

KING OF THE HILL

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She floated there in the great nothing, still warm and soft and blue-green if you could eyeball her from a few thousand miles out, still kissed under blankets of clouds.

Mama Earth. Getting old now, tired, her blankets soiled with her own secretions, her body bruised and torn by a billion forgotten passions.

Like many a mother before her, she had given birth to a monster. He was not old, not as planets measure time, and there had been other children. But he was old enough. He had taken over.

His name?

You know it: there are no surprises left. Man. Big Daddy of the primates. The ape that walks like a chicken. Homo sap. Ah, the tool-maker, flapper of tongues, builder of fires, sex fiend, dreamer, destroyer, creator of garbage ...

You know me, Al.

Mirror, mirror, on the wall—

Ant is the name, anthill is the game.

There were many men, too many men. They have names.

Try this one on for size: Sam Gregg. Don't like it? Rings no bells? Not elegant enough? Wrong ethnic affiliation?

Few among the manswarm, if any, cared for Sam Gregg. One or two, possibly, gave a damn about his name. A billion or so knew his name.

Mostly, they hated his guts—and envied him.

He was there, Sam Gregg, big as life and twice as ugly.

He stuck out.

A rock in the sandpile.

They were after him again.

Sam Gregg felt the pressure. There had been a time when he had thrived on it; the adrenaline had flowed and the juices bubbled. Sure, and there had been a time when dinosaurs had walked the earth. Sam had been born in the year that men had first walked on the moon. (It had tickled him, when he was old enough to savor it. A man with the unlikely name of Armstrong, no less. And his faithful sidekick, Buzz. And good old Mike holding the fort. Jesus.) That made him nearly a century old. His doctors were good, the best. It was no miracle to live a hundred years, not these days. But he wasn't a kid anymore, as he demonstrated occasionally with Lois.

The attacks were not particularly subtle, but they were civilized. That meant that nobody called you a son of a bitch to your face, and the assassins carried statistics and platitudes instead of knives and strangling cords.

Item. A bill had been introduced in Washington by good old Senator Raleigh, millionaire defender of the poor. Stripped of its stumbling oratorical flourishes, it argued that undersea development was now routine and therefore that there should be no tax dodges for phony risk capital investment. That little arrow was aimed straight at one of Sam's companies—at several of them, in fact, although the somewhat dim-witted Raleigh probably did not know that. Sam could beat the bill, but it would cost him money. That annoyed him. He had an expensive hobby.

Item. Sam retained a covey of bright boys whose only job it was to keep his name out of the

communications media. They weren't entirely successful; your name is not known to a billion people on a word-of-mouth basis. Still, he had not been subjected to one of those full-scale, no-holds-barred, dynamic, daring personal close-ups for nearly a year now. One was coming up, on Worldwide. The mystery man—revealed! The richest man in the world—exposed! The hermit—trapped by fearless reporters! Sam was not amused. The earth was sick, blotched by hungry and desperate people from pole to shining pole. There had never been an uglier joke than pinning man's future on birth control. A sick world needs a target for its anger. Sam's only hope was to be inconspicuous. He had failed in that, and it would get him in the end. Still, he only needed a little more time ...

Item. The U.N. delegate from the Arctic Republic had charged that Arctic citizens of Eskimo descent were being passed over for high administrative positions in franchises licensed to operate in the Republic. "We must not and will not allow," he said, "the well-known technical abilities of our people to serve as a pretext for modern-day colonial exploitation." The accusation was so much rancid blubber, of course; Sam happened to like Eskimos as well as he liked anybody, and in any event he was always very careful about such things. No matter. There would be a hearing, facts would have to be tortured by the computers, stories would have to be planted, money would be spent. The root of all evil produced a popular shrub.

There were other items, most of them routine. Sam did not deal with them himself, and had not done so for fifty years. ("Mr. Gregg never does anything *personally*," as one aide had put it in a famous interview.) Sam routed the problems down to subordinates; that was what they were for. Nevertheless, he kept in touch. A ruler who does not know what is going on in his empire can expect the early arrival of the goon squad that escorts him into oblivion. There were the usual appeals to support Worthy Causes, to contribute to Charity, to help out Old Friends. Sam denied them all without a qualm and without doing anything; his lieutenants had their orders. A penny saved ...

Sam was not really worried; at worst he was harassed, which was the chronic complaint of executives. *They* were not on to him yet. There was no slightest hint of a leak where it counted. If *that* one ever hit the air cleaner there would be a stink they could smell in the moon labs.

Still, he felt the pressure. He was human, at least in his own estimation. There was a classic cure for pressure, known to students of language as getting away from it all. It was a cure that was no longer possible for the vast majority of once-human beings, for the simple reason that there was nowhere to go.

("To what do you attribute your long and successful life, Mr. Gregg?" "Well, I pension off my wives so that I always have a young one, and I see to it that she talks very little. I drink a lot of good booze, but I never get drunk. I don't eat meat. I count my money when I get depressed. If I feel tense, I knock about the estate until I feel better. I try to break at least three laws every day. I owe it all to being a completely evil man.")

Sam Gregg could take the cure, and he did.

He did not have to leave his own land, of course.

Sam *never* left his Estate. (Well, hardly ever.)

He took the private tube down from his suite in the tower and stepped outside. That was the way he thought of it, but it was not precisely true. There was a miniature life-support pod that arched over a thousand acres of his property. It was a high price to pay for clean air, but it was the only way. Sam needed it and so did the animals.

There were two laws that he broke every day. In a world so strangled by countless tons of human meat that land per capita was measured in square feet, Sam Gregg owned more than a thousand *acres*. Moreover, he did nothing useful with that supremely illegal land. He kept *animals* on it. Even dogs and cats had been outlawed for a quarter of a century, and what passed for meat was grown in factory vats. When people are starving, wasting food on pets is a criminal act. (Who says so? Why, people do.) Most of the zoos were gone now, and parks and forests and meadows were things of the past.

Sam took a deep breath, drinking in the air. It was just right, and not completely artificial either. Cool it was, and fragrant with living smells: trees and wet-green grass and water that glided over rocks and earth that was soft and thick.

This was all that was left, a fact that Sam fully appreciated.

This was the world as it once had been, lost now and forever.

Man had come, mighty man. Oh, he was smart, he was clever. He had turned the seas into cesspools, the air into sludge, the mountains into shrieking cities. Someone had once said that one chimpanzee was no chimpanzee. It was true; they were social animals. But how about ten thousand chimpanzees caged in a square mile? That was no chimpanzee also—that was crazy meat on a funny farm.

Oh, man was clever. He raped a world until he could not live with it, and then he screamed for help.

Don't call me, Al. I'll call you.

Sam shook his head. It was no good thinking about it. He could not ride to the rescue, not with all of his billions. He had no great admiration for his fellow men, and it would not matter if he had.

There was only one thing left to try.

Sam tried to close his mind to it. He had to stay alive a little longer. He had to relax, value, enjoy—He walked along an unpaved trail, very likely the last one left on the planet. He breathed clean air, he felt the warmth of the sun glowing through the pod, he absorbed ...

There were squirrels chattering in the trees, rabbits busy at rabbit-business in the brush. He saw a deer, a beautiful buck with moss on his horns; the buck ran when he spotted Sam. He knew who the enemy was. He saw a thin raccoon, a female that stared at him from behind her bandit's mask. She had three young ones with her and they were bold, but Mama herded them up into an oak and out of danger. He could see the three little masks peering down at him from the branches.

The trail wound along a stream of cold, fast water. Sam watched the dark olive shadows lurking in the pools. Trout, of course. Sam drew the line at bass and carp.

He came out of the trees and into a field of tall grass. There were yellow flowers and insects buzzed in the air. He sensed the closeness of shapes and forms, but he could not see them in the breeze-swept grass. There was life here, and death, and life again.

But not for long.

He turned and retraced his steps. He felt a little better.

The raccoons were still in the oak.

Sam went back inside. Back to the salt mine.

He worked hard until dinner.

"What was the exact hour?" Lois asked him, absently stroking one of her remarkable legs. (She had two of them.)

"I don't remember," Sam said. "I was very young."

"Come on, Sam. I'm not stupid. You *can't* tell me that with all the resources of your mysterious enterprises you can't find out the exact time."

"I am telling you. I don't know." Sam looked at her, which was always pleasant in a tense sort of way. Lois was sensual but there was no softness in her. She had a lacquered surface stretched like a drumhead over taut springs. She always looked perfect, but even her casual clothes were somehow formal. She never forgot herself. She was a challenge, which was fine once in a while. Sam was old enough to decline most challenges without dishonor.

Lois did not have to remind Sam that she had a brain. Sam never made *that* mistake. Her little reference to "mysterious enterprises" was an effective threat. At thirty, she had climbed the highest

pinnacle on her scale of values: she was the wife of the richest man in the world. She didn't want a settlement. She wanted it all. Sam had no children.

Bright, yes. Cunning, yes. Skilled, certainly. Faithful with her body, yes—Lois took no needless risks. But that fine-boned head enclosed a brain that was all output; not much of significance ever went *in*. The hard violet eyes looked out from jelly that had been molded in Neolithic times.

She would have made a dandy witch.

She spent her days puttering with expensive clothing and obscure cosmetics. She had a library of real books, thus proving her intellectual capacity. They were all about reincarnation and astrology. She considered herself something of an expert with horoscopes. A pun had frequently occurred to Sam in this connection, but he had refrained. He was not a cruel man.

"I want to do it for you," she said. "You have decisions to make. It would help. Really, Sam."

She was quite sincere, like all fanatics. It was a gift she could give him, and that was important to her. It was an ancient problem for women like Lois: what do you give to a man who has everything? The gag presents get pretty thin very quickly, and Sam was not a man who was easily convulsed.

He sipped his drink, enjoying it. He always drank Scotch; the labs could create nothing better. "Well," he said. "I haven't a clue about the minute of my birth. I'd just as soon forget my birthday."

Lois was patient. "It would be so simple to find out."

"But I don't give a damn."

"I give a damn. What about me? It's a small thing. I know the day, of course. But if the moons of Saturn were in the right position . . ."

Sam raised his eyebrows and took a large swallow of Scotch before he answered. "They are always in the right position," he said carefully. "That's the way moons are."

"Oh, Sam." She did not cry; she had learned some things.

Sam Gregg stood up to refill his glass. He did not like to have obtrusive robots around the house. Self-reliance and all that.

He was not unaware of himself. He did not look his age. He was a tall, angular man. There was still strength in him. His hair was gray, not white. His craggy face was lined but there was no flab on him. His brown eyes were sharp, like dirty ice.

Sam sometimes thought of himself as a vampire in one of the still-popular epics. ("Ah, my dear, welcome to Castle Mordor. A moment while I adjust my dentures.") Splendid looking chap, distinguished even. But then, suddinkly, at the worst possible moment, he dissolves into a puff of primeval dust . . .

"Let's go beddy-bye," Sam said, draining his glass. "Maybe I can remember."

"I'll help you," Lois said, reporting for duty.

"You'll have to," Sam agreed.

Sam worked very hard the next few weeks. He even found time to check the hour and the minute of his birth. He was being very careful indeed, trying to think of everything.

Lois was delighted. She retreated to her mystic stewpot, consulted her illustrated charts, talked it over with several dead Indians, and informed Sam that he was thinking about a long, long journey.

Sam didn't explode into laughter.

His work was difficult because so much of it involved waiting. There were many programs to consider, all of them set in motion years ago. They had to mesh perfectly. They all depended on the work of other men. And they all had to be masked.

It wasn't easy. How, for instance, do you hide a couple of spaceships? Particularly when they keep taking off and landing with all the stealth of trumpeting elephants?

("Spaceship? I don't see any spaceship. Do you see a spaceship?")

Answer: You don't hide them. You account for them. For all practical purposes, Sam owned the space station that orbited the Earth. He controlled it through a mosaic of interlocking companies, domestic and foreign. It was only natural for him to operate a few shuttle ships. A man has a right to keep his finger in his own pie.

Owned the space station, Daddy?

Yes, Junior. Listen, my son, and you shall hear . . .

The great space dream had been a bust. A colossal fizzle. A thumping anticlimax.

The trails blazed by the space pioneers led—quite literally—Nowhere.

Fortunately or otherwise, Mighty Man could not create the solar system in his own image. The solar system was one hell of a place, and not just on Pluto. There were no conveniently verdant worlds. There were just rocks and craters, heat and cold, lifeless dust and frozen chemicals.

There were other suns, other planets. Big deal. There were no handy space warps, no faster-than-light drives. Unmanned survey ships took a very long time to report, and their news produced no dancing in the streets: rocks, craters, desolation. Who would spend a lifetime to visit Nothing?

Would you? (Naw, I'd rather go see Grandma.)

Scientific bases had been established on Luna, and they survived. They survived with enormous expense, with highly trained personnel, with iron discipline. Even the scientific teams had to be replaced at short intervals.

Radiation, you know. Puts funny kinks in the old chromosomes.

The Mars Colony of half a century ago, widely advertised as a solution to the population crisis, was a solution only in the grim sense of a Final Solution. Even with the life-support pods—Sam had lost a fortune on the early models, but he had learned a few things—it was no go. Five thousand human beings had gone to Mars to start the New Life. (A drop in the bucket, to be sure. But there was much talk about Beginnings, and Heroic Ancestors, and First Steps.) A few of them had gotten back. Most had died or gone mad or both. Some of them were still there, although this was not generally known. They were no longer human.

The problem was that it was perfectly possible to set up a scientific base on Mars, or even a military base if there had been any need for one. But soldiers on Mars are a joke, and appropriations committees had long since stopped playing the old game: *Can You Top This?* Scientists could do little on Mars that they could not do on Luna. And people—plain, ordinary people, the kind that swarmed the Earth and scratched for a living, the kind that had to go—could not exist on Mars.

And so?

And so, kiddies, what was left of the space program was taken over by what was referred to as the Private Sector of the Economy. Got your decoder badges ready? It works out to S-a-m G-r-e-g-g. Governments could not continue to pour billions into space when there was no *earthly* reason for doing so. But with existing hardware and accumulated expertise it was not prohibitively expensive for Sam Gregg to keep a few things going. There was the matter of motive, of course. Sam Gregg had one, and he made money besides.

There were other projects to conceal, but they were easier than spaceships. Genetics research? Well, cancer was still a killer and everyone wanted to live forever. Such work was downright humanitarian, and therefore admirable. Ecological studies? The whole wretched planet was fouled by its own ecology—a solution *had* to be found. (There was no solution at this late date, but so what? It was a Good Thing. Everyone said so.) Computers, robots, cybernetics? Certainly *they* were beyond reproach. Hadn't they ushered in the Golden Age? Well, hadn't they?

Sam Gregg had his faults—ask anyone—but wishful thinking was not among them. He *knew* that he could succeed if he just had time. He could succeed if they didn't get him first. He could succeed because

he had the resources and because the problem was essentially one of technology. No matter how complex they are, technological problems can be solved unless they involve flat impossibilities. You can build a suspension bridge, send a man to Mars or wherever, construct cities beneath the sea.

There are other problems, human problems. How do you build a bridge between people? How do you send a better man to Mars? How do you construct an anthill city that is not a bughouse? Money will not solve those problems. Rhetoric will not solve them. Technology will not solve them.

Therefore, Sam did not fool with them. He used them for protective coloration, but he did not kid himself.

He stuck to the art of the possible.

Oh yes, he had a dream.

There was justice in it, of a sort. But human beings care nothing for justice. They look out for Number One.

Number One?

Sam permitted himself a brief, cold smile.

They would tear him apart if they knew, all those billions of Number Ones ...

A day came when all the bits and pieces fell into place. The data came back, coded across the empty hundreds of millions of miles. The columns added up. The light turned green.

Sam was exultant, in a quiet sort of way. He had expected it to work, of course. He had checked it all out countless times. But that was theory, and Sam was a skeptic about theories.

This was fact.

It was ready. Not perfect, no—but that too had been anticipated.

Ain't science wunnerful?

He could not stay inside, not when he was this close. He had to get outside, taste what was left of freedom. At times like these, it was not enough to know that it was there. He had to *see* it.

He walked on the Estate.

Lois joined him, which was a pain in the clavicle but Sam did not allow her presence to destroy his mood. Lois had on one of her cunning Outdoor Suits. She always professed to adore what she called Nature, but she walked as though every blade of grass were poison ivy.

(Poison ivy had been extinct for decades. Lois would soon follow suit.)

"It's so peaceful," Lois said. She usually said that here.

Rather to his own surprise, Sam answered her. He wanted to talk to somebody, to celebrate. Failing that, he talked to Lois. "No," he said. "Not really. It only seems peaceful because we are observers, not part of it. And it *is* controlled, to some extent."

Lois looked at him sharply. It had been one of his longer speeches.

"See that cedar?" Sam pointed to it, knowing that she did not know a cedar from a cottonwood. "Tough little tree. It'll grow in poor soil, it doesn't take much water. See how the roots come up near the surface? It's brittle, though. Won't last long. That oak is crowding it, and it's got a century or two to play with. See that little willow—there, the droopy one? It needs too much water and the drainage is wrong. It'll never make it. Am I boring you?"

"No," Lois said truthfully. She was too amazed to be bored.

"See the bunny rabbit?" Sam's voice lapsed into parody. "See bunny run! He'd better run. Lots of things eat bunny rabbits. Hawks, bobcats, wolves. Snakes eat little bunnies—"

"Oh, Sam."

As if to prove his point, a beagle hound stuck his wet nose out of the brush. His white-tipped tail

wagged tentatively. His liquid eyes were pools of adoration. (Beagles were originally bred as hunters. Remember?)

Sam turned his back on the dog. "Man's best friend. The supreme opportunist. He figured the odds twenty thousand years ago and threw in with us. K-9, Secret Agent. Con. Fink. Surplus now. Dear old pal."

"I don't understand you sometimes," Lois said with rare perception.

I don't understand them, either, Sam thought. Animals, not women. Little Forest Friends. Nobody understands them. We were too busy. There wasn't even a decent field study of the chimpanzee until around 1930. Seventy years later there were no chimpanzees. We didn't bother with the animals that were not like men; who cared? We learned exactly nothing about kudus and bears, coons and possums, badgers and buffalo. Too late now. They are gone or going, and so is their world.

Sam Gregg was not a sentimental man. He was a realist. Still, the facts bothered him. It was hard not to know. He would never know, and that was that. There was no way.

They walked along the trail together. (Arm in arm, lovely couple, backbone of empire.) Sam was a little nervous. It had been a long fight and—as they used to say—victory was at hand.

He felt a little like God and a lot like an old man.

From the branches of a gnarled oak, a masked mother and three small bandits watched them pass. There were ancient raccoon thoughts in the air.

You are ready.

So do it. Don't wobble.

Sam did it.

Sound dramatic?

It was (in the very long run) and it wasn't (here and now). An extremely well-balanced, insulated, innocuous conveyor left the main lab and hissed gently to the spaceport. A large gray metallic box was loaded into a shuttle ship and locked into place. The box was ten feet square, and it was heavy. It could have been much smaller and lighter—about the size of a jigger glass—except for the refrigeration units, the electronic circuits, the separation cubicles, and the protective layers.

The shuttle lifted to the space station. Strictly routine.

The gray cube of metal was transferred very gingerly to a larger ship.

She (that was surely the proper pronoun) was a special ship, a swimmer of deep space. She was crammed with expensive gear. Say, a billion dollars worth. Maybe more.

She took off. She was completely automated, controlled by computers, powered by atomics.

There were no men on board.

The ship was never coming back.

Sam?

He stayed home.

There was nowhere for him to go.

Remember?

It is curious how a small gesture will offend some people.

There was no more capital punishment, unless living on earth was it, but good men and true were willing to make an exception in Sam's case.

"So you sunk twenty billion into it over a ten-year period," his chief lawyer said. He said it the same

way he might have asked, "So you think you're a kumquat, eh?"

"Give or take a few million. Of course, some of the basic research goes back more than ten years. If you figure all that in, it might go to twenty-two billion. Maybe twenty-three."

"Never mind that." The lawyer groaned. He really did.

Lois was not happy and developed a case of severe frigidity. She was not only married to a man confronting bankruptcy, but she was also the wife of a Master Criminal. It does imperil one's social position.

(There was no way to keep it quiet, naturally. Sam had known that. Too many people were involved.)

They had a great time, the venom-spewers: senators and editorialists, presidents and kings, cops and commissions, professors and assorted hot-shots. All the Good People.

Sam had, to put it mildly, violated a public trust. (Translation: he hadn't spent his money on what *they* wanted.)

He was guilty of a crime against humanity. (Judge and jury, definer of crime? Humanity. All heart.)

It did not matter in the least that twenty billion dollars (or twenty-two, or twenty-three, or a hundred) could not have saved the earth. Earth was finished, smothered by her most illustrious spawn. It would take a few years yet, while she gasped for breath and filled the bedpan. But she was through.

Man had never cared overmuch for facts.

He believed what he wanted to believe.

("Things may be bad, but they are getting better. All we have to do is like be relevant, you know? Enforce the Law. Consult the swami. Have a hearing. Salvation through architecture. When the going gets tough the tough get going. All problems have solutions.")

There was one other thing that made Sam's sin inexcusable.

You see, animals have no votes.

The defense?

It was clear, simple, correct, and beyond dispute. It was therefore doomed.

("We'll give him a fair trial, then hang him.")

Way down deep where convictions solidify, Big Man had expected to meet his counterpart on other worlds. ("Ah, Earthling, you surprise I speak your language so good.") He had failed. He had found only barren rocks at the end of the road.

From this, he had drawn a characteristically modest conclusion.

Man, he decided, was alone in the accessible universe.

This was a slight error. There were primitive men who would not have made it, but there were no more primitive men.

The plain truth was that it was *Earth* that was unique and alone. Earth had produced life. Not just self-styled Number One, not just Superprimate. No. He was a late arrival, the final guest.

("All these goodies just for *me!*")

Alone? Man?

Well, not quite.

There were a million different *species* of insects. (Get the spray-gun, Henry.) Twenty thousand kinds of fish. (I got one, I got one!) Nine thousand types of birds. (You can still see a stuffed owl in a museum.) Fifteen thousand species of mammals. (You take this arrow, see, and fit the string into the notch . . .)

Alone? Sure, except for the kangaroos and bandicoots, shrews and skunks, bats and elephants, armadillos and rabbits, pigs and foxes, raccoons and whales, beavers and lions, moose and mice, oryx and otter and opossum—

Oh well, *them*.

Yes.

They too had come from the earth. Incredible, each of them. Important? Only if you happened to think that the only known life in the universe was important.

Man didn't think so. Not him.

Not the old perfected end-product of evolution.

He didn't kill them all, of course. He hadn't been around that long. The dinosaurs had managed to become extinct without his help. There were others.

He did pretty well, though. He could be efficient, give him that.

He started early. Remember the ground sloth, the mammoth, the mastodon? You don't? Odd.

He kept at it. He was remarkably objective about it, really. He murdered his own kin as readily as the others. The orang had gone down the tube when Sam was a boy, the gorilla and the chimp and the gibbon a little later.

Sorry about that, gang.

In time, he got them all. It was better than in the old days. He took no risks, dug no traps, fired no guns. He simply crowded them out. When there were billions upon billions of naked apes stacked in layers over the earth, there was no room for anything else.

Goodbye, Old Paint.

So long, Rover.

Farewell, Kitty-cat.

Nothing personal, you understand.

All in the name of humanity. What higher motive can there be?

This is a defense?

What in hell did Sam do?

In hell, he did this:

Sam Gregg decided that mankind could not be saved. Not *should* not (although Sam, it must be confessed, did not get all choked up at the thought of human flesh) but *could* not. It was too late, too late when Sam was born. Man had poisoned his world and there were no fresh Earths.

Man could not survive on other planets, not without drastic genetic modifications.

And man would not change, not voluntarily.

After all, he was perfect, wasn't he?

That left the animals. Earth's other children, the ones pushed aside. The dumb ones. The losers. The powerless.

You might call it the art of the possible.

Did they matter? If they were the only life in the universe? Who knew? Who decided?

Well, there was Sam. A nut, probably. Still, he could play God as well as the next man. He had the money.

Pick a world, then. Not Mars. Too close, and there were still those ex-human beings running around there. Don't want to interfere with *them*.

Sam chose Titan, the sixth moon of Saturn. It was plenty big enough; it had a diameter of 3550 miles. It had an atmosphere of sorts, mostly methane. He liked the name.

Besides, think of the view.

It was beyond human engineering skill to convert Titan into a replica of Mother Earth in her better days. Tough, but that's the way the spheroid rebounds.

However, with atomic power generated on Titan a great deal could be done. It was, in fact, titanic.

The life-support pods—enormous energy shields—made it possible to create pockets in which breathable air could be born. It just required heat and water and chemical triggers and doctored plants—

A few little things.

A bit of the old technological razzle-dazzle.

Men could not live there, even under the pods. Neither could the animals that had once roamed the earth.

Sam's animals were different, though. He cut them to fit. That was one thing about genetics. When you knew enough about it, you could make alterations. Not many, perhaps. But enough.

Getting the picture?

Sam did not line the critters up two by two and load them into the Ark. (Noah, indeed.) He could not save them all. Some were totally gone, some were too delicate, some were outside the range of Sam's compassion. (Who needs a million kinds of bugs?) He did what he could, within the time he had.

He sent sex cells, sperm and ova, one hundred sets for each species. (Was that what was in the box? Yes, Junior.) Animals learn some things, some more than others, but most of what they do is born into them. Instinct, if you like. There was a staggering amount of information in that little box.

The problem was to get it out.

Parents have their uses, sometimes.

But robots will do, if you build them right. You can build a long, long program into a computer. You can stockpile food for a few years.

So—get the joint ready. Then bring down the ship and reseal the pods. Activate the mechanisms. Fertilize the eggs. Subdivide the zygotes. Put out the incubators. Fill the pens.

And turn 'em loose.

Look out, world.

That was what Sam Gregg did with his money.

They didn't actually execute him, the good people of Earth. There was not even a formal trial. They just confiscated what was left of his money and put him away in a Nice Place with the other crazies.

It would be pleasant to report that Sam died happy and that his dust was peaceful in its urn. In fact, Sam was sorry to go and he was even a little bitter.

If he could have known somehow, he might—or might not—have been more pleased.

Millions of lonely miles from the dead earth, she floated there in the great nothing. Beneath the shimmering pods that would last for thousands of years, a part of her was cool rather than cold, softer than the naked rocks, flushed with green.

Saturn hovered near the horizon, white and frozen and moonlike.

The ancient lifeways acted out their tiny dramas, strange under an alien sky. They had changed little, most of them.

There was one exception.

It might have been the radiation.

Then again, the raccoon had always been a clever animal. He had adroit hands, and he could use them. He had alert eyes, a quick intelligence. He could learn things, and on occasion he could pass on what he knew.

Within ten generations, he had fashioned a crude chopping tool out of flaked stone.

Within twenty, he had built a fire.

That beat man's record by a considerable margin, and the point was not lost on those who watched.

A short time later, the dog showed up, out in the shadows cast by the firelight. He whined. He thumped his shaggy tail. He oozed friendship.

The raccoons ignored him for a few nights. They huddled together, dimly proud of what they had done. They thought it over.

Eventually, one of the raccoons threw him a bloody bone, and the dog came in.

Don't like the ending? A trifle stark?

Is there no way we can communicate with them from out of the past? Can't we say something, a few words, now that we are finished? Ah, man. Ever the wishful thinker. Still talking. Sam had tried. He was human; he made the gesture.

There was a small plaque still visible on the outside of the silent ship that had brought them here. It was traditional in spaceflights, but Sam had done it anyhow.

It could not be read, of course.

It could not be deciphered, ever.

But it was there.

It said the only words that had seemed appropriate to Sam:

Good luck, old friends.

Afterword:

I won't write an editorial. I have already cheerfully sinned: there is a message in my story. If you didn't receive it, look out your window. Or pry open the lid on your coffin.

What triggers a story? Harlan triggered this one. If he had not asked for it, I probably would not have written it, at least not now. So he is to blame.

But why this particular story? I can't explain, of course. No writer can. You might be interested in a few personal notes:

It is early in September, 1969. I've just come back from a month in the mountains of Colorado. I consider myself a trout fisherman, dry flies only. (I don't keep many of them; I return them to the streams. Cheers.) I walked a lot, through country that was almost deserted twenty years ago. I can testify that there are few streams so remote that someone has not tossed a beer can into them. Trailers are everywhere, a pox on the land. Kleenex hangs from the bushes, the final mark of man. Beaver dams are ripped apart for sport. Trees are slashed with initials. There are even, so help me, Development Schemes. Ain't nature keen?

When I was in Kenya a few years ago, I did a little demographic work with just one tribe. Back in 1850, the first explorer in the area (a missionary type named Krapf) estimated that there were about 70,000 Kamba. A bit later, in 1911, the British took a kind of a census. There were 230,000 Kamba. As of right now, the figure is pushing 900,000. This, mind you, is on the same land area. You should see it.

I saw the pictures from Mars. You did too. It does not look one hell of a lot like Barsoom.

The summer is ending and soon the cold winds will blow. When fall comes, we feed the raccoons on our porch. They have to eat a fair amount before winter. They look at me and I look at them. There will be fewer of them this year, and more of them will be hurt and dragging shattered feet. Bulldozers have torn their environment apart. Old men set traps and the kids blaze away with popguns.

This morning, driving to work and trailing exhaust fumes, I saw raw sewage from an overflow line dumped into the lake. Had enough? Me too. I hope someone reads my story, and doesn't like it.

—Chad Oliver, 1969