



When the Mountain Shook

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About Abernathy:

Robert Abernathy (1924 – 1990) was an American science fiction author during the 1940s and 1950s. He was known primarily for his short stories which were published in many of the pulp magazines that flourished during the Golden Age of Science Fiction. Many of his stories have been included in various anthologies of classic science fiction.

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At sunset they were in sight of the Ryzga mountain. Strangely it towered among the cliffs and snow-slopes of the surrounding ranges: an immense and repellently geometric cone, black, its sides blood-tinted by the dying sun.

Neena shivered, even though the surrounding cold could not reach her. The ice-wind blew from the glacier, but Var's love was round her as a warming cloak, a cloak that glowed softly golden in the deepening twilight, even as her love was about him.

Var said, "The Watcher's cave should be three miles beyond this pass." He stood rigid, trying to catch an echo of the Watcher's thoughts, but there was nothing. Perhaps the old man was resting. From the other direction, the long way that they two had come, it was not difficult to sense the thought of Groz. That thought was powerful, and heavy with vengeance.

"Hurry," said Neena. "They're closer than they were an hour ago."

She was beautiful and defiant, facing the red sunset and the black mountain. Var sensed her fear, and the love that had conquered it. He felt a wave of tenderness and bitterness. For him she had come to this. For the flame that had sprung between them at the Truce of New Grass, she had challenged the feud of their peoples and had left her home, to follow him. Now, if her father and his kinsmen overtook them, it would be death for Var, and for Neena living shame. Which of the two was worse was no longer a simple problem to Var, who had grown much older in the last days.

"Wait," he commanded. While she waited he spun a dream, attaching it to the crags that loomed over the pass, and to the frozen ground underfoot. It was black night, as it would really be when Groz and his henchmen reached this place; lurid fire spewed from the Ryzga mountain, and strange lights dipped above it; and for good measure there was an avalanche in the dream, and hideous beasts rushed snapping and ravening from the crevices of the rock.

"Oh!" cried Neena in involuntary alarm.

Var sighed, shaking his head. "It won't hold them for long, but it's the best I can do now. Come on."

There was no path. Now they were descending the steeper face of the sierra, and the way led over bottomless crevasses, sheer drops and sheer ascents, sheets of traitorous glare ice. Place after place had to be crossed on the air, and both grew weary with the effort such crossings cost. They hoarded their strength, helping one another; one alone might never have won through.

It was starry night already when they saw the light from the Watcher's cave. The light shone watery and dim from beneath the hoary back of the glacier, and as they came nearer they saw why: the cave entrance was sealed by a sheet of ice, a frozen waterfall that fell motionless from the rocks above. They heard no sound.

The two young people stared for a long minute, intrigued and fearful. Both had heard of this place, and the ancient who lived there to keep watch on the Ryzga mountain, as a part of the oldest legends of their childhood; but neither had been here before.

But this was no time for shyness. Var eyed the ice-curtain closely to make sure that it was real, not dream-stuff; then he struck it boldly with his fist. It shattered and fell in a rain of splinters, sparkling in the light that poured from within.

They felt the Watcher rouse, heard his footsteps, and finally saw him—a shrunken old man, white-haired, with a lined beardless face. The sight of him, more marred by age than anyone they had ever seen before, was disappointing. They had expected something more—an ancient giant, a tower of wisdom and strength. The Watcher was four hundred years old; beside him even Groz, who had always seemed so ancient, was like a boy.

The Watcher peered at them in turn. "Welcome," he said in a cracked voice. He did not speak again; the rest of his conversation was in thought only. "Welcome indeed. I am too much alone here."

"You were asleep!" said Var. Shock made his thought accusing, though he had not meant to be.

The old man grinned toothlessly. "Never fear. Asleep or awake, I watch. Come in! You're letting in the wind."

Inside the cave it was warm as summer. Var saw with some surprise that all the walls were sheathed in ice—warm to the touch, bound fast against melting by the Watcher's will. Light blazed in reflections from the ice walls, till there was no shadow in the place. Behind them began a tinkling of falling water, thawed from the glacial ridges above to descend sheet-wise over the cave mouth, freezing as it fell into lengthening icicles. The old man gazed at his work for a moment, then turned questioningly to the young pair.

"We need a little rest out of the cold," said Var. "And food, if you can spare it. We're pursued."

"Yes, yes. You shall have what I can give you. Make yourselves comfortable, and in one minute... Pursued, eh? A pity. I see the world is as bad as it was when I was last in it."

Hot food and drink were before them almost at once. The Watcher regarded them with compassion as their eyes brightened and some of the shadow of weariness lifted from them. "You have stolen your enemy's daughter, no doubt, young man? Such things happened when I was young."

Warming to the old man now, Var sketched his and Neena's history briefly. "We should have been safe among my people by now. And before very long, I'm sure, I would have performed some deed which Groz would recognize as a worthy exploit, and would thus have healed the feud between our families. But our flight was found out too soon. They cut us off and forced us into the mountains, and now they are only a few hours behind us."

"A pity, indeed. I would like to help you—but, you understand, I am the Mountain Watcher. I must be above feuds and families."

Var nodded somberly, thinking that an old recluse would in any case be able to do little for them against Groz and his violent kinsfolk.

"And what will you do now?"

Var grinned mirthlessly. "We haven't much choice, since they're overtaking us. I have only one idea left: we can go where Groz may fear to follow us."

"To the mountain, you mean."

"And into it, if need be."

The Watcher was broodingly silent; his eyes shifted to Neena, where she nestled by Var's side. He asked, "And you—are you willing to follow your lover in this?"

Neena returned his gaze without flinching; then she looked sidelong at Var, and her lips curled with a proud and tender mockery. "Follow? Why, I will lead, if his courage should fail him."

The old man said, "It is no part of my duty to dissuade you from this thing. You are free persons. But I must be sure that you know what you are doing. That is the second part of the law the First Watcher made: to guard lest the unwary and the ignorant should bring harm on themselves and on all men."

"We know the stories," Var said brusquely. "In the hollow heart of their mountain the Ryzgas sleep, as they chose to do when their world

crumbled. But if they are wakened, the mountain will tremble, and the Ryzgas will come forth."

"Do you believe that?"

"As one believes stories."

"It is true," said the Watcher heavily. "In my youth I penetrated farther into the mountain than anyone before, farther even than did the First Watcher. I did not see the sleepers, nor will any man until they come again, but I met their sentries, the sentinel machines that guard them now as they have for two thousand years. When I had gone that far, the mountain began to shake, the force that is in the Earth rumbled below, and I returned in time." Now for the first time Var sensed the power in the old man's look, the power of four hundred years' wisdom. Var stared down at his hands.

"The Ryzgas also were men," said the Watcher. "But they were such a race as the world has not seen before or since. There were tyrannies before the Ryzgas, there was lust for power, and atrocious cruelty; but such tyranny, power, and cruelty as theirs, had never been known. They ruled the Earth for four generations, and the Earth was too little for them. They laid the world waste, stripped it of metals and fuels and bored to its heart for energy, poisoned its seas and its air with the fume of their works, wrung its peoples dry for their labor ... and in each of those four generations they launched a ship of space. They were great and evil as no other people has been, because they wanted the stars.

"Because of them we must build with dreams instead of iron, and our only fire is that of the Sun, and even now, two thousand years later, the Earth is still slowly recovering from the pangs and poison of that age. If you turn up the sod in the plain where the wild herds graze, you will find numberless fragments of rusted or corroded metal, bits of glass and strange plastic substances, debris of artifacts still showing the marks of their shaping—the scattered wreckage of the things they made. And we—we too are a remnant, the descendants of the few out of all humanity that survived when the Ryzgas' world went down in flame and thunder.

"In the last generation of their power the Ryzgas knew by their science that the race of man would endure them no longer. They made ready their weapons, they mined the cities and the factories for destruction, making sure that their works and their knowledge would perish with them. Meanwhile they redoubled the yoke and the punishments, hastening the completion of the last of the starships.

"From the memories that the old Watchers have left here, and from the memories of dead men that still echo in the air, I have gathered a picture of that world's end. I will show it to you... ."

Var and Neena stared, unstirring, with wide vacant eyes, while the old man wove a dream around them, and the bright ice-cave faded from their vision, and they saw—

Black starless night, a sky of rolling smoke above the greatest city that was ever built. Only the angry light of fires relieved the city's darkness—that, and the blue-white lightning flashes that silhouetted the naked skeletons of buildings and were followed by thunder and a shaking of the earth.

Along lightless streets, half choked with rubble and with the dead, poured a mad, hating horde. The recurrent flashes lit scarred faces, naked bodies blackened and maimed from the hell of the workshops where the Ryzgas' might had been forged, eyes that stared white and half sightless from the glare of the furnaces, gnarled hands that now at long last clutched the weapons of the last rebellion—a rebellion without hope of new life on a world gutted and smoldering from the fulfilment of the Ryzgas' dream, without slogans other than a cry for blood.

Before them death waited around the citadel where the masters still fought. All round, from the lowest and most poisonous levels of the shattered city, the slaves swarmed up in their millions. And the lightning blazed, and the city howled and screamed and burned.

Then, unbelievably, the thunder fell silent, and the silence swept outward like a wave, from ruined street to street. The mouths that had shouted their wrath were speechless, and the rage-blinded eyes were lifted in sudden awe. From the center, over the citadel, an immense white globe soared upward, rising swiftly without sound.

They had never seen its like, but they knew. It was the last starship, and it was leaving.

It poised motionless. For an instant the burning city lay mute; then the millions found voice. Some roared ferocious threats and curses; others cried desolately—*wait!*

Then the whole city, the dark tumuli of its buildings and its leaping fires and tormented faces, and the black sky over it, seemed to twist and swim, like a scene under water when a great fish sweeps past, and the ship was gone.

The stunned paralysis fell apart in fury. Flame towered over the citadel. The hordes ran and shrieked again toward the central inferno, and the city burned and burned... .

Var blinked dazedly in the shadowless glow of the ice-cave. His arm tightened about Neena till she gasped. He was momentarily uncertain that he and she were real and here, such had been the force of the dream, a vision of such scope and reality as Var had never seen—no, lived through—before. With deep respect now he gazed upon the bent old man who was the Mountain Watcher.

"Some of the Ryzgas took flight to the stars, and some perished on Earth. But there was a group of them who believed that their time to rule would come again. These raised a black mountain from the Earth's heart, and in hollows within it cast themselves into deathless sleep, their deathless and lifeless sentinels round them, to wait till someone dare arouse them, or until their chosen time—no one knows surely.

"I have told you the story you know, and have shown you a glimpse of the old time, because I must make sure that you do not approach the mountain in ignorance. Our world is unwise and sometimes evil, full of arrogance, folly, and passion that are in the nature of man. Yet it is a happy world, compared to that the Ryzgas made and will make again."

The Watcher eyed them speculatively. "Before all," he said finally, "this is a world where you are free to risk wakening the old tyrants, if in your own judgment your great need renders the chance worth taking."

Neena pressed her face against Var's shoulder, hiding her eyes. In her mind as it groped for his there was a confusion of horror and pity. Var looked grimly at the Watcher, and would have spoken; but the Watcher seemed suddenly a very long way off, and Var could no longer feel his own limbs, his face was a numb mask. Dully he heard the old man say, "You are tired. Best sleep until morning."

Var strove to cry out that there was no time, that Groz was near and that sleep was for infants and the aged, but his intention sank and drowned under wave upon wave of unconquerable languor. The bright cave swam and dissolved; his eyelids closed.

Var woke. Daylight glimmered through the ice of the cave mouth. He had been unconscious, helpless, for hours! At the thought of that, panic gripped him. He had not slept since childhood, and he had forgotten how it was.

He came to his feet in one quick movement, realizing in that action that sleep had refreshed his mind and body—realizing also that a foot-step had wakened him. Across the cave he faced a young man who watched him coolly with dark piercing eyes that were familiar though he did not know the face.

Neena sat up and stifled a cry of fright. Var growled, "Who are you? Where's the Watcher?"

The other flashed white teeth in a smile. "I'm the Watcher," he answered. "Often I become a youth at morning, and relax into age as the day passes. A foolish amusement, no doubt, but amusements are few here."

"You made us fall asleep. Groz will be on us—"

"Groz and his people could not detect your thoughts as you slept. They were all night chasing elusive dreams on the high ridges, miles away."

Var passed a hand across bewildered eyes. Neena said softly, "Thank you, Watcher."

"Don't thank me. I take no sides in your valley feuds. But now you are rested, your minds are clear. Do you still mean to go on to the Ryzga mountain?"

Not looking at the Watcher, Var muttered unsteadily, "We have no alternative."

There was a liquid tinkling as the ice-curtain collapsed; the fresh breeze of morning swept into the cave. The youth beckoned to them, and they followed him outside.

The glacial slope on which the cavern opened faced toward the mountain. It rose black and forbidding in the dawn as it had by sunset. To right and left of it, the grand cliffs, ocher and red, were lit splendidly by the morning sun, but the mountain of the Ryzgas drank in the light and gave nothing back.

Below their feet the slope fell away into an opaque sea of fog, filling a mile-wide gorge. There was a sound of turbulent water, of a river dashed from rock to rock in its struggle toward the plain, but the curling fog hid everything.

"You have an alternative," said the Watcher crisply. The two took their eyes from the black mountain and gazed at him in sudden hope, but his face was unsmiling. "It is this. You, Var, can flee up the canyon to the north, by a way I will show you, disguising your thoughts and masking your presence as well as you are able, while the girl goes in the other direction, southward, without seeking to conceal herself. Your pursuers will

be deceived and follow her, and by the time they catch her it will be too late for them to overtake Var."

That possibility had not occurred to them at all. Var and Neena looked at one another. Then by common consent they blended their minds into one.

They thought, in the warm intimacy of unreserved understanding: *"It would work: I-you would make the sacrifice of shame and mockery—yet these can be borne—that I-you might be saved from death—which is alone irreparable... . But to become I and you again—that cannot be borne."*

They said in unison, "No. Not that."

The Watcher's face did not change. He said gravely, "Very well. I will give you what knowledge I have that may help you when you enter the Ryzga mountain."

Quickly, he impressed on them what he had learned of the structure of the mountain and of its guardian machines. Var closed his eyes, a little dizzy by the rapid flood of detail.

"You are ready to go," said the Watcher. He spoke aloud, and his voice was cracked and harsh. Var opened his eyes in surprise, and saw that the Watcher had become again the hoary ancient of last night.

Var felt a twinge of unfamiliar emotion; only by its echo in Neena's mind did he recognize it as a sense of guilt. He said stiffly, "You don't blame us?"

"You have taken life in your own hands," rasped the Watcher. "Who does that needs no blessing and feels no curse. Go!"

They groped through the fog above blank abysses that hid the snarling river, crept hand in hand, sharing their strength, across unstable dream bridges from crag to crag. Groz and his pack, in their numbers, would cross the gorge more surely and swiftly. When Var and Neena set foot at last on the cindery slope of the great volcanic cone, they sensed that the pursuit already halved their lead.

They stood high on the side of the Ryzga mountain, and gazed at the doorway. It was an opaque yet penetrable well of darkness, opening into the face of a lava cliff, closed only by an intangible curtain—so little had the Ryzgas feared those who might assail them in their sleep.

Var sent his thoughts probing beyond the curtain, listened intently, head thrown back, to their echoes that returned. The tunnel beyond slanted steeply downward. Var's hands moved, molding a radiant globe from the feeble sunshine that straggled through the fog-bank. With an abrupt motion he hurled it. The sun-globe vanished, as if the darkness

had drunk it up, but though sight did not serve they both sensed that it had passed through to light up the depths beyond. For within the mountain something snapped suddenly alert—something alive yet not living, seeing yet blind. They felt light-sensitive cells tingle in response, felt electric currents sting along buried, long-idle circuits... .

The two stood shivering together.

The morning wind stirred, freshening, the fog lifted a little, and they heard a great voice crying, "There they are!"

Var and Neena turned. Far out in the sea of fog, on a dream bridge that they could not see, stood Groz. He shook the staff he carried. It was too far to discern the rage that must contort his features, but the thought he hurled at them was a soundless bellow: "Young fools! I've caught you now!"

Behind Groz the figures of his followers loomed up as striding shadows. Neena's hand tightened on Var's. Var sent a thought of defiance: "Go back! Or you'll drive us to enter the mountain!"

Groz seemed to hesitate. Then he swung his staff up like a weapon, and for the two on the mountainside the world turned upside down, the mountain's black shoulder hung inverted above them and the dizzy gulf of sky was beneath. Var fought for footing with his balance gone, feeling Neena reel against him until, summoning all his strength, he broke the grip of the illusion and the world seemed to right itself. The mist billowed again and Groz was out of sight, but they could hear him exhorting his men to haste.

Neena's face was deadly pale and her lips trembled, but her urgent whisper said, "Come on!"

Together they plunged into the curtain of darkness.

At Var's thought command Neena froze instantly. "Feel that!" he muttered, and she, listening, sensed it too: the infinitesimal trickle of currents behind what appeared to be a blank tunnel wall, a rising potential that seemed to whisper *Ready ... ready...* .

The sun-globe floated behind them, casting light before them down the featureless tunnel that sloped always toward the mountain's heart. Var summoned it, and it drifted ahead, a dozen feet, a little more—

Between wall and wall a blinding spindle of flame sprang into being, pulsed briefly with radiant energy that pained the eyes, and went out. The immaterial globe of light danced on before them.

"Forward, before the charge builds up again!" said Var. A few feet further on, they stumbled over a pile of charred bones. Someone else had

made it only this far. It was farther than the Watcher had gone into these uncharted regions, and only the utmost alertness of mind and sense had saved them from death in traps like this. But as yet the way was not blocked... .

Then they felt the mountain begin to tremble. A very faint and remote vibration at first, then an increasingly potent shuddering of the floor under their feet and the walls around them. Somewhere far below immense energies were stirring for the first time in centuries. The power that was in the Earth was rising; great wheels commenced to turn, the mechanical servitors of the Ryzgas woke one by one and began to make ready, while their masters yet slept, for the moment of rebirth that might be near at hand.

From behind, up the tunnel, came a clear involuntary thought of dismay, then a directed thought, echoing and ghostly in the confinement of the dark burrow:

"*Stop!*—before you go too far!"

Var faced that way and thought coldly: "Only if you return and let us go free."

In the black reaches of the shaft his will groped for and locked with that of Groz, like the grip of two strong wrestlers. In that grip each knew with finality that the other's stubbornness matched his own—that neither would yield, though the mountain above them and the world outside should crumble to ruin around them.

"Follow us, then!"

They plunged deeper into the mountain. And the shaking of the mountain increased with every step, its vibrations became sound, and its sound was like that of the terrible city which they had seen in the dream. Through the slow-rolling thunder of the hidden machines seemed to echo the death-cries of a billion slaves, the despair of all flesh and blood before their monstrous and inhuman power.

Without warning, lights went on. Blinking in their glare, Var and Neena saw that fifty paces before them the way opened out into a great rounded room that was likewise ablaze with light. Cautiously they crept forward to the threshold of that chamber at the mountain's heart.

Its roof was vaulted; its circular walls were lined with panels studded with gleaming control buttons, levers, colored lights. As they watched light flicked on and off in changing patterns, registering the progressive changes in the vast complex of mechanisms for which this must be the central control station. Behind those boards circuits opened and closed in

bewildering confusion; the two invaders felt the rapid shifting of magnetic fields, the fury of electrons boiling in vacuum... .

For long moments they forgot the pursuit, forgot everything in wonder at this place whose remotest like they had never seen in the simplicity of their machineless culture. In all the brilliant space there was no life. They looked at one another, the same thought coming to both at once: perhaps, after two thousand years, the masters were dead after all, and only the machines remained? As if irresistibly drawn, they stepped over the threshold.

There was a clang of metal like a signal. Halfway up the wall opposite, above a narrow ramp that descended between the instrument panels, a massive doorway swung wide, and in its opening a figure stood.

Var and Neena huddled frozenly, half expecting each instant to be their last. And the Ryzga too stood motionless, looking down at them.

He was a man of middle height and stocky build, clad in a garment of changing colors, of fabric delicate as dream-stuff. In his right hand, with the care one uses with a weapon, he grasped a gleaming metal tube; his other hand rested as for support against the frame of the doorway. That, and his movements when he came slowly down the ramp toward them, conveyed a queer suggestion of weariness or weakness, as if he were yet not wholly roused from his two millenia of slumber. But the Ryzga's manner and his mind radiated a consciousness of power, a pride and assurance of self that smote them like a numbing blow.

With a new shock, Var realized that the Ryzga's thoughts were quite open. They had a terse, disconnected quality that was strange and unsettling, and in part they were couched in alien and unintelligible symbols. But there was no block. Apparently the Ryzga felt no need to close his mind in the presence of inferior creatures... .

He paused with his back to the central control panel, and studied the interlopers with the dispassionate gaze of a scientist examining a new, but not novel, species of insect. His thoughts seemed to click, like metal parts of a mechanism falling into places prepared for them. The image occurred oddly to Var, to whom such a comparison would ordinarily have been totally strange.

"Culture: late barbarism. Handwork of high quality—good. Physically excellent stock... ." There was a complicated and incomprehensible schemata of numbers and abstract forms. "The time: two thousand years—more progress might have been expected, if any survivors at all initially postulated; but this will do. The pessimists were mistaken. We

can begin again." Then, startlingly super-imposed on the cool progression of logical thought, came a wave of raw emotion, devastating in its force. It was a lustful image of a world once more obedient, crawling, laboring to do the Ryzgas' will—*toward the stars, the stars!* The icy calculation resumed: "Immobilize these and the ones indicated in the passage above. Then wake the rest... ."

Var was staring in fascination at the Ryzga's face. It was a face formed by the custom of unquestioned command; yet it was lined by a deeply ingrained weariness, the signs of premature age—denied, overridden by the driving will they had sensed a moment earlier. It was a sick man's face.

The Ryzga's final thought clicked into place: *Decision!* He turned toward the switchboard behind him, reaching with practised certainty for one spot upon it.

Neena screamed.

Between the Ryzga and the control panel a nightmare shape reared up seven feet tall, flapping black amorphous limbs and flashing red eyes and white fangs. The Ryzga recoiled, and the weapon in his hand came up. There was an instantaneous glare like heat lightning, and the monster crumpled in on itself, twitched briefly and vanished.

But in that moment a light of inspiration had flashed upon Var, and it remained. As the Ryzga stretched out his hand again, Var acted. The Ryzga froze, teetering off balance and almost falling, as a numbing grip closed down on all his motor nerves.

Holding that grip, Var strode across the floor and looked straight into the Ryzga's frantic eyes. They glared back at him with such hatred and such evil that for an instant he almost faltered. But the Ryzga's efforts, as he strove to free himself from the neural hold, were as misdirected and unavailing as those of a child who has not learned to wrestle with the mind.

Var had guessed right. When Neena in her terror had flung a dream monster into the Ryzga's way—a mere child's bogey out of a fairy tale—the Ryzga had not recognized it as such, but had taken it for a real being. Var laughed aloud, and with great care, as one communicates with an infant, he projected his thoughts into the other's mind. "There will be no new beginning for you in *our* world, Ryzga! In two thousand years, we've learned some new things. Now at last I understand why you built so many machines, such complicated arrangements of matter and energy to do simple tasks—it was because you knew no other way."

Behind the hate-filled eyes the cold brain tried to reason still. "Barbarians... ? Our party was wrong after all. After us the machine civilization could never rise again, because it was a fire that consumed its fuel. After us *man* could not survive on the Earth, because the conditions that made him great were gone. The survivors must be something else—capacities undeveloped by our science—after us the end of man, the beginning... . But those of us who chose to die were right."

The tide of hate and sick desire rose up to drown all coherence. The Ryzga made a savage, wholly futile effort to lift the weapon in his paralyzed hand. Then his eyes rolled upward, and abruptly he went limp and fell in a heap, like a mechanical doll whose motive power has failed.

Var felt Neena beside him, and drew her close. As she sobbed her relief, he continued to look down absently at the dead man. When at last he raised his head, he saw that the drama's end had had a further audience. In the outer doorway, backed by his clansmen, stood Groz, gazing first in stupefaction at the fallen Ryzga, then with something like awe at Var.

Var eyed him for a long moment; then he smiled, and asked, "Well, Groz? Is our feud finished, or does your ambition for a worthy son-in-law go beyond the conqueror of the Ryzgas?"

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