

CLASSICS TO GO

# AMAZING

STORIES  
VOLUME 13



FREDERIK POHL

# **Amazing Stories**

**Volume 13**

**Frederik Pohl**

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# **Asteroid of the Damned**

**Frederik Pohl and Dirk Wylie**

**Somewhere on that asteroid of sin  
lurked the crime king of the Universe.**

"Sorry, son," MacCauley said with the barrel-scrapings of his patience. "I said no and I meant it. I haven't got anything to give you. Now please stop wagging at me and go."

The excited glitter of the Palladian's luminiferous eyes died dispiritedly. MacCauley turned his back on the slight-bodied asterite and rapped his thumbnail against his drained glass. The bartender, a heavy and humorous man, expertly refilled Mac's glass with oily, musky, milk-white synthetic liquor and said: "This Kiddie bothering you? Scat, you, or I'll see that you never get into this place again."

Mac shrugged as he watched the stripling strain to catch the bartender's meaning by reading his lips, then mournfully disappear. "No more than they all do," he answered. "What's the matter with them, anyhow? They're positively nutty on the subject of money."

The bartender shook his head and snatched a quick drag on a smoldering cigar-stub. Replacing it on a ledge, he said: "Not money so much. You couldn't bribe a Kiddie with a certified check for a couple of billion dollars. They're not bright, exactly; they don't regard paper as worth anything. It's metal they want. If it happens to be precious, that's all right, but any kind of metal will do. What they're really crazy

about, of course, is silver and copper. They'll do just about anything for it, including murder and treason."

Mac, listening too intently, gulped a bit more of his drink than even his spaceman's gullet could take. When the red-hot lava stopped strangling him and he could see once more through the streaming fountains that had been his eyes, he managed to choke out: "What do they want it for? Do they eat it?"

The bartender laughed. "Nah. They don't really eat anything. They drink some kind of stuff they find in the rocks—like they used to find petroleum, on Earth. Radioactive, this stuff is. That's all they need to live on. They don't breathe at all. You can see that; they don't even have a mouth or a real nose, just a sort of trunk that they drink through.... Wait a minute. Be back."

The bartender rolled away. A couple of new customers had come into his side of the bar and were demanding attention.

Mac sighed and glanced at his watch. But the bartender was back and ready for more talk before Mac had made up his mind to leave. The bartender wanted to talk because this was a dull night in the cafe attached to Pallas' largest gambling-room; for the same reason, MacCauley wanted to leave. He was here on business.

However, he might need to know something about the natives of Pallas for his business. And he really was shockingly uninformed about the creatures who inhabited the free-port asteroid. Other than that they were called Kiddies, looked like seven-year-old Earthly children, and didn't breathe, he really knew nothing.

"Then what do they do with this metal if they don't eat it?" he asked.

The bartender shrugged. "They probably know, but they're too dopey to be able to tell you. I asked one of them once—

he wrote out an answer, the way they always do when they want to tell you something. Seems they generate electricity in their bodies. A Palladian's idea of a real good time is to take a hunk of pure copper and hold it in his hands. The current runs from one hand to the other. They are like that. This one claimed that each metal gave them a different kind of thrill."

"All right if you like," MacCauley said absently. "Me, I'll take my jolts out of a bottle."

"Was that an order for another drink?" The bottle was already in the fat man's hands.

MacCauley nodded, and glanced again at the time. He swallowed the poisonous liquor as fast as he could manage; then took one last quick look around the bar to make sure.

Yep, he was wasting time here. The place was practically empty.

He paid his check in Earth-American dollars, and passed on to the main game room.

Like everything else in Pallas, it was completely underground, with a purely artificial atmosphere. Artificial, in fact, was the word for Pallas. Everything about it was synthetic; there wasn't a figment of reality to be found in it. All that Pallas had to offer visitors was freedom from most of the more pressing laws of the more civilized—and larger—worlds. That, and the Kiddies, the peculiar race that had been found on the small asteroid when the first space-explorers got there. Everything that Pallas had, it owed to the fact that, in essence, it had nothing. No minerals worth the cost of extraction; no agriculture; no science; no artifacts; no history. It was so totally useless that the major worlds of the system had declared, "Hands off!" And to that fact Pallas owed the liberality of laws that made it a refuge



for fugitives from the Tri-Planet justice, as well as a planet-sized gambling den.

MacCauley curled the tip of his nose when he got a whiff of the atmosphere. It had been bad enough in the bar—thin, moist air, representing a compromise between the atmospheres of Earth, Mars and Venus; enjoyable to the members of none of the races from those planets, but just barely breathable to all. That atmosphere, even when pure, was obnoxious. And here, in the densely-packed main hall, it was really foul. There was something about Venusians, Mac decided, that he didn't like. It wasn't their fault, of course, that they had evolved in a wet climate, and had distinct auras of unearthly B.O. in consequence of their need to perspire. But it wasn't his fault, either, and he didn't see why he should suffer for it.

Mentally holding his nostrils, he waded into the reek and halted by a magneto-roulette table. A casual observer, MacCauley hoped, would think he was engrossed in watching the game. Actually he was carefully scrutinizing each of the score of players and spectators at the table. Somewhere in this motley mob made of the dwellers of a half-dozen planets there might be a cool, level-headed, thoroughly dangerous man, the brains of the syndicate that was flooding Earth and Venus with narcophene. That drug was the most formidable in the history of narcotics. You chewed it—if you were insane or ignorant!—and you felt nothing but a pleasant coolness on your tongue. There weren't any mad hallucinations of grandeur; you never lost consciousness of what you were doing or who you were. Just, without your consciously realizing it, you felt better all around. Things that should have worried you sick seemed trivial; you could laugh at the specter of sickness or agony or anything, however fearsome that endangered or injured you. The drug had a certain medical value; it was used to prevent total insanity in persons suffering from utterly

incurable and horribly painful diseases. For with them it didn't matter that the narcophene habit was permanent, once acquired; they didn't have to fear the mental and moral and eventually physical collapse that was bound to come. They were as good as dead anyhow.

But for others....

And the man who had reorganized the once-smashed industry of manufacturing and smuggling it was on Pallas now. That much the home office of Tri-Planet Law knew, and had told Mac. That was all their best operatives on the inner planets had been able to dig up, and from that point onward ... nothing. Those who could have told more were addicts, and those who had tried to tell more were dead. Murdered.

There was a TPL office on Pallas, of course, but it was a one-man outfit. And the one man seemed thoroughly incompetent, for this job, at least. His reports had shown him to be unable to even begin the job of tracking down the man. Hence, MacCauley.

For the sake of appearances, MacCauley threw a bill on number 28, lost it, and moved on. Nobody in the neighborhood of that table corresponded to the vague physical description he'd been able to glean from the scanty reports.

Nor, he found, did anyone in the house. That didn't prove anything, of course, except that the man Mac was after wasn't at this particular place at the time; or, naturally, that the description MacCauley'd been given was wrong from the ground up, but that wasn't a thing to think about.

He shrugged and moved toward the exit. The room was packed worse than ever; he had to shove his way through. He kept bumping into people, he noticed—then looked around. It wasn't so much that he was bumping into people,



he found, as that people, represented by the Kiddie, were nudging him.

"Oh, for the Lord's sake!" he cried tiredly. "I tell you I won't give you anything. Now get away from me. And stay away, if you want to keep living."

The Kiddie shrank into himself and seemed to whimper voicelessly. The glow-glands set around his eyes shone a pinkish purple of fright. He started to say something—in the primitive sign-language that his race used to communicate with aliens—but halted the gesture and abruptly turned and slunk away. His slight frame, the size and appearance of a seven-year-old boy's, vanished almost immediately in the pack of hulking Venusians and attenuated, pallid stick-men from Mars.

MacCauley didn't pursue him; there was no reason, of course, for him to do so.

But that, "of course," like so many others, was wrong. There was a definite reason for Mac to follow the metals-mad asterite. Mac found the reason when he reached the cloakroom. He reached in his pocket to tip the pretty Terrestrial check-girl—and found not even a pocket. Just a slit that had been made not more than ten minutes before, through which the pocket itself and contents had been neatly extracted. Presumably by the Kiddie.

"Damn!" was the best Mac could do, but he said it with feeling. He was casting about in his mind for something he could say to the girl that might make her forget about tips when he saw the Kiddie himself, luminescing a vivid green, scuttling out the front door.

"Hey!" he yelled, and it wasn't only a desire to get away that kept the Kiddie from looking around; he couldn't hear any more than he could speak. Language failing, Mac took stronger measures. He left his sport-silk jacket on the arm of

the bewildered girl and sprinted after the Kiddie. Intercepting him just previous to the door, he swung the Palladian around and gestured with frantic anger. The Kiddie, with a surprising show of strength in so frail a body, attempted no answer or denial of the charge of theft, but wrenched himself free and darted out the door.

Mac, following, met the inevitable. When the luck of the MacCauleys ran bad, it stayed bad—or worse. He collided with a fat and pugnacious drunk. Not only collided with him but knocked the wind out of him. If it hadn't been that the drunk had an equally drunk and volatile companion, that would have been all right. As it was, Mac found himself on the receiving end of a pale, knuckly Venusian fist.

He was flat on the floor before he realized he'd been hit. Then began the real trouble.

Somebody yelled, "Oh, boy! A fight!" and leaped joyously on Mac with a pair of magno-caulked spaceman's boots. What happened after that got worse and worse. Everybody in the gambling joint seemed to have mayhem in their hearts. Practically to a man, they poured out and joined in the free-for-all. Half the floating population of Pallas seemed to have come to rest on MacCauky's solar plexus by the time he heard the soft, popping noises from the weapons of the house's private army of bouncers and trouble-shooters. When MacCauley next found himself able to look around he was out in the half-hearted illumination of the street, sick and weak from the effect of the gas pellets which had quelled the riot.

And without a penny to his name.

It would have been foolhardy to have left his money in the "safe" at the hotel, though there was slight comfort in that thought. One place was as good as another on Pallas, where laws were made for the sheer pleasure of violating them;

the native Palladians, shifty and unmoral as they were, were hopelessly outclassed in dishonesty by the civilized men of the inner planets. The one law all respected was the law of pure and applied force.

Mac fumbled a crumpled cigarette from his pocket and thought miserably of going to the police. Miserably, because the native police force was a joke and a mockery, maintained more to put the squeeze on innocent foreigners than for any other reason. Which shows how naive the asterites were; there was nothing innocent about most of the foreigners that came to the tiny planet.

Even the TPL post on the asteroid was powerless, shackled by diplomatic necessities to the pretence that the thick-witted Palladians were capable of running their own world. "Hands off!" was the watch-word.

His swollen eyes squinting at the fluoro-flame lamps set in the rocky ceiling of the tunneled street, MacCauley sighed heavily, feeling the full weight of his predicament.

All his money had been on him. All that was left of his money was a memory and a neat little slit just under the zip-seal flap of his hip pocket. And on Pallas, where it was dog eat dog and the devil help the one who lacked a full set of teeth, money was the means of obtaining dental attention.

Yes, Mac was in a mess, for all his kit, including the last can of Terrestrial cigarettes, were in the hotel room; even his blasters, the slim, wicked pistols that projected a vibratory pencil-beam that destroyed flesh and neural fibers and left the brain watery pulp, were locked up in that dark little rat-hole up near the top of Pallas' single, buried city. Mac was weaponless, except for a tempered bronze knife in his shirt, on an outlaw world where a swift attack was the best insurance against sudden death.

His hotel bill was payable every twenty-four hours, and his period of grace had expired. Pallas being first and foremost a gambling planet, it wasn't at all uncommon for a man to check into the best suite a hotel could offer, his money-belt fat and heavy with a half-million in platinum credits; leave in the early afternoon for a little fling at the tables, and come back in the evening asking apologetically if he might borrow the price of a shave so he could look nice on the trip back home.

For that was the rule: no money, out you go and your baggage held by right of a lockout. Everything on Pallas was operated by the same ruling—cash strictly in advance. And to make sure that no floaters were left to the dubious charity of the planetoid, there was another standing rule. A law, this time; a duly enacted law of the Palladian legislature and the sole ordinance that was enforced by the foreign-sponsored native authorities.

Before a visitor was admitted to Pallas, he was first made to post a bond equal to his passage back home. And that could not be touched or refunded until he left.

MacCauley groaned aloud and looked about him. Walking blindly and without thinking, very easy in the light gravity of low-powered magna-gravs, he had entered a part of the sealed city new to him.

He was in the native quarter, at the planetoid's core, where the asterites were as thick as red dust on Mars—and for the first time Mac saw a Kiddie policeman. He was wearing no more clothing than the rest of his kind, just carried a staff of office, like the old Bow Street Runners.

An idea suddenly made contact in MacCauley's mind. He signaled the officer and dragged out a notebook and pencil, unnecessarily, as it happened. The Kiddie, in sinuous gestures, signified that he could understand English, partly

by lip-reading, partly by picking up the sound in some weird fashion through rock-conduction and the sensitive soles of his splay feet.

Mac, enunciating carefully, spoke.

"One of your people has robbed me. I want him arrested. Where do I go?"

The Kiddie bobbed his head, and from the manner in which his luminiferous glands sparkled balefully, it was evident where he thought MacCauley should go. Nevertheless, he snapped out *his* little pad and stylus, and scrawled: "Commi wih me tu Offic he wil arange arest."

MacCauley deciphered the scribble. He shrugged and said, "Okay. Hop to it, sonny." He walked beside the diminutive policeman for a few hundred feet, glancing incuriously at the small burrows which pierced the rock walls and kicking away chunks of the queer, spongy rock on which the Kiddies subsisted, the equivalent of Earthly garbage.

He should have thought of the cops before, he realized. The Kiddies, as a race, were not numerous, and he could probably bully them into finding the thief and recovering his money. After all, why not?

He soon found out. The lolling half-breed Venusian interpreter who loafed around the ratty, worm-infested police station heard his complaint and deftly translated it for the benefit of a moth-eaten Kiddie who seemed to be as much in charge here as anyone else. MacCauley drew an easy breath, his first in two hours, and then—

The interpreter sing-songed, "Forty Earth-dollars, please. Filing fee."

MacCauley's eyes narrowed. The old squeeze play. "Don't be a sap," he said flatly, his thin lips tight against his teeth. "I

haven't got forty cents. That little louse took everything that was in my pocket."

The Venusian smirked, and regarded his greenish, webbed hand with great interest. "That is very bad, my friend," he said, and flicked a flea from a fold in the skin of his wrinkled wrist. "Here on Pallas we have a law; the citizens must be protected. When a foreigner makes an accusation against a citizen, it is quite possible that he is wrong, and a great injustice will have been done. As you know, there is only one way to soothe a Palladian ... money."

MacCauley cursed bitterly, harsh, biting oaths. "All right," he said then, forcing his tone to evenness. "I'll sign a guarantee of the money. When you catch this pickpocket, you'll reclaim the money; then I'll put up the bond pending trial."

By great effort the interpreter managed to look shocked. "That is absurd. You must pay now; if the Palladian is innocent, he will not have the money. No, it is impossible."

"If he's innocent it'll be because you caught the wrong guy. Why, by all the Plutonian Ice Devils, should I have to pay for your mistake?"

The green-skinned man smirked again. "It is the law. The law is very strict. If you do not like it, you can go back to the planet you came from." And he turned away, busying himself with some important-looking papers, dusty and much-handled. MacCauley was not too preoccupied to note that the blubbery Venusian was holding them upside-down.

MacCauley socked his balled fist into his palm and wondered if pacing the littered floor would help. He was now, he assured himself, in the worst of all fixes. The time he'd been trapped between two hostile groups of Mercurians who were settling a private argument with quarter-mile lightning bolts was a pleasure compared to this. Then he'd had his guns, at least, and no restrictions about using them.

He had to have his kit. Which meant getting his money back. It was necessary, he decided, to play his trump card. He hadn't wanted to reveal himself as a free-lancing TPL man; word would be sure to leak out. But he certainly couldn't accomplish anything otherwise; the chance of recovering the credits, and eventually his *materiel*, was nil without some sort of aid. And that was what he could get only by showing these small-time constables that he was Mr. Law himself. It may be also that he was motivated by justifiable conceit in TPL itself.

"Okay," he snapped suddenly, startling the pudgy hybrid with the sharpness of his voice. "I guess there's no point in keeping under wraps any longer. Let me tell you who I am...."

Twenty minutes later, as he stumbled out of the warped stone building, he was wondering dazedly why his TPL affiliation had done him no good.

Tri-Planet Law was an organization that had considerable history, nor could all of it be written. It was the most potent single force in the history of any planet of the Solar System, figured any way you like. It was the only force whose rule was hardly ever challenged.

When you broke the law within the territories mandated by TPL, you did so with the very greatest caution. And you never tried to fight back if you were caught. It wasn't really a large organization, relative to the vast throngs of intelligent life that swarmed the System. It was only a tiny decimal of one per cent of the entire population of the thirty inhabited globes. But when you consider that the total census showed more than a hundred billion individuals of high enough brain-power to be rated sentient, you can understand that a fraction of a per cent does mean close to a hundred and thirty thousand persons united into the best-



organized police and military force that a hundred trained social technicians could evolve.

That is why MacCauley couldn't understand the fact that the half-breed interpreter had practically laughed in his face.

True, TPL's hundred and thirty thousand of personnel were largely on the planets of Earth, Mars and Venus, plus their possessions and allied states. TPL had no standing here, officially, but the organization had a de facto reign over all of space by virtue of the fastest and best-armed space-ships made. And Pallas, dependent upon the transient trade, certainly shouldn't be able to afford to anger representative of the body that ruled the space-lanes.

Something, Mac decided, was thoroughly rotten in the local checking office of TPL. Something that might show why the operative on Pallas hadn't begun to be able to find the man or men behind the narcophene racket.

MacCauley hadn't shown himself there before because he didn't want himself identified with the Law group. Now that he'd uselessly exposed himself, that obstacle was nullified.

He'd found out where the place was just so he could avoid it. Pausing a second to puzzle out its probable direction, he started off.

It was close, of course; nothing was far from anything on Pallas. Within five minutes he was standing outside the building, rubbing his chin and deciding that he could stand a wash-up before going in.

Like most of the asteroid's structures, this one seemed to have been made by a blind moron for his elder brother's fifth birthday. Stepping gingerly to avoid bringing the ceiling down about his ears, he made for the washroom.

The Kiddie attendant was scrunched up in a corner, luminescing happily over a former airlock handle. "Hey!"

Mac said uselessly. A wadded paper towel brought better results, and the Kiddie glanced up.

Of course, it had to be the Kiddie who lifted Mac's roll. The gods of chance saw to that. In a trice Mac had backed the frightened Kiddie into a corner, looking rather threatening what with his grim expression and the bronze knife suddenly sprouting from his fist. He was fumbling for the gesture that would convey, "Gimme!" to the asterite when the interruption came.

"Having fun?"

Mac dropped the Kiddie and spun around, automatically reaching for a blaster that wasn't there. "Who the devil are you?" he snarled.

The long Terrestrial newcomer leaned gingerly on a soot-covered washstand and frowned. "Me? I work near here. Who are you?" He stuck a cigarette in his taut lips, pinched the tip and inhaled sharply as it flared bluely.

Something clicked in MacCauley's memory. Remembrances of long rows of files, photographs.... The TPL agent for Pallas. He said, "You're Kittrell, right?"

The long man nodded. "I might be," he said, "if you're somebody that's got a right to know. So what?" He hadn't moved but his posture seemed subtly altered, caution in every line of his frame. From the position of his hands, Mac more than suspected he was armed.

Easing his hands behind his back, he twisted the stem of his wristwatch. Kittrell jumped. "Hey!" he exclaimed. Sparks were fairly snapping from the blazing dial of his own heavy, old-fashioned timepiece—the recognition signal of TPL operatives. "I guess I am Kittrell," the man acknowledged. "They told me they were sending someone from the Narcotics division to take over on that narcophene business. You him?"