

DENY THE SLAKE

By RICHARD WILSON

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Those couplets held
(unless they lied)
The reason why
a world had died!

The skipper looked at what Ernest Hotaling had scribbled on the slip of paper.

*The color of my true love's cheek
Will turn to gray within a week.*

The skipper read it and exploded. "What kind of nonsense is this?"

"Of course it wouldn't rhyme in a literal translation," Ernest said mildly. "But that's the sense of it."

"Doggerel!" the skipper exclaimed. "Is this the message of the ages? Is this the secret of the lost civilization?"

"There are others, too," Ernest said. He was the psychologist-linguist of the crew. "You've got to expect them to be obscure at first. They didn't purposely leave any message for us."

Ernest sorted through his scraps of paper and picked one out:

*They warn me once, they warn me twice.
Alas! my heedn't turns me spice.*

"There seems to be something there," Ernest said.

The skipper snorted.

"No, really," Ernest insisted. "An air of pessimism—even doom—runs all through this stuff. Take this one, for instance:

*"Music sings within my brain:
I think I may go mad again."*

"Now that begins to make some sense," said Rosco, the communications chief. "It ties in with what Doc Braddon found."

The skipper looked searchingly at his technicians, as if he suspected a joke. But they were serious.

"All right," the skipper said. "It baffles me, but I'm just a simple spacefaring man. *You're* the experts. I'm going to my cabin and communicate with the liquor chest. When you think you've got something I can understand, let me know. 'I think I may go mad again.' Huh! I think I may get drunk, myself."

What the technicians of the research ship *Pringle* were trying to learn was why the people of Planetoid S743 had turned to dust.

They had thought at first they were coming to a living, if tiny, world. There had been lights on the night side and movement along what seemed to be roads.

But when they landed and explored, they found only powder in the places where there should have been people. There were heaps of fine-grained gray powder in the streets, in the driving compartments of the small cars—themselves perfectly preserved—and scattered all through the larger vehicles that looked like buses.

There was powder in the homes. In one home they found a heap of the gray stuff in front of a cookstove which was still warm, and another heap on a chair and on the floor under the chair. It was as

if a woman and the man for whom she'd been preparing a meal had gone *poof*, in an instant.

The crew member who'd been on watch and reported the lights said later they could have been atmospheric. The skipper himself had seen the movement along the roads; he maintained a dignified silence.

It had been a highly developed little world and the buildings were incredibly old. The weather had beaten at them, rounding their edges and softening their colors, but they were as sturdy as if they'd been built last week.

All the cities on the little world were similar. And all were dead. The *Pringle* flew over a dozen of them, then returned to the big one near the plain where the ship had come down originally.

The tallest building in each city was ornate out of all proportion to the rest. The researchers reasoned that this was the palace, or seat of government. Each of these buildings had a network of metal tubing at its peak. Where there were great distances between cities, tall towers rose from the plains or sat on tops of mountains, each with a similar metal network at the apex.

The communications chief guessed that they were radio-video towers but he was proved wrong. There were no radio or television sets anywhere, or anything resembling them.

Still, it was obvious that they were a kind of communications device.

Doc Braddon got part of the answer from some of the gray dust he'd performed an "autopsy" on.

The dust had been found in a neat mound at the bottom of a large metal container on the second-story of a medium-sized dwelling. Doc theorized that one of the people had been taking some sort of waterless bath in the container when the dust death came. The remains were thus complete, not scattered or intermingled as most of the others were.

Doc sorted the particles as best he could and found two types, one definitely inorganic. He conferred with Rosco on the inorganic residue. Rosco thought this might be the remains of a tiny paradio transceiver. Possibly each of the people had carried one around with him, or built into him.

"We're only guessing that they were people," Doc said cautiously, "though it would seem safe to assume it, since we've found dust everywhere people could be expected to be. What we need is a whole corpse."

While patrols were out looking for bodies Rosco tested his theory by sending a radio signal from one of the towers and watching a feeble reaction in the dust.

"If we can assume that they were people," Rosco said, "they apparently communicated over distances by personalized radio. Maybe through a mechanism built into the skull. Would that mean there wouldn't be any written language, Ernest?"

Ernest Hotaling shrugged. "Not necessarily. I should think they'd have kept records of some kind. They could have been written, or taped—or chipped into stone, for that matter."

He asked the lieutenant to enlarge his search. "Bring me anything that looks like a book, or parchment, or microfilm, or tape. If it's chipped in stone," he added with a grin, "I'll come to it."

Meanwhile they ran off the film that had been grinding away automatically ever since the planetoid came within photoradar range of the ship. The film confirmed what the lookout reported—there had been lights on the night side.

Furthermore, one of the sensitized strips at the side of the film showed that signals, which had been going out from the tower tops in a steady stream, increased furiously as the *Pringle* approached. Then, as the ship came closer, they stopped altogether. At the same instant the lights on the night side of the planetoid went out. The film showed that the road movement the skipper had seen stopped then, too.

Ernest tried to analyze the signals reproduced on the film. He had small success. If they represented a language, it would take years before he could even guess what they meant. The only thing he was sure of was that the signals, just before they died, had become a thousand times more powerful.

"Maybe that's what killed them," Rosco said.

"Possibly," Ernest said. "It begins to look as if the people were deliberately killed, or committed suicide, all at once, when we hove into sight. But why?"

"You tell me," Rosco said. "That sounds like your department."

But Ernest could tell him nothing until after the lieutenant came back with a long slender cylinder enclosing a seemingly endless

coil of fine wire. The lieutenant also brought a companion cylinder, apparently a means of playing back what was recorded on the coil.

Ernest experimented until he learned how to operate it, then shooed everybody out of his cabin and went to work.

Ernest Hotaling had joined the crew of the research ship *Pringle* on Ganymede as a replacement for Old Craddock, who'd decided on short notice that thirty years of spacefaring were enough. It would be another ten or twelve years before the *Pringle* returned to Earth and though Craddock was only seventy-eight his yearning to start a proper bee farm became overwhelming.

The others were not unhappy about his departure. The swarm he'd kept in his cabin was small but the bees were gregarious and were as likely to be found in the recreation room as in their hive. So when Craddock and the paraphernalia he'd collected over the decades had debarked, the rest of the crew sighed in collective relief and the skipper went looking for a replacement.

Ernest Hotaling, fresh out of Ganymede U., was the only man qualified, on the record, for the job. He had the necessary languages and his doctorate was in psychology, though his specialty was child therapy.

The skipper puzzled through the copy of Ernest's master's thesis. The lad—he was twenty-three then—had devoted it to children's folklore. The skipper, admittedly a simple man, wasn't sure it contributed profitably to the world's knowledge to spend a year in the study and explanation of *Winnie the Pooh*, or *Step on a crack/Break your mother's back*, or *The Wizard of Oz*.

The skipper had gone to Space Prep at the age of fourteen and later to the Academy itself and there were obviously wide areas of childhood that had passed him by. He'd never heard of *Struwwelpeter*, for instance, or *Ibbety bibbety gibbety goat*, and he wondered if a grown man who immersed himself in this sort of thing was the one for the job.

What was worse was that Hotaling, according to the University yearbook, was a poet.

But when the skipper interviewed Hotaling and found him to be a lean, muscular young man who'd obviously had a haircut in the past week and who laughed genuinely at one of the skipper's more purple stories, he signed him on immediately.

The skipper had one last thought. "You don't keep bees, do you?"

"Not even in my bonnet," Ernest said.

"Then we'll get along. Just keep your nursery rhymes to yourself."

"Aye, aye, sir," said Ernest.

"Look," Ernest told the skipper, "I've studied their literature, if that's what it is, until I'm saturated with it. Maybe it doesn't make sense to you but I've worked out a sort of pattern. It's an alien culture, sure, and there are gaps in it, but what there is fits together."

"All right," the skipper said. "I'm not questioning your findings. I just want to know why it has to be in that ridiculous rhyme."

"Because they were a poetic people, that's why. And it doesn't *have* to be in rhyme. I could give you the literal translation, but it was

rhymed originally and when I make it rhyme in English too you get a more exact idea of the kind of people they were."

"I suppose so," the skipper said. "As long as we don't have to report to the Flagship in the sonnet form I guess I can put up with it. I just don't want to become the laughing stock of the fleet."

"It's no laughing matter," Ernest said. "It's pretty tragic, in any number of ways. In the first place, as Rosco suspected, they communicated by radio. But they had no privacy and couldn't hide anything from anybody. They were always listened in on by the big boys in the palace."

"How do you know?"

"By the coil I worked from. It's a listening-storing device. These aren't official records I've transcribed; they're the everyday expressions of everyday people. And every one of them had been taken down and stored away, presumably so it could be used against the person who expressed it, if it ever became necessary.

"But they couldn't always get through to the person they wanted to reach, even though they got through to the coil. Here's a sad little lover's lament, for instance:

*"My plea to her is lost, as though
The other three command the flow."*

"Like a busy signal?" asked the skipper.

"Very much like one," Ernest said, pleased by the skipper's comprehension. "On the other hand, they always got the messages from the palace. These took priority over all other traffic and were

apt to come at any time of the day or night. The people were just one big captive audience."

"What about the dust? That seems to be a recurring theme in those jingles of yours."

"It is." Ernest quoted:

*"Dust is he and dust his brother;
They all follow one another."*

"They're all dust now," the skipper said. "Did they have a revolution, finally, that killed everybody off?"

"Both sides—the rulers and the ruled, simultaneously? Maybe so." Ernest sorted through his pieces of paper. "There's this one, with its inference of the death of royalty along with that of the common man:

*"Comes the King! O hear him rustle;
Falter, step, and wither, muscle."*

The skipper was beginning to be exasperated again.

"I'll be in my cabin," he said. "You seem to accomplish more when I keep out of your way. But if you want to join me in a little whiskey to keep the falters and withers at bay, come along."

The lieutenant knocked at Ernest's door in the middle of the night. "Mister Hotaling!" he called urgently.

Ernest fumbled into a pair of pants and opened the door.

"One of the men found this thing," the lieutenant said. "We were going to keep it locked up till morning but it's driving me crazy. Figured you'd better have a look at it."

The thing was a blue-green puppet of a creature wearing—or made of—a kind of metallic sailcloth. It was about three feet tall, a caricature of a human being. It hung limp by one arm from the lieutenant's grasp, its head lolling on its shoulder.

"What is it?" Ernest asked sleepily, "a doll?"

"No; it's just playing dead now. It was doing a clog step in the cage before." He gave the thing a shake. "The worst of it is, it hummed all the time. And the humming seems to mean something."

"Bring it in here," Ernest said. He was fully awake now. "Put it in the armchair and stick around in case I can't handle it."

The creature sat awkwardly where it was put. But then the eyes, which a moment ago had seemed to be painted on the face, shifted and looked squarely at Ernest. It hummed at him.

"I see what you mean," he told the lieutenant. "It seems to be trying to communicate. It's the same language as on the coils." He stared at it. "I wish it didn't remind me of Raggedy Andy. Where did you find it?"

"In the throneroom of the palace. One of the men on guard there grabbed it as it came out of a panel in the wall. He grabbed it and it went limp, like a doll."

"Listen," said Ernest.

*"Don't you cry, boys; don't you quiver,
Though all the sand is in your liver."*

"What's that?" the lieutenant said. "Do you feel all right, Mister Hotaling?"

"Sure. That's what he said. Raggedy Andy here. I translated it— with a little poetic license."

"What does it mean?"

"I don't think it's a direct message to us. More likely it's something filed away inside his brain, or electronic storage chamber or whatever he's got. The verse is in the pattern of the ones I translated the other day. The question now is whether Andy has any original thoughts in his head or whether he's just a walking record library."

"How can you tell?"

"By continuing to listen to him, I suppose. A parrot might fool you into thinking it had intelligence of its own, if you didn't know anything about parrots, but after a while you'd realize it was just a mimic. Right, Andy?"

The puppet-like creature hummed again and Ernest listened, gesturing the lieutenant to be quiet.

Finally Ernest said:

*"Down the valley, down the glen
Come the Mercials, ten by ten."*

"That makes as much sense as the one about the liver," the lieutenant said.

"Takes it a bit further, I think. No, seriously. 'Mercials' is a set of syllables I made up, as short for 'commercials'—or the sand in their

craw, the thumb in their soup—all the things they had to put up with as the most captive of all audiences."

"That wasn't an original thought, then?"

"Probably not. Andy may be trying me out with a few simple couplets before he throws a really hard one. I wonder if he knows he's got through to me." He laughed as the lieutenant looked at him oddly. "I don't mean *he*, personally. I know as well as you do he's some kind of robot."

"I see. You mean, is somebody controlling him now, or is he just reacting to a stimulus the way he was built to do?"

"Exactly." Ernest frowned at the doll-like creature. "I suppose the scientific way would be to dissect him—it. Take it apart, I mean. I've got to stop thinking of it as a him. We'd better get Doc Braddon in on this."

He punched the 'com button to Doc's cabin. The sleepy voice that answered became alert as Ernest explained. Doc arrived minutes later with an instrument kit, looking eager.

"So this is your new toy," he said. The creature, which had been slumped listlessly in the chair, seemed to look at Doc with distaste. It hummed something. Doc looked inquiringly at Ernest. "Have you two established communication?"

"It's a robot," Ernest said defensively. "The question is, could we learn more by leaving it intact and pumping it for whatever information is stored up inside it, or by taking it apart? For instance, it just said:

*"Uninterred beyond the hills
Lie never weres and never wills."*

Doc became excited. "It really said that?"

"Well, not in so many words. It said—"

"I know, I know. Your poetic license hasn't expired. I mean, that *is* the gist of it? That somewhere back of the hills there's a charnel heap—a dump of corpses, of miscarriages—something of the sort?"

"You could put that interpretation on it," Ernest said. "I got the impression of something abortive."

"That's the best lead yet," Doc said. "If we could find anything other than dust piles, no matter how embryonic—Lieutenant, your boys must have been looking in the wrong places. How soon can you get a detail out over the hills?"

The lieutenant looked at his watch. "If I've got this screwy rotation figured out, dawn's about half an hour off. That soon enough?"

"It'll have to do."

"What about Raggedy Andy here?" Ernest asked. "Do we keep him intact?"

"Don't touch a hair of his precious head," Doc said. "He's earned a stay of dissection."

The creature, still quiet in the chair, its eyes vacant now, hummed almost inaudibly. Ernest bent to listen.

"Well?" Doc said.

"Strictly a non-sequitur," Ernest told him:

*"Here we go, lass, through the heather;
Naught to daunt us save the tether."*

"It makes me sad," Doc said. He yawned. "Maybe it's just the hour."

Cook had accomplished his usual legerdemain with the space rations but the breakfast table was less appreciative than usual.

"The detail's been gone a long time," Doc Braddon said, toying with an omelet. "Do you think it's a wild goose chase?"

"Reminds me of a time off Venus," the skipper said. "Before any of you were born, probably...."

His juniors listened politely until the familiar narrative was interrupted by the 'com on the bulkhead. They recognized the voice of Sergeant Maraffi, the non-com in charge of the crew in the scout craft.

"We found something. Looks like bodies. Well preserved but incomplete. Humanoid."

"Bring 'em back," the skipper said. "As many as you've got room for in the sling." He added as an afterthought: "Do they smell?"

"Who knows?" Maraffi said. "I sure don't aim to take off my helmet to find out. They're not decomposed, though."

The skipper grumbled to Doc: "I thought you checked the atmosphere."

"There isn't any," Doc said, annoyed. "Didn't you read my report?"

"All right," the skipper said, not looking at him. "I can't do everything. I naturally assumed these people breathed."

"If they did, it wasn't air," Doc said.

"Bring back all you can, Maraffi," the skipper said. "But leave them outside the ship. Everybody on the detail takes double decontamination. And we'll put you down for hazard pay."

"Aye, aye, sir. We're on our way."

"They're androids," Doc said. He'd gone out in a protective suit to the grisly pile. "These must be the false starts."

The other technicians watched him on a closed-circuit hook-up from inside the ship.

"Are they like us?" Ernest asked. "They look it from here—what there is of them."

"Damn near," Doc said. "Smaller and darker, though. Rosco, you were right about the communication. There's a tiny transceiver built into their skulls. Those that have heads, that is."

"If that's the case," Rosco said, "then why weren't these—stillbirths, whatever you want to call them—turned to dust like the others?"

"Because they'd never been activated," Doc said. "You can't blow a fuse if it isn't screwed in. Skipper, I've seen about all my stomach can stand for now. I suppose I'm a hell of a queasy sawbones, but these—things—are too much like human beings for me to take much more of them at the moment."

"Come on back," the skipper said. "I don't feel too sturdy myself."

Ernest Hotaling was writing verse in his cabin when the lieutenant intercommed him. He had just written, in free translation:

*A girl is scarcely long for the road
If passion'd arms make her corrode.*

Ernest wasn't entirely satisfied with the rhyme, though he felt he'd captured the sense of it. The lieutenant's call interrupted his polishing. He touched the 'com and said: "Hotaling."

"Patrol's back, Mister Hotaling. You'll want to see what they found."

"Another heap of false starts? No, thanks."

"Not this time. They found some people. Two live people."

"Alive! Be right there."

He raced down, then fretted as he waited for Doc to fumigate the people as they came through the airlock. Ernest saw them dimly through the thick glass. They were quite human-looking. But how had they survived whatever had turned thousands of their fellows to dust? Or were these—a man and a woman, elderly and fragile-looking—the rulers who had dusted the others?

"How much longer, Doc?" he asked.

Doc grinned. "In about two quatrains and a jingle, Ernest."

They brought the couple to the main lounge and set them down at a long table. The skipper took a seat at the far end. Apparently he planned to listen but not take part in the questioning. That would be up to Ernest Hotaling, if he could establish communication.

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