

A Short Story



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TINY WINDOWS

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He had to find a single planet somewhere in the vast Universe.

The trouble was, if he found it—would he remember what he must do?

He knew that there had been trouble, and he had been told what he had to do. The trouble was he had forgotten. He didn't remember where it was.

He had been speeding past an off-color white dwarf when it happened. If he had taken the trouble to look around, he would have seen that the white star was going to explode. He knew a potential nova when he took a good look at one. But after all these centuries he had grown careless, and when the blast had come—the small star suddenly blazing into a billion-fold brilliance—the penetrating radiation had hit him with full intensity. There had been no ship to protect him, no clothing that might serve as a shield. His kind had done away with such things eons before, as they had learned to move through space by using some of the radiant energy that filled it.

He had blacked out completely.

When he came to again, he was far past the nova, in the dazzling brightness of a rarefied cloud of radiant hydrogen atoms. The nova itself had lost so much of its momentary brilliance that it was now indistinguishable from the myriads of other stars. He himself was speeding on with feverish haste toward a nebular cluster a thousand light years away.

He slowed down. He had the feeling that the distant cluster was not his proper destination. But what was? What star, what planet was the spot in space he had to find? And what was he supposed to do once he got there?

And who had given him the instructions? Where, in the vast immensity of the universe was the place called "home", the place where he could return for the information he had forgotten?

He didn't recall. He knew only, with that same distressing vagueness, that somewhere there was something he had been ordered to do. And that once given, the order had to be carried out.

He traveled aimlessly, by feeling alone. Time meant nothing to him as an individual, for his kind had long mastered the problems of age. But time meant much to those he had been sent to—to do what? Was it to help? They must be waiting for him now. They must be wondering why he didn't come.

He would have to hurry. Hurry to do something he didn't yet suspect, but would sooner or later remember.

After a few centuries, he began, in his anxiety, to talk to himself, as is the way of individuals too long alone. "That star cluster there could be it," he said to himself hopefully, and veered toward the right.

"Doesn't look familiar, though," he muttered. "Maybe if I would get closer —"

He came close enough to see the thousands of stars as individuals, to pick out the satellites circling the bright discs of light, to study the pale planets themselves and their tiny subsatellites. As he turned his attention from one to another, disappointment slowly filled him. No, this was not the place. There was nothing in the configuration of the stars, nothing in the size or position of the planets that sounded a familiar chord in his consciousness. He would have to go further—or turn back.

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He left the place behind him. The next time the same thing happened he didn't have quite so much hope, and his disappointment was less keen. But it was disappointment none the less. Time was passing, and they must be waiting for him impatiently.

After a while the hope and the disappointment both died away almost completely. The former shrank to a tiny spark that grew dimmer and dimmer as the centuries passed. He wondered if it would ever wink out entirely.

It was characteristic of him that the anxiety this caused was only for those who were waiting, expecting him hourly, and wondering why he didn't come. He had no sense of fear for himself, no feeling of despairing loneliness that might be expected to arise from being so long isolated in space. It was only that he would have liked some one to talk to, besides himself.

On a fair number of planets he found animal-like creatures in different stages of development, and on a few he discovered life that was intelligent. It was with these that he had a renewed feeling of anticipation, the spark of hope glowing momentarily before it faded again.

"It's intelligent life I've got to find," he told himself. "But where?"

His astronomical memory, insofar as it covered the post-nova period, was perfect, and he paid more attention to the details of star-and-planet configuration than he had ever done before. Gradually a star-map formed in his mind, a map that covered enormous distances of space. Those places he had investigated and eliminated from consideration were slowly crossed off. It was a large needle he had to find, and his own powers were considerable, but the haystack he had to search was infinite. There was no telling how many more centuries would pass before he found it.

And then another thought struck him. They'd know back home that something had gone wrong. Would they send someone else to do the job in his place?

He rather doubted it. He had a vague feeling that there weren't many with his own peculiar talents. What had to be done had to be done by him, or left undone altogether.

More time passed. And one day, when the space charted on his brain-map had grown to vast dimensions, and the spark of hope had become so tiny that he was not quite sure any longer that it was there at all, he noted from a distance a galaxy that seemed familiar.

"That's it!" he cried. "That's it!"

The spark flared, and as he sped toward the galaxy it became a flame. It was a lens-shaped assemblage of stars, with two small spiral arms composed of a few million stars each, and it was seemingly not too different from millions of other galaxies he had passed in the course of all those centuries. But to him, seeking so desperately, this galaxy was unique. It was the right one. He coursed through it from spiral arm to spiral arm, and now there could be no doubt. The star he wanted was small and yellowish, far from the center of the lens. It had a rather elaborate planetary system, which he recognized at once.

This was it. The third planet, the one with a single subsatellite, was the one he had been sent to find. To find, and perhaps to help. But how?

The finding of the planet had solved one problem. So far it had given him not a hint toward the solution of the second—the reason why he had been sent here.

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There was life on this ball of mud and water, a great deal of life, both vegetable and animal. And some of the latter could, without too great a distortion of the truth, be called intelligent. It had raised cities, tunneled into mountains, changed the appearance of sections of the planet itself. It was to this intelligent life that he had been sent.

A dim memory of the need for caution kept him from letting himself be seen. "I'd only frighten them," he thought. "I'll have to investigate thoroughly before I reveal myself. And maybe the investigation will remind me of what I have to do."

The first thing was to come down to earth. Choosing the dark side of the planet, shaded from the central sun by its own bulk, he shrank his body and let himself drop in the gravitational field. From time to time he slowed his fall in order to keep from flaming through the atmosphere and attracting their attention. And at a thousand feet above the surface he came to a complete stop, hovering over a city, and making up his mind where to land.

Something droned toward him through the air, colored lights winking on and off. He darted downward and to one side. Where the city lights faded out, he let himself fall all the way to the ground.

He was off a dimly lit highway. Small metal vehicles ran along it, their lights momentarily tearing apart the darkness ahead of them. A glance through the metal at the creatures inside the vehicles gave him a queer thrill. Yes, these were the ones he had been sent to.

Quickly reshaping his body and clothing himself so that he seemed to be one of them, he began to walk along the highway. Cars sped past him, picking him out in their headlights. None of them stopped, but he had time to probe their minds and listen to their language.

What he found was not pleasant. Among all the feelings which controlled their thoughts, fear was easiest to detect. And along with the fear were hatred and envy and greed, anxiety and guilt. Oddly enough, there were also hope and affection for each other, but it was the worse feelings that predominated. There was no doubt that they needed help.

That didn't make any clearer, however, what he had to do. He had an idea that it was not his mission to work out a detailed solution. He had to do some simple thing, something—

The two men were lying in wait, either for him or for some other pedestrian they judged sufficiently unwary. He sensed them long before the first one

stepped out toward him, a cigarette in one hand and what was supposed to be an ingratiating look on the brutal face.

“Got a match, bud?”

The other man suddenly plunged at him from the side, an arm wrapping itself around his neck. The assailant tried to bend him back, the forearm cutting across his windpipe. The arm of the first man swung, a rough fist smashing at his face.

Then the two assailants screamed in pain and terror. Where they had touched him, fist and arm broke into flame. Both men turned from him in horror, and ran off wildly, as if to get away from themselves.

He hadn't meant to hurt them, but they had contrived their own punishment. Perhaps—no, that wasn't it. He wasn't here to punish either.

He walked along, and soon he found himself entering the city. A man in a blue uniform watched him suspiciously and ordered him gruffly to get moving.

“I am moving,” he said pleasantly.

“Don't you get wise with me,” said the bluecoat, and raised a threatening club.

He paid no attention to the club and kept on, toward the heart of the city.

What he saw only confirmed the impression he had obtained from the minds of the men and women in the cars. Too many thoughts were mean and ignoble, arising only from selfish and vicious desires. Many of those who saw him seemed to sense his strangeness, and moved toward him with a single impulse—to take advantage of his ignorance. Men spoke to him out of the sides of their mouths, offering him bargains. Women offered themselves.

“Look, Mac, this stuff is hot, see? Just came off a truck—”

“Wanta look at some nice pictures, Mister?”

“I can give you a good address, Bud.”

“Out for a good time, Jack?”

The planet was sick. Had he been sent to cure it?

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He came to an area of broad lighted streets. Lights glittered everywhere, attracting the attention of those around him by going on and off. Great posters advertised the attractions inside places of amusement.

He entered one of them, an astonished ticket-collector calling after him, "Hey, where's your ticket, Bud?" But there was something about him that prevented the man from pursuing.

He lost himself in the darkness and watched the screen. Here, in brief and vivid form, was pictured the life of the planet. Women in bathing suits plunged into a pool and formed a pattern which imitated sensuously the petals of an unfolding rose. A small animal leaped through hoops and climbed a ladder. Groups of men drove against each other for possession of an object which they kicked occasionally into the air. An elderly man looked grim and made a speech into a microphone. And then a film showed the main business of the planet, which seemed to be the killing of its supposedly intelligent inhabitants. Bombs exploded, planes crashed, desperate lines of men ran forward to meet their deaths.

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Something quickened in his mind. He almost remembered now. This was what he had come here about.

His will moved, and the theatre vanished behind him. Now he was on the battlefield itself.

The reality was worse than the image, far worse. Here were not only the roars of the great guns, but the curses and screams of the wounded, the gasps of the dying. Here were not only horrible sights and sounds, but the odors of death—the sharp nitrogenous fragrance of explosives, the heavy sulfurous smoke of burning oil, the sickening smell of sweating or decaying flesh.

A cloud came into being from the explosion of a mortar shell, and two men dropped to the ground. In answer to the mortar, the flaring barrel of a tank gun spoke hoarsely, and half the crew of the mortar fell in turn. But there seemed no end to this deadly dialogue. The next moment there came the burst of a bomb from a low-flying plane, and the tank half turned over on its side, a heap of smoking steel.

He knew at last why he had been sent here. He knew now what he had to do.

He ripped the flaring-mouthed gun from the tank. His hands twisted the thick metal into a shape it had never known before, bent it into a strange curve,

fashioned it so that it would emit overtones to chill the souls of those who heard it. His brain charged the instrument with the energy of his own mind, energy that would send its voice to the far corners of this diseased planet, and leave not a single individual deaf to its dreaded tones.

Putting the improvised horn to his lips, Gabriel blew the call for which the planet had so long been waiting.

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joseph Samachson (February 18, 1906, - July 2, 1980).

Samachson was an American science fiction writer and mathematician. Born in New York City, he pursued a career that blended his passion for science fiction with his academic background in mathematics.

Samachson gained prominence as a prolific author in the science fiction genre during the mid-20th century. His stories often explored speculative themes related to space, time travel, and futuristic technologies. He contributed to various science fiction magazines, including "Imagination Stories of Science and Fantasy," where his works found a platform for publication.

In addition to his writing, Samachson had a background in mathematics and was recognized for his contributions to mathematical education. His dual interests in science fiction and mathematics reflected in some of his works, where he often incorporated scientific concepts into his imaginative storytelling.

He left a lasting impact on the genre with his imaginative narratives that blended scientific concepts with the fantastical, contributing to the rich tapestry of American science fiction literature.



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