‘… that what was myth in one world might always be fact in some other.’ PERELANDRA

‘Before the class breaks up, gentlemen,’ said the instructor, ‘I should like to make some reference to a fact which is known to some of you, but probably not yet to all. High Command, I need not remind you, has asked for a volunteer for yet one more attempt on the Moon. It will be the fourth. You know the history of the previous three. In each case the explorers landed unhurt; or at any rate alive. We got their messages. Every message short, some apparently interrupted. And after that never a word, gentlemen. I think the man who offers to make the fourth voyage has about as much courage as anyone I’ve heard of. And I can’t tell you how proud it makes me that he is one of my own pupils. He is in this room at this moment. We wish him every possible good fortune. Gentlemen, I ask you to give three cheers for Lieutenant John Jenkin.’

Then the class became a cheering crowd for two minutes; after that a hurrying, talkative crowd in the corridor. The two biggest cowards exchanged the various family reasons which had deterred them from volunteering themselves. The knowing man said, “There’s something behind all this.’ The vermin said, ‘He always was a chap who’d do anything to get himself into the limelight.’ But most just shouted out, ‘Jolly good show, Jenkin,’ and wished him luck.

Ward and Jenkin got away together into a pub.

‘You kept this pretty dark,’ said Ward. ‘What’s yours?’

‘A pint of draught Bass,’ said Jenkin.

‘Do you want to talk about it?” said Ward rather awkwardly when the drinks had come. ‘I mean - if you won’t think I’m butting in - it’s not just because of that girl, is it?’

‘That girl” was a young woman who was thought to have treated Jenkin rather badly.

‘Well,’ said Jenkin, ‘I don’t suppose I’d be going if she had married me. But it’s not a spectacular attempt at suicide or any rot of that sort. I’m not depressed. I don’t feel anything particular about her. Not much interested in women at all, to tell you the truth. Not now. A bit petrified.’

‘What is it then?’

‘Sheer unbearable curiosity. I’ve read those three little messages over and over till I know them by heart. I’ve heard every theory there is about what interrupted them. I’ve-‘

‘Is it certain they were all interrupted? I thought one of them was supposed to be complete.’

‘You mean Traill and Henderson? I think it was as incomplete as the others. First there was Stafford. He went alone, like me.’

‘Must you ? I’ll come, if you’ll have me.’

Jenkin shook his head. ‘I knew you would,’ he said. ‘But you’ll see in a moment why I don’t want you to. But to go back to the messages. Stafford’s was obviously cut short by something. It went: “Stafford from within fifty miles of Point Xo308 on the Moon. My landing was excellent. I have- ” then silence. Then come Traill and Henderson. “We have landed. We are perfectly well. The ridge M392 is straight ahead of me as I speak. Over.” ‘

‘What do you make of “Over” ?’

‘Not what you do. You think it means “finis”- the message is over. But who in the world, speaking to Earth from the Moon for the first time in all history, would have so little to say- if he could say any more ? As if he’d crossed to Calais and sent his grandmother a card to say “Arrived safely”. The thing’s ludicrous.’

‘Well, what do you make of “Over” ?’

‘Wait a moment. The last lot were Trevor, Woodford, and Fox. It was Fox who sent the message. Remember it?’

‘Probably not so accurately as you.’

‘Well, it was this. “This is Fox speaking. All has gone wonderfully well. A perfect landing. You shot pretty well for I’m on Point Xo308 at this moment. Ridge M392 straight ahead. On my left, far away across the crater, I see the big peaks. On my right I see the Yerkes cleft. Behind me.” Got it?’

‘I don’t see the point.’

‘Well, Fox was cut off the moment he said “Behind me”. Supposing Traill was cut off in the middle of saying “Over my shoulder I can see” or “Over behind me”, or something like that?’

‘You mean -‘

‘All the evidence is consistent with the view that everything went well till the speaker looked behind him. Then something got him.’

‘What sort of something?’

‘That’s what I want to find out. One idea in my head is this. Might there be something on the Moon - or something psychological about the experience of landing on the Moon- which drives men fighting mad ?’

‘I see. You mean Fox looked round just in time to see Trevor and Woodford preparing to knock him on the head?’

‘Exactly. And Traill -for it was Traill- just in time to see Henderson a split second before Henderson murdered him. And that’s why I’m not going to risk having a companion; least of all my best friend.’

‘This doesn’t explain Stafford.’

‘No. That’s why one can’t rule out the other hypothesis.’

‘What’s it?’

‘Oh, that whatever killed them all was something they found there. Something lunar.’

‘You’re surely not going to suggest life on the Moon at this time of day?’

The word “life” always begs the question. Because, of course, it suggests organization as we know it on Earth -with all the chemistry which organization involves. Of course there could hardly be anything of that sort. But there might- I at any rate can’t say there couldn’t- be masses of matter capable of movements determined from within, determined, in fact, by intentions.’

‘Oh Lord, Jenkin, that’s nonsense. Animated stones, no doubt! That’s mere science fiction or mythology.’

‘Going to the Moon at all was once science fiction. And as for mythology, haven’t they found the Cretan labyrinth?’

‘And all it really comes down to,’ said Ward, ‘is that no one has ever come back from the Moon, and no one, so far as we know, ever survived there for more than a few minutes. Damn the whole thing.’ He stared gloomily into his tankard.

‘Well,’ said Jenkin cheerily, ‘somebody’s got to go. The whole human race isn’t going to be licked by any blasted satellite.’

‘I might have known that was your real reason,’ said Ward.

‘Have another pint and don’t look so glum,’ said Jenkin. ‘Anyway, there’s loads of time. I don’t suppose they’ll get me off for another six months at the earliest.’

But there was hardly any time. Like any man in the modern world on whom tragedy has descended or who has undertaken a high enterprise, he lived for the next few months a life not unlike that of a hunted animal. The Press, with all their cameras and notebooks, were after him. They did not care in the least whether he was allowed to eat or sleep or whether they made a nervous wreck of him before he took off. ‘Flesh-flies,’ he called them. When forced to address them, he always said, ‘I wish I could take you all with me.’ But he reflected also that a Saturn’s ring of dead (and burnt) reporters circling round his spaceship might get on his nerves. They would hardly make ‘the silence of those eternal spaces’ any more homelike.

The take-off when it came was a relief. But the voyage was worse than he had ever anticipated. Not physically- on that side it was nothing worse than uncomfortable- but in the emotional experience. He had dreamed all his life, with mingled terror and longing, of those eternal spaces; of being utterly ‘outside’, in the sky. He had wondered if the agoraphobia of that roofless and bottomless vacuity would overthrow his reason. But the moment he had been shut into his ship there descended upon him the suffocating knowledge that the real danger of space-travel is claustrophobia. You have been put in a little metal container; somewhat like a cupboard, very like a coffin. You can’t see out; you can see things only on the screen. Space and the stars are just as remote as they were on the Earth. Where you are is always your world. The sky is never where you are. All you have done is to exchange a large world of earth and rock and water and clouds for a tiny world of metal.

This frustration of a life-long desire bit deeply into his mind as the cramped hours passed. Then he became conscious of another motive which, unnoticed, had been at work on him when he volunteered. That affair with the girl had indeed frozen him stiff; petrified him, you might say. He wanted to feel again, to be flesh, not stone. To feel anything, even terror. Well, on this trip there would be terrors enough before all was done. He’d be wakened, never fear. That part of his destiny at least he felt he could shake off.

The landing was not without terror, but there were so many gimmicks to look after, so much skill to be exercised, that it did not amount to very much. But his heart was beating a little more noticeably than usual as he put the finishing touches to his space-suit and climbed out. He was carrying the transmission apparatus with him. It

felt, as he had expected, as light as a loaf. But he was not going to send any message in a hurry. That might be where afi the others had gone wrong. Anyway, the longer he waited the longer those pressmen would be kept out of their beds waiting for their story. Do ‘em good.

The first thing that struck him was that his helmet had been too lightly tinted. It was painful to look at all in the direction of the sun. Even the rock-it was, after all, rock not dust (which disposed of one hypothesis)-was dazzling. He put down the apparatus; tried to take in the scene.

The surprising thing was how small it looked. He thought he could account for this. The lack of atmosphere forbade nearly all the effect that distance has on Earth. The serrated boundary of the crater was, he knew, about twenty-five miles away. It looked as if you could have touched it. The peaks looked as if they were a few feet high. The black sky, with its inconceivable multitude and ferocity of stars, was like a cap forced down upon the crater; the stars only just out of his reach. The impression of a stage-set in a toy theatre, therefore of something arranged, therefore of something waiting for him, was at once disappointing and oppressive. Whatever terrors there might be, here too agoraphobia would not be one of them.

He took his bearings and the result was easy enough. He was, like Fox and his friends, almost exactly on Point Xo3oB. But there was no trace of human remains.

If he could find any, he might have some clue as to how they died. He began to hunt. He went in each circle further from the ship. There was no danger of losing it in a place like this.

Then he got his first real shock of fear. Worse still, he could not tell what was frightening him. He only knew that he was engulfed in sickening unreality; seemed neither to be where he was nor to be doing what he did. It was also somehow connected with an experience long ago. It was something that had happened in a cave. Yes; he remembered now. He had been walking along supposing himself alone and then noticed that there was always a sound of other feet following him. Then in a flash he realized what was wrong. This was the exact reverse of the experience in the cave. Then there had been too many footfalls. Now there were too few. He walked on hard rock as silently as a ghost. He swore at himself for a fool - as if every child didn’t know that a world without air would be a world without noise. But the silence, though explained, became none the less terrifying.

He had now been alone on the Moon for perhaps thirty-five minutes. It was then that he noticed the three strange things.

The sun’s rays were roughly at right angles to his line of sight, so that each of the things had a bright side and a dark side; for each dark side a shadow like Indian ink

lay out on the rock. He thought they looked like Belisha beacons. Then he thought they looked like huge apes. They were about the height of a man. They were indeed like clumsily shaped men. Except-he resisted an impulse to vomit - that they had no heads.

They had something instead. They were (roughly) human up to their shoulders. Then, where the head should have been, there was utter monstrosity - a huge spherical block; opaque, featureless. And every one of them looked as if it had that moment stopped moving or were at that moment about to move.

Ward's phrase about 'animated stones' darted up hideously from his memory. And hadn't he himself talked of something that we couldn't call life, not in our sense, something that could nevertheless produce locomotion and have intentions? Something which, at any rate, shared with life life's tendency to kill? If there were such creatures - mineral equivalents to organisms - they could probably stand perfectly still for a hundred years without feeling any strain.

Were they aware of him? What had they for senses? The opaque globes on their shoulders gave no hint.

There comes a moment in nightmare, or sometimes in real battle, when fear and courage both dictate the same course: to rush, planless, upon the thing you are afraid of. Jenkin sprang upon the nearest of the three abominations and rapped his gloved knuckles against it globular top.

Ach! - he'd forgotten. No noise. All the bombs in the world might burst here and make no noise. Ears are useless on the Moon.

He recoiled a step and next moment found himself sprawling on the ground. "This is how they all died,' he thought.

But he was wrong. The figure above him had not stirred. He was quite undamaged. He got up again and saw what he had tripped over.

It was a purely terrestrial object. It was, in fact, a transmission set. Not exactly like his own, but an earlier and supposedly inferior model -the sort Fox would have had.

As the truth dawned on him an excitement very different from that of terror seized him. He looked at their misshaped bodies; then down at his own limbs. Of course; that was what one looked like in a space-suit. On his own head there was a similar monstrous globe, but fortunately not an opaque one. He was looking at three statues of spacemen: at statues of Trevor, Woodford, and Fox.

But then the Moon must have inhabitants; and rational inhabitants; more than that, artists.

And what artists! You might quarrel with their taste, for no line anywhere in any of the three statues had any beauty. You could not say a word against their skill. Except for the head and face inside each headpiece, which obviously could not be attempted in such a medium, they were perfect.

Photographic accuracy had never reached such a point on earth. And though they were faceless you could see from the set of their shoulders, and indeed of their whole bodies, that a momentary pose had been exactly seized. Each was the statue of a man turning to look behind him. Months of work had doubtless gone to the carving of each; it caught that instantaneous gesture like a stone snapshot.

Jenkin’s idea was now to send his message at once. Before anything happened to himself, Earth must hear this amazing news. He set off in great strides, and presently in leaps - now first enjoying lunar gravitation - for his ship and his own set. He was happy now. He had escaped his destiny. Petrified, eh? No more feelings? Feelings enough to last him for ever.

He fixed the set so that he could stand with his back to the sun. He worked the gimmicks. ‘Jenkin, speaking from the Moon,’ he began.

His own huge black shadow lay out before him. There is no noise on the Moon. Up from behind the shoulders of his own shadow another shadow pushed its way along the dazzling rock. It was that of a human head. And what a head of hair. It was all rising, writhing - swaying hi the wind perhaps. Very thick the hairs looked. Then, as he turned in terror, there flashed through his mind the thought, ‘But there’s no wind. No air. It can’t be blowing about.’ His eyes met hers.