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Cover painting by Kelly Freas
(*from The Climbing Wave, by Marion Zimmer Bradley*)

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P. M. Hubbard is the most skilled and graceful writer of light (and occasionally serious) verse whom Punch has discovered since A. P. Herbert. (Memo to American publishers: A collection of his delightful poetry is long overdue.) In this story, written especially for F&SF, he brings a poet's sense of concise beauty to a classic and ever-tragic theme of science fiction.

Botany Bay

by P. M. HUBBARD

IT WAS ONE OF THOSE EVENINGS YOU get in England around midsummer, that seem to go on indefinitely. I could build up a nice bit of atmosphere about that evening, but it wouldn't be true. If there was an atmosphere, I didn't feel it; and on the facts, even as presented, I don't see why there should have been. And the petrol-station was a perfectly ordinary one, and the man on duty, to all appearances, a perfectly ordinary man.

The man filled her up, speaking with a pleasant richness in what I took to be the local voice. Then he went inside for change, and I got out and walked around a bit to stretch my legs. The road followed the valley here, with hills — I suppose chalk downs — rising sharply on the far side. It was really starting to get dark at last, and the narrow strip of tarmac reflected like water the tremendous sultry glow that

lay across the tops of the hills. There were a few stars showing, and one in particular, a steady orange-gold, over the high skyline right opposite the pumps.

I fetched up beside the door of the garage, looking at the collection of spares and accessories they always put in the window at these places. The man must have thought I was still in the car. He came straight out of the door, leaving me behind him, and walked towards the pumps. He had the money in his hand. Then he stopped, just as I was going to speak to him, and uttered a sound which I could hardly believe I'd heard, only my stomach was still sickened at it. When I pulled myself together, I decided he was ill, and went to him. He was still standing there, with the line of pumps between him and the car, gazing up at the sky, where the orange-yellow star, clearer now, gazed back.

I said, "Are you all right?" I didn't touch him or anything. He was perfectly steady on his feet, just standing there, and I still wasn't sure. Then I came abreast of him and saw his face. I haven't described his appearance before, because he wasn't the sort of man you find it necessary to describe — just an ordinary man, in overalls, a bit on the small side and quiet-spoken, but very ordinary. Now he had a look on his face that needs describing, but isn't easy to describe — not adequately. It was a look of longing, a sort of shocking hunger, but so overlaid with hopelessness that the impression was one of complete passivity. He didn't move because there was nothing he could do. The sound he had uttered had been squeezed out of him; it was quite involuntary. He was looking at the star.

I said, "Are you all right?" again. It was an idiotic question to ask a man with that look on his face, but it was the sort of thing one does say. He heard me the second time. He turned and held out the money to me, but in a tentative sort of way, and not quite within my reach, as though he couldn't get me properly focussed. I moved up and took it from him. That seemed to rouse him. He looked at me, rearranging his disintegrated features. "I thought you were in the car," he said. The voice, with its soft country burr, was quite unchanged.

It seemed to be dark now all at

once. The orange star glowed in the sky, but he did not look at it. It didn't look right to me, but I don't notice that sort of thing much, and I think now it was probably quite normal. There again, there was no reason, even on the facts, why it should have been anything else.

I said, "That star —" but he cut me very short. "That's not a star, sir," he said. "More what you'd call a planet." He spoke exactly as a countryman speaks to a townsman, putting him right, but no disrespect intended. He was in every way perfectly ordinary again.

"All right," I said, "a planet it is. But look, chum, I don't want to interfere, and I'm sorry if you didn't know I was there. But I heard you and saw your face just now, and there's something very wrong. If there's anything I can do —"

He turned his back while I was still speaking and started walking towards the garage. He said, "I wonder why the hell They let me remember."

He went inside and I followed him. In the last glimmer of daylight we groped our way into the little boarded box of an office and sat down on hard chairs. The air smelt of petrol and oiled metal. I could see the outline of a cash-register and above it the stolid, frowning profile against the luminous window. "I didn't ought to remember, not by rights," he said. "They said —" He caught his breath, and I felt sick at the stomach again. "They

said —” this time the word was harsh with a sort of incredulous defiance — “They said we’d remember nothing that was any good to us — just enough to keep us unhappy. They must have got the mixture wrong.” He thought for a bit. “A couple of hundred of us there must have been, my time. Too many to handle properly, perhaps. Used to be forty or fifty in a batch, generally, but They had been having a lot of trouble. Don’t all get there, of course. Even They don’t know everything, and there’s a lot of wastage. What happens to the ones that miss nobody knows, but They wouldn’t care, so long as they get us off. Still, there must be a lot of us about, remembering enough to keep us unhappy. It’s nicely done, really. You’ve got to hand it to them. They are clever all right.”

He chuckled, a soft country chuckle, and then caught his breath again, so that I felt my heart thud twice in the sudden, hollow silence.

The window-frame lit up silver with the lights of an on-coming car. I got up, clutching with both hands at the solid reality of a country garage. Somebody sounded a horn outside, and he said, “I’ll have to ask you to move your car, sir. You’re blocking the pumps.”

“I will,” I said. I got in and started her up. Then, seeing no reason to do anything else, I drove on.

It was nearly a year before I went there again. I had no need to stop this time, and did not mean to. Nevertheless, I found I had been hoping to see him outside by the pumps; and when I did not, I hesitated on the throttle, and then stopped the car and walked back.

I didn’t know the man who came out. He was a lot older, probably the boss. I suddenly found myself in a difficulty. I said, “Oh — I was hoping to see the chap who was here.”

He looked at me a bit sharp. “Newman, you mean?” he said.

“I don’t know his name. About a year ago. A smallish chap, fair.”

“That’s right, Newman. What d’you want him for? Any sort of trouble?” He seemed eager.

“No,” I said, “no trouble. Isn’t he here?”

“He went,” he said. “Walked out on me. Must be nearly a year ago now. Never heard a word from him, nor did anyone else. Left everything in order, I must say. But when you asked for him, I wondered.”

I said, “It doesn’t matter.” I turned and walked back to the car, feeling his eyes on my back the whole way. Now, of course, I shall never know. Only I did not imagine it. I can see him and hear him much too clearly for that, railing in his soft country voice against some monstrous celestial tyranny I could not understand.