

RETURN ENGAGEMENT

By Lester Del Rey

IT WAS later than Daniel Shawn had thought when they finally came out of the little farm house and headed for the big car of Tommy Rogers. It was almost sundown. And there had been a light rain.

He took a slow breath, almost tasting the vigour of the air.

Strange that it should be late, though. Time had seemed to go so slowly. The whole visit of Professor Rogers had been a mistake that was hard on both of them. Now it was ending clumsily, as it had begun and continued in awkwardness. Once Tommy had been his friend. But that was before Tommy went into Administration and Shawn had given it all up to come back here to the little Minnesota farm where he had been born.

'A rainbow!' Tommy exclaimed suddenly. 'I haven't seen one in years.'

'Nor missed it, I'll warrant,' Shawn guessed, raising his eyes to see it. It lay in the gap between the locust trees, adding a jewelled light to their dark greenness.

Tommy laughed his administrator's unoffended laugh and glanced back over the little farmyard before climbing into the car. 'What do you find here, Dan? Kerosene lamps, outdoor plumbing, not even a radio. I still say it's no place for you -when you could take over the Chair of History if you'd be sensible.'

'I was born here,' Shawn replied, evading the part of the question he didn't want to answer.

' Butthat was forty-five years ago!

Shawn nodded. 'Yes. And sometimes, I think, so was the reality of myself. Let it be, Tommy, and I'll ride into Utica with you.'

Tommy couldn't let it go, of course. There was that in the man which hated any way of life he could not understand. Maybe that was why he'd once studied sociology, only to find that the science could never supply enough answers. He repeated his question as the motor started.

'I don't know,' Shawn answered slowly, fumbling for his pipe as he tried again to answer it to himself. 'Something I almost saw as a child and then lost. Maybe all of us lost it once. That's why I turned to history, to find where it went. But I never found it. You used to do a lot of reading once, Tommy. You tell me. What was in Spencer, in Coleridge a little, in Orlando - only like an echo, but now it's gone from all our writing.'

'I never thought there was anything like that,' Tommy said flatly.

Shawn sighed. He should have known the answer that was a part of the man. Then they reached the little village, no more than a mile from the farm. He got out, putting out a hand.

But Tommy wasn't ready to end it yet. 'If you're going to eat here, I'll join you,' he suggested.

Shawn shrugged, then nodded. He was sorry that he had given in to the man's importunings over the phone and let him make the useless drive from Chicago. There should have been an end to it now. Yet Shawn had intended to dine here, since his own cooking was no better than it should be.

He picked up tobacco and the paper at a little store before leading the other to the restaurant beside the gas station. They ordered and waited for the food, with nothing to say between them.

The paper, Shawn saw from the headlines, had been another mistake, but he glanced at it while consuming the tasteless food. There was a dark ugliness in the news. As there always was. The lilt of life was lacking in every part of it. It was heavy and ponderous, even when it tried to be witty. And around him, the few diners were filled with a heaviness that made their laughter a deliberate effort and gave them

no pleasure in the stories they told endlessly to each other.

'Why?' Shawn asked abruptly, pointing to the headlines.

'You're still a sociologist, Tommy. Tell me, why all the darkugliness?'

For a moment, it seemed that there was a measure of understanding in the man. He sighed. 'Sociologists don't know much more about the present cultural matrix than anyone else, Dan. Too much technology, maybe, before the culture can absorb it. Or maybe this is just one of the plateaux in an evolution towards a sense of group maturity.' 'Maturity?' Shawn questioned bitterly.

'It could be.' And now the administrator's optimism was creeping back into the face. 'Oh, I know, there's still hate and ugly conflict. But think of the earlier ages, Dan. Look at the superstitious panics, the persecutions, the witch-burnings. There was a time when anything different from what was considered human was to be killed on sight. Children ostracize or fight with anyone who differs from the group norm. Seems to me we've improved a lot in that respect - at least in this country. We're trying to understand other peoples. Why right now, Dan, if little green men got out of a saucer, most people would be delighted to meet them. Lots of men are hoping to find alien races - look at Project Ozma. Or look at the case of that priest who is writing about the question of redemption for non-human beings. If there were werewolves today, I'll bet that there'd be a lot more scientific interest in them than fear or hatred. There wouldn't even be any persecution of witches, unless they went in for criminal activity. That could be considered a form of maturity.'

Or maybe the human race was so unconsciously sick of its own sordiness that it would welcome even alien relief, Shawn thought.

But he let the conversation die. There was as little answer to the problem, in sociology as in history - as he had known all along.

He went out with Tommy at last, putting out his hand awkwardly in silence as the other reached his car.

'You sure you won't come back, Dan?' Tommy asked for the last time. 'You're definitely turning President Schuyler down?'

'I won't come back, Tommy.'

He stepped back from the car and stood watching it drive away. Then he sighed and dismissed the whole unfortunate business from his mind.

It was already so far into dusk that the stars were shining as he turned to walk homeward. The Moon was full and start-linglywhite in the dark sky. Wisps of clouds fleeced its path. The night was going to be one of loveliness. For a moment he was glad he had ridden in, since it gave him an excuse to travel back through the beauty of it.

The road went across the railroad tracks that led to all the earth, and yet the rails seemed to lead nowhere in the moonlight. It carried him on, past the school where once a teacher had touched his mind, then past the old cemetery, shaded with hollows of darkness. For a moment, there was a touch of the spiritual hush he had felt long before as he moved by the quiet place. Then it was shattered by a coarse laugh, and a burst of smut-tinged words of a juke song on a transistor radio.

Superstition was dying, as Tommy had said. At least, the older superstitious fear of things in the night. But the darkness of it was being replaced by an even darker veil of sordid ugliness.

Even the dead had no peace. A couple had found the retreat for their own use, but without even the respect of silence. And maybe these dead could never feel the lack, if they could know. Yet he felt his soul rubbed in dirt as he guessed the ages of the couple. They were using the time for what should have been an opening outward in them for things better reserved for later years.

The houses thinned out and were behind him, except for a single light back from the road half a mile ahead. Here the land dipped down, carrying the road with it. It had been a gravelled road once. Shawn missed the sound of the pebbles. But the Moon was the same he had known long ago, its light like a kiss across the fields. Even crops cultivated by great machines instead of horses could take on a difference in the silvering from above.

Where had men lost whatever they had lost? History had taught him nothing, though he had searched. And the keys in literature were too elaborately carved to fit the lock. Books were written to bury the feelings of a past generation, not to reveal what might be happening in the present.

There had been a magic iri men once. Oh, to be sure, it had been rare enough, and whole areas had missed it. Rome had been mighty in valour without it. Much of Greece had lost it, though it lay somewhere in the soft hint of legends older than Olympus. But there had been Persia. There had been Queen Maev and the Isle of Avalon, the sea warriors of Ys and the dreams that misted across man's rise from a beast. No time had ever been without it before.

Yet this time was lacking whatever it was. Save for a few bits borrowed from the past in Yeats, there was no song or dream in the poetry now; and nobody even read poetry to look for such things. The art was as ugly and machine-sym- boledas the thoughts of the little minds that made it.

The music was noise and the only legend was the legend of power.

A car filled with teenagers passed him. The top was down, but none of them were seeing the moonlight.

Shawn passed the sandstone ridge at the edge of his farm, lifted a wire gate and left the road. The woods still stretched along the road. They were his woods, as they had been once when he was a boy. There, along the little rutted trail through them, was the hazel bush, or one like the one he remembered. The wild grapes were ripe and sweet, beaded with the rain or dew. He fasted them and went meditatively on.

There had been a lilt in a few men's thoughts once -enough to lighten the others, and to echo still, faintly, out of the filter of older literature and legendry. It had gone. Maybe the industrial revolution? But that was a poor answer, since the revolution had touched only lightly on much of the world, yet the wonder had vanished just as quickly. Maybe the drive towards power? And yet, there had been power before without the death of the glamour he could sense without defining.

Something had gone out of men. In its place was only the body of man's work - the machines, the dark forces that drove him on to bombs and destiny, the rockets that could lift him towards outer space but hide the dancing of the stars. Hundreds of years before, the lilt - and there was no other word -had vanished.

History had failed to show a reason why.

Shawn had come back here, looking for the threads he had lost in childhood. He was still seeking them. He walked on through the stubble left from the harvested barley . . . and something seemed to whisper in

his veins.

There was the feeling in him that he should go on. He went, past the sagging barn and down the lane towards the orchard. The pump at the old well creaked and gave forth water that was reddened with rust, but cold and tingling on his palate. He stopped to pluck an apple from an unpruned tree and munched on it.

And now the tingling was stronger, and there was a faint singing of the blood in his ears, as if a horn were being blown somewhere. It became louder as he crossed a stile into the meadow.

The grass was faintly damp. There was the smell of clover in the air, over the faint, rich musk of the earth itself. He moved across it, listening to the bending of the grass and the soft scuttling sounds of the little creatures that lived in it. From a pond beyond the orchard lane, the croaking of frogs reached him, the eerie call of a screech owl, the chirping of crickets.

The bugling of the strange excitement in his mind was stronger now.

He headed for the little dip near the centre of the meadow. As a boy, he had lain there in the sunlight out of the wind and read *Princess of Mars* and *Haggard and Dunsany*, or crouched in the moonlight at times when he was too restless to sleep and too filled with unremembered plans. It was too damp now for a man of forty-five to return to the earth, but the spot drew him.

And then he saw the thing, centred in the spot towards which he was headed, and his heart seemed to leap with shock and then with expectancy.

He moved to it slowly.

He tried to tell himself it was something left behind by some wooing couple or as a practical joke by his neighbours. But he knew better.

It looked like a shell made of something milky-white. Half was almost buried in the grass. The other half of the opened shell was resting backwards against a rock. It seemed to be lined with a softness like the packed down of a milkweed pod. And it was perhaps eight feet long.

But it was the sweep of the lines and the rightness of the form that held his eyes. There was a fluting of the milky substance that lifted something in him as he had felt it lift before at an ancient jade screen or a phrase of Mozart.

There was no mark to show how it had come there. It must have been after the rain, since the lining was dry and soft to his touch.

Inevitably, he thought of flying saucers. But he threw the idea out of his mind, like a man brushing dirt from himself. The ugliness of the times was reflected in the pitiful situation where men's dreaming of better things led only to the banality of the cults. And of all the cults, the flying saucer ones were the least alive with a spark of the - lilt.

Yet he knew without questioning that this thing had never been shaped on Earth.

And as if to confirm his idea, his eyes caught sight of a design that was revealed softly in the moonlight against the lid of the shell. He bent to see it, but it was still too dim.

Finally, as he had known he was going to do, he kicked off his wet shoes and stepped into the hollow of the padding, letting himself down gently until his eyes were near the carving.

Moonlight shone gently through the lid, making it hard to be sure of details. But somehow, his eyes filled with the figure. It was a woman - or rather, not a woman, since the features were planed as no human face could be. A strange woman, thinner than any human and more supple, from the dance in which she was frozen. The final proof of lack of humanity lay in the hair that rippled from her head and grew into a double crest on her back, spreading outwards across each of her shoulders, but standing well above her skin.

And suddenly, her hand seemed to move!

Shawn blinked. But it had been no illusion. The carved fingers opened and the arm moved towards him, just as the lid began to move inward to close the shell. There was a dancing cloud of motes that sprang from her hand and sped towards him. He lifted his arms, but it was too late. The gleaming motes struck

his eyes, and they closed.

Gentle waves of sleep washed across his brain. He had only time to feel the shell lift somehow and ride upwards into the moonlight before the sleep claimed him completely . . .

There was a sense of the passage of time, eventually. His eyes would not open, but he lay somewhere that was not on Earth, and he could sense that hours had passed. Hours, he thought. Not days or weeks, but only hours.

Around him, there was a stirring. He could sense that the shell was gone, and there was an alien but earthy odour in his nostrils. Now sounds came - voices — but no voices he had ever heard. There was a silvery quality to them, like the voices of children mysteriously robbed of the harsh overtones of childish screams. These were almost liquid. Yet he could sense a frenzy and worry in them. In the background, there was a chanting, and the heart inside him seemed to be crying as it ended.

He tried to sit up and open his eyes, but his mind was still not in control of his body. Some sign must have shown, however. There was a gentle touch on his forehead, and a few words obviously meant to be soothing. The words held a hint of familiarity, but he could understand none of them.

'Where am I?' he asked.

There was a sigh near him, and another voice answered. It was a strong, masculine voice with a power of command and responsibility behind it, even though there were no really deep tones. 'You would call it Mars,' the words came in oddly accented English. ,

'Mars? In a few hours?' Yet as Shawn protested, he sensed the Tightness of the answer. The weight of him was little more than a third that which he had always known.

The voice was sober and somehow withdrawn. 'Our ways are not your ways, man. Our science means as little to you as yours to us. We accept the way of the universe where you bend the laws of nature against themselves. Who shall say which is better? Yet for this one thing of moving beyond the distances you know, we have ways you have not.'

'Yet you speak English.'

'There have been others before you. Not many.' The voice was falling, like the ending of an organ note. 'So few. And now . . .' It died away, and then resumed more normally. 'But enough. We go to confer. Use the time until we return as you will.'

There were rustlings again, and then light shone weakly through Shawn's lids. Something touched his face, and he found his eyes opening. This time when he tried to sit up, his body obeyed, though the motion was awkward in the unfamiliar pull of the planet.

A dream, he told himself. A fantasy. He'd wake in the morning wet and soaked in the meadow, sneezing with a cold from exposure.

But he knew better. A dream like this could be none of his making. There were elements in it, as he stared about, that could never have come from his mind.

There wasn't much to see. He was in a room that must have been carved from coloured rock, and there was a sense of a great many feet of similar rock above him. The light seemed to be in the air itself, diffused and softly silver over everything. He lay on what must be a couch, but a couch with soft curves and ornaments no man could have planned. And beyond him was a fountain.

It was a tiny fountain, carved out of the wall of rock, with a thin spray of water falling over into a basin, making a soft tinkling sound. In front of the basin was the carving of a kneeling girl. This time there was only a hint of the shoulder crests of hair, but the green of the stone made the other features easier to see. No human artist could have fashioned that, and no human model could have posed for it. The girl was beautiful, but it was as if she came from a race that had descended from something related to the lighter monkeys, as man claimed descent from a great anthropoid ancestor of himself and the gorilla.

Then, without warning, a curtain seemed to fall across the room. It cut off most of it, leaving him with only a little space before the couch. But if the blackness was of cloth, it fell without a rustle. And behind it was the stirring of others moving into the room and finding places.

Behind the screen, the voice he took to be that of a leader began again. 'What are you called, man? I am Porreos, a prince of my people.'

'Danny,' Shawn answered. His own response surprised him. He'd not called himself that since his childhood. But he let it stand.

'Then, Danny, we have conferred. And we feel you are better for not seeing us, since you cannot remain with us. We are sorry to have brought you here, though it is too late to alter that. But you will be returned.'

Shawn puzzled over it, finding no logic to the decision. Why couldn't he remain? Why pick him up and bring him over all the distance for nothing but this? And why had the shell been on Earth in the first place?

He did not think he had spoken aloud, but Porreos sighed and began to answer. 'We had hoped for a child of your race, Danny. One who could learn to live with us, as you could never do here. And the call of the shell was set for the yearning of one of your children. Strange that you should have answered. As strange as the shells that have returned to us empty. It has been so long...'

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Again it was the fading of an organ note. And behind it came the hint of a wailing song in many voices, a snatch of group response that cut into Shawn's nerves and brought tears to his eyes, though he could understand none of it. There was a delicacy here, a lack of strength and force, that hardly matched a race able to span space at the breathtaking speed of the shells.

The air around him was almost as thick as that of Earth, and there had been a fountain of water. It fitted no picture of Mars, as these voices fitted no people he had expected to find on the harshness of the little world. Suspicion grew in his mind suddenly.

'You never came from this planet, Porreos !'

This time, the wailing chant began before the prince could answer. It was a thing of beauty and tradition, but the ache in it was like the ache of a man who would reach for the stars to melt them against the palm of his hand, and then look to find them gone. There was a laughter to it like the laughter that there would be because of the aching he felt too strong inside his breast for anything else.

Shawn learned more from the song behind the words than from the answer that Porreos made. No, they had never developed on Mars, but far away. They had been an old race ten million years before. But on their world there had been another race, stronger, younger, with all that they lacked. And for a time, the two had touched falteringly, to the benefit of both. But then had come a great change over the younger race.

Something that the old ones could not understand had taken over the whole emotions of the new ones. It had built a sudden hatred.

The race that had sometimes feared and sometimes loved the race of Porreos was deliberately filled with superstition and belief that all other creatures were things of ultimate evil, to be shunned, hated and mistreated. And the old race had been unable to withstand it. They had never been strong. They had dwelt on only a part of the home planet at any time. But now, finally, they were forced to flee.

Mars was the best they could find.

They had carved dwellings out under the surface and trapped what little air and water there was. It was a poor home to them, but all they had.

And now they were dying, slowly and gently. They each lived for a long time, but they bred infrequently to make up for it. And there was no longer the heart in them to keep up their numbers. All of the race that was left were here, behind the curtain.

'All,' Porreos repeated as the song came to its end like the sound of the last leaf falling in the forest of winter. 'It is a respect we owe you, at least, for disturbing you.'

'But you'll disturb children, Porreos ? You don't mind stealing them and bringing them here ?'

'Don't condemn us without understanding,' the voice said, and there was dignity and hurt in it. 'We're a lonely people. We need others, and even a single child whom we can adopt and make into one of us helps. And besides, there's another need which doesn't concern you.'

And there, Shawn realized, must lie the real crux of the matter. There was some need. There had to be, to send the shells across space looking for someone from Earth. 'Maybe it does,' he decided slowly. 'You've brought me here. The reason should concern me as much as it would concern a child.'

'No!'

Shawn waited patiently, as an adult might put pressure on a baulky child. He heard the same pressure mount behind the screen, with a rising tempo of rustlings and subdued whispers in the tantalizingly familiar alien tongue.

'Don't ask us that, Danny!' It was almost a roar of pain from the prince. 'A child we can adopt and make one of us and be bound to. But it is not for you to ask! We're an old, proud people, and our traditions are stronger than the laws of nature you Earthlings fight. We cannot ask favours outside our own. We cannot beg - not even for a part of the world that was our own. And we shall not beg of you!'

It was a nightmare experience. Logic was in abeyance, as if some part of him had already recognized that normal logic could not be used. But it was no more a nightmare than his own culture had become to him in the last few years. Beside that ugliness, this unreason was almost childishly simple.

'You're not begging,' he told the group behind the curtain. 'I'm giving. Tell me what you want of me and take it.'

There was a shock of silence, and a whisper that was not in the voice of the prince. 'You trust us that much?'

To his own surprise, he did. Somewhere his mind was making a pattern out of all this, and he was not afraid of them.

'As a free gift, then,' Porreos said at last, and some of the fatigue seemed to lift from the voice. 'We have one who is dying. And there is something in your blood which can save her - a resistance that our bodies lack. We need a few drops of your blood, Danny.'

Shawn got up quietly from the couch and approached the curtain. He thrust out his bared arm experimentally, surprised when it penetrated with almost no resistance. He grinned at himself as he waited.

There was the tiniest of prickings on his finger, and a brief itch. When he withdrew his hand, something like a fine mesh of cobweb lay over the end of the finger. He was sure there would be no infection.

There were stirrings but no voices behind the screen, and he waited, staring again around the limited section of the room he could see. It was beautiful. There was a shaping of beauty no man could have rendered. But there was a weakness, a lack of the very brutal force he sensed in even the ugliness that was overtaking Earth . . . And there was no lilt here either.

'Danny,' Porreos called at last. 'Danny, there is life among us in one who was dying. Your blood is our debt. Before we return you to Earth, there is another tradition which we must keep. Make one request of us, as is your right now. And if we can fulfil it, the boon is yours.'

It was what Shawn had expected. It could be no other. And there was still a surprise.

No, he thought, there could be no lilt here and none among his people. The dark force there and the fair lack of force here were neither complete. And the lilt he had named and sought could only come from a true completion. No wonder the shell had come to him in answer to his yearning. No wonder that these people sought a child of Earth while his people lost their superstitious xenophobia and even wanted alien contact from the stars.

'Porreos,' he asked, 'can you follow my thoughts?'

'A little, Danny Shawn.' The voice was reluctant, as if the admission carried unknown dangers. Then it was suddenly filled with intensity. 'Yes, oh yes, we can follow!'

The curtain vanished, leaving the room visible to Shawn, and he could see all of the ancient race that was left before him. There were less than a hundred there, green-clad and brown-garbed men, and women with delicate winglike mantles of hair. Their faces were inhuman and their tiny bodies were strange. But they were familiar as no alien being could ever be.

'Ask your boon,' the prince of the fairy folk cried. But they already knew, and there was laughter rising and smiles spreading across the elfin faces that looked up towards the human.

'Come home,' Shavvn asked them. 'Come back to-Earth. We need you!'