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# THE GREATEST ASSET

The Earth was one large park. It had been tamed utterly. Lou Tansonia saw it expand under his eyes as he watched somberly from the Lunar Shuttle. His prominent nose split his lean face into inconsiderable halves and each looked sad always-but this time in accurate reflection of his mood.

He had never been away so long-almost a month-and he anticipated a none-too-pleasant acclimation period once Earth's large gravity made its grip fiercely evident.

But that was for later. That was not the sadness of now as he watched Earth grow larger.

As long as the planet was far enough to be a circle of white spirals, glistening in the sun that shone over the ship's shoulders, it had its primeval beauty. When the occasional patches of pastel browns and greens peeped through the clouds, it might still have been the planet it was at any time since three hundred million years before, when life had first stretched out of the sea arid moved over the dry land to fill the valleys with green.

It was lower, lower-when the ship sank down-that the tameness began to show.

There was no wilderness anywhere. Lou had never seen Earthly wilderness; he had only read of it, or seen it in old films.

The forests stood in rank and file, with each tree carefully ticketed by species and position. The crops grew in their fields in orderly rotation, with intermittent and automated fertilization and weeding. The few domestic animals that still existed were numbered and Lou wryly suspected that the blades of grass were as well.

Animals were so rarely seen as to be a sensation when glimpsed. Even the insects had faded, and none of the large animals existed anywhere outside the slowly dwindling number of zoos.

The very cats had become few in number, for it wasmuch more patriotic to keep a hamster, if one had to have a pet at all.

Correction! Only Earth's nonhuman animal population had diminished. Its mass of animal life was as great as ever, but most of it, about three fourths of its total, was one

species only - Homo sapiens. And, despite everything the Terrestrial Bureau of Ecology could do (or said it could do), that fraction very slowly increased from year to year.

Lou thought of that, as he always did, with a towering sense of loss. The human presence was unobtrusive, to be sure. There was no sign of it from where the shuttle made its final orbits about the planet; and, Lou knew, there would be no sign of it even when they sank much lower.

The sprawling cities of the chaotic pre-Planetary days were gone. The old highways could be traced from the air by the imprint they still left on the vegetation, but they were invisible from close quarters. Individual men themselves rarely troubled the surface, but they were there, underground. All mankind was, in all its billions, with the factories, the food-processing plants, the energies, the vacu-tunnels.

The tame world lived on solar energy and was free of strife, and to Lou it was hateful in consequence.

Yet at the moment he could almost forget, for, after months of failure, he was going to see Adrastus, himself. It had meant the pulling of every available string.

Ino Adrastus was the Secretary General of Ecology. It was not an elective office; it was little-known. It was simply the most important post on Earth, for it controlled everything.

Jan Marley said exactly that, as he sat there, with a sleepy look of absent-minded dishevelment that made one I think he would have been fat if the human diet were so I uncontrolled as to allow of fatness.

He said, “For my-money this is the most important post on Earth, and no one seems to know it. I want to write it up.”

Adrastus shrugged. His stocky figure, with its shock of hair, once a light brown and now a brown-flecked gray,his faded blue eyes nested in darkened surrounding tissues, finely wrinkled, had been an unobtrusive part of the administrative scene for a generation. He had been Secretary-General of Ecology ever since the regional ecological councils had been combined into the Terrestrial Bureau. Those who knew of him at all found it impossible to think of ecology without him.

He said, “The truth is I hardly ever make a decision truly my own. The directives I sign aren't mine, really. I sign them because it would be psychologically uncomfortable to have computers sign them. But, you know, it's only the computers that can do the work.

“The Bureau ingests an incredible quantity of data each day; data forwarded to it from

every part of the globe and dealing not only with human births, deaths, population shifts, production, and consumption, but with all the tangible changes in the plant and animal population as well, to say nothing of the measured state of the major segments of the environment-air, sea, and soil. The information is taken apart, absorbed, and assimilated into crossfiled memory indices of staggering complexity, and from that memory comes answers to the questions we ask."

Marley said, with a shrewd, sidelong glance, "Answers to all questions?"

Adrastus smiled. "We learn not to bother to ask questions that have no answer."

"And the result," said Marley, "is ecological balance."

"Right, but a special ecological balance. All through the planet's history, the balance has been maintained, but always at the cost of catastrophe. After temporary imbalance, the balance is restored by famine, epidemic, drastic climatic change. We maintain it now without catastrophe by daily shifts and changes, by never allowing imbalance to accumulate dangerously."

Marley said, "There's what you once said-'Man's greatest asset is a balanced ecology.'"

"So they tell me I said."

"It's there on the wall behind you."

"Only the first three words," said Adrastus dryly.

There it was on a long Shimmer-plast, the words winking and alive: MAN'S GREATEST ASSET...

"You don't have to complete the statement."

"What else can I tell you?"

"Can I spend some time with you and watch you at your work?"

"You'll watch a glorified clerk."

"I don't think so. Do you have appointments at which I may be present?"

"One appointment today; a young fellow named Tansonia; one of our Moon-men. You can sit in."

"Moon-men? You mean-"

“Yes, from the lunar laboratories. Thank heaven for the moon. Otherwise all their experimentation would take place on Earth, and we have enough trouble containing the ecology as it is.”

“You mean like nuclear experiments and radiational pollution?”

“I mean many things.”

Lou Tansonia's expression was a mixture of barely suppressed excitement and barely suppressed apprehension. “I'm glad to have this chance to see you, Mr. Secretary,” he said breathlessly, puffing against Earth's gravity.

“I'm sorry we couldn't make it sooner,” said Adrastus smoothly. “I have excellent reports concerning your work. The other gentleman present is Jan Marley, a science writer, and he need not concern us.”

Lou glanced at the writer briefly and nodded, then turned eagerly to Adrastus. “Mr. Secretary-”

“Sit down,” said Adrastus.

Lou did so, with the trace of clumsiness to be expected of one acclimating himself to Earth, and with an air, somehow, that to pause long enough to sit was a waste of time. He said, “Mr. Secretary, I am appealing to you personally concerning my Project Application Num-”

“I know it.”

“You've read it, sir?”

“No, I haven't, but the computers have. It's been rejected.”

“Yes! But I appeal from the computers to you.”

Adrastus smiled and shook his head. “That's a difficult appeal for me. I don't know from where I could gather the courage to override the computer.”

“But you must, ”said the young man earnestly. “My field is genetic engineering.”

“Yes, I know.”

“And genetic engineering,” said Lou, running over the interruption, “is the handmaiden of medicine and it shouldn't be so. Not entirely, anyway.”

“Odd that you think so. You have your medical degree, and you have done impressive work in medical genetics. I have been told that in two years time your work may lead to the full suppression of diabetes mellitus for good.”

“Yes, but I don't care. I don't want to carry that through. Let someone else do it. Curing diabetes is just a detail and it will merely mean that the death rate will go down slightly and produce just a bit more pressure in the direction of population increase. I'm not interested in achieving that.”

“You don't value human life?”

“Not infinitely. There are too many people on Earth.”

“I know that some think so.”

“You're one of them, Mr. Secretary. You have written articles saying so. And it's obvious to any thinking man-to you more than anyone-what it's doing. Over-population means discomfort, and to reduce the discomfort private choice must disappear. Crowd enough people into a field and the only way they can all sit down is for all to sit down at the same time. Make a mob dense enough and they can move from one point to another quickly only by marching in formation. That is what men are becoming; a blindly marching mob knowing nothing about where it is going or why.”

“How long have you rehearsed this speech, Mr. Tansonia?”

Lou flushed slightly. “ And the other life forms are decreasing in numbers of species and individuals, except for the plants we eat. The ecology gets simpler every year.”

“It stays balanced.”

“But it loses color and variety and we don't even know how good the balance is. We accept the balance only because it's all we have.”

“What would you do?”

“ Ask the computer that rejected my proposal. I want to initiate a program for genetic engineering on a wide variety of species from worms to mammals. I want to create new variety out of the dwindling material at hand before it dwindles out altogether.”

“For what purpose?”

“To set up artificial ecologies. To set up ecologies based on plants and animals not like anything on Earth.”

“What would you gain?”

“I don't know. If I knew exactly what I would gain there would be no need to do research. But I know what we ought to gain. We ought to learn more about what makes an ecology tick. So far, we've only taken what nature has handed us and then ruined it and broken it down and made do with the gutted remains. Why not build something up and study that?”

“You mean build it blindly? At random?”

“We don't know enough to do it any other way. Genetic engineering has the random mutation as its basic driving force. Applied to medicine, this randomness must be minimized at all costs, since a specific effect is sought. I want to take the random component of genetic engineering and make use of it.”

Adrastus frowned for a moment. “ And how are you going to set up an ecology that's meaningful? Won't it interact with the ecology that already exists, and possibly unbalance it? That is something we can't afford.”

“I don't mean to carry out the experiments on Earth,” said Lou. “Of course not.”

“On the moon?”

“Not on the moon, either. -On the asteroids. I've thought of that since my proposal was fed to the computer which spit it out. Maybe this will make a difference. How about small asteroids, hollowed-out; one per ecology? Assign a certain number of asteroids for the purpose. Have them properly engineered; outfit them with energy sources and transducers; seed them with collections of life forms which might form a closed ecology. See what happens. If it doesn't work, try to figure out why and subtract an item, or, more likely, add an item, or change the proportions. We'll develop a science of applied ecology, or, if you prefer, a science of ecological engineering; a science one step up in complexity and significance beyond genetic engineering.”

“But the good of it, you can't say.”

“The specific good, of course not. But how can it avoid some good? It will increase knowledge in the very field we need it most.” He pointed to the shimmering lettering behind Adrastus. “You said it yourself, 'Man's greatest asset is a balanced ecology.' I'm offering you a way of doing basic research in experimental ecology; something that has never been done before.”

“How many asteroids will you want?” Lou hesitated. “Ten?” he said with rising inflection. “As a beginning.”

“Take five,” said Adrastus, drawing the report toward himself and scribbling quickly on its face, canceling out the computer's decision.

Afterward, Marley said, “Can you sit there and tell me that you're a glorified clerk now? You cancel the computer and hand out five asteroids. Like that.”

“The Congress will have to give its approval. I'm sure it will.”

“Then you think this young man's suggestion is really a good one.”

“No, I don't. It won't work. Despite his enthusiasm, the matter is so complicated that it will surely take far more men than can possibly be made available for far more years than that young man will live to carry it through to any worthwhile point.”

“Are you sure?”

“The computer says so. It's why his project was rejected.”

“Then why did you cancel the computer's decision?”

“Because I, and the government in general, are here in order to preserve something far more important than the ecology.”

Marley leaned forward. “I don't get it.”

“Because you misquoted what I said so long ago. Because everyone misquotes it. Because I spoke two sentences and they were telescoped into one and I have never been able to force them apart again. Presumably, the human race is unwilling to accept my remarks as I madethem.”

“You mean you didn't say 'Man's greatest asset is a I balanced ecology'?”

“Of course not. I said, 'Man's greatest need is a balanced ecology.'“

“But on your Shimmer-plast you say, 'Man's greatest asset-'“

“That begins the second sentence, which men refuse to quote, but which I never forget-'Man's greatest asset is the unsettled mind.' I haven't overruled the computer for the sake of our ecology. We only need that to live. I overruled it to save a valuable mind and keep it at work, an unsettled mind. We need that for man to be man-which is more important than merely to live.”

Marley rose. “I suspect, Mr. Secretary, you wanted me here for this interview. It's this

thesis you want me to publicize, isn't it?”

“Let's say,” said Adrastus, “that I'm seizing the chance to get my remarks correctly quoted.”