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Editor

Volume 2

January, 1952

Number 5

★ ★ *Feature Novel* ★ ★



QUEST OF THE QUEEN Ross Linden 8

Chris Lane follows a hunch his reason tells him to be romantic nonsense into a startling biological discovery, and an amazing interplanetary quest—the quest of Myrna!

An Unusual Novelet

THEY WILL DESTROY Bryce Walton 42

Incredibly returned from Andromeda, Conrad and Kaye find Earth ruled by the strange scientific mysticism of the followers of Shiva—The Destroyers.

Short Subjects

FALSE PROPHETS SHALL RISE (Article) L. Sprague de Camp 69

NOT QUITE HUMAN Emil Petaja 71

Dorcas' discovery can insure any man's love forever...

THE AWAKENING Arthur C. Clarke 83

Marlan wants to learn one more thing before he dies...

Departments

TODAY AND TOMORROW 68 **DOWN TO EARTH** 86

FROM THE BOOKSHELF 82 **READERS' PREFERENCE PAGE** 98

Cover by Milton Luros (see page 68)

Interior Illustrations by Finlay, Kiemle, Luros, and Poulton

FUTURE SCIENCE FICTION STORIES, January, 1952, published bi-monthly by COLUMBIA PUBLICATIONS, INC., 1 Appleton Street, Holyoke, Mass. Editorial and executive offices at 241 Church Street, New York 13, New York. Entered as second class matter at the Post Office at Holyoke, Mass., under the act of March 3, 1879. Entire contents copyrighted 1952 by Columbia Publications, Inc. 20¢ per copy; yearly subscription \$1.20. When submitting manuscripts, enclose stamped, self-addressed envelope for their return, if found unavailable. The publishers will exercise care in the handling of unsolicited manuscripts, but assume no responsibility for their return. Printed in the U. S. A.



the AWAKENING

by
ARTHUR C. CLARKE

Marlan's quest was a strange one,
and he knew he would not long
survive its fulfillment.

MARLAN was bored, with the ultimate boredom that only Utopia can supply. He stood before the great window and stared down at the scudding clouds, driven by the gale that was racing past the foothills of the city. Sometimes, through a rent in the billowing white blanket, he could catch a glimpse of lakes and forests and the winding ribbon of the river that flowed through the empty land he now so seldom troubled to visit. Twenty miles away to the west, rainbow-hued in the sunlight, the upper peaks of the artificial mountain that was City Nine floated above the clouds, a dream island adrift in the cold wastes of the stratosphere. Marlan wondered how many of its inhabitants were staring listlessly across at him, equally dissatisfied with life. There was, of course, one way of escape, and many had chosen it. But that was so obvious, and Marlan avoided the obvious above all things. Besides, while there was still a chance that life might yet hold some new experience, he would not pass through the door that led to oblivion.

Out of the mists that lay beneath him, something bright and flaming burst through the clouds and dwindled swiftly towards the deep blue of the zenith. With lack-lustre eyes, Marlan watched the ascending ship: once—how long ago!—the sight would have lifted his heart: once he too had

gone on such journeys, following the road along which Man had found his greatest adventures. But now on the twelve planets and the fifty moons there was nothing one could not find on Earth. Perhaps, if only the stars could have been reached, humanity might have avoided the cul-de-sac in which it was now trapped: there would still have remained endless vistas of exploration and discovery. But the spirit of mankind had quailed before the awful immensities of interstellar space. Man had reached the planets while he was still young, but the stars had remained forever beyond his grasp.

And yet—Marlan stiffened at the thought and stared along the twisting vapour-trail that marked the path of the departed ship—if Space had defeated him, there was still another conquest to be attempted. For a long time he stood in silent thought, while, far beneath, the storm's ragged hem slowly unveiled the buttresses and ramparts of the city, and below those, the forgotten fields and forests which had once been Man's only home.

The idea appealed to Sandrak's scientific ingenuity: it presented him with interesting technical problems which would keep him occupied for a year or two. That would give Marlan ample time to wind up his affairs—or, if necessary, to change his mind.

If Marlan felt any last-minute hesitations, he was too proud to show it

When all else is boredom, some men
will still want to know...

as he said good-bye to his friends. They had watched his plans with morbid curiosity, convinced that he was indulging in some unusually elaborate form of euthanasia. As the door of the little spaceship closed behind Marlan, they walked slowly away to resume the pattern of their aimless lives: and Roweena wept, but not for long.

While Marlan made his final preparations, the ship climbed on its automatic course, gaining speed until the Earth was a silver crescent, then a fading star lost against the greater glory of the sun. Rising upwards from the plane in which the planets move, the ship drove steadfastly towards the stars until the sun itself had become no more than a blazing point of light. Then Marlan checked his outward speed, swinging the ship round into an orbit that made it the outermost of all the sun's children. Nothing would ever disturb it here: it would circle the sun for eternity, unless by some inconceivable chance it was captured by a wandering comet.

For the last time Marlan checked the instruments that Sandrak had built. Then he went to the innermost chamber and sealed the heavy metal door. When he opened it again, it would be to learn the secret of human destiny.

His mind was empty of all emotion as he lay on the thickly padded couch and waited for the machines to do their duty. He never heard the first whisper of gas through the vents: but consciousness went out like an ebbing tide.

Presently the air crept hissing from the little chamber, and its store of heat drained outwards into the ultimate cold of space. Change and decay could never enter here: Marlan lay in a tomb that would outlast the Earth itself. Yet it was more than a tomb, for the machines it carried were biding their time: and every hundred years a circuit opened and closed, counting the centuries.

SO MARLAN slept, in the cold twilight beyond Pluto. He knew nothing of the life that ebbed and flowed upon Earth and its sister planets while the centuries lengthened into millenia, and millenia into aeons. On the world that had once been Marlan's home, the mountains crumbled and were swept into the sea: the ice crawled down from the Poles as it had done so many times before and would do many times again. On the ocean beds the mountains of the future were built layer by layer from the falling silt, and presently rose into the light of day, and in a little while followed the forgotten Alps and Himalayas to their graves.

The sun had changed very little, all things considered, when the patient mechanisms of Marlan's ship reawakened from their long sleep. The air hissed back into the chamber, the temperature slowly climbed from the verge of absolute zero to a level at which life might start again. Gently, the handling machines began the delicate series of tasks which should revitalise their master.

Yet he did not stir. During the long ages that had passed since Marlan began his sleep, something had failed among the circuits that should have awakened him. Indeed, the marvel was that so much had functioned correctly; for Marlan still eluded Death, though his servants would never recall him from his slumbers.

And now the wonderful ship remembered the commands it had been given so long ago. For a little while as its multitudinous mechanisms slowly warmed to life, it floated inert with the feeble sunlight glinting on its walls. Then, ever more swiftly, it began to retrace the path along which it had travelled when the world was young. It did not check its speed until it was once more among the inner planets, its metal hull warming beneath the rays of the ancient, unwearying sun. Here it began its search, in the temperate zone where the Earth had once circled: and here

it presently found a planet it did not recognize.

The size was correct, but all else was wrong. Where were the seas that once had been Earth's greatest glory? Not even their empty beds were left: the dust of vanished continents had clogged them long ago. And where, above all, was the Moon? Somewhere in the forgotten past it had crept earthwards and met its doom, for the planet was now girdled, as once only Saturn had been, by a vast, thin halo of circling dust.

FOR A WHILE the robot controls searched through their electronic memories as the ship considered the situation. Then it made its decision: if a machine could have shrugged its shoulders, it would have done so. Choosing a landing place at random, it fell gently down through the thin air and came to rest on a flat plain of eroded sandstone. It had brought Marlan home: there was nothing more that it could do. If there was still life on the Earth, sooner or later it would find him.

And here, indeed, those who were now masters of Earth presently came upon Marlan's ship. Their memories were long, and the tarnished metal ovoid lying upon the sandstone was not wholly strange to them. They conferred among each other with as much excitement as their natures allowed and, using their own strange tools, began to break through the stubborn walls until they reached the chamber where Marlan slept.

In their way, they were very wise for they could understand the purpose of Marlan's machines and could tell where they had failed in their duty. In a little while the scientists had made what repairs were necessary, though they were none too hopeful of success. The best that they could expect was that Marlan's mind might be brought, if only for a little while, back to the borders of consciousness before Time exacted its long-deferred revenge.

The light came creeping back into

Marlan's brain with the slowness of a winter dawn. For ages he lay on the frontiers of self-awareness, knowing that he existed but not knowing who he was or whence he had come. Then fragments of memory returned, and fitted one by one into the intricate jig-saw of personality, until at last Marlan knew that he was—Marlan. Despite his weakness, the knowledge of success brought him a deep and burning sense of satisfaction. The curiosity that had driven him down the ages when his fellows had chosen the blissful sleep of euthanasia would soon be rewarded: he would know what manner of men had inherited the earth.

Strength returned. He opened his eyes. The light was gentle, and did not dazzle him: but for a moment all was blurred and misty. Then he saw figures looming dimly above him, and was filled with a sense of dreamlike wonder, for he remembered he should have been alone on his return to life, with only his machines to tend him.

And now the scene came swiftly into focus, and staring back at him, showing neither enmity nor friendship, neither excitement nor indifference, were the fathomless eyes of the Watchers. The thin, grotesquely articulated figures stood around him in a close-packed circle, looking down at him across a gulf which neither his mind nor theirs could ever span.

Other men would have felt terror, but Marlan only smiled, a little sadly, as he closed his eyes forever. His questing spirit had reached its goal: he had no more riddles to ask of Time. For in the last moment of his life, as he saw those waiting round him, he knew that the ancient war between Man and insect had long ago been ended: and that Man was not the victor.