SATELLITE
science fiction

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A COMPLETE NOVEL

ROCKET TO LIMBO

by ALAN E. NOURSE

In the early days of space travel it took a ship centuries to reach the stars. Now the long voyage could be telescoped into a few short months. But explorers still paid a fearful price for knowledge.

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A Remarkable Story by the Author of NO BLADE OF GRASS

DOOM OVER KAREETA

By JOHN CHRISTOPHER

Famine and disaster threatened the Kranaki's underwater city. Only the pygmies could help, and they lived in a far-off, quite mad world.

THERE WAS a swell moving in from the Deep. Even here in the Council Place, where it was sheltered, they could feel it and see the phosphorescence flickering under the quickening pulse of the waters. Out in the Deep the waters would be surging heavily. There would be damage on the outlying hydrofarms, and another bad harvest.

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Dilwan, swimming in powerfully to the centre of the throng, could sense the mood of despair that hung over everyone. He looked down towards the mass of dark figures huddled on the seabed, and remembered what his father had told him of the last days of Serbena.

Dilwan himself had been born during those days, when the harvests had failed for the last time and the giant sharks had breached the defences and torn a path of destruction through the doomed city. In a vague way, he could even remember fragmentary details of the terror-fraught journey across the Deep to Kareeta. But most of what he remembered came from the stories his father had told him, many seasons before. Of the inky, nonphosphorescent blackness of the Deep. Of the huge forest of squids into which they had blundered, and where his mother had died. Of the flashing, bloody stories of sharks, as they swept down on the tattered fugitives from Serbena. And at last, of the sight of the walls of Kareeta where they had found safety.

All that was ninety seasons ago. More than seventy seasons had passed since his father had been killed by the sharks while working on an outlying hydro-farm. In that time Kareeta, season by season, had slipped nearer to the doom that had overwhelmed her sister-city.

Each season the scavenger-fish preyed more openly on the hydro-fields, swooping down in the wake of the shark bands and laying waste acres of cultivated land. The two races had evolved a strange, menacing symbiosis; as though they were deliberately combining to exterminate the Kranaki and crush intelligence in the world of water. And they were only part of the doom hanging, more and more ominously, over Kareeta. Each season the squids advanced more openly up the sides of the Deep. They had overwhelmed the whaling station at Purka. And the whales themselves were less and less tractable. Fewer returned to their pens each season. Those that did frequently turned on their Kranaki masters.

Finally, in the last thirty seasons, eruptions and land-quakes had occurred with greater and greater frequency, bringing with them swells and storms, splitting and laying waste the hydro-farms and shaking Kareeta itself. It seemed to the Kranaki that the end could not be long delayed. And with the end of Kareeta would come the end of their race. There was no other city to which the survivors could retreat. Since the fall of Serbena, Kareeta had been the only stronghold of the Kranaki.

Dilwan stopped swimming,

and allowed the current to carry him gently into the place reserved for him on the dais. They had been waiting for him. He relaxed and listened. The President, Balakon, began speaking, slapping the water with his huge flippers into impulses that rippled out to the antennae of the waiting Kranaki.

He said: "The allotment of *pilner* will be halved from the beginning of next season. All the *pilner* crops in the hydro-fields to the northwest have been destroyed by the last eruption."

A sigh rippled round and in towards the dais, emanating from hundreds of flippers. Dilwan felt the shock; a realization of the desperate situation. Without *pilner* the Kranaki could not live. On half their present allotment they would be perilously near to starvation.

Balakon went on: "In the last season over a hundred Kranaki have been killed; mostly by sharks, a few by squids, three by rebellious whales. Our numbers are now less than seven hundred. But even for seven hundred our harvests are too meagre. The fewer there are, the fewer we can spare for guards, and the more easily can the sharks break through to ravish the farms and even the outskirts of the city itself. We must break this stranglehold if Kareeta is not to die."

He paused, waiting for the impulses of despair to die out of the water.

"I can remember," Balakon continued, "when the Kranaki held five great cities and numbered more than a hundred thousand. That was only eight hundred seasons ago. In the times of our grandfathers the Kranaki cities spread out in hundreds to the further seas; to the warm seas of the south and to the cold seas that stretched beyond to the ice. And round the cities, league after league, lay the hydro-farms, growing a multitude of crops that now are only a memory."

He stopped for a while, remembering. "When I was very young," he said, "I tasted *charang*. It had a lightness and warmth and beauty in it, so that your body felt as insubstantial as a floater when you had eaten it. It grew only in the cold beyond the warm, in the gardens of the city of Charbera, which died seven hundred seasons ago. There will be no more *charang*."

A current swept through the Council Place, stirring the tendrils of the Kranaki with thoughts of the storms swirling up from the Deep around them.

Balakon said: "In the days of our grandfathers the Kranaki ruled from cold to warm and on to cold again; from the bottom of the Deeps to the thin waters above. The whales came and went at our bidding; the sharks cowered away from us in the thin waters,

and our ancestors hunted them for sport. We were supreme until—the Shock.

"You have all heard of it; of the days when the sea-bed crumbled beneath our cities and substances bubbled up, turning the water into thin, blindingly hot mist. Only in the far south and here in the north did a few cities survive; cities that have fallen one by one before the attack of the sharks and the squids, and the tremblings of the sea-bed. Now there is only Kareeta, and it seems impossible that Kareeta can survive another ten seasons."

The vibrations of despair rocked more violently through the waters of the Council Place. Dilwan, listening, realized that the calm pronouncements of Balakon were grimly reinforcing the sense of doom that hung over the Kranaki. Each must have known the end was near, and hoped to be mistaken. Balakon spoke with a dreadful, inescapable authority. And yet Balakon himself had planned the one possible way of salvation. Now he went on, firmly over-riding the despair about him.

"It seems impossible," Balakon said, "but there is one chance of saving our race. For thousands of seasons, among the things that have dropped into our depths from the thin water there have been some that were not dead fish but strange, artificial creations containing queerly-formed, dead pygmies. It is in our history that these creations have changed throughout the seasons, becoming more complex as though fashioned by a race of growing culture and ingenuity. We thought for a long time that the pygmies who must have made them lived in the thin water, and that these, perhaps, were their funeral vessels, designed to carry their dead into what, to them, would be the mysterious depths below.

"For thousands of seasons our ancestors planned how they might establish contact with the pygmies, and perhaps help them in their struggles against their enemies. Some of their bodies that we found had had limbs torn by our own enemies, the sharks. But by ourselves we could not penetrate up into the thin water. It was not until a few hundred seasons before the Shock that Ralbaned, the great hydro-farmer, developed that new hard, transparent coral of which Kareeta is built, and adapted it to the creation of pressure-suits moulded to our shapes.

"Since then our adventurers have swum up through the thin water and found a world of thin mist lying above it, and learned that the pygmies live on the bed of that mist, using their strange vessels to cross the intervening waters. When the Shock came we were preparing to send large expeditions to meet them. Even since the Shock our adventurers

have dared the thin waters and the blockade of sharks to see this strange world above us. And we have kept a watcher at our last outpost, Berdan.

"A tunnel leads up to Berdan, a tunnel which the sharks have not yet found. Once at Berdan our watchers are safe from them, for Berdan itself is surrounded on all sides by the air-bed on which the pygmies live. For a season at a time the watchers stay, burdened by pressure-suits, trying to make contact with the pygmies. But as the watchers could only plunge into the mist for a fraction of time, they have always failed. The pygmies do not recognize them, except, perhaps, as strange fish.

"Now, in the time of our greatest need, another hydro-farmer has found what may be the solution to our desperate plight. Dilwan, a native of lost Serbena, has found a means of lining the pressure-suits with a new form of sponge. In the new pressure-suit a Kranak can venture into the mist, protected from thinness by the coral, and from waterlessness by the sponge. At last we can meet the pygmies on their own air-bed!

"We will go to them, and they will help us against our mutual enemies, the sharks, and give us their strange, fashioned things to help on the hydro-farms, while we in turn teach them of all the richness that lies on the sea-bed for those that have the strength to take it. Nothing will be able to stand against the combined force of the Kranaki and the pygmies.

"But it will not be easy to penetrate the mist. Even with the new pressure-suits it will be an agonizing adventure, only to be borne for a short time. We must send an emissary, who can first prove our intelligence to the pygmies. Dilwan, who made this venture possible, has asked to be allowed to go, and we have given permission. Dilwan! The future—the very existence—of the Kranaki depends on your mission. May the Ruler of the Deep attend you!"

Dilwan heard the chorusing vibrations. "The Ruler of the Deep attend you!" He felt inside himself the pride of the Kranaki, of the race that had once held the oceans to their furthest reaches. On him the future depended, and he would not fail them.

Two of the Kranaki floated down to him, holding the artificially-shaped coral that was to protect him from the thinness above. He wriggled into it, and when the head-piece had been pulled down the coral insects were set to work on the join, to seal them until his return. Only a small gap was left, so that water could continue to flood in around him. He would not seal this with coral until, at Berdan, he was ready to meet the pygmies.

Now, with powerful strokes, he

swam above the Council of Kranaki. For a moment he watched them, feeling their vibrations of hope and goodwill beating even through the enclosing coral. Then, with a steady, powerful motion, he was swimming away from Kareeta. Six young Kranaki swam with him, spared from the desperately urgent need of the harvest to protect him against sharks until he reached the mouth of the tunnel.

Half a dozen sharks eddied down, but sheered away quickly at the sight of the seven Kranaki. Dilwan felt a surge of vicious hatred against them and their cowardly avoidance of battle except when they outnumbered the Kranaki by four or five to one. The hatred changed into triumph as he thought of his own mission, and how its success would put weapons into the hands of the Kranaki.

We shall hunt them down, he thought with grim satisfaction, we and the pygmies. We shall hunt them until not a shark remains in the oceans. Even the small ones in the thin water we shall destroy. And the cities of the Kranaki shall rise again.

II

ROGER BLAINE groaned in more than spiritual anguish. The road seemed to be turning into a sticky river of molten lead. The front wheel of his bicycle was continually popping the bubbles of tar that swelled up in front of them, while ahead, waves of heat shimmered up like a wall of mist between the loch and the forested hills. He felt as though he had been cycling for years through a section of Dante's Inferno. And Hilda looked as cool and unperturbed as ever.

"Take it easy," he panted. "What are you using for power—atomic energy?"

His wife smiled sweetly at him. "Just ordinary muscle power, darling," she replied. "I told you you were getting too flabby. This sort of holiday is just what you need. Wait till I've had you up and down Ben Nevis a few times! You'll be a different man."

"I won't last that long," he prophesied gloomily. "Another hundred yards of this and I shall melt into a grease ball and evaporate. When I think of the things you told me about the cool Scottish valleys and lochs, I feel that my faith in woman is shaken for ever."

Hilda smiled. "Hold on," she said. "It's less than a mile now to Invermoriston. I should hate to think of you melting away when almost in sniffing distance of a nice long, cool pint of beer. Contemplate the beauties of Ness and forget the heat. You might see the monster! As a qualified zoologist, you could classify it. Think of it—*draco Blainensis!*"

Roger grunted. "Any monster with any sense would keep well under in this weather. Anyway, it's too early in the day, and the weather's too clear. For the creation of the Loch Ness monster you need a nice misty evening full of shadows, a preliminary oiling of good, strong Scotch, and a Celtic imagination. Given those three, you stand a chance of seeing monsters by the million."

"You skeptical scientists!" Hilda protested. "Just because you haven't got their bones neatly docketed in the Natural History Museum in Kensington, sea-monsters can't possibly exist. When it should be obvious that, if they live at the bottom of the ocean, you could never by any chance find their remains."

Roger mopped his sweating brow with a handkerchief. If anything, it was getting a little hotter, incredible as it seemed.

"There are at least two very good reasons for disbelieving the Loch Ness monster story," he said wearily. "In the first place, it is difficult to see how the monster could get along the Caledonian Canal from Inverness to the loch without being spotted, and no one has yet reported its presence in the canal. In the second, if the monster lives, as you claim, at the bottom of the ocean, then the difference in pressure at the surface of the water would kill it immediately."

"Not valid," Hilda declared. "In the first place, the monster might have been in the loch for hundreds of years, or there might be a subterranean entrance somewhere. And in the second, it might be a tough monster, able to withstand different pressures. There could be all sorts of reasons. You're just a dogmatic scientist. I hope the monster comes after you!"

"I'll try the Scotch this evening, and brush up my imagination," he promised.

"We'll see about that," his wife said grimly.

At last the road bent away from the loch, and the welcome sight of the Invermoriston Hotel lay before them. With surprising speed Roger parked his bicycle and disappeared into the lobby. When Hilda followed him, she found him contemplating the remains of a pint of beer.

"Your watch was slow," he said reproachfully. "We almost didn't make it. It's a quarter to two."

"Lemonade would have been just as good for you," Hilda said, ignoring his instinctive shudder. "But I've good news for you. They have some room here. As it will probably be past three o'clock by the time we finish lunch, I thought we might have a rest and set off for Fort Augustus in the morning. I think you've lost enough fat for one day."

Roger rolled his eyes up.

"Saved at the eleventh hour!" he murmured. "This calls for another drink."

Hilda watched the beer vanish. "Come on," she said. "Lunch is ready. If we get it over quickly we can go for a ramble up the Moriston."

She dragged him away, protesting.

It was not until evening, however, that Hilda succeeded in getting him away from the hotel, and then he refused point-blank to walk up the winding Moriston, insisting instead on the shorter walk to the loch. And at Dalcataig Pier he insisted on resting, developing a sudden passion for contemplating the beauties of Ness.

The scene was impressive. Behind them rose the hilly forests of Portclair and Invermoriston, dark, tossing green in the evening breeze. In front lay the purple loch and, further on, the gently rising heights beyond Glen Albyn. The sun which had set behind Portclair was still lingering on the house-tops of Invermoriston.

A boat came into Dalcataig Pier, and men got out, workers from the aluminum works on the other side of the loch. Roger and Hilda heard them talking excitedly as they passed: "Och! Wullie McKay saw it. He said you couldna mistake it. It's the auld monster again. I ken fine we'll have the newspaper bodies doon with us again noo."

"There you are," Hilda said triumphantly. "It's back!"

Roger smiled the superior, irritating smile of one who knows better. "Let's get back to the hotel," he said. "I want to stoke my imagination up."

As they were turning back from Daclataig they met a man running towards them. He called breathlessly:

"Tak heed! The monster's in the Moriston, wallowing like a whale. I'm off to the Pier for a gun."

There was no disputing his sincerity or sobriety. Without a word, Roger and Hilda began to run towards the river Moriston. They reached the bridge to find all the inhabitants of the tiny village assembled up on it.

Then they saw it, wallowing up the small river from the loch. A vast, scaly neck rose from the water, upholding a long, flat head that peered dazedly about, as though the tranquil light of the Scottish twilight were too brilliant for it. Its body stretched behind, an impressive bulk tapering into flippers in parts. Just under the neck were two membranous tendrils, projecting stiffly like spears. It moved awkwardly up the river towards the bridge.

For a moment the villagers stayed, gazing at the invader in stark disbelief. Then they fled,

panic-stricken, back to their houses. Hilda felt like joining them, but Roger was leaning so far forward over the bridge in his anxiety to take in all details of the monster that she felt obliged to hang on to his coat, in case he overbalanced and fell into the river.

The monster seemed to notice the villagers streaming away, and made a move towards the bank as though to follow them. But the pull of the water was too much for it, and it fell back defeated. Rolling in mid-stream, it lifted its head towards the bridge again, and saw the two people still standing there. The long, scaly neck moved towards them. Hilda felt like screaming, but Roger was gazing at the approaching monster as though it were the Holy Grail. Her nose caught the thick, fishy smell of the sea. She stared at the broad, serpentine head and the gleaming eyes.

There was a cry from the south bank, and she saw the Scot they had passed on the road running towards them, waving a rifle.

"Ye're all richt!" he shouted. "Hauld on—I've got a bullet for it."

Roger shouted back frantically: "No, no! Don't shoot for God's sake. *It's wearing a diving suit!*"

The Scot levelled his rifle. "I'm nae fashed if it's wearin' a kilt," he called. "It's not coming up the Moriston!"

The shot rang out above Roger's frantic appeals. The monster reared as a bullet hit it in the neck. There was a brief, high whistling, as though a balloon were being deflated, and the long neck slumped forward into the water.

Roger dashed down to the bank, and into the river, with Hilda following.

"It can't be dead," he muttered. "A single bullet can't stop an elephant, let alone a thing like this. Unless . . . I can't believe it!"

The head had fallen sideways, so that it projected a little from the water. Roger bent over it, his lips tight. After a moment he looked up at Hilda watching from the bank. The villagers had begun to swarm back, realizing that the monster had been overthrown.

Roger said: "It's dead, all right. Diagnosis—multiple internal ruptures. The same as we would have if suddenly transported into a vacuum. That shot merely punctured its protective covering."

Hilda said: "You mean . . . ?"

"That it was an intelligent being!" Roger exclaimed. "I guessed it from the bridge, when that fool was waving his gun about. God, what a waste!" He climbed wearily out of the water.

"Maybe another one will follow it," Hilda said reassuringly. "The natives can be warned. Next time it will be different."

Roger looked back over the

bridge. The villagers were clustered in excited groups, looking down on the monster where it lay with the water washing over it.

"Maybe," he said. "If there *is* a next time."

III

THE LAST quake had brought down several pillars of the Council Place. A strong current was flowing through Kareeta, brushing the phosphorescent organisms into startling lambency. Balakon looked round at the huddled Kranaki.

"We must still hope," he signalled. "A young, strong Kranak such as Dilwan could last a whole season in a pressure-suit. Perhaps he is having difficulty in convincing the pygmies of the urgency of our plight. We must hope that he will come back. We have tried to duplicate the pressure-suit he made, but the sponge does not breed true. We might stumble on it again tomorrow—or never. And the harvest is worse, even than we had feared it would be. Kareeta can only survive a few more seasons. We must hope Dilwan will come back."

The Kranaki huddled silently about the dais from which their leader spoke. High above circled a school of giant sharks, watching and waiting with timeless malignance.