

**SUPER
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A NOVEL OF FORGOTTEN WORLDS

- THE BRAIN BEAST** William F. Temple 8
A single destroyer crouched in the minds of all men, drawing them ever closer to the web of the brain beast!

EIGHT STORIES OF TOMORROW

- THE HUNTED** John D. MacDonald 52
They are the best and most dangerous game in the solar system—these strange, vicious beasts called "Men"!
- THE WALL OF DARKNESS** Arthur C. Clarke 66
Only Shervane dared to learn the mind-shattering truth of that incredible barrier!
- DREADFUL DREAMER** Margaret St. Clair 80
The Mars cat gave you everything you desired, took nothing but one tiny thing you didn't want—and without which you couldn't live!
- SPACEMAN, BEWARE!** Stanley Mullen 85
Before Calloran died, he must make his body a blazing space beacon!
- CHANGELING** Ray Bradbury 98
Leonard—or the thing that had been Leonard— must be destroyed!
- THE SURVIVORS** Bryce Walton 104
Humanity was dead; nothing was left for Anders and his wife but the ritual of hatred—or the greater ritual of forgiveness!
- GRAVITY TRAP** Damon Knight 112
The message in the sky read, "No escape"!
- THE HAND FROM THE STARS** Kris Neville 116
He bore from the cosmic dark a lamp of knowledge—or death!

DEPARTMENTS AND FEATURES

- MISSIVES AND MISSILES** The Readers 123
- POPULAR FILMS** Ted Palmer 64
- LAWRENCE PORTFOLIO** 79
- THE SCIENCE FICTIONEER** . Conducted by Frederik Pohl 94
- FANDOM'S CORNER** Conducted by James V. Taurasi 121

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GRAVITY TRAP

By

Damon Knight

High above in the frosty air the stas were cold — a myriad prisons to which there was no escape from the one freedom that was Robertson's birthright — Death!

"I TELL you," said Dr. Asa Becker, "there's sentient life out there! Why not? Why is it so difficult to believe?" He snapped the pencil he had been worrying for

the last half-hour and dropped the pieces on his disorderly desk.

Robertson sighed with relief. That pencil had been getting on his nerves.

"Well," he said, "atmosphere? Temperature and pressure? Energy? How do you explain—"

The astronomer stamped his foot. His white hair waved like palm-fronds over his withered brown face. "How do you explain pudding!" he said. "What do you want me to do? Give them a scientific name and a complete ecological description? Very well: *Incola spatium*; habitat, the mountains beyond the Moon; diet, green cheese; habits, unmentionable. Now; are you satisfied?"

Robertson shook his head, unruffled. "No," he said, "You haven't told me yet how these creatures can exist in interplanetary space."

Becker looked at him with a kind of baffled fury.

"Were do they get energy?" pursued Robertson.

"Where does a geranium get energy? A schoolboy could tell you."

"From the sun," said Robertson, "plus water, plus carbon dioxide, plus nitrogen, plus several thousand mineral compounds—none of which are found in space."

Becker stood up and peered at him as if he were a biologist and Robertson a rather disgusting specimen. "You," he said, "are E. W. Robertson, Executive Director of the World Federation's space-flight project. You have so many degrees after your name that you might be worth more as soup than as a scientist. I will go further: you are worth more as soup. Your brain is soup!" He slammed his open palm down upon the desk.

His fingers encountered another pencil, and he began rolling it furiously back and forth.

"He mistakes his tribal customs for the laws of the universe," he quoted. "Listen to me. Get this into your head, if you have a head: This pebble we inhabit is not the cosmos. That is an important fact, Dr. Robertson. If you do not know that fact, you find yourself reasoning as follows: 'We in China subsist chiefly upon rice. Rice is not grown in foreign lands. Therefore there can be no life—not to call it life—anywhere but in China.'"

Robertson's smile was like a friendly dog's. "All right," he said. "I'll grant the possibility of indigenous life-forms in space. If you can show them to me, as you say, I'll even grant that they exist. But you'll still have to prove to me that they're dangerous to us."

Becker broke his second pencil.

"Dangerous to us," he repeated thoughtfully, rolling the sounds over his tongue. "Dangerous to us." He leaned over the desk. "Tell me, Dr. Robertson—give me the benefit of your opinion—is an elephant dangerous to an ant?"

Robertson smiled pleasantly and said nothing.

"Is a policeman dangerous to a lunatic?" cried Becker, springing up. "Is a jailer dangerous to a convict?"

"I don't understand you, doctor," said Robertson.

"No," snorted Becker, "of course not." He sat down with a thump, then leaned over the desk and pointed a bony forefinger like a pistol at Robertson's head. "Let me put the question more immediately. Not two weeks ago, your first moon ship, designed, built, manned and launched under your personal direction, vanished without a trace somewhere on the further side of the Moon. Do you call that dangerous?"

"Yes," said Robertson gravely. "I

would give anything to know what happened to that ship."

"I," said Becker, "have been trying to tell you for the last hour."

THERE was a taut silence, while the two men looked at each other across the littered desk.

Robertson was a man of fifty, with straight iron-gray hair and heavy, good-natured features. Becker was seventy-one, and his tall, reed-thin body looked almost impossibly fragile beside the other's squatness. Robertson had worked hard for his fame and won it; but he had come five hundred miles today, leaving urgent business behind him, because the summons came from Becker.

The old astronomer sighed finally, groped in his pocket, pulled out an ancient turnip watch. "The hundred-incher will be free in about ten minutes," he said, struggling to cram the watch back again. He missed the pocket twice, gave up and tossed the watch onto his desk.

"Come, Dr. Robertson. I am going to show you the dominant life-form in this solar system; and may you be damned if you refuse to believe what you see."

He stalked out the door, leaving Robertson barely time to pluck his topcoat from the rack, and clattered down the stairs. Following him, Robertson emerged into a pale violet twilight, in which the great starlit dome of the observatory, across the quadrangle, loomed like some fantastic fungus.

The sun had set, leaving only a violet glow over a quarter of the sky, and the observatory buildings stood out blackly, bright-edged, against it. High above in the frosty air, the stars were cold.

By half-running, Robertson caught

up with the astronomer's tall figure at the farther door. They went up another flight of stairs together, and strode out into the vast, dimly lit observatory floor. Above them in the echoing vault, the spidery framework of the telescope showed as intenser black against black.

The old man called up to someone above, and in a moment a dark-haired, spectacled young man wearing what appeared to be three sweaters, one over the other, clambered down and grinned cheerfully at them. "All yours," he said. "Pretty good seeing, but it'll be better in a hour." He nodded and walked off into the dimness.

Becker climbed the ladder, Robertson following, and seated himself before the eyepiece. Robertson crouched uncomfortably beside him, holding his topcoat together at the throat, while the astronomer clipped a bulky filter over the eyepiece and made endless adjustments. Down below, a motor hummed gently as the long tube swung slowly back and forth; up and down. . . .

Becker straightened at last and peered at Robertson with an odd grin.

"All right," he said, and stood up.

Robertson slid into his place and put his eye to the lens.

At first he saw nothing but a blaze of stars, scattered like sparks on purple velvet. For a moment he imagined himself in the lost Moon ship that he had helped launch into those deeps, and he felt cold and alone.

"You're seeing in the high ultra-violet," said Becker in his ear. "It's never been done before. These cubs here don't know anything about it. Well, do you see it?"

Robertson did not reply. He was staring, transfixed, as — something — melted into view across the star-field. Spaced widely in the field were a red

disc and a red star that he recognized even in their unfamiliar tints: Mars and Betelgeuse. Between them, glowing transparently across all the myriad stars that lay between, was a violet shape that his mind rejected even as he saw. It was no shape that he had ever known before, but it was indisputably alive.

Around it were smaller shapes, each as unfamiliar as the first, each bearing so plainly the stamp of function, that for a wild instant he thought that he was looking at an elderly butterfly-hunter surrounded by his gear.

As he watched, it moved.

BECKER caught him at the edge of the platform and held him till he could think again. "I've just saved your life, Dr. Robertson," said the old man gravely. "That will cost you a quarter."

Robertson had all he could do, on the way down, to concentrate on putting his feet on the rungs. On the stairs, he had recovered himself sufficiently to ask, "How did you stand it, the first time?"

"I am an old man," said Becker, precisely. "Perhaps you had not heard that I was in the hospital for two weeks last month?"

They emerged onto the silent quadrangle and started across it in silence. Halfway across, Robertson glanced up and saw the fading violet glow in the sky.

He shuddered.

BECKER sat down behind his desk and folded his hands under his thin chest. "You have now seen an unquestionable reality," he said, "and in consequence, you will begin to ask silly questions." He folded his hands.

Robertson looked at him soberly.

"I'll believe anything you say," he said, and meant it. "But there are some things about this . . . I must ask you—"

The lingering shapes faded momentarily and his doubt came back. "If they're all that you say," he asked, "why is it that they never come to Earth?"

"Silly question number one," remarked Becker. "I shall give you two silly answers to it. The first is Socratic: why don't we, and why won't we, ever go to Jupiter? The second is pragmatic: How do you know they don't?"

He produced another pencil from the litter on his desk and shook it at Robertson. "Neither answer means anything," he said fiercely. "What does mean something is this: It is a doubtful assumption that gravity bothers them. It is a fact that it bothers us.

"Lord!" he shouted, rising abruptly, "what a pack of idiots I have to deal with! If I say 'one G' to you, it means only a constant that you use in your calculations. You understand gravity on Jupiter, because you've been in an airplane. But you've never been in space, and so you don't understand gravity on Earth. Will you understand," he cried, shaking his pencil under Robertson's nose, "that you have lived all your life under a gravitational pull that would flatten you like a jellyfish if you weren't built of microscopic cells?"

"Will you realize, man, that gravity has bent your back, worn out your muscles, and made the day of your death as certain as the falling of your arches? Will you ever understand anything, if you don't understand that?"

He sat down, trembling, as suddenly as he had arisen. "And has it ever

(Continued on page 130)

SUPER SCIENCE STORIES

(Continued from page 115)

occurred to you," he said, "that gravitation is an extraordinary phenomenon in the universe?"

Robertson, stunned, began to get an inkling of the other's intent. "Do you seriously mean to say—" he began incredulously.

"I mean," thundered Becker, "that the doctrine of the Fall of Man is true! I mean that you are a convict—a convict in a prison whose walls and bars are gravity. I mean that the fourteen men who sailed in that Moort rocket were silly jail-breakers who thought their jail was the Universe—and who were duly apprehended for their crime!"

Robertson put his face in his hands. "All jails?" he muttered; "all the stars in the sky. . . ."

He looked up when he heard a gasp from Becker. The old man was shaking, writhing in his chair, his eyes staring crazily at nothing. Then his body jerked; his hand went to his heart and fell limply away again. His head lolled.

Robertson felt it then: a movement, too vast to be felt directly, that shuddered, not in his bones, but in the very molecules of his flesh. Something came ponderously into the room from distance inconceivable and stopped before him. He felt himself looked at.

Face distorted, he flung himself away. He tripped, and gravity felled him.

Half lying on the floor, half against the wall, he stared at the naked air before him, and in one brief instant thought he saw: a point, hollow within, widening away from him in impossibly huge perspective.

He squeaked once, like a guinea pig, as the needle took him.