

# Fantasy and Science Fiction

OCTOBER *Including Venture Science Fiction*

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Cover by Chesley Bonestell  
(Unloading empty fuel tanks on the moon)

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*Katherine MacLean is one of the very few "names" in science fiction who has never before appeared in F&SF. It is pleasant to repair that omission, and particularly so with this neat tale of poise, and counterpoise.*

## INTERBALANCE

*by Katherine MacLean*

**THE BAREFOOT GIRL STOOD** staring at the house. Behind her was the property wall, nine feet high and painted bright blue; the gate was a good distance away. She should not have come in. She was trespassing on private property. The day before she had stood closer to the gate, and the day before that she had stood in the archway of the entrance. Right behind where she stood this day there was a cluster of palm scrub, but she did not hide; instead she stood in the open, conspicuously and defiantly staring at the house.

From the house, viewed through the sights of a rifle by old dim eyes, she was a small wavering figure.

The old man looking through the rifle sights muttered angrily and pulled the rifle back. He began to range through the house looking for a window from which he could see the girl clearly enough for a good shot.

There was more going on in the big house. Unseen by the old man, a tall boy went out onto the steps of the house and waved at the girl urgently signalling her to come closer.

She saw the boy, but she did not see the old man. Hesitantly, she moved a few yards closer to the house, and then stopped, digging her toes into the alien softness of the close-cropped green lawn. Outside the wall there was no grass, only sand and bushes, ocean and jungle, and palm-thatched brick houses on stone streets that ran slanting into the mountains. The house she stared at was different in many ways. Its owner wore a full suit of clothes and would speak only English; he came out from behind his wall only once a month to buy provisions and arrange for workers for his property. He was considered to be insane, and when three people disappeared in one year

there were horrible rumors about what he had done to them. However he also had the only machine gun on their side of the topless mountains, and so the villagers were polite and obliging to him, and shrugged. Even if the rumors were true, why worry? The old man would die of old age soon.

The girl remembered all this. The rumors were probably lies. Many lies were made up to be frightening and amuse a dull evening in the rainy season. She believed that they were lies, but she felt danger and glanced quickly from side to side and behind her, feeling as she might if there were a jaguar near.

The boy gestured again for her to come closer, but she shook her head and waited. Presently he grew tired of gesturing and came across the lawn to her. He was a tall gangling boy, big for fifteen, with a white shirt with long sleeves, and trousers and shoes, pale complexion and brown combed hair—altogether an antique and strange appearance, like that of the North Americans before the Radiation.

“What are you doing here?” he demanded as soon as he came close. “My father is very angry because you were here yesterday.” The boy looked quickly over his shoulder at the house, a glance more of nervousness than observation. “I think he is asleep. He

won't see us from the windows if we talk on the porch.”

“No,” she said firmly. “No closer.” She spoke English, and he was surprised. The palm trees bent over the brick wall around his world, and the thunder of the surf was always close, and it was nothing like the pictures of the lands where English was spoken.

They glanced at the house apprehensively. The heavy brick front of the big building had recessed windows, glassless and half-shuttered with pools of shadow within; the darkness of the shaded interior of the house looked out like the black pupil of an eye. They looked away with a deep breath, and he looked at the girl. She was also only fourteen or fifteen, small, brown and pretty, dressed in a blue and green cloth that covered one breast and left the other bare. Her skin was brown and smooth and clean, and her hair was black and her eyes blue.

“Why are you here?” he demanded.

She looked at his eyes and then looked at his shirt with obvious wonderment. “Why do you stay inside your wall? We are going on a party to the jungle tonight. We bring bread and cheese. Have fun.” Her high-pitched young voice was plaintive. “Many years now I see you in the windows of your house and behind the wall. My name is Narine.

You are a man now. You can come out."

"My father doesn't want me to associate with villagers," the boy explained.

The old man in the house tried to get a clear shot at the girl. She was closer now, and made a larger target, but her blue and green dress blended too well with the blue and green of the wall and bushes behind her. His eyes watered and his hand wavered and he found his sights crossing the white shirt of his son, who for some reason was talking to the trespasser.

The hunter muttered curses against old age and radiation, and remembered that the cellar had windows. The cellar windows, at grass level, would silhouette them both sharply against the bright sky, and make them visible even to a man half blind. He hurried for the stairs.

"You are a man now," the girl said. "He will die soon: old men always die. God will protect you. Come to the picnic, we will have fun, we will dig, and we will go far out."

The boy looked down at her from a superior height. "I can't waste my time playing or going on picnics. I am being educated."

She made her eyes round, waiting to understand what he meant, and looked admiringly at his grey eyes and intelligent expression.

The boy's slender shoulders

straightened as he explained and he seemed to grow taller. "My father is educating me against the Tide of Advancing Savagery. He is teaching me to be Civilized and Carry on Progress." It was obviously a quotation in someone else's tone of voice; he stood proudly and touched the breast of his white shirt as if it were a badge.

She nodded admiringly, but was still puzzled. "How does he do this, Man?"

The boy had not heard this expression, Man, before in English, but it seemed to be a compliment. He raised his chin and looked more authoritative. "My father teaches me things like mathematics, advanced mathematics. He is a fine teacher. His father was a Ph.D. and a teacher in the States. He says that they don't teach civilization any more, anywhere."

He looked at the palm trees leaning over the blue-painted wall, and listened to the distant rumble of the surf, and remembered that he had never spoken to anyone outside except the foremen of the work gangs that picked his father's fields. The girl seemed to be educated, although she spoke a strange English. He looked at the girl, her smooth brown skin, her blue eyes, and the dress that covered only one breast, and he grew confused. "Do they—I mean, is civilization . . ."

"Civilization?" The pretty

brown girl was still uncertain about the question. "I don't dig . . . I mean, we don't force anyone to learn! An answer without a question means nothing. Karma is that you want to learn as much as you deserve to know. There is a man in Yelopo, five miles away, who likes numbers. He plays with number theories, and puzzles all the time. When someone here in Puerto needs a problem solved, they measure with a string and make drawings and take the string and the drawings to him. He solves it and they pay him in hens and pigs." She smiled. "See, we need only one man to do mathematics, and we have only one man. The good god of Interbalance takes care of it for us."

He was insulted. "One mathematician—that's not civilization!" He lifted his eyes to the mountains behind the village. They towered into the sky, nobly high, like ideals.

"My fathers both paint pictures," she said in her high pitched, apologetic worried voice as he stared angrily away from her. "They also fish and pick papaya, of course. The pictures are very strange, but not as strange as my grandfather's pictures. Everyone should do what his spirit calls him to do. If my little brothers wanted to study mathematics I would look through the empty houses and find books for them."

The mountains he stared at, al-

though lofty, were covered with jungle, and in the distance a tiny figure, leading a burro, wended slowly up a mountain trail. The girl talked as if she were being tolerant, allowing him to study. It was all wrong and unlike the right principles, and he grew more angry.

She touched his sleeve timidly with a single finger. "If you *like* to study . . ."

"No!" he snapped, still not looking at her. The burro and the villager on the mountain trail moved upward slowly, looking almost like ants. "I don't like mathematics at all. I don't like studying. I do it anyhow. Father says doing what you don't like hardens you and gives you discipline." He looked at her contemptuously. "Father is right. You're all a bunch of degenerating savages!"

The brown girl in the blue dress raised a small fist to hit him, and instead stamped her feet, squealing with rage. "I am not degenerate! My name is Narline Robinson. My Father Robinson, good family. My mothers, Lopez, Rothberg, and Sumpello. We are the best family—thirteen children not monsters, born handsome and six still alive, healthy, almost adults. Two of my mothers still alive and young. I am the oldest child. I will make grandparents of them and they will be proud."

She stopped for breath and looked suspiciously at his clothing

as if wondering suddenly what they covered. "You, you only-son. Are you a monster?"

"No," he almost shouted. His shirt blazed white in the sunlight and he looked at the exit arch in the wall, confusedly thinking of escape from the talking. "I'm fine. Radiation hasn't done a thing to me. Father says he was always careful to stay indoors. And he keeps me in, too. I can't go on a picnic. Go away—he might see you!"

Suddenly she had stopped being angry. She was smiling, looking at him warmly. "Come with me on a picnic." She reached out daringly and tugged at his hand. "Look how close the gate is. We can go by ourselves. We can play and help humanity. We can talk and dig each other and build counterpoint."

The boy did not understand the last remarks, but he understood temptation. He glanced at the exit gate, feeling her hand in his, and dropped her hand, growing pale.

"Are you afraid of him?" she asked, lowering her voice.

"He wouldn't do anything to me," the boy said without certainty. "I'm his son."

The old man propped open a cellar window and discovered that it was as he had thought—the conversationalists made two perfect black outlines against the blue sky. He aimed at the smaller silhouette.

"The village people are afraid of him too," she said in a low voice. "Does he really catch people and pull them to bits in a dungeon?"

"I don't know." From talking in the sun, his pale skin was getting an unaccustomed flush, but he paled again. "My father doesn't tell me anything. He just educates me."

She shrugged. "They hear screaming."

"Maybe. Or maybe it's him screaming. He gets very angry sometimes in his radiation laboratory."

*"Radiation laboratory . . ."*

She made the sign to ward off evil and sank to the lawn; she succeeded in being graceful and did not faint, but her knees had bent under her involuntarily. This was the most forbidden of evil things, held in horror by the entire human race, and here she was only fifty feet from a house containing it.

The old man in the basement took his finger from the trigger and cursed as the smaller silhouette sank down out of sight of his ground-level eye. He rushed for the stairs.

"No no, you misunderstand," the boy said, bending over her urgently. "It's a secret. I should not have told. I didn't intend to mention it. But he's not making more radiation. He is trying to make people immune to radiation. To save the race."

"Oh," she said forgivingly, looking up at him, and she managed a weak giggle. "But Man, we already know what to do to save the race. Breed. There aren't enough people. Lots of empty houses. Most babies damaged by the radiation, they don't live long enough to be born even, or not much after that. We all help. We try to make lots of babies. Breed and use no medicine." She giggled again, and leaned in a comfortable lounging position on the lawn, looking reminiscent. "It is not easy to make babies. But it is fun trying. It is good for the race."

She smiled at him while he blushed. "Why don't you come on a picnic. Tonight there is five. Very far out. Very interbalanced. Very new for you I guess, but Pang Ho."

A dim voice from the direction of the house hissed, "Hussy!"

She had been heard.

The boy moved between her and the house. "Get up," he whispered, bending over her. "Walk toward the gate. I'll walk right behind you, between you and the house, so he can't see you."

"Is he awake?" Her eyes rounded until they were as large as rabbits' eyes, and suddenly in them was the delayed fear of being pulled apart in a mysterious dungeon. Fear grew into panic, and she whimpered in a tiny strangled sound.

"It will be all right," he said, bending over her. "Get up carefully."

Slowly the pair straightened and they began walking away from the house with his body between her and the house, and the eye of the rifle.

"Hussy!" hissed the old man, and dashed across the great wide shadowed mahogany floor past rows of shuttered windows. He was a lean old man, leanly fitted in a dacron grey suit that hung on him as if it had been originally fitted for someone younger with a thicker chest. The suit was one of the silkily perfect suits put out by the States just before the big confusion and the radiation came all over the world.

He went out of the half-opened front door and down the stairs and across the lawn in a tiptoeing run.

The couple was moving toward the gate single file over the grass.

His son was saying, "I won't be able to go with you on this picnic, girl. When is the next one?"

"STOP!" the old man bellowed, more to stop what was being said than to stop their motion toward the gate.

They turned and he stood with his feet braced and the rifle pointing at them both. He was a magnificent old man, incredibly old, with white hair, a lean, lined face and old eyes, and bony withered hands holding the gun almost

without tremor. One accumulated radiation sickness slowly and evenly from the air with the years, and it was impossible to find any difference between radiation sickness and age, so the villagers had given up having two names for the same thing. He was forty, and he was old, very old. Very few men lived past their forties, but this man fought the advance of age with inflexible determination and personal resentment, as if it were an enemy.

Outrage held him upright and alert.

"Leo, where are you going with that girl?"

"Just as far as the gate, Father."

"Stand away from her. I'm going to make her an example to trespassers. I'll teach these degenerates to stay away."

"She's not doing any harm, Father."

The fierce old man snorted, almost a laugh. "I heard her. She's a degenerate, a savage. And she wants you to become one too. She is against morality and discipline. She believes in having fun when The Situation Is Desperate. When the Future Is at Stake. When the Issue Is Serious. My father knew how to deal with types like this. My father shot a beatnik in front of me, and I can shoot a degener-

ate." His voice rang with savage satisfaction.

"But Man," his son said, remembering the flattering and pleasant word the girl had used to him. "She's a good girl. Don't be childish, Man." Nervously he hoped that the word would remind his father that a man had the duty to be moderate and keep good judgment.

His father's complexion turned a shade of light violet, and his rifle muzzle began to wander back and forth vaguely.

"What was that you said, Leo?" he asked in a strange small voice.

It seemed to be changing his attitude. It was worth repeating.

"I said," his son repeated firmly, "don't be childish, Man."

His father's complexion darkened to purple and his eyeballs turned red. "*They're closing in!*" he shrieked in a loud voice. "*Aarwk!*" He fell over backward and the rifle discharged and blew a hole in a leaf of a palm tree. Everything became very quiet and there was only the distant rumble of the surf, and the squawk of a tropical bird.

"See," said the girl, after a pause to see if anything else would happen. "I told you not to worry. God takes care of everything. There is Interbalance."

