

L. RON HUBBARD



WHEN SHADOWS FALL

GALAXY
PRESENTS

WHEN SHADOWS FALL

AND then there came a day when Earth lay dying, for planets also die. About her crept a ghost of atmosphere, the body eaten full away by iron rust and belching smoke until the plains, stretching wide, were sickly red, and no green showed from range to range and pole to pole.

Red as Mars.

Dead, or nearly so, with the broken tumble of her cities peopled with the lizard and the wind. And the spaceports, which had given birth to the empires of space, were charred and indistinct upon the breast of Mother Earth.

So thought Lars the Ranger sitting in the window of the Greater Council Hall, so he saw from this eminence above the world and the red plains.

He too was getting old. Strong and young he had voyaged far on dangerous ways to bring the treasure back, but now he voyaged no more. Science had prolonged the beating of his heart a thousand years beyond his time, but now he was old and stiff and the Council chamber was cold.

The voices were thin behind him. They echoed oddly in this reverberant tomb. Seats were here for all the Council members of full six hundred systems. But the seats were empty now and their metal threw back the reedy whine of the clerks who called them all to order, reading names which had been

gone these seven hundred years, all formal, all precise, and noting that they were not here.

Mankin, Grand President of the Confederated Systems, sat hunched and aged upon his dais, looking out upon his servants, listening to the threadbare rite.

“Capella!”

Silence.

“Rigel Centaurus!”

Silence.

“Deneb and Kizar and Betelgeuse!”

Silence.

And onward for six hundred names.

Silence.

For they were mighty there in the stars and Mother Earth was old. They were thriving across a mighty span of ten thousand light-years. And Mother Earth had no longer any fuel. They had taken the oil from her deepest springs and the coal from her lowest mines. They had breathed her air and forged her steel and taken their argosies away. And behind them they had scant memory.

Earth had no power of money now, no goods, no trades, no fleet. And the finest of her strong young men had gone this long, long while. The lame, the halt, these and the dimmest of sight had stayed. And now there was nothing.

“Markab!”

“Achernar!”

“Polaris!”

No one there. No one there. No one there. No one.

Lars the Ranger stood and stiffly shook out his cloak. He

couched the ceremonial space helmet in his crookt arm and advanced formally to the dais. He bowed.

He might have reported there in the ritual that the fleets were ready and the armies strong, that as General of Space he could assure them all of the peace in space.

But he was suddenly conscious of who they were and how things stood and he said nothing.

There was Greto, once a wizard of skilled finance, sitting chin on breast in an advisor's chair. There was Smit, the valiant warrior of five hundred years ago. There was Mankin, tiny in his robe, crushed down by years and grief.

About Lars swirled, for an instant, the laughing staff of centuries back—young men with the giddy wine of high risk in their hearts. About Lars thundered the governing mandates of Earth to Space, to System Empires everywhere.

And then he saw the four of them and the clerks, alone here on a world which was nearly dead.

He broke ritual softly.

“There are no fleets and the armies have melted away. There is no fuel to burn in the homes, much less in the cannon. There is no food, there are no guns. I can no longer consider myself or this Council master of space and all that it contains.”

They had all come there with a vague hope that it would break. And it had broken. And Greto came to his feet, his wasted body mighty and imposing still.

There was silence for a while and then Greto turned to the dais. “I can report the same. For fifteen long years I could have said nearly as much. But I admit this now. Earth is no more.”

Smit lumbered upright. He scowled and clenched a black fist as he looked at Lars. “We have our fleets and our guns. Who has been here these last decades to know that they are without fodder? Bah! This thing can be solved!”

Mankin hunched lower, opened a drawer and brought out a tablet which he took. As he set down his water glass, he belched politely and looked from one to the next, bewildered, a little afraid. He had been able to handle many things in his day.

He fumbled with his reports and they were all the same. People were old and children were few. The food was gone and winter would be cold.

He cleared his throat. Hopefully he looked at Smit. “I was about to suggest that some measure be taken to remove the few thousands remaining here to some planet where food and fuel are not so dear. But I only hope that I can be advised—”

“You could remove nothing,” said Greto, thrusting his hands into his pockets. “You could take nothing away. For there’s not fuel to lift more than twenty ships from the surface of Earth. The cause may be lost, but I am not lost. Earth is no longer tenable as she is. I propose that, with credits long past due, I force the purchase of atmosphere manufacturing equipment and other needful things.”

“Credits!” said Smit. “What do I know of credits? If this thing is at last in the light and the need is desperate, I can give them the promise of guns in their guts. Need they know?”

Mankin looked from one to the other. He was heartened a little, for he had begun to see these fabulous men as little

more than companions of his desultory chess games. But he did not heed them too much.

He turned to Lars.

“What says the General of Armies and Admiral of Fleets?”

Lars the Ranger laid his helmet on the clerk’s table. All semblance of formality fell from him as he took a pipe from his pocket, loaded it and lighted it with his finger ring. He looked from Mankin to Greto.

“My fleet,” he said, “has not fired a jet in so many years that I have quite forgotten how many emergency charges were left aboard. I do know that mechanics and even officers have long since used all reserve atomic fuel for the benefit of lighting plants in the cities and our few remaining factories. At the most, on all our five continents I seriously doubt whether or not we retain enough fuel for more than two or three hundred light-years. That is, of course, for one of our minor destroyers. Hardly enough for an extended cruise of space.

“At the old Navy yard at the Chicago spaceport I daresay there may be four destroyers in more or less workable condition. Certainly there are enough spare parts in the battleships to complete them and make them usable. In our service lists we have a handful of technicians who, though they may be old, still retain some of their touch.

“We could probably beg enough food in the way of voluntary contributions to provision the trip. Perhaps we are just dreaming. We may be at best only old men sitting in the sun and thinking thoughts much better carried out by young sinews. But I for one would like to try.

“Today I walked through the streets of this city and an illusion gripped me. Once more I was a young man returning from a colonization in the Capella system. The sidewalks were lined with people, the unbroken pavement glittered before me thick with roses. Young boys and girls darted in and out amongst the crowd adding their shrill cries. I knew how great, how strong, Earth was. And then, the illusion faded and the pavement was broken and the roses were thorny weeds, and an old woman whined for bread at the street corner. I saw but one child in half a hundred blocks of walking, and he was ill.

“An old man is old and has nothing but memory. It is youth which plans, endeavors and succeeds. Frankly, gentlemen, I have but little hope. But I cannot stay, while even a few years remain, and know that Mother Earth which I served for all my thousand years is dying here, forgotten and unmourned.”

He sat looking at them in a little while, puffing his pipe, swinging an ancient but well-polished boot, not seeing them but remembering.

Smit blustered to his feet. “We are speaking of dreams. I know very little of dreams but I demand to be told why our friend desires to beg for food? Are we still not the government? Must we dig in garbage cans to provision our government’s expeditions and crawl in dung heaps for a few crumbs of combustium? The first right of any government is to enforce its will upon the people.

“I highly approve of the expedition. I demand that I be allowed to take one section of it. And I desire, if this matter be agreed upon, that all necessary writs and manifestos be placed in my hands to create it a reality.”