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**ROBERTO VACCA**

**15 QUAIN  
SF STORIES**



**LOVE DOLPHINS COMPUTERS RELIGION PLAGUES ETs  
ADDICTION PARALLEL TIMETRACKS LONG LIFE ELIXIR**

**15 QUIANT SF STORIES** - 146 pp. - Italian Lire 21,000 (about US\$10)

Short stories about: LOVE, DOLPHINS, COMPUTERS, RELIGION, PLAGUES, ETs, ADDICTION, PARALLEL TIMETRACKS, LONG LIFE ELIXIR. A love story is based on information theory. The one about extraterrestrials is quite grim. Two stories about religion are outrageous. The dolphin story is a joyous one. Three stories tell the adventures of Philip Quartara a systems engineer full of resource and sagacity.

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## PREFACE

Science fiction is often boring. Particularly the repetitive tales of galactic empires. Not so Bradbury, Wyndham, Asimov, Keyes and many others. So in the past forty years I tried to concoct some stories that are fun to read and apt to induce new connections and insights. I hope you enjoy them.

The first one was AUTO-DA-FE-MATIC with which I meant to fill a gap: I had noticed that few science fiction writers invented stories having to do with religion. In 1957 the dominance of catholic culture in Italy was oppressive - and resented by some. So I made an attempt at satire imagining a theocratic state where the clerics had monopolized all professional activities in my country.

I took up again the religious theme a few years later with *The True Story of Yehoshua bar-Joseph* in which I took the liberty of attributing fictional inventions and powers to young Albert Einstein. There I also started to use the device of the quirk in time, which was exploited masterfully many times by John Wyndham. In fact *Fifty-fifth Year of the Fascist Era* is molded after *Random Quest* - a Wyndham story I consider just about perfect.

I had begun to work with computers in 1955 (and I am still active in the field). In the mid Fifties I worked with some British mathematicians and engineers from Manchester. They had worked with the University department where Alan Turing had been doing research. So ideas connected with artificial intelligence and coding crept into my fiction.

I wrote the latest stories - like *Userfriendliest* - in the late Nineties and they are somewhat more cantankerous than the early ones.

If you like these stories, try also "The Death of Megalopolis" (also available on [www.printandread.com](http://www.printandread.com)). If you contribute enough to the success of my fiction, I'll put out some novels of "economics fiction". These were written originally in English, but published only in Italian, Spanish and Portuguese. *Crude and Evil* gives the prescription for blackmailing OPEC. *The Supreme Pokhazuka* explains why Switzerland is so rich, although it has so few natural resources and why the Soviet Union was so poor, although it had vast natural resources. *This Barbarous Domination* explains the inner mechanisms of Mafia. *God and the Computer* tells the true story of the death of Pope John XXI (Peter of Spain, a great logician) in 1277.

## **INCOMMUNICABILITY**

The day in which men and extra-terrestrials met for the first time was not dramatic at all. Extra-terrestrials were too small and men could not see them. They could not be heard, nor touched, nor smelled. For a long time men were not aware of them and their presence on Earth had no consequences.

In the beginning the extra-terrestrials too did not even notice the presence of men. At the end of their trip some of them happened to land in the rare spots where strong acids were to be found and they were destroyed. Others happened to land on the stony soil of deserts and were annihilated by the very high temperatures. Others arrived on the sea or among the ice, where they could not establish vital colonies, but could only subsist in a state of hibernation. Only those that happened to find a fertile soil, rich in organic matter, could begin to develop.

At long last the extra-terrestrials became aware of man and they attempted to establish a contact, to find a means of communication. Their first endeavors were doomed to failure and no other outcome would have been possible both because of the absolute lack of any previous common experience and, mainly, because of the absence of similar or comparable sensations. Both men and extra-terrestrials were sensitive to some thermal and light stimuli, but their reactions to the same wavelengths were quite different and they did not constitute any common ground.

The learning capability of extra-terrestrials was inferior to that of humans and they were also handicapped by severe limitations to their voluntary mobility. They were, however, sensitive to the difference of temperature between the human body and the environment and they began to feel frustrated by the lack of any sensible response of man to their timid approaches. For a long time they tried to make their presence known, but always without success. At last they decided to try the ultimate means: they tried to enter the cycle of man's biological development and to modify it. This attempt finally succeeded. Man became aware of the presence of extra-terrestrials beyond the shade of a doubt and some men began to live with them in the closest symbiosis, often throughout their lives which were invariably shortened as a consequence of that same symbiosis.

When an extra-terrestrial begins to live with a man, he has great expectations (this is the only way of putting into words the internal state of the extra-terrestrial). Each development it causes, is an attempt to communicate, every growth is a symbol. But the man does not understand, he is only dominated by fear. And at last he goes to his grave together with his guest.

This situation began thirty thousand years ago. Not all men are approached, but the ones who are not directly contacted know that their friends or their relatives have been reached. No one understood yet what the message is. In fact hardly anybody suspects the very existence of a message. Only a state of terror is communicated.

Men speak of the extra-terrestrials in veiled terms, although they have found a name by which to call them. Even scientists use the name explicitly only when they are speaking generically: hardly ever when speaking of a given person.

It is an ugly name. Cancer.

## A PARADISE FOR THURSIO

There was a woman in the lab. Selvie had been working very quietly in her corner, but I must have realized she was there. I stopped humming the Troubleshooter's Ballad before I reached the end of the second stanza:

"Sweat is trickling down my face,  
"The taste thereof is salt:  
"I 'm running on a race  
"With an intermittent fault.

"I don't think I can cope  
"With the hunt for the bloody clod.  
"To stare at the bloody scope ..."

(I composed the ballad many years ago, after two hours I was staring at the screen of an oscilloscope trying to understand why FINAC made errors in negative shifts three or four times a day). The rest of the ballad is quite bawdy and it would have shocked Selvie, who is a very modern and nice girl and who is very good at statistics, but who does not like bad language.

I was debugging a program for our digital computer. The purpose of the program was to detect repeated and significant sequences in the supersonic signals emitted by Thursio, the dolphin we have in the big swimming pool at the IMSAS experimental station. At last I found an error in the indexing of certain secondary cycles and I quickly changed the B reference of about thirty instructions. I guessed the program should have worked all right now, but I just was not in the mood to type the corrections and to feed them to the computer. I said to Selvie:

"Let's call it a day. Will you have dinner with me?"

Selvie said yes she would and I was so pleased that on my way out I forgot to switch off the Ampex machine that recorded on magnetic tape all the high frequency sounds intermittently uttered by the dolphin. The rest of that night is part of another story.

As soon as I entered in the lab the next morning I recalled suddenly my oversight of the night before. The tape recorder was very hot. I switched it off realizing I was stupidly blushing and I removed the reel of tape which had been recorded in the night. It was probably to seek unconsciously an excuse for my distraction that I inserted the reel in the frequency converter, which would have made the recording audible to human ears. I switched the converter on and for the first time I seemed to notice a glimpse of articulate speech in Thursio's squeaks. The hypothesis that at night dolphins are more talkative came to my mind at once.

I kept listening for more than one hour until the reel came to an end. The more interesting bits had probably been recorded the night before at sunset. First one could hear a cry repeated many times:

"Aryon! Aryon!"

Then a kind of singsong, mumbled at first and later pronounced more clearly:

*"Espre pantafè osafàno eskedasà feresòn feresàg feresàp meteripà."*

The first hint that Thursio was speaking ancient Greek was given, of course by the sounds we had interpreted as "pantafè". We listened to the recordings hundreds of times shifting them up and down the audio band, so that they sounded as if they were uttered at times with the shrill voice of a child, at times with the croaky moan of an old man. It took all day, however, to recognize in the recording the well known Eolic lyric:

"O Evening, thou bringst all back that was scattered by bright Dawn. Thou bringst back the lamb, thou bringst back the kid, thou bringst to the mother her young one."

I thought the best thing to do was to repeat the original text to Thursio through the underwater loudspeakers installed in the pool. I took the microphone and said loud and clear:

*"Espere panta fèreis - òsa phainolis eskedas auos. Fèreis oin, fèreis aiga -fèreis apu mèteri pàida."*

Thursio got it at once. He jumped a couple of yards out of the water and his cry could be heard clearly with no need of a converter:

"Aryon!"

I really should have started much earlier to experiment with Thursio at night. I realized it, rereading Plinius who writes that in the Iasius gulf

dolphins came up at once to the fishermen who called them and ate food out of their hands and that each boat had a friendly dolphin who followed it at night when it sailed with burning lights (C.Plini Secundi Naturalis Historiae, Lib. ix, 10).

Anyway I began right away to learn the Eolic dialect. After a couple of weeks I was able to understand enough and I was able to make myself understood. So I was able to resume a conversation that had been interrupted for over 2,500 years.

Thursio told me that some dolphins learnt how to speak for the first time from the poet Aryon near the shores of Lesbos in the sixth century b.C. Since then the more cultivated dolphins, who have passed to each other through eighty generations the knowledge of Eolic and the worshipped name of their first teacher, call all men Aryon and do not attack them, as they consider us the only other intelligent animal in the world. In very old times, however, dolphins even ate man.

I made a micro-miniaturized frequency converter which I installed on the mask of my aqualung, so that I could listen to Thursio in real time as I swam with him in the pool. Every day I would remain under water for hours. In the beginning we spoke Eolic until I realized that Thursio was able to learn English a lot faster than I could progress in the study of that old Greek dialect. Two months after our first verbal contact we could chat happily in English as we floated in the pool.

Plinius states that dolphins like to be called Simon because of the fact that they are bottle nosed. I asked Thursio, therefore, whether he preferred to be called Simon rather than Thursio, which is the name we use for their species. He answered he had never heard of the story and had no real preference.

The current notion that dolphins are happy and playful animals is suggested by the shape of their big mouth, which assumes an expression of constant laughter as soon as they open it. This impression, however, is only based on a gratuitous extension of the validity of patterns of human expression.

Thursio had a very closed and gloomy character. He was always dissatisfied and he told me that many other dolphins are sad and moody like himself. When we see a dolphin cavorting near a group of swimmers, we should not think that he tries to express joy with his jumps: he is just looking for some human warmth. When we see a dolphin playing with a rubber ball, we should not believe that he is releasing jocular merriment: he is probably deep in gloomy thoughts and is nuzzling the ball just like a man worried by serious trouble could kick an empty can that happens to be in his path.

The unhappy character of so many of these odontocetes is caused by a sense of guilt that has been haunting them for more than twenty-five centuries and is based on the memory of their anthropophagy preceding their meeting with the poet Aëon. Since the sixth century B.C. not a single case of an anthropophagous dolphin has been recorded. On the contrary: they feel so deeply the commandment forbidding them to damage intelligent beings (men and dolphins), that often they do not abandon their relatives not even after death and they keep afloat corpses in an advanced state of decomposition with assiduous, though ill directed, affection and care.

Thursio told me that not all dolphins are as cultivated and intelligent as commonly believed. Many dolphins can barely speak or have at their disposal a very limited choice of words. Other dolphins, and Thursio spoke contemptuously of them beating the water's surface with his horizontal tail, are not serious persons at all and they are excessively addicted to gambling. The crowds of dolphins that follow ships - he told me - certainly do not go after the garbage dumped out of the vessels: the procurement of food is much too easy for them, endowed, as they are, with a very efficient sonar system.

It appears rather that dolphins have an uncanny ability of measuring time intervals (Thursio explained this, but I have had no time yet to carry out precise measurements nor to evaluate the magnitude of their units) and the dolphins that follow ships in twos or threes are continuously betting on the future speed, coordinates and course variations of the vessels. Of course dolphins do not bet for money or objects, but for performances. In some cases the winner comes to the surface and floats with his mouth open, while the loser has to locate a fish and to pursue it strenuously steering it until it swims into that open mouth. In other cases the loser has to swim under the winner and has to keep him afloat allowing him to doze and rest. It is well known, in fact, that dolphins never sleep, because their nervous centers which control breathing are in their cerebral cortex : for them breathing is always a conscious action, as it has to be for air-breathing animals who live in water and who have to realize perfectly where they are before they even start to inhale.

Thursio's viewpoint was that observation of random events should not be carried out for greed, but only for divination purposes. Poor fellow ! He told me that in common with many others of his species, he believed the most incredible humbug about the possibility of knowing future events and followed the most unlikely and absurd superstitions. For example he would do a quick somersault in the water and then he would count with his uncanny ability the number of ripples on the water surface to be found between 78 and 156 centimeters from his nose : if that number was odd, the following day something good would happen, if it was even, the following day was to be unlucky and Thursio sank to a deep pit of unfathomable

sadness. Other times the odontocete would count the number of tail strokes he beat between sunrise and sunset and he would set to himself the task of making that number a multiple of nineteen, considering that his failure to do so would have represented an unforgivable sin.

I tried to teach him something in the most varied fields of knowledge. I tried to teach him some logic, but when I told him about the principle of non contradiction, he thought I was making fun of him, so obvious was the concept to him. He was very cross and jumped out of the water falling again on top of me and nearly stunning me. This was his notion of a playful outburst of mild resentment. He just did not show any interest in the principle of causality.

I taught him some terrestrial physics. When I told him that the shape of the earth was spherical, he said that the idea sounded quite reasonable and that the earth radius had to be about 6,400 kilometers, which accomplishment I considered really remarkable. I decided then to tell him something about astronomy and I was really flabbergasted, when I realized: that Thursio had very clear ideas about stars and planets. He described in a surprisingly accurate way the apparent motion of Jupiter, but, from his remarks I realized that he considered that planet as a person, a kind of man or dolphin.

I flattered myself that Thursio held in high esteem both my intelligence and my culture. For some time I had been teaching him to read using colored plastic cards. He liked it very much and I had to make for him some cork letters that floated in the pool and that he would move about and align in sequence to form words and sentences. He loved amphisbaenic phrases (that read the same from left to right as from right to left) and he never tired of trying to compose new ones till late at night. This was fairly tiresome as the weather was now a lot cooler, but I was obliged to light the pool up so that he could continue reading and writing at night. When he realized I switched the lights on and off at will, he expressed his admiration in flattering terms.

Some time after that he started to ask personal questions. He wanted to know how I spent my time after: I went each night. It was very hard to explain the concept of a home. It had been a lot easier to explain what is a book. I told him:

"I go home. I eat something. I talk with friends or I read a book. I switch the light off and I sleep."

He asked:

"If you want to read some more, you switch the light on again, don't you ?"

I said:

"Yes. But this does not happen very often. Usually I have no trouble going to sleep."

At these words Thursio dived until he reached the bottom of the pool and remained there motionless. He did not utter a single word, did not answer questions and just emitted his supersonic ping-ping to determine by sonar my position in the water. I could hear him through my headset fed by the frequency converter in the aqualung and I had the impression that his notes had a peevish quality. I swam to the bottom and patted him on the head.

He was adamant: he did not react in any way.

For a whole week he surfaced every ten minutes just to breathe and then only a small part of his head showed above water, just enough to allow his breathing orifice to take air in. The rest of the time he was visible and he refused all food. I left the hydro-phones switched on all night with the tape recorder on, but the recordings consisted only of occasional ping-pings.

I tried to broadcast seventeenth century music through the underwater loudspeakers. (Plutarch says that music attracts dolphins and humors them up). But the only result was that Thursio wrecked the loudspeakers hitting them with his tail. I talked to him in persuasive tones, but to no avail.

I phoned Kellogg in Florida and Lilly in the Virgin Islands to ask for their advice, but they just said a few words of generic encouragement. Their diffidence was well justified because before my frantic phone calls they had known nothing of my results with Thursio. I was obviously at fault for having omitted to send preliminary reports to the two eminent specialists. Both Kellogg and Lilly barely knew of my existence and on the basis of the evidence could only consider me as a crank.

At long last one morning Thursio surfaced again of his own accord. I saw his big dark, motionless shape in a corner of the pool almost touching the edge with his nose. I was afraid he had died, starved to death. He was alive. When I got near him, he started to rock rhythmically. He was obviously nervous.

I figured that if I had left just then, even only to get my skin-diving outfit, I might have lost perhaps an unique chance of re-establishing contact with my friend. From a distance I saw Selvie who was coming to work. With brief frantic gestures I indicated to her I wanted my aqualung: without my frequency converter I could not have heard Thursio, even if he could hear me. Selvie understood at once and started off running with her

incomparable grace. After two minutes she was back ready with my stuff. I started to speak slowly, while I stripped:

"Wait, Thursio. Wait, my friend. In a minute I'll be down. Take it easy. Now I'll be able to listen to you and you'll tell me everything: what you are thinking - what your troubles are. There's no hurry. We'll sort things out together ... "

As soon as I had the aqualung on, I dived. When the white bubbles stopped streaming past the mask and I could see again, I realized that Thursio was not rocking any more. The splash had probably startled him. I stroked lightly his rubbery side and, at last, he responded with a weak flapping of fins I spoke in Eolic:

"O friend ! What is it thou doest to me ?"

He answered in English, shuffling each word.

"You cannot imagine -- you cannot imagine what it means to have a quick and agile mind and to use it continuously only to satisfy trivial needs. To have to think all the time about how and when to breathe. To think about catching fish. To see dimly facts or truths, which are soon forgotten because you cannot write them down. To see it could be possible to communicate with beings who are more successful than we are: aryons, men ... and to end up using them just for some silly ball game. Before I began speaking with you this is all I did with men: I played and I took dead fish out of their hands. When we began to talk to each other, for the first time I have understood new things. I have realized that my agile body is only an impediment and I felt like that time when a remora stuck to my belly. You told me that man's intelligence has progressed because you have hands and you can mark, choose, sort, write, manufacture, make ... make cork letters with which you taught me to read. Did you know that in our language there is no word which means "to make" ? When we teach our young ones to speak, we can explain what some thing means by pointing. Pointing at boats which are made by man ... but we do not make anything. We swim, we eat. we hunt, we mate quickly with our females, but we do not produce things. We cannot even point properly at things : we have to point using our whole body.

"You cannot imagine what it means to have difficult and disordered thoughts, continuously interrupted by the need of thinking of breathing. We come near to the shores to meet men and when we swim in shallow waters and we see the bottom streaming so fast too near to our eyes, we are afraid we'll be stranded and we'll die starved and choked by our own weight. But we keep coming to bring back meaningless words we heard men shout and we repeat them to ourselves:

"A grampus ! A grampus !"

"And we go back and we idle time away in a confusion without end. I told you we know about death and we know there is nothing after death. You told me that some men have a silly belief in another life after death and that a certain Plato explains this belief with the simile of passing from wake to sleep and again from sleep to wake. But we never sleep and we never thought anything like that. I may live for another ten years. When I realized how many things you have that I'll never have in my time: your home, your books, your ordered thoughts, your choices, your easy communications, the ideas of dead men written on dry paper that does not decay and that you can take in your hands whenever you want, I envied you, Aryon. I hated you and I did not want to speak to you any more."

Thursio complained with a modulated wail that could be heard even without a frequency converter and that my assistants from the edge of the pool interpreted as a whistle of joy.

Now all has changed. The swimming pool at IMSAS communicates directly with the open sea. Thursio and the other dolphins can come and go as they like, at least as far as allowed by their jobs. Now they are all IMSAS employees: some in the Physiology Department and others in the Oceanography Department They draw their salaries in the form of plastic coated checks at the window of the swim-in bank on the edge of the pool. They spend their money to buy food (when they have no time or no wish to go fishing) or to furnish their home. The pool is not a cage any longer, but a home. Each dolphin has his own concave platform two feet from the water surface. Each platform is equipped with two controls, specially designed to be worked easily with a dolphin's pectoral fins. By means of these controls each dolphin can switch on and operate a slide viewer and he can read the vast library stored in the memory of our computer. He can type messages and rout them to the Local Area Network or through Internet. He can jot down notes, which are coded and stored in the computer memory and he can consult the notes he previously took, until he decides to erase them. Each dolphin can switch a light on and off whenever he wishes. As they lie on their platforms they can even doze now and then. Their mental abilities are developing beautifully.

Thursio is in paradise.