

MERVYN JONES

## *Scrolls from the Dead Land*

When Professor X, the distinguished lunologist, was announced, the Minister bustled round to the front of his desk with his most amiable smile.

"Take a seat, my dear fellow. Always delighted to see you. Oh, I simply put everything aside when I heard you were coming."

The Professor sat down in his usual cautious way, as though he suspected the seat of the chair of containing some juvenile practical joke. He carried a bulky folder of casually collected papers.

After the customary pleasantries and a significant pause, the Minister asked with a touch of sharpness: "Well? How's it coming?"

"It's solved," the lunologist said simply.

"My dear chap! You don't say so! But I thought you had weeks of work ahead of you."

"So did we. Nobody imagined it would yield to ordinary cryptological technique, but it has. It's not our kind of script, naturally, but it presents fewer problems than, shall we say, the Minoan."

"Indeed," said the Minister.

"Creation," his visitor remarked in his lecturing style, two parts pomposity to one part humour - "creation is evidently a repetitive process. In the moon, aeons ago, life presented the same catalogue of achievements and blunders that we think of as uniquely terrestrial. They must have been astonishingly like us."

"And you've actually read what they wrote?"

"Certainly. You can read it too." The Professor began to fumble among his papers.

The Minister paced slowly to the window and gazed skyward. The gesture was rehearsed, yet it was sincerely chosen to fit this moment of discovery: a moment as important, in its way, as the first landing.

Over London the autumn daylight was fading. Soon the whine of the great lifts descending to the shelters would be heard; as on every day since precautionary defence had been ordered ten years ago, the upper world would be cleared when work ended of all but the few with special passes. Invisible but potent, the electromagnetic field of missile disintegration roofed in Britain and every other civilised nation, except for the agreed and internationally inspected space-travel zones,

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But the faint white shape of the moon was apparent against the greyish-blue. One could easily imagine it to be still as mysterious as when it had been a deity for the Greeks or an ideal mistress for the poets. The Minister was a modern man and a man who lived by facts; yet there were times when he could hardly believe that men were up there, building, mining, patrolling frontiers, keeping watch for aggression. This sense of wonder, he supposed, was natural for the older generation, even for those who made regular tours of inspection, like himself and the Professor. After all, they had been grown men - himself a back-bencher, the other a lecturer - when the first satellite cleaved the atmosphere.

"This is the last page of it," the Professor was saying. "It so happens that they wrote from right to left, so we were starting at the end. You'll see it all before long, but I thought you would like to have the first bit we deciphered."

"Of course," said the Minister, eagerly grasping the typed sheet. "What's it all about?"

"It was evidently a historical account. It was prepared in this amazingly durable form - the chemical composition of the parchment is remarkable in itself - and hidden carefully so that a record would remain whatever happened. Rather like the newspapers people insert in foundation stones. But you'll gather that when you read it."

"I can't wait," exclaimed the Minister with the boyish enthusiasm he preserved as carefully as his figure. "You'll excuse me, my dear fellow?"

"Of course."

The Minister settled himself at his desk and read:

"... say yet whether these powers of destruction have outrun our ability to control them. Already one war fought with modern weapons, brief and localised though it happily proved, has given us a dreadful warning. And the weapons now in our arsenals exceed those whose use we have witnessed as mightily as the latter exceeded the puny methods of fighting known to our ancestors.

"As we recorded, prosperous cities and fertile plains are now places of desolation. Despite the passage of time, the atmosphere in those regions is still so poisoned that we cannot venture among them. The few survivors lead a poverty-stricken existence on the fringes of the target areas.

"Aid on a lunar scale has reduced the effects of the disaster. But if war breaks out again there will be no aid, because there will be none to bring it. The targets next time will not be cities, but nations: not districts, but the entire surface of our sphere.

"From the air, we look down in awe - and let us hope in shame - on the craters that once were the scene of busy and purposeful life.

There is a kind of beauty about these craters, which some optimists plan, once they are cleaned, to make into pleasure lakes. But they are mere pockets compared with the craters that can, we fear, be made by the newer weapons.

"The capacity of these weapons is a matter of guesswork, for the only certainty is that they are so mighty that we dare not test them. Experts, however, believe that they will drive deep into the inner rock of the sphere and alter, or rather wipe out, the geography of nations and even continents. Craters may be produced so vast that it would be impossible to see across them, supposing anyone were alive to look. The walls surrounding these awful pits might rise to the height of mountains.

"And all would be dead. Soft and useful soil would be buried beneath upsurging rock. Beautiful beyond our imagining in their sinister way, these overlapping circles of death will be nothing but a monument to our folly."

The Minister glanced up suddenly. Professor X, hands demurely placed on his knees, was gazing at the framed photograph of Aneurin Bevan over the mantelpiece. The Minister examined his visitor's expression, but could make nothing of it. He scratched his chin and read on:

"There is talk of an even stranger and more irrevocable peril. The force of the explosions, some scientists think, could dehydrate the atmosphere. Water, the source of all life, would cease to exist. Without the elements that compose it, there would be no air. Our sphere would be stripped of the friendly layer that protects it from the scorching of the sun or the freezing of empty space when it turns from the sun. If this happens, it means the end not only of life, but of the conditions in which life can grow. The silent rocks would be not only dead but barren.

"Is the end near? - the end of the marvellous, and to our knowledge, unique, experiment whose slow process we have recorded? That we cannot know. It may be that we shall halt in time and achieve a wisdom that will enable our children to laugh at our fears. It may be, even if the worst happens, that another form of life will emerge, able, in some way we cannot envisage, to exist in conditions that would be death to us.

"Or it may be that our successors are already striving towards birth elsewhere. Such a hope, or such a guess, arises from recent observations of that larger sphere which, as some think, originally fathered us as its satellite. It is almost impossible, even with modern instruments, to peer through the steamy cloud that envelops it. But some maintain that this cloud hides the beginnings of life, albeit on an incredibly primitive level."

Again the Minister looked up. The moon, now established in the darkened sky, looked back at him, bland and innocent. As much could be said of the Professor. The Minister scraped his chair on the floor, making an ugly sound which served for a comment, and set himself to read at a brisker pace the last page of the typescript.

"If this is so, there is a limit even to despair. The end for us need not be the end of everything. In the course of infinite time, what can now be no more than at most vegetable organisms may develop into beings like ourselves. Or rather, those last two words surely betray our vanity and the limits of our imagination. Whatever creatures come to control that sphere may well be better, wiser, more worthy of life in every respect than we have shown ourselves. Our imperfections, the sufferings we blindly tolerate, our mad practice of seeking ways to end life instead of to improve it, may be utterly alien and inconceivable to them. Beings as erratic, in the biological sense, as we are could not, surely, be produced again.

"All this dreaming; but perhaps our dreams are the finest things we have made or can make. And if it is a fancy, it is a noble fancy to look far forward and dream of this record being read by those higher forms of life - who will, for all we know, conquer the secret that might have been ours if we had chosen it in preference to hurling destruction at one another : the secret of travelling from sphere to sphere.

"If ever that comes about, let us hope that they will reflect on our failures and our doom, not as a warning which they will be too happy and too wise to need, but as cause for the pity which, despite the crimes and the foolishness here set down, our little successes have deserved."

The Minister laid the paper down. Then, with an abrupt movement, he seized it again, crammed it into a drawer, and turned the key. He glared at the lunologist, not with his usual practised charm, but with anger.

"This is a hoax!" he shouted. "You've cooked this up to waste my time and teach me my business. How dare you? How dare you?"

The Professor lumbered sadly to his feet, gathering his papers.

"Yes," he said, "it's a hoax. But if you had been taken in, there might be some hope for you."