

Venture

SCIENCE FICTION

VIRGIN PLANET

POUL ANDERSON 4

It was a daydream come true—a brand new world, like Earth but more beautiful, and Davis Bertram the only man among a million women. And holy Cosmos, he'd found it, and he wanted out!

World of the Future

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World of the Future

Two stories about the world after the Blowup . . .

1. A MAN OF THE WORLD

by LES COLE

A man in that day will call himself civilized . . .
but what would we call him by our "civilized" standards?
One thing is certain: basic hungers do not change

THE DAY DAWNED BRIGHT BUT cool, and it was the cold snap in the air which awakened John Reeves. He rolled out of the blankets, cast a wary eye around the area to see if there had been any intruders. He tasted his mouth, grimaced, and stood up.

This would be the day, he felt it in his bones.

"Today you'll find it," he said aloud, "so why not celebrate? Brush your teeth—you can afford it." A slight breeze caused the branches of the trees to rustle a lonely answer. "After all," John Reeves said, "you're still a civilized man."

Carefully Reeves lifted a small leather case from his pack. He ran his fingers over the zipper and fumbled in his pack until he found a small can of oil. He put one drop on a finger and spread it over half the zipper's length; then the operation was repeated for the unoiled portion and it slid easily.

"Save it," he said, over and over. "Save it. Use it up wear it out make it do or do without."

Finally he opened the case, easing the zipper along its path with slow pressure. Inside was a soap dish, broken and empty; a toothbrush holder, frayed; the shaving mirror cracked; the comb still firmly in its holder but missing more than half its teeth, an aged crone mocking him. He drew out the toothbrush, and the half-empty tube of toothpaste.

Down at the stream, with loving fingers, he unscrewed the cap and stared at the tube, with its beautiful sheer white background, blue letters, and a red dot over the "i." Three times he sang it—"Brusha, brusha, brusha: New Ipana toothpaste—" and then gave himself over to the ecstasy of brushing.

Finished, he wiped the traces of paste from his beard with his hand and licked his fingers clean.

Then he returned to the camp site.

The gutted rabbit he'd killed the day before was still lying where he'd left it. He hacked off the head and paws, inserted the point of his knife at the belly and made a circular cut around the body. Working his fingers in until he could grip the fur, he yanked and the skin slipped off like a pull-over sweater. He did the same for the rear portion.

The man squatted and ate, rocking back and forth on his heels. At one point his teeth could not bite the raw flesh free. Rage and frustration swept over him; he let the rabbit drop, then, and jumped up, staring at the puffy masses of clouds in the sky.

"Filth!" Reeves shrieked, "swine—" He broke off, so choked up all he could do was gulp convulsively. He then was able to continue, "Swine and pigs. And why did you do it to me, you filth!" Abruptly he stopped and returned to breakfast.

John Reeves had been without human companionship for a long time, now. . . .

He'd been over this country before, but it had been more than a year since, just after the Blowup, and the conditions then were far from good.

Reeves was a meticulous man; he'd had a survival kit prepared and escape route chosen. He was enough of a survivor type to real-

ize instinctively the route ran through a fall-out pattern: the animals he had seen then acted erratic, almost drunk. Many were dead. So he had left his planned route and moved at right angles, and the new path had taken him across the country he was exploring today, a year later.

When he saw the house on the small hill, he remembered his waking thought that *today* would be the day. The desire to rush to the house was nearly overwhelming. Yet the pellet holes in his pack bore testimony to the efficiency of the shotgun which repulsed him the first time he'd blundered up to a house.

He spent the rest of the morning and early afternoon working his way up the hill. There was little cover; just an occasional clump of scrub brush growing from dry, grassy slopes.

He went on his stomach most of the way. At intervals he would rise and run, falling behind a selected bush. The late fall sun had dispersed the morning mists; now it was hot. The sweat on his eyebrows and cheeks ran down into his beard and itched, and he scratched his face cruelly.

Excitement began to mount as he drew closer. The house looked deserted, and, better, not to have been looted.

"I wonder why, John," he whispered aloud during a rest. "Is it because this is back woods coun-

try off the beaten trails?" He quieted abruptly, for the last words had been spoken in normal conversational tones.

Finally he made it to the top, behind the house. He took cover in back of the woodshed, and eyed the house, noticing for the first time that some of the windows had been broken: apparently looters *had* been here. There was even a slim chance that someone was occupying the house now. His hopes fell, yet he could leave no possibility uninvestigated.

"What would you do, John, under those conditions?" he asked. His face took on a cunning look as he replied, "I'd wait in the barn till the intruder was in the house and then take him unawares." He paused a moment and then laughed silently. "You fool them —try the barn first."

He slipped out of his pack and put it on the ground. Then he picked up a small rock and a length of two-by-four lying nearby. He swung it, feeling the balance.

He darted over to the barn, running openly. By now, if there were occupants, they would be aware of him. He was careful, however, to run to the rear of the structure, keeping it between him and the house. Then he worked his way cautiously to the front.

The barn doors were hanging open. Quickly Reeves tossed the rock inside, bouncing it against a

wall, and ducking back. There was no reaction, so he eased inside. The place was deserted—he realized that with considerable let-down.

"Where are you?" he whispered, "come and fight."

He stood momentarily, surveying the prize he'd won. The barn was his, and the woodshed, too, and if the enemy was around, he must be in the house.

Boldly now he strode to the back door. It was open, slightly ajar. With his foot he kicked it farther open; the crash, as it swung around and hit the wall, echoed throughout the structure. Survival instinct made the man jump to one side of the doorway, in spite of his aggressive attitude.

Nothing happened. "All right, I'm coming after you," he said and entered. In room after room, the story was the same: the house, too, was deserted. Reeves had won his victory over the ghosts of an extinct era.

Obviously looters *had* been here. The place was a shambles: the furniture upset and strewn about, the front door hanging by one hinge, the kitchen torn apart in a search for staples.

With mounting disappointment he began the room-to-room search he'd not had time to conduct on his first trip through.

The bathroom was first on the list, and it took only a quick glance to realize it wouldn't be found

here. The wall cabinet mirror was gone, of course, as were its contents. A dark brown stain in the tub suggested evil.

The bedrooms, too, yielded nothing. His hopes fell further. There was small likelihood of finding what he wanted in the living-dining area. . . .

It wasn't much of a sound—a faint whistle—but it brought him whirling to a crouch at the window. Two figures were approaching; he thought he could distinguish a man and a woman.

Their tactical approach was clumsy, much too open. Professionally he sneered at them, even while planning his defense. One thing was certain; they weren't going to steal his house from him. It would, however, call for an amount of slyness. He doubted that he could handle two at once; they'd have to be taken separately.

Silently he crept out the back, angling to the barn, keeping the house between himself and the intruders. He circled in back of the barn, watching.

They came, much too quickly. They blundered into the area, trying to be silent, failing. He could see them clearly. They were young, about ten years his junior. The boy was unbearded: either clean-shaven today, or still too young to need it.

The girl stood between the house and the barn while the man investigated the latter. Reeves'

sneer almost turned to pity. The fool didn't even bother to check the woodshed. But both their packs were full and looked inviting. Maybe this punk kid had one!

He was close enough to hear their whispered conference. She was to stand guard in front while he investigated the house. The boy went past his line of sight; up the steps and into the house—the door crashing as it had with him. Now all Reeves could see was the girl, watching and then slowly turning to cover the front, a wicked looking Winchester .32 rifle held at ready.

Now is the moment, he thought to himself, as he eased forward. Now, on your stomach, your knees, your feet, but silently. So silently.

Dim memories came back. It was a different war, a different time, a different world . . . the sergeant's voice in his ear, repeating over and over, "Fast . . . fast . . . fast . . ."

She fell silently and he caught the rifle as it slipped from her hands. He paused and listened, but there was no noise from inside.

Then he looked again at the unconscious girl. Vague stirrings began in him; this was the first time since the world died that he'd been this close to a woman. His heart beat too fast; his temples throbbed. He bent down towards her—

The noise inside the house reminded him: he still had something to do.

Ignoring the sudden sweat which had sprung out over his body, he put down the rifle and stole silently up the steps and stood beside the door. He checked his knife wiped his palm on his shirt, and took a firm grip on the haft of the weapon. He scratched his beard, fiercely.

He screamed once, in falsetto, hoping it sounded feminine. Footsteps, urgent running footsteps pounded down the hall. Just as they got to the doorway, Reeves stuck his foot across it. His enemy burst out, tripped, and rolled down the front steps, dropping his rifle.

Reeves jumped after the youth, raised the knife, and struck. He hadn't counted on the other's quick recovery; he missed as the youth rolled away. Growling, he threw himself on his foe's body, unaware that he'd dropped his knife.

The youth fought silently; Reeves mouthed syllables of idiotic filth. The youth fought silently—but with desperation and knowledge. Reeves did not recall knowledge or experience, and slowly, not understanding why, he began to lose. He felt himself tiring.

His teeth were firmly clenched in the other's arm when he let go, suddenly kneeled. He doubled and

blindly staggered aside in time to avoid a fatal cut from the now unsheathed knife of the foe. As it was, the point passed glancingly below his ribs and opened a nasty cut.

The sharp, biting sensation of severed skin seemed to clear his mind. In detailed perspective he saw what he would lose: the house, the woman, his life. The youth's momentary advantage was gone; by the time he struck again, with all his force, Reeves dodged. The other stumbled by, and Reeves, with all his fading strength, struck him in the throat with his balled fist.

The boy fell, gasping, and tried to rise. Reeves was already there, kicking at the same vulnerable spot. The enemy dropped his knife and fell on his back. Quickly Reeves scooped it up and plunged it home.

With nervous fingers he rolled the body over and undid the pack. He spilled the contents on the ground, pawing through.

Suddenly, with sharply in-drawn breath, he saw it! The object of his long search was over. Rising, he danced merrily in circles, holding on high the straight razor, the strop, and an unbroken shaving mirror.

Spent finally, he stopped and began laughing with joy. "John, John, you can shave again. John, you will be clean-shaven! You will be civilized again, John, and

when you are, the world will be civilized, too. . . ."

He fondled his prizes, gazing at himself in the mirror, seeing a strange bearded face, seeing the reflection of the sun's rays bounce off nearby objects. The circle of light, in one of its trips, caught the hair of the girl where she lay.

Reeves stopped then, staring at her anew. Tears ran from his eyes as the tension began again. With dirty, red-stained fists he wiped them away until he was no longer aware of them.

His world compressed to a

tight sphere upon which a giant pounded. Each jar shook him to his being; each beat was a blacksmith hitting an anvil multiplied a thousandfold; each throb the pounding of the sea a hundredfold.

Slowly, the bleeding and pain in his side unnoticed, he rose. Daintily he stepped over the still form of his scratched, battered and deceased foe. Hypnotically, unaware he still held the mirror and blades, he strode toward the supine form of the woman.

John Reeves, civilized man.

VENTURINGS . . .

- We were impressed by the **LES COLE** story when it came in, but felt we ought to hear the woman's point of view too. **ROSE SHARON** agreed to tell it, and she does it, we think, most convincingly.

—RPM