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[115]

THE HILLS OF HOME

by Alfred Coppel

“Normality” is a myth; we're all a little neurotic, and the study of neurosis has been able to classify the general types of disturbance which are most common. And some types (providing the subject is not suffering so extreme a case as to have crossed the border into psychosis) can be not only useful, but perhaps necessary for certain kinds of work....

The river ran still and deep, green and gray in the eddies with the warm smell of late summer rising out of the slow water. Madrone and birch and willow, limp in the evening quiet, and the taste of smouldering leaves....

It wasn't the Russian River. It was the Sacred Iss. The sun had touched the gem-encrusted cliffs by the shores of the Lost Sea of Korus and had vanished, leaving only the stillness of the dusk and the lonely cry of shore birds.

From downstream came the faint sounds of music. It might have been a phonograph playing in one of the summer cabins with names like Polly Ann Roost and Patches and Seventh Heaven,

but to Kimmy it was the hated cry of the Father of Therns calling the dreadful Plant Men to their feast of victims borne into [116] this Valley Dor by the mysterious Iss.

Kimmy shifted the heavy Martian pistol into his left hand and checked his harness. A soft smile touched his lips. He was well armed; there was nothing he had to fear from the Plant Men. His bare feet turned up-stream, away from the sound of the phonograph, toward the shallows in the river that would permit him to cross and continue his search along the base of the Golden Cliffs—

The sergeant's voice cut through the pre-dawn darkness. "Oh, three hundred, Colonel.... Briefing in thirty minutes."

Kimball tried to see him in the black gloom. He hadn't been asleep. It would have been hard to waste this last night that way. Instead he had been remembering. "All right, Sergeant," he said. "Coming up."

He swung his feet to the bare boards and sat for a moment, wishing he hadn't had to give up smoking. He could almost imagine the textured taste of the cigaret on his tongue.

Oddly enough, he wasn't tired. He wasn't excited, either. And that was much stranger. He stood up and opened the window to look out into the desert night. Overhead the stars were brilliant and cold. Mars gleamed russet-colored against the sable sky. He smiled, remembering again. So long a road, he thought, from then to now.

Then he stopped smiling and turned away from the window. It hadn't been an easy path and what was coming up now was the hardest part. The goddam psychs were the toughest, always wanting him to bug out on the deal because of their brainwave graphs and word association tests and their Rorschach blots.

"You're a lonely man, Colonel Kimball——"

"Too much imagination could be bad for this job."

How could you sit there with pentothal in your veins and wires running out of your head and tell them about the still waters of Korus, or the pennons flying from the twin towers of Greater Helium or the way the tiny, slanting sun gleamed at dawn through the rigging of a flyer?

Kimball snapped on a light and looked at his watch. 0310. Zero minus one fifty. He opened the steel locker and began to dress.

The water swirled warm and velvety around his ankles. There, behind that madrone, Kimmy thought. Was that a Plant Man? The thick white trunk and the grasping, blood-sucking arms——

The radium pistol's weight made his wrist ache, but he clung to it tightly, knowing that he [117] could never cope with a Plant Man with a sword alone. The certainty of coming battle made him smile a little, the way John Carter would smile if he were here in the Valley Dor ready to attack the white Therns and their Plant Men.

For a moment, Kimmy felt a thrill of apprehension. The deepening stillness of the river was closing in around him. Even the music from the phonograph was very, very faint. Above him, the great vault of the sky was changing from pink to gray to dusty blue. A bright star was breaking through the curtain of fading light. He knew it was Venus, the Evening Star. But let it be Earth, he thought. And instead of white, let it be the color of an emerald.

He paused in midstream, letting the warm water riffle around his feet. Looking up at the green beacon of his home planet, he thought: I've left all that behind me. It was never really what I wanted. Mars is where I belong. With my friends, Tars Tarkas the great Green Jeddak, and Carter, the Warlord, and all the beautiful brave people.

The phonograph sang with Vallee's voice: "Cradle me where southern skies can watch me with a million eyes——"

Kimmy's eyes narrowed and he waded stealthily across the sacred river. That would be Matai Shang, the Father of Holy Therns—spreading his arms to the sunset and standing safely on his high balcony in the Golden Cliffs while the Plant Men gathered to attack the poor pilgrims Iss had brought to this cursed valley.

"Sing me to sleep, lullaby of the leaves"—the phonograph sang. Kimmy stepped cautiously ashore and moved into the cover of a clump of willows. The sky was darkening fast. Other stars were shining through. There wasn't much time left.

Kimball stood now in the bright glare of the briefing shack, a strange figure in blood-colored plastic. The representatives of the press had been handed the mimeographed releases by the PRO and now they sat in silence, studying the red figure of the man who was to ride the rocket.

They were thinking: Why him? Out of all the scores of applicants—because there are always applicants for a sure-death job—and all the qualified pilots, why this one?

The Public Relations Officer was speaking now, reading from the mimeographed release as though these civilians couldn't be trusted to get the sparse information given them straight without his help, given grudgingly and without expression.

[118] Kimball listened, only half aware of what was being said. He watched the faces of the men sitting on the rows of folding chairs, saw their eyes like wounds, red from the early morning hour and the murmuring reception of the night before in the Officers' Club. They are wondering how *I* feel, he was thinking. And asking themselves why *I* want to go.

On the dais nearby, listening to the PRO, but watching Kimball, sat Steinhart, the team analyst. Kimball returned his steady gaze thinking: They start out burning with desire to cure the human mind and end with the shadow of the images. The words become the fact, the therapy the aim. What could Steinhart know of longing? No, he thought, I'm not being fair. Steinhart was only doing his job.

The big clock on the back wall of the briefing shack said three fifty-five. Zero minus one hour and five minutes.

Kimball looked around the room at the pale faces, the open mouths. What have I to do with you now, he thought?

Outside, the winter night lay cold and still over the Base. Floodlights spilled brilliance over the dunes and the scrubby earth, high fences casting laced shadows across the burning white expanses of ferroconcrete.

As they filed out of the briefing shack, Steinhart climbed into the command car with Kimball. Chance or design? Kimball wondered. The others, he noticed, were leaving both of them alone.

“We haven't gotten on too well, have we, Colonel?” Steinhart observed in a quiet voice.

Kimball thought: He's pale skinned and very blond. What is it that he reminds me of? Shouldn't there be a diadem on his forehead? He smiled vaguely into the rumbling night. That's what it was. Odd that he should have forgotten. How many rocket pilots, he wondered, were weaned on Burroughs' books? And how many remembered now that the Thern priests all wore yellow wings and a circlet of gold with some fantastic jewel on their forehead?

“We've done as well as could be expected,” he said.

Steinhart reached for a cigaret and then stopped, remembering that Kimball had had to give them up because of the flight. Kimball caught the movement and half-smiled.

“I didn't try to kill the assignment for you, Kim,” the psych said.

“It doesn't matter now.”

“No, I suppose not.”

“You just didn't think I was the man for the job.”

“Your record is good all the way. You know that,” Steinhart [119] said. “It's just some of the things——”

Kimball said: “I talked too much.”

“You had to.”

“You wouldn’t think my secret life was so dangerous, would you,” the Colonel said smiling.

“You were married, Kim. What happened?”

“More therapy?”

“I’d like to know. This is for me.”

Kimball shrugged. “It didn’t work. She was a fine girl—but she finally told me it was no go. ‘You don’t live here’ was the way she put it.”

“She knew you were a career officer; what did she expect——?”

“That isn’t what she meant. You know that.”

“Yes,” the psych said slowly. “I know that.”

They rode in silence, across the dark Base, between the concrete sheds and the wooden barracks. Overhead, the stars like dust across the sky. Kimball, swathed in plastic, a fantastic figure not of earth, watched them wheel across the clear, deep night.

“I wish you luck, Kim,” Steinhart said. “I mean that.”

“Thanks.” Vaguely, as though from across a deep and widening gulf.

“What will you do?”

“You know the answers as well as I,” the Colonel said impatiently. “Set up the camp and wait for the next rocket. If it comes.”

“In two years.”

“In two years,” the plastic figure said. Didn’t he know that it didn’t matter?

He glanced at his watch. Zero minus fifty-six minutes.

“Kim,” Steinhart said slowly. “There’s something you should know about. Something you really should be prepared for.”

“Yes?” Disinterest in his voice now, Steinhart noted clinically. Natural under the circumstances? Or neurosis building up already?

“Our tests showed you to be a schizoid—well-compensated, of course. You know there’s no such

thing as a *normal* human being. We all have tendencies toward one or more types of psychoses. In your case the symptoms are an overly active imagination and in some cases an inability to distinguish reality from—well, fancy.”

Kimball turned to regard the psych coolly. “What’s reality, Steinhart? Do *you* know?”

The analyst flushed. “No.”

“I didn’t think so.”

“You lived pretty much in your mind when you were a child,” Steinhart went on doggedly. “You were a solitary, a lonely child.”

[120] Kimball was watching the sky again.

Steinhart felt futile and out of his depth. “We know so little about the psychology of space-flight, Kim——”

Silence. The rumble of the tires on the packed sand of the road, the murmur of the command car’s engine, spinning oilily, and lit by tiny sunbright flashes deep in the hollows of the hot metal.

“You’re glad to be leaving, aren’t you——” Steinhart said finally. “Happy to be the first man to try for the planets——”

Kimball nodded absently, wishing the man would be quiet. Mars, a dull rusty point of light low on the horizon, seemed to beckon.

They topped the last hillock and dropped down into the lighted bowl of the launching site. The rocket towered, winged and monstrously checkered in white and orange, against the first flickerings of the false dawn.

Kimmy saw the girls before they saw him. In their new, low waisted middies and skirts, they looked strange and out of place standing by the pebbled shore of the River Iss.

They were his sisters, Rose and Margaret. Older than he at fifteen and seventeen. But they walked by the river and into danger. Behind him he could hear the rustling sound of the Plant Men as the evening breeze came up.

“Kimm-eeee—”

They were calling him. In the deepening dusk their voices carried far down the river.
“Kimm-eeeeeeee—”

He knew he should answer them, but he did not. Behind him he could hear the awful Plant Men approaching. He shivered with delicious horror.

He stood very still, listening to his sisters talking, letting their voices carry down to where he hid from the dangers of the Valley Dor.

“Where is that little brat, anyway?”

“He always wanders off just at dinnertime and then we have to find him——”

“Playing with that old faucet——” Mimicry. “My rad-ium pis-tol——”

“Cracked——just cracked. Oh, where IS he, anyway? Kimm-eee, you AN-swer!”

Something died in him. It wasn't a faucet, it WAS a radium pistol. He looked at his sisters with dismay. They weren't really his sisters. They were Therns, with their yellow hair and their pale skins. He and John Carter and Tars Tarkas had fought them many times, piling their bodies for barricades and weaving a flashing pattern of skillful swords in the shifting light of the two moons.

[121] *“Kimm-eee Mom's going to be mad at you! Answer us!”*

If only Tars Tarkas would come now. If only the great Green Jeddak would come splashing across the stream on his huge thout, his two swords clashing——

“He's up there in that clump of willows——hiding!”

“Kimmy! You come down here this instant!”

The Valley Dor was blurring, fading. The Golden Cliffs were turning into sandy, river-worn banks. The faucet felt heavy in his grimy hand. He shivered, not with horror now. With cold.

He walked slowly out of the willows, stumbling a little over the rocks.

He lay like an embryo in the viscera of the ship, protected and quite alone. The plastic sac contained him, fed him; and the rocket, silent now, coursed through the airless deep like a questing thought. Time was measured by the ticking of the telemeters and the timers, but Kimball slept insulated and complete.

And he dreamed.

He dreamed of that summer when the river lay still and deep under the hanging willows. He dreamed of his sisters, thin and angular creatures as he remembered them through the eyes of a nine-year-old——

And his mother, tall and shadowy, standing on the porch of the rented cottage and saying

exasperatedly: “*Why do you run off by yourself, Kimmy? I worry about you so—*”

And his sisters: “*Playing with his wooden swords and his radium pistol and never wanting to take his nose out of those awful books—*”

He dreamed of the low, beamed ceiling of the cottage, sweltering in the heat of the summer nights and the thick longing in his throat for red hills and a sky that burned deep blue through the long, long days and canals, clear and still. A land that he knew somehow never was, but which lived, for him, through some alchemy of the mind. He dreamed of Mars.

And Steinhart: “*What is reality, Kimmy?*”

The hours stretched into days, the days into months. Time wasn't. Time was a deep night and a starshot void. And dreams.

He awoke seldom. His tasks were simple. The plastic sac and the tender care of the ship were more real than the routine jobs of telemetering information back to the Base across the empty miles, across the rim of the world.

He dreamed of his wife. “*You don't live here, Kim.*”

She was right, of course. He [122] wasn't of earth. Never had been. My love is in the sky, he thought, filled with an immense satisfaction.

And time slipped by, the weeks into months; the sun dwindled and earth was gone. All around him lay the stunning star-dusted night.

He lay curled in the plastic womb when the ship turned. He awoke sluggishly and dragged himself into awareness.

“I've changed,” he thought aloud. “My face is younger; I feel different.”

The keening sound of air over the wings brought a thrill. Below him, a great curving disk of reds and browns and yellows. He could see dust storms raging and the heavy, darkened lines of the canals.

There was skill in his hands. He righted the rocket, balanced it. Began the tricky task of landing. It took all of his talent, all of his training. Ponderously, the ship settled into the iron sand; slowly, the internal fires died.

Kimball stood in the control room, his heart pounding. Slowly, the ports opened. Through the thick quartz he could see the endless plain. Reddish brown, empty. The basin of some long ago sea. The sky was a deep, burning blue with stars shining at midday at the zenith. It looked unreal, a painting of

unworldly quiet and desolation.

What is reality, Kimmy?

Steinhart was right, he thought vaguely. A tear streaked his cheek. He had never been so alone.

And then he imagined he saw something moving on the great plain. He scrambled down through the ship, past the empty fuel tanks and the lashed supplies. His hands were clawing desperately at the dogs of the outer valve. Suddenly the pressure jerked the hatch from his hands and he gasped at the icy air, his lungs laboring to breathe.

He dropped to one knee and sucked at the thin, frigid air. His vision was cloudy and his head felt light. But there *was* something moving on the plain.

A shadowy cavalcade.

Strange monstrous men on fantastic war-mounts, long spears and fluttering pennons. Huge golden chariots with scythes flashing on the circling hubs and armored giants, the figments of a long remembered dream——

He dropped to the sand and dug his hands into the dry powdery soil. He could scarcely see now, for blackness was flickering at the edges of his vision and his failing heart and lungs were near collapse.

Kimmm-eee!

[123] A huge green warrior on a gray monster of a toat was beckoning to him. Pointing toward the low hills on the oddly near horizon.

Kimmmm-eeee!

The voice was thin and distant on the icy wind. Kimball knew that voice. He knew it from long ago in the Valley Dor, from the shores of the Lost Sea of Korus where the tideless waters lay black and deep——

He began stumbling across the empty, lifeless plain. He knew the voice, he knew the man, and he knew the hills that he must reach, quickly now, or die.

They were the hills of home.

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The original page numbers from the magazine have been preserved.

The following errors have been corrected:

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