

Diluvium by Steven Utley

For the past few years, Mr. Utley has been focusing his efforts on a series of stories about the folks who travel back to the Silurian Era to study the days when trilobites ruled the Earth. The muddy plains of the distant past prove to be a great backdrop for stories that are both timely and timeless. In this new one, modern ideologies clash by night on a darkling evaporite basin. (Note to editor: if you ever get your hands on a time machine, item #1 on your agenda should be going back to apologize to Matthew Arnold for writing that line.)

*In the here and now, Mr. Utley reports that his most recent book is a collection entitled *The Beasts of Love and another collection, Where or When, is due out soon.**

* * * *

The Paleozoic sun rose with its usual suddenness, and Jack started awake when light touched his face. Sarah had left the flap turned back when she went out. Through the open end, he looked down a long, stony slope, onto a broad streambed. The rocks glistened from the previous evening's rain. The difference of a few meters of altitude and the absence of any plant life taller than a few centimeters allowed him, by the mere lifting of his head, to see far downstream, where the ancient eroded terrain, surrendering all pretense, became a hazy peneplain. The river threaded its languid way across the flatland to the limit of his vision. He watched the sky lighten to gray-blue. He could hear Sarah moving around outside.

Jack got up and washed his face with tepid water from the basin on the camp table. The aroma of coffee hung in the still air. He said, "Good morning," and kissed Sarah on the cheek.

"Enjoy the sunshine while it lasts," she said as she poured coffee into a tin mug and handed it over. "The weather station says we're in for more rain. More and then some. A line of thunderstorms coming in."

"Wouldn't know it to look at the sky."

"Check out that dark line along the horizon."

"Well, dang."

"Our mysterious visitor's still over there." Sarah nodded toward the opposite wall of the valley. The previous evening, they had been preparing to turn in when they saw the flicker of a flashlight in the distance.

"Where're the binoculars?"

"There behind you."

Jack peered through the binoculars but could see nothing.

"It's just one person," Sarah said, "I'm pretty sure. He's right by the streambed." She pointed. "See it?"

"Your eyesight's better than mine. Now who else could be here?"

"I thought at first it might be one of Van Thorp's people. They're supposed to be somewhere just north of here."

"They would've called or come on over."

Sarah nodded. "I gave him a buzz already, and he says all of his people are present and accounted for."

"Whoever it is should've come over and said hello."

"Would you try to cross that streambed at night?"

"Good point. I'll ask the frau berdirektor at base camp."

"Satellite should be overhead."

Jack picked up the phone, punched buttons, and said, "Ruth," and after a moment the voice at the other end said, "Why, Jack! What can I do for you?"

"We seem to have a stray person in our valley. Van Thorp says it's not one of his people. Any idea who it could be?"

"Let me check. Call you back in a second."

The second dragged into minutes. Finally, Jack shrugged and put the phone down and got to work; for several days he and Sarah had been collecting fossils along the ridge, a beautiful Cambrian outcrop. The morning passed. It was noon before Ruth called back.

"If it isn't some maverick of Van Thorp's," she told Jack, "I don't know who it can possibly be. There's not supposed to be anybody else in your area."

"Well, whoever it is," Jack said, glancing at the gathering overcast, "is going to get washed all the way downriver to you when this storm breaks. He's dumped his kit right on the bank of the stream, well below the highwater mark."

"Can you signal him?"

"We haven't caught so much as a glimpse of him. Guess I'd better wander over and save the idiot's life. Besides, I always like to know who my neighbors are. Bye, Ruth."

"Keep me posted, Jack. Bye."

Sarah stood looking up at the gathering overcast. "Sky's definitely getting darker. You don't have very much time."

"Let's make sure we're still all lashed down. Then I'll go check out our neighbor."

"You'd better step on it, then. In fact, why don't you go on over now? I can take care of everything here. That storm's coming fast."

"All right."

"Maybe you should take the first-aid kit." He looked at her; she shrugged. "Just in case."

Jack put the first-aid kit into his knapsack and, without preamble, set off down the slope. As he approached it, the streambed began to take on the appearance of a stretch of very bad two-lane blacktop. Water-borne sand and pebbles had eroded away softer rock, creating a network of narrow, sinuous channels, some as much as a meter wide and a meter deep. Dark turbid water gurgled in the hollows; Jack could see it as well as hear it as he stepped carefully from one stony rim to the next. The footing, treacherous enough by day, would have been impossible during the night.

He gained the opposite slope and called out loudly. A rolled-up sleeping bag and a knapsack lay at the base of a pile of broken rock. He heard a weak cry, "Over here," and walked around the rocks and saw

a long, lean man sitting on the ground, his back supported against a boulder. The man wore a khaki safari suit, now much the worse for wear. He had removed one boot; Jack could see for himself that the ankle was swollen. The man gave him a tired grin and said, "My prayers are answered."

"Is your ankle broken?" Jack said, dropping his pack.

The man shook his head. "Twisted it in the dark."

"Have you been lying here all this time?" Jack asked as he knelt and examined the ankle. "We saw your light last night. We're camped up on the opposite ridge."

"I didn't know anybody was around."

"Still." Jack dug the first-aid kit out of his knapsack. "You could've used your phone. Anyone in range would've answered your distress signal."

"Phone's on the blink. I don't know what the problem is. By the way, my name's Farlough. Jim Farlough."

Jack introduced himself, adding, "I'm with the P.R.I. team."

"Eh?" Farlough winced as Jack began to wrap his ankle.

"The Paleontological Research Institute. Cornell." Jack suddenly sat back on his heels. "Farlough? James Farlough? *The Doctor Farlough? Advocates for Biblical Creation?*"

Farlough grinned. "My reputation precedes me."

Before Jack could reply, his earphone filled with static, then Sarah said, "Just checking with you. Find our stranger?"

He touched his ear to show the other man that he had a call. "Yes. It's Doctor Farlough himself. From the A.B.C.s."

"What?"

"Doctor James Farlough. As in the A.B.C.s. You know."

Sarah did not respond immediately. Then: "Jack, you're kidding me."

"Fraid not."

"*The Farlough? The A.B.C.s?*"

"Fraid so."

"What's he doing here?"

"For starters, he's sprained his ankle."

"But how'd he get here? And--"

"Ask Ruth. I'll call you back, Sarah." Jack lowered his hand. To Farlough he said, "Did you come upriver on the supply barge?"

"No, over the ridge."

"Just you, by yourself?"

"Of course not. My group's camped two, three days' journey from here. Off thataway," and Farlough jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

"The only thing off 'thataway' is an evaporite basin the size of California. If your people aren't equipped any better than you, they're all going to die out there."

"Give us some credit, please. I thought this region looked promising."

The dark clouds had moved in quickly while they talked, and a few enormous raindrops began to spatter the dust around them. One struck Jack on the cheek with stinging force.

"Jack," Sarah said in his ear, "talk to me."

"I'm here."

"I couldn't raise Ruth."

"Take care of yourself, I'll be okay. I've got to stick with Doctor Farlough for the time being." He broke the connection and told Farlough, "I'm not going to try to lug you across the streambed. We'd fall in a pothole for sure. We've got to get to higher ground on this side, and right away. I've seen this stream in flood." He stepped back and surveyed the prospects, then pointed to a jumble of large boulders. "We should be able to stay out of the worst of it up there."

Jack gathered Farlough's meager equipment, stooped and got the man's arm over his shoulder, and drew him up.

"This is going to be like running a three-legged sack race," he said, "with an anvil tied around my neck."

They crept slowly and painfully up the slope, with frequent pauses for rest. Raindrops smacked them with increasing force, until the bottom seemed simply to drop out of the sky. They were soaked and half-blinded when, at last, they found a sheltered space among the boulders that barely accommodated them. The howling wind defeated speech. Jack dropped the gear and lowered Farlough as gently as possible. Then he removed a heatpot from Farlough's equipment and got it going and stuffed the rest of the equipment into a dry crevice. The heatpot put out just enough light to cast their shadows on the enclosing rocks and just enough warmth to make them uncomfortable in their sodden clothing as they watched the storm. There was nothing else to do. Lightning flashes illuminated a black, endlessly writhing torrent at the bottom of the slope. Jack did not worry about Sarah but wished that he were snuggling with her in their sleeping bag. He was not sure afterward, but he thought he dozed.

After what seemed like a long time, the wind abruptly fell off and the rain began to come down at a steeper angle. Jack could just hear himself when he asked Farlough, "Are you hungry? I always travel with a pocketful of crackers and a chocolate bar."

Farlough absently shook his head. He seemed entranced by the storm. After a couple of minutes, he said, "This doesn't look like it's going to let up anytime soon."

"Are you comfortable there?"

"Yes. Thank you. Thank you for coming to my rescue. There are coffeepaks in my knapsack there. Be just the thing."

Jack rummaged in the knapsack and pulled out a coffeepak. As he poured water from his canteen into

the pack and set it on the heatpot, Farlough said, "You know, it's exciting to think that we are, this moment, within a few years of the end of the Noachian flood described in Genesis. In the aftermath of the deluge, of course, there must have been localized--"

Jack sat back and said, "Just why are you here in the Paleozoic?"

Farlough looked around at him now, and his mouth twisted drolly. "For the same reason everyone else is. To find out things for myself."

"Looking for Adam and Eve?"

"Not at all. Adam and Eve have already been dead for quite some time. We are, as I said, actually in the immediate aftermath of the great global inundation described in the Book of Genesis. Between the expulsion from the Garden of Eden and the confusion of tongues."

"Do you really believe that?"

"No less completely and absolutely than you believe life just started from chemicals combining at random."

"Chemicals don't combine at random. They combine in very particular and predictable ways. Two atoms of hydrogen plus one atom of oxygen always equal water." Jack indicated the simmering coffeepak between them with a flick of an index finger. "Heat water in a coffeepak and you always get--coffee. And so on."

Farlough gestured negligently, as though the point was beside the point. "We are here--my colleagues and I--to prove the truth of diluvial geology, which states that the fossil record and almost all modern landforms were created by the waters of the Noachian deluge."

"You thinking of interviewing Noah himself?"

"Noah's story has already been written. Unfortunately, it doesn't include visitors from the future."

Jack laughed shortly. "Do you suppose he's still floating around in the Ark, or is he already stuck on that mountaintop?"

In reply, the other man only smiled. Jack decanted half of the coffeepak's contents into a metal cup and handed that over to Farlough, who accepted it with a nod of thanks. They sat and sipped for the better part of a minute.

Then Farlough said, "Our *hope* is that the repopulation of the world has already begun. It would be fascinating to observe the rise of the civilization that built the Tower of Babel. But all we need to prove our case is to find just one kind of creature that the conservative scientific establishment says shouldn't be here in the so-called Paleozoic age."

"You mean besides us anomalous humans."

"Anything that doesn't belong." Farlough drained his cup and set it beside his thigh; he braced his arms and shifted his fundament slightly, grimacing as he did so, then, apparently more comfortable than he had been, settled back against the rock, crossed his hands over his belly, and regarded Jack with an expression of tolerant amusement.

"You call this age the Paleozoic," he said, "your physicists prattle about spacetime anomalies and uncertainty principles and the infinite replication of worlds. *We* believe that God created the so-called

anomaly so that we could at long last--but once and for all--prove the fallacy of the uniformitarian and evolutionist doctrines so dear to the scientific establishment. That establishment did everything it could to keep us from coming here. It took the combined efforts of right-minded public officials and private citizens to finally get us here. Private citizens raised the money, too."

"Well, if we establishment types start turning up anomalous artifacts, we'll know who to blame. I've never known a creationist who was above faking evidence."

"What sort of fake evidence do you have in mind, and--" Farlough held his elongate arms out to the sides, his fingertips brushing the walls of their shelter "--where do you suppose I have secreted it on my person?" He lowered his arms and crossed his hands over his belly again. "Not that there haven't been some fraudulent claims made in the name of diluvial geology, of course. Those so-called man tracks in that dinosaur trackway in Texas haunt us just as you establishment scientists are haunted by--" he gave Jack a cheerfully malicious smile "--Piltdown man."

"That crack hasn't drawn blood in a long time," Jack said mildly. "Like all scientific frauds, Piltdown was eventually found out--by scientists."

"Nevertheless, the incidence of fraud among creationists is nothing like as great as among establishment scientists. Your whole system is a fraud, because of what you omit from it. Even when evidence of intelligent design literally crawls in front of you. I refer of course to one of the most enduring arguments against the theory of evolution--the bombardier beetle!"

Jack laughed out loud. "Ah, yes! Our old friend, the bombardier beetle! You know, when I was a kid, I saw the animated feature version of that allegedly beloved children's classic, *Bomby the Bombardier Beetle*."

"Clearly you didn't profit from the viewing."

"On the contrary. I learned an awful lot from it. I learned the beetle's ability to fart fire is certain proof of a creator. I learned bombardier beetles are cute, talk in squeaky voices, and somehow are cognizant of the Bible and its import--though it wasn't clear why they should be, since they don't have souls."

Farlough smirked. "You think I'm a narrow-minded, ill-read boob or even an illiterate, don't you? I am in fact an omnivorous, voracious reader. I read *Bomby* at the appropriate age. I have since read Tolstoy, Kafka, and much else--even Darwin. Know thy enemy. I see by your expression you don't believe me. Very well, let's take Hazel May Rue's book, since you brought it up. The scientific establishment has always dismissed *Bomby* as mere anti-Darwin propaganda."

"You can hardly blame us. It *was* published by the old Institute for Creation Research."

"Yet it addresses precisely the same issues," Farlough said, "that concern Kafka--arguably the most twentieth-century of writers--in his famous 'Metamorphosis.' Gregor Samsa awakes one morning to find himself transformed--evolved or more accurately devolved, though Kafka doesn't use either term--into a gigantic insect. Gregor finds his new body ill-suited to the demands of survival, perishes miserably, and is swept out in the garbage. *Bomby* embodies the creationist idea that everything *is* as it was created, thus, there can be no change--no evolution. But *Bomby* also presents the idea that the agent of this creation, unlike the unidentified agent of change in Kafka's tale, is beneficent and knows best for all its--*His*, God's--creatures. Gregor Samsa necessarily fails to survive because his change is unnatural, literally ungodly, whereas Bomby, as his elders explain to him, will survive because God has given him survival traits."

Jack, who had listened open-mouthed throughout this monologue, shook his head and said in a

dumbfounded and yet grudgingly admiring tone of voice, "Now I've heard goddamn everything." He leaned against the most comfortable portion of rock behind him. "Not that I'm conceding a thing, but I'm not going to argue flood geology with you anymore. I'm going to take a nap."

"I'm just trying to pass the time."

"Try passing it in silent communion with the elements. I'd argue with you some more if we were back home and you were trying to convince the school board to put *Bomby* on the required reading list. But we're here in Paleozoic time, hundreds of millions of years from home--"

"A few thousands," Farlough said good-naturedly.

"Whatever. Anyway, the sound of rain activates the sleep center in my brain. Part of my inheritance from some tiny insectivore."

Jack closed his eyes. Eventually, he did fall asleep.

The rain had subsided to a drizzle when he snapped back into wakefulness. Across from him, Farlough slept with his chin on his breast. Jack tried to call Sarah and got only a painful earful of static. He put the phone away and fumed for a while and then slept again. He awoke the second time to find the clouds had parted to either side of a bright full moon that poured down milky light. The phone still was not working, and the stream was still a roiling, hissing barrier. Across from him, Farlough awoke with a shudder. He stretched and looked out the mouth of their shelter and said, "What a big beautiful moon."

"I wish it was a new moon and the stars were out," Jack growled. "Then you could point out the north star to me."

Farlough regarded him with suspicion. "I'm not an astronomer."

"Oh, come on. Everybody over the age of six knows where the north star's supposed to be." Farlough did not rise to the challenge. "Y'know, there's this old sci-fi story--there's a planet with more than one sun, where night falls only once every few thousand years. When it does and all the stars come out, everybody goes crazy at the sight of them, and civilization collapses."

"Ah." Farlough nodded. "And you think the sight of the strange Paleozoic night sky should make me go crazy as well?"

"No, I think you're already crazy. But at least admit the sky here is strange. Notice how much bigger the moon looks? That's because it's closer to the Earth than it will be in Cenozoic time."

"No," Farlough said, "it looks bigger simply because it looks bigger. The deluge worked profound changes on the world. The atmosphere creates optical distortions, and--"

"I give up."

Jack tried several more times to call Sarah. Finally, he gave that up, too, and prepared a meal for Farlough and himself. They spoke little. The moon passed, and the sound of the racing stream lulled Jack back to sleep.

He was stiff and slightly chilled when he awoke for the third time. Sunlight slanted through gaps in his shelter. The heatpot was missing. So was Farlough.

Jack pushed himself up and stepped into the steaming morning. Almost at once the phone beeped.

"Jack," Sarah said. "Thank goodness. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. But *he's* missing, and so's all his stuff."

"I haven't seen him, and I've been watching your side ever since the sun came up."

"Then where'd he go?"

"Where *could* he go?"

"Nowhere far away. Not with that ankle of his. I'm stuck on this side until the water goes down, so I may as well look for him. Any word yet from Ruth?"

"No. Still can't get through. Maybe the storm fried something down there."

"Keep trying. If you do get through, ask about a guy named Farlough and a creationist expedition. I'm going to look for our stray."

By that afternoon, Jack was able to cross the stream, picking his way carefully from the rim of one channel to the next. He trudged up the slope to the camp. He was tired and muddy, but Sarah embraced him tightly. She had coffee and hot food waiting, too. He dropped his knapsack, sat down wearily, and said, "No place like home."

"No sign of him?"

"None. Nothing. Not a trace."

"It gets weirder. I managed to raise the base a little while ago. Ruth says there's nobody here by the name of Farlough, and there's certainly no creationist expedition."

Jack looked at her solemnly. "This is starting to creep me out. You can't sneak so much as a paper clip through the anomaly. Never mind a creationist. Never mind a whole pack of creationists."

Sarah returned his look. "Are we imagining this?"

"No. Of course not." He dug the first-aid kit out of his knapsack and snapped it open. "I wrapped his ankle for him. The bandage is gone. He's gone. All his stuff is gone. *Where?*"

"What're you going to tell Ruth? You know she'll want to follow through on this."

"I haven't the faintest idea. I really don't."

Later, they gazed up at the night sky from their sleeping bag, and after some time had passed without words, Sarah, with her head against Jack's and her arm draped across his chest, said, "Maybe he was from some other place."

"What other place could he be from?"

"One of those alternate universes. Maybe the spacetime anomaly isn't just the interface between our own time and this prehistoric age. Maybe there really are infinite multiple universes like the physicists talk about. Each slightly different or a whole lot different from all the others. And maybe this man you met slipped through from one of them."

"Sar, we can't give Ruth a story like that. She'd have us sent home in straitjackets."

"What else can we give her? He was here, and now he's gone."

"Gone *where*?"

"So maybe," Sarah said after several seconds, "he slipped back into some other universe. His own universe. And it's everything the creationists say this one is. It's cozy and confined and only six thousand years old, and there's no evolution, and the Sun goes around the Earth. God--*a* god, *some* god--is in his heaven there. Laws of physics there are apt to be suspended without warning, according to this deity's whim."

"Maybe I should send *you* home in a straitjacket."

"I'm just supposing. In our own universe, all Farlough and other creationists can do is fume about the physical laws governing it. And be, I don't know, scared, I guess is the word. Scared of its vastness and implacability and its utter indifference. But the unpredictable physical laws in that other universe let this other Farlough come through our universe for a little while."

Jack shivered in spite of himself. He said, "Frankly, it sounds like a really terrifying place to live."

They lay at the base of the beautiful Cambrian outcrop and looked up at the moon and the stars, and the moon and the stars looked down at them, and at last one of them murmured to the other, "Well, I'm glad we're right where we are."