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SUPER **SCIENCE** *STORIES*



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AND THEN—THE SILENCE

By **RAY BRADBURY**

You who read this—look about you. Think of the sun and the sky and the world you know. Think long and think deep—because some day you will lose it all—like Xoton did!

WE LET them come in. They set their long silver ships down in the valleys, on the plateaus and plains. We let them come in without moving against them. All of us watched and waited and communicated to ourselves about the invaders. It was almost a joke.

We knew they were coming? Yes, we knew. We heard them coming across space. We counted one thousand of their projectiles shooting through the void. They were running away from something. They had to run. Their planet, which they called Earth, was no longer habitable. They built ships and escaped from Earth before it was too late.

We all saw them land and we heard the vibration of their sharp, unthinking words. They had a leader; a tall man with lean-steel shoulders and a white, quiet face. He spoke to his people about the trip, the sacrifice, the new world to live upon.

The scale of his voice-vibration was this:

"We are here through the grace of God. We have surmounted incredible obstacles and found our new world.

"We are indeed fortunate that this new world is uninhabited. It is good that we need not fight alien peoples for the right to land here. We have come down in peace upon a light, green paradise where there is nothing but the sound of air, light and earth, of water and winds and mountains."

We didn't particularly want to kill this man. His name was Monroe. But we knew he would have to pay the penalty of being one of his kind.

It was the other man who was an irritant, a fleshy molecule of quick, bitter incorrigibility. "Sure. Sure," he said rapidly. "This is a set-up. No Indians to fight—no Germans dive-bombing us . . . a sweet set-up. Why, listen, Monroe, in six months we can have this dinky hunk of earth revamped into a damned fine facsimile of New York, Chicago and all points West. Watch our steam!"

The other humans made loud cheering noises. It came out of their lungs and throats, and it seemed senseless. Monroe said nothing.

We waited. We had our task set out for us. We didn't want the humans to escape again, like they had escaped from earth at the threat of annihilation. We wanted them to settle down, to build and get contented and easy in their life. We wanted them to allow their space-ships to rust, idling away. We could wait.

We had all the time in this timeless universe.

We remembered vibrations of quick, sharp voices. . . .

"Be on the watch, Carlson. There may be nomadic tribes of people on this world. There may be strange diseases and stran-

ger animals. We can't have any wars now. We can't afford war."

"Yes, sir. I'll watch. I'll watch close."

And they did watch. But they didn't see anything. They walked in pairs, male and female. They stood on mountains, they strolled in wild-brushed gullies, near naked dry-sand river hollows. They smelled the keen-edged air of Xoton like vigorous wine. They saw a sun go up in the sky and come down in the sky and they saw the stars wheel with cosmic majesty from horizon to horizon. They saw seasons come and go, and at last they were very sure there was no danger.

That was what we had anticipated.

They thought they owned Xoton. They thought it was theirs for good and all. They made many words about it, printed and spoken. They sang ballads about it, toasted it in liquors, dreamed of it in dreams.

We let the first generation and the second generation die of its own accord from its own inherent diseases, its cultural conflicts and social degenerations. We let them build far and wide their web and shuttle and vise of steel. They put boats on the rivers. They put planes in the sky. They put moles in the ground. They put their dead in the ground, too, and all the while we waited and watched for the proper time.

We knew them for what they were. The senseless little motes of electrical mobility called Animal life: who moved without the cosmic motion, who moved for no reason in no particular direction and made chaos with their flesh mouths about their insensible wildness. We knew them for the final fragments of humanity racing from one world to the next in an insane attempt to survive.

And now when they were settled fine and neat, when they lived in their metal homes and travelled in metal cars, now then it was the precise time for us to act . . .

The more curious of them may have prophesied something by the simple act of perceiving the quiver of a tree-branch, or the tongue of wet salt green lapping along the soundless shores of the sea, or the movement of the wind, ever so slight. But those things are so natural.

In fact, they are the only natural, rhythmical things in the universe, where they have taken their place. All else is unnatural and, therefore, must not long exist.

The night before it happened, we communicated about it. We agreed, all of us, that the invaders would be taken unaware. We, like an amoeba, had taken them in to our heart. Now they were the nucleus. All we had to do to destroy them would be constrict our pseudopodes. One cosmic movement.

IT WAS a fine warm spring morning. The sky was polished and shining and the ships of men went across that sky like flecks of dream-stuff.

People were walking and talking and living the warm life. There was laughter and there was songs.

And then the mountains moved. And then the sky constricted like a blue fist. And then the rivers tore wild in a torrent from their ridges. The earth crumbled, trembling. The sun glowed hot and violent.

Man and his cities were in the nucleus of all this.

We killed them. We crushed them and destroyed them. Every one of them. Every one.

Not one escaped.

It was a triumph of nature. It was so carefully blue-printed and carried to fruition.

We killed them.

And now Xoton is quiet again. Quiet in the yellow sun, quiet in the winds from all the seas and far mountains, quiet like the spreading snow on hills in winter, like ice locking the waters of a creek. So quiet. Oh, in the name of God, so very quiet.

You who read this—in some far distant galactic sphere—look about you. Think of the sun and the sky and the world beneath your fleshy limbs.

Think long and think deep.

Are the rivers running too swiftly this spring? Is the sun too warm in the summer? Are the winds too keen in the autumns? Is the snow too deep in the winter?

Perhaps—perhaps you are living upon another Xoton.