



CLASSICS TO GO

AMAZING

STORIES
VOLUME 97

WILLIAM DOUGLAS MORRISON

Amazing Stories

Volume 97

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Task of Kayin

William Douglas Morrison

*From out beyond the second sun he came; a fugitive
from
a dead and sterile world ... seeking solace, friends, a
home, on Earth—a planet of even greater terrors.*

The sensation of which he was most conscious was that of loneliness. He was no longer very much afraid, and sometimes he even thought that his enemies back home were no longer hunting for him. But in the midst of these strange creatures he learned that there was one thing worse than open hostility, and that was indifference. They had no more interest in him than they had in each other, and even though their indifference increased his own chances for safety, it was a chilling thing none the less.

He knew that though they were like him superficially, they were intensely different within. He stood at a street corner trying to fathom the difference, while the crowds surged about him, buffeting him from side to side. They seemed to have no idea of personal dignity. He still understood their language only imperfectly, and spoke it with difficulty, but he had learned, in a primitive way, to read their faces, and during this time of day, at least, their faces told of a strain and fear all their own, of an uncertainty even greater than his. They were going home from work, and they were afraid of countless trifles—that something unpleasant might

happen, that they might not get seats on their conveyances, that bad news might greet them when they arrived.

He stared with fascination at a heap of newspapers spread out on the corner stand. He could guess the purpose of these layers of white sheets covered with black or red symbols, but he could not yet interpret them, and he had no idea whether any one had seen or reported his ship. It was almost certain that some one had observed a shooting star, but the chances were very much against any observation having been made of the star's slow, dark drift to earth. At any rate, he had concealed his ship among the growth of tall native plants, and some day he would find time to repair the relatively minor damage he had sustained, and continue his journey.

Meanwhile, he had to make up his mind what to do here. His original store of food had been exhausted a week before as these creatures counted time, and despite the fact that his metabolic requirements were low, he had long needed to eat again. The food that was exhibited in many stores was of a kind strange to him, but from the very structure and behavior of individuals who ate it, he knew that it was of the right chemical composition. Examining it cautiously with a small analyzer held close to his eye, he noted that at least it contained none of the more dangerous poisons. It would do, if he could obtain it.

But he must obtain it in a manner that these creatures considered legal, not as he had obtained his clothes. He recalled how absurdly different his own clothes had been, constructed to fit a creature whose morphology was so much unlike theirs. He had taken over a suit from a man he had met driving on a dark country road, not too close to the ship. He had stopped the car and put the man to sleep without difficulty, but there must have been a great outcry

after his victim had awakened to find himself cold and naked in the driver's seat.

He hadn't minded, for he had already left the place where the incident had occurred. But he wanted no hue and cry raised here. Although under other conditions he would have minded their hostility no more than their indifference, he knew that hostility now might very seriously limit his freedom to act.

He listed the things he had to do. He had to find food and shelter, learn their language and customs, and as quickly as possible, their alphabet. He had to acquire their manner of thought and feeling so well that he could blend with them not only superficially, but psychologically as well. He had to —

A rough shoulder caught him on the chest and spun him half around. A rough voice, more a snarl than anything else, said, "Whatsa matter, ya blind?"

The way the words were run together confused him, but he had listened keenly, and he knew the phrase that was required in such situations. He said politely, but almost unintelligently, "Excuse. I sorry."

"Foreigner, huh? Why don't ya go back where ya came from?"

This was the first person who had spoken to him in his new world. The encounter left him angry and contemptuous, but it was not to be long before he learned that the individual he had been privileged to meet was not wholly typical.

He moved along, alert to observe and to learn, but entirely without aim so far as an ultimate destination was concerned. He noted that the nature of the streets he traversed changed subtly with every intersection. The primitive, but well constructed buildings that had lined them soon gave way to even more primitive, dilapidated, and

filthy structures. It was clear that they had rich and poor here, and that he was approaching the dwellings of the poor.

He heard a rhythmic sound in the street, as of a percussion instrument, and following it, found a female of the prevailing species, dressed somewhat differently from the other females, and pounding on a hollow cylinder of fairly large diameter. Other, more piercing instruments, added sounds of their own, and then voices were lifted in song. He lingered, fascinated, and wished only that he had a sound-recorder to take permanent note of the strange music.

He was not the only one who lingered. Half a dozen dilapidated males had gathered, attracted like him by the rhythmic noise, and after a female had ended a strange exhortation which he did not fully understand, they all followed the company of musicians into a ramshackle building. Inside, he listened to other exhortations, and then had food thrust upon him.

It was a bowl of soup, the first nutrient of this strange planet that he had eaten. The taste, as well as the quick ocular analysis he made, indicated that it was deficient in many of the chemicals that he needed for his own nutrition, but at least it had energy value, and he imbibed it slowly and thoughtfully. When he had finished, they asked him if he wanted more, but he said politely, "No, thank."

The young woman who had offered it to him said, "Oh, you're a refugee, I suppose. Driven out of your native country?"

He nodded.

"Don't you have any friends here?"

He shook his head, and said, "No, thank."

"That's too bad. You look as if you hadn't eaten for a long time. Your face is awfully thin."

“Yes, thin.” He did not explain that for a member of his race he was not thin at all.

“What’s your name, please?”

“Name? What?”

“How do people call you?”

“Kayin. My name Kayin.”

“Kane. That’s rather a strange name for a foreigner. Well, don’t worry, Mr. Kane, we’ll take care of you.”

Her attitude helped erase the hostile encounter of an hour before. When they finally showed him a cot, one of a row on which many men were already stretched out, he tried to reconcile the contradictory kinds of behavior he had met, and decided that the psychology of this race would prove more complicated than he had at first believed.

The cot was extremely inconvenient, but somehow he managed to stretch out on it like the others. He slept little, and in the morning, when he awoke, it was with strained muscles and a sense of fatigue, but he was eager to see more of the world on which he found himself, and he left the next day, to continue his wanderings. During the hours that followed, he covered many miles of ground. With ears and mind open, he picked up more and more words, and by evening he was fairly confident in his ability to make himself understood in almost any situation.

He went hungry that day, but in the evening he slept much more comfortably at the foot of an old tree on a vacant lot. Far above he could see the star from which he had come. He stared at it impersonally for a short time, wondering whether he would see his own planet again. Then he fell into a half-sleep, one that rested him, though still leaving his senses partly alert.

He was becoming more accustomed to the rather short day-and-night rhythm of the planet, and he awoke at the first faint signs of daylight before anyone had noticed him.

That day he encountered groups of men congregated about dingy little buildings on a dingy street. He found that they were seeking employment, and knowing that the best way to learn about a strange race was to study the manner in which the people worked, he joined one of the groups. But there was not a single occupation with regard to which he could claim experience, and he was hired finally to do heavy, but unskilled labor, at eighty cents an hour.

The work was more difficult for him than for the others. He looked like them, but they had muscles which he simply did not possess. He was so clumsy at lifting rocks that another man, with whom he was working, said finally in exasperation, "Didn't you ever lift anything before? Look, pal, do it like this. Bend at the knees, see? That's it, like this—no, you're doing it all wrong!"

It was a nuisance, it might even be dangerous, to be stared at so closely. The fact was that his knees simply would not bend as human knees did. They were jointed in quite another fashion, and no surface similarities could conceal the fact that in action there was all the difference of two worlds between them.

He said, "Sorry. I—injured."

"Oh, can't bend them, huh? This is no job for you, pal."

"Am stranger. Know not—what else."

"Yeah, it's tough."

He returned to his work again, this time warmed by the other's sympathy, and less uneasy about being observed. And as he worked, he thought sardonically of what they would think on his home planet if they knew.

He was sure that his enemies would have roared with laughter. Here was Kayin, the one they had feared for his brilliant mind, for his knowledge of science, for his practical skill. They had outwitted him—with the odds on their side, it was true—driven him a hunted creature past strange stars, and forced him to come to ground again in the guise of one of the meanest of a mean and unintelligent race. And even in the humble position to which he had been reduced, he could not hold up his end of the work.

He clenched his jaws grimly at the thought, and the very motion made him realize that in no way was he like the others, that even so simple a matter as the number and shape of his teeth might give him away. Unintelligent as they were, once they took the trouble to look with some care, they would know a creature who was not one of them.

On the second day of work he did arouse suspicion, but at first not from the other workers. The creature that bared its teeth and barked at him was a dog. For a time Kayin found the animal's attention embarrassing. He threw a stone at the beast, but it ran only a short distance, and stopped to bark again. He had an idea of what the trouble was. That day he had replaced his worn trousers by a new and baggy pair of overalls, not yet saturated with the scent of human beings, and the dog had noticed his own faint but strange odor. Now it was making a nuisance of itself, and drawing everyone's attention to him.

"That mutt don't like you, Mac," said a foreman who passed by.

"Funny about dogs, the way they bark at some people," someone laughed.

Kayin threw another stone, but the beast dodged and continued to bark. His audience was growing now, and Kayin's skin began to twitch nervously, in a way that itself

might have drawn an audience if they had been in a mood to notice such details of behavior. "I patted cat this morning," he said apologetically. "Crazy dog smells cat."

He would have them all staring at him if this went on much longer, and he knew that he had to act quickly. Looking around him, he spied a compressed air hose lying on the ground. He picked it up, turned on the air, and directed the nozzle at the dog. The blast knocked the animal head over heels, and sent him howling on his way. Everyone laughed, and Kayin turned back to his work in relief. But from now on he knew that he must wear no new clothes.

As the work progressed, his attention turned from the immediate tasks at hand, and he began to wonder what its purpose was. There seemed to be hundreds of men, all engaged in menial tasks, all part of some greater overall plan. He began to wonder, too, if people who could make such plans could be so unintelligent as he had first assumed. Or was it simply that their intelligence had not developed, that they lacked the background of science to make the most of their minds, to use the resources their planet possessed?

A rough voice, almost the twin of that first rough voice of two days before, growled, "Hey, you, wake up and get movin'. Whaddya think you're gettin' paid for?"

He swung his pick without looking up. The foreman had no idea that the tall foreigner he knew as Kane was staring at him curiously with tiny camouflaged eyes that quite literally grew in the back of the strangely shaped head, trying to understand what made the human being tick.

By the end of a week Kayin was confident that he knew the language well enough to start reading it. He went to a public school which he found was open in the evenings, and there joined a class where someone explained the alphabet, and

made clear to foreigners that English was a language full of traps and pitfalls. Kayin absorbed the information eagerly, but after the third lesson he found the pace much too slow, and did not return. He had never before encountered a language of so strange a structure, and the actual making of the sounds gave him trouble, but the basic principles of language study were as valid here as on his home planet, and he learned rapidly. By the end of a month he could read.

By the end of the same month he had learned, too, the nature of the project on which he was working. On several occasions, the engineer in charge had passed by him to exchange a few words with the foreman and once with the man who had ordered the building.

The words had been significant. There could be no mistake, for Kayin had come across them in his reading. "Laboratory" had a very definite meaning. And there were such expressions as "incubation tanks," and "thermostat controls." All in all, enough to let him know that they were engaged in constructing a plant for the manufacture of biochemical substances.

He knew that there were biochemical plants already in existence, scattered over the civilized part of the planet, and the thought of great danger did not occur to him. But he continued, as the men around him would have put it, to keep his ears open, and as time went on he became more and more disquieted.

Meanwhile, his relations with the people among whom he worked became almost human. They greeted him every day as one of themselves, asked casual questions about the place from which he had come and the way he had lived, and accepted the answers as if with a quiet confidence that he was telling the truth. Once, in an access of good feeling, one of them had gone so far as to slap him amicably on the shoulder, and Kayin had experienced agony such as he had

never felt before. But he managed to conceal the pain, and even to laugh weakly. He made sure, however, that a similar incident would never happen again. Whenever someone approached him too closely, he opened his extra eyes very slightly, ready to step aside at the touch of a too friendly hand.

He had not realized how much his own attitude toward them had changed until the day an accident occurred. A large shelf of rock had unexpectedly turned up to block the excavation of a wide pit, and it had been necessary to shatter it with dynamite. But the explosive did not at first go off, and one of the men had gone back to see what was wrong. He had been just in time to be knocked down by the blast itself, and to be covered by the mass of dirt and broken rock that slid into the excavation.

It was Kayin who ran for him first, digging frantically away at the smothering mass, without regard for the fragments that continued to rain down upon him. And after he had reached the man, who was unconscious, but still breathing, it was Kayin who had wondered why on this Earth he had taken the risk for the sake of a creature who meant so little to him. There was another risk as well, he found, when they summoned a doctor to treat the injured man, and someone suggested that Kayin had been injured too. But Kayin quickly shrugged off the idea that he needed treatment, and went back at once to his work. He wanted no doctor discovering what unusual arms and legs and internal organs he had.

In the days that followed he continued to wonder at himself. Working together with these men, he had changed. But he must be careful, he knew, not to change too far. They had only, he was certain, to see him as he was, to realize his difference from them, and their friendliness would change to hate, causing them to turn from him with fear and loathing.

The building had reached the stage of scaffolding, and he was still at work. It was now that he learned the full truth about the project which was soon to come into operation.

He was on the outside of the building, and two of the men in charge were nearby. One of them, shrewd and elderly, had financed the building. The other, in his thirties, was the scientist who had invented the process. They were speaking in low tones, tones which no human being standing in Kayin's position would have been able to understand.

"You're sure, Blayson, that there's no danger?" the older man was saying.

The scientist smiled. "There's always some danger, Mr. Lymer, especially when you try something new. But there's nothing we shouldn't be able to control."

"I still don't think that you know too much about what you're doing."

"I've admitted that myself. But we get results, don't we? We'll corner the world market, Mr. Lymer. Name your antibiotic and we'll make it. And in addition to anything now being sold, we'll have dozens that nobody has even imagined. I think I've given you enough evidence to convince you of that."

"I suppose you have. But this use of cosmic rays makes me uneasy. You still don't know enough about them."

It was at this point that Kayin's third and fourth eyes, usually so completely concealed, popped wide open in surprise and terror. It was fortunate that no one took the trouble to look at him at that moment.

The younger man was saying confidently, "We'll control them. All we need to know is that they're high energy, higher than anything we can produce here on Earth, and that we can concentrate them in a way no one else can.