

# PLANET STORIES



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*It had taken him ten years to find them—to even convince himself that they existed. Now Manson was ready to kill!*



# THE WATCHERS

by ROGER DEE

**H**E LEFT HIS GRYO ON THE dark lawn and circled the villa, carefully avoiding the wash of light from open windows. The blast gun lay snug and cold in his hand, and his thought ran bleakly: *Here am I, Peter Manson, pacifist, idealist, reformer, preacher in print of tolerance and amity—about to kidnap a man whom I shall almost certainly kill before morning.*

Tomorrow the telecast would list his

madness with other insanities: sex murders, suicides, political drumbeatings for the coming holocaust of the inevitable Fourth War . . .

*War.*

“They’re going too far,” he said, half aloud. “Their routine meddlings were bad enough, but another war now might mean the end of everything.”

He found the alien who called himself Leonard Havlik in a bright, book-lined

study, packing a miscellany of papers into a brief case that bore his name in gold lettering. A secretary was helping, a slim girl with crisp, copper-colored hair and clear green eyes.

Manson waited, tense with unaccustomed strain. Somewhere a bird trilled sleepily, and the night-wind, fragrant with the smell of trampled clover, blew cool against his damp face.

Irrelevantly, the scene inside reminded him of his own quiet study where he had labored for ten years over the scant gleanings of his search. In that time he had written four books, fighting with a reformer's apostolic zeal to open the eyes of men to their own possibilities, and he had failed.

He had not awakened his kind, but he had found the Watchers. The failure was not his fault. It was Theirs . . .

The girl left the room. Manson straightened at his window, bringing up the blast gun.

"Come out, Havlik," he ordered. "Quickly, or I'll blow you to dust where you stand—*Watcher!*"

**HIS QUARRY** looked up, startled—a small, dark man with a thin, tired face and sparse gray hair, a perfect replica of the million ordinary businessmen his camouflage of humanity aped.

Manson snicked off the safety catch of his weapon, and Havlik came through the window quickly, without protest. Manson prodded him into the gyro and manacled his wrists together.

"We Earthmen have a time-tested proverb," Manson said, "to the effect that you can't fool all the people all the time. I've spent ten years searching for you, Havlik—and here I am."

He set the autopilot for his cabin on Green River, holding his blast gun warily, and sent the gyro slanting upward into the night. Havlik smiled faintly, dark eyes gleaming in the light of the instrument panel.

"Laugh while you can," Manson said grimly. "I've learned something of you Watchers already. I'll know more by morning."

"Force was unnecessary," Havlik said un-

expectedly. "I would have given you information willingly, since our mission here is ended. The Kha Niish, who are our masters, have ordered us to leave Earth. Tonight."

Manson stared, the alien's assurance fanning his anger.

"You're lying—you Watchers have mingled with us for centuries, using our own ignorance to set us against each other. You've kept us in perpetual confusion, deafening us with our own bickering while you tightened your hold on us. Now you're fomenting a Fourth War that may wipe us out completely, to save yourselves the trouble of liquidating us directly. You'd never go now, with success almost in your hands."

"Perhaps you mistake our intention," Havlik said. "How do you know you're right?"

"Because men of themselves would not do the brutal, idiotic things that fill the telecasts every day," Manson said. "We are a gregarious people, craving affection—why should we lie and steal and murder each other by the millions? Man is a rational animal, yet he does not behave in a rational manner. By simple induction, the basic cause of his social idiocy stems from outside himself. Someone, or Something, is setting us against each other. I suspected as much ten years ago, and tonight I have proved it."

Havlik shrugged. "You've wasted your time. We leave Earth tonight."

Manson laughed shortly. "You're not going anywhere, my friend. I need you for information."

"What else would you know? Our reason for quitting Earth?"

"You're not leaving at all," Manson said, nettled. "You may have planned a routine jump to your base on Pluto, but you're not giving up a juicy plum like Earth. Not after all these years!"

**HE PEERED** through the gyro's side glass searching for the white peak of Green Mountain to check his position. The skyglow of Denver shimmered in the east, but the peak was lost in darkness.

"You misunderstand our motive," the alien said. "But you're quite right about

our base on Pluto. Induction again?"

"On a different level, yes," Manson said. "Pluto is a solar anomaly—a small, heavy planet where there should be nothing but a larger and lighter world. Pluto was never born to Sol—it's an alien planet, brought in from Outside by you Watchers."

A red light winked on the control panel, and the gyro swerved fractionally. A fiery streak of crimson rocket exhaust flared ahead and vanished, explaining the deviation.

"Seattle-Miami express," Manson muttered. Then the unnatural angle of the exhaust-trail registered, troubling him. "But it shouldn't cross my course—and it should be going up, not *down*!"

"Your crusade is based on a false premise," Havlik said. "We came to Earth less than fifty years ago, not to destroy humanity but to guide it. The Kha Niish sent us as missionaries, to sow the seed of Their benign culture among men as we have sowed it among a thousand other infant races born into Their galaxy."

The gyro tilted, spiraling down for a landing. A farmhouse, lighted windows cheerful against the dark countryside, rose to meet it. Beside the house, standing on end like a giant cartridge case, Manson saw a sleek, shining bulk—a ship.

He raised incredulous eyes to meet the alien's dark stare. Comprehension stunned him.

"You fiend," he breathed. "You've tricked me somehow—you've played cat-and-mouse with me from the first!"

He remembered the gun in his hand and swung it up.

"Let your weapon drop," Havlik said. "You set the autopilot at my direction. This is our evacuation point."

The gun slid from Manson's fingers. He tried to retrieve it from the floor and cried out, startled, when his body refused to obey.

The alien removed his manacles. "You will be free again as soon as we lift."

"Lies," Manson grated. He fought to break the stasis that held him, veins knotting in his forehead with the effort. "I might have known!"

The gyro landed gently, a hundred yards

from the cylinder.

FIGURES SWARMED about the great ship, pouring up a wide ramp in orderly embarkation. The girl Manson had seen at the villa came running toward the gyro, copper hair blowing in the night-wind.

"You were almost late," she called to Havlik. "We're ready to—" She caught sight of the Earthman and broke off.

In the dark depth of her eyes Manson saw understanding and a great pity, and for the first time it came to him that Havlik had not lied. Aliens they might be, but not destroyers—in this girl burned the same ideals, the same transcendent zeal that drove him. She was as human, basically, as he.

*The same will to raise up the helpless is in us both, he thought. The compulsion to carry the saving light of reason to those in darkness . . .*

"Wait," he begged. "Your master wouldn't have ordered you away if Earth needed you—and if men can work out their own salvation, then they don't need me, either! Take me with you out there—let me help you, let me see the Outside galaxy of the Kha Niish for myself!"

He spoke to Havlik, but his eyes clung to the girl as to a magnet. She met his gaze fully, the compassion in her own eyes deeper than grief.

Havlik shook his head. "Your sanity would not bear the presence of the Kha Niish, nor of the other races Outside. You are drawn to this girl as to another of your own kind—but do you suppose that the Kha Niish would shape her in Their image? She is like the rest of us, an android creature, refashioned by the Masters to suit the environment of each new world we visit."

The last of the swarming figures vanished into the great cylinder. A muted gong-sound thrummed through the night. A voice called, urgently.

"The Kha Niish did not order us away because men are solving their own problems," the alien said. "We leave you to destroy yourselves, as you will, because man is one of the rare failures of the Galactic Urge. You are a race of incorrigibles."

Later Manson sat woodenly in his gyro, waiting for volition to return, the scent of scorched earth and ozone and trampled clover strong in his nostrils.

*We Earthmen have another inerrant old saw, he thought bitterly. An excruciatingly funny one dealing with silk purses and*

*sows' ears . . .*

For a long time he sat quietly, straining his eyes to follow the last faint rocket-streak that arced upward against the stars. Then the stasis that held him fell away, and he reached for the blast gun that lay under his feet.

