

KEEPER OF THE DREAM

Charles Beaumont

Across the high white towers of the city, the moon sprinkled a fine dust of light. It fell over the tiered streets and tiny alleys and left no shadows, reflected and reflected again by a million hidden eyes.

Hunicutt stared for a time up the dizzy feet, through the invisible filigree of glass which guarded the people. He stared at the moon. Then he gathered his jacket about his shoulders, took out a cigarette and, hesitating no longer, stepped upon the empty moving walkway.

The houses he glided past were dark. They sat aseptically in their geometric arrangements, dark and, but for the low hum of deep machines, silent. Hunicutt looked at his watch; it was late, very late. He must hurry. O'Hanion would be retiring soon.

The humming sound reminded Hunicutt of the noise his small son had made at cutting his finger on a history tape. Donny—what would Donny think of all this? If the lad knew, suddenly, in an instant, what his father knew now and had suspected for years. . . .

The belt slowed at an intersection. Hunicutt replaced his cigarette, looked about a final time at the slumbering city and began to walk past rows of identical buildings. He stopped at one of these, put his thumb to the alarm, waited. The lift carried him to the topmost level of the unit.

A small man with fat pale cheeks was standing in the hallway. The man looked neither pleased nor displeased; he smiled at Hunicutt in this way.

"Professor O'Hanion—I'm sorry. I didn't realize it was so late."

The small man smiled again, shrugged, walked into the large room from which he had come. Hunicutt followed, trying to guess, to make sure merely from the walk, the eyes, the way the drinks were prepared.

"Well, Jim," the older man said, groaning slightly as he seated himself. He made no effort to conceal a violent yawn. "You should be home and asleep, you know. It won't do for you to be anything but alert tomorrow."

Hunicutt felt the steadiness of the eyes. He clutched his glass and tried to think of words that would not sound foolish.

"Here now, what is it?" asked O'Hanion, "I must be sleeping myself soon; we've no time to waste. Hard work today, exhausting work."

"I realize that," Hunicutt said, "and—I'm sorry. But it's about the work that I came to speak to you."

"Yes?"

The small eyes developed a sparkle in the room's new light, a patronizing life of their own. Always before, Hunicutt had been able to forgive this; now, tonight, it made him angry. He looked up and caught the half-smile disappearing.

"Professor, listen to me. I've worked with you for almost four years now. As first assistant, I feel I've done a decent job—"

"My right arm, Jim."

"And in all this time I've never said a word about the fact you've chosen not to give me the results of your studies. I didn't much like that, but there weren't any complaints."

"Quite right. You understood the strict rules of secrecy under which I was to conduct my work—in accordance with the Chancellor's most urgent command." O'Hanion smiled and tented his fingers.

"You wouldn't even tell me the basic nature of the studies—I was like a robot at an assembly line: fitting bolts to something, something, never quite sure what, never daring to ask."

The small man tipped his head, lifted the cold-beaded glass and shrugged discreetly.

Hunicutt lowered his voice and spoke his words with emphatic precision. "But I wasn't a robot, Professor. As a human I started to ask questions—oh, no, not of you; of myself."

"Did you, Jim?"

"Yes. And I started getting answers."

O'Hanion's smile thinned for a moment. "What sort of answers?"

"Frightening ones, Professor. The kind that keep you awake nights."

"Shall we get to the point now?" O'Hanion said, "Assuming there is one—or have you come merely to discuss your insomnia?"

"Despite everything," Hunicutt said, "the secrecy, the piecemeal work, your own elaborate efforts to throw me off—I think I know what we've been doing."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, and I think I know our work is finished now."

The small man studied Hunicutt's face. He rose from his chair and went back to the bar. "Is that all?" he asked.

"No. I also know the results."

O'Hanion refilled the glasses, not nervously, but intensely. He sighed. "Then I suppose, Jim, we'll have to have a talk now."

Suddenly, and for a reason he didn't entirely understand, Hunicutt relaxed. His muscles ached as they eased out of the tension.

"First, of course," O'Hanion said, "I must inquire what it is you think you've found out."

"That the tests have all been negative—all of them. That the samples not only assured it but told specifically why. That there is no longer any reasonable doubt on the question."

The small man drained his glass. "Quite right," he said at last. "Quite right."

Hunicutt walked over to the organ, trailed his fingers once across the keys, watched the lush colors dance over the sound-screen. "No wonder you took such pains. . . ." He laughed shortly as the fears came true. He closed his eyes. "*Negative.*"

The professor, who was beginning to look older, extended his hands in a gesture of hopelessness. His voice was dispassionate. "A pity your rest had to be disturbed, Jim. If you'd waited a few more hours, these melodramatics would have been unnecessary."

Hunicutt opened his eyes.

"That is to say, the results will be released tomorrow," he

went on, "and that will be the end of that. Unhappy news, I grant."

"You intend to turn this report over to the Chancellor?"

"Of course."

Hunicutt rose abruptly and walked to the large french window at the end of the room. He stood there quietly for a while. Then he turned. "Come over here, Professor, will you?"

Professor O'Hanion moved to the window and looked curiously at the thin young man beside him. Hunicutt gazed over the city.

"They're asleep," Hunicutt said. "All of them. And do you know what they're doing? They're dreaming. The same as they did yesterday and every other day and every other night. You understand this."

The room, which was now darkened, made the small old man's eyes coruscate; his cheeks seemed fatter, paler.

"Look out there and listen to me," Hunicutt continued. "The people—"

O'Hanion moved to turn on the lights, but Hunicutt caught his arm firmly. For a tense moment the two men stared down at the quiet clean columnades of steel and crystal.

"The trouble is," said Hunicutt, "we don't understand irony any more. Or even appreciate it. Don't look so smug and imperious, O'Hanion—I'm talking about you, too. Look: here we are, grand products of the twenty-second century, snug and warm and closer to Nirvana than anybody even came near to thinking just a short hundred and fifty years ago. No disease now, no wars, no ugliness; no suffering and starving millions, Professor. Everybody beautiful these glorious days, well fed, well cared for—just about perfect!"

"Jim, I admire your patriotic grasp of world conditions. However—"

Hunicutt's words came faster, easier—he stopped worrying about sounding foolish. "But I haven't come to the irony yet. It's this. Nobody—no really intelligent thinking person, anyway—thought for a second that the human race would ever achieve what we have achieved. *But*—one thing, one single item of progress was taken utterly for granted by all of them. You've got three guesses."

"Now, my boy, I can understand your—"

"Rocket travel! They didn't doubt it for an instant—not for an instant. Thought of it in terms of 'another twenty years

or so.' They figured that by 2100 every planet would be colonized and half a dozen more new ones discovered. Now confess, any true connoisseur of irony would find this hilarious! It's the one thing we never got!" Hunicutt laughed in a peculiar voice unused to laughing. "So now," he went on, "it's become what? The one thing that's kept us alive. Have you forgotten the most basic law of nature? Life is based on want; in the absence of want life cannot persist. Remember? What do you think has sustained us?"

O'Hanion clucked nervously. "May I recall something to *your* mind, Jim? We happen to be scientists. As such it's our duty to study truth—absolute truth."

"Oh yes, of course. We're that special breed, fearless, emotionless, heartless, workers with the single purpose."

"The proper study for science is—"

"Man! That's part of what's wrong, Professor. Science in its search for your 'absolute truth' has divorced itself from man and become a two-headed fanatic, blind in all its eyes. What good is truth if it is of no benefit to humanity?"

"It's too late, my boy, for a philosophical discussion."

"Too late—for a lot of things. You, O'Hanion, look at you: the Grand Inquisitor. All in one camp, isolated. And you can't realize that actually the same thing has worked for you—it's kept you alive, too."

The small man fingered the ruff of his sleeping robe. "This is gibberish. *What* has kept me alive?"

"The Dream, you fool! How can I tell you?—Here, I'll do it logically, with plates, illustrated slides, so your scientist's logic can grasp it." Hunicutt held the older man's arm tightly. "We are apes in a zoo, O'Hanion. Like the apes, we have Utopia, and we are about to perish because of it. We have been given everything: desires all fulfilled, slowly, subtly, until the whole world is engulfed by satisfaction. With the exception of a pitiful few, work has disappeared for everyone. We vegetate. Look—I have a little boy. Did you know that? His name is Donny. He's fat and flabby and healthy. Do you know what he does all day? He plays rocket-man. He goes to the moon, up beyond the moon into the stars and beyond the stars. And when he's tired of the stars, then he goes even further. He never stops, he never thinks of another thing spontaneously, because he has almost two hundred more years to go. But he is logical, Donny is: it was injected into him like a

vaccine, as it was with everybody else. Once he's told, he'll believe. Tell me this—what will happen to him then?"

Hunicutt stared at O'Hanion evenly, levelly; his voice rasped harshly.

"What will happen, Professor, when you tell the world that it must stop dreaming, that there will never be any trips to the stars? That forever we must rot in our garden, and there is no escape . . ."

"You're being childish," O'Hanion said. "What will they do? They'll adjust."

"Adjust!"

"Yes! As we've always done. As we did when logic and truth finally forced us to give up that other dream—if you insist on using the word. What did the theologians prate? Without God we will surely perish. We lost God; we didn't perish. We adjusted and were better for it."

"Giving up faith is easier than giving up a dream, Professor."

"Nonsense. I'll simply explain that all doubt has been removed, that we have explored and re-explored carefully every possible avenue. The reason no life exists on any other planet, I will tell them, is because it is impossible for it to do so. By a freak arrangement, Earth happens to be the only inhabited planet, from the beginning of time: that is all. I'll show them the proof—the pictures, the simplified papers, the samples. A child will be able to understand when I explain that these minerals contain, as they have always contained, poisons which forbid animal or vegetable contact however foreign the body chemistry. The facts are irrefutable. When the people finally accept, they will recondition their thinking."

Hunicutt found himself wincing at the words, feeling them like strong blows. He was talked out now, he could bring no more arguments or thoughts. He released O'Hanion's arm.

"I'm—sorry, Professor. Maybe I am talking nonsense. I don't know. I only know I've lived—I, Jim Hunicutt, scientist—because of one thing. One thing only. And now it's been taken away from me."

Hunicutt slumped into a chair; he did not notice the small old man who had not left the window. There was an odd expression in O'Hanion's face.

"We'll simply adjust," O'Hanion said, softly. He turned. "See here, Jim—don't blame me. I didn't make it this way."

"I know. I know."

"I was given a job to do. I did it. And now—" His voice trailed off, full of soft surprise, "—now it's—over."

Hunicutt nodded. He threw his head back.

"Jim, what's to keep us from flying to the stars anyway? We could go through space, we wouldn't have to land—"

"We're a logical people," Hunicutt said. "Pointless experience—no. You've proven that every extra-terrestrial body is impossible. You did your work well."

"Yes—" O'Hanion stood erect, his eyes shaded at the glass.

"So." Hunicutt weaved across the room. "Tell me this. What are we going to do from now on? I mean you and me—and don't say *adjust*. I'm sick of the word."

"I hadn't really thought about it."

"Your job is finished. Are there any more problems for science, important ones, big ones? After the news is out, what will O'Hanion do with his keen mind? Eat and sleep and—what else?"

"Be still!"

"Nights and days," Hunicutt almost chanted. "Dreaming of the cold stuff we've been studying. Of Mars and Venus and the moon and—Each one of them, each one of us, the first to land, the first to discover and start again to build with the materials of the new worlds. Plans for vast cities in the sands of Mars—villages springing up on every asteroid—not a star in the heavens that hasn't been touched by one of them out there!"

Professor O'Hanion snapped on the light. The window went black.

Hunicutt laughed. "You know what? We're extinct now, Professor, we scientists. No more problems unsolved—no more scientists. Maybe they'll mount one of us in plastic!"

The cheeks of the small man burned red; his fists were clenched. "What would you have me do? Shirk my job and my duty, turn from command, lie to them? Whether they survive or not—it isn't my concern. My concern is only to expose them to truth."

"Who's talking about *them*, you fool? What about you and me? We're in it, too, remember!" Hunicutt wanted desperately to cry or scream.

The small man looked pathetic. "But we already know."

Hunicutt felt the anger drain from him again. It left a hole. "Yes—I was forgetting. We already know. . . ."

O'Hanion shaded his eyes at the window; he paced, a slow tired circle, paced for many minutes. Then he paused. As he stood there, a look of caution, almost of cunning, came into his face. "The possibility of error in the calculations is not ruled out, Jim," he said.

Hunicutt faced him, challenging him. He said nothing.

"The Duquesne tests. You'll recall our application of the tests? Yes? Well, I've long suspected three proofs of being fallacious—and all our calculations derive from them!"

Hunicutt watched the small man wheel around and hurry off, flinging doors wide. He followed and found O'Hanion in the laboratory workshop, pulling papers from a giant wall receptacle.

"Could this not have been disastrous?" he was saying. "I think so. Thanks to you. Oh, I know the Chancellor will be furious—but I can explain. In the end, he'll understand."

The old man flipped through pages, made notes in pencil, ran grizzled fingers down tables of equations.

"What will he understand?" Hunicutt demanded finally.

O'Hanion turned and faced him, his features inscrutable. "That our work is lost—irretrievably."

Hunicutt met the old man's eyes, now lustrous and deep.

"So you can see, however dispiriting the fact," O'Hanion continued, "we must begin again. From the beginning. We couldn't possibly release information based on tests which are demonstrably in error."

"No, of course not," said Hunicutt, masking his eyes. He longed to ask: What error? Where does our flaw lie? What have we done wrong? But he did not.

"Help me, Jim. These notes are of no use to us now."

Together they went out through the corridors, past the robots, into the main laboratory. Together they carried the years of heavy work to the incinerator and fed the white flames—the bound and unbound sheaves of papers, the charts, the graphs, the proofs—everything. Soon nothing was left but their tools and the premises for a new beginning.

Professor O'Hanion turned to Hunicutt.

"Goodnight, my boy," he said softly. "Get a good night's rest. We've a lot of work ahead of us."