

A comprehensive guide to one of science fiction's most influential novels.

Slanology: An In-Depth Guide to A.E. van Vogt's Most Famous Novel

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# *SLANOLOGY*

*An In-Depth Guide to  
A.E. van Vogt's Most Famous Novel*

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# Introduction

*Slan* is justly considered A.E. van Vogt's finest novel, and the fact that it was his very first novel makes this achievement all the more noteworthy. Prior to this, his career as a science fiction writer was restricted mainly to "monster" type stories such as "Black Destroyer," "Discord in Scarlet," and "The Sea Thing." In each of these tales the monster was intelligent but a menace to mankind. Just when many readers of *Astounding Science Fiction* were becoming convinced that van Vogt was a one-track writer, *Slan* appeared, dramatically turning this theme on its head — the "monster" (here in the form of Jommy Cross) is intelligent but benevolent, and it is ordinary *mankind* that poses the menace. And just when the reader becomes convinced this is nothing more than a clever reversal of his usual theme, the apparent goodies-versus-baddies situation is revealed to be something far more complex, showing that neither the slans *nor* humanity are entirely good or entirely evil.

When the novel was first serialized in 1940, it quickly made its mark as a truly pioneering work in the science fiction genre, serving as a perfect example to other writers who wished to create more ambitious stories of their own. Aside from the realistically murky background filled with legends, garbled facts, lies, and counter-lies — just like the real world — van Vogt was one of the first writers to introduce tense and plausible political intrigue to science fiction. He laid the groundwork for later grandmasters such as Frank Herbert and Philip K. Dick, who honed science fiction's unique possibilities for intrigue to a fine art. And the novel's rich multilayered complexity was indicative of a genre that was rapidly becoming more sophisticated, largely thanks to John W. Campbell, editor of *Astounding* from September 1937 onward, who strove to push the limits of what science fiction could do. In line with this maturity, *Slan* was one of speculative literature's first serious treatments of telepathy and the role of the "superman" in society, the latter being a topic of much discussion during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As such, *Slan* reflects the strong Darwinian ideas of the Eugenics Movement, in that it portrays a superior race evolving that is destined to replace (or rule) regular *homo sapiens*, a theme which is continued even today in works such as the recent *X-Men* films.

Although often criticized for his shortcomings as a writer, van Vogt was indisputably a craftsman who excelled in his own special areas of expertise. One of his greatest strengths as a writer lies in his ability to create short but effective transition scenes. In numerous places throughout the novel, he very nicely encapsulates entire years in a few terse paragraphs. This very difficult technique

is sadly neglected among today's authors, who are perfectly content to rack up the word count with excessive detail, fleshing out parts of the story that would be far more effective when quickly summed up. And notably for a novel so short, *Slan* showcases van Vogt's fertile imagination — it contains a great deal of variety, switching locations quite often and with each setting being unique and interesting. There is also a nice blend of action, suspense, and even humor, with the unifying tale of Jommy's quest for truth offering ample opportunity for introspection and character development throughout the novel. And, of course, no discussion of van Vogt would be complete without touching on his ability to evoke in the reader a deep fascination and a sense of wonder that few before or since have been able to equal.

### **A Brief Explanation**

This booklet is meant to be read as a supplement to the novel, not as a replacement. *Slan* is perhaps van Vogt's most complex work with a rich but tangled backdrop to the story. This booklet sets out to "untangle" all this information and present it in an easily-consulted form, to enhance your understanding of this fascinating and influential novel.

Writing this study came about through a peculiar chain of events. I'm currently working on an extensive guide to the fiction of A.E. van Vogt, which I'm calling *The Sevagram Handbook*. (This will be several years in the making, so don't expect to see it anytime soon.) This guide will give a summary for each work, as well as a list of characters, places, and aliens, and information on the different versions of each text. Since I re-read *Slan* in January in order to properly review Kevin J. Anderson's new [Slan Hunter](#) novel, I ended up doing a "prototype" entry for *Slan* to experiment with the format I had in mind for the *Handbook*.

However, it wasn't until months later, when I was close to finishing my coverage of *Slan*, that I realized that this "entry" ran to 23,000 words and was far too detailed and bulky for the *Handbook*. I had become so engrossed in what I was doing that I failed to consider this "entry" in context. (Needless to say, the final *Handbook* entry for *Slan* is much shorter, coming to a much more manageable 1,500 words.) Fortunately, rather than letting all this effort go to waste, fellow van Vogt enthusiast Mark McSherry recommended that I offer this study as a downloadable e-booklet.

So I'd like to thank Mark for his wonderful advice, and to acknowledge my debt to Jean-Marc Lofficier, Lance Parkin, and Lars Pearson, whose *Doctor Who* reference works inspired both this booklet and the upcoming *Sevagram Handbook*, and to Michael McKinney who suggested the idea for a detailed timeline and a list of

gadgets... even though his suggestion was made years ago and for a completely different project!.

## **Page References**

Since there are innumerable references to specific sections of the novel throughout this booklet, I have used the 1975 Berkley Medallion edition of the novel. (Which contains the 1968 version of the story — for more on the various texts, see the **Different Versions** section of this booklet.) I purposefully selected an edition that has been printed numerous times with the same pagination, making it easy for you to obtain the same source through a used book seller.

A page number in parentheses — such as "(186)" — is placed after a bit of information to show where it came from. Sometimes multiple pages scattered throughout the novel are referenced for the same "fact." Also, sometimes multiple items of information were found on the same page — when this occurs, the page reference is given after multiple sentences.

# Plot Summary

**Setting:** Earth & Mars, from around 3529 to 3544 A.D. (see **Timeline**)

## **Chapter One** (pages 5-14)

Patricia Cross and her son Jommy travel to the city of Centropolis, capital of the world. The Crosses are slans, telepathic offshoots of the human race who are hated and feared by regular humans and exterminated on sight. Jommy has been entrusted with the task of assassinating Kier Gray, world dictator and persecutor of the slans. Only after Gray's death will slans be able to live normal, happy lives. To do this he will need access to a great weapon invented by his deceased father, hidden in the catacombs beneath the city. His mother has long prepared Jommy for this, since she suspects that she will not be alive to do it herself.

A group of men close in on them. They split up, his mother having already resigned herself to capture, but will do her best to allow her son to escape. Just as the authorities make their move, Jommy jumps onto the rear bumper of a passing car and is whisked away.

Unfortunately Jommy senses that the occupants of this car are John Petty, head of Gray's secret police force, and his chauffeur/bodyguard Sam Enders. Although Petty has the ability to block telepathy almost as well as a slan, Jommy senses Petty's thoughts: the police chief is a ruthless man and has decided he must kill Kathleen Layton, a young slan girl, in order to undermine Gray's authority.

Just then, the two men hear on the police radio that there is an escaped slan boy in the vicinity whose mother was just killed, and that the boy was last seen riding on a car that passed through the area. As the car screeches to a halt, Jommy jumps clear and runs while the two men fire upon him. He is hit, but manages to escape through a run-down warehouse district and into a poor housing development where some of the desperate residents try to capture him for the \$10,000 reward. He eludes them and finds a hiding place. He detects a nearby mind, filled with evil plots, focused on his hiding place, but whoever it is does not give him away as the searchers pass by. This individual is revealed to be a bitter elderly woman who calls herself Granny. She knocks him semi-unconscious and pries the weakened child out of the hiding place, all the while muttering to herself incessantly about how the slan boy will make her a fortune.

## **Chapter Two** (pages 15-24)

The next scene introduces the reader to Kathleen Layton, a young slan girl who is a prisoner of the state, protected inside the palace by Kier Gray under the pretext that she is a study subject. On the eve of her eleventh birthday she is warned in a roundabout fashion by Davy Dinsmore, a former friend of hers, that she is scheduled to be executed the next day, explaining that Gray had agreed to his cabinet that the slan girl would be terminated when she reached the age of 11.

Terribly upset, she runs off to her room and tries to go to sleep. However, she detects the thoughts of an assassin sent to kill her. Although the man has some training in blocking telepathy, just enough leaks out to let her know that someone is afraid the execution will not be carried out and is determined to take matters into their own hands. Amply warned, she is able to evade his attack. She slips out a secret passage connecting her room to Kier Gray's office.

She comes upon the mysterious Gray as he is composing a letter. He has the most impenetrable mind she has ever encountered, but despite this barrier between the two and a great deal of fear on Kathleen's part, they seem to regard each other with respect, trust, and a certain degree of affection. She tells Gray of the attempt on her life, speculating that Petty was behind it. The dictator agrees, and explains that Petty's plan is to use Kathleen's death to discredit Gray. Now, all that Gray can do to remain in a strong position — and, indeed, alive — is to prevent Petty from killing Kathleen. Gray orders the Council to be awakened for an emergency session.

### **Chapter Three** (pages 24-36)

The twelve members of the Council — of which Gray is the senior member, elected into that role by his fellow members — convene late at night. John Petty already has the firm support of three other members and does all he can to make the situation seem hopeless for Gray and to swing the others by confusing the issue at hand. He attempts to portray Gray as a weak and paranoid leader unwilling to do what must be done to eliminate the slan threat. Gray points out Petty's schemes to replace him and reminds the council members that any change to the current power structure will necessitate the culling of the old political order, themselves included.

In the middle of this debate, the current situation on Earth becomes clear. The slans are winning the war despite all of humanity's efforts to wipe them out. In an attempt to strengthen their own position the government has taken strong measures during the last century or so which have been counterproductive, creating an ignorant and terrified population that is rapidly descending into desperate poverty. The slans' greater intelligence ensures their superiority in the

fields of science and invention, while human scientists are demoralized and unproductive. Gray expresses his regret that not a single slan scientist has been enlisted to aid them, and laments that the great slan scientist Peter Cross was murdered three years previously by the mob-like police before Cross' talents could be harnessed by the state. The only way to win the war is to either exterminate the slans once and for all, or to negotiate with them for peace — an option that Gray increasingly favors despite opposition. And lastly, to undercut Petty's schemes Gray proclaims that Kathleen will *not* be executed at all, but will be kept alive as part of his continued study of slan development.

Petty then moves to vote Gray out of office. Gray admits that he has known of Petty's plot for some time and has made preparations to counter it. All the members of the Council decide to support Petty's bid for power, emboldened by the knowledge that they each have a private army to back them should their elected dictator ever defy their collective will. They plan to frame Gray for treasonous collaboration with the slans, with his decision to keep Kathleen alive as evidence. Finally left with no other option, Gray reveals that he outwitted them all by "recruiting" the head of each Councilor's army and promising them a seat on the Council. At that moment the twelve "replacements" barge into the room and assassinate their superiors. Only John Petty survives this coup, and he agrees to cooperate fully with Gray's plans.

Kathleen's eleventh birthday passes without incident. Two days later she encounters Davy in the palace halls. He apologizes for his behavior of the last few months, explaining that at his father's suggestion he turned against Kathleen to protect his own life, and since she had long ago promised never to read his mind the only way to warn her of the threat on her life was to publicly taunt her with it. She thanks him for the warning and forgives him.

#### **Chapter Four** (pages 37-44)

Jommy awakens to find himself chained to a bed in Granny's house, out in the country on the outskirts of Centropolis. Granny threatens to turn him over to the police unless he does what she says.

Three days later they get ready to go into Centropolis. From a distance, Jommy gets his first look of the palace, Kier Gray's seat of power, although it was built by slans centuries previously. He remembers his mother telling him that although it is currently held by humans, it still contains many secret chambers, including treasure troves of technological devices and weapons that humanity thankfully remains totally unaware of. It will be six years before Jommy reaches the age of 15 — at that time he will be ready to carry out his task.

## **Chapter Five** (pages 44-48)

Surreptitiously slipped into town in an old cart, at Granny's insistence Jommy begins his assigned task of shoplifting in a large and lavish department store, using his telepathic powers to avoid detection. While there, he learns the news that John Petty recently executed ten traitorous Council members. Petty is distrusted and disliked among the people, while Gray is respected and admired for his unwavering strength against the slan menace.

While in the department store Jommy bumps into a man rushing past. He reads the man's mind and discovers to his complete astonishment that the man is a slan. Yet as he follows the man and continues his probing, the man proves to be a very strange slan — he seems to lack telepathic abilities though he can close off his mind better than any human.

He follows the man out onto the street, and a few blocks further on sees him enter the Air Center, where all aircraft transportation in the world is controlled. Jommy is astonished — places like this have strict security to ensure no slans get through. Jommy risks entering and is shocked when he senses that all the men around him are slans, but that they lack telepathic abilities. When asked to leave Jommy removes his hat, revealing his tendrils. Although the men express pleasant surprise and welcome at seeing a fellow slan, their minds reveal something else entirely in the split second before all telepathic contact is blocked off: hatred and murderous intent towards the "snakes," slans with tendrils.

## **Chapter Six** (pages 48-53)

His pursuers raise the alarm but Jommy escapes through a random door. He senses in their minds the fear that the true slans will become aware that Air Central is run by these "tendrillless" slans. He makes his way to the outside of the building, onto a window ledge. Using his strong slan hands and fingers he climbs the wall and reaches the roof, where in the descending gloom he sees a ship being launched into space from a nearby building. The conquest of space is widely considered a myth, something that never happened and is a pernicious slan lie — but obviously the tendrillless slans possess this ability.

Realizing that he must escape and get to safety, he returns to the department store where he steals a few more items to placate Granny's wrath at his tardiness. He now realizes that he will need the relative security of Granny and her house until he comes of age and decides to strike a balance with Granny — give her only enough wealth to keep her dependent on him. The rest of the money he uses for his own purposes.

## **Chapter Seven** (pages 53-67)

For the next six years Jommy lives with Granny as his "grandson," thieving for all their needs. He educates himself as best he can from a wide variety of sources, expanding his knowledge of engineering, geography, culture, history, and the various branches of science and math. He learns that supposedly during the slan war, a hundred thousand slans infiltrated human society at every level, quietly taking over control of the world, and that the only thing that ruined this scheme was the slans' insistence of converting human babies, which apparently caused such revulsion that humanity rose up in mass protest, toppling the slans.

He also continues to cautiously observe the activities of the tendriless slans, learning that ships come and go on a regular nightly schedule. He also builds secret tunnels beneath Granny's house to provide for escape when she finally decides to betray him.

His fifteenth birthday finally arrives and he heads for Centropolis and the Catacombs. Once in town he discovers the streets deserted and defense guns being set up. A message comes over the public address system, warning that a slan ship has been seen heading for the palace and all citizens are to flee to safety.

He enters the Catacombs. His father had hypnotically planted critical information in his mind that comes to the fore as he makes his way into the tunnels. Unfortunately, the Catacombs are rigged to alarm (to deter slans and criminals from using them) so Jommy hurries in his search. And there is a further complication — the walls of the tunnel disperse thought waves, making it difficult to detect anyone else who may be down there.

He finds his father's weapon behind a secret compartment in a section of wall, and is almost immediately forced to use it to kill two guards who stumble upon Jommy. It is a potent weapon, a small rod capable of completely incinerating anything in its path. The weapon was stored with his father's notes. He leaves the tunnels, taking the weapon and notes with him.

The slan ship has come and gone, but the streets are now crowded with panicked people. Jommy overhears wild and conflicting reports on the radio — maybe the ship was destroyed, or landed at the palace with the slans now speaking with Kier Gray, or that it merely delivered a message and left.

He returns to his home and finds Granny in her usual drunken stupor. But her mind is awash with thoughts of betrayal — she has told the police about Jommy.

## **Chapter Eight** (pages 67-87)

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