

The Fifth Planet

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I

“IT ISN’T THERE any more,” he said. He was the only man I ever knew who hunted for bones in the stars, and I remember we were standing out among his sheep in the clear starshine when he said it. “It isn’t there any more,” he repeated. And innocently enough I asked, “What isn’t?”—not really thinking at all but just making conversation and watching the silver light drifting over the gray backs of the sheep.

“The fifth planet,” he answered. I thought a minute and counted in my head twice over to make sure, and then I said a little soothingly, as one talks to a confused child, “But the fifth planet is Jupiter. There it is over there. All you have to do is swing the tripod around and you’ll pick it up all right. Planets don’t disappear that easy, thank God.”

“The fifth one did all the same,” he said. But he shifted the tripod and took a sight toward Jupiter, and the sheep went on munching. I decided I hadn’t heard him correctly. After all there is a good deal of wind in those high valleys, and even the frost made little pinging sounds cracking the stones.

We might have been standing on the moon ourselves, it was so cold. I wanted badly to go in and sit by the fire, but it was like this night after night, and nothing for me to do about it if I wanted companionship. He was a bone hunter like myself, in a kind of way. There aren’t many of us, nor enough help to stand by, so I couldn’t let him down even though I knew he was crazy as hell. If I was playing a hundred-to-one shot when I looked for bones around his ranch by day, he was playing it a million to one at night. That just doesn’t make sense. Your life isn’t long enough to fool with odds like that. Just the same, there we were out with those sheep and pointing his little telescope looking for bones in the sky.

I suppose that was the thing that intrigued me the first season we met. I’m not a star hunter, though like most people who work with the earth and its past, I have my normal share of curiosity about the universe. It was a far-off interest, though,

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and besides I was nearsighted from too much peering at the ground. Radnor was different. He already had a squint when I met him, from straining over that telescope, and he was the sort of chap who generally ends up in a cistern or a cesspool while marching around after the stars.

He wasn't a professional. That kind never is. He was a pure bona fide amateur, and part of the lunatic fringe. He got into this thing by accident, and like most such people, he didn't know when to stop. It began with Williams and a flight of meteors. It ended with—well that's the story. But this is how it began.

II

Williams came up there on the hunt for a meteor. Not an ordinary one, you understand, but the real stuff. A twenty-tonner heard and seen passing over three states. I knew Williams quite well—we worked at the same institution once—and I knew there wasn't a keener eye for a starfall and where it was going.

He'd plotted it all out from the reports, triangulated, and headed up there into that high tableland. Of course he ran into Radnor. He would have to in order to operate in there at all. It was Radnor's ranch and Radnor that helped him. They were lucky, sure. A ranch hand had seen the hole where it struck. They got it, and it was quite a feather in Williams's cap. In any sane place in the world they would have packed it off posthaste to a museum, with a few drinks for the local boys, and things would have gone back to normalcy fast.

The trouble was that nothing up there was normal. In the first place, digging out that big chunk of iron took time, equipment, and all sorts of supplies. Williams stayed at Radnor's place for weeks, and knowing Williams as I did it was easy to guess what happened: Williams simply took the malleable clay of Jim Radnor, sheepman, and made a star hunter out of him. That might have been all right, in a nice amateur sort of way, if they had kept it to the front porch on a Sunday evening, but that wasn't how Williams did things.

He was a born teacher—if he wasn't an astronomer I'd have said preacher and been closer to the truth—and he set out to convert Radnor. He aimed to convince Radnor of the impor-

tance of meteorite observation, which might have been all right too—there's no real harm in it if your mind runs that way—but then he added that last devilish touch that only a fanatic like Williams would have used to corrode the soul of a good sheepman.

It was unethical, to my mind, immoral really, because it is the kind of thing which the innocent amateur isn't ready to withstand. He hasn't built up to it with the necessary preparation. You take him, addlepat and open-mouthed, and let him look into space until his brain is reeling. Then you whisper over his shoulder something about life out there in that void, and the only way we can ever learn if it exists. And you speak—oh, I knew old Williams well, you know—of the freezing dark that surrounds us and the loneliness that comes to the astronomer in that room under the slit dome. You speak of the suns going by, and the great fires roaring in the solitude of space. You speak of endless depths, great distances all cold and still and empty of the life of man. And then far off, like an insect singing, you begin to whisper the hope of life on other planets, and whether it is true or untrue, and whether there has ever been or will be things like ourselves out there to share our loneliness. And then you tell again how the secret may be found.

III

It's not my secret. I won't vouch for it, you understand. It's Williams's field, not mine, but I know what he is capable of and the kind of kinks he can tie in people's heads. I've heard that wistful insect singing too, down another dimension—time—which is why I go on bone hunting. Well, he must have done it to Radnor. When I dropped in, a year later, the man had all the symptoms.

I've never known a nicer fellow than Jim. One of those odd, big-handed, practical fellows with a streak of romance that had lain dormant till Williams touched it off. Unmarried, too. Probably a wife could have handled him, or driven Williams away before the damage was done, but he had had no protection, so there he was with the little telescope Williams had gotten for him, and nothing on his mind but stars.

He had a bunch of file cards in boxes all over his bedroom. I've never seen anything like it. There was no system, no alphabet, but all observations on meteorites and things pertaining to them filed in a colossal jumble. It made him feel scientific, I guess. He told me about the boxes and said he had "facts" in them.

"Now, Jim," I said, for I knew him well, having been in and out of that country before on a mission concerning a small mouselike animal a million years deceased, "now, Jim, what in the name of God are *you* looking for? One crank in this country is bad enough. I don't like competition."

"Bones," he said.

"What?" I exclaimed.

"Bones," he repeated.

"I don't get you," I said. "You've got a nice little telescope that Williams gave you. You've card files full of stuff on meteorites. You're mumbling to me about the Doppler effect and the red shift. What has all that to do with bones? You're in astronomy."

"I'm hunting for interplanetary bones," he said then. He looked at his shoes, and I guess he thought I wouldn't like it very well, being in bones myself. He needn't have worried. I saw where Williams had led him, and I had no intention of following.

"Oh!" I said. And then I just remarked casually I'd be off for the hills in the morning. I knew what Williams could do to a man. He might have done it to me once, if I hadn't been near-sighted. Williams was a fanatic. It wasn't that there was basically anything wrong with his theory, if he'd been content to leave it at that. You'll find it all there in the books. Where the fanaticism came in was in his utter ruthlessness, and his power over people. He knew his theory was a million-to-one shot—a twice-ten-million-to-one shot. And his idea of shortening the odds was to get twenty thousand jug-headed enthusiasts to waste their lives looking for the proof.

The proof, of course, was bones, interplanetary fossils. Nobody had ever found them and nobody ever—well, I don't know now. The older you get the less you know. At the last Radnor had his say, but he never showed me anything. That isn't science, you know.

It was meteorites that were the key. The theory runs that

they, or some of them, are the products of a smash-up in space, the fragments of a lost planetary body. The chemical composition suggests it. Some are heavy metal such as we expect at our own earth's core; others resemble rocks at the earth's surface. The variation suggests that some of them, at least, originated at different depths in another planet. A planet blown to hell and gone. Just here is where Williams got in his play. Instead of sitting quietly in a good club with his drink and the meteorites, he takes the next impossible step.

The meteorites, he says, keep coming in—big ones and little ones, raining in with the earth's attraction. Okay then, keep looking, keep watching. Some day you'll get an unconsumed mass of sedimentary rock off that vanished planet. Sedimentary rock, mind you; fossil-bearing rock. Get it and you've got the secret of the galaxies. One fossil speeding in from outer space, one bit of fossil life unknown to this planet, one skull from a meteor's heart, and space out there—I remember Williams's gesture at that point of his talk—becomes alive. Man is no longer lonely. Life is no longer a unique and terrible accident. It, too, holds its place with the spinning suns.

My God, when I was younger Williams could make the hair stand up along my neck. Think of it! To know if life was out there, or even had been out there. To know whether there were interplanetary parallelisms, perhaps even men—beings, anyhow. To know and to find it all in a whirling piece of rock coming down from the night sky.

No, Williams never told me the chances; I learned of them from other men. I learned that meteorites of sedimentary rock have never been found. I learned that the surface layers of a planet form such a small proportion of its actual bulk that, dispersed in outer space, the number of such fragments coming in, if they came at all, would be infinitesimal. The fossil-bearing rocks of a planet would be in about the same proportion as dirt on the surface of a suddenly exploded golf ball to the substance of the ball itself. The odds were too great, you see, too great for a short-lived creature like man. The odds, those infernal odds!

But I have said that Williams was a fanatic. He was—a cold madman. He tracked meteors everywhere. He organized societies of meteor enthusiasts. He lectured on meteors. He told

his tale. He increased the watchers. I followed his progress for years. I saw him pile up meteors like iron junk in his rooms. All iron, no once-living stone that had felt air and known the sun. The fossils might be out there—yes, they might—but living men don't win on a million-to-one shot. Williams was getting old.

He was getting old when he came the long way up that mesa in pursuit of his last flaming disappointment. He was old when he met Radnor. And he took the last of his fury and his hunger and his eloquence and poured them into that romantic, stubborn, religious-minded man.

"It's a question of time, that's all," Radnor said to me later after I had come down from the hills for supplies. He said it with the assurance of one of those damned one-track amateurs that pull Pluto out of a hat after the professionals have gone home to bed.

I spat into the fire.

"All we need is watchers, more and more watchers. Then . . ."

It was Williams all over again. But there was a difference. I could hear it at the back of his talk. "You will see. It will prove how small we are and how great, also. There will be signs, progress, evidence eventually of how high life can go, evidence from an older planet. Evidence of the Great Plan."

"All right, Jim," I said, seeing him eye the door. I was growing used to his routine. "All right," I said meekly, "we'll go out and watch." It was one of those periods of heavy star fall, but the heavy ones don't come often, not even high up where we were.

IV

I think it was on the third night that I heard him mention that fifth planet, and again the next night. I tried tactfully to correct him once more. Actually I was afraid the stuff was going to his head.

"Look, Radnor," I said, "what do you mean by the fifth planet? I tell you it's Jupiter."

He looked at me and I could see his stubborn, intense eyes back in their shadowy hollows. "Not by Bode's law," he contradicted, and mumbled some figures at me. I remembered his

piles of cards, then, and the way Williams must have hammered him.

“Jupiter is the sixth planet,” he went on, more to himself than me. “There’s a gap between Mars and Jupiter—something is missing there. There’s a gap in the planet distances. The fifth planet isn’t there.”

“Pure accident,” I grumbled, feeling out of my depth.

“No,” said Radnor, and we both instinctively stared up at something we couldn’t see. “There’s something there, all right. You’ve forgotten the asteroids—Ceres and the rest. They’re moving where there should be a planet. It’s the fifth one, and they’re all that’s left of it. Something went wrong there.”

A meteor trailed high above us, dissolved, and vanished. “Of course,” I said. “Stones, aren’t they? Just fragments, I remember. Part of something bigger. No air, nothing but thousands of stones on a planet’s pathway.”

“The fifth planet,” he said again. “It’s part of the fifth planet that comes down here in little pieces. Williams was sure of it. He said——”

“It was beyond Mars,” I conceded to humor him. “There might have been a chance for life there. Curious, what happened . . .”

I turned away then. It was cold and our breath made little frost rings in the dark. “Come on,” I urged, but he just stood there brooding as I went in. I left early the next morning. I won’t say with relief, for I liked Radnor. But, after all, this was Radnor in a new phase. Later, in the smoker, as the train started to roll eastward, I thought briefly of Williams and his strange influence upon men of Radnor’s type. I thought also of that wide and red-stoned plateau, and the things that came down upon it out of the dark. Then someone started a game of poker, and with the miles clicking off behind us, I forgot, a little deliberately perhaps, the whole episode. One has to live, you know, and I’ve always had a feeling that space was not in my line.

V

I don’t think, as things turned out, that it was in Radnor’s line either. Men of his religious nature get centered on a symbol,

finally. With some of them it may be gold tablets buried on a mountain, or a book with cryptic inscriptions. Or it may be just a voice in the woods that they alone can hear. With Radnor I guess it was the fifth planet, and I should have known it when I left him out there in the frost that night.

I never expected to see him again. In a job like mine you go many places, have casual contacts with any number of people, and are apt never to turn up in the same spot twice. As it happens in this case, I wish I never had, but I did.

It was a small matter—a question of the proper zoning of a new fossil—but it brought me back two thousand miles, and two years later. I thought of Radnor, of course. I even went to the trouble of clipping a couple of astronomical articles out of the science section of the *New York Times* for him. I figured he'd like them for those overloaded fact boxes he kept.

Things never change in a country like that. There were the same little desert owls flitting from fence post to fence post as when I went away. The road unwound into the same red distance. It was evening when I got to the ranch, and Radnor received me hospitably enough. I must say he had aged a bit, and his eyes seemed apathetic, but after all, none of us gets any younger.

After supper we talked sheep for a while. It seemed safe, and I was not unskilled at it, but after a time a silence fell between us. It was then I drew out the clippings.

He read the first one without comment and dropped it on the white tablecloth. I handed him the second. I remember it had something to do with a recent discovery about the Martian atmosphere and gave strong support to the theory that there might be life on that planet. Knowing Radnor as I had, I expected this one to be good for an evening's conversation. He looked at the headline with an expression of mingled indifference and dislike. "They shouldn't publish that sort of thing," he said.

"I thought you might like it for those big files of yours," I countered uneasily. He raised his head and looked through me the way that little black telescope of his used to pick up holes in space. "I burned them," he said flatly.

It was awkward, and the whole thing was beginning to get on my nerves. I wanted to get up, and I did. I lit a cigar and

studied his face over it. I made one more effort. "How about the scope?" I suggested. "It's a clear night and I reckon you can show me a lot now." Then I started moving for the door.

He pulled himself together with a visible effort and followed me out. For all his peculiarities he was a courteous man, and I had been his friend. On the porch he halted me. There was a high, thin starlight, I remember, and it did odd things to his face.

"I don't look any more," he said, and then repeated it. I dropped into a chair and he sat uneasily facing me on the porch railing. A sort of tension was building up steadily between us.

"I don't look any more because I know," he said. "I know about it already. 'Seek and you shall find,' the Book says. It doesn't say what you will find, it just says you will find. Up here there are ways. Williams knew them."

I looked past him into the night. There was nowhere else to look except out on that great windswept plateau. A long streamer of green light shot across the horizon. The stones are still coming in, I thought wearily, but with the other part of my mind I said to Radnor, putting my words carefully together, "I don't follow you. Do you mean you found something?"

He ignored the interruption. "I believed in the Plan," he said, "what some people call the Divine Plan. I believed in life. I believed it was advancing, rising, becoming more intelligent. I believed it might have been further along out there"—he gestured mutely. "I believed it would give us hope to know."

I heard him, but I put the question bluntly. After all, it might be a matter for science and scientist is what I called myself. "What did you find," I asked, "specifically?"

"The Plan is not what you think," he said. His eyes in that strange light were alien and as cryptic as before. "The Plan is not what you think it is. I know about it now. And life—" He made another gesture, wide, indifferent, and final. There was a greater emptiness than space within him. I could feel it grow as we sat there.

I did not ask that question again. You can call me a fool, but you did not sit there as I did in that valley out of time, while star falls whispered overhead, and a fanatic talked icy insanity at your elbow. I tell you the man frightened me—or maybe it

was space itself. I got the feeling somehow that he wanted me to ask again what he had found. And by then I didn't want to hear. Why? Well, that kind of experience is painful, and you try to forget afterward, but I think he must have hit some weak spot in my psychology, probed unaware some unexpressed deep horror of my own. Anyhow I had a feeling that I might believe his answer, and I knew in the same clairvoyant instant of revulsion that I could not bear to hear him give it. "Have you got a match?" I said.

He sighed and came a long way back from somewhere. I thought I saw how it was with him then. Williams had finished him as he had finished others. Well, space is not my job. I checked my data in the hills next morning and talked a lot about sheep, and left—maybe a little sooner than I normally would.

I had a card once from Radnor afterward. It was five years later, and I remember it well, because it came a week after Hiroshima. There was nothing on the card but one line, as though it had been hanging in the air all that time and had just caught up to me. "The Plan is not what you think it is," it read. "Do you see now?"

For a time I puzzled over it, unsure that I did. But after Nagasaki the thing began to be a tune in my head like the little songs the wind makes under telegraph wires. It just went on sighing, "You see? You see?" Of course I knew he was crazy, but just the same he was right about one thing. The fifth planet is gone. And maybe I see.