

SUPER-SCIENCE FICTION

Vol. 2 — No. 6

October, 1958

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SUPER-SCIENCE FICTION is published bi-monthly by Headline Publications Inc., at 1 Appleton Street, Holyoke, Mass. Editorial office at 1790 Broadway, New York 19, N. Y. Entered as second class matter at the post office at Holyoke, Mass., August 21, 1956, under the Act of March 3, 1879. Single copy 35c. Subscription rates, \$4.00 for 12 issues. Not responsible for unsolicited manuscripts, and all such materials must be accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes. All stories printed in the magazine are fiction, and any similarity between the characters and actual persons is coincidental. Copyright 1958 by Headline Publications Inc. All rights, including translation, reserved under International Copyright Convention and Pan American Copyright Convention. Printed in the U.S.A.

THE GREAT WHITE GODS

by WYNNE N. WHITEFORD

illustrated by ORBAN

It was the first contact between the men of Earth and the strange super race from beyond the stars. But how would this race judge men from Earth? By their deeds?

ALLE through the long afternoon, the rain pelted down into the sweltering jungle. Hart's little four-wheel-drive truck skidded maliciously on the muddy track, and it took all his concentration to keep it from sliding into one of the streaming ditches. Yet the urgency of fear compelled him to drive fast.

Every bend of the track brought the same view as the others—vast, towering trees, their pallid trunks spearing up hundreds of feet into the mist of falling rain. The dense, impossible vegetation, vegetation like nothing on the face of the Earth, primitive as a Carboniferous coal forest.

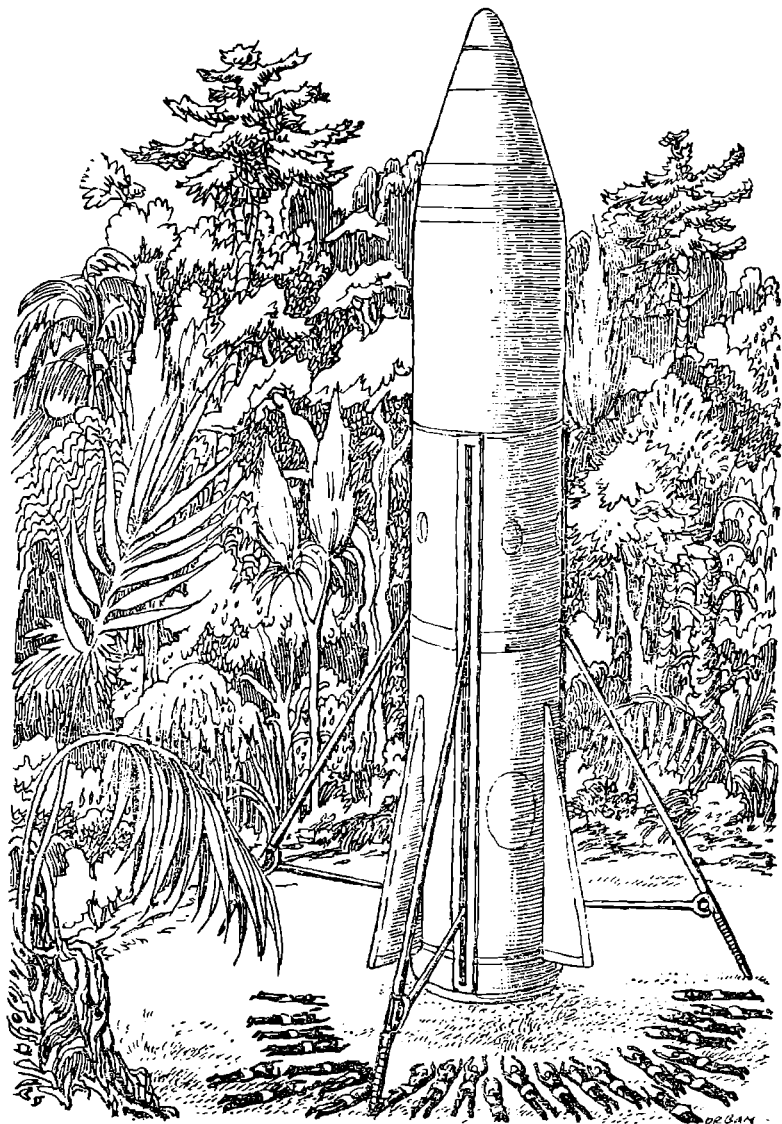
Now and then he passed

through native villages, their wooden buildings glistening with rain-wet resin paint. Brown figures clustered in the doorways.

Unexpectedly, a final twist of the road brought him out of the jungle into the broad, open area of the Port, its edges bordered with black tree-trunks where the clearing fire had ended. He drove along the level, hard-rolled road between the fields of cane, and pulled up under the carport of the official residence.

Clayton met him at the door, his thin hair plastered damply to his forehead. "Come in and have a drink, Doc?"

The biologist nodded briefly as he sprang from the truck.



Indoors, only the endless movement of the fans made the steamy air breathable. Through the venetian blinds the sunlight burned with a fierce whiteness. "Where's Brandon?" he asked.

"Knocking sense into some of the boys. They wanted to stop work."

Glass in hand, Hart walked across to the window, lifting a slat of the blind to peer through. Across the level clearing of the Port, one of the Company ships stood on its fins, an immense steel shell, needle-nosed, higher than a thirty-story building. The loading gantry looked slender, almost flimsy beside it, with the lightness of all low-gravity structures.

"We're playing this the wrong way, Clay," said Hart.

"What the hell do you mean?"

"The whole project. We jumped into it too quickly." He gestured with his glass towards the line of brown native buildings on the far side of the Port. "It was their world. We should have waited, learned a bit about them be-

fore we forced our way of life on them."

"With these hills full of thorium? We had to have a labor force to get it out, didn't we?" Clayton broke off as the door opened and a thickset man stamped into the room, shaking the rain out of his hair. "What's your angle on it, Reg? The Doc thinks we should leave the place to the Ulni."

Brandon looked at Hart with undisguised hostility. "What the devil do *you* know about it?"

Hart's eyes narrowed as he swept his fingers through his hair. "I know I've spent only six months here. But at least I've made some headway in understanding the Ulni—and that's more than anyone else has done in the five years since the first landing."

Brandon poured himself a drink. "Animals," he said with an air of finality. "That's all they are—animals. They don't keep any written records. Nothing." He drained his glass and wiped the back of his hand across his sweating forehead. He pulled the cord of the venetian blind, flooding the room

with the harsh pale daylight. "Look what we've done for them, man. Put them forward a thousand years. When we came, they had only a few vegetable plots to keep them alive."

"So?" said Hart sourly.

"Look. Ten thousand acres under cane—and the stuff produces more than sugar-cane. Do you know, we've built forty-eight alcohol-burning engines in our workshops so far. Got them driving trucks, tractors, sawmills, generating plants, all running on the alcohol we distil from the cane. We get the thorium, sure. But we've given them the beginning of a self-supporting machine economy."

Hart turned. "Damn it all, show a bit of imagination. You're dealing with an alien form of life. Product of a different evolution. This was too big a thing for the Company Board of Directors to decide. Think of this: you got this world very easily, didn't you?"

"Sure," Brandon snorted. "They let us walk right in."

"Do you know why?"

Brandon threw his head back. "Yes. Because we had

guts. Knew what we wanted, and didn't let a bunch of sub-humans stand in our way."

THE biologist shook his head. "It was luck more than anything else. The same sort of luck that let the Spanish Conquistadores overthrow the Incas."

"What the hell are you driving at?"

"Listen. When the Spaniards went into South America, the local people thought they were the old Aztec gods—there was a legend they'd return from over the sea."

"So?"

"So they had their conquest easily. You've been just as lucky. I've been digging into the legends of the Ulni. They're quite intelligent, you know. It's a hard intelligence to measure, because its bases are so different from ours. For instance, our thinking is mainly visual—theirs is auditory. They haven't good vision—look at their faceted eyes—but their auditory memory is better than ours. Look how quickly they picked up our language."

"Like parrots. I still say they're animals."

"But listen. Think what it means to have an auditory rather than a visual-based intelligence. It puts them at a disadvantage in many ways, yes. They can't build up reference libraries, or make blueprints for complicated machines. But I wouldn't say they were necessarily inferior—only different."

Clayton yawned. "We've got away from the Spaniards and the Incas. Where was that leading to?"

"I'm coming to that. The Ulmi have one very deep rooted legend; I keep coming across it again and again. It's a legend of some beings they call The White Ones, or sometimes The Swift Ones. According to the story, they come from the sky, at certain long intervals of time. They identified *you* with *them*—that's what confused them all when your first ship arrived. It had come before the Time."

Brandon looked steadily at Hart for a few seconds, as though trying to make up his mind whether he was telling the truth or not. Then he

shrugged his shoulders.

The biologist mopped the sweat from his face and neck, and moved closer to one of the fans. "They have shrines to the White Ones here and there. And more than that: they have relics."

"Well?"

Hart took something out of his pocket. It looked like a flat disc of metal. "You know the Ulmi have no written language, don't you?"

"That's right."

"Then tell me what you make of *that*." He threw the metal disc on the table. Brandon picked it up. About five inches in diameter, with a small hole in the center, it was a plate of pale yellow, iridescent metal, light in weight, with a graduated scale running round its rim. And against the scale were outlandish black letters or figures.

Brandon weighed the thing in his palm. "Where did you get it?"

"In one of the Shrines of the White Ones. The story is that it came from one of their ships from the sky." He pointed to the disc. "I'd say it was the dial of some sort of gauge.

But what are the figures?"

Clayton moved alongside Brandon, and they both studied the disc in silence for some seconds. Then the thick-set man shrugged his shoulders again. "It only means that some other ship has landed here before us." He gestured angrily with the disc. "This doesn't mean a thing. Everyone who operates a space ship doesn't speak English, you know. After all, there's a Brazilian fleet. Another from Japan."

Hart shook his head. "Better try again. Do those marks look like Japanese?"

The two Company men said nothing.

"Another thing," said Hart. "Count the graduations. Whoever, or should I say whatever made that thing counted on a duodecimal system. Rather a basic difference, isn't it?"

"Listen!" broke in Clayton.

IT came from a long way off—the eerie wailing of some kind of wind instrument.

"They've been playing those things every day and night for a week."

"They signal that way,"

said Hart. "I've learned some of it." He listened for a minute. "They're saying the Time is nearly at hand."

"The Time?" Clayton looked uneasy. "You mean—"

Hart nodded. "The Time for the White Ones to return."

Brandon walked across to the door. "Lot of balderdash." He glared across at the wooden buildings of the antive town. When he turned, he passed his tongue across his lips.

"Lot of blasted rot," he roared, looking ferociously at Hart. "Look at our own legends, back on Earth. They're full of imaginary visitations from the skies. Flaming dragons landing from above, and belching men out of their insides, or things like men. That's the oldest myth in the world."

Hart looked from Brandon to Clayton, and back again. "Maybe you're right. But have you thought of it this way? Suppose some of those things were *not* myths."

"Eh?" asked Brandon. He opened his mouth to speak, then shut it again as the idea took hold. It was Clayton who broke the silence.

"I could do with a drink," he announced. The neck of the bottle rattled against the glass. "Y'know," he said over his shoulder. "He could be right, Reg. We've learned to fly through space. Right. So we think we're God almighty. We put bases on the Moon. On the deserts of Mars. On Venus, Titan, Alpha Centauri 3, and on out to Altair. Then here. And wherever we find life, we've found nothing to stand up to us." He tossed the drink down his throat with practised quickness. "That is, not yet. Are you with me?"

"Go on," said Brandon.

"We haven't really come far from home, have we?" Clayton gestured vaguely. "Twenty-odd light-years—that's the limit of our spread. As far as Altair toward the Hub, as far as Sirius the other way. And from here to the Hub of the Galaxy it's—how far, Doc?—something like forty-thousand light-years, isn't it? With an estimated thousand million planetary systems."

"We'll spread over the lot, some day," said Brandon. "Not us—but our descendents."

Clayton groped for the bot-

tle, refilling his glass without turning away. "Suppose something else has been doing a bit of expanding? Remember that blue metal tripod somebody found on top of a mountain on Altair 5? Made everyone think, when I was a kid; but no-one ever came up with an answer. Or that plastic handle off something that was never traced, lying on a beach on one of the Centauri planets—remember it on the video? Plastic as hard as steel, with grips for six fingers and a thumb, only when you got your fingers on the grips your thumb wouldn't come within inches of the thumb grip. Nobody makes a thing like that for a joke. Carve it out of wood or ivory, maybe—but pressure-mold it out of plastic? Not the way I see it."

"Ah, those things were fakes," snorted Brandon. "A journalist'll do anything to sell news."

"He could be right, you know," said Hart, looking at Brandon.

Brandon glared from one to the other. "What's the matter with you guys? Letting these pipes get on your nerves?"

"Just a minute." Hart held up his hand, listening. The weird notes had changed their rhythm. A strange crescendo was repeated over and over—then silence.

"What was that?" asked Brandon.

Hart seemed to have to make a conscious effort to unclamp his jaws to speak. "The Time," he said. "The Time is here."

The silence was heavy and ominous. The rain had stopped, and only the faint splashing of rivulets broke the stillness—that, and the occasional cry of some half-reptilian thing in the jungle. Then the three men became aware of another sound, almost at the same moment. Thin and high, a sound almost too high to be heard, wavering down the scale in an uncanny whistle. It seemed to come across an immense distance.

"What the devil's that?" roared Brandon. The three of them made for the door. Outside, they became aware of the murmur of alien voices from the native town. Brown figures danced, whirling in frenzy, limbs flailing.

"Look!" Hart jumped at the

explosive tension in Clayton's voice. Their eyes followed his shaking finger. Then they saw it, high up across a clear belt of sky, above and beyond a rift in the dense masses of cloud. A thin, fine line of white. The line of a high-altitude vapor trail. The vapor trail of some high-flying machine. Not a space ship—they didn't land like that, and in any case none were due. Not a plane—there were none on the planet. But *something* had flashed across above the clouds, something that moved high and fast.

Hart began to stride towards his truck. "I'm getting out of here," he said. "Remember, I'm warning you. Something big's going to happen."

Brandon took a couple of steps towards him, then stopped. "I'm staying here." His manner changed. "Look: we've acted the way we thought was right. Taking the thorium doesn't matter—the Ulni have no use for it. And we showed them the right way to live."

Hart started his motor. "Save it up," he said. "You haven't got to explain it to *me*."

HE drove away along the road of hard-packed earth, straight in to the jungle at right angles to the river. Soon, the road was climbing through the trees, a ledge hugging the mountain side. Up, up towards the dense rain-forest of the plateau.

And then, as he was driving along a straight stretch of the road, something huge and metallic whipped across the strip of sky ahead of him, where the trees lining the road didn't quite meet. He had only the briefest glimpse of it—something slanting down through the air towards the Port.

Further on, Hart stopped where the road angled round a spur of the mountain, giving him a view of most of the Port. He saw the Company ship standing on its three fins beside the gantry, but even as he looked a bright light sparkled like a welding arc at the base of one of the fins. The fin glowed red-hot, crumpling like sheet tin as the whole massive bulk of the three-hundred-foot ship toppled ponderously over, crashing to the ground with a reverberating boom.

Lightning blazed with a white ferocity across the radar aerials and the tower of the transmitting station, leaving them a mass of twisted girders and fused wire. Then Hart saw the newly arrived ship.

It was like nothing he had ever seen. A flattened, fish-shaped thing with angular fins, hovering in the air as though it weighed nothing, with a shimmering unreality about it as though he were looking at it through some kind of force field.

Brandon and Clayton, on their way to their ship, had halted in the field of young cane, a couple of ants in the distance. A cone-shaped beam of light from the hovering ship shone down over them, barely visible in the sunlight, and where it touched the canefield a circle of flame blasted a ring of smoking blackness. The ring held the two men trapped in its center.

Then Hart noticed the brown hordes of the Ulmi streaming from their town. They flung themselves prostrate within a few hundred yards of the ship, lifting and bowing their bodies in a kind

of ecstasy. A kind of ramp ran down from the ship, glowing like a flattened beam of light.

Three figures walked down, the center one a little ahead of the others, and at the foot of the luminous ramp they halted. They were a long way from Hart, but he could see that there was something strange about them. Manlike, yet very tall and long-limbed and quick-moving, with large, rounded heads. They seemed to be nearly naked and white, as though they had brilliantly white skin, like shark-skin. Or it may have been close white fur.

The leader gestured, and something like glass or metal flashed in his hand. The cone of light disappeared. Brandon and Clayton began to walk slowly towards the trio, looking squat and clumsy.

Hart sprang back into his truck.

This was history. The Battle of the Hellespont, the signing of the Magna Carta, Hiroshima—all these past land-

marks were nothing to this. This was the first meeting between races that had evolved in different parts of the Galaxy, fighting their separate ways upwards from the intertidal slime to the boiling swamps, from forest to plain, from villages to cities, from the conquest of the sea to the conquest of the stars.

And these others—the White Ones—were they further along the line? Suddenly he swung the truck around and headed back for the Port. Dangerous—but it was a risk he had to take.

Whoever they were, whatever they were, right now they were forming their first opinion of the human race. They were modelling their picture of a human being on Brandon and Clayton....

He couldn't let it stay like that....

Then his world disappeared in a flash of light. As he died, Hart knew that the White Ones had formed their opinion. They had judged. They had acted. It was..... THE END