the preparatory material I have been given to read. Also, Perdita had cataract operations on both eyes a few years ago, and she came through them successfully and with little difficulty. Cataract operation involves removing the defective natural lens of the eye, and replacing it with a clear artificial lens. It will naturally involve local, or maybe total, anesthesia. The operation has a very long history of success, dating back to the Middle Ages. It is recorded that the Jewish surgeon and philosopher Moshe ben Maimon, whose name was sometimes Hellenized as "Maimonides", once successfully performed a cataract operation on a sultan, despite the very great risk to himself should the operation have gone wrong. And Deirdre was born at Maimonides Hospital in Brooklyn. (I have been informed that the most famous philosophical work of Maimonides, *A Guide to the Perplexed*, does much more perplexing than guiding.)

THE MINISTRY OF MISCELLANY

This is **Dagon**, a monthly fanzine of commentary on science, science fiction, fantasy, mystery novels, comic art, role-playing games (RPGs), and anything else that seems like a good idea at the moment, is published by John Boardman, 12716 Ginger Wood Lane, Clarksbug, MD 20871. My land-line phone number is 301-515-4271. (I do not presently have a cell-phone.)

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A Appears which is edited once a month (if enough contributions come in) by Mark

T To L. Blackman, Apt. 4A, 1745 E, 18th St., Brooklyn, NY 11229. The copy

I Inflamm count for **APA-Q** is 15 print copies.

O Optic **Dagon** also goes to others who have indicated an interest in its sub-

N Nerves ject matter. Subscriptions are 10 issues for \$15 in the U. S. A., and for \$40

elsewhere.

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The most important news item of the past few weeks might well be a lie. It is the claim by the rickety Communist monarchy of North Korea that it has successfully tested a nuclear fusion bomb, most commonly called an "H-bomb" in the popular media. To explain the full meaning of this claim, it is necessary also to explain a few things about the atomic nucleus, which I will have to do without information from some of my books which are in storage.

The atomic nucleus, which accounts for most of the mass of an atom, is composed of particles called nucleons. These come in two varieties, protons, which have a positive electrical charge, and neutrons, which are electrically neutral. The number of protons in a nucleus is called the atomic number, and the total number of nucleons is called the atomic weight. Outside the nucleus, in several energy levels, are electrons, which each have a negative charge equal and opposite to the positive charge of a proton. These electrons determine the chemical properties of the atom. If they are equal to the number of protons in the nucleus, that atom is electrically neutral.

The nucleus is in most cases stable because it contains two balanced forces, one attractive and one disruptive. Nucleons are attracted to one another by the strongest force known, but this is a very short-range force which scarcely extends beyond the nucleus. The disruptive force has been known since the 18th century, that like electrical charges repel one another. This force has a much longer range than the intra-nucleon force.

It therefore follows that, as we consider larger and larger nuclei, the nucleus becomes more nearly unstable. The limit is reached with a nucleus that has 83 protons. No nucleus with more than 83 protons is apparently stable. To reach stability, as Henri Becquerel and Marie and Pierre Curie discovered in the late 19th century, the atomic nucleus must expel something. They discovered three types of particles that were expelled by such atoms, and named them alpha, beta, and gamma radiation. Alpha particles eventually proved to be composed of two protons and two neutrons, thus reducing the repellent forces of the protons in the nucleus. Beta particles are electrons, expelled as neutrons are turned into protons. Gamma radiation is photons, as electromagnetic radiation is now called, which remove energy from an overly energetic nucleus. They are the most energetic of all electromagnetic radiation.

The rate at which one radioactive nucleus turns into another is measured by its half-life, the time it takes for one half of the nuclei to decay. Half-lives of radioactive nuclei can be from a fraction of a second to billions of years. For example, two varieties of uranium (U) nuclei have atomic weights of 238 and 235. A U-238 nucleus has 92 protons and 146 neutrons, while a U-235 nucleus has 92 protons and 143 neutrons. They are chemically identical but have widely differing physical properties. The half-life of U-238 is a few billion years, meaning that the Earth has about half the U-238 that it started with. But the half-life of U-235 is a few million years, so that now U-235 atoms are less than 1% of the Earth's uranium.

Nuclei with higher atomic numbers than uranium's 92 have such short half-lives that they cannot presently be found on Earth. However, they can be *made*. By bombarding uranium with smaller nuclei, atoms whose atomic numbers are greater than 92 have been made. Chief among them is plutonium (Pu), with 94 protons and, most commonly, 145 neutrons in the nucleus. However, heavier nuclei with up to 118 protons in the nucleus have been created.

Before World War II, it was discovered that U-235 and Pu-239 nuclei could be

bombarded with neutrons, causing them to split apart with a huge release of energy. During the war, a nuclear research facility at Oak Ridge, TN determined how to use this fact for military purposes. Bombs based on both these fissionable elements were constructed. The U-235 bomb was nicknamed "Little Boy", and the plutonium-based bomb became "Fat Man". In August 1945 bombs of both types were dropped on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Hiroshima got "Little Boy", and Nagasaki got "Fat Man".

In subsequent years it was found that bombs could be based on nuclear fusion as well as on nuclear fission. The nuclei to be fused were not those of heavier atoms like uranium and plutonium, but on hydrogen, the most common element in the universe. This discovery also answered a question that had puzzled astronomers for decades - how do the Sun and other stars produce the energy which they radiate away in such huge quantities.

Stars get their huge masses by gravitational attraction from the gas clouds out of which they are formed. The pressures at a star's core are so great that hydrogen atoms are fused into helium atoms, thus releasing far more energy than is formed by nuclear fission. The Sun could be regarded as a continually exploding hydrogen fusion bomb. There is so much hydrogen at the Sun's core that it has been fusing at the same rate for about five billion years, and will continue to get energy from the fusion of hydrogen for at least another five billion years.

We do not have access to such pressures as exist within the Sun, to cause nuclear fusion. so some other way has to be found to initiate the fusion of hydrogen within a fusion bomb. But a fission bomb can be used to ignite the fusion bomb.

This is how the United States, and all other countries which have tested fusion bombs, get it done. And it is how North Korea would have to do it. In discussing this matter, the media usually refer to fission bombs as "atomic bombs" or "A-bombs", and to fusion bombs as "hydrogen bombs" or "H-bombs".

North Korea has a nuclear weapon testing facility up north near the Chinese border. There had already been three tests of fission bombs ("A-bombs") there. A fourth test took place there early in January. However, it was recorded by seismologists as a strength of 5.1 on the Richter scale. This would be about right for an A-bomb, but much too small for a H-bomb.

(The Richter scale, used to measure the strength of earthquakes, is a logarithmic scale. This means that a "6" is ten times as powerful as a "5", a "7" is ten times as powerful as a "6", and so on.)

What apparently happened at this most recent North Korean test is that the fission bomb exploded, but did not set off the fusion bomb as it should have done. The European Union, Russia, China, and of course South Korea and the United States have all condemned this attempted test of a fusion bomb but what they will do about it remains to be seen.

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If you still feel up for a scientific topic, there is an interesting little mathematical

operation which will mystify anyone who thinks that algebra is a mysterious realm of higher mathematics. Start with any two numbers. The calculations will be easier if both numbers are integers ("whole numbers"), and if both are odd or both are even, but the operation will work with any two numbers. First square the average of these numbers, and then subtract their product. The result will be a perfect square, which you can check with the square root key on one of those handy pocket calculators.

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For over 150 years, the state song of Maryland has been "Maryland, My Maryland". This sounds like an altogether appropriate sentiment, until you look into the circumstances in which it was written. It was written in 1861 in Louisiana by a Marylander who was clearly overwhelmed by the secessionist sympathies all around him. To the German tune called "*O Tannenbaum*" it urged Marylanders to spurn the "northern scum" and join the self-styled "Confederacy". Fortunately, almost all Marylanders spurned not their country, but the notion of secession. Since Annapolis, the state's capital, was on the shores of Chesapeake Bay in slave-holding territory, the state legislature met in the loyalist western town of Frederick, and firmly refused pro-slavery and secessionist sentiment. A handful of traitors from the eastern part of the state sneaked over the Potomac and enlisted in Confederate units in Virginia. However, a monument to their memory is now under question here in Montgomery County, and may not survive much longer.

I am not surprised that "Maryland, My Maryland" is to a German tune. From colonial times onward, many people from Germany have settled in Maryland, as any local telephone directory will make obvious. In many Maryland towns, Oktoberfest is celebrated annually.

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The National Football League's (NFL) play-offs began with the "wild card" games on the weekend of 9-10 January, which meant that from then on, each losing team is eliminated. The defending champion Seattle Seahawks played the Minnesota Pirates on 10 January in their home state. (Oops - that should be the Minnesota *Vikings*. I made the mistake because, despite all the romantic notions associated with the term "Vikings", the Vikings were mainly sea-going thieves and murderers.) I have Viking ancestors, but I am not inclined to excuse their crimes.

Be that as it may, the Seahawks defeated the Vikings 10-9, thanks to a missed Viking attempt at a field goal in the last seconds of the game. But the game's most interesting statistic was the weather. At kickoff the temperature was -6°F (-21°C), which should have been expected in a Minnesota January. Only two colder games were on record in the entire history of the NFL.

The Minnesota NFL team was called the Vikings because there are a great many people of Scandinavian ancestry in the upper Midwest - so many that two of its states are sometimes called "Norse Dakota" and "Finnesota". Scandinavian immigrants probably settled there

because its forests, lakes, and cool climate reminded them of the "old country".

But hereabouts all the other play-off games were ignored for the Washington Bearskins or Bare Skins or Pigskins or Foreskins or whatever they will be called after the demeaning name "Redskins" is finally disposed of. For years, several tribes of the original Americans have protested that name, though so far none of them have quoted the "definition" that appeared in Ambrose Bierce's *The Devil's Dictionary*. Bierce, who wrote that definition even before the team had been founded as the "Boston Redskins" in the early 1930s, observed that their skins are not even red, at least not on the outside.

The 'Skins finished the regular season on top of the National Conference East, which qualified them for the play-offs. But this is not the achievement it appears to be. The 'Skins' record was 9 wins and 7 losses, so you can only guess how well the rest of the conference played. (Some people called them the National Conference Least.) It was the first time in three years that the 'Skins had qualified for the play-offs, and their fans were ecstatic. Their first game in the play-offs was a visit from the Green Bay Packers, which seem to have the same reputation in the NFL as the New York Yankees do in baseball's American League. They are almost always strong in league play, frequently win, and are always to be reckoned with.

At first it seemed that the 'Skins would turn their fans' hopes into reality. In the second quarter they had an 11-0 lead. But then the Packers came charging back, and eventually won by the quite respectable score of 35-18.

But I am much more a baseball fan than a football fan. Football, basketball, and hockey are all governed by the clock, but a baseball game creates its own schedule. An inning is over when three outs are made, not when a clock says it is over. It will be more than a month before even spring training games begin, and the baseball season starts at the beginning of April.

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A favorite pastime of science fiction fans seems to be composing and singing filksongs about science fiction or fantasy, sung to existing tunes. The word "filksong" was originally "folksong" until someone misprinted it in a fanzine, and it thus got into the vocabulary.

One of the best-known filksongs is "The Orcs' Marching Song", written to the tune of "The Ballad of Jesse James" by the late George Heap, though it may have additions from other filkers. It has been reprinted in a collection of filksongs, published (I believe) by the New England Science Fiction Association (NESFA). I do not have a copy of it, and would be grateful for information on how to get one. It tells the story of the Ring of Power and its history, from Sauron's original loss of the ring to its destruction, from a largely pro-Sauron viewpoint. (Most filksongs seem to treat the original filked story in this way.) The chorus, and a variant chorus, are:

Sauron had no friend to help him at the end,
 Not even an orc or a slave.
 It was dirty Frodo Baggins who fixed his
 little wagon
 And laid poor Sauron in his grave.

Sauron had no friend to help him at the end,
 Not one of his foul orkish crew
 It was dirty Frodo Baggins who fixed his
 little wagon
 Because it was the faanish thing to do.

I do not know whether the alternate chorus was also George's composition. Some singers shout the words "Orc! Orc!" after the second and fourth line of either chorus. After the last line of the original chorus, Fred Lerner is certain to shout "Lousy necrophile!" Ignore him.

Two of my contributions to filksinging have been published in earlier issues of **Dagon**. "The Nazgul King of Angmar" relates an event which lies in the distant past of *Lord of the Rings*, and is to the tune of "The Bastard King of England", allegedly composed by Rudyard Kipling. (I do not know whether this is a fact, or whether Kipling wrote the tune as well as the words. Information on these points would also be appreciated.)

The other **Dagon** filksong honors the real hero of the later *Star Wars* films, and is "Jar Jar Binks of the Space Marines" to the tune of "Captain Jinks of the Horse Marines". Both were published in **Dagon** before September 2013, when I moved from Somerford Place to Montevue. Those issues of **Dagon** are now in storage, and I cannot easily lay hands on them. However, I will reprint them from memory if people want them.

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The biggest jackpot in the history of raffles has just been consummated in the Powerball Lottery. It is about \$1,580,000,000, and was divided among the people who correctly guessed the six one- and two-digit numbers drawn. There were three people who did this, in California, Florida, and Tennessee. The money will be divided equally among them, but with huge cuts for taxes, or if you wanted the whole pay-off at once.

In the last weeks before the drawing, there were huge sales of tickets. I did not participate, partly because the odds against winning were announced as 292,000,000 to one, but mainly because the whole affair is a ridiculous and largely futile expression of greed. There was even a "second-tier" lottery which offered \$1,000,000 to anyone who got *some* of the numbers right. Three people in Maryland, two in Virginia, and about 80 in the entire country won that prize, but again the odds were so large that there was no point in trying for it.

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The presidential campaign slogs drearily onward, first towards the primary elections and then towards the general election of Tuesday 8 November 2016. The primaries and caucuses are regulated by each state, so they are spread out during all the earlier months of this year. Some of the state primary elections are merely advisory, while others choose delegates to the parties' national conventions, who might or might not be required to vote for the candidates to

whom they are pledged. It would make more sense to have them all on the same date, and instructed in the same way, but this would violate “states’ rights”, a slogan which is invoked whenever its use would render the nation’s public business more confusing. For example, most public attention is now focused on early primary elections or caucuses in New Hampshire, Iowa, and South Carolina. New Hampshire and Iowa are small, homogeneous states without significant ethnic minorities. (The biggest ethnic minority in New Hampshire is the descendants of French Canadians who wandered over an easily permeable border.) South Carolina has a large African-American population, but virtually every one of them is a registered Democrat, who cannot vote in Republican primary elections, and so would have no effect on the state’s delegation to the Republican National Convention.

Most of the media’s attentions are focused on the Republican presidential nomination, particularly on Donald Rump’s campaign for that nomination. He consistently leads polls for that nomination, and the media speculate over whether those polls really predict the result of his campaign. Rump is nearly as unpopular with the Republican Party’s leadership as with the Democrats, as was demonstrated by Governor Nikki Haley’s (R-SC) response to President O’Bomba’s State of the Union speech.

If the Republicans should manage to deny their presidential nomination to Donald Rump, he will most probably claim that they acted unfairly, and then would run as an independent against both the Democratic and Republican candidates. This will unquestionably result in a Democratic landslide victory. And even if Rump manages to secure the Republican nomination, his openly bigoted campaign speeches against immigrants and Muslims will turn a majority of voters against him.

Even if the Democrats should nominate Bernie Sanders instead of Hillary Clinton, Rump’s candidacy will certainly fail. We may as well get used to four more years of a Democratic administration, and possibly even a split in the Republican Party which might destroy it as a functioning political body.

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On 14 January 2016 a long article by Caitlin Giron appeared in the *Washington Post*. Its author claimed that she was explaining the term “politically correct” to, presumably, us ignorant illiterates.

This was scarcely necessary. The words of the English language have meanings that are easily accessible in any dictionary. The meaning of the word “correct” is not in doubt. Neither is the meaning of the word “political”. If a candidate confesses that he or she rejects political correctness, or attacks another politician for political correctness, he is confessing that his own views are wrong, that he is admitting this fact, and that he is presumably admitting it because he is backed by people who support his admittedly incorrect views. What other meaning could such an admission have?

A recent incident in Maine provides us with an illustration of this principle. Governor Le Page, a Republican, claims that drug dealers are coming in from New York and Connecticut, selling drugs, and usually getting white girls pregnant before they leave the state. A day or two later he backed up and said that there was nothing racial about his remark. Obviously he regarded this quip as politically incorrect, and was trying to explain why it was nevertheless his opinion if he wanted the support of racists.

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In our fast-moving society we are used to things becoming obsolete. However, we are sometimes surprised by *what* things become obsolete. Who would have believed that typewriters, mimeographs, or phone booths have become obsolete? Without phone booths, how would Superman or Wonder Woman change from civilian clothes into their superhero outfits?

(Long before phone booths became obsolete, *Mad* published a parody in which Wonder Woman ducked into a phone booth for this purpose, only to discover that Superman was already using it to get rid of his civilian clothes?)

The introduction of the dial telephone wiped out a long string of jokes based on an earlier method of obtaining a telephone connection. When I was a boy, my grandparents had the old style of telephone in their Iowa farmhouse. You activated it by picking up the earpiece, turning a little crank which put a live operator on the line, and telling her (invariably "her") whom you wished to speak with. When numbered lines came into use, you would give her the number. Now even dial telephones are obsolete, and you reach your party by pressing numbered buttons.

The typical telephone joke of that distant era involved the caller, the operator, and a wrong number. One such joke went this way:

SEXY FEMALE VOICE: "Hello-o! Madame Fifi speaking."

INDIGNANT MALE VOICE: "Dammit, operator, I told you to get me the STOREhouse!"

AND NOW WE SEE WHAT WE HAVE...

As of present writing it is now about 10 AM on Friday 14 January 2016 and I have completed everything I had planned to put into this issue of **Dagon**. However, it is by no means finished. I still have to print these ten pages on my computer's not always compliant printer, give them to Deirdre so she can get 80 copies reproduced, collated, and stapled next Tuesday, and then mail them out to the intended recipients. My experience with earlier issues has persuaded me that this cannot always be done when I wish to do it, or that it won't be postponed by the failure of something to work properly. And these postponements could be due to *anything*. One of the problems with writing, printing, collating, and mailing out **Dagon**

is the unaccountable way in which so many different things can go wrong at once, each one requiring the assistance of someone different.

If all goes as I expect it to, members of **APA-Q** will have this issue of **Dagon** put into the mail by Mark Blackman on the first weekend of February, and other **Dagon** readers will receive it in the mail sometime during the last two weeks of January. But otherwise its date of arrival will be anybody's guess. And if all does not go well, who knows? Do not be surprised if this issue of **Dagon** is slipped into your hand by the rider of a Bactrian camel who (the rider, not the camel) is wearing the uniform of an Austro-Hungarian postman.

As for the next issue, that is even more problematical. The material about the American presidential election of 2016 may have reached you long after the election, electoral college wrangle, inauguration, impeachment, conviction, and life imprisonment of Donald Rump.

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you may find something of
interest to you on p.____.