

THEY knew it when they stepped out of the ship and saw it. There was, of course, no way that they could have known it, or have been sure they knew it, for there was no way to know what one might be looking for. Yet they did know it for what it was, and three of them stood and looked at it and the fourth one floated and looked at it. And each of them, in his brain or heart or intuition, whatever you may name it, knew deep inside himself a strange conviction that here finally was the resting place, or one of the resting places, of that legendary fragment of the human race that millennia before had broken free of the chains of ordinary humans to make their way into the darkness of the outer galaxy. But whether they had fled from mediocrity or whether they had deserted or whether they had left for any one of a dozen other reasons was a thing that no one now might know, for the matter had become an academic question that had split into several cults of erudite belief and still was fiercely debated in a very learned manner.

In the minds of the four who looked, however, there was no shred of question that here before them lay the place that had been sought, in a more or less haphazard fashion, for a hundred thousand years. It was a place. One hesitated to call it a city, although it probably was a city. It was a place of living and of learning and of working and it had many buildings, but the buildings had been made a part of the landscape and did not outrage the eye with their grossness or their disregard for the land they stood upon. There was greatness about the place—not the greatness of gigantic stones heaped on one another, nor the greatness of a bold and overwhelming architecture, nor even the greatness of indestructibility. For there was no massiveness of structure and the architecture seemed quite ordinary, and some of the buildings had fallen into disrepair and others were weathered into a mellowness that blended with the trees and grass of the hills on which they stood.

Still, there was a greatness in them, the greatness of humility and purpose and the greatness, too, of well-ordered life. Looking at them, one knew that he had been wrong in thinking this a city—that this was no city, but an extensive village, with all the connotations that were in the word.

But most of all there was humanness, the subtle touch that marked the buildings as those that had been planned by human minds and raised by human hands. You could not put your finger upon any single thing and say, this thing is human, for any one thing you put your finger on might have been built or achieved by another race. But when all those single things were rolled into the whole concept there could be no doubt that it was a human village.

Sentient beings had hunted for this place, had sought the clue that might lead them to the vanished segment of the race, and when they failed, some of them had doubted there had been such a place, with the records that told of it often in dispute. There were those, too, who had said that it mattered little whether you found the missing fragment or not, since little that was of

THE ANSWERS

CLIFFORD D. SIMAK

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Sentient beings had hunted for this place, had sought the clue that might lead them to the vanished segment of the race, and when they failed, some of them had doubted there had been such a place, with the records that told of it often in dispute. There were those, too, who had said that it mattered little whether you found the missing fragment or not, since little that was of any value would come from a race so insignificant as the human race. What were the humans? they would ask you and would answer before you had a chance to speak. Gadgeteers, they said, gadgeteers who were singularly

unstable. Great on gadgets, they would say, but with very little real intelligence. It was, they would point out, only by the slightest margin of intelligence that they were ever accepted into the galactic brotherhood. And, these detractors would remind you, they had not improved much since. Still marvelous gadgeteers, of course, but strictly third-rate citizens who now quite rightly had been relegated to the backwash of the empire.

The place had been sought, and there had been many failures. It had been sought, but not consistently, for there were matters of much greater import than finding it. It was simply an amusing piece of galactic history, or myth, if you

would rather. As a project, its discovery had never rated very high.

But here it was, spread out below the high ridge on which the ship had landed, and if any of them wondered why it had not been found before, there was a simple answer—there were just too many stars; you could not search them all.

"This is it," said the Dog, speaking in his mind, and he looked slantwise at the Human, wondering what the Human might be thinking, for, of all of them, the finding of this place must mean the most to him.

"I am glad we found it," said the Dog, speaking directly to the Human, and the Human caught the nuances of the thought,

the closeness of the Dog and his great compassion and his brotherhood.

"Now we shall know," the Spider said, and each of them knew, without actually saying so, that now they'd know if these humans were any different from the other humans, or if they were just the same old humdrum race.

"They were mutants," said the Globe, "or they were supposed to be."

The Human stood there, saying nothing, just looking at the place.

"If we'd tried to find it," said the Dog, "we never would have done it."

"We can't spend much time," the Spider told them. "Just a quick survey, then there's this other business."

"The point is," said the Globe, "we

know that it exists and where it is. They will send experts out to investigate."

"We stumbled on it," said the Human, half in wonderment. "We just stumbled on it."

The Spider made a thought that sounded like a chuckle and the Human said no more.

"It's deserted," said the Globe. "They have run away again."

"They may be decadent," said the Spider. "We may find

what's left of them huddled in some corner, wondering what it's all about, loaded down with legends and with crazy superstitions."

"I don't think so," said the Dog. "We can't spend much time," the Spider said

again. "We should spend no time at all," the Globe told them. "We were not sent out to find this place. We have no business letting it delay us."

"Since we've found it," said the Dog, "it would be a shame to go away and leave it, just like that."

"Then let's get at it," said the Spider. "Let's break out the robots and the ground car."

"If you don't mind," the Human said, "I think that I will walk. The rest of you go ahead. I'll just walk down and take a look around."

"I'll go with you," said the Dog.

"I thank you," said the Human, "but there really is no need." :

So they let him go alone.

The three of them stayed on the ridge top and watched him walk down the hill toward the silent buildings. Then they went to activate the robots. The sun was setting when they returned, and the Human was waiting for them, squatting on the ridge, staring at the village.

He did not ask them what they had found. It was almost as if he knew, although he could not have found the answer by himself, just walking around. They told him.

The Dog was kind about it. "It's strange," he said. "There is no evidence of any great development. No hint of anything unusual. In fact, you might guess that they had retrogressed. There are no great engines, no hint of any mechanical

ability."

"There are gadgets," said the Human. "Gadgets of comfort and convenience. That is all I saw." "That is all there is," the Spider said. "There are no humans," said the Globe. "No life of any kind. No intelligence."

"The experts," said the Dog, "may find something when they come."

"I doubt it," said the Spider.

The Human turned his head away from the village and looked at his three companions. The Dog was sorry, of course, that they had found so little, sorry that the little they had found had been so negative. The Dog was sorry because he still held within himself some measure of racial memory and of

loyalty. The old associations with the human race had been wiped away millennia ago, but the heritage still held, the old heritage of sympathy with and for the being that had walked with his ancestors so understandingly.

The Spider was almost pleased about it, pleased that he had found no evidence of greatness, that this last vestige of vanity that might be held by humans now would be dashed forever and the race must now slink back into its corner and stay there, watching with furtive eyes the greatness of the Spiders and the other races.

The Globe didn't care. As he floated there, at head level with the Spider and the Dog, it meant little to him whether

humans might be proud or humble. Nothing mattered to the Globe except that certain plans went forward, that certain goals were reached, that progress could be measured. Already the Globe had written off this village, already he had erased the story of the mutant humans as a factor that might affect progress, one way or another.

"I think," the Human said, "that I will stay out here for a while. That is, if you don't mind."

"We don't mind," the Globe told him.

"It will be getting dark," the Spider said.

"There'll be stars," the Human said. "There may even be a moon. Did you notice if there was a moon?"

"No," the Spider said.

"We'll be leaving soon," the Dog said to the Human. "I will come out and tell you when we have to leave."

There were stars, of course. They came out when the last flush of the sun still flamed along the west. First there were but a few of the brighter ones and then there were more, and finally the entire heaven was a network of unfamiliar stars. But there was no moon. Or, if there was one, it did not show itself.

Chill crept across the ridge and the Human found some sticks of wood lying about, dead branches and shriveled bushes and other wood that looked as if it might at one time have been milled and

worked, and built himself a fire. It was a small fire but it flamed brightly in the darkness, and he huddled close against it, more for its companionship than for any heat it gave.

He sat beside it and looked down upon the village and told himself there was something wrong. The greatness of the human race, he told himself, could not have gone so utterly to seed. He was lonely, lonely with a throat-aching loneliness that was more than the loneliness of an alien planet and a chilly ridge and unfamiliar stars. He was lonely for the hope that once had glowed so brightly, for the promise that had gone like dust into nothingness before a morning wind, for a race that huddled in

its gadgetry hi the backwash of the empire.

Not an empire of humanity, but an empire of Globes and Spiders, of Dogs and other things for which there was scarcely a description.

There was more to the human race than gadgetry. There was destiny somewhere and the gadgetry was simply the means to bridge the time until that destiny should become apparent. In a fight for survival, he told himself, gadgetry might be the expedient, but it could not be the answer; it could not be the sum total, the final jotting down of any group of beings.

The Dog came and stood beside him without saying anything. He simply stood

there and looked down with the Human at the quiet village that had been quiet so long, and the firelight flamed along his coat, and he was a thing of beauty with a certain inherent wildness still existing in him.

Finally the Dog broke the silence that hung above the world and seemed a part of it.

"The fire is nice," he said. "I seldom have a fire."

"The fire was first," the Human said. "The first step up. Fire is a symbol to me."

"I have symbols, too," the Dog said, gravely. "Even the Spider has some symbols. But the Globe has none."

"I feel sorry for the Globe," the

Human said.

"Don't let your pity wear you down," the Dog told him. "The Globe feels sorry for you. He is sorry for all of us, for everything that is not a Globe."

"Once my people were sorry like that, too," the Human said. "But not any more."

"It's time to go," the Dog said. "I know you would like to stay, but . . ."

"I am staying," said the Human.

"You can't stay," the Dog told him.

"I am staying," the Human said. "I am just a Human and you can get along without me."

"I thought you would be staying," said the Dog. "Do you want me to go back and get your stuff?"

"If you would be so kind," the Human said. "I'd not like to go myself."

"The Globe will be angry," said the Dog.

"I know it."

"You will be demoted," said the Dog. "It will be a long time before you're allowed to go on a first class run again."

"I know all that."

"The Spider will say that all humans are crazy. He will say it in a very nasty way."

"I don't care," the Human said.

"Somehow, I don't care."

"AE right, then," said the Dog. "I will go and get your stuff. There are some books and your clothes and that little trunk of yours."

"And food," the Human said.

"Yes," declared the Dog. "I would not have forgotten food."

After the ship was gone the Human picked up the bundles the Dog had brought, and, in addition to all the Human's food, the Human saw that the Dog had left him some of his own as well.

The people of the village had lived a simple and a comfortable life. Much of the comfort paraphernalia had broken down and all of it had long since ceased to operate, but it was not hard for one to figure out what each of the gadgets did or once had been designed to do.

They had had a love of beauty, for there still were ruins of their gardens

left, and here and there one found a flower or a flowering shrub that once had been tended carefully for its color and its grace; but these things had been long forgotten and had lost the grandeur of their

purpose, so that the beauty they now held was bittersweet and faded.

The people had been literate, for there were rows of books upon the shelves. The books went to dust when they were touched, and one could do no more than wonder at the magic words they held.

There were buildings which at one time might have been theaters and there were great forums where the populace might have gathered to hear the wisdom or the argument that was the topic of the

day.

And even yet one could sense the peace and leisure, the order and the happiness that the place had once held.

There was no greatness. There were no mighty engines, nor the shops to make them. There were no launching platforms and no other hint that the dwellers in the village had ever dreamed of going to the stars, although they must have known about the stars since their ancestors had come from space. There were no defenses, and there were no great roads leading from the village into the outer planet.

One felt peace when he walked along the street, but it was a haunted peace, a peace that balanced on a knife's edge,

and while one wished with all his heart that he could give way to it and live with it, one was afraid to do so for fear of what might happen.

The Human slept in the homes, clearing away the dust and the fallen debris, building tiny fires to keep him company. He sat outside, on the broken flagstones or the shattered bench, before he went to sleep, and stared up at the stars and thought how once those stars had made familiar patterns for a happy people. He wandered hi the winding paths that were narrower now than they once had been and hunted for a clue, although he did not hunt too strenuously, for there was something here that said you should not hurry and you should not

fret, for there was no purpose hi it.

Here once had lain the hope of the human race, a mutant branch of that race that had been greater than the basic race. Here had been the hope of greatness and there was no greatness. Here were peace and comfort and intelligence and leisure, but nothing else that made itself apparent to the eye.

Although there must be something else, some lesson, some message, some purpose. The Human told himself again and again that this could not be a dead end, that it was more than some blind alley.

On the fifth day, in the center of the village, he found the building that was a little more ornate and somewhat more

solidly built, although all the rest were solid enough for all conscience's sake. There were no windows and the single door was locked, and he knew at last that he had found the clue he had been hunting for.

He worked for three days to break into the building but there was no way that he could. On the fourth day he gave up and walked away, out of the village and across the hills, looking for some thought or some idea that might gain him entry to the building. He walked across the hills as one will pace his study when he is at a loss for words, or take a turn in the garden to clear his head for thinking.

And that is how he found the people.

First of all, he saw the smoke coming

from one of the hollows that branched down toward the valley where a river ran, a streak of gleaming silver against the green of pasture grass.

He walked cautiously, so that he would not be surprised, but, strangely, without the slightest fear, for there was something in this planet, something in the arching sky and the song of bird and the way the wind blew out of the west that told a man he had not a thing to fear.

Then he saw the house beneath the mighty trees. He saw the orchard and the trees bending with their fruit and heard the thoughts of people talking back and forth.

He walked down the hill toward the house, not hurrying, for suddenly it had

come upon him that there was no need to hurry. And, just as suddenly, it seemed that he was coming home, although that was the strangest thing of all, for he had never known a home that resembled this.

They saw him coming when he strode down across the orchard, but they did not rise and come to meet him. They sat where they were and waited, as if he were already a friend of theirs and his coming were expected.

There was an old lady with snow-white hair and a prim, neat dress, its collar coming up high at her throat to hide the ravages of age upon the human body. But her face was beautiful, the restful beauty of the very old, who sit and rock and know their day is done and

that their life is full and that it has been good.

There was a man of middle age or more, who sat beside the woman. The sun had burned his face and neck until they were almost black, and his hands were calloused and pock-marked with old scars and half crippled with heavy work. But upon his face, too, was a calmness which was an incomplete reflection of the face beside him, incomplete because it was not so deep and settled, because it could not as yet know the full comfort of old age.

The third one was a young woman and the Human saw the calmness in her, too. She looked back at him out of cool gray eyes and he saw that her face was

curved and soft and that she was much younger than he had first thought.

He stopped at the gate and the man rose and came to where he waited.

"You're welcome, stranger," said the man. "We heard you coming since you stepped Into the orchard."

"I have been at the village," the Human said. "I am just out for a walk."

"You are from outside?"

"Yes," the Human told him, "I am from outside. My name is David Grahame."

"Come in, David," said the man, opening the gate. "Come and rest with us. There will be food and we have an extra bed."

He walked along the garden path with

the man and came to the bench where the old lady sat.

"My name is Jed," the man said, "and this is my mother, Mary, and the other of us is my daughter Alice." "So you finally came to us, young man," the old lady said to David.

She patted the bench with a fragile hand. "Here, sit down beside me and let us talk awhile. Jed has chores to do and Alice will have to cook the supper. But I am old and lazy and I only sit and talk."

Now that she talked, her eyes were brighter, but the calmness was still in them.

"We knew you would come someday," she said.~ "We knew

someone would come. For surely those who are outside would hunt their mutant kin."

"We found you," David said, "quite by accident."

"We? There are others of you?"

"The others went away. They were not human and they were not interested."

"But you stayed," she said. "You thought there would be things to find. Great secrets to be learned."

"I stayed," said David, "because I had to stay."

"But the secrets? The glory and the power?"

David shook his head. "I don't think I thought of that. Not of power and glory. But there must be something else. You

sense it walking in the village and looking in the homes. You sense a certain truth."

"Truth," the old lady said. "Yes, we found the Truth."

And the way she said it Truth was capitalized.

He looked quickly at her and she sensed the unspoken, unguarded question that nicked across his mind.

"No," she told him, "not religion. Just Truth. The plain and simple Truth."

He almost believed her, for there was a quiet conviction in the way she said it, a deep and solid surety. "The truth of what?" he asked. "Why, Truth," the old lady said. "Just Truth."

It would be, of course, something

more than a simple truth. It would have nothing to do with machines, and it would concern neither power nor glory. It would be an inner truth, a mental or a spiritual or a psychological truth that would have a deep and abiding meaning, the sort of truth that men had followed for years and even followed yet in the wish-worlds of their own creation.

The Human lay in the bed close beneath the roof and listened to the night wind that blew itself a lullaby along the eaves and shingles. The house was quiet and the world was quiet except for the singing wind. The world was quiet, and David Grahame could imagine, lying there, how the galaxy would gradually grow quiet under the magic and the spell

of what these human-folk had found.

It must be great, he thought, this truth of theirs. It must be powerful and imagination-snaring and all-answering to send them back like this, to separate them from the striving of the galaxy and send them back to this pastoral life of achieved tranquillity in this alien valley, to make them grub the soil for food and cut the trees for warmth, to make them content with the little that they have.

To get along with that little, they must have much of something else, some deep inner conviction, some mystic inner knowledge that has spelled out to them a meaning to their lives, to the mere fact and living of their lives, that no one else can have.

He lay on the bed and pulled the covers up more comfortably about him and hugged himself with inner satisfaction.

Man cowered in one corner of the galactic empire, a maker of gadgets, tolerated only because he was a maker of gadgets and because the other races never could be sure what he might come up with next; so they tolerated him and threw him crumbs enough to keep him friendly but wasted scant courtesy upon him.

Now, finally, Man had something that would win him a place in the respect and the dignity of the galaxy. For a truth is a thing to be respected.

Peace came to him and he would not

let it in but fought against it so that he could think, so that he could speculate, imagining first that this must be the truth that the mutant race had found, then abandoning that idea for one that was even better.

Finally the lullabying wind and the sense of peace and the tiredness of his body prevailed against him and he slept.

The last thought that he had was, I must ask them. I must find out.

But it was days before he asked them, for he sensed that they were watching, and he knew that they wondered if he could be trusted with the truth and if he was worthy of it.

He wished to stay; but for politeness' sake he said that he must go and raised

no great objection when they said that he must stay. It was as if each one of them knew this was a racial ritual that must be observed, -and all were glad, once it was over and done with.

He worked in the fields with Jed and got to know the neighbors up and down the valley; he sat long evenings talking with Jed and his mother and the daughter and with the other valley folk who dropped in to pass a word or two.

He had expected that they would ask him questions, but they did not; it was almost as if they didn't care, as if they so loved this valley where they lived that they did not even think about the teeming galaxy their far ancestors had left behind to seek here on this world a destiny that

was better than common human destiny.

He did not ask them questions, either, for he felt them watching him, and he was afraid that questions would send them fleeing from the strangeness of him.

But he was not a stranger. It took him only a day or two to know that he could be one of them, and so he made himself become one of them and sat for long hours and talked of common gossip that ran up and down the valley, and it was all kindly gossip. He learned many things—that there were other valleys where other people lived, that the silent, deserted village was something they did not fret about, although each of them seemed to know exactly what it was, that they had no ambition and no hope

beyond this life of theirs, and all were well content.

He grew content himself, content with the rose-gray morning, with the dignity of labor, with the pride of growing things. But even as he grew content, he knew he could not be content, that he must find the truth they had found and must carry that truth back to the waiting galaxy. Before long a ship would be coming out to explore the village and to study it and before the ship arrived he must know the answer; when the ship arrived he must be standing on the ridge above the village to tell them what he'd found.

One day Jed asked him, "You will be staying with us?"

David shook his head. "I have to go back, Jed. I would like to stay, but I must go back."

Jed spoke slowly, calmly. "You want the Truth? That's it?"

"If you will give it to me," David said.

"It is yours to have," said Jed. "You will not take it back."

That night Jed said to his daughter, "Alice, teach David how to read our writing. It is tune he knew."

In the corner by the fireplace the old lady sat rocking in her chair.

"Aye," she said. "It is time he read the Truth."

The key had come by special messenger from its custodian five

valleys distant, and now Jed held it in his hand and slid it into the lock of the door in the building that stood in the center of the old, quiet, long-deserted village.

"This is the first time," Jed said, "that the door has been opened except for the ritualistic reading. Each hundred years the door is opened and the Truth is read so that those who are then living may know that it is so."

He turned the key and David heard the click of the tumblers turning in the lock.

"That way," said Jed, "we keep it actual fact. We do not allow it to become a myth.

"It is," he said, "too important a thing to become a myth."

Jed turned the latch and the door swung open just an inch or two.

"I said ritualistic reading," he said, "and perhaps that is not quite right. There is no ritual to it. Three persons are chosen and they come here on the appointed day and each of them reads the Truth and then they go back as living witnesses. There is no more ceremony than there is with you and me."

"It is good of you to do this for me," David said.

"We would do the same for any of our people who should doubt the Truth," said Jed. "We are a very simple people and we do not believe in red tape or rules. All we do is live.

"In just a little while," he said, "you

will understand why we are simple people."

He swung the door wide open and stepped to one side so that David might walk in ahead of him. The place was one large room and it was neat and orderly. There was some dust, but not very much.

Half the room was filled to three quarters of its height with a machine that gleamed in the dull light that came from some source high in the roof.

"This is our machine," said Jed.

And so it was gadgetry, after all. It was another machine, perhaps a cleverer and sleeker machine, but it was still a gadget and the human race were still gadgeteers.

"Doubtless you wondered why you

found no machines," said Jed. "The answer is that there is only one, and this is it."

"Just one machine!"

"It is an answerer," said Jed. "A logic. With this machine, there is no need of any others."

"You mean it answers questions?"

"It did at one time," said Jed. "I presume it still would if there were any of us who knew how to operate it. But there is no need of asking further questions."

"You can depend on it?" asked David. "That is, you can be sure that it tells the truth?"

"My son," Jed said soberly, "our ancestors spent thousands of years

making sure that it would tell the truth. They did nothing else. It was not only the life work of each trained technician, but the life work of the race. And when they were sure that it would know and tell the truth, when they were certain that there could be no slightest error in the logic of its calculations, they asked two questions of it."

"Two questions?"

"Two questions," Jed said. "And they found the Truth."

"And the Truth?"

"The Truth," Jed said, "is here for you to read. Just as it came out those centuries ago."

He led the way to a table that stood in front of one panel of the great machine.

There were two tapes upon the table, lying side by side. The tapes were covered by some sort of transparent preservative.

"The first question," said Jed, "was this: 'What is the purpose of the universe?' Now read the top tape, for that is the answer."

David bent above the table and the answer was upon the tape:

The universe has no purpose. The universe just happened.

"And the second question . . ." said Jed, but there was no need for him to finish, for what the question had been was implicit in the wording of the second tape:

Life has no significance. Life is an

accident.

"And that," said Jed, "is the Truth we found. That is why we are a simple people."

David lifted stricken eyes and looked at Jed, the descendant of that mutant race that was to have brought power and glory, respect and dignity, to the gadgeteering humans.

"I am sorry, son," said Jed. "That is all there is."

They walked out of the room, and Jed locked the door and put the key into his pocket.

"They'll be coming soon," said Jed, "the ones who will be sent out to explore the village. I suppose you will be waiting for them?"

David shook his head. "Let's go back home," he said.