Impressionist

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Radigan looked at the painting with a collector’s naked avidity and a man’s naked fear. Would he ever know the meaning behind its Horror?

Radigan paused at the base of the steep slope and glanced back up at the palatial chalet preempting the hilltop. Usually the sight of it reassured him. This morning it did not.

He brought his eyes back to his immediate surroundings. Before him the canal flowed cold and clear, and across the canal, beyond the perimeter of his domed demesne, ochre plains rolled lazily away to the soft shapes of distant mountains. Around him on the canal bank scintillating crystal trees awaited the first breath from the automatic breeze-machine, and above him, beyond the transparent roof of the dome, the mauve Martian sky prepared for the pale footsteps of the ascending sun.

Not a discordant note in the whole scene, Radigan thought—as long as you excluded the bright cube hovering just above the bank, some several hundred yards away.

He lit a cigarette—a standard operating procedure when he was confronted by the not-quite-comprehensible and briefly tinged the artificial air with a lungful of bluish smoke. He knew he should return to the chalet and turn over the investigation of the cube to his private police force, or, better yet, forget about it altogether. He had long since learned the futility of interfering with Martian phenomena.

But the cube intrigued him...

He had noticed it first from the veranda-room of the chalet. Harrow, the art dealer, had been breakfasting with him, having coptered in the preceding evening with the Psomanka original Radigan had commissioned him to buy, and the two men were discussing the painting over their coffee, Harrow with enthusiasm, Radigan with a sort of fascinated horror.

Radigan had ordered the painting sight-unseen. He was a collector, but he was not a connoisseur. He conducted his art ventures in the same way he conducted his business ventures—on a grand and indiscriminate scale. His business enterprises stretched all the way from Venus to Neptune; his collection of paintings extended all the way from Hogarth’s “The Rake’s Progress” to Neliedlieden’s “A Venerian Afternoon.” Now it included the most coveted collector’s item of all Psomanka’s “Portrait of a Man Gnawing a Bone.”

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“It is possible to understand Psomanka,” Harrow was saying, “but first you must level all the barriers of orthodox thinking. You have to free your mind. Let yourself go.”

“I’m not sure. I want to understand him,” Radigan said.

He was thinking of the previous evening when, with trembling fingers, he had undone the oiled wrappings and unrolled the ancient canvas. The thousand-credit chandelier, suspended like a miniature galaxy from the ceiling of the game room, elicited each ghastly detail with such shocking vividness that for a moment he stood there mesmerized, incapable of removing his eyes from the obscene creature he had innocently brought to life.

There was an indeterminable hazy-blue background the edge, perhaps, of a primeval forest, and then again, perhaps not. When dealing with a Psomanka painting, you could never be entirely sure of anything. In the foreground there was a terrace of some kind, consisting of greenish flagstones. And on the terrace stood or, more aptly, crouched Psomanka’s version of a man.

He was naked and obese. His pallid flesh hung in ropy folds around his bloated waist. He was frozen in an attitude of horrified surprise, as though something, or someone, had just frightened him completely out of his senses. His eyes were livid receptacles filled with stark hopeless terror. His wide loose-lipped mouth was slavering. Most loathsome of all was the white partly-gnawed bone which he clutched avidly to his breast.

Radigan was hardened to Martian art at its most grotesque, but that night his sleep had been a horrid succession of nightmares. Worst of all was the recurrent feeling of familiarity the deep-rooted conviction that in that hideous face in the painting there was a resemblance to someone he knew very well, someone he had known for a long time. But try as he would, he could not remember whom.

Harrow was talking again: “You have to keep in mind that the Martian expressionist of that era had a wide perspective. He had an inkling of what infinity is all about, and that inkling flavored everything he painted. That’s why when we, from our cramped viewpoint, examine a Psomanka, we have to let ourselves go in order even to begin to comprehend its symbolism. We have to consider every possibility.”

“And every impossibility,” Radigan said. “Including the impossibility of his having been able to find such a gruesome subject to pose for him in the first place.”

“You miss the point utterly.” Harrow was annoyed. He was careful, however, to keep his annoyance in check. Radigan knew why: it was not prudent to antagonize a man who could buy and sell nations, Who could, with a flick of his fingers, instigate an interplanetary war. “Literally, there never was such a creature as the painting depicts, If Harrow went on. “Psomanka depicted a physically normal individual from an indefinite age, but he depicted him as he, from his macrocosmic perspective, saw him. It was sort of like God painting a mortal.”

“That’s absurd!”

Harrow shook his head. “I’m afraid it’s nothing of the sort. It is, as a matter of fact, the one and only resolution that holds water. By portraying his subject in the nude and by stressing his obesity, Psomanka suggested depravity of character. By accenting his subject’s bestiality, he implied that ethically his subject was but little above the level of beasthood.”

It was at this point that Radigan had noticed the cube. Harrow was sitting with his back to the wide observatory window, and Radigan opposite him, commanded an excellent view of the canal. At first he thought that the sun was reflecting in some unique fashion from its surface. Then, when the phenomenon persisted, he realized that a box-shaped concentration of bright light had winked into being just above the bank and was gradually intensifying into a rather terrifying tangibility.

Harrow’s voice droned on. “When you’re up against a race that was innately telepathic and that possessed time travel before its extinction, you’re up against the ultimate enigma. You’ve got one paradox on top of another. Martian history is fantastic. It encompasses events that happened millennia after it was recorded events that in many instances have yet to occur. It records the progress of a people that lived a million years ahead of themselves and a million years behind themselves. A race of immortal mortals that will keep cropping up forever.

“How then can transient creatures like ourselves even begin to understand their art unless we completely unleash our imaginations? Consider the partly-gnawed bone in the Psomanka. Obviously it is symbolic—but what does it symbolize?”

With an effort Radigan transferred his gaze from the cube to his guest. “To me it suggests the uncouth femur of some prehistoric Martian mammal,” he said.

“That is merely what it appears to be. Actually it might be anything. It might be a planet. Remember, we are unleashing our imaginations. It might even be a solar system...”

Radigan was too preoccupied to comment. He was impatient for Harrow to leave so that he could go down the hillside and investigate the cube. It had seemed, at first, to bean ideal way to kill an otherwise dull morning, and consequently he had kept the discovery to himself. He had hardly been able to conceal his eagerness when Harrow, at last perceiving that his analysis of the Psomanka was being ignored, got up, made his farewells, and departed.

Now, standing on the canal bank, Radigan wished that he had not come. He wished that he were back in the chalet, watching comfortably and safely from the veranda room while his private police did the investigating. It occurred to him that his boredom must be unhealthily acute for it to have driven him upon such a potentially dangerous mission. It did not occur to him that he had so desperately wanted to take his mind off the horror he had just added to his collection that he had instinctively pounced upon the first distraction to come along.

But there was no turning back. He had his self-respect to contend with and he knew that if he were to retain what little of it he still had left, he had to go on. He resumed walking reluctantly. The brightness of the cube hurt his eyes, and he lowered them to the mossy flagstones inlaid upon the canal bank. He did not raise them again till he was quite close to his objective. When he did so he saw that the cube was not nearly as bright now; that it had acquired a stability that had been lacking before. It was as though it were resolving itself regaining a reality it had temporarily lost. I t was not nearly as large as he had expected it would be either.

As a matter of fact, it was just about the right size for a man to sit in it comfortably. A man or a Martian...

Now a shadow was beginning to show faintly beyond the translucent walls. A shadow... and then a shape. A shape substanceless at first, then gradually, implacably, solidifying—

The breeze-machine went on, and the crystal trees rattled in its sudden breath. Ripples like blue gooseflesh sprang out on the surface of the canal. Abruptly Radigan wanted to turn and run—to flee back up the blue-green hillside to the security of his chalet. To shut out forever the hideous realization that was crawling into his mind. But he could not move. He could only stand there helplessly while the last of his sanity drained away.

He was still standing there when Psomanka, carrying his collapsible easel, his palette and brushes, stepped out of the time-chamber into the moment.