

FUTURE SCIENCE FICTION

No. 34

35¢

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AUTHOR, AUTHOR!

- ★ ROBERT SILVERBERG, we presume, is
- ★ known to you all. And he'll be still better
- ★ known after his novel, "We, The Marauders" appears in the February issue of *Science Fiction Quarterly*. That's not just a hint—it's a proclamation!



FORCE OF MORTALITY

by Robert Silverberg

How could everyone on this planet have died, all at the same time, when they knew the secret of immortality?

KENDRICK pointed to the small brown planet out in front. "I guess that's the one. Looks harmless enough."

Arthur Quantrell consulted the chart, nodded, and slouched back into his acceleration cradle, wincing in anticipation of the bash of the jets.

As the younger man's fingers skipped over the keyboard, the ship shot into its spiral landing orbit. Quantrell felt the flabby roll of flesh around his middle sag as gravity hit him, and tried to ignore the pain.

"*I grow old...I grow old...*" he thought grimly to himself, quoting a half-forgotten ancient poem, while the ship roared down. *I'm just about ready for the boneyard.*

And that reminded him of the scout's report on the planet growing larger and larger before them. "It's boneyard," the scout had said. "A planet full of skeletons."

Quantrell considered that. The prospect of a planetary boneyard was one to look forward to, after all his fruitless surveys, all the journeys to Deneb IV and Procyon II and Rim planets and Edge planets, only to poke aimlessly at the mouldered bits and scraps of some long-forgotten civilization. He realized, sadly, that in his sixty years in Extraterrestrial Archaeology he had never uncovered anything important, never written a major book, never put forth a theory

of any consequence. And now, as he writhed with the pain of acceleration, he knew the years were catching him.

"How's it going?" Kendrick yelled back at him.

"All fine," Quantrell said, biting hard. "But I'll be glad when we put down."

"Any minute now," said Kendrick.

QUANTRELL winked, in what he hoped was a brave gesture. "*I grow old*," he thought again, and tried to recall the next line. He couldn't. Something about trousers—*I shall roll up my trousers*?... No, no, that can't be it. He looked at Steve Kendrick, lying comfortably in the acceleration cradle, his strong young body effortlessly rolling with every blow, and allowed himself a moment of painful sentimental recollection of the days when he had been as strong and as sturdy.

I'm not going to black out, he thought fiercely, remembering the last landing, when the final moment of acceleration had shot him into a humiliating faint. But as the ship glided into the small planet's atmosphere and started the last steady swerve to the ground, his grip on consciousness gradually but inexorably began to loosen.

KENDRICK was standing over him with an expression of concern on his face and a yellowed skull in his

hands. Quantrell's immediate interest was the skull. Almost as a reflex, he found himself classifying it: dolichocephalic, platyrrhine nasal structure, cranial capacity high—probably 1800 cc. Then he realized he had blacked out after all; he struggled out of the cradle, fussing with the clamps to cover his embarrassment, and clambered to his feet.

"I've been out already, Doc," said Kendrick. "Found something while you were resting." That was all. No reference to his collapse under gravitational strain, which would be enough to cashier him out of the service if they ever found out. *But Steve is always tactful and sympathetic about the difference in our ages*, he thought.

He took the skull from Kendrick and scrutinized it. It was definitely humanoid, probably fairly close to human in structure. The skull was long and tapering, with a gentle, receding jawline and firm brows.

"They're lying around all over the place. Some of them buried, some just lying in the open. And all of them big, real big—about nine feet tall, I'd say. Every last one."

"Looks good, does it?"

"Probably be a record find. And I hope so; Terra can learn a lot from these dead worlds."

"Yes," said Quantrell. He studied Kendrick's plain, open

face almost as intently as he had examined the skull.

STEVE KENDRICK was a fanatic, and that was surprising in one so young. His particular form of fanaticism, Quantrell had discovered almost as soon as they had been teamed, was the desire not to overlook even a scrap of information, to bring it all back to Terra. On that most frustrating expedition of Arthur Quantrell's long life—the trip to Deneb IV—they had found just a few muddy remnants of a dead culture in four months of digging. Quantrell had, at last, managed to dredge up an immense carved monument from the bottom of a swamp; at the last minute the winch gave and the whole thing crashed back into the depths of the swamp.

Disgusted, exhausted, covered with mud, Quantrell had suggested they abandon the project and move on; but Kendrick, reproaching him—mildly, as befitted the fifty-year age differential—had insisted on recovering the huge thing and dragging it back to Terra. If it had the slightest interest, Kendrick would not leave it behind.

Quantrell examined the skull. "Let's get out there," he said. "This looks exciting."

"I know what you mean. I'm all worked up too. This is really my first big chance. But something like this ought to be old hat to you, though."

No, Quantrell thought. *It's*

my first big chance too, after all these years. But he didn't want to tell that to Steve.

He slipped into his space-suit with ease born of long practice, and swung out onto the catwalk. He started to lower himself to the ground, then paused and stared.

"Lord," he said softly.

As far as he could see, there were vast stretches of buildings. It seemed like one immense tenement, stretching out to the horizon, standing dead and windowless. And sprawled over the ground, hanging out of the broken windows, carpeting the streets—skeletons.

HE FELT his heart starting to throb with the old excitement that had first hit him the day he had hewed a head out of a river bank in southern France. Hastily he went down the catwalk, grunting out an involuntary hunh-*wheeze* as he moved. He dropped the last couple feet, feeling the ground give slightly beneath his feet, and waited for Kendrick to come down.

"What do you make of it?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. Think it's a ceremonial burial ground?"

"Not likely," smiled Kendrick; he knelt and examined a skeleton sprawled almost at his feet. "They wouldn't just dump their dead like this, would they? Without even an attempt at burial?"

Quantrell shook his head.

"It's a non-human race, Steve. We can't ever be sure how their minds operated."

He let his eyes rove over the entire incredible panorama. It was a cosmic charnel-house; he had never seen so many skeletons at once, just lying about. What catastrophe could have overtaken these people all at once? What could have happened, he wondered, feeling a little dizzy at the immensity of the project they had stumbled on.

"This must be a totally dry planet," he said. "These bones would have rotted long ago if there'd been any humidity to speak of."

KENDRICK nodded, agreeing. "Let's see what's in these houses," he suggested. They crossed the little clearing to the nearest entrance to the massive pile of architecture. It was grisly to have to step over the heaped-up bones, and Quantrell was beginning to find the silence oppressive.

Kendrick pushed open the door and they edged in. The mustiness was almost tangible; it was like stepping into a family vault. Quantrell's fingerbeam flicked into the opening. The light revealed heaps of corpses stacked everywhere, some neatly composed with arms locked across the sternum, others sprawled out bizarrely, some clinging to others in what could have

been a final desperate embrace or a mortal struggle.

"There's one funny thing about all these skeletons," said Kendrick. "They're all the same size. All about nine feet tall."

"You're right," Quantrell agreed. "And all about the same age, too, I'd guess, though I wouldn't put more than a week's pay behind it." He opened an inner door and the hinges fell away from the wood as he did so. "Whatever happened here happened a long time ago," he said.

He shot a beam of light into the next room. A skull grinned back at him, and he saw dimly that there were more behind that one.

"Come on," he said. "Let's get out of here."

HE CHECKED the points off on his fingers. "One, they're all about the same size and age. Two, this whole planet's covered with them."

"Without an inch of breathing space," added Kendrick. "I don't imagine we missed much when we made our tour yesterday. Wherever you go, heaps of bodies."

"Point three," said Quantrell. "Three—that's the snapper. What did they die from? How? Why? What happened? We're going to be filling out an awfully puzzled-sounding report, something tells me."

"But at least we'll bring back a load of skeletons.

That's something concrete."

"True."

"I'd like to check that building again," Kendrick said. "Perhaps they left some record—some history of whatever happened to them. If they did, it shouldn't be too hard to put together a pattern."

"Good idea."

"You want to go now?"

"No. You go by yourself; I'll stay here. I want to do the articulation on the skeleton you brought in." Arthur Quantrell busied himself over the long, graceful body while the younger man donned his spacesuit.

FINALLY, Kendrick left. Quantrell gratefully sank down to rest. He stared balefully at the skeleton stretched out on the floor. *Why couldn't this have happened to me when I was younger,* he thought. *Why now, when I'm old and worn out and too tired even to string together that fellow's ribs?*

Tired. He thought of Steve Kendrick, clambering around in the heaps of rubble and bones, and bent down to loosen his boots. His feet were starting to swell from the morning's walking, and his ankles ached; the ligaments were getting to be weak and yielding.

"I grow old... I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled," he said triumphantly, at last remembering the poet's next line. Warily he

got up and forced himself down to work on the ticklish job of articulating the skeleton; the dried remnants of muscles and ligaments that held it together now would never stand up to acceleration.

AN HOUR later, he had managed to complete the powerful foot (with prehensile toes? he wondered) up to the femur. He decided to take a break, to let some of the squint go out of his eyes and some of the quivering from his hands; but after a moment of relaxation he heard Kendrick bounding up the catwalk, and hastily snapped to. He didn't want Steve to find him napping on the job.

"Suit up in a hurry," yelled Kendrick as he burst through the hatch. "I think I've found the answer to the whole business. There's a set of pictograms running down a corridor on the second floor of that building, with explanations in an E Double Four language."

"Great," Quantrell said. He pulled himself together, slid into his suit, and followed Kendrick down the catwalk. They headed silently across to the entrance, skirting the heaps of skeletons strewn all over.

"Upsy daisy," said Kendrick pointing to a rope ladder dangling from a hole in the ceiling. "I jury-rigged a ladder for us; I don't trust

the strength of those stairs."

"Wise move," Quantrell said. "They might be a billion years old, for all we know." But all the same he did not feel happy about having to struggle up a rope ladder.

Kendrick scrambled up lightly and easily, and waited at the top for Quantrell. When he finally made it, huffing and coughing, Kendrick snapped on his beam and pointed. "There you are."

Quantrell whistled. They were in what seemed to be an endless corridor, stretching off to a pinpoint in the distance, and up here there were no skeletons—just long rows of paintings, done in bright pigments and almost photographic realism.

Quantrell squinted and looked closely. The aliens shown were finely-built, handsome people, roughly humanoid. The first few panels showed pleasant scenes of what he supposed was everyday life. Under each painting ran a line or two of commentary, in a language which he recognized as close kin to Old High Sirian.

"Here's the story all spread out for us," he said. "Let's get to work."

WHAT SEEMED like hours went by as they moved down the rows of paintings, carefully studying the scene portrayed, then

digging away at the words below. Kendrick, who had specialized in linguistics, did most of the translating, but it was Arthur Quantrell who patiently accumulated fact after fact to put the story together.

"This one seems contradictory," said Kendrick. "Here it says that they were immortal. But how could they die, then? Why?"

"You've jumped to conclusions. What does it say there?"

Kendrick read it aloud. "*'On this unhappy day we put an end to the force of mortality. From this day on, none of us grew old.'* If that doesn't mean immortality, what does?"

"Examine the words. They ended the force of mortality," said Quantrell. "That doesn't mean they did away with death. But you wouldn't understand the distinction yet."

"What's that?"

"Never mind," said Quantrell. "Let's move on; maybe it'll come clear to you here."

KENDRICK looked at the picture. It showed a radiant man, glowing with youth. He translated the commentary: "*'At first we were happy, for age had gone from us. We had put an end to the force of mortality.'*"

Kendrick turned to Quantrell. "It's not right of you to play games with me. How could these people be immor-

tal and still be able to die?"

"You're missing the distinction," said Quantrell, leaning against the far wall. "The force of mortality, Steve, isn't the same thing as death. It's only the probability that an individual who's survived to Time T isn't going to make it to T plus 1. It's a statistical reference. Among Terrans, the force of mortality increases in proportion to age; the longer you've lived, the less probable it is that you'll continue to live. I'm eighty; you're thirty. Senescence increases the force of mortality. Statistically, it's more probable that natural causes will finish me tonight than you."

"And you mean these people overcame this force of mortality and still died?"

QUANTRELL frowned impatiently. "You still don't see it. They didn't stop death; just old age. *They didn't deteriorate.* They grew up, reached adulthood, and stayed happy and healthy until something carried them off. But since they weren't getting progressively older and more decrepit, the odds on their surviving didn't get shorter as they went along."

"I get it," said Kendrick. "It's the glass bottle analogy: bottles break, but the probability of breaking has nothing to do with the age of the bottle. It's just as likely for a brand-new bottle to break as one a

century old. The odds are the same."

"Exactly. That's the difference between humans and bottles—and between humans and these people. They died, just the way we die, but without crumbling apart first—the way I'm doing."

"You're still in good shape, old timer," said Kendrick. "But I still don't see what it was that came along and killed them like this."

"The pattern's obvious enough," said Quantrell. "To me, at least; I don't know if you'd arrive at the same conclusion. But I'll let you work it out as we go along. If I keep on telling you things, your brain'll atrophy. That's a common ailment among men of your age, I hear."

Kendrick laughed, and they edged on. The corridor began to narrow here, and footing became precarious.

"I don't trust the solidity of the floor here," said Quantrell, observing the groan of the wood beneath his feet. And then, abruptly, as if the remark itself had cracked the wood, the ancient planks gave way and he went crashing through to the floor below.

A BLINDING bolt of pain shot along his leg as he landed. He fought to keep himself from screaming, and, looking up, saw Kendrick's anxious face peering down through the hole.

"How's that for calling my

shot?" Quantrell asked, trying to smile.

"Don't be funny. You all right?"

"I think I cracked it," he said, pointing to his left leg, crumpled underneath him. "At my age, we get pretty brittle."

"Should I come down?"

"Better get the emergency kit from the ship first. I'm going to need a splint."

"You want me to leave you here all alone while I get it?"

"No other way," said Quantrell. "But I don't mind; I won't be all alone." He indicated the shattered skeleton he had landed on, and the others heaped around.

"If you want—"

"Go on, go on," said Quantrell impatiently. "Get the kit, and don't stand here chattering." Steve Kendrick's face vanished instantly, and Quantrell was alone.

He stared at the skeletons, wondering how long it would be before he would be on one of their number. A broken leg out here—they'd have to hop over to Rigel II for immediate medical treatment, or he'd be crippled. And in any event he'd be through, as soon as the surgeons got a look at the wreck of a body he'd been dragging around so long. The broken leg would finish him, even if the other things didn't. Broken legs don't heal quickly or cleanly when you're old.

He looked at the skeletons

again. *They* had never been old; they had been handsome, powerful youths to the day of their death. But they had died too.

"The pattern's obvious enough," he had told Kendrick. And it was. Even without seeing the later pictograms, he could construct the rest of the planet's history.

THEY HAD beaten senescence. There was no physical deterioration of the body with advanced age. Thus, fertility continued throughout the entire lifetime. *A doubtful blessing*, he thought, from the vantage point of his eighty years. But that meant a birth-rate way up; and the death-rate had probably dropped down to next to nothing. The result: in two or three generations, the planet must have been packed to its rafters. And there's a limiting factor; one small planet can hold only so many people and still have room to produce food.

It was easy to picture the last days of the planet. Frantic attempts at birth control, all going to naught because people wouldn't listen. Perhaps leagues of volunteer suicides, doing their bit to reduce congestion. Death, death, and more death, but the overcrowding was barely alleviated. And then mass starvation, bodies lying all over the place, finally just a few survi-

vors struggling along, possibly trying to farm somewhere amid all the corpses. And, at last, they too succumbed, perhaps to disease brought on by the decomposing dead, and all was quiet—a tiny brown planet covered with billions and billions of corpses.

"Hey!" came a distant voice from somewhere. "Can you hear me?"

"Where are you?" Quantrell shouted, loud as he could.

"I'm outside. The whole works caved in, and I'm going to have to dig through the rubble to get you. It's going to take a couple of hours."

"Dig away. I'm in no hurry."

THE PAIN from his leg was fierce, and since he didn't dare move he had become stiff and cramped and his leg had fallen asleep right up to the thigh. He wondered if he could hold out until Steve got there.

The skull of the skeleton he had landed on lay just by his left hand. He picked it up and looked at it—the wide nose, the empty, staring eyes.

If Kendrick had fallen down here he'd have got up and brushed himself off. *But I'm old, and my bones are brittle.*

Yet these people conquered senescence. Their bones weren't brittle. And look what happened to them.

He put the skull down and felt something sharp and metallic next to it. He groped around and his hand closed on an edge. He tugged. It was a book, made up of metal sheets bound together. Trying not to disturb the fractured leg, he pulled the book up to where he could see it.

Flashing on the beam, Arthur Quantrell puzzled over the characters, straining hard to read them. *This will be a good way to pass time*, he thought. From far away came the constant *thud-boom* as Kendrick dug his way toward him. Slowly, painstakingly, he began to translate the unfamiliar figures.

It was a medical book; it explained the simple formula that had brought doom to this planet. The process was simplicity itself, set forth clearly and precisely. Growing more and more excited, he raced on through the book, as the sound of Kendrick's digging grew louder.

IT WAS ALL here; the whole recipe for ending old age forever. No more slow, endless deterioration. No more Quantrells groaning from the pain of a brittle broken bone in an old, worn body.

And then he hit something that made his eyes widen: the statement that the process was capable of reversing aging already under way. No complete

rejuvenation, of course, but it could restore some measure of youth and vitality.

It was all here, neatly packaged and waiting for him to stumble over it. Simply apply the formula and the flabby roll of fat, the weak eyes, the tired feet, the broken leg—all magically washed away.

Do I dare, he asked himself.

What have they ever done for me? For sixty years I've gone from planet to planet; is that a life? *Here I am, an old man—on a dry planet*, he thought, deliberately misquoting.

Why not do it? Why not simply bring the book back? They would rejuvenate me, wash all my troubles away. What of it if they end up in a boneheap too? What of it?

An involuntary shudder of horror ran through him, twitching together the raw, broken ends of the bone.

No.

Thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season. Wonderful the way I still recall the Eliot, he told himself.

He smiled, letting the tension ooze away, thinking to himself, *I thought I was too old for temptation.* He looked at the book, wondering what it would be like to be young again. He shook his head sadly.

above, and Kendrick's shout rang out clear and loud. "Still hanging on, old man?"

It shook him from his moment of abstraction. He glanced upward and said. "I'm fine, Steve. How far away are you?"

"Just a little more," Kendrick said. "A few feet and I'll be with you."

"I'll be waiting." Quantrell looked at the book in his hand, and began to sweat. It was suddenly imperative to bury it—deep.

He remembered Kendrick's tenacity in that swamp on Deneb IV. Steve was never one for leaving an artifact behind; and Kendrick wouldn't understand the casual relationship at all, or if he did he'd not believe it. He wouldn't see that eternal youth carries with it the price of death; he'd bring the book to Terra...and they wouldn't listen to Quantrell's theory either.

He allowed himself to visualize the result, as the sound of Kendrick's digging grew louder. Perhaps, several million years later, a pair of archaeologists from someplace out near the Magellan Cluster might come upon the third planet of a small yellow sun. They might wonder what had happened to bring about the disaster that had befallen this planet: vast mounds of skeletons, all over.

SUDDENLY, there came the sound of scrabbling from

QUANTRELL quivered with anguish and regret. He eased himself to a sitting position.

"How you doing?" Kendrick called.

"Won't mind seeing daylight again." He heard the sound of Kendrick's furious activity. Slowly, almost blind with pain, Quantrell began to drag himself across the room. It felt as if the jagged ends of the broken bone were gouging into his nerves. Clinging to the book grimly, he pulled himself ten feet, then fifteen. He was heading for the huge heap of bones at the far end of the room.

Then he was there, sprawled out full-length, the precious volume dangling limply from his hand. He shook his head sadly and gingerly shoved the book into the boneheap, trying not to disturb the dust in any way; this was one artifact he didn't want Kendrick to find.

When it was hidden, he started mournfully at the bones for a moment, and then started the long crawl back to the other end of the room. He wanted to be as far away from that book as possible when Kendrick got there.

There was the sound of a final blow; and then, just as Arthur Quantrell had composed himself in a position of repose, Kendrick appeared.

AS IF IN a dream, Quantrell watched Kendrick splint up his leg, lower him to the dolly like some incredibly ancient and fragile relic, and wheel him through the long nightmare corridor to the ship. He sensed upward motion, and knew he was going up in a sensed upward motion, and knew he was going up a hoist to the hatch, and then that he was snug in his acceleration cradle.

An indeterminate period of time passed, and then he realized Kendrick was looking down solicitously at him.

"We're on our way to Rigel," he said. "They'll have you as good as new in a few days."

"I didn't hear the blastoff."

"I know. You've been really out, for two days."

"I'm very tired."

Kendrick nodded. "It's rough to be old," he said. "Lord, it's criminal that a man like you should get old and brittle."

"Don't feel sorry for me," Quantrell said weakly.

"As soon as they get you together at Rigel, we'll shoot back here and find out just what happened to those people, yes?"

Quantrell smiled. "You'll have to do that on your own," he said. "They'll cashier me the minute they see me. I haven't had a physical for years, which is the only reason I've been able to hold down

and they'll know it in no time."

"Don't say that; it's not true."

"You don't have to spare my feelings. We don't last forever, you know."

He closed his eyes and allowed himself to wonder what it would be like had he brought the book back with him. To live the rest of his life untormented by his myriad aches, without the nagging consciousness that his body was rotting away piecemeal—

But it was foolish to think that way. The aches, the rotting, were all part of a teleo-

logical pattern. And the book was the random hypothesis that would upset the pattern. It would only turn Terra into another planetary bone-yard, given time.

He smiled faintly at the irony whereby the most worthwhile accomplishment of his archaeological career had been an act of deliberate vandalism—hiding an artifact. It was an odd way to finish.

"Sleeping?" asked Kendrick softly.

"Just dreaming," said Arthur Quantrell. He leaned back and closed his eyes and waited.