

What had caused the people of the crystal city to perish? And why had their remains disappeared so completely that not even their bones were left?

**ROOM WITH VIEW
BY ROBERT F. YOUNG**

THE PLANET was a shining sphere of crystalline cause and effect. It was the sound of glass chimes in a summer wind captured and set to architecture. It was the only child of a lonely star, and it was moonless. It was also dead.

Donant didn't know how long he'd been walking. An hour, perhaps. Maybe longer. There was a timelessness about the eternal streets and the endless edifices, and he'd left his watch in the ship, remembering only his compass. But the compass was by far the more important item: with its needle never deviating from the magnetic lode in the ship's heart, he could never get lost—not even in a city that covered an entire planet.

Not even in a dead city.

Donant was a cartographer and much of his life had been spent in the unexplored sectors of the galaxy where civilizations were rare and cities even rarer. Nevertheless he was used to cities. He knew the Cities of the Plane intimately—the metropolises of Mars and Venus and the collective edifices of Earth. But he was used to cities with limited boundaries, not cities that covered whole land masses and linked crystalline arms across seas. Moreover he was used to cities with people in them.

He came presently to a structure more striking than the others. Like them it was constructed of a crystallike material and seemed to have been cast from a single gigantic mold; but there was a quality about it that set it aside. Gazing up at the prismatic facade, Donant got the impression that the long dead architect had used an emotional rather than an architectural blueprint.

The facade transformed the afternoon sunlight into a trillion shifting rainbows. Poignant lines blended together to form a frozen waterfall of windows and balconies, cornices and ledges. The effect was dazzling. It was also tinselly. Donant wondered why.

Just before him was the entrance, a huge triangle cut into the base of the waterfall. There were no doors. Donant hesitated a moment, then climbed the crystalline stairs and entered the building.

The huge chamber into which he stepped should have awed him, but it didn't. The light of day seeping colorfully through the prismatic walls was abetted by a cluster of blazing lights suspended from the dome. In the center of the floor a lofty statue stood upon a square pedestal, and around the pedestal were circular rows of chairs. Beyond the chairs, balconies rose, tier on tier, to the point where the walls ended and the dome began. Everything—chairs, statue, walls, dome—was constructed of the same crystalline substance, everything was immaculate—and everything was dead.

A council room, Donant thought. Perhaps *the* council room.

He chose an aisle and walked down it to the pedestal. The chairs substantiated the evidence of the doors and windows of the other buildings he had passed: the race that had built the city had been humanoid and of approximately the same stature as Earthmen.

The pedestal turned out to be a speaker's platform as well as the base for the statue; steps were cut into it for the convenience of the speaker. Donant did not climb the steps. There was nothing he had to say, and even if there had been, there was no one to whom he could have said it. Instead he stood at the end of the aisle, gazing up at the statue.

The statue represented a woman, a beautiful woman. Alien though her beauty was, Donant was impressed by it. Her body was thin, but unmistakably mammalian. Her features were small, almost tiny, yet exquisite in their flawless perfection. She was wearing a simple white tunic and the exposed areas of her flesh were tinted—no, permeated—with the pink-gold flush of living human tissue. For a moment Donant almost forgot he was looking at a statue.

Her pose intrigued him. Her right arm hung gracefully at her side, but her left arm was raised, and suspended from her fragile fingers at a level with her eyes was a horizontal bar. Suspended from the bar, in turn, were two shallow cups, one at each end. The bar was slightly canted, and one of the cups was lower than the other.

Scales, Donant thought. Primitive scales.

He craned his neck to see their contents, but he was too close to the pedestal. He walked back up the aisle to the entrance, turned and tried again. The angle was still wrong: all he could see was a sparkle

in one scale and a flash of green in the other.

He found stairs that led to the balconies, climbed them. He went as high as he could, to the beginning of the dome itself. Then he looked at the scales again—this time their contents were clearly visible. In one of them, the lower, heavier one, was a dazzling crystalline cube. In the other, the one found wanting in the balance, was a green knife.

Curiosity had motivated Donant's landing. Extinct planetary cultures were none of his business. None of his official business, anyway. But he liked cultural problems, and he particularly liked this one. A dead city, a crystalline cube, and a green knife . . .

In the street again, walking, he attacked the problem. The planet was dead; therefore the inhabitants had either left it or perished on it. If the first alternative were the case, then they must have had space travel.

Donant shook his head. A race of people, in order to develop space travel, must have stepping stones. Its imagination has to mature gradually. Without the moon as the first stepping stone man might not have been able to reach Venus and Mars. Without Venus and Mars it was extremely doubtful if he could have reached Mercury and Pluto; and without the confidence that those first stepping stones gave him the prospect of traveling over four light years to Alpha Centauri would have overawed him, crippled his as yet immature imagination, and he would have gone on living on Earth, crowding himself into ever expanding cities, turning the energy that would have gone into the building of better and better spacecraft into the building of better and better buildings, into the creation of better and better building materials, till at last he found the ultimate material and with it, possibly, his justification for existence.

This planet had no moon. It was the only offspring of its sun, and the nearest star was forty-one light years away. No, Donant concluded, its inhabitants definitely had not had space travel.

That left alternative number two: the inhabitants had perished, every single one of them, and so completely that not even their bones remained.

Why?

Donant stared at the shining streets and the immaculate buildings. The gentle throb of entombed machines coursed rhythmically through the crystalline bricks beneath his feet. But the streets were as devoid of life as they were of dust, and the doors of the buildings were closed, the windows faceless.

Plague? *Weltschmerz*? Moral decay? Donant shook his head again.

His directionless walk had brought him to a different sector of the city. The buildings here were slightly more functional in appearance, but they were facsimiles of each other and they stood shoulder to shoulder like rows of pretty girls, each with the same make-up, the same girth of bust and buttock, and the same stereotyped smile. At the base of each, on a level with the street, was a little sunken doorway fringed with crystalline lattice.

Apartment houses, Donant thought. Or at least their equivalent. Coincidentally with the thought came another thought: when a problem as a whole proves insoluble, concentrate on a single aspect of the problem. In this case, a single building.

He chose the building at random and stepped into its sunken entrance, intending to try the door. But before his fingers even touched the featureless surface, the door swung inward and concealed lights flicked on to reveal an empty foyer. Donant stepped across the threshold and the door closed behind him.

The furniture was simple and—invariably—of the same material as everything else in the city, on the whole planet for that matter. Against one wall a blue table stood on legs as slender as flower stems. There were blue chairs to match, and a small blue cloud of a couch.

On the wall opposite the door was a vertical bank of buttons. Donant stepped forward and depressed the lowest one. The wall behaved as he had thought it would: it split vertically, and the two halves receded. But instead of the elevator he had expected, he saw a long corridor lined at regular intervals with doors.

He frowned. He was a logical man and he liked logical phenomena. So far nothing on the planet had made sense, and he knew he would never be able to leave till he forced it to make sense. As he stood

there the two halves of the wall came back together in a seamless junction.

Annoyed, Donant depressed the second lowest button. This time there was a pause before the wall enacted its alternative role as a door—a pause and a sense of increased weight. Donant smiled then. It was he who had been illogical, not the builders. What he had mistaken for a mere foyer was really a foyer-elevator.

The second floor corridor was identical in all outward respects to the first. But Donant was a systematic as well as a logical man, and a systematic investigation of the building virtually demanded that he begin on the ground floor. When the door became a wall again he depressed the lowest button and a moment later stepped out into the first floor corridor.

He stood immobile for a moment, listening. There was no sound except the almost inaudible purring of invisible machinery. Behind him the foyer-elevator door once more blended into a wall. He started walking down the corridor. Light emanated softly from an indeterminate source, seemed to be a part of the crystalline walls themselves.

He paused before the first door. It was featureless, just as the street door had been, hardly distinguishable from the wall itself. He stood before it confidently, waiting for it to open.

He stood there for some time, but nothing happened. Naturally not, Donant thought, irked with himself. The street door was indiscriminate, admitted anyone. This door was probably attuned to the ex-tenant's personality or emotional pattern. This door didn't know him from Adam.

Donant drew his incandescer, dialed it to maximum intensity and began to burn out a section large enough to permit his passage. The crystalline material had an incredibly high melting point, but it cowered before the blue-white wrath of the incandescer beam. Blue smoke coiled up, and automatic suction fans hummed into action and whisked it away. When the section of the door broke free and fell to the floor, the corridor walls saturated it with an acrid-smelling fluid.

Donant edged through the opening into the room beyond. It was a large room, well ventilated and well furnished. Opposite the door a big oval window looked out into a courtyard. All of the chairs in the room were arranged so that they faced the window, but the chairs were empty, the room was empty, and the courtyard was empty.

He approached the window more closely and peered out. The courtyard was a small one, surrounded by high featureless walls. Donant started. The walls, unlike every thing else he had seen in the city, were *not* made of the crystalline substance. They were made of metal, a dull, gray, familiar metal.

They were made of lead.

Presently Donant lowered his eyes. The grass of the courtyard was a sickly green. There was a flower garden to the left, and the alien flowers drooped tiredly in the bright sunlight. Directly opposite the window there was a tree.

Donant found himself staring at the tree. It was an alien tree, botanically remote from the elms and maples he had known on Earth, but it wasn't the alien quality that gave him pause, that filled him with foreboding. It was something else. The tree was dead.

The other two rooms of the apartment were small and windowless. They contained padded oval platforms and were obviously sleeping quarters. There wasn't a particle of dust in them—or a particle of life.

Donant returned to the corridor.

He experienced a sense of wrongness. After a moment he noticed that the section of the door he had burned out had disappeared, and then he noticed that the burned edges of the door itself, into which the section had fitted, had receded back to where the crystalline material was unaffected.

As he watched, the material closed back in upon itself as though the orifice were a wound and the wound were healing. In a little while the door was whole again and all evidence of his vandalism had vanished.

A self-healing building? A self-healing city? Then it must be a sentient city too. The crystalline material, despite its deceptive appearance, bore no relationship to crystal. It was a complex alloy that the extinct race had developed, an alloy that possessed therapeutic qualities and an awareness of

decomposition.

And its awareness was not confined to its own decomposition. It included and acted upon everything detrimental to the cleanliness of the streets and structures which the metal comprised. For the first time Donant understood why there was no dust or corrosion in a city that had probably been dead for years, if not centuries. And he guessed why there were no bodies, no bones.

A most meticulous metal. Not only did it clean up after itself, it cleaned up after its creators as well.

Donant burned a section out of the next door and stepped into the next apartment. It was a duplicate of the first—three rooms, the furniture in the largest room grouped with the oval window as the central motif, and the window framing a view of walls, grass, flowers, and tree—

Donant found himself staring at the tree again. It was unquestionably the same tree, its twisted trunk and leafless branches the same bone white in the glaring sunlight. And yet it stood just outside the window, exactly in front of the window, and that was manifestly impossible because it stood exactly in front of the window of the room he had just left.

After a moment he dropped his eyes to the lawn. It was a wretched lawn by any standards. In some places it had faded to a bleached yellow, in others it had died out altogether. Even in the few places where it still contained a semblance of life, it was singularly unimpressive. The individual blades of grass were asymmetrical, thick on one side, dwindling to a sharp edge on the other, tapering upward to a lopsided point—

Suddenly Donant found himself thinking of the statue he had seen in the council chamber—the statue and the scales, and the objects the scales contained. A crystalline cube and a green knife—

Or a building brick and a blade of grass?

Abruptly another incongruity about the courtyard caught his eye. When he had entered the apartment building the sun had long since passed its meridian. That being so, part of the courtyard should have been in shadow, but the only shadows on the dying lawn were the shadows cast by the branches of the dead tree, and they lay directly beneath the branches themselves . . .

Donant left the room, walked down the corridor, took the foyer-elevator to the sixth floor and burned down the first door he came to. There was another living room and another oval window, and beyond the window, on the same level as the floor, were the tree, the lawn, and the flowers. Donant was not surprised. He walked over to the window and put his foot through it. The huge tube popped and showered in white dust to the floor, and the crystal-like alloy devoured the dust the way it devoured all dust, all dirt, all flesh that had ceased to live. The tree and the lawn and the flowers became a medley of wires and tubes and resistors, and Donant knew why the city was dead.

DONANT LIFTED the ship to ten thousand feet and threw it into glide. He turned up the scanner to a radius of five thousand miles and attuned it to the characteristics of the place he waited to find. Buildings and streets and streets and buildings flowed forever beneath him; oceans and causeways, and automatic factories that once had processed: the food that had been drained from the seas. He flew west, keeping pace with the sun, and the fading afternoon traveled with him.

Two subjective hours passed before the scanner gave the sharp buzz he was waiting for. Darkness began to creep in from the twilight belt as he arrowed the ship down to the dot of greenness shining like a verdant star in the scintillating wastes of the city.

The ship was small, and he brought it down on the moribund lawn. He got out and walked over to the dead tree. The tree was a pitiful thing in the lengthening shadows—a desiccated corpse, an unburied cadaver. Donant stood beneath it, thinking of the race that had killed it—and thereby killed themselves.

They had had to make a decision, and the statue in the council chamber symbolized that decision. They had weighed nature against cities and they had found nature wanting in the balance; and their decision had been irrevocable because if the ultimate building material they had created destroyed all dirt, all decayed matter—*it destroyed topsoil too.*

Why, then, hadn't they chosen a different metal? Donant thought he knew the answer. Aside from the fact that the new alloy had promised them an architectural Utopia, there had been another consideration:

over-population. No matter what building material they had chosen, the end result would have been the same: a planetary city. The only alternative would have been birth control, and birth control, Donant knew, was contrary to the survival urge of any race of people.

The dead race had overlooked the essential truth that, while machines could take over the function of physical photosynthesis, they could not take over the function of spiritual photosynthesis; that a man cannot live solely for the sake of his own creations, and that he had to have other creations to inspire him, to reanimate his will to go on living; natural creations above and beyond his ability to duplicate.

The beauty of the council building—and the beauty of the city as a whole—was tinselly because it was the product of creators without a criterion, creators who were creatively impotent. And, Donant knew, it was only a short step from creative impotence to sexual impotence.

Sunoikismos, he thought. Carried to extremes, it resulted in tragedy which the ancient Greeks had never dreamed of. For if it was true that man could not live entirely alone, neither could he live entirely with his fellow men.

He could usurp his green lands with his cities, and he could find sustenance for his belly in his seas.

He could create a complex society and learn to live in harmony with his neighbors. And as long as he did not completely lose contact with the death-to-life cycle of the earth he could find the strength and the inspiration to go on living, reproducing, laughing, loving, creating. But when he covered up and killed the last but one area of green land and in desperation televised that area to his tens of billions of sterile cubicles, he was very close to death.

Donant touched the trunk of the tree. His fingers sank deep into the dead tissue. The grass around his feet was gray and lifeless in the shadows.

He walked slowly towards the ship. A three dimension television camera stood on spidery legs on the fringe of the lawn. Its glass eye stared at him solemnly as he passed, its lens glinting forlornly in the last rays of the lonely sun. Beyond the high lead walls, that had failed to perform their function, the crystalline edifices stood, tall and mute and empty.

Donant lifted the ship. The dot of dying grass and dead tree faded into the building shadows. The buildings coalesced, became a meaningless mass. When he left the atmosphere Donant set his coordinates so that the ship would emerge amid green worlds. Then he hit the transphotic—

Hard.