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Author: Jesse F. Bone

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE ISSAHAR ARTIFACTS ***

THE ISSAHAR ARTIFACTS

By J. F. BONE

*Lincoln said it eons ago.... It
took a speck of one-celled plant
life on a world parsecs away to
prove it for all the galaxy.*

THE following manuscript was discovered during the excavation of a lateral connecting link between the North-South streamways in Narhil Province near Issahar on Kwashior. The excavator, while passing through a small valley about 20 yursts south of the city, was jammed by a mass of oxidized and partially oxidized metallic fragments. On most worlds this would not be unusual, but Kwashior has no recorded history of metallic artifacts. The terrestrial operator, with unusual presence of mind, reported the stoppage immediately. Assasul, the District Engineering monitor, realized instantly that no metallic debris should exist in that area, and in consequence ordered a most careful excavation in the event that the artifacts might have cultural significance.

The debris proved to be the remnants of an ancient spaceship similar to those described in Sector Chronicles IV through VII, but of much smaller size and cruder design—obviously a relic of pre-expansion days. Within the remnants of the ship was found a small box of metal covered with several thicknesses of tar and wax impregnated fabric which had been mostly destroyed. The metal itself was badly oxidized, but served to protect an inner wooden box that contained a number of thin sheets of a fragile substance composed mainly of cellulose which were brown and crumbling with age. The sheets were covered with runes of *lingua antiqua* arranged in regular rows, inscribed by hand with a carbon-based ink which has persisted remarkably well despite the degenerative processes of time. Although much of the manuscript is illegible, sufficient remains to settle for all time the Dannar-Marraket Controversy and lend important corroborating evidence to the Cassaheb Thesis of Terrestrial migrations.

The genuineness of this fragment has been established beyond doubt. Radiocarbon dating places its age at ten thousand plus or minus one hundred cycles, which would place it at the very beginning of the Intellectual Emergence. Its importance is beyond question. Its implications are shocking despite the fact that they conform to many of the early legends and form a solid foundation for Dannar's Thesis which has heretofore been regarded as implausible. In the light of this material, the whole question of racial origins may well have to be reevaluated. Without further comment, the translated text is presented herewith. You may draw your own conclusions. Go with enlightenment.

-BARRAGOND-
Monitor of Cultural Origins and Relics
Kwashior Central Repository

I have decided after some thought, to write this journal. It is, I suppose, a form of egotism—for I do not expect that it shall ever be read in the event that I am unable to leave this place. Yet it affords me a certain satisfaction to think that a part of me will remain long after I have returned to dust. In any event, I feel that one is not truly dead if a part of his personality remains. Many of the ancients such as Homer, Phidias, Confucius, Christ, da Vinci, Lincoln, Einstein, Churchill—

and many others—live on through their works when otherwise they would long since have been forgotten and thus be truly dead. Earth's history is full of such examples. And while I have no expectation of an immortality such as theirs, it flatters my ego to think that there will be some part of me which also will survive ...

(Note: There are several lines following this which are obliterated, defaced or unreadable. There are more to follow. In the future such gaps in the content will be indicated thus: ...)

... I expect that it is a basic trait of character, for spacemen must be gregarious, and although I am not truly a spaceman I have been in space and, in consequence, my character is no different from my ex-crewmates—at least in that respect. I think as time passes I shall miss the comfort of companionship, the sense of belonging to a group, the card games, the bull sessions, the endless speculation on what comes next, or what we will do when the voyage is over and we are again on Earth ...

... I particularly recall Gregory. Odd, but I never knew his surname, or maybe it was his given name, for Gregory could function as well in one respect as the other. He would boast continually of what he would do to wine, women, and song once we returned to Earth. Poor Gregory. The meteor that hulled our ship struck squarely through the engine room where he was on duty. Probably he never knew that he had died. At least his fate had the mercy of being brief. Certainly it is not like mine. It was ... given ...

There was plenty of time for the survivors to reach the lifeboats, and in our decimated condition there were plenty of boats—which increased our chances of living by a factor of four ... I suppose that it was foolish to give way to the feeling of every man for himself but I am not a spaceman trained to react automatically to emergencies. Neither am I a navigator or a pilot, although I can fly in an emergency. I am a biologist, a specialist member of the scientific staff—essentially an individualist. I knew enough to seal myself in, push the eject button and energize the drive. However, I did not know that a lifeboat had no acceleration compensators, and by the time the drive lever returned to neutral, I was far out in space and thoroughly lost. I could detect no lifeboats in the vicinity nor could I raise any on the radio. I later found that a transistor malfunctioned, but by then I was well out of range, stranded between the stars in the black emptiness of space. After reading the manual on lifeboat operation there was but one course open. I selected the nearest G-type star, set the controls on automatic, and went into cold sleep. There was nothing else to do. If I remained awake I would be dead of oxygen starvation long before I reached a habitable world. The only alternative was the half-death of frozen sleep and the long wait until the boat came within range of the sun I had selected.

I awoke in orbit around this world, and after I recovered full use of my faculties and checked the analyzer, I decided to land. I'm afraid I did a rather bad job of it, since I used the chemical rockets too late, and the plasma jets scorched a considerable amount of acreage in the meadow where I finally came to rest. However, the residual radioactivity is low, and it is safe enough to walk outside.... The life boat is lying beside a small stream which empties into a circular pool of blue water in the center of a small meadow. The fiery trail of the jets and rockets has burned a hundred-foot-wide path across the meadow, and the upper edge of the pool, and ends in a broad, blackened circle surrounding the boat. I came down too fast the last few feet, and the drive tubes are a crumpled mess inextricably fused with the bent landing pads. This boat will never fly again without extensive repairs which I cannot perform. But the hull is otherwise sound, and I am comfortable enough except for a few rapidly healing bruises and contusions. In a few days I should be well enough to explore....

I am surprised that this world is so capable of supporting human life. The consensus of scientific opinion has been that less than one out of 50,000 planets would be habitable. Yet I have struck paydirt on the first try. Perhaps I am lucky. At any rate I am alive, and my lifeboat, while somewhat damaged by an inept landing, is still sufficiently intact to serve as a shelter, and the survival kits are undamaged, which should make my stay here endurable if not pleasant ... and we are learning a great deal about our galaxy with the development of the interstellar drive—not the least of which is that authoritative opinion is mere opinion and far from authoritative.

This world on which I find myself is in every respect but one similar to Earth. There is no animate life—only plants. No birds fly, no insects buzz, no animals rustle the silent underbrush. The only noise is the wind in the trees and grasses. I am utterly alone. It is a strange feeling, this loneliness. There is a feeling of freedom in it, a release from the too-close proximity of my fellow men. There is the pleasure of absolute privacy. But this will undoubtedly pall. Already I find that I am anxious for someone to talk to, someone with whom I can share ideas and plans. There ...

... which I cannot explain. But one thing is certain. My first impression of this place was wrong. The life here, if not animate, is at least intelligent—and it is not friendly. Yet neither does it hate. It observes me with a slow, methodical curiosity that I can sense at the very threshold of consciousness. It is a peculiar sensation that is quite indescribable—unpleasant—but hardly terrifying. I suppose I can feel it more than a normal person because I am a biologist and it is part of my training and specialized skill to achieve a certain rapport with my surroundings. I first noticed it yesterday. It came suddenly, without warning, a vague uneasiness, like the feeling when one awakens from a partially remembered but unpleasant dream. And it has been increasing ever since.

The principal impressions I received from this initial contact were an awareness of self and a recognizance of identity—the concept of *cogito ergo sum* came through quite clearly. I wonder what Descartes would think of an alien intelligence quoting his dogma.... I think it is animal, despite the absence of animal life in this area. The thought patterns are quick and flexible. And they have been increasing in power and precision at an appreciable rate. I am sure that it is aware of me. I shall call the feeling "it" until I can identify the source more accurately. Certainly "it" appears to be as good a description as any, since there is no consciousness of sex in the thought patterns. I wonder what sort of ... and to my surprise I *swore!* I do not ordinarily curse or use obscenities—not because they are obscene but because they are a poor and inexact means of conveying ideas or impressions. But in this case they were particularly appropriate. No other words could so precisely describe my feelings. Me, a rational intelligence, succumbing to such low-level emotional stimuli! If this keeps on, the next thing I know I will be seeing little green men flitting through the trees.... Of course, this world is unnatural, which makes its effect on the nervous system more powerful, yet that does not explain the feeling of tension which I have been experiencing, the silent straining tension of an overloaded cable, the tension of a toy balloon overfull with air. I have a constant feeling of dreadful expectancy, of imminent disaster, mixed with a sense of pain and a lively—almost childlike—curiosity. To say that this is disquieting would be a complete understatement, this state of chronic disease, mixed with occasional rushes of terror. I am certain that my nervous system and emotional responses are being examined, and catalogued like a visceral preparation in an anatomy laboratory. There is something infinitely chilling about this mental dissection.

... and after a careful search of the area I found precisely nothing. You who may read this will probably laugh, but I cannot. To me this is no laughing matter. I find myself jumping at the slightest noise, an increase in the wind, the snap of an expanding hull plate, the crackle of static over my radio. I whirl around to see who, or *what*, is watching me. My skin crawls and prickles as though I were covered with ants. My mind is filled with black, inchoate dread. In three words, *I'm scared stiff!* Yet there is nothing tangible—nothing I should be frightened about, and this terrifies me even more. For I know where this continual fear and worry can lead—to what ends this incessant stimulation can reach.

Under pressure my body reacts, preparing me to fight or flee. My adrenals pump hormones into my bloodstream, stimulating my heart and my sympathetic nervous system, making glucose more available to my muscles. My peripheral capillaries dilate. Intestinal activity stops as blood is channeled into the areas which my fear and my glands decide will need it most. I sweat. My vision blurs. All the manifold changes of the fight or flight syndrome are mobilized for instant action. But my body cannot be held in this state of readiness. The constant stimulation will ultimately turn my overworked adrenal glands into a jelly-like mess of cystic quivering goo. My general adaptation syndrome will no longer adapt. And I will die.

But I am not dead yet. And I have certain advantages. I am intelligent. I know what faces me. And I can adjust. That is one of the outstanding characteristics of the human race—the ability to adjust to our environment, or, failing that, to adjust our environment to us. In addition, I have my hands, tools, and materials to work with here in the lifeboat. And finally I am desperate! I should be able to accomplish something. There must be ...

... But it is not going well. There are too many parts which I do not know by sight. If I were a more competent electronicist I would have had the parts assembled now and would be sending a beacon signal clear across this sector. The pressure hasn't been any help. It doesn't get greater, but it has become more insisting—more demanding. I seem to feel that it *wants* something, that its direction has become more channelized. The conviction is growing within me that I am destined to be *absorbed*.

The fear with which I live is a constant thing. And I still keep looking for my enemy. In a strange, impersonal way it has become my enemy for though it does not hate, it threatens my life. My waking hours are hell and my sleep is nightmare. Strange how a man clings to life and sanity. It would be so easy to lose either. Of one thing I am certain—this cannot go on much longer. I cannot work under pressure. I must act. I shall try again to find my enemy and kill it before it kills me. It is no longer a question of ...

... Never again shall I wish to be alone. If I get out of this alive I am going to haunt crowds. I will surround myself with people. Right now I would give my soul to have one—just one—person near me. Anyone. I feel certain that two of us could face this thing and lick it. If necessary we could face it back to back, each covering the other. I am now getting impressions. Sensory hallucinations. I am floating. I swim. I bathe luxuriantly in huge bathtubs and the water runs through my body as though I were a sponge. Have you ever felt *porous*?...

... and that last attack was a doozer! I wrecked a week's work looking for the little man who wasn't there. The urge to kill is becoming more intense. I want to destroy the author of my misery. Even though I am still a balanced personality—polite language for being sane—I can't take much more of this. I will not go mad, but I will go into the adrenal syndrome unless I can end this soon.

Nothing I have done seems to help. For a while I was sure that the music tapes held the pressure back, but the enemy is used to them now. I am still working on the subspace beacon. The radio

and most of the control linkages have gone into it. It looks like an electronicist's nightmare, but if the survival manual is right, it will work. It has to work! I dread the time when I shall have to cannibalize the recorder. Can't help thinking that Shakespeare was right when he wrote that bit about music soothing the savage breast. It may not soothe the enemy, for it isn't savage, but it certainly soothes me, even though there's something repetitive about it after a half a hundred playings. My breast's savage all right. Fact is, it's downright primitive when an attack starts. I can feel them coming now. I keep wondering how much longer I can last. Guess I'm getting morbid....

More nightmares last night. I drowned three times and a purple octopus gave me an enema. Woke up screaming, but got an idea from it. Funny that I never thought of it before. Water's the fountainhead of life, and there is no real reason for assuming my enemy is terrestrial. He could just as well be aquatic. I'll find out today—maybe. Just to be doing something positive—even thinking—makes me feel better....

Got it! I know where it is! And I know how to kill it. Fact is, I've already done it! Now there's no more pressure. God—what a relief! This morning I burned the meadow and cut down the nearest trees surrounding this clearing and nothing happened. I expected that. Then I checked the water. Nothing in the stream, but the pond was *green!*—filled almost to the edge with a mass of algae! A hundred-foot platter of sticky green slime, cohesive as glue and ugly as sin. It *had* to be it—and it was. I never saw algae that cohered quite like that. So I gave it about fifty gallons of rocket juice—red fuming nitric acid—right in the belly. Then I sat down and let the tension flow out of me, revelling in its pain, laughing like crazy as it turned brown—and the pressure disappeared. No tension at all now. The place is as quiet and peaceful as the grave. I want to laugh and laugh—and run through the burned meadow and roll in the ashes so grateful am I for my deliverance.

Got the idea of killing the monster from a splash of rocket fuel on the bank of the stream and my memory of the pain in the early feelings. But it was nothing compared to the feeling when the acid hit that damned mass of green slime! Even though my brain was screaming at me, I felt good. I should put a couple of hundred gallons into the stream just to make sure—but I can't afford it. I need the fuel to run the generators to propagate the wave that'll bring me home if someone hears it. And they'll hear it all right. My luck is in. Now I'm going to sleep—*sweet sleep that knits the ravelled sleeve of care*—Shakespeare, old man, you had a phrase for everything! I love you. I love everything. I even feel sorry for that poor plant ... of guilt. It couldn't help the fact that my jets set up a mutation. And being intelligent it *had* to be curious. Of course, no one would believe me if I started talking about intelligent algae. But what's so odd about that? Even the most complex life forms are just aggregations of individual cells working together. So if a few individual cells with rudimentary data-storage capacity got the idea of uniting why couldn't they act like a complex organism?

It is useless to speculate on what might have happened had that thing lived. But it's dead now—burned to death in acid. And although destruction of intelligent life is repugnant to me, I cannot help feeling that it is perhaps better that it is gone. Considering how rapidly it developed during its few weeks of life, and the power it possessed, my mind is appalled at its potential. I've had my experience and that's enough. Lord! but I'm tired. I feel like a wrung-out sponge. Guess I'll rest for a little while ...

... and received a reply to my signal! They heterodyned it right back along my own beam. They'll be landing in a week. I don't think I'll take this manuscript with me. I couldn't use it—and somehow I don't feel like burning it. Maybe I'll make a time capsule out of it. It will be amusing to speculate about what sort of a reaction it'll provoke, providing it is ever read. I can see them now, huge-headed humans, wrinkling their noses and saying "Intelligent algae—fantastic—the man must have been mad!"

The manuscript ends here—and of course we know that the "man" was not mad. He left behind a rich heritage indeed, for those few cells that escaped his wrath and floated down to the sea. Did we but know his origin we would erect a suitable memorial if we had to travel to the farthest reach of our galaxy. But the names he quotes are not in our repositories and as for the word "Earth" which he used for his homeworld, I need not remind my readers that the intelligent terrestrial inhabitants of the 22,748 planets of this sector use the term "Earth" or its synonyms "soil" and "world" to describe their planets. Of course, the term "Homewater" is gradually replacing this archaic concept as we extend our hegemony ever more widely across the disunited worlds of the galaxy.

At that it seems strange that the unknown author's race should have passed. As individuals they had so many advantages, while we are so weak and individually so helpless. They could do almost everything except communicate and cooperate. We can do but little else, yet our larger aggregations can control entire worlds, some peopled perhaps with descendants of this very individual. It merely proves that Dannar's statement in the preface of his Thesis is correct.

"United, cohesive cooperation is the source of irresistible strength."

THE END



Transcriber's Note:

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*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE ISSAHAR ARTIFACTS ***

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