

FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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So Bright the Vision.	4
<i>by Clifford D. Simak</i>	
The Robot Carpenter	42
<i>by Frank B. Bryning</i>	
Attack from Within	54
<i>by Burton Crane</i>	
Fair Exchange	79
<i>by Mack Reynolds</i>	
The Far-Off Stars	81
<i>by Ruth Sterling</i>	
The Only Conqueror	85
<i>by Norman Arkaway</i>	
Room for Improvement	94
<i>by Mann Rubin</i>	
Hail to the King	102
<i>by Edward Ludwig</i>	
The Voiceless Sentinels	106
<i>by Roger Dee</i>	
The Macauley Circuit	117
<i>by Robert Silverberg</i>	
Universe in Books	126
<i>by Hans Stefan Santesson</i>	

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Ed Moritz
Cover Design

the voiceless sentinels

by . . . Roger Dee

The Primes and the primitive Stampers looked at reality through quite different eyes. That alone was frightening—

WHEN THEY came back down the slope from the Prime ship the *Unis*' helicar was waiting.

Their wives waited with it, Floris Coulter at the controls and Lillian D'Anteri on the seat behind, each betraying after her own fashion a relief at their safe return that overrode, for the moment, the anxiety that had gripped them since the arrival of the Primes.

Owen Coulter forestalled their questions with the authority of long habit. "No time for talk now," he said. "We'll call a council as soon as you can get us back to the *Unis*."

Louis D'Anteri's control was less rigid. He paused with a foot on the helicar's mounting-step to turn a dark, rebellious face back toward the Prime ship that crowned the slope above.

"They ordered us home," he said angrily. "Do they own the Galaxy? They treat us like idiot children—"

"Let it wait, Louis," Coulter said. "We'll decide how we feel about their decision after we decide what to do about it."

Still he felt a share of his lin-

Somewhat the very name, Roger Dee—we've pointed this out before—conjures up resplendent visions of pirate's gold and a Jolly Roger fluttering in the breeze on the Spanish Main. We're not suggesting that Mr. Dee's everyday personality is in the least piratelike. It can hardly be denied that he has a quite wonderful way of making his characters walk the plank, if they happen to be unworthy Earthmen confronted by the anger of a star race immeasurably wise.

guist's resentment when he followed D'Anteri's glance to the enigmatic sphere of the Prime ship, glowing with a pearl's soft perfection in the bright Sirian sunlight.

"Take us up," he said to Floris. He squinted against the Sirian glare, gauging its intensity. "It will be dark within a couple of hours, and the sooner we let everyone know what we're up against the sooner we can settle on a course of action."

There must be action if they were to find a way out, he thought grimly as he settled himself beside his wife. Humanity had too many dreams and too many millions invested in this first stellar venture to surrender it without a struggle.

The helicar swung low over a green plain toward a tree-dappled expanse of shining water. The uncompromising spire of the *Unis* loomed up in massive silhouette over a far roll of ground ahead, uninspiring to him now that he had seen the functional grace of the Prime ship. Beyond and below the *Unis*, not yet seen but imminently visible, the Stamper lake-shore village lay sprawled in its haphazard straggle of gouged-out vegetable plots, its crude clusters of mud-and-stone hovels looking like nothing so much as a colony of misshapen beehives.

At the brook, the helicar skimmed directly over the shambling quadruped bulk of an itinerant Stamper bound for the village. Its close-set hoofs struck up slow pon-

derous puffs of dust from the grass and its anterior snout dangled clumsily. There was something grotesque about the way its prehensile lip clutched the leaf-rolled bundle of its small possessions. Utterly without auditory sense, it remained unconscious of their passage until the machine soared into visual range. Then it halted abruptly to stare with the characteristic Stamper goggle of flat-faced incomprehension.

"Cattle!" D'Anteri said, his voice edged with contempt.

The helicar swept lower, and at the top of the next slope Coulter was relieved to see four waiting figures at the *Unis'* ground-level entrance port. His relief vanished, however, when he saw that only two of the four were human. He had hoped that his crew would hang together to hear the outcome of his mission. But the remaining figures, from their towering dun-colored bulk, could only be the unceasing, senseless Stamper watch.

D'Anteri, behind him, said querulously: "They are still there after two weeks, goggling at the ship. What do they want, Owen?"

Coulter shrugged, dismissing the minor irritant. "Without auditory communication, they'll never tell us," he said. "That's Lloyd Mason's problem anyway, Louis."

Mason was indulging his ecologist's dedicated curiosity when Floris set the helicar down before the *Unis'* vertical bulk. The waiting couple were Jerome and Janet

Bishop, the ship's dietician and electronicist respectively. They came forward at once to meet Coulter, circling to clear the pair of goggling Stampers.

"What was it, Owen?" Bishop demanded. He was bareheaded, in shorts and singlet like the others, and his gangling eagerness made him look like an impatient sandy crane. "What did they want?"

"They want us to go home," Coulter said. "They ordered us back to Earth until we're civilized enough to rate their permission to spread out of our own system."

He looked toward the open entrance port, impatient now to get his council discussions started. "Where are the Masons?" he demanded.

Bishop grimaced. "There was some stir of activity in the Stamper village and Lloyd went down there to take notes. Emily went along to see that he came to no harm."

"I'm sure they'll be back any minute now," Janet Bishop said pacifically. She was a small, plump woman with soft brown hair and warm brown eyes, and her easy patience was a perfect governor to Bishop's hastiness. "Emily will have seen the helicar land. She'll bring Lloyd on the double."

Coulter squinted restively down the slope at the unlovely sprawl of Stamper huts.

"They'd need thirty minutes to walk up, even if they started right now," he said. "We haven't any

time to lose. Will you go after them in the helicar, Louis?"

The little linguist scowled. "Why bother? Lloyd wouldn't have an opinion to offer beyond his latest wild surmise about Stamper psychology, and Emily would only bicker."

"We still have to take a vote. Any concerted action requires the sanction of the entire crew."

D'Anteri swore in open exasperation. "I know, I know. You always have to do it by chapter and verse."

"It's the only safe course," Coulter told him mildly. "Let small issues go, and bigger ones follow. That's why they made me captain before we left Earth, Louis. I'm methodical enough—and unimaginative enough—to take responsibility seriously."

D'Anteri yielded with his usual ill-grace. "They were right, of course. And you're right now. But do you have to be so damned exact about *everything*?"

Coulter let it go without replying and turned instead to his ship. D'Anteri climbed into the helicar and shot it forcibly aloft, expending in his violence some of the congenital resentment that smoldered in him.

Seconds later, he was setting the small plane down at the edge of the Stamper village.

Lloyd and Emily Mason came up together as D'Anteri stilled his engine, their disproportion of build and disposition giving them the intangible aspect of being a single

individual divided into complementary, mobile halves. Mason was small, round, bald and bespectacled, and fired with an introverted enthusiasm for his work that dismissed outside concerns as negligible. His wife was both thinner and inches taller, and she was silent to the point of primness. Her resolution, in fact, was as adequate a foil to Mason's vagueness as Janet Gibson's mildness was to her own husband's irritability.

Characteristically, Mason's initial remark dealt with his own immediate interest rather than with the problem of the Primes.

"They're getting set for something big here in the village," he said. The waning Syrian sunlight flashed on his spectacles when he looked back at the slow, elephantine stirring among the huts. "They're a devilishly consistent species in spite of their limitations, and their pattern of behavior is beginning to make sense. Give me a few weeks more and—"

"We may not have even a few hours," D'Anteri interposed bluntly. "The Primes warned us off when Owen and I went up to answer their summons. That's why I came for you two. We're going to hold a council of action immediately."

Mason plucked off his glasses and polished them unhappily. "But we can't go *now*—not just when I'm making progress! Louis, I learned only this morning why the occasional itinerant singles roll up their little gaggle of possessions and

wander off. It's their system of gene balance—of keeping the stock fresh by sending out old blood and bringing in new. And it isn't simple instinct. It's a calculated system, don't you see?"

D'Anteri studied the lumbering in the village with open distaste. There were hundreds of Stampers gathered now in the central concourse and the slow thudding of their hoofs, raising the sound that had given them their name, drifted about him on a breeze heavy with the smell of alien bodies and wind-borne dust.

The brutes were more primitive than consistent, he thought—a blind alley of evolution, a fumbling experiment imprisoned in a narrow rut of sense limitation that made impossible any real improvement of species. Without language or hearing, with restricted vision and a metabolic rate so low that it rendered thought as clumsy as their snail's-pace locomotion, what improvement could there be?

He dismissed them from mind. "The others are waiting," he said. "Get in, will you?"

Mason clipped on his glasses again with a gesture of resolution. "I'll stay here, and use the time remaining to me. The others can confer without me."

"Don't be a fool," D'Anteri said waspishly. "We've little enough time, and you're wasting it."

Emily Mason answered him like a schoolmistress quelling an incipient argument between children.

"Lloyd was sent here to study whatever ecology we found, Louis. He's only pursuing that study."

Mason looked from one to the other, his round face distressed. The emergency demanded a directness foreign to his nature, and he met it reluctantly.

"I'd rather trust Emily's judgment than my own," he said. "And we've a proxy provision for absent members. Emily can go with you and cast my vote as she thinks best."

It was typical of his wife that she did not protest so sensible a conclusion. She said decisively, "I'll come back for you immediately after the council. If you need me before then, use your communicator."

She climbed into the helicar and seated herself primly beside D'Anteri. "I'm quite ready."

Mason was already at work on his field notes when the helicar rose into the air.

COULTER, with his crew assembled, launched into council discussion without delay. He had set up a view-screen at one end of the quarters bay, directly opposite the ship's tape projector. He had also paused to deliver a brief oration about the importance of dimming the quarters lights, feeling a need to make clear to all the seriousness of their position. Floris and the D'Anteris, Bishops, and Emily Mason sat on their bunks along the narrow length of the bay, waiting for him to continue.

"You know that the Prime ship appeared only two hours ago," he said, at last. "Janet and Floris saw it land, and all of us heard the Primes summon me. The call came through very clearly on the ship's communicators."

He paused, disturbed even in retrospect by the passionless assurance of that alien voice.

"We didn't even remotely suspect until then that such a race of overlords existed in the Galaxy," Coulter said. "Assuming, of course, that they *are* overlords. At any event, the situation had to be faced —so Louis and I went up to see them. We took along one of Lloyd's little undergarb recorders to tape the actual interview for the rest of you. The film will show what the Primes and their ship are really like."

He snapped on the projector. The screen lighted, centering on the pearly sphere of the Prime ship. The motion of Coulter's approach made the scene bob jerkily until the sphere filled the screen and an opening dilated in its hull.

D'Anteri's small figure, pushing ahead to meet possible danger, blotted out the picture briefly. Then there appeared on the clearing screen an interior that was a concave reversal of the outer hull, identical with it except for a smooth expanse of floor concealing the lower third of the ship. Whatever engines drove the craft quite obviously lay below deck. There were no ports or vision screens or con-

trol banks, no visible break in the overall concavity of polished surface.

The two Primes waited at the center of the circular floor, looking like nothing so much as wingless, unfeathered cranes, glabrous and fragile. There was grace and unmistakable intelligence in their every aspect as they regarded Coulter and D'Anteri out of their dark, pupilless eyes.

"Avian," Jerome Bishop said wonderingly.

His wife said simply, "They're lovely. How can they be so cruel?"

Floris' reaction was more practical. "They don't look like tyrants. Maybe they're right, Owen. Maybe we *do* seem like savages to them. Maybe they're justified in saying we've broken away from our reservation too soon for our own safety."

"We can't judge a creature's nature or intent by its appearance," Coulter pointed out. "They're a totally alien species, so we've simply no basis for comparison. We can only choose between our own need and the risk we may run if we should decide to defy them."

He halted the projector, freezing the scene.

"They didn't actually threaten us. They only made it quite plain that we must go home. The problem is, does their leaving us no alternative imply that they have the power to enforce their order?"

"They're physically insignificant," Bishop said. "Did you see

anything that looked like heavy armament, Owen?"

Coulter shook his head. "Only what you see here."

D'Anteri looked speculatively down the long room. "They don't look like a race that knows violence. There's a good chance that they're not armed at all."

The others looked at one another uneasily, disturbed to find their own inference so bluntly stated.

"So how do we know," Bishop finished, "that they can force us to go?"

Coulter said quietly, "Putting them to the test could be dangerous. They're infinitely far ahead of us in general development. Their armament may be completely beyond us."

D'Anteri disagreed. "I seriously doubt that. I doubt if there's anything in their ship's drive, for instance, that we couldn't work out with enough research time. There are only so many physical properties and so many corollary applications. We're not stupid, and we're a determined species."

"State your proposition, Louis."

"It's this," D'Anteri said. "We can't defy them and then sit tight without giving up the initiative. Neither can we run like sheep until we are sure that they can enforce their ultimatum."

Bishop sat up straighter. "You've got something there, Louis. They may be only a local culture, a minor species without any real authority

at all. If they're just *bluffing*—"

"We'll have to find that out," D'Anteri said, "or run home like scolded children. There's no compromise measure here. Whatever we do will be final, one way or another."

Bishop said almost dreamily, "Two birds with one stone. Earth could use a drive like the one that powers that sphere. It could speed up our colonization program by generations."

"You're suggesting," Coulter said, "that we attack and take over their ship by surprise. Remember that we'd risk more than our lives. We could set colonization *back* for generations if we lose the *Unis*. Would our people at home approve of that, Louis?"

D'Anteri answered the question with another. "Would they approve if we give up here without a fight?"

There was a hiatus that dragged interminably until D'Anteri said, "Question."

They voted quickly and silently by a show of hands. Emily Mason, sharing her husband's aversion to violence, voted against attack. Coulter did not vote, but his ballot was unnecessary.

The other five voted solidly to fight.

D'Anteri, for the first time in weeks, looked almost happy. "One man is enough," he said. "I'll take the helicar and a fission bomb from the munitions hold. One bomb should do it."

They did not argue because

D'Anteri alone had both the aggressiveness and hair-fine coordination which would be needed. But when he went to the personnel lift to drop down to ground level his wife accompanied him, deaf to his protests.

"It can't be helped if none of us go back to Earth," she said. "But I won't go back without you."

When they had gone, the remaining five looked at one another restively. Coulter, seeking escape from the strain of waiting, restarted his projector.

"We may as well see the rest of the film," he said.

LEFT ALONE at the Stamper village, Mason found it all but impossible to concentrate on the growing stir of activity before him. He had expected to dismiss the problem of the Primes by leaving it to others better qualified than himself. But an uncharacteristic disquiet nagged at him when he returned to the task of reassembling his notes.

The nub of his uneasiness resided in the fact that he had not himself considered any other course but that of accepting the Prime ultimatum, with as much delay as possible to allow him time for unravelling the mystery of the Stampers' excitement. But suppose the others should decide differently?

Suppose they decided to remain and fight?

The prospect of open conflict distressed him profoundly, so dis-

turbing his work that he broke off to polish his glasses unhappily. Violence was totally foreign to his mild nature, the thought of physical harm to Emily insupportable.

"I should have gone back with Louis," he said aloud.

He turned to gauge the time remaining before darkness fell, and found the molten-silver furnace of Sirius sliding down below the horizon. Too much time had elapsed already. He'd have to hurry.

He had taken his communicator unit from his belt to ask Coulter for a delay of discussion before the absurdity of making an open call occurred to him. The Primes had summoned Coulter before on that same frequency. Whatever he said now would be intercepted, defeating and destroying the purpose of the council aboard the *Unis*.

"I could walk back," Mason thought. But the slope leading up to the *Unis*' needle-shape seemed impossibly long and tedious, swaying his decision. "Or," he alternated with happy inspiration, "I can call Emily to come for me in the helicar."

He was thumbing the stud of his communicator when the first wave of Stampers flowed out of the village and bowled him over.

He lost his grip on the communicator and weaved about in a frantic effort to dodge the slow pound of dun-colored hoofs. For an instant he was certain that he would be trampled to pulp, and a mental picture of Emily returning

alone and inconsolable to Earth flashed through his mind, filling him with a greater horror than the thought of his own imminent death.

In the end he escaped—not by his own efforts but simply because the slow, pistonng lift of a Stamper hoof caught him and flung him, breathless and half-stunned, out of the melee.

For a full minute he lay frozen and incredulous, gulping down great breaths of dusty air while the Stamper herd plodded furiously past. Finally the deliberate regrouping of their ranks told him—amazing him with his own dispassionate ecologist's eye for detail—that whatever purpose had been slowly building up in them at the village had come to a head and that they were now determinedly on the march toward its fulfillment.

He sat up and stared toward the van, and beyond it. And all at once he was no longer in doubt as to their destination. It was the *Unis*, rising out of growing dusk with a silver spark of Sirius-light still glowing on her spire.

Mason struggled to his feet and ran up the slope as fast as his pudgy legs would carry him, straight toward his ship.

THE SCREEN moved.

"Watch this," Coulter said. "This is the part where the Primes told us we'd have to go. We tried to argue, but—well, here it is."

Coulter himself did not show on

the screen because the recorder had been concealed under his singlet. D'Anteri's figure, a little out of focus, went stiff with anger.

"But we've only been here two weeks," D'Anteri's voice said. "And you've been here only *two hours*. How can you have learned enough about us in that little time to judge us?"

There ensued a silence. A moment later Coulter's voice said, "If you know that much about us, you must realize how important this venture is to our culture. We've traveled far from our own solar system because our home planet is over-populated. But we plan no military conquest. We're not a cruel or tyrannous people."

There was another silence.

D'Anteri's recorded voice, thick with disgust, said suddenly: "The Stampers? They're less than barbarians. They're *cattle*!"

The screen stilled under Coulter's numbed touch. Lights came on. There was a murmur of startled surmise up and down the quarters bay.

"The Primes' voices didn't record," Floris said. "Why, Owen?"

Coulter turned on Bishop. "You are charged with the care of all electronic equipment, Jerome. Did you check that recorder?"

Bishop stood up, his face crimson. "There's absolutely nothing wrong with that recorder. Your voice and Louis' registered, didn't they?"

Coulter seemed to wilt slowly.

"Then there were no Prime voices," he said. "I—I guess you all know what that means."

Emily Mason, with precise logic, answered first. "It means that there was no original summons over our communicator equipment. The Primes don't speak. They're telepathic."

Coulter nodded. "Of course. That's how they knew so much about us within two hours of their landing. They knew our language and what our intentions were. No wonder there were no weapons or engine controls in their ship. Everything is *mental* with them, perhaps even their propulsor power."

"Then they are aware of everything we've thought and planned," Floris said. "We hadn't a chance of surprising them from the first."

"Poor Louis and Lillian," Janet Gibson said. She began to cry softly. No one else spoke.

They were still sitting there quietly when the slow thunder of Stamper hoofs broke the night silence. Gibson climbed the companionway ladder to the control room for a look outside, and came back swiftly, his face drained of all color.

"The brutes are moving this way," he said. "Hundreds of them. Maybe thousands."

Emily Mason said, "Lloyd," in a smothered voice, and went up the ladder at a run. The others followed at her heels.

The Stamper herd was very near now, flowing like a ponderous

living surf up the slope. The growing rumble of hoofs sent a trembling through the entire ship.

Mason came into view finally a hundred yards ahead of the main Stamper van, a tiny running figure reeling with exhaustion. His wife saw him first in the near-darkness and would have taken the personnel lift down alone if Bishop and Coulter had not instantly plunged into the cage after her.

The three of them met Mason just outside the central airlock, carried him inside, and sent the lift flying upward to quarters bay.

They eased him gently down on his bunk, and stood by while his stertorous breathing quieted. Emily held one of his plump wrists between her fingers and counted his pulsebeats with a pinched look of controlled strain.

"There's no permanent damage," she said at last, when his heart had slowed its frantic pounding. "It was just over-exertion. He'll be all right in a moment."

Coulter bent over the still heavily breathing ecologist. "What happened, Lloyd? Surely the Stampers aren't trying to attack the ship?"

Mason tried to answer but could not. He closed his eyes and lay back, giving up the attempt. His wife looked apprehensively at Coulter.

"They can't possibly get in, can they?" she asked.

"Of course not," Coulter assured her. "There's nothing to worry about. They're no more than

a pack of dogs, for all their size."

Still he flinched with the rest when the plangent slamming of the lower entrance port came to them up the elevator shaft. It was not until the lift-cage dropped by itself, summoned from below, that he realized the truth.

"That will be Louis and Lillian with the helicar," Coulter said. "It has to be. No Stamper could manipulate those port controls, let alone bring down the lift."

"The Primes could," Floris said, but no one took her seriously. The Primes would not have bothered.

The D'Anteris were with them a moment later. Lillian had been crying, and D'Anteri's face had a pinched, beaten look.

"I couldn't drop the bomb," he said. "It—disappeared."

In the hiatus that followed Lillian went to stand with Emily beside Mason. She only nodded when the Stamper demonstration was explained to her. But D'Anteri, when they told him what they knew of the Primes, threw up his hands in his characteristic gesture of resignation.

"Then we're whipped," he said. "We may as well go home—before the *Unis* disappears like my bomb. Maybe the Primes are right, and we're not really ready for stellar colonies. If we haven't outgrown wars at home—"

Coulter cut in with, "We'll take a vote on that."

Mason summoned the strength to sit up and say, "Home," with

the rest. The vote was unanimous.

"Then we'll blast off as soon as the field is clear," Coulter said. Relief made his voice almost light. "But there's no point in cremating hundreds of those poor devils down there. How long before they'll drift away, Lloyd?"

"Before morning," Mason said. "I'm sure of that."

Mason's breathing was still ragged and his round face streamed with perspiration. But he was himself again. Something like professional satisfaction colored his voice when the others gathered about him.

"I told you they were a consistent species," he said to D'Anteri. "Haven't they proved it?"

D'Anteri stared. "Precisely what are you getting at, Lloyd?"

"Intelligence and logic aren't strictly synonymous," Mason said.

"But they're nearly so—nearly enough, at any rate, to make reasoning a relative function. The Stampers felt toward us precisely as we felt toward the Primes, and because their logic was the same as ours they followed the same course. To be safe, they had to eliminate us and take over our ship. That they needed two weeks instead of two hours to make that decision and plan an attack is a case in point. The difference in relative intelligence accounts for the time lag."

Bishop laughed, an incredulous bark of sound. "You mean that those idiotic creatures, with their limitations, actually expected to take us over? Ship and all?"

It was Coulter, first as usual to grasp the basic reality of a new situation, who answered him.

"They had a better chance than we did," he said.

