



The Next Time We Die

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Published: 1957

Categorie(s): Fiction, Science Fiction, Short Stories

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About Williams:

Robert Moore Williams (1907—1977), born in Farmington, Missouri, was an American writer, primarily of science fiction. His first published story was *Zero as a Limit*, which appeared in *Astounding Science Fiction* in 1937, under the pseudonym of "Robert Moore". He was a prolific author throughout his career, with his last novel appearing in 1972. His "Jongor" series was originally published in *Fantastic Adventures* in the 1940s and 1950s, but only appeared in book form in 1970.

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Now in the nooning, with the sun high overhead and the shadows huddling dispiritedly at their sides, the threat that existed in this wild desert was completely invisible.

The girl, Nora Martin, said, "What I don't understand is why we were so stupid as to come here in the first place. We could have stayed on Earth and had homes and families." Becoming conscious of what she had said, she hastily corrected herself. "I mean, each of us could have had a home and a family."

Pike McLean shifted the muzzle of the Rangeley just a trifle, adjusting it so that the cross hairs in the periscope sight covered the exact spot where he expected, and hoped, the next native would appear. He tried to dig the sand out of his eyes. Since he had sand on his hands, this only got more of the gritty particles into his eyes. He wished fervidly for a deep satisfying breath of the thick muggy air of Earth before he died.

"This air, there's not anything to it," he muttered.

The girl glanced sharply at him. She had eyes that were as blue as the skies of Earth on a sunny day. The dirt on her nose made her look human. At this moment, the eyes had anger in them. Back of the anger were unshed tears.

"Did you hear what I said?" she repeated.

McLean shifted his long body so that it lay a little lower in the depression in the sand. "I guess you came here because you're an archeologist and you're getting paid to examine ruins. I came here because I'm a roustabout who is supposed to be able to do anything, which is what I'm getting paid for." He paused and removed an offending grain of sand from his right eyelid. "Dying is not much," he continued. "Why are you so frazzled about it? It doesn't even hurt, when you really get to it, that is."

"You talk as if you have died before!"

"Why, I have," he answered, surprise in his voice. "Hundreds of times. Since we first crawled out on the mud flats and grew feet and left our gills behind us, that's a long time. We've been dying ever since, that's for sure. And probably for a much longer time."

"I thought you were talking about reincarnation," the astonished archeologist said.

"So I was," the roustabout answered. "They're only different approaches and aspects of the same problem. We reincarnate in order to take another crack at the puzzle of evolution. Some day we'll solve it!"

Then we will fall heir to the farther stars instead of just this little old duck pond of a solar system."

"You sound very sure of yourself. What proof—"

"It's in the book," McLean answered. "We're *homo sapiens*. And that means something. The mud flats didn't stop us. We crawled off of them and on to the high ground and into the forests and overran a planet. The atom bomb didn't hold us up too long, even when we got to using it on each other. Where in all that space—" His hand swept upward in an arc that included all the vast expanse of stars dimly seen here on this world even at high noon. "—is anything that can stop us, when we can keep coming back to take another crack at the problem? Any problem, I don't care what it is, can be solved if we can keep working at it long enough!" Enthusiasm sounded in his voice, then faded out. He drew his hand down. Two of the fingers were missing.

McLean stared at the ooze of blood and plasma and set his lips against the pain. "That damned needle ray can sure knock a hunk out of a man," he said.

"Oh, Pike, why did you have to be so careless!" Sliding the pack from her back, she opened it. Taking great care not to get her head above the edge of the hole, she opened the first-aid kit and applied antiseptics and bandages to the stumps of the two fingers. Alternately she scolded and then soothed him.

"You do that real well," he said, approvingly. "You should have been a mama, instead of an archeologist, and raised a whole slather of kids, so you could bandage all their cuts and pat away all their bruises."

A longing as deep as the seas of Earth showed in her blue eyes. "That—that was what I wanted. But I got side-tracked into a profession." The longing was washed away in a film of sudden tears.

McLean closed his lips even tighter. He applied one eye to the sight of the Rangeley, now adjusted to function as a periscope. Level and apparently free of all danger, the grim red sands swept away to the low mountains in the distance. The air was so clear and so thin that he could even see the ruins of the city that had been their destination when they had left the ship. The city was a vast mass of tumbled masonry sprawled on treeless, forgotten hills. On the sand nothing moved. Yet death was there in front of him, and his eye had certainly passed over it.

"The nice little foxes are all in their nice little holes," he said.

The girl made a wan effort to smile. "How are your fingers? I mean, do they hurt much?"

"They feel like I don't have them." Grinning at his own joke, McLean swung the sight of the Rangeley around to their desert buggy. The over-size tires loomed up like huge rubber doughnuts sprouting mysteriously out of the desert sand. The door of the car was invitingly open.

"It's only a quarter of a mile," he said. "We could sprint that far. But how could we run at all without legs?"

"We have legs," the girl said eagerly. "Let's try to make the car."

"We wouldn't have 'em, if we jumped out of this hole and started running. The little foxes have sharp teeth."

"Oh." Her voice dropped as the color faded from her eyes. "Then what are we going to do?"

"Stay here and hope they send out another desert car from the ship looking for us. If we don't return in a reasonable time, they may become curious about us."

"And if they don't come?"

"We'll try to out-fox the foxes."

"If we had a radio—"

"We do, but it's in our buggy. If we were there, we wouldn't need a radio. The dur-steel body of the car would stop the beam from that needle gun. How the hell does it happen that wild tribesmen, with no science and no industry, living here in a desert, have a weapon like that needle ray gun?"

"When they built their city there, they weren't desert tribesmen," the girl explained. "They were going somewhere, then, and they had science and at least light industry, and skilled workers. When they came back to the desert, they left everything behind them except their weapons. A primitive will always choose a weapon over anything else. He will value it as he values his life, because that is what it is."

"Why did they come back to a desert?"

"That's one thing we expected to discover in their ruined city, Pike." The girl's voice took on the patient tone of the expert instructing the amateur. "War with a neighboring tribe, in which they were defeated, might have been the reason. Change in climate might have been a factor. Perhaps there were other reasons too, famine, pestilence. They started up, then went back. This has happened so often that it seems to me that the seeds of decay always sprout at the same time as the seeds of greatness."

"I wish I were an archeologist and a philosopher, and understood all those things," McLean said, longingly.

"You are a man, which is more important."

"Do you mean *male*?"

"No. Man. *M-a-n*." She spelled the word for him. "Man. The highest level reached by the life force on Earth, to date. Or in the Solar System, as we know it."

"Oh, you mean the top of the heap," McLean said. "Sure, we know that. But the little foxes hiding in their nice little holes don't know it. They don't think that being a man is so much." A thin sparkle of light flickered through the air above his head as he spoke. He had the impression that a crackling sound went with the death beam, like the rustle of static in space. "See! That's what they think of us! Targets!"

The girl dodged downward. McLean advised her not to be a sissie and turned his attention to the sight of the Rangeley. Nothing was in sight. This did not surprise him. He had not expected to see anything except sand. "I betcha I'm looking right at two or three of those devils and not seeing them," he grumbled.

"They are adept at protective coloration," the girl said. "Let me look."

She applied her eye to the scope of the Rangeley, moving it on its mounting so that it swept across the sand. "There's one!" she said, sudden excitement in her voice.

"Where?" McLean demanded, pushing her aside and put his eye to the scope.

"Right where I have the sight centered. Can't you see that little bulge? Right there." She started to stand up and point.

McLean jerked her backward and shoved her face into the sand. "Don't get so excited that you start to stand up," he growled. Light sparkled through the air above them.

"I forgot," the girl said, meekly. "Let me get my head up. You've got my nose and mouth full of sand."

"Out here, you only forget once," the roustabout said, releasing her. "I still don't see anything," he said, peering through the scope. He moved aside as she pushed at his shoulder.

Again she studied the terrain. Making a minute adjustment of the sight, she pulled the trigger. The Rangeley burped softly—it was a gas operated gun—then three quick explosions took place out on the desert where the explosive pellets hit. A wild yell followed. McLean got his eye to the sight in time to see a tribesman spin crazily within fifty feet of them. The fellow turned one last cartwheel, then collapsed into a bundle of dead rags.

"You got one!" McLean yelled triumphantly.

"Did—did I? I'm sorry—I mean—" Her voice trailed choked with fear.

He looked quickly at her. The girl's eyes were filled with tears. "I didn't really mean to do it," she blubbered.

"Cut out that damned caterwauling!" he ordered. "This is war. The fact that just you and me, and some wild Martian Indians, are involved in this war doesn't make it any less deadly. If we don't get them, they'll get us." He held up his bandaged hand. "Do you think the tribesman who did that was after my fingers? He wasn't! What he wanted was my head!"

"All right, all right, I understand this intellectually, it's just that my emotions got involved."

"Get them uninvolved," he said. "How could you see that Martian when I couldn't?"

"Better ability to differentiate colors, probably," the girl answered. "Women can usually see colors better than men. That was the way I picked him out."

"Do some more differentiating between colors," he invited, waving her back to the sight of the Rangeley. "Maybe, by Harry, we'll get out of here alive after all!" Hope surged in his voice. "If we do—"

"If we do, then what?" the girl asked.

He shook his head. "If we do get out, I couldn't tell you anyhow. There's no point in talking. But in case we don't get out, I want you to know that you're a mighty nice kid."

"Well—thanks." Her eyes were deep blue again, like the skies of Earth. She moved toward him.

"Hey, what did you do that for?"

"Just an impulse. I always kiss men who tell me I'm a nice kid."

"Nice kid, nice kid, nice kid," McLean said.

"You're too eager." The blush on her cheeks was visible through the sand. Hastily she applied her eye to the sight of the Rangeley. McLean sighed. He had never had a girl. It seemed to him that fate was playing him a cruel joke to try to give him one under these conditions, in a hole in the sand with wild Martian tribesmen surrounding him. He mentally estimated the distance to the desert buggy, considered their chances of making this trip and arriving alive. He was shaking his head at his own estimate when the Rangeley burped again.

"I missed!" the girl said. "Oh! Here he comes!"

McLean shoved her away from the sight. The Martian was moving toward them, fast. Instead of a gun, he had a spear.

"You didn't miss," the roustabout said. "You hit him but you only wounded him. This is his death charge!"

He pressed the trigger of the Rangeley. The gun burped twice. In the distance the exploding slugs threw up small geysers in the sand. The native kept coming. In the sight, he looked to be ten feet tall. Vaulting the Rangeley, he seemed to grow even more in stature. He screamed at the top of his lungs as he thrust downward with the spear.

McLean shoved the girl away from him, rolled in the other direction. He caught a glimpse of a metal spear point burying itself in the sand in the exact spot where he had been lying. The roustabout wrapped both arms around the legs of the Martian and yanked hard. The fellow came down, on top of McLean. The human shoved him aside.

The Martian was a twisting, squirming, raging, biting, clawing, kicking wild tangle of knobby knees and knobbier elbows. Whichever of these knobby joints hit, it hurt. The fellow had a knife in his belt, which he was struggling to get free. McLean, seeing the knife, was trying equally hard to keep him from getting it.

The human caught the hilt of the knife with his left hand. With his right fist, he struck at the native's stomach. Grunting, the Martian opened his mouth and tried to bite McLean. The roustabout, no stranger to this kind of fighting, butted him in the open mouth with the top of his head, then struck again, savagely, at the stomach. He felt his fist sink home in the leathery tissue there.

The native grunted and went limp. McLean jerked the knife from its scabbard. He did not have to use it. A series of fine tremors passing through his body, the Martian was dying. The explosive slug from the Rangeley had finally done its work. With relief McLean let the body drop.

McLean wiped sweat and sand from his face. "That was the death charge, all right. But you didn't miss. See—" He pointed to the wound in the Martian's chest.

The Rangeley stopped burping as the girl took her eyes from the sight and looked around. Glancing at the Martian, she hastily averted her face. An instant later, she was back at the sight. The Rangeley began burping again.

McLean had the impression that all the time he had been fighting with the Martian, the Rangeley had been burping.

She had kept the gun going!

There was something he wanted to say to this archaeologist. He waited until he had enough breath to say it.

"You're all right," he said at last. "I mean you use your head and keep the others holed up while I fight this one."

She flashed a smile at him. "They're not holed up, they're running," she answered.

McLean lifted his head above the level of the hole. A corpse was sprawled almost at the muzzle of the Rangeley. A second lay fifty feet away. A third was perhaps a hundred yards distant.

While he had been fighting the berserk Martian, the others had seized the opportunity to charge.

"Good girl! You saved our necks." He watched the running tribesmen. She was keeping the sand at their heels thoroughly stirred up with slugs from the Rangeley.

"Wonderful!" McLean breathed. "Lift your sights just a little—"

The Rangeley went into silence. Looking down, he saw that her shoulders were shaking with sobs.

"I know how you feel," he said, gently. "But you had to do it, to save our necks. Come on! Let's get back to our car while they're still running and we have the chance!" He swung into action.

Collapsing the sight into place, he swung the Rangeley and its tripod mounting over his shoulder. Catching the girl by one hand, he began to run.

To both, the car looked like heaven. It was that, and more. Here in this desert each had found in the other something that he had searched for all his life and had not found. There was heaven in this thought. McLean could hear the girl panting as she ran beside him, but she was also laughing. He began to laugh too, from pure happiness. He squeezed her hand and she squeezed back.

His laughter went into quick silence as he saw the tube of the needle ray gun projecting past the rear tire of the desert car. The bright, baleful eye of a Martian crouching there was visible behind the weapon.

"It's a trap!" he gasped. "They ran on purpose, knowing we would beat it to our car as soon as they were gone."

Skidding to a halt, he tried to bring the Rangeley off his shoulder. The needle ray gun winked at him. He coughed and went down in the sand.

The gun winked again, spitting its bright eye of light at the girl. She went down like a falling doll.

McLean pulled himself up on one knee and one hand. There was a hole in his chest as big as his fist, but there was no pain. The high energy radiation from the needle gun seared the nerve endings so that no sensations were transmitted.

The roustabout shook his fist at the native crouched under the car.

"You got us this time," he yelled. "But we'll be back again. You can't lick us. We'll get you if it takes another million years." The drive that had brought *homo sapiens* up from the mud flats was in his voice.

His head began to swim. He took another deep breath. Beside him, the girl lay completely silent. Only her eyes showed that she knew what had happened.

McLean looked at her. There was still something that he wanted to say. His mind was fogging and he had difficulty in finding the words.

"The next time through, I want to meet you earlier," he said at last. "I want us to have the chance we missed this trip, of a home and a bunch of—" He coughed. "And a bunch of kids," he ended.

The girl said nothing. She was beyond the ability to speak. But she understood him. The glow that came into her eyes made them as beautiful, and as full of promise, as the skies of Earth.

McLean quietly laid down.

The returning tribesmen danced their wild victory dance around the two humans. Level and bare, the endless sands of Mars stretched far away.

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