

The Intruder

by Emil Petaja, 1915-2000

Published: 1940
in »Futura Fantasia«



It was in San Francisco, on the walk above the sand and surf that pounded like the heart of the Earth. There was wind, the sky and sea blended in a grey mist.

I was sitting on a stone bench watching a faint hint of distant smoke, wondering what ship it was and from what far port.

Mine was a pleasant wind—loneliness. So when he came, wrapped in his great overcoat and muffler, hat pulled down, and sat on my bench I was about to rise and leave him. There were other benches, and I was not in the mood for idle gossip about politics and taxes.

„Don't go. Please.” His plea was authentic.

„I must get back to my shop,” I said.

„Surely you can spare a moment.”

I could not even to begin to place the accent in his voice. Low as a whisper, tense. His deep-set eyes held me... his face was pale and had a serenity born of suffering. A placid face, not given to emotional betrayals, yet mystical. I sat down

again. Here was someone bewilderingly strange. Someone I wouldn't soon forget. He moved a hand toward me, as tho to hold me from going, and I saw with mild curiosity that he wore heavy gloves, like mittens.

„I am not well. I... I must not be out in the damp air,” I said. „But today I just had to go out and walk. I had to.”

„I can understand.” I warmed to the wave of aloneness that lay in his words. „I too have been ill. I know you, Otis Marlin. I have visited your shop off Market Street. You are not rich, but the feel of the covers on a fine book between your hands suffices. Am I right?”

I nodded. „But how...”

“You have tried writing, but have had no success. Alone in the world, your loneliness has much a family man, harassed might envy.”

„That's true,” I admitted, wondering if he could be a seer, a fake mystic bent on arousing in me an interest in spiritism favorable to his pocket-book. His next words were a little amused, but he didn't smile.

„No, I'm not a psychic—in the ordinary sense, I've visited your shop. I was there only yesterday,” he said. And I remembered him. In returning from my lunch I had met him coming out of my humble place of business. One glimpse into those brooding eyes was not a thing to soon forget, and I recalled pausing to watch his stiff-legged progress down the street and around the corner.

There was now a pause, while I watched leaves scuttling along the oiled walk in the growling wind. Then a sound like a sigh came from my companion. It seemed to me that the wind and the sea spoke loudly of a sudden, as tho approaching some dire climax. The sea wind chilled me as it had not before, I wanted to leave.

„Dare I tell you? *Dare I!*” His white face turned upward. It was as though he questioned some spirit in the winds.

I was silent; curious, yet fearful of what it might be he might not be allowed to tell me. The winds were portentously still.

„Were you ever told, as a child, that you must not attempt to count the stars in the sky at night—that if you did you might *lose your mind?*”

„Why, yes. I believe I've heard that old superstition. Very reasonable, I believe—based on the assumption that the task would be too great for one brain. I—”

„I suppose it never occurred to you,” he interrupted, „that this superstition might hold even more truth than that, truth as malignant as it is vast. Perhaps the cosmos hold secrets beyond comprehension of man; and what is your assurance that these secrets are beneficent and kind? Is nature rather not terrible, than kind? In the stars are patterns—designs which if read, might lure the intrepid miserable one who reads them out of earth and beyond... beyond, to immeasurable evil... Do you understand what I am saying?” His voice quivered metallically, was vibrant with emotion.

I tried to smile, but managed only a sickly grin. „I understand you, sir, but I am not in the habit of accepting nebulous theories such as that without any shred of evidence.”

„There is, sad to say, only too much evidence. But do you believe that men have lost their minds from incessant study of the stars?”

„Perhaps some have, I don't know,” I returned. „But in the South of this state in one of the country's leading observatories, I have a friend who is famous as an

astronomer. He is as sane as you or I. If not saner." I tacked the last sentence on with significant emphasis.

The fellow was muttering something into his muffler, and I fancied I caught the words „danger..." and „fools..." We were silent again. Low dark clouds fled over the roaring sea and the gloom intensified.

Presently, in his clipped speech, the stranger said, „Do you believe that life exists on other planets, other stars? Have you ever wondered what kind of life might inhabit the other stars in this solar system, and those beyond it?" His eyes were near mine as he spoke, and they bewitched me. There was something in them, something intangible and awful. I sensed that he was questioning me idly, as an outlander might be questioned about things with which the asker is familiar, as I might ask a New Yorker, „What do you think of the Golden Gate Bridge?"

„I wouldn't attempt to guess, to describe, for instance, a Martian man," I said. „Yet I read with interest various guesses by writers of fiction." I was striving to maintain a mood of lightness and ease, but inwardly I felt a bitter cold, as one on the rim of a nightmare. I suddenly realized, with childish fear, that night was falling.

„Writers of fiction! And what if they were to *guess too well*? What then? Is it safe for them to have full rein over their imaginations? Like the star-gazers..."

I said nothing, but smiled.

He went on, „Perhaps, man, there have been those whose minds were acute beyond most earthly minds—those who have guessed too closely to truth. Perhaps *those who are Beyond* are not yet ready to make themselves known to Earthlings? And maybe THEY, are annoyed with the puny publicity they receive from imaginative writers... Ask yourself, *what is imagination*? Are earth-minds capable of conceiving that which is not and has never been; or is this imagination merely a deeper insight into worlds you know not of, worlds glimpsed dimly in the throes of dream? And whence come these dreams? Tell me, have you ever awakened from a dream with the sinister feeling that all was not well inside your mind?—that while you, the real you, were away in Limbo—*someone*—some *thing* was probing in your mind, invading it and reading it. Might not THEY leave behind them in departure shadowy trailings of *their own minds*?"

Now I was indeed speechless. For a strange nothing had started my neck-hairs to prickling. Authors who might have guessed too well... Two, no three, writers whose stories had hinted at inconceivable yet inevitable dooms; writers I had known; had recently died, by accident.

He continued, „What of old legends? Of the serpent who shall one day devour the sun. That legend dates back to Mu and Atlantis. Who, man, was and is Satan? Christ? And Jehovah? benevolent and all-saving, were but a monstrous jest fostered by THEY to keep man blindly content, and keep him divided among himself so that he strove not to unravel the stars?"

He paused, and when I said nothing, he said: „Man, in my foolish youth I studied by candleflame secrets that would scorch your very soul. Of women who with their own bare hands have strangled the children they bore so that the world might not know... Disease and sickness at which physicians throw up their hands in helpless bafflement. When strong men tear at their limbs and heads and agony—seeking to drive forth alien forces that have netted themselves into their

bodies. I need scarcely recount them all, each with its own abominable significance. It is THEM. Who are eternal and nameless, who send their scouts down to test earth-man. Don't you realize that they have watched man creep out of primal slimes, take limbs and shamble, and finally walk? And that they are waiting, biding their time..."

I shivered with a fear beyond name. I tried to laugh and could not. Then, bold with stark horror, I shouted quite loudly: „How do you know this? Are you one of *them*?"

He shook his head violently. „No, no!"

I made as to go, feeling an aching horror within me.

He called, „Stay only a moment more, man. I will have pity on you and will not tell you all. I will not describe *them*. And I will not assay that which, when upon first seeing you here by the sea, *I first intended...*" I listened. Not daring to look at him; as in the grip of daemoniac dream. My fingers clutched at the edges of the bench so tightly that I have been unable to write with them until now. He concluded thus:

„So you see that I am everywhere a worldless alien. Sometimes this secret is too great for one mind to contain, and I must talk. I must feel the presence of someone human near me, else I shall attempt to commit suicide and again fail. It is without end—my horror. Have pity on me, man of earth, as I have had pity on you."

It was then that I gripped him by the shoulders and looked with pleading desperation into his staring eyes. „Why have you told me? What—" My voice broke. My hands fell to my sides. I shuddered.

He understood. Shrieked one word: „*Pity!*" into my insensible ear, and was gone.

That was three nights ago and each night since has been hell. I cannot remember how long it was after the stranger left that I found myself able to move, to rise, hobble home, suddenly ancient with knowledge. And I cannot—*will not*—reveal to you all that I heard.

I thought myself insane, but after an examination, a physician pronounced me that I had been strained mentally. I am competent. But I wonder if he is wrong.

I view the silken stars tonight with loathing. *He* sought to master their inscrutable secret meaning, and succeeded. He imagined, he dreamed; and he fed his sleep with potions, so that he might learn where his mind might be during sleep, and himself probe into the mind that wandered from space into his resting body-shell. I am no scientist, no bio-chemist, so I learned little of his methods. Only that he did succeed in removing his mind from Earth, and soaring to some remote world over and beyond this universe—where *they* dwell. And *they* knew him to be a mind of Earth, he told me. He but hinted of the evil he beheld, so potent with dread that it shattered his mind. And *they* cured him, and sent him back to earth... „They are waiting!" he shrieked, in his grating skeleton of a voice. „They are contemptuous of man and his feeble colonies. But they fear that some day, like an overgrown idiot child, he may do them harm. But before this time—when Man has progressed into a ripeness—*they* will descend! Then they will come in hordes to exploit the world as *they* did before!"

Of his return, and his assuming the role of a man, the Alien spoke evasively. It was to be assured that this talk of his was not some repulsive caprice; to know that all of it was true, that I gripped him and beheld him.

To my everlasting horror, I must know. Little in itself, what I saw, but sufficient to cause me to sink down on the stone bench in a convulsive huddle of fear. Never again in life can I tear this clutching terror from my soul. Only this: That when I looked into his staring eyes in the dimness of murky twilight, and before he understood and quickly averted, I glimpsed with astoundment and repugnance that between the muffling of his coat and black scarf *the intruder wore a meticulously painted metal mask—to hide what I must not see...*

