

Mana

by **Eric Frank Russell, 1905-1978**

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Lazy waters lapped and gurgled across the silver sand. An orange sun crawled high in the heavens, poured its rays through this atmosphere, and etched the higher portion of the beach with a delicate dado of shadow palms.

Omega, the last man on earth, stood naked in the coolness beneath a feathered frond.

He sighed, turned, and strode lithely into a paradise of plants.

Six thousand years, the long, extended years of the final era, had passed over Omega's head. But he was not old as beasts and plants grow old. His age was purely mental, and represented the measure of his satiation.

His body remained young, would always be young. Thousands had died within the sixty centuries of his memory, but he could recall none who had succumbed with physical decay. Men had explored with intellectual satisfaction, the exhausting of curiosity, the desire for mental rest—even as some of the esoteric

ones of primeval days had willed their passing because they had lost the urge to live.

Omega was the last, solely because he was not yet satisfied. There was one thing still to be done—if it could be done.

He had lived through and tasted every experience within reach of mankind. He had even exercised his monofecundity and produced a child. But his son refused further issue, lived fast and soon was satisfied.

Thus the flesh of his flesh, with the companions of his past, had slipped like figments of a summer's dream. Men of the latter day knew the difference between what there was to learn and what it was possible to learn. Even human ingenuity could not encompass the cosmos. So each had quaffed his little cup and crept away to sleep. He, Omega, the unsatisfied one, lived on, determined to do that which had been declared impossible.

His feet sped swiftly up a wooded slope; he mounted the crest and saw the towers and minarets of Ultima gleaming through a golden haze that lay along the valley. Exercise had tired his muscles; he called upon will power molded by a million years of evolution; his body rose into the air, floated over the treetops and across the valley. He landed lightly upon a marble battlement.

Calf muscles ached their protest against his fondness for walking. Omega rubbed them into submission, sat and rest awhile, then stepped off the battlement and floated to the silent boulevard beneath.

Eerily, like the central figure of an allegorical picture, his form drifted across the dusty, unmarked highway, his feet swinging restfully twenty inches above the surface.

No other forms were levitated, and none walked through the peaceful avenues of that once-mighty city. Silent spires spiked to the azure vault above. Idle battlement reproduced the skyline of ancient Tintagel. Flying buttresses arched boldly to walls that knew no secrets to conceal.

Omega moved toward a dull metal door set in the opposite wall.

The door opened, Omega floated through it, along a corridor and into his laboratory. His feet felt the cold kiss of stone; he stepped to a glass-topped case and peered into it with eyes that shone as brightly as eyes that found the world still new.

"*Mana*," he murmured. His voice sighed softly, like the wind that quivers in the reeds along the water's marge. "*Mana*." He often talked to himself. The habit was his only concession to loneliness. He pressed a stud that caused a dull, warm glow to spread through the interior of the case.

"Nothing," they said, "could perpetuate mankind forever," he proclaimed. "Nothing.

"Nothing that man could make, or produce could make, or produce, or build, or give, could endure as long as Nature endures. The valleys shall be raised, and the hills shall be made low. All that humanity has made, all that humanity can leave, shall crumble into the dust; and the empire that once was, and soon is not shall, shall be given over to the birds of the air, the beast of the field, the trees, the shrubs, and the creeping growths."

His fingers rapped on the case; he noted resulting movements below the glass.

"Patience," he told himself. "The thousandth failure may but precede the first success."

Eagerly he strode to a complicated chair that stood with tilted back against a maze of instruments. Suspended above the seat by simple counterweights was a great metal hood.

"It must be photons," declared Omega, standing before the chair. "A thousand experiments have shown that either cosmic rays or photons perform the function of carriers of *mana*. And I still maintain that it cannot be cosmic rays. If it were, there could be no *mana*, upon the ozone-wrapped Perdel, in Alpha Centauri."

Seating himself in the chair, he continued to reason.

"Therefore, by simple elimination, it must be photons. And upon this planet only we bipeds were really susceptible to their natural intensity, other life being less affected. But if I can increase the strength, passing an abnormal load along a beam of photons, a positive reaction should be hereditary. It would, I think, be handed from generation to generation, and—"

His lips snapped shut: he raised an arm and pulled down the hood until it covered his head completely. A contact on the armrest closed beneath his firm fingers and the apparatus woke to life.

There was no noise, nothing to indicate action save a swift turn and steady trembling of needles within three dials, and a mighty, angling leap of a concentrated beam of cold light.

Omega sat limply, the machine behind him driving a double cone of psychowaves through the back of his head. The cones narrowed through his brain, emerged from his eyes, passed through lenses set in the front of the hood, and entered the wave trap that gleamed mirrorlike at the base of the light transmission tube. In effect, the trap was the focal point of Omega's mind.

The beam of cold light was a thin column of intense brilliance as it poured up the tube, angled across to the case, and again angled into the interior. The glow from the case was vanquished by the new and mightier illumination.

For fifteen minutes the last man sat half concealed beneath the metal sheath. Then his damp fingers opened the contact; his hand raised the hood and exposed a face strained with fatigue.

He crossed the case, stared through its glass top.

"Mechanistic behaviorism may serve as a crutch—but never as a ladder," he told the unheeding subjects of his experiment.

A small heap of rotten wood lay in one corner of the case. In the center, between two highways swarming with pedestrians, stood a midget box mounted upon microscopic wheels. Near it rested a Lilliputian bow with a bundle of tiny arrows.

Raising the lid of the case, Omega inserted a hand and moved the little cart with a touch of slender fingers. Delicately, he shot an arrow from the miniature bow, and saw ants scuttle in all directions. Patiently, he rubbed two shreds of wood into flame, and let them burn at a safe distance from the rest of the heap.

"I feel one degree more stupid after each attempt. The light must be transporting it somewhere."

He watched the agitated ants as he stood and mused awhile. Then he sighed, closed the lid, and floated from the room.

Timeless day and immeasurable night upon a world that rolled in sluggish mourning for glories long departed. Omega stood upon a battlement and turned his face to the fiery ring that split the midnight sky from horizon to horizon. Incredibly ancient scrawlings upon records long since perished had described the beauty of the satellite from which this ring was born. Omega doubted whether the serene loveliness of the Moon had exceeded the glory of the remnants.

The light of the leas of Luna served to reveal the triumph upon the face of the last man, and the case of ants clasped firmly in his arms. With a frown for his sensation of mental weakness, but a contrasting smile upon his lips, he stepped off the battlement and glided like a phantom above the leafy cohorts that pressed eagerly upon the marble outskirts of Ultima. His figure floated onward, far above the treetops where wooden arms were raised in worship of the ring.

Over a tiny glade he ceased his forward progress, wavered in the slight, cool breeze, descended slowly, and felt his feet sink into a dewy cushion of earth. He placed the case upon the grass, opened its lid, tilted it, and watched the ants depart.

Satisfaction shone upon his features while he studied a group of insects laboriously surging out of the midget cart. They pushed, and pulled, twisted its wheels this way and that, and finally trundled it into the secret path of grassy jungle. He watched it disappear with its load of splinters of rotten wood, the bow and arrows resting on top. He stretched his form, and raised a glowing face to the heavens.

"When the first hairy biped rode the waters on a log, that was *mana*," he proclaimed. "When fire was found, and made, and used, that was *mana*. Whenever men struggled one step higher up the ladder of life, it was *mana*." He swung an arm in a sweep embracing the entire cosmos. "Even as it was given to us by those whom we could never know, I give it to those who can never know men. I give it as our everlasting monument."

His nerves grew taut as he summoned his weakened will. He floated upward, faster, faster, toward the elegiac ring. He was bound for space, where eternal sleep came easily and was undisturbed. There were no regrets within his soul, and he uttered no farewell. He cast one glance downward at aimless billows surging on a printless shore. His eyes passed thence to the woodland glade, caught the first flicker of a tiny fire, and he was satisfied.

Omega, the last man, had presented the ants with fire, the wheel and the bow. Best of all, he had given them what both the first man and the last had called *mana—intelligence*.

