

PLANET STORIES



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The Dancers

By WILTON HAZZARD

There was time now—plenty of time on this strange, dark planet—for those erudite exiles from frozen Earth to ponder the value of man's accumulated knowledge.

IT WAS the hour before dawn. In the middle of the night the big ship had landed on the new planet, the satellite of the sun Proxima. Now they sat in the dark waiting, and they talked.

"I wish we hadn't killed them," Rossiter said softly. His profile was faintly visible against the diffused light of the stars. "It's a bad sign, a bad start for a new life."

"They attacked us," Bernard answered quickly.

"Two spears, against forty blasters and stun guns?" Rossiter laughed. "An attack! We should have met them with stunners at low charge. But McNess ordered us to blast. The woman and the baby stick in my craw."

"All our nerves were on edge," Bernard answered thoughtfully. "I know I was afraid when we first stepped out of the ship. There was something terrifying about air, and space, and the sky. But you're right, of course. We shouldn't have been ordered to blast." The two men were sitting a little apart, but there was a murmur of many low voices around them as the others from the *Elpis* waited and talked.

"I wonder why they attacked us?" Bernard went on. "Primitives usually run. We must have been an unbelievable sight to them, spiraling down out of the sky."

"I don't know," Rossiter replied wearily. "And we can't ask them. They're dead, all five of them. That wind's cold." He was shivering.

"You could go back inside the ship," Bernard said half-humorously.

"I'm sick of the *Elpis*. We all are. Eight years of it—it's too much. We'll get used

to the wind, I suppose. There's going to be lots of wind, with so much water and only this one land mass on our new world. It's not like earth."

Bernard made an involuntary movement. Then he relaxed. "I suppose the taboo is lifted now that we've landed," he said heavily. "We can talk about earth again, and wonder, and speculate. I wonder what they're doing now on earth."

"Starving. Freezing. Burrowing into the ground for coal and warmth. They must be living a good many hundred feet down now, those that are left. And the seas are frozen. There's an ice sheet from pole to pole.

"We astronomers paid you back finely, didn't we, Bernard, for all the appropriations you got us in committee meeting. You were always generous with us and the physicists. But when the catastrophe happened, the mystery, the debacle, we couldn't help. We didn't know the answer. We didn't know."

"I remember—" Bernard answered, choking a little, "—I remember the day before it happened. There was a report on my desk about some tribe of Indians high in the Andes. The report said that the parents had been persuaded to send their children to the school in the foothills, that even among the adults illiteracy and ignorance were being eliminated. It was the last of the ignorant tribes.

"I looked up at the sign over my desk and read the motto, 'There is nothing unknowable. There are only things not yet known,' and I thought, 'Yes, we're getting

near our goal. We've conquered ignorance and superstition and illiteracy. And as time goes on we'll know more and more things. The area of the unknown will constantly diminish. Knowledge is like an expanding circle of light that eats into the darkness. Then the darkness came. And you didn't know."

"WE KNOW what happened well enough," Rossiter corrected. He sounded older than his fifty-two years. "I was at the observatory that night. I remember thinking that it was almost time for me to go to the dormitory to sleep. It was summer; Sirius and the sun would both soon be up. Sirius rose, blazing in the darkness, and after him Leo, in the southeast. It should have been invisible in the sunlight. I couldn't believe what I saw. And still the sun didn't come up.

"We know what happened in a way. We don't know how or why. The sun, our sun, never rose. The sun just disappeared."

"How softly everyone's speaking," Bernard said irrelevantly. "It's the sky and the darkness. I could hardly hear you." He got to his feet.

"Where are you going, Tom?" Rossiter asked.

"I want to look at the bodies. The people we blasted, I mean."

"That's morbid. Don't go, Tom. Stay here."

"But I want to go. I'll be back." He moved away through the dimly visible outlines of men and women seated on the ground.

He came back after a while and sat down by his friend in silence. "I think I know why they attacked us," he said after a pause.

"Why?"

"I think we interrupted some magical or religious rite. They were at a very low level of material culture, of course. The points on the spears were stone, and they were wearing garments of what looked like some sort of tree bark. Not woven cloth. But the young men were wearing rattles of some sort of shell around their ankles, and the old man was holding a little drum in his hands.

"You see, they had a good cranial capacity. As soon as human beings can think at all, they start trying to impose their will on the universe. I think they met here by the shore to perform some sort of magic. The woman and the baby watched, the old man played his drum, the two young men sang and danced. Perhaps this bit of the coast was sacred to them. Perhaps, when we set our ship down here, we profaned a sacred place."

"The woman and the baby bother me," Rossiter said thoughtfully. "It seems a dreadful thing to me to kill a woman. Ever since Kate died . . ."

Bernard rested his hand for a moment on the older man's shoulder in sympathy. "It was wrong. We shouldn't have done it," he responded. "But we must forget it. Tomorrow, when it's light, we'll bury them."

"I wonder if they were the only humanoid life on the planet," Rossiter said, pursuing his own train of thought. "This island was the only land mass we found anywhere. If those five, so few . . . When we blasted them, did we wipe out the planet's native humanoid life?"

"Possibly," Bernard admitted uneasily. He cleared his throat. "If they hadn't attacked us we could have helped them. They were primitive, superstitious, blankly ignorant, of course. But they had good skulls. They could have learned. We'd have taught them, as we did the primitives on earth. We'd have led them gently away from their superstition and ignorance. As we did on earth. Let's not talk about it any more."

Rossiter made a sort of noise. Bernard leaned forward quickly. "What's the matter, Dick? Are you all right?"

"I—what you said—" Rossiter seemed to grope for words. "Be quiet a minute, Tom. I want to think. What you said then—I—it—" He laid his hands over his eyes.

"I'll get Dr. Ferguson," Bernard offered.

"No, I'm all right." Once more he fumbled for words. "I've suddenly come to understand. You made me understand—as we did on earth."

"What—"

Rossiter got to his feet. In his normal voice, which sounded very loud in the darkness, he said, "I know what made the sun go out."

The murmur of low talking ceased suddenly. There was a sense of listening, of half-seen bodies leaning forward intently in the starlight. Rossiter said, "On earth there was always somebody dancing."

"Dancing? I don't see—" Bernard spoke in wonderment, but there was an odd, apprehensive note in his voice.

"There was always somebody dancing," said Rossiter. He halted. Then he continued in a stronger voice, "Always, in the high mountains there was somebody fasting and praying. Always before dawn there was the sound of the rattles and the stamping footsteps."

"In the winter the flame leaped high on the rock through the swirls of snow as they made fire magic. They danced. They prayed. They chanted. And the sun came up."

"What are you trying to say?" Bernard demanded. He had risen and was standing facing the older man.

"That people used to think, before we taught them better, that they had something to do with the sun's rising. They grew too wise to believe it any longer. But who knows? Who knows whether they were not right? Whether the force that impels the stars is not, finally, the human will?"

There was a silence. Somebody laughed nervously.

Dr. Ferguson had already stepped forward and was holding Rossiter by the elbow. Together, he and Bernard urged the older man toward the *Elpis*. They spoke to him gently. They did not argue or disagree with him. They led him inside the ship.

Much later Bernard came out alone. Dr. Ferguson had remained with Rossiter, quieting him with sedatives. It was still quite dark.

Bernard looked up at the sky, sighing. "How long the dawn is in coming," he said, as if to himself.
