

DAVID I.
MASSON

THE CALTRAPS
OF TIME:
MOUTH OF HELL



The Caltraps of Time
David I. Masson

First published in 1968 by Faber & Faber Ltd
Published in electronic format in 2003
by Ansible E-ditions

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This freely downloadable sampler of David I. Masson's *The Caltraps of Time* contains only the preliminary pages, the final notes on the stories' original appearances, and the single short story 'Mouth of Hell'.

AUTHOR'S FOREWORD

Now, when the frontiers of strict scientific hypothesis read like science fiction, but the conduct of global affairs reads like a set of fifth-rate films dreamt up by moronic scriptwriters, and humanity gets on with the business of running the Sixth Major Extermination of Species, I invite you to relax with the imaginations of a slightly more innocent decade.

The White Queen enjoyed believing in six impossible things before breakfast; here you can believe in a dozen, a few of which may be possible, or at least secrete a truth: the chaos at the heart of language; the fires beneath us; the dimensional complexities of time; parallel universes; the fragility of civilization.

David I. Masson
December 2002

MOUTH OF HELL

When the expedition reached the plateau, driving by short stages from the northern foothills, they found it devoid of human life, a silent plain variegated by little flowers and garish patches of moss and lichen. Kettass, the leader, called a halt, and surveyed the landscape while the tractors were overhauled. The sun shone brightly out of a clear sky, not far to south for the quasi-arctic ecology was one of height, not latitude. Mosquitoes hovered low down over tussocks below wind-level, beetles and flies crawled over the flowers. Beyond a quarter-metre above the ground, however, a bitter wind from the north flowed steadily. The distance was clear but it was difficult to interpret what one saw, and the treeless waste held no clues to size. Ground undulations were few. There were no signs of permafrost beneath. After a time a fox could be made out trekking southward some way off. Some larger tracks, not hooved, showed by the edge of a bog pool. If one wandered far from the vehicles and men, the silence was broken only by the thin sound of the wind where it combed a grass

mound, the zizz and skrittle of insects, the distant yipe of fox or other hunting animal, and the secretive giggle of seeping water. Here and there on the north side of a mound or clump traces of rime showed, and a few of the pool edges were lightly frozen.

Returning to the main body, Kettass ordered the midday meal to be prepared. He thought about the situation. The wind was a trouble: it was steady and merciless and evidently below freezing point. One could bake at one's south side and freeze, literally, on one's north side. As the hour wore on the wind increased and became, if anything, colder as the sun grew hotter. But a fringe of dark grey cloud began to climb along the southern horizon, like a ragged curtain seen from upside down, climbed and spread, until its outer streamers menaced the sun. Kettass got the party going again, and the little group of tractors trundled carefully, picking their way towards the clouds.

After two hours, 'Afpeng spotted a herd of greydeer and the party stopped. A long stalk by 'Afpeng, Laafif and Niizmek secured three carcasses which were strapped to the vehicles, and the party moved on. The clouds continued to grow and by evening covered half the sky, to south, the icy wind from the north meanwhile growing in strength. A camp was made, using the

tractors as weather walls to supplement the canvas. The deer were cured and their flesh preserved, against a time of shortage of food.

During a wakeful night the wind blew steadily on, slackening only towards dawn. The night was clear and freezing hard. In the morning the sky was cloudless and the whole plateau covered with white frost.

‘What direction now, chief?’ asked Mehhtumm over breakfast.

‘Press on south, simply.’

In two hours the frost was gone. The beetles came out from their hiding places, the sun beat down, the ground was warm, but the wind blew fiercer than ever and as cold. Far ahead, cumulus heads rose fully formed from the horizon, and soon towering thunderclouds covered the southern sky. A screen of false cirrus spread and became a grey pall, shutting off the sun. The wind grew and turned gusty at times.

‘Have you noticed the ground?’ said Mehhtumm in Kettass’ ear some hours later.

‘The slope? Yes.’ And the chief halted the convoy. It was just as though someone had tilted the world slightly. They were pointing down a gentle slope, nearly uniform, which spread east and west as far as eye could see. Behind to north, the same slope. The change had

been too gradual to notice before. Kettass had the troop deploy into a broad arrow with his vehicle in the lead and centre.

In the next two hours the tilt became more and more pronounced. Pools had become moist watercourse-beds. Kettass' altimeter showed that they were down halfway to sea-level. Yet the vegetation was hardly changed. The mosses were richer, the ground almost hot, but the icy gale hurtled at their backs as if to push them down the hillside, a hillside that stretched mile after mile to either horizon. They were shut in north and south by the tilt of the ground, now visibly a curve round which they could not see. 'Ossnaal's face was a grey-green, and Kettass wondered why one who could be so cool on a rock-face should be so easily affected by this landscape. Not that 'Afpeng looked too good, and no one was happy.

'Where's it going to end, eh?' muttered Laafif.

The thundercloud had become a vast wall of dark vapour, lit by frequent flashes. An almost continuous rumbling came from the south, and their sets crackled. Kettass ordered the vehicles to run level with his own. The slope was now a clear threat to progress.

An hour later Kettass stopped the vehicles again. The slope was dangerously steep. Although it was

barely noon the light was poor, under the pall of cloud which now arched over most of the sky. Plants were more lush but more isolated, so that much rock and gravel could be seen. The biting wind rushed on.

'Looks as though we'll need our climbing suckers after all,' suggested Mehhtumm. Pripand and Ghuddup were muttering together beside vehicle 5 and looking darkly about them. 'Ossnaal's face was white and everyone looked anxious.

'If only a handy hollow or ledge would appear, then we could park the tractors,' went on Mehhtumm. Kettass said nothing. He was considering the altimeter.

'Must be *below* sea-level,' he said at last; 'yet no trees, nothing but this arctic wind, keeping vegetation down I suppose, and no sign of a bottom.' Then 'Immobilize here, everybody. Keep two vehicle-lengths apart. Cast out grapnels as best you can. Pull out the packs and climbing equipment, just in case. Pitch tents, but well east of the vehicle line, and choose vegetation areas: the gravel may be in the track of floods. Same thing with the stores. After all that's done, a meal.'

Before the meal was ready the gale was suddenly full of soft hail, which turned to cold rain. The afternoon was punctuated by showers of this sort. The grapnels saved two vehicles from rolling off in a shallow spate.

Kettass held a council of war. 'Seems to me,' growled Niizmek, 'there's no bottom in front of us. We could send one or two ahead to report, and camp here till we know more.'

'What do you say, 'Afpeng?'

'Strike twenty kilometres east or west, in case there's a spur or a chimney?'

'Ossnaal?'

'I think ... I don't ... It's a waste of time trying east or west. You can see there's nothing however far you go. It's go on or turn back.'

'You can't take the lot of us,' Laafif snapped; 'you can't get enough stores down with us, without tractors. If the ground isn't reached soon and this slope steepens, we've had it. Only two or three men can get down, and then only for a few kilometres' travel.'

Ghuddup and Pripand, mechanics, said nothing.

'I think,' now put in Mehhtumm, 'we might send a patrol party first tomorrow, to go up to half a day down, return by twilight, and report. Then you can decide, eh, chief?'

'Probably best, but I'll sleep on it,' said Kettass.

Few slept that night. The wind was moist, the ground cooled off, the thunder ceased after midnight but the storm of wind roared on. Next morning again a

clear sky, apart from some tumbling clouds low down on the southern horizon (which owing to the slope, was not very far off). It was chilly but not freezing. Kettass chose a party of three after a breakfast at first light, among the long dark purple shadows cast across the tilted ground by vehicles and tents. Mehhtumm was to lead; for the other two Kettass asked for volunteers. To his surprise 'Ossnaal and Ghuddup spoke up. 'If we're not able to use the tractors I'll be at a loose end. Pripand can keep an eye on them. I like climbing, if we get any,' said Ghuddup. 'Ossnaal assured Kettass he was fit; 'I want to find out what we are really coming to.'

The trio set off almost at once; besides iron rations and water, ropes, karabiners and the newly devised suckers, they carried oxygen. 'You don't know how deep this basin is going to go, and what air you'll encounter,' Kettass pointed out.

At first they were in communication with the main party, but at about five kilometres reception grew too faint, partly from the crackling that came with the morning's cumulonimbus. Before this Mehhtumm reported that the air-pressure suggested they were 2,000 metres below Mean Sea-Level, that the slope was over 50° from the horizontal, that the surface was rock

and sand, interspersed with unusual and highly coloured lichen, that there were numerous small torrents east and west of them, and that mist and cloud had appeared, hovering off the edge not far below. After that, silence ... until a hysterical signal, eventually identified as Mehhtumm's, in the deep evening twilight.

Soon after they lost radio contact with the camp, Mehhtumm, 'Ossnaal and Ghuddup paused to stare at the cloud formations. Swags of dirty grey, like dust under beds, floated in the air level with their eyes and a kilometre or so south. Lightning from the formless curtain behind turned them into smoky silhouettes. The cumuloid heads above had largely vanished in the general mass of thundercloud. The tilted horizon terminated in a great roll of clear-edged cloud like a monstrous eel, which extended indefinitely east and west. The ground air, at any rate, was here free of the gale, but the rush of wind could be heard between the thunder. The atmosphere was damp and extremely warm. The rock surface was hot. What looked like dark, richly coloured polyps and sea-anemones thrust and hung obscenely here and there from crannies. The scene was picked out now and again by shafts of roasting sunlight funnelling down brassily above an occasional

cauliflower top or through a chasm in the cloud-curtain. Progress even with suckers was slow. Mehhtumm got them roped together.

An hour later the slope was 70°, with a few ledges bearing thorn bushes, dwarf pines, and peculiar succulents. The torrents had become thin waterfalls, many floating outwards into spray. A scorching breeze was wafting up from below. Two parallel lines of the roller cloud now stretched above them, and the storm seemed far above that. The smooth, brittle rock would take no pitons.

A curious patternless pattern of dull pink, cloudy lemon yellow and Wedgwood blue could just be discerned through the foggy air between their feet. It conveyed nothing, and the steepening curvature of their perch had no visible relation to it. Altimeters were now impossible to interpret, but they must clearly be several kilometres below sea-level. Crawling sensations possessed their bodies, as though they had been turned to soda-water, as Ghuddup remarked, and their ears thrummed.

Mehhtumm and Ghuddup ate part of their iron rations and swallowed some water, but 'Ossnaal, whose face was a bluish pink, could only manage the water. They took occasional pulls of oxygen, without noticeably

improving their sensations.

Two hours later found them clinging to a nearly vertical rock face which continued indefinitely east, west and below. The patternless pattern below their feet was the same, no nearer visibly and no clearer. The waterfalls had turned to fine tepid rain. The air behind them, so far as it could be seen (Mehhtumm used a hand mirror) was a mass of dark grey vapour, with much turbulence, through which coppery gleams of hot sunlight came rarely. The traces of sky above were very pale. The naked rock was blisteringly hot, even through sucker-gloves, but carried a curious purple and orange pattern of staining, perhaps organic. The crawling sensation had become a riot of turbulence in their flesh. Their ears were roaring. Something stabbed in their chests at intervals. Their sense of touch was disturbed and difficult. It was lucky they had suckers. Yet with all this, an enormous elation possessed Mehhtumm, an almost childish sense of adventure. 'Ossnaal was murmuring continuously to himself. Ghuddup was chuckling and apostrophizing the 'Paisley patterns' of the abyss.

Half an hour later 'Ossnaal gave a shrill cry which could be heard in the others' earphones, and went into some sort of fit. Fortunately his suckers held.

‘We must get him up somehow. Can we move him foot by foot?’ shouted Mehhtumm. He felt curiously carefree and regarded the crisis as an interesting abstract problem.

‘I’m not going up!’ snarled Ghuddup.

‘You can’t go down and you can’t stay here. Our only chance is to try and get him up bit by bit. Maybe he’ll come to or faint, and we can manage him that way.’

‘I’m not losing our only chance of seeing what’s below,’ snarled Ghuddup again. ‘The hell with ’Ossnaal, and the hell with you too. You’re yellow, that’s what you are, a yellow skunk, a yellow Paisley skunk!’

Mehhtumm, in a dream, saw Ghuddup, who occupied a central position, saw quickly with a knife through the ropes on his either side. The long ends flailed down. ’Ossnaal’s twitching body hung from three suckers of his four. Ghuddup spidered nimbly down and was soon virtually out of sight, but his muttered obscenities could be heard in Mehhtumm’s radio. Mehhtumm tried to collect his thoughts, still dreamlike. Finally he arrived at the conclusion that he must go for help, as he could certainly not manoeuvre the sick man by himself, and together they would probably perish uselessly. He pushed ’Ossnaal’s left hand hard against

the rock to fasten the sucker, tested the other three and shifted one. There was nothing to belay to. Extracting a luminous-dye marker from a pocket, he splashed the dye vividly over 'Ossnaal's suit and around him. He waited close to 'Ossnaal for two minutes, trying to rouse him by shouting his name. Finally the man quietened, and muttered something in response to Mehhtumm's shouts of 'Hang on; don't move!'

Mehhtumm began clambering upward, marking the rocks with the dye-splasher. Half a minute afterwards a sound and a movement beneath caught his attention, and he looked down in time to see the body of 'Ossnaal plummeting into the abyss. An invisible Ghuddup was still muttering in Mehhtumm's radio, and it was half an hour before his voice faded.

The rest of the upward journey was a nightmare, and took Mehhtumm far longer than he expected. After about three hours his head began to clear as his body reverted to normal, and the full realization of what had happened came to him. The first terrible doubts of his own action flooded in. There was nothing to be done now but to make as good speed as he could to the camp.

He had been calling for an hour before he was heard on their radios. Kettass sent Laafif and 'Afpeng to collect him. They managed to rendezvous by radio,

and brought him back, weeping like a child, in darkness.

‘Sounds like some sort of gas narcosis to me,’ Kettass said later to a recovered Mehhtumm.

‘Yes, could even be nitrogen narcosis; except for ’Ossnaal. There could have been something else wrong with him – would you think?’

‘I should never have let him go. He looked peculiar for some time ... We shall have to write off Ghuddup as well, poor fellow, if we can’t trace him in the morning.’

Next day in the early sunlight Mehhtumm, Laafif and Kettass went down unroped, and marked with dye. The oxygen apparatus of each was adjusted to give them a continuous supply as a high percentage of their inspiration total. They followed Mehhtumm’s markings. It was agreed that the first man to notice any specially alarming symptoms, or to have any detected by the others, was to climb up at once, but that till then they would keep close together, and that the remaining two must come up together as soon as either began to succumb. What happened was that Laafif, becoming confused despite the oxygen about 100 metres above the fatal spot, started to ascend. Mehhtumm passed the spot and, despite a persistent impression that he had become a waterfall, silently climbed on down, passing

Kettass rapidly. He was 400 metres below, muttering to himself and glaring about him, when he and Kettass heard something between a sob and a laugh in their radios, and Laafif's body passed them, a few feet out, turning over and over. It became a speck above the carpet of coiling vapour which had replaced yesterday's colour pattern. The cries were still sounding in their radios minutes later when reception faded.

Kettass, dimly retaining a hold on sanity, eventually persuaded Mehhtumm to return, convincing himself and the other through a swirl of sensations, that it would be no use searching for yesterday's madman over several thousand vertical metres of rock. Mehhtumm said later that at that depth he had kept on seeing little images of Ghuddup, brandishing a yellow knife, hovering around him.

They got back in the late afternoon, and next day a silent expedition set off for home, one man per vehicle.

It took five years for authority to build two suitable VTOL craft capable of flying and taking off efficiently in both normal and high-pressure air, and fully pressurized within. Mehhtumm was dead, killed in a climbing accident on Mogharitse, but Kettass secured a passage as film-taker and world radio-commentator on

one craft, and Niizmek on the other. The broadcasts were relayed from a ground station set up on the plateau, which picked them up, or rather down, from the ionized reflecting layer of the atmosphere, since the basin depth would cut off direct craft-to-layer-to-receiver broadcasting; even so, only about a quarter of the material came through.

The two craft landed in summer on the plateau near the 15° slant zone. Flight between about 11 a.m. and midnight was considered meteorologically impossible owing to the severe up currents and the electrical disturbances. They took off at 7 a.m. just before dawn, using powerful searchlights. Kettass' craft, piloted by an impassive veteran of thirty named Levaan, was to sink down past the rock wall near the original descent. The other craft sped west looking for a change in the geography. The two were in continuous communication through the pilots' radios (on a different wavelength).

Levaan tried his radar on the invisible floor of the basin. 'You won't believe this – we have 43 kilometres beneath us.'

Kettass was speechless.

'There's a secondary echo at 37 km or so – could be the cloud layer below. Let me try the lidar.' He aimed

the unwieldy laser ‘gun’ downwards. ‘Yes, that’ll be the cloud layer all right. And that blip over there, that’s the roller cloud, or rather an incipient roll – I don’t think there’s anything visible to the eye.’

‘The – the ground echo: what does that make it in depth?’

‘Given our altitude above MSL that makes the basin floor over 41 km below sea, and nearly 42 beneath the bevel of the plateau.’

They began to descend. All trace of the event of five years ago was lost. The craft sank nine or ten kilometres, as indicated through the vertical radar. Kettass informed the world that the tinted rock was continuing and took a few film sequences. The sun poured across over the impossible vertical face. At fifteen kilometres down the colours had broken up into isolated dots and patches. The empty parts of the sky had turned a milky white, now began to change to brazen yellow. There was still no visible sign of a bottom, none of the patternless pattern described by Mehhtumm, but the fog below was brilliant in sunlight, yellow sunlight. Even in the air-conditioned cabin it was exceptionally hot wherever the sun struck.

‘Perspective makes the wall appear to curve in above us and below us,’ Kettass was saying to his

microphone. The view was indeed rather like that seen by a midge dancing a few inches in front of a wall made of barrel-staves curving towards him, except that the 'midge' would have been no thicker than a fine hair. The sky met the cliff line dizzyingly far overhead. No less than three parallel lines of black roller-cloud (very slender) were now silhouetted against the yellow sky, while a fourth roll was indicated by an Indian file of fishlike silhouettes alongside them. Not very far beyond hung the shaggy charcoal bases of the first cumuloids, behind which the brassy sun beat down. Black ghosts of the clouds grew and gestured, many kilometres high, on the cliff wall. At times Kettass had the illusion that the craft was flying banked sideways, and that the cliff wall was the horizontal floor of the world.

Descent began to be very bumpy. The other craft reported no change at 50 km west. At 36 km down the open sky was now a blood-orange hue. The fog, which had become exceedingly turbulent, was close below, and after cautious exploration Levaan found a hole through which pink, green and indigo masses could be dimly seen, crawling in the quivering air-currents. At 38 km down, battling against strong updraughts, they sighted far below a vast vista of dully red-hot lava, cold greenish lava, and what looked like violet mud, in

apparently kilometres-wide slabs and pools, lapping right up against the thirty-to-forty-km high vertical wall on one side, and ending in pitch darkness many kilometres southward. Occasional flashes of forked lightning played near the cliff base. Besides the distortions of the air currents, the whole floor was in slow motion, spreading, rocking, welling, bubbling.

Levaan broke in on Kettass' commentary to say he dared not stay longer, as the updraughts were becoming too violent and the fabric was groaning. The other craft had just sighted the end of the basin and wished to make its own commentary. Risking a breakup in the turbulence near the roller cloud level, Levaan's craft rose to pass it, and swung back to rendezvous. Niizmek and his pilot Fehos had sighted a step-like formation closing in the western end.

Next morning the two craft switched roles. Fehos and Niizmek descended into the pit, some way out from the wall, while Levaan's craft flew east to find how the basin ended on that side. But Fehos' transpex imploded at 39 km down with a crack heard on the radios of the world and the craft, a squashed insect, plunged into the magma. After that Levaan would not fly his craft below 25 km down.

They established that the cliff line stretched 163

km east to west, or rather slightly north of east to slightly south of west, and that the western end, later known as the 'Terraces', consisted of a series of nearly vertical cliffs of from 2,000 metres to 3,000 metres high each, separated by sloping shelves and screes several km across. The eastern end, the 'Staircase' or 'Jacob's Ladder', proved to be a rather similar formation like a file or grid whose ridges or bars were 500-metre-high 30°-lean overhangs (over the basin) of hard rock, alternating with boulder-and-gravel-filled hollows of soft rock, the whole system being tilted down southwards at an angle of 35°. The southern edge was a vertical wall like the northern, nearly parallel to it, but peak-bordered, higher by several thousand metres, 146 km long, and some 200 km away. After a few months press and radio exhausted their superlatives and wisecracks ('Nature's Mohole' was the type) and took up 'Slingo', a new parachute waltzing craze sweeping the world.

Thirty years later Kettass, a hale septuagenarian, was taken down the 'Terraces' pressurized cable railway by his son-in-law, daughter, and three grandchildren, and, looking through the triple transpex wall, gazed in silence upon the oozing magma from 700 metres' range.

He did not live to travel the tourist rocket route built five deaths and 83 strikes later down 'Jacob's Ladder', but two of his granddaughters took their families down the North Wall lift. That was the year Lebhass and Tollhirn made their fatal glider attempt. By this time, three other deaths and 456 strikes later, heat mills, for the most part automatically controlled and inspected, were converting a considerable fraction of the thermal energy in the basin to supply two continents with light, heat and power. A quarter of the northern plateau was given over to their plant, another quarter contained a sanatorium and reserve for hardy tourists, and the other half was a game reserve and ecological study area, but the jagged mountains of the south, scoured by their own murderous southerly winds, resisted general exploitation.

ORIGINAL APPEARANCES

The first edition of *The Caltraps of Time* contained seven short stories, all originally published in *New Worlds SF*:

Lost Ground, *New Worlds* 169, December 1966.

Not So Certain, *New Worlds* 173, July 1967.

Mouth of Hell, *New Worlds* 158, January 1966.

A Two-Timer, *New Worlds* 159, February 1966.

The Transfinite Choice, *New Worlds* 165, August 1966.

Psychosmosis, *New Worlds* 160, March 1966.

Traveller's Rest, *New Worlds* 154, September 1965.

This new edition contains three extra stories:

Doctor Fausta, *Stopwatch* ed. George Hay. London: New English Library, 1974.

The Show Must Go On, *The Disappearing Future* ed. George Hay. London: Panther, 1970.

Take It or Leave It, *The Year 2000*, ed. Harry Harrison. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970