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Their atomic torches tore open the huge door in the hill near the devastated metropolis. Then the cases wrapped in foil revealed to them at last the blazing beauty earth had lost.



The gentle creatures from the Six Worlds were astonished to find that the beautiful green planet was a jungle of ruin. Could they solve the awful mystery of

Who destroyed the Earth?

BY ROBERT WOLF EMMETT

ILLUSTRATED BY DON SEXTON

THE FAT little space ship cruised deeper into the newly found solar system—a neat, ordinary system with a healthy sun lighting a cluster of nine well-behaved planets and their satellites. Everyone on the ship—from venerable Navigator to little Foodserver—stayed as close as possible to the viewing screens. Huge round eyes with lavender pupils stared from grey furry faces. Voices like tiny glass flutes echoed comments and speculations along the gaily painted metal corridors.

The third planet was beginning to take shape on the screens. So far the system had been a great disappointment to the explorers looking for intelligent life. The huge outer planets, far from the busy but smallish sun, had proved to have monstrously thick shells of ammoniated ice and atmospheres of methane fatal to oxygen-breathing creatures like the people of the Six Worlds.

The fourth planet had seemed promising, but turned out to be a sere ball of red rock, motionless dust and feeble ground lichens. But the third planet, now swimming into view, was like a vision of home. A shining sphere of blue and green, slightly flattened at the poles, which were capped with gleaming ice, it hung in dark space like a tastefully designed jewel.

"Surely there must be life here," said Navigator admiringly. "What a waste if there is not."

The others of the small crew twitched their long furry tails in agreement, never taking their eyes from the viewing screens where one could now make out veils of white cloud, shot all through with gold, surrounding the third planet.

"Will they be like us?" squeaked Foodserver, stroking his fur which had still the iridescence of childhood. "Or will they be horrible monsters?"

"The Star-Maker," said Navigator sternly, "fits the form to the place. There are no such things as monsters."

The little one did not seem crushed. He hustled over to a viewer and twiddled the calibrated knobs with his seven jointless fingers, the claws (which would be soon falling off) getting in his way. Watching him, Navigator reflected with affect-

ionate exasperation that the tremendous excitements of deep space travel were not good for the very young. The imagination got too much jolting. The simple duties of opening and serving the canned foods and helping crochety old Grower with the hydroponics tanks were not enough to keep the little fellow occupied.

At the forward viewer stood Historian muttering into her wrist recording machine. Beside her, Picture-Keeper wiggled his long ears at regular intervals. This was to operate his camera, an invention of his own which consisted of a pair of thick spectacles astride his flat furry nose. It took a stereoscopic picture of whatever his eyes saw. Though the gadget was eminently practical, he was getting fed up with jokes about his ear wiggling. His images and

Historian's notes covered everything encountered by the roving ship, so that the people back home on the Six Worlds might marvel at the endless variety of the Star-Maker's creation.

As the plump little ship neared the outer film of the third planet's rich atmosphere, Power-Drive-Engineer slowed to a crawl. Navigator spoke to Historian about finding a place to explore, preferably near some centre of civilization—if, by grace of the Star-Maker, their long search was to be rewarded at last.

Historian's delicate hands manipulated the electronic binoculars and she pressed her face into the soft-rimmed eyepiece. For a time she scanned the place below (they were close enough now for there to be a "below" and an "up"). Then those near her saw the slender body stiffen, the tail start to swing back and forth and ultimate maker of agitation—the silky fur ripple as though in a breeze. The piping voices hushed. Everyone waited patiently to learn what had so horrified the dispassionate Historian. Everyone, that is, but Foodserver who was never patient about anything.

"What is it?" he shrilled. "What do you see?" There was no answer from the absorbed figure at the scope. Foodserver danced up and down in frustrated curiosity.

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Looking at the Raphael from the forgotten walls of the Metropolitan, the furry creature saw a sure prophecy of dread on the face of the Madonna.

Who Destroyed the Earth?

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 19

Historian, her voice oddly taut, summoned Navigator. He set the ship on robot control and loped over to her. Silently she motioned him to look into the binoculars. He looked and his breath came out in a gasp. He and Historian stared at each other, hardly breathing. Foodserver could not stand it another minute. Ship's discipline or no ship's discipline, he hopped to the scope, stretched up to his full height and peered into the lenses.

"Oh!" he squeaked. "Oh!"

One by one, all in silence or soft murmurs, the explorers looked at the close-up image of the beautiful third planet. Back home, the Council had said to them, "Go out there into the great darkness and find some other intelligent life, so that we may not feel ourselves alone."

Well, they had found intelligent life. Stupendous intelligence and all snuffed out. There were cities in the viewer but they were in ruins, smashed, ripped and blasted like elaborate toys crushed by a fretful child. The plan had been, if life were met, to land near a city and project from the ship a huge image of one of themselves holding in one hand a drawing of a bisected angle, in the other a piece of soil-grown fruit. The crew member in charge of the projection machine waited in vain for his order.

THE SHIP floated closer, circling the planet. City after city showed scattered and lifeless. Towers lay stretched on the ground as rusting skeletons, bridges hung in mid-air like broken jaws, and everywhere were deep craters with glassy white edges like terrible sores.

"A meteor storm, perhaps," said Picture-Keeper, but there was no conviction in his voice.

In the countryside the trees were black and bare, or, even worse, were covered with rank foliage that looked so wrong it had to be some sort of forced mutation. This grew up out of a carpet of green fungus that was turning dirty white here and there.

"The fungus," explained Grower, "is dying. But it seems to have eaten off the living matter that preceded—that stuff." He pointed with disgust at the flabby, bloated mutations.

"But how did all this happen?" asked Foodserver, subdued for the first time in his life.

No one answered him. He was much too young to be exposed to this obscenity. For there could be no doubt that this was—worst of all possible blasphemies—deliberate destruction. Feeling ill, Picture-Keeper twitched his ears to operate the camera. Otherwise the people of the Six Worlds would never believe it. In sadness they took the ship back to the first great city—one of the largest on the whole planet. Its heart was a slim, small island thickly clustered with a profusion of elegant metal towers, now bent grotesquely and rusting to red lace. The counters picked up no excessive radioactivity; the air was pure, although higher in oxygen than they were used to. A soft spring rain fell on the wreckage and the dying green fungus that clung wherever there was exposed soil. Two rivers flowed clean and sparkling to the sea.

"I wonder," said Foodserver, who seemed to have grown up a little, "what they looked like."

"Yes," said Historian, "that is important."

Following their usual exploration procedure, they got into their round air-skimming sleds and cruised among the silent ruins. The magnetic pickups gleaned samples of artifacts, sprayed them with a transparent coating and stored them in bins for Historian.

"Especially things with writing on them," she requested, "and works of art."

But there were no works of art. And only a few bits of writing. The explosions and the solar heat they generated had melted stone and vaporized whole blocks of metal-framed buildings. In one street lay a pointed shape that was obviously a water-traveling ship, tossed up from the sea. They carefully kept a twist of glazed blue-and-white metal bearing the mysterious inscription KEEP RIGHT and a slab of massive reddish metal deeply inscribed MANUFACTURERS TRUST. The explorers felt lonely in the desolation. Historian put her arm

around Foodserver's shoulder.

"What did they look like, you asked? Well, from the doors we have been able to make out and the stairs and seats of stone, we can know that they were something like us physically. They were about twice as tall, though, and much more heavily built. They stood erect, bent their bodies at the hips and knees, as we do, and had articulated hands."

"Did they have tails?" asked Foodserver, curling his own luxuriously around his neck and tickling his right ear with the furry tip.

"That we may never know," said Historian disconsolately. "If only a picture had survived, even a carving showing just one of them."

IT WAS Foodserver who found the great door. Skimming over the bare hills just above the city he suddenly shrilled into the phones, "What is that?"

It turned out to be a huge metal door let into the raw rock of a small mountain. Hardly visible under the coating of dying fungus, it was at least ten times the height of the tallest person on the ship. Hope spurred the explorers; perhaps here was an underground refuge of the survivors of whatever had happened to the third planet. They assembled before the mighty door, again marveling at the engineering genius of the great lost people. They made as much noise as they could. There was no answer from within. Perhaps, suggested Navigator, they were being too noisy and scaring anyone inside.

Foodserver volunteered to try it alone. With a mingled feeling of heady self-importance and strange humility, he went to knock at the door. His soft rapping seemed the only sound on the whole planet. There was no answer. He shouted as loud as he could: the delicate notes echoed from the blank metal. After a while they took atomic torches to the tough metal, even though Power-Drive-Engineer grumbled about the drain on his engines. He had some justification; it took hours to get through.

When at last a section fell away, its crash muffled by the carpet of horrid mold, there was nothing behind it but an empty cave. Foodserver yelped in disappointment. Historian shook her head.

"That colossal door was never put up just to keep the rain out of a rock cave," she said firmly.

They went in and poked about, stripping the mold from the walls. In here the ugly growth was even closer to death than outside. Grower found the inner door. Smaller than the other one, it was of the same tough metal and its edges were sealed with lead. When that barrier was breached, everyone sighed. Ahead stretched a vast natural chamber of rock, wholly free of the green mold. Piled high were crates and boxes, sealed in lead foil and labeled in large black letters. One inscription was common to all, METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART—whatever that might mean.

Navigator held Foodserver back with a firm hand on the ruff of fur at the back of his neck. He gave a ceremonious nod to Historian. With the slow dignity so admired by her race, but a little flustered nonetheless, she advanced to the packages, chose a small flat one and set to work with her knife. Working carefully, she exposed a case made of slats of wood, then a flat object wrapped in more lead foil, then in heavy cloth. When this was removed it was as though a rocket had gone off in the dead grey room.

Light blazed up at them, color as pure as sky and flowers, and they knew

at last what the people of the third planet had looked like. The object that the lost people had stored away with such loving determination was a square of stout cloth stretched tight over a wooden frame and touched with countless strokes of pigment in many colors.

The picture thus formed represented a female—they knew that at once—holding a baby in her lap. Her face had no fur; she had only five rather stiffly jointed fingers and her eyes were quite small, but most wonderfully gentle. She wore a white garment caught at the waist with a blue belt and a simple blue cloak. For some reason, probably symbolic, the artist had shown a glowing light around her head, but the real radiance was in her smile as she looked down at the baby.

"No tails," said Foodserver, but nobody heard him.

They stood in silence before the

on some sort of glazed material; it showed a building like a bubble of foam standing in a garden. There was no telling what it had been from the label, TAJ MAHAL ANONYMOUS MINIATURE, but they all knew that the building stood like that no longer.

"What poets they were!" said Engineer.

"What mathematicians!" said Navigator.

"But what," said Foodserver—and the question fell like ice in the great cave—"did the others look like?"

EVERYONE stood quite still for a moment. A dark shadow seemed to gather around them. Here, on the picture cloths, were the great people. Not, perhaps, the faces of one's own familiar standards of beauty, but unquestionably a noble race and comprehending. So, then, who had done all that to the cities and the very grass? They looked around fearfully. Each had his own image of the kind of creature that had so ruthlessly wiped out the busy dreamers of the third planet.

"But you said there were no monsters!" cried Foodserver to Navigator.

"Perhaps I was wrong," murmured Navigator. "I don't know."

At once Navigator took hold and exercised command. They must hurry the packing and get away. It was just possible that the terrible invaders were still lurking somewhere near. When they quit this system they must be certain they were not being followed. If followed—and his delicate voice was grim—they must not go home. There were no weapons on the ship, but it could blow up its own engines if need be. At all costs they must never lead back to the Six Worlds that dreadful enemy.

Everyone understood and a courtliness came into their manner with each other. The remaining pictures, still in their wrappings, were hastily piled on the sleds. Foodserver stood in a corner pondering.

"Isn't it possible," he asked at last, "that the great ones might have done it themselves?"

Several of the crew looked at the youngster in amazement. Such a bad tongue, really! Navigator took him firmly by the ear and led him to a foil-covered picture.

"Now, young fellow, you unwrap that yourself and take a long good look," said Navigator.

This even though they were in a hurry, because the right thinking of the young is most important. Historian added her bit while Foodserver worked at the package.

"You remember, little one, that all those shins and cars that ran along metal rails were powered by simple, ancient combustion engines. And all that—that *destruction*—(the word was not easy for her to say) was from atomic weapons. Now, is it logical that a race with atomic energy would use it for weapons and not for power and production?"

Foodserver had to admit that she must be right. He concentrated on seeing what beautiful vision the picture was going to present. But he was not the first to see it, after all. He had to step behind it to loose the wrappings. What he saw was the sudden look of sick horror and disbelief on the faces of the others as the painting came clear. He hurried around to the front and looked. His eyes began to burn and he knew that there was no need any more to fear the dreadful enemy. He had been right, but it gave him no satisfaction. He felt hurt, cheated; they all did, their round eyes sad and their very limbs twisting in agony with that bleeding figure nailed to a cross. ★