



# WORLDS of SCIENCE FICTION

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### COVER:

By Kenneth Rossi, illustrating "Bleedback"

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BY WILLARD MARSH

*They were used to retarded life forms, but this was the worst.*

*Yet it is a missionary's duty to bring light where there is none,*

*for who can tell what devious forms evolution might take?*

## the ethicators

**T**HE MISSIONARIES came out of the planetary system of a star they didn't call Antares. They called it, naturally enough, The Sun—just as home was Earth, Terra, or simply The World. And naturally enough, being the ascendant animal on Earth, they called themselves human beings. They were looking for extraterrestrial souls to save.

They had no real hope of finding humans like themselves in this wonderously diversified universe. But it wasn't against all probability that, in their rumaging, there

might not be a humanoid species to whom they could reach down a helping paw; some emergent cousin with at least a rudimentary symmetry from snout to tail, and hence a rudimentary soul.

The ship they chose was a compact scout, vaguely resembling the outside of an orange crate—except that they had no concept of an orange crate and, being a tesseract, it had no particular outside. It was simply an expanding cube (and as such, quite roomy) whose "interior" was always paralleling its "exterior" (or attempting to), in ac-

cordance with all the well-known, basic and irrefutable laws on the subject.

A number of its sides occupied the same place at the same time, giving a hypothetical spectator the illusion of looking down merging sets of railway tracks: This, in fact, was its precise method of locomotion. The inner cube was always having to catch up, caboose-fashion, with the outer one in time (or space, depending on one's perspective). And whenever it had done so, it would have arrived with itself—at approximately wherever in the space-time continuum it had been pointed.

When they felt the jar of the settling geodesics, the crew crowded at the forward visiplate to see where they were. It was the outskirts of a G type star system. Silently they watched the innermost planet float past, scorched and craggy, its sunward side seeming about to relapse to a molten state.

The Bosun-Colonel turned to the Conductor. "A bit of a disappointment I'm afraid, sir. Surely with all that heat . . .?"

"Steady, lad. The last wicket's not been bowled." The Conductor's whiskers quivered in amusement at his next-in-command's impetuosity. "You'll notice that we're dropping downward. If the temperature accordingly continues dropping—"

He couldn't shrug, he wasn't physiologically capable of it, but it was apparent that he felt they'd soon reach a planet whose climate could support intelligent life.

If the Bosun-Colonel had any ideas that such directions as up

and down were meaningless in space, he kept them to himself. As the second planet from its sun hove into view, he switched on the magniscan eagerly.

"I say, this is more like it. Clouds and all that sort of thing. Should we have a go at it, sir?"

The Conductor yawned. "Too bloody cloudy for my taste. Too equivocal. Let's push on," he said languidly. "I have a hunch the third planet might be just our dish of tea."

Quelling his disappointment, the Bosun-Colonel waited for the third planet to swim into being. And when it did, blooming like an orchid in all its greens and moistnesses, he could scarcely contain his excitement.

"Why, it looks just like Earth," he marveled. "Gad, sir, what a master stroke of navigation. How did you realize this would be it?"

"Oh, I don't know," the Conductor said modestly. "Things usually have a habit of occurring in threes. I'm quite a student of numerology, you know." Then he remembered the Mission and drew himself erect on all his legs. "You may prepare for landing, Mister," he ordered crisply.

The Bosun-Colonel shifted over to manual and busied himself at the helm, luffing the square craft down the troughs of air. Gliding over the vast tropical oceans, he put down at a large land mass above a shallow warm sea, twenty-five degrees below the northern pole.

Too numbed for comment, the crew stared out at the alien vista.

They'd heard of retarded life forms from other Missionary expeditions—of planets where the inhabitants, in extreme emergency, had been known to commit murder. But this was surely the worst, the most vicious imaginable in the galaxy.

Here, with life freshly up from the sea, freshly launched on the long climb to maturity and self-realization—was nothing but horror. With so lush a vegetation, so easily capable of supporting them side by side in abundance, the monsters were actually feeding on each other. Great lumbering beasts they were with their bristling hides and huge tails, charging between the giant tree ferns; gouging living chunks from one another while razor-toothed birds with scaly wings flapped overhead, screaming for the remnants. As the sounds of carnage came through the audio ports, the youngest Oarsman keeled over in a faint.

Even the Conductor was visibly shaken. The Bosun-Colonel turned to him with a sick expression.

"Surely it's a lost cause, Skipper. Life like this will never have a soul worth saving."

"Not in its present stage," the Old Man was forced to agree. "Still, one never knows the devious paths that evolution takes." He considered the scene for a thoughtful, shuddering interval. "Perhaps in several thousand millenniums . . ."

The Bosun-Colonel tried to visualize the possibility of Ethical Life ever materializing through these swamp mists, but the logic against

it was too insurmountable for the imagination.

"Even so," he conceded, "granting the impossible—whatever shape it took, the only worthwhile species would still be . . ." He couldn't bring himself to say it.

"Meat-eaters," the Conductor supplied grimly.

On hearing this, the Oarsman who had just revived promptly fainted again.

"It's too deep in the genes," the Conductor continued, "too far advanced for us to tamper with. All we can hope to do is modify their moral outlook. So that by the time they achieve star travel, they'll at least have a basic sense of Fair Play."

Sighing, bowed by responsibilities

incommensurate with his chronological youth, he gave the order wearily. It was snapped down the chain of command to the Senior Yardbird:

"All paws stand by to lower the Ethics Ray! Step lively, lads—bugger off, now . . ."

There was a din of activity as the outer locks were opened and the bulky mechanism was shipped over the side. It squatted on a cleared rise of ground in all its complex, softly ticking majesty, waiting for the First Human to pad within range of its shedding Grace and Uplift. The work party scrambled back to the ship, anxious to be off this sinister terrain. Once more the crew gathered at the visiplat as the planet fell away beneath them, the Ethics Ray winking in the day's last light like a cornerstone. Or perhaps a tambourine . . .

**N**IGHT CLOSED down on the raw chaotic world, huge beasts closed in on the strange star-fallen souvenir. They snuffled over it; then enraged at discovering it was nothing they could fill their clamoring mindless stomachs with, attempted to wreck it. They were unsuccessful, for the Machine had been given an extra heavy coat of shellac and things to withstand such monkeyshines. And the Machine, in its own finely calibrated way, ignored its harassers, for they had no resemblance to the Life it had been tuned to influence.

Days lengthened into decades, eons. The seas came shouldering in to stand towers tall above the

Ethics Ray, lost in the far ooze below. Then even the seas receded, and the mountains buckled upward in their place, their arrogant stone faces staring changelessly across the epochs. Until they too were whittled down by erosion. The ice caps crept down, crackling and grinding the valleys. The ground stretched and tossed like a restless sleeper, settled, and the Ethics Ray was brought to light once more.

As it always had, it continued beaming its particular signal, on a cosmic ray carrier modulated by a pulse a particular number of angstroms below infrared. The beasts that blundered within its field were entirely different now, but they still weren't the Right Ones. Among them were some shambling pale bipeds, dressed in skins of other beasts, who clucked over its gleaming exterior and tried to chip it away for spearheads. In this of course they were unsuccessful.

And then one day the First Human wandered by, paused square in the path of the beam. His physiology was only approximate, his I.Q. was regrettably low—but he was Pre-Moral Life, such as it was, on this planet.

The Ethics Ray made the necessary frequency adjustments, tripped on full force. The Primitive froze under the bombardment, its germ plasm shifting in the most minute and subtle dimensions. Then, its mission fulfilled, the Ethics Ray collapsed into heavy molecules and sank into the ground. The first convert raced away in fright, having no idea what had hap-

pened. Neither did his billion sons and daughters . . .

**B**ACK ON the home base, the Conductor reported in at the Ethication of Primitive Planets office. It was a magnificently imposing building, as befitting the moral seat of the universe. And the Overseer was an equally imposing human with ears greyed by service. His congratulations were unre-served.

“A splendid mission, lad,” he said, “and I don’t mind suggesting—strictly *entre nous*—that it could jolly well result in a Fleet Conductorship for you.”

The Conductor was over-whelmed.

“Now just let me jot down the essentials while they’re still fresh in mind,” he continued, pawing through a desk drawer. “Botheration! I seem to have traded the last of my styluses. Do you happen to have one on you?”

“With pleasure.” The Conductor handed over his monogrammed gold stylus, receiving in exchange a toy silencemaker.

“My youngster traded it to me this morning,” the Overseer chuck-

led.

He wrote rapidly for several moments, then gave the stylus back. The Conductor found a weathered paper-weight in his rear pocket, which he traded him for it. It looked like it might have come from this very desk at one time. Then with a smart salute, he about-faced.

On the way out, a pair of secretaries paused in their trading of a pelt brush for a tail-curler to watch him admiringly. As well they might. Fleet Conductor!

The future Fleet Conductor of a solar system he would never think of calling Antares paused at the door. In its polished panel he regarded himself with due appreciation. He had sown the seeds of civilization on a far-flung planet where, countless light years from now, they would flower to maturity. Not among the strongest or cleverest species, to be sure, but among those most worthy of applying First Principles, the moral law of give and take.

Among those remote cousins of the Conductor himself—who under no circumstances would ever think of himself as resembling a rather oversized trader rat. ● ● ●