

off the light and went home, floating vaguely along the corridors pulsating gently, looking rather like a soap bubble with iridescent entrails.

Next morning he drifted back to find his high-frequency Chemist friend crepitating rapidly, waiting for him outside his hobby-room.

'I didn't go in,' communicated the Chemist. 'I didn't want to upset anything. How are the People?' (That was the popular way of referring to Ghadd's cultures, for Ghadd always spoke of them as if they were as alive as himself.)

'Fine, I should imagine,' said low-frequency Ghadd. 'Come in.'

He went over to study the cultures before switching on the light—for that would alter conditions. With his superb perception—it wasn't exactly an eye—he could see that all was going well, extremely well, although no details were visible. He emanated satisfaction, and floated closer.

'Ugh!' he said. 'It stinks!'

The Chemist drifted over and extended a pseudopodic nostril. 'Hum,' he said. 'So it does. Can't identify the gas offhand either. What's the culture?'

'I—forget.' Ghadd's frequency oscillated in shame. He was far from being the perfect scientist. 'I didn't make notes. I'll get the microvid.'

He floated off quickly to repair his error, and returned with the apparatus. Ghadd had still not switched on the light in case it affected the People.

The microvid was set up: Ghadd and the Chemist plugged themselves in and settled down to watch exactly what was happening on a tiny portion of the ball's surface. At first the picture they received was one of water—as was natural since Ghadd's compounds *were* largely water—but Ghadd moved the focus till he found an area where the cultures were established and spreading.

Neither of them could stand the sight very long: they unplugged themselves almost simultaneously, white and flaccid with nausea.

'Fool!' the Chemist flashed, anger interfering with his transmissions. 'Why didn't you tell me they'd be as vile as that?'

'How could I have known,' blared Ghadd, 'you non-transmitting cretin? They've mutated!'

The Chemist extended a pseudopod and tore off a section from the viewer of the microvid. His transmissions were incoherent with static, but Ghadd managed to gather that the Chemist was about to brain him. That was sobering. In a world where no violence had ever been willingly committed the ugliness of it was petrifying.

'Friend!' squeaked Ghadd. 'Old friend!'

The Chemist faltered and put down the weapon. He collected himself. 'What's wrong with us?' he bleated.

'I don't now,' fluttered Ghadd. 'It must be the influence of this—the compound—'on our minds.'

'It must be. Switch on the light.'

'What are you going to do?'

'Destroy it,' said the Chemist. 'Little ground-anchored things with legs, fighting with machines that flew! Fighting on the *ground* with weapons! Ghadd, that's too much. . . .'

They were dazzled as the lights came on.

'Watch,' said Ghadd. 'We must be sure they're gone.'

He increased the power flow to the heater of the little ball. But the Chemist had destroyed the vision of the microvid: all they had left was a sound-recording taken as the ball—and the two smaller ones revolving in smaller orbits—darkened and burst into flames.

Afterwards they sent the recording to the alien languages department to see if a culture so tiny and primitive and with such a rapid metabolism could communicate one with another. The reply was soon had. The recording seemed, said the translators, to be part of a religious service held for blind folk. It was very short, and only two things were recorded: the reading and a hymn. It said:

'And they shall look unto the earth; and behold trouble and darkness, dimness of anguish; and they shall be driven to darkness.'

The Chemist moved convulsively. 'When we switched the light on,' he said, 'we must have blinded—the glare—'

'Hush,' said Ghadd, 'they're singing.'

They fell silent in time to hear the last of it:

'A thousand ages in Thy sight

Are as an evening gone:

Short as the watch that ends the night . . .'

And at that point the recording ended—and so did the Chosen People of Ghadd.

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