

SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES MAGAZINE

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EARTHMAN'S CHOICE

BY ROGER DEE

ILLUSTRATED BY BRYAN

Cameron and his wife were left stranded on Venus when the old madness of the human race struck across all the millions of miles of space at them. The Droon Mind offered them shelter—of a kind!

For seconds after the roar of the blast rolled up the mountain-side to them Cameron and his wife stood frozen beside their caterpillar ore sled and stared palely at each other, neither daring to voice their inevitable first thought.

"That was the *Astra's* fuel pile letting go," Cameron said finally. "We found what we came to Venus for, Helen, but we'll never take it away."

She answered him indirectly, displaying for the thousandth time the characteristic common-sense that made her a perfect

balance-wheel to his driving impatience.

"Miilak!" she called.

The Droon worker came out of the ore pit toward them, his silvery eye-discs glowing like bland, cryptic windows against the violet oval of his face. The flood of white light from the mist ceiling overhead sank into his flesh without highlight or reflection, causing Cameron to think irrelevantly of a purple California grape, translucent but with an odd quality of absorbing and drowning light.

Unerringly Miilak read the



question in their minds and droned his answer in the English which he and the millions of his kind swarming the planet had learned in a single day.

"The star-ship is destroyed," he said. "The men are all dead but Jansen."

Cameron stared, feeling again the instinctive prickle of unease that had been his first reaction to a creature so human in form yet so alien of nature. He knew the infallibility of the Droon's communal telepathic sense, but for the moment it seemed to him that more than simple awareness lay behind the enigmatic eye-discs. Anticipation, triumph?

Impatiently he discarded the thought, knowing that in spite of his improbable abilities the Droon worker was utterly amenable to an Earthman's will—a four-foot puppet with a faculty of telepathic rapport, and nothing more.

"What happened?" Cameron demanded. "How did Jansen escape?"

The mellow drone was placid, disinterested. "A message came from your own world and made the crew like madmen. Afterward, Jansen destroyed the ship and the men in it."

"A message," Helen breathed. Hope sprang up in her eyes. "Vic, maybe it isn't all—"

He knew her thought: World Council might have finished a second ship ahead of schedule to assist the *Astra* in her last-ditch attempt to augment Earth's dwindling stockpile of radio-actives. Perhaps another expedition was on its way already, and they were not marooned after all. Jansen, taut with the eternal strain that rode the crew, might have gone mad from simple relief of tension and . . .

"There is no second star-ship," Miilak said, answering Cameron's unspoken query. "There is war on Earth. Jansen destroyed the ship because his country ordered it."

Helen came into Cameron's arms and began to cry quietly, her face hidden against his chest. He held her with detached tenderness, thinking bitterly that the agony of waiting was over at last. The *Astra's* precious cargo would never reach Earth to swing the balance from unrest to peace; the *Astra* was gone, and with her had gone Earth's chance.

Their foolhardy argosy into space was done, and for nothing. Earth by now would be broken into a hundred warring factions, locked in a vicious struggle that might tear down all that the ages had built.

"We could have prevented this war, except for Jansen and his

kind," Cameron said thickly. Futility sickened him—and was displaced, characteristically, by an instant and overpowering need for revenge. "The filthy spy!"

Milak read his thought and climbed obediently to the orestled's seat to start the motor. Helen raised a startled, tear-streaked face when Cameron vaulted up beside the native.

"Vic! What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to find Jansen," he said grimly, "and kill him."

Knowing him, she did not argue. Instead she mounted the sled and sat beside him in silent misery, her soft mouth quivering.

The sled took them swiftly downward through masses of mica-flecked boulders, past yawning burrows of the Droon workers' tunnels, past groves of yellow-leaved trees that rose taller and thicker as the green plain below came up to meet them. Across the valley floor wound a clear, shallow river, its placid surface gleaming like silver. In the distance another mountain range rose, lofty peaks hidden in the mist ceiling.

At the valley's upper end loomed the deserted city, rising tier upon massive tier, conical towers reaching for the mists.

Helen's hand found Cameron's, and from its trembling he sensed that she shared the feeling of pygmy inconsequence that fell upon him with each fresh sight of the empty city. And with reason, he thought, for it was more than a city. It was a monument, a towering testimonial to the greatness of the race that had built and then abandoned it.

Pervading light drenched it and made it a place without shadow, a featureless pile of polished planes that gleamed like glass, unbroken by any aperture. For the thousandth time Cameron pondered that illogical blankness, wondering why a creation so perfect should turn upon its world a face so blind.

"But they *had* to see," he muttered. "A race must visualize before it can build beauty like that . . ."

He felt the puzzled weight of Helen's regard and broke off, recalling the purpose that drove him. There was no time now to consider a dead city's riddle. He had to find Jansen.

In a bend of the river below they saw the crater where the *Astra* had lain, a great raw pit gouged out of the green meadow, dust still swirling lazily at its bottom. There was no trace of the ship. Even the second, and

larger, ore-sled was now gone.

They stared in dreary silence at the crater until a flash of movement farther up the valley caught Cameron's eye. A man-made dot crawled across the plain, sunlight winking on angular, metallic surfaces—the second sled, making straight for the dead city.

"The fool!" Cameron said. "Does he think he can hide from me here, with a million Droons broadcasting every move he makes?"

The bright dot grew rapidly larger when they gave chase.

Cameron's sled was faster, so much faster that by the time Jansen reached the city they could distinguish the pale blur of the saboteur's backward-turned face. Once Jansen shook a clenched fist, and Cameron grunted with satisfaction.

"He's unarmed, or he'd have opened on us by now," he said. "All our weapons were locked away to prevent trouble, remember?"

Helen touched his arm, pleading with him. "Don't follow into the city, Vic, please. If anything should happen—"

He squeezed her fingers absently, knowing that she was not afraid for herself but for him. A moment later they were at the city gates.

The city stretched before them

in vast ordered divisions like the segments of a gigantic disc, silent avenues converging like spokes toward a central hub; a place heavy with the silence of millenia, deserted beyond the meaning of time. The only sound was the jangling of the sleds, echoing through canyoned, empty streets.

The *Astra's* crew had never penetrated here, bending every energy toward gathering a full hold of ore before Earth should recede beyond reach. Cameron had no eye for detail now, his whole attention centered upon the vehicle ahead.

The city-segments narrowed, the empty streets drew more sharply toward their common center. Jansen's sled was no more than a hundred feet ahead when it clanked into the final confluence and halted.

It was a place of utter desolation, a vast circular arena lying naked and empty except for a towering block of native stone that gleamed like pale, polished marble. The stone was the city's hub, and in each of its four vertical surfaces black tunnel-mouths gaped, angling downward.

Into the planet itself? Cameron felt his scalp prickle at the thought. Was that where the city builders had gone—inside?

Jansen did not hesitate. He

chose the danger he did not know, and plunged directly into the first black opening.

Miilak halted the sled beside Jansen's and waited passively. Helen clung to Cameron, hampering him. "Please, Vic—we don't know what may be down there!"

He shook her off. "Jansen went in. I'm going after him."

He strode into the orifice, Helen and Miilak at his heels.

The tunnel sloped gently downward, and it was not dark. A faint glow lighted the way, growing sharply brighter at the farther end where Jansen had vanished, swallowed up by whatever lay beyond.

At the glow, Cameron paused. "What's ahead there, Miilak?"

Something like ecstasy warmed the native's mellow drone. "The Hive is there, and the Droon Soul guiding Its people through the eternal Cycle."

Cameron swore, startled by the inference. "So *that's* why you're all in rapport! I should have known—you're like a termite colony or an ant-hive, a composite intelligence!"

Helen pressed against him, her eyes on the Droon worker's placid face. "Miilak, what will happen if we follow Jansen?"

For the first time the answer was oblique. "That lies between

the Earthpeople and the Droon. I may not say."

"Rot," Cameron said shortly.

He moved into the light, down a short incline that dropped away to a circular chamber whose polished walls gaped with the mouths of a dozen other corridors leading deeper into the planet's heart. Light flooded from a low-arched ceiling, falling without shadow upon a circle of kneeling Droon people.

They ignored his entrance, their silver eye-discs fixed raptly upon a globe of milky radiance that rested upon a pedestal in the center of the room. The globe pulsed and changed, mottled with strange shadows and seethed with alien motion.

Cameron ignored it, centering his attention upon the tense figure of Jansen crouching against the farther wall.

"The burrows are open," Cameron said. "Why don't you run, Jansen? Have you lost your nerve?"

The saboteur raised a thin, frantic face. His eyes rolled, pale with terror.

"I won't go!" he said shrilly. "You can't drive me out, Cameron—I know what is down there now!"

"I see you've found out about the hive-brain," Cameron said. His lip curled. "Facing a thing

like that is harder than murdering a crew of unsuspecting men, isn't it?"

Jansen's eyes begged, mute as a dog's. "I'm sorry about the *Astra*, Cameron . . . Can't you forgive me now when we're alone here with this thing, when we'll never get off the planet alive?"

Cameron moved in, circling the ring of kneeling Droon people. The globe on its pedestal spun a flickering web of light and shadow, sucking at his attention like an insistent, hypnotic vortex.

"No," he said. "You're going to pay for the *Astra*, Jansen."

A shadow welled out of the globe, assumed a shape defying definition. It caught Cameron and froze him in midstride, his consciousness recoiling in stark panic from the overwhelming intelligence that threatened to swallow his.

Fading vision told him that Jansen had surrendered control already; the placidity that lay across the saboteur's face was as alien as the round-eyed serenity of the Droon people.

Darkness swept Cameron into a void stippled with icy pinpoints of light. He heard Helen's stifled scream and fought to reach her, and could not. The grip on his mind closed tighter . . .

He drifted like a disembodied

soul, powerless to shut out the scene unfolding below him.

A jungle world that steamed with primeval mists, acrawl with alien life monstrous beyond his conception. Under his eyes the jungles thinned, the mists lifted, the monsters gave way before smaller and less feral fauna. A new race, violet-skinned and silver-eyed, rose to swarm across the planet.

The Droon people.

Parallel to their evolution grew a formless shadow, shot through with a myriad tiny sparklings like moonlight on snow crystals. It waxed and swelled and became the pulsing thing Cameron had seen emerge from the globe of light in the Droon-circle.

In the depths of his consciousness a soundless voice implanted a conviction; this was the hive-mind, the racial soul. The light-points were Droon people, cells of its being.

The concept revolted him, and he rejected angrily the postulation of a race without liberty.

His own people fought to the death against restraint—the suicidal war raging on Earth at the moment was, paradoxically, an end result of that principle. No man who had ever known freedom could ever belong body and soul to a tyrannical race-master, drowning his personal

ego in termitic regimentation . . .

But this was perfection, his conviction told him. All other ways must lead to insanity and to death.

Violently he denied it. The individual is more important than the whole, personal liberty a greater thing than the culture that bears it. He, Victor Cameron, was a discrete entity, and he would rather die than be a part of such a corporate monster.

Yet you must join us or perish, the voice said. *Your own race is dying, the end of your world is at hand. Take your place in the circle before it is too late. Your companions understand — look and see.*

Sight and speech returned, and he saw Helen and Jansen kneeling side by side in the Droon-circle. Their unnatural stillness startled him; the alien calm that lay like a veil across Helen's face sent him taut with horror.

"Helen!" His voice was a hoarse half-shout. "You didn't—"

She stood erect at the sound of his voice, her slim hands raised against his fury.

"Jansen and I joined the Cycle because we understand what the Droon offers," she said. The voice was Helen's, but rounded to an impersonal evenness totally foreign to the girl he had known. "We have entered the Hive, Vic,

but it's not the bondage you think. It's release, the ultimate peace. Join us quickly, before it is too late."

He fought with all his strength to break the stasis that held him, and his futility only fanned the rage higher in him.

"Join you?" he shouted. "Come into that slave-chain willingly? I'll see you damned first—even you, Helen!"

"Hurry, Vic," Helen said, as if he had not spoken. "Earth is dying. Unless you join us you will die with her."

He hesitated, finding behind her words a stark mental picture of Earth shriveling and cracking, spewing out atomic fires in a blazing, cosmic holocaust.

Helen came toward him, her wide eyes glowing like the sight-discs of the Droon people. "You have glimpsed the truth, Vic. Join us now, while there is still time."

He made his voice savage, pushing back the fearful concept growing at the back of his mind.

"I can't knuckle under to this hive-brute—if I'm going to die I'll die free, as an Earthman should!"

"Please, Vic," she begged. "The Droon is right. It knows—everything."

"Then it knows how we climbed up out of the slime," he

said, "It knows that men came up the hard way, alone, and built a culture that might have reached the stars. Our ancestors went out with their heads up and their bare hands for weapons, and fought their way through a world that would have swallowed the Droons overnight!"

She shook her head, and the familiar toss of her dark hair wrung him sharply with the ache of remembered intimacy.

"We were a proud people," she said, "but a dull and savage one. The Droons built and abandoned the city above us, because they had outgrown it, ages before our recorded history began."

You were great once, the soundless voice said, but what you have known is only a clumsy, apish mockery of the older culture that was yours before some cosmic accident to Earth destroyed it. What you have now is a patchwork of degeneracy, bound from the first to fail.

"Degeneracy?" Cameron raged. "Do you know what you're saying, Helen? Does the Droon Soul that speaks through your mouth know?"

"Men were always like the Droon people, Vic, though they

never knew it. There are no free individuals anywhere, except in dissolution. We are units too in an all-encompassing Man-soul."

Stunningly the concept flared in his mind, beating down the feeble protests his stubborn hope raised against it. His eyes went from Helen to Jansen, who knelt in rapt serenity with the rest of the circle and communed with the vast, throbbing intelligence that was the complete Droon.

"But if Earth has a Man-soul," Cameron whispered, "then how can we be at each other's throats now? How could we ever have blundered into the atomic trap that is destroying us?"

The truth came of itself, numbing him with its crushing simplicity, and he saw with final clarity the gibbering unreason behind man's tortured idealism and blind ferocity. Earth's Man-soul, maimed by that ancient, cosmic catastrophe, was helpless to control its own ragings . . . mad.

"You're right," Cameron said. "I should have seen it long ago."

Then he knelt, between Helen and Jansen, in the circle.
