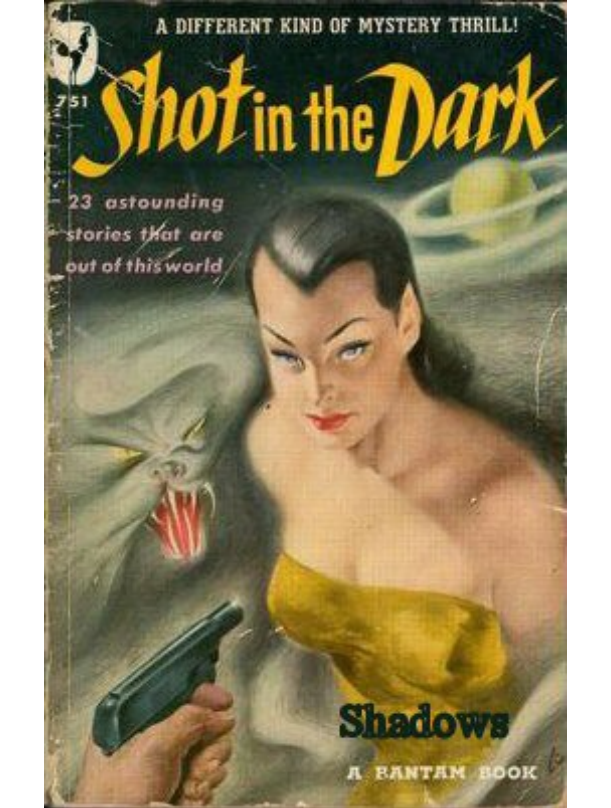


A DIFFERENT KIND OF MYSTERY THRILL!

751

Shot in the Dark

23 astounding
stories that are
out of this world



Shadows

A BANTAM BOOK

THE SHADOWS

Leigh Brackett

FOR COUNTLESS numbers of its years there had been no sight or sound or sense of man upon the world of the little blue star. But now, without warning, a remembered thing had come suddenly into the air again—a quiver, a subtle throbbing that meant only one kind of life. The shadows felt it, the Shadows that had waited so long and patiently. They began to stir among the ruined walls. They rose and shook themselves, and a soundless whisper ran among them, a hungry whisper, wild and eager. "Man! Man! Man has come again!" THE GALACTIC SURVEY ship lay in an expanse of level plain, ringed on one side by low mountains and on the other by a curving belt of forest. A river ran across the plain and there was much grass. But nothing cropped it, and there were no tracks in the mud of the river bank to show that anything had. Hubbard sniffed the warm air and dug his feet into the soil, which was rich and dark. He grinned broadly. "This is something like it," he said. "A pretty world. Real pretty."

He was a young man. His field was anthropology, and this was his first voyage out. For him, the stars still shone brightly. Barrier looked at him between envy and sadness. He said nothing. His gaze roving off across the Main and the forest, studied the sky—a suspicious, sombre gaze. He was old enough to be Hubbard's father and he felt every year of it, pressed down and running over.

"Of course, the colors are all wrong," said Hubbard, "but that's nothing. After they'd lived with a blue sun for a while people would think it was the only kind to have."

Barrier grunted. "What people?"

"Why, the colonists, the people that will live here some day!" Hubbard laughed suddenly. "What's the matter with you? Here at last we've found a beautiful world, and you're as glum as though it were a hunk of dead rock."

"I guess," said Barrier slowly, "that I've seen too many hunks of dead rock, and too many beautiful worlds that—"

He broke off. This was no time to talk. In fact, it was not his place to talk at all. If he didn't like what he was doing any more he could go home to Earth and stay there, and leave the stars to the young men who had not yet lost their faith.

The mountains, the plain, and the forest were very still in the bright blue morning. Barrier could feel the stillness. No wing cut the sweet air, no paw rustled the tangled grass, no voice spoke from among the curious trees. He moved restlessly where he stood, looking rather like an old hound that scents danger where there should be game. That was Barrier's job, his science, the oldest science of mankind—to venture into strange country and feel the invisible, sense the unknown and survive. He was head of the Ground Exploration team, and an expert on exploring. He had been at it all his life. Too long.

Hubbard said, "I wish Kendall would come back. I want to get started."

"What do you think you're going to find?"

"How do I know? That's the fun of it. But on a world like this there's bound to be life of some kind."

"Human life?"

"Why not?"

Again Barrier grunted, and again he said nothing.

They waited. Other men were scattered about the and the river bank, taking samples of soil, rock, water, and vegetation. They stayed close to the ship, and all were armed. The technical staff, after checking solar radiation, atmospheric content, temperature gravitation, and the million and one other things that go to make a world habitable or otherwise for Earthmen, had rated this planet Earth-Type A, and in obedience to Survey ruling the ship had landed to determine surface conditions. So far, they had all been favorable. So

Barrier fidgeted, and listened to the silence.

PRESENTLY a speck appeared far off in the sky. It gave off a thin droning, coming closer, and developed into a small 'copter which settled down beside the ship, gnat alighting beside a whale. Kendall and his observer and cameraman got out.

Barrier went up to him. "What did you find?"

"More of the same," said Kendall, "and nothing in Except—" He hesitated.

"Except what?"

"Over there beyond the forest. I thought it might be the ruins of a city."

"There!" cried Hubbard. "You see?" Kendall shrugged. "The boys said no, it was just a bunch of rocks grown over with the woods. I don't know. You can decide for yourselves when you see the pictures."

The men who were out on the plain and the river hank had come

running up. They were all young men, like Hubbard. Only the Captain, the chief of Technical, a couple of research scientists and Barrier were old. There was an uproar of voices, all talking at once. The Survey ship had made few landings, and it had been a long time since the last one. They were like youngsters let out of confinement, bursting with excitement and pride at what they had found. Barrier went with them into the ship, into the main salon. There was a brief wait while the film, which had been developed automatically on exposure, was fed into the projector. The lights were cut. The small screen came to life. They all watched, with intense interest. The panorama unfolded in natural color, like and yet unlike Earth. On closer inspection, the forest trees were not trees at all, but monstrous flowers with stems as thick as trunks, bearing clusters of brilliant and improbable blooms. Barrier caught a glimpse of something that might have been a butterfly or a drifting petal, but other than that, nothing moved.

He asked, "Were there any signs of animal life?" Kendall shook his head. "No." Impatiently, Hubbard said, "The 'copter probably frightened it away."

"Frightened things run," said Barrier. "There's nothing running." Hubbard swore under his breath, and Barrier smiled. It had become a personal necessity for Hubbard to discover life here, and no wonder. He had had very little chance to practice his anthropology, and the voyage was almost over. His insistence on animals arose from the fact that without them there were not likely to be men.

"There," said Kendall, and held up his hand. The film was stopped, on a frame showing an area of tree-flowers and clambering vines rather more open than the forest proper. Humps and ridges of stone showed here and there among the tangled growths.

"You see what I mean," said Kendall, and gestured again. The film

rolled, repeating the long low swings the 'copter had made across the area. "I got as close as I could, and I still couldn't figure it."

"It sure looks like a city," said Hubbard. He was quivering with excitement.

"Look there. See how regular those lines are, like streets, with houses fallen down on other side."

Two other voices spoke up. Aiken, the expert on planetary archaeology, admitted cautiously that it might be a city. Caffrey, the geologist, said that it might just as well be a natural rock formation.

"What do you think, Barrier?" asked Captain Verlaine. "Can't tell from the picture, sir. I'd have to examine the stones."

"Well," said Verlaine, "that seems to settle it. Make that area your first objective. Don't you agree, Cristofek?"

Cristofek, who was Chief of Technical, nodded emphatically. "And Barrier, in case it does turn out to be a ruin, make every effort to discover what sort of inhabitants it had and, above all, what happened to them." Barrier stood up. "All right," he said. "Let's be on our way." The seven men of his team joined him—all, like Hubbard, specialists, young men picked for physical condition and trained in the use of arms. Aiken and Caffrey were among them, also a lad named Morris who was in charge of the walkie-talkie. Barrier consulted Kendall about bearings, and then went with the others to get his gear. Within a quarter of an hour they were marching off across the plain.

BARRIER felt a twinge of nostalgia so strong as to be a physical pain—nostalgia for the days when he had been green and eager like the rest, leaving the ship, which he hated, for the uncrossed horizons of

new worlds, full of a shivering fascination, full of hope. The hope had been the first to go, and then the fascination.

Now, looking at the bright landscape, beautiful in spite of its unearthly tints, he found himself thinking that he would like to be in a certain bar he remembered in Los Angeles, not worrying about anything, not pondering meanings and significances and the shapes of alien leaves, forgetting completely the dark conviction that had grown in him over the years. Schmidt, the entomologist, was chattering with Gordon, whose field was zoology, about worms and insect forms, of which many had been found. Hubbard speculated with Aiken on The City. They already called that. The high grasses swished against their boots. Wind blew softly and the sun was warm. But apart from the eight invading humans there was nothing sentient to enjoy these blessings. Barrier disliked the empty silence. It was unnatural in such a lush and joyous setting.

His eyes roved constantly, grey eyes set in a face the color of old leather and surrounded by the complex wrinkles that come from squinting against numberless foreign suns. For a long time they saw nothing. And then, more and more, they narrowed and watched a certain sector to their left. Barrier lifted his hand, and the little column stopped. "Over there," he said.

"Do you see those shadows?" They all stared. Hubbard laughed. "Cloud shadows."

"There are no clouds."

"Well, then, it's the wind making ripples in the grass." He glanced sidelong at Barrier. "What's the difference what makes them? They're only shadows!" Barrier said heavily, speaking to them all, "Will you please try to remember that you are not on Earth? In a strange world anything, a shadow, a blade of grass, may be alive and deadly."

Their faces regarded him, intelligent, uncomprehending, trying not to show that they thought he was being a trifle ridiculous. He knew that they now felt hardened veterans of the star-worlds, with the vast experience of their four or five landings behind them, and all on planets that had had only normally dangerous life-forms. He could not make them understand the things he had seen,

the inimical stealthy things that hated man.

He motioned them on again. They had already forgotten shadows, but he had not. There seemed to be number of them—how do you count shadows? Smallish clots of darkness they were that flitted along some distance away, losing themselves in the waving grass, difficult to see in the brilliant sunshine, but unmistakably They seemed to be running parallel with the men.

They looked like perfectly normal shadows and Barrier would not have given them a second thought, except that in his experience a shadow must be thrown by something, and here there was nothing, not even so much as a patch of cloud or a bird's wing.

They marched on across the beautiful, empty, silent plain. And then, again, Barrier called a halt.

They had come to the edge of a stream that ran down toward the river, cutting itself a cleft in the soil of the plain. Caffrey immediately scrambled down the steep bank and began to study the layers of silt and sand and clay. Gordon followed him, casting back and forth along edge of the water. He became vastly excited when discovered a hideous small creature that resembled a purple prawn. Something else, that might have been snake or an eel, went off with a ropy slither between the wet rocks.

Hubbard danced up and down. "I told you there was life here!" Barrier said gently, "I never denied it."

He glanced upstream. The shadows were bunched together, hovering over the cleft. They had not come any closer, but they were watching. He could not see with his eyes that they were watching, for they were only featureless blobs of gloom. But he felt it, in every nerve, in every pore of his prickling skin. There was

something ugly about being watched by shadows.

ABRUPTLY, Caffrey began to dig like a terrier in the soft ground midway up the bank. Presently he held up an object like a blackened, broken stick that was knobbed at one end. He handed it to Gordon, who voiced a sharp exclamation and cried out for Barrier.

"It's a bone," said Gordon. "The leg bone of a large deer, I should say, or a small horse. You know what I mean, the equivalents thereof." Hubbard was quite beside himself. "Vertebrate life. That proves that evolution here has followed practically the same path it did on Earth." He looked around, though he expected to see a man materialize from among the rocks. Barrier said to Gordon, "How old is that bone?" Gordon shook his head. "It's been in the ground a long time. How long would you say, Caffrey?"

Caffrey squinted at the bank. "Judging from its depth under the present topsoil, I should guess five or six hundred years, maybe more. That's only a guess of course. There are so many factors I haven't any data for."

"In other words," said Barrier, "a long time." He frowned at the ancient bone, and then at the deserte landscape around him.

Morris sent word of their find back to the ship. The marched on. The

shadows followed.

There were several miles of the flat grassland now between them and the ship. It lay glinting dully in the blue light, Leviathan at rest. The outposts of the forest, solitary clumps and little clustered groves of the giant flowers and equally lofty ferns, sprang up around the men, gradually screening off both the plain and the sky until they walked in a warm blue gloom shot through with the brilliant spectral colors of the blooms.

At first they went slowly, on the watch for dangerous plant-forms. Apparently there were none. Hansen, the botanist, chanted aloud with wonder at every step. Schmidt was entranced by huge butterflies and numerous insects that crept and flew and made tiny buzzings. Gordon and Hubbard peered eagerly, but there was nothing for them to see.

Barrier walked ahead, going with a lanky noiseless like an Indian. His eyes were anxious, and his senses on edge. It was very lovely in the forest, with the blooms of many colors nodding overhead. Barrier thought of a garden at the bottom of the sea. The glades were full of blueness like still water. There began to be wisps of mist along the ground.

He thought for a time that they had lost the shadows. Then he saw them again, low down, slipping along between the rough, pale flower-trunks. They had changed

formation. They were all around the men now, in a circle. They had come closer. Much closer.

Barrier made the men bunch up. He pointed out the hollows to them, and this time they were less inclined to shrug them off.

"Better let me talk to the ship," he said, and Morris clicked the switch

on the walkie-talkie. He did that several times, repeating the call letters, and then he shook his head.

"Sorry," he said nervously, "I'm blanked out. There's some electrical disturbance, very strong .. ."

Barrier glanced at the shadows. Creatures of force? They must be, since they were not solid matter. Electronic discharge from their bodies might well disrupt the small transmitter.

He considered turning back. They were now about equidistant from the ship and the area of the possible ruins, and if the shadows had anything evil in mind, turning back could not stop them. The ship was well out of reach. Besides, he had his orders, and if these shadows were a native life-form, it was his duty to find out about them.

They had made no hostile move as yet. Hostile or not, could shadows hurt men?

And if so, how did you fight them?

The ground mists were thickening. They must be approaching swampy ground, although he had not noticed any on Kendall's films. Tenuous wreaths and veils hung in the blue glades, each separate droplet glittering with diamond fires in the filtered sunlight. The breeze rippled them to and fro very prettily. They were not fever mists. Barrier forgot them, returning his watchful attention to the shadows.

Within the past few minutes they had drawn their circle in until they were only a few feet away from the men. They glided round and round, utterly silent, in a kind of nervous dance. The men were all watching them now. Hubbard spoke to Barrier, and his voice had an edge of fright.

"What are they? What do they want?"

"They're only shadows," said Barrier irritably. "What does it matter what they want?" Then he called out the others, "Keep together. If things get rough we'll be back. But no matter what happens, don't bolt. If you do, there won't be any way to help you."

THEY WENT on, treading on each other's heels staring around them. The shadows wove and bounded. Quite suddenly, Schmidt screamed. His gun went off with snarling hiss. It flared again and again into a clot of darkness, which did not flinch.

"It touched me," Schmidt shuddered. "It touched me!"

He began to run, not very far, because there was no space with the ring of shadows to run in. Barrier caught him by the arm.

"Shut up," he snarled. "Shut up!" Schmidt stood shivering. "It was cold. Cold as death."

"You're not dead, are you?"

"No."

"You're not hurt?"

"No."

"Then shut up." Barrier glared at Schmidt, at the others. "The next one of you that panics, I'll knock him flat."

He was afraid himself. Miserably afraid. But he said, "They haven't hurt us yet. Maybe they can't. Anyway, wait a while before we blow our tops." The young men swallowed and straightened their faces out into stiff lines and tried hard not to see the shadows. Schmidt

twitched as he walked. Barrier wished there was a sound in the forest. A squeak, a grunt, a war that meant something warm-blooded and alive. There wasn't. Even their own footfalls were deadened on the soft ground.

The mists thickened, sparkling, bright. The alien sun was blotted out. The shadows skulked and clung. Sweat poured down the cheeks of the men, stained their drill lockets. Hubbard said, licking his lips, "How much farther?"

"Another mile or two."

Barrier wished the mists were not there. They made him feel shut in and suffocated. He worried about bogs. The blue daylight was maddening. He thought of the honest yellow glare of Sol and wondered what madness it was that sent men out to the ends of the galaxy seeking other suns. He stumbled suddenly, and looked down. At first he thought the obstacle was a rounded stone half buried in the mold of fallen petals. And then he knew it wasn't. He stooped and lifted it up and held it out to Hubbard. "You wanted man," he said.

Hubbard rubbed his palms up and down along his thighs. He stared at the thing in Barrier's hands, and the others stared over their shoulders, and the thin grinned at them with a single gaping line of teeth. Hubbard reached out and took it.

"It's very old," he said. "As old as that." He pointed to Gordon's trophy. Schmidt said in a curiously shrill voice, "There were men here once, and animals. Now there aren't any. They're all dead, and I know what killed them." He stared hard at the shadows.

Barrier swore. "That's fine talk from a scientist. I thought you people were trained not to jump to conclusions."

Hubbard muttered, "Barrier is right." He looked at the skull and repressed a shiver. "Come on, I want to see those ruins." They went on, so close together that their shoulders rubbed. The mists grew denser and brighter and heavier. The men sweated, ignoring the shadows, desperately ignoring them.

Without any warning, the shadows sprang.

There was a moment's terrible screaming from the men, and then there was silence, and after that a few stifled, horrid sounds. The skull fell from Hubbard's grasp and rolled away, grinning a wise grin as it went. Barrier swayed where he stood, clawing blindly with his hands at his own flesh. He could see the others. Through a veil of shadowy gloom he could see them, dimly, and the gloom was behind his eyes and not before them. Some of them had tried to run, and the shadows had caught them as they ran. Two of them kicked and grovelled on the ground. Their outlines were indistinct, blurred over. Their eyes were crazy. So were Barrier's.

The shocking swiftness of that leap, the noiselessness the awful cold that poured in suddenly upon the flesh—the loathsome sense of an intruder grasping at mind and body, taking them over from within. . . .it was inside him. The shadow was inside him. Its substance interpenetrated his warm and living flesh, alien and unreadable intelligence was clinging tight against his own, and it was shaking him, driving him, he was going to die. . . . They're dead, all the men and animals, and I know what killed them—Schmidt was gone, plunging off into the mist, taking with him the terrible invader in his flesh. There were still shadows, a lot of them, running loose, there had not been enough men. Some of these went after Schmidt.

Barrier forgot his orders, his command, his pride. Blind, black terror overwhelmed him and he ran. He wanted to outrun the thing that held him, to shake it free and lose it utterly, and go on running right off this

filthy blue-lit world. But he couldn't. It was part of him. He would not lose it till he died.

Hee ran, through the silent forest, where the nodding blossoms were shrouded thick in mist and the flower-trunks were hidden, and there was nothing but himself and the nightmare that dwelt in his flesh, and a darkness in the air around him.

Several times he fell, but something forced him up and on again. He had lost all track of the other men, He had almost forgotten them. Once, far off, he heard a shriek and knew that someone was dying, but he did not care. His mind was lost inside the shadow.

He was only distantly aware that suddenly the mists were gone and he was staggering over ground that had once been cleared but now was overgrown, though not so thickly as the forest. He stumbled among stones, reeled and scrambled around great hummocks from which peeped shattered cornices, and crossed an open space where his feet brought forth a sound of dry sticks cracking. He looked down and saw that the sticks were human bones. He sobbed and turned his head to see the little group of shadows that hovered at his heels.

"Are you waiting your turn?" he yelled at them, or tried to yell, and made only a hoarse whispering. His face, so strangely blurred and dimmed, twisted into a insensate mask of rage. He bent and picked up the old bare bones from around his feet and threw them at the shadows, and cursed, and sobbed, and then he ran again, five paces, ten, across the crackling open space, and there was a hummock too high to climb and too wide to go around. He butted himself against it, into a knee of stone that thrust out between the creepers, and then he fell. His body jerked convulsively, and was still.. HE WAS looking at a moon. It was a red moon, small but very close.

There were mountains on it, and gouge out hollows. His mind made idle pictures of them, face, a crouching rabbit. There were stars. He did not recognize them. Presently another moon came up, larger one, and pallid green. He tired of making pictures on the moons.

Someone was moaning, close at hand.

Mildly curious, Barrier turned his head. He saw a man, lying curled up with his knees against his chest and his arms clasped over his head. He seemed to know the man. He studied the partly visible face. Of course he knew him, it was young Hubbard, who had been looking for men. . . . Barrier sprang up. Cold sweat burst out on him and his body trembled, standing rigid in the moonlight. He searched inside himself as a man will search for a remembered pain, sick and praying not to find it.

It was gone. The shadow was gone. He clutched at Hubbard, and saw that the unholy dimness had left his features. He shook Hubbard and shouted at him, and he saw that there were other men huddled on the ground, two, three, four of them. He ran from one to the other, and they looked up at him with empty, frightened eyes. Schmidt was not among them, nor Morris. Six. Six living out of eight. And the shadows had gone away out of their flesh.

For one short second he was hopeful. Then he looked out across the open space where the bones were and saw the company of dark and restless blots that moved among the spiky ribs and tumbled, careless limbs. He almost laughed that he had considered hope.

He returned to Hubbard. "How did you get here?" he asked, and slapped the young man's face until he answered.

"I don't know. I—just ran." Hubbard gave a racking Oliver. "Oh God, Barrier, that thing inside me just like smoke blows through a bush,

and cold. . . ." Barrier slapped him again. "Where're Schmidt and Morris?"

"I don't know"

Barrier set about getting the others on their feet. None of them knew precisely how they had gotten there. None of them knew what had happened to Morris, but Aiken said:

"I saw Schmidt. I was running and I passed by Schmidt lying on the ground, at least I think it was Schmidt, it had his specimen case still strapped around it, and it was dead. Oh yes, there wasn't any doubt at all about its being dead."

He turned away suddenly and tried hard to be sick. Barrier said slowly, "So they finished off two of us, and brought the rest of us here. I suppose they want to complete the job at their leisure. So here we are. We can't communicate with the ship, and they won't send Kendall out to look for us before morning. And if we're still alive by then, and Kendall does happen to find us, and lands—what do you think they'll do about it?" He glanced toward the shadows.

Nobody answered.

"I wonder," said Barrier at last, "if fire would keep them off." The others stared at him. They they scurried about, gathering dead creepers, dry grass, anything that would burn. They made fires, a ring of them across the mouth of the cul-de-sac where they were caught. They waited, breathless with hope.

The shadows crept up toward the flames. Then, as though delighted with them, they began to flit back and forth around the fires, frolicking over and through them, almost, it seemed, playing tag among the columns of smoke. Hubbard wept.

Mist was crawling up out of the forest. The small red moon was sinking, and the larger pale green one shed ghastly light. The fires burned low and the shadows danced around them.

"They look real cute there, don't they?" said Barrier viciously. "Having fun." The flames died down, became beds of embers. Some of the shadows began to make tentative small rushes toward Barrier and the five who were left of his team. Coffrey whispered, "I guess they're coming for us. He still had a withered blossom stuck in his buttonhole

The shadows darted nervously, toward the men and then back to the glowing red embers. Beyond them tenuous arms of mist advanced and coiled between the ruins. They began to obscure the remaining moon, and as the light faded the shadows moved more swiftly with a greater eagerness. Aiken had been rooting among the creepers that shrouded the hummock. Suddenly he bleated, "There a passage here, a doorway. Maybe we could get inside and—and barricade it."

"Against shadows?" said Barrier, and laughed. "It's better than nothing," Hubbard said. "Anything's better than just sitting here."

HE SCRAMBLED toward Aiken, who had disappeared, and the others followed. All at once, Barrier began to laugh. They stared at him, their faces round and startled. Barrier shouted at them, laughing.

"You still don't get it, do you? You still think you can run and hide, and put up little defences, and win out somehow in the end because you're men and man always wins out. You haven't learned yet, have you?"

"Learned what?" asked Hubbard, in a low, queer voice. Barrier studied the shadows. "Why should I tell you, though? It took me half a lifetime and a lot of worlds to learn the truth. Why shouldn't I keep it to

myself, and lot you die happy?"

Abruptly, Hubbard sprang at him. He was like an enraged child, boiling with a confused fury of which the greater part was the fear of death. Barrier caught his wrists.

"You dirty yellow-belly," Hubbard squealed. "You're opposed to be our leader, you're supposed to show us what to do, and what do you do? You give up." He called Barrier a number of evil names. "The great explorer, the big brave leader, hell! You're just an old man with all the guts run out of you. You should have gone back to Earth and let somebody that could fight take over."

Barrier thrust him away, quite hard but without anger.

"All right," he said, "I'll let you in on it. Earth was a soft planet. Oh, she tried to put her foot down—ice ages, volcanoes, plagues, floods, droughts, and famines—but it was too late, and it wasn't enough, and now we've got the upper hand of her. But the other worlds are tougher. sooner or later, they find a way. . . .

"We aren't welcome in the universe. I don't know why. Maybe it's because we aren't content to be the animals we are, but must always be pretending that we're something else, prying about and upsetting things grasping after stars, making trouble and screaming because it hurts. I don't know. I only know that we're hated. Everywhere I've been, wherever there was a man they'd been gotten rid of somehow."

He glanced up at the alien stars, dimming now with the mist that rolled across them.

"They hate us," he said softly. "Their children hate us. Everywhere we have enemies, but never any friends."

Then he sighed. "You're right, Hubbard. I am an old man, with the guts worn out of me. You run on in and hide, now, and I wish you luck. Me, I don't like holes.

The shadows were hard upon him now. One brushed, against him, and its touch was cold, cold as the bone that lay in the open space. Swiftly, so swiftly that no of the men could stop him, Barrier whirled and leaped through them, running like a deer.

He took them by surprise, the small dark blots that hung so close to him. He got past them, trampling on the brittle bones. And then the shadows followed, spreading out fanwise behind him, with three or four racing on to catch him. He was some distance ahead of them. He heard Hubbard's voice shrieking after him, but not the words it said. He put out every ounce of strength that was in him, rushing between the heaped-up ruins, into the arms of mist that reached along the ground.

The shadows were closing in. But it was the mist that sprang. It rolled around and wrapped him in, and where it touched his flesh he knew that the glittering droplets were not drops of mist at all but tiny flecks of life, separate, sentient, gathered together in formidable colonies of cloud. And he knew two other things, in that second when it was too late for knowledge—that the mist had not touched him nor the others in the forest, and it had moved into the ruined city after them, against the wind. Tiny flecks of life, glittering like powdered gems. And they hated man with a curious, inherited enmity.

There was a numbing agony in Barrier, an ecstasy of curious anguish that made his body twitch and dance.

His throat convulsed, but no sound came out of it, and were filled with motes of fire. He tried to run and could not, and somewhere far away in another .. world, Hubbard was still shouting. The shadows came. A

broken thought went tumbling into the stricken emptiness of his mind —They work together, damn them, and they both hate man. Then there was the horrid cold, the alien presence sweeping through him, and this was death. . . . The mists drew back. The tearing anguish left him, the chill darkness that possessed him was somehow healing to his seared nerves. It was like being shocked with icy water, so that suddenly he could see and think again, even through the gloomy veil that dimmed his sight and mind. The shadows leaped and swirled around him, and where they leaped the mists that were not mists at all drew hback, sullen and reluctant, but coiling all the same

upon themselves. And the shadow-thing that was in-side of Barrier made him turn and go back toward the ruins, not fast this time, but slowly because he had

been hurt, giving Barrier, in some unfathomable way, of its own strength. The others came behind, a rear guard, dodging, weaving, pouncing on the stealthy tentacles of mist that ought to reach around them to the men who stood gaping by the great hummock. Here and there a glistening cloud engulfed a single shadow, and suddenly it was not.

Barrier's face, obscured by the dim aura, took on a strange expression. He sat down at Hubbard's feet and the Shadow left him, and they were as they had been before, the me the shadows, the little beds of ash still glowing, and the wavering mist beyond.

Hubbard swore meaningless oaths meant to conceal his shame. "Were you crazy, Barrier? Did you think you could draw them all away from us?" Aiken said, "He was trying to get away, to get a warning to the ship so maybe they could save us." He bent over. "Barrier, listen. Barrier. . . ." He paid them no attention. He was watching the shadows that hovered between them and the mist. A few of them were darting as they had before, from the burned-out fires to the men

and back again.

"They want us to put on more fuel," he said slowly, "The fires help them keep the mist away." He turned abruptly to the others. "They saved me, did you see that? They came after me, and one protected me with its own body, and some of them died." He was shaking a little. "We were wrong about them. They were trying to help us in the forest. They followed us like—" A word hovered on his tongue and he considered it, thinking of his boyhood and a small soiled terrier who had eaten his boots and loved him and once had interposed his body between Barrier and a fearsome hissing thing. It had only been a gopher snake, but the idea was the same.

"I think," he said, "that those shadows were the dogs, the protectors, of the men who lived here once. Different from our own, but trained to hunt down and turn aside enemies from their men. It was the mist that killed Schmidt and Morris, of course. We didn't keep together, and the shadows couldn't save us all."

The men stared at the shadows. It was hard to change their minds now, but they could not deny what they had seen. Their faces softened, just a little, losing some of the hard fear. Then Hubbard said:

"But what about them?" and he pointed at the bones. Barrier shook his head.

"Whatever killed them, it wan't the shadows." His voice had an odd far-away note. His mind was very busy with something, taking it apart and studying the pieces intently and then putting it back together a different way. At last he smiled and went toward the shadows. He began to talk to them, putting out his hands, and they clustered around him, bounding up playfully. They must have been lonesome all this time," he said, "guarding their masters'

bones."

Aiken said, "Down there in that passage—it's built of solid rock and hasn't crumbled a bit—there are some symbols cut in the wall. I haven't really looked at them, but well, it seems as though all the people in the city gathered here to die at once, and it could be that they left a message or two in the strongest places."

"Let's look," said Hubbard.

They went down through the opening Aiken had found, all except Barrier, who was still playing with the shadow-dogs, and smiling. He was only mildly interested when they came back, Aiken and Hubbard both flushed and joyous.

"Those symbols," said Aiken. "They're pictographs, so simple and clear that anyone could read them. They must have hoped, those people, that someone would come along sooner or later. Anyway, they told what happened to them, or rather, what was going to happen. The planet had already entered the edges of a cloud that was death to lung breathers. That's why the animals died too, and only the lungless creatures lived. And Barrier. . . ."

"Yes?"

"They mentioned the dogs. They drew quite clear pictures of them at work, so that strangers would know." Barrier nodded. He looked at the dark blots romping about his feet. "They've waited all this time. Well, they can wait a little longer."

Then he straightened up, still with that odd, wry smile.

"Seems like I spoke too soon," he said. "Maybe there enough worth

in us that here and there some little world will give us another chance. Anyway, it's nice to know there's one place where we have some friends." They heaped fuel on the fires, and the shadows danced. Barrier watched them, looking somehow younger, like a man who has rediscovered hope.