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# ASTOUNDING

## SCIENCE-FICTION



"HELL SHIP" by Arthur J. Burks

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# The Disinherited

by  
Henry Kuttner

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*A short story about one who watches over development.*



*The giant spoke. "You are safe here. Your enemies cannot pass that barrier."*

The man worked swiftly and mechanically, a grotesque figure in his protective armor and transparent helmet. He was alone in the bare lead-sheathed room, seated before a conveyer belt, his gloved fingers making delicate adjustments in the enigmatic mechanisms that moved into place under the microscope before him. There was a stinging smart in his eyes, a dull pain he would not be able to relieve until his work was done.

Fifteen years ago a soldier had taken him to this grim chamber far underground and instructed him in his duties. Ever since then he had known the dull monotony of a machine's existence, not even comprehending the nature of his work. In 2530 A. D. the Helots—the worker class—had lost all knowledge of science, and so the man could not understand that the subtly powerful bombardment of radium was destroying his sight and his life. But the horror

of darkness that lay before him he realized, for his father, too, had worked in a room similar to this.

Presently a bell sounded through the audiophone within his helmet, and the man arose as the conveyer belt slowed and stopped. Sighing, he removed the armor. Under the cool radiance of carbon-dioxide lamps he stood revealed as a thick-bodied youth whose seamed, harsh face seemed far older than his twenty-eight years. A loose, sleeveless tunic, shorts, and sandals, were all the clothing necessary in the warm atmosphere within the City of the Lords. He stepped out into a low-ceilinged corridor and trudged toward an elevator.

Five minutes later he thrust open the door of his apartment, a cheerless room in the Helots' dormitory section. With no trace of expression on his stolid face he crossed to a low couch and dropped upon it in the utter relaxation of weariness. But he sat up quickly as a girl entered.

She, too, wore the sexless Helot uniform. Her face and close-clipped dark hair seemed drab and uninteresting, but the mask of impassivity dropped from it as she came toward the man, and made it alive and attractive.

"You're tired, Ron," she said. "A hard day?"

Ron Carver shrugged. "I'm strong enough for it, I guess. But my eyes ache——"

The girl went to a compartment in the wall and brought out a vial. She pressed Carver back on the couch and brushed his eyes with the soothing liquid as she talked.

"Must it go on forever?" Her voice was very bitter. "Won't they transfer you?"

"Why should they, Morna? It's easy to get new Helots to replace the others." He sat up again, gripping her wrists. "Morna, I had another warning today. About——"

"A—a child?"

"Yes. We've been mated for a year now, and—well, you know their laws. So many Helots annually—no more, no less. They want——"

Morna dropped the vial unnoticed on the floor and stared dully at nothing. "No. I won't bear a child. Not even your child, Ron—to this. Slavery. No!"

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Without expression Carver said, "The alternative is a re-mating. Some other Helot will have you."

"No," the girl said again. "We can die if necessary."

"You know I can't. There's Ardno out there——"

Morna held up a warning hand, her face frightened. The girl's lips formed unspoken words. "Not here. *They* may be listening."

She picked up the vial and resumed her task of bathing Carver's eyes. "They've been talking in the Factory, Ron. Excitement—all through the City. About the Ship."

"Eh? I heard something, not much though. Has it reached Mars?"

Morna shook her head. "I don't think so. A few rumors floating about, that's all. Nothing's certain. They wouldn't tell *us*, you know. But I believe something's gone wrong. One of the guards told a girl that the Ship stopped halfway to Mars and is coming back. It's strange."

"Why strange? They might have run out of fuel. Or——"

"It's more than that," Morna whispered, her mouth close to Carver's ear. "I hear the Lords are—afraid!"

"What?"

"Something happened out there in space. I don't know. It's the first interplanetary flight beyond the Moon, and—— Don't keep moving, Ron! I can't——"

But Carver pushed her away and got up. He went to a closet and from behind a meagre stack of garments withdrew a small parcel, which he hid in a mesh-steel knapsack. He donned heavier clothing.

“Be back soon, Morna,” he told the girl, and went out.

Morna stared after his bulky figure. Her hands were clenched in her lap, still gripping the little vial. Presently she dropped it to the floor and crushed it underfoot, grinding the glass to splinters. She was thinking of the warning Carver had received. Another mate. No! She would bear a child for only one man, and not even for Carver would she bear—a Helot. Another slave for the machines of the Lords!

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Carver made his way to one of the City’s gates. His pass was in order, and the soldier nodded and waved him on. A long, broad road stretched into the blue distance through wooded hills, but Carver turned aside into the scanty forest. Occasionally he cast a furtive glance behind him, but, though autocars flashed along the road and one or two aircraft droned overhead toward the landing-fields on the City’s roof, no one paid heed to the Helot. It was good psychology to let the workers do as they wished during their free hours. Always provided that they did not interfere with the pleasure of the Lords.

Outside the City the wind was cold and chilling, yet Carver drank it in hungrily, his face bare to the refreshing blasts. Out here a man could feel some illusion of a freedom which had not really existed in America, or in all the world, for hundreds of years. To be free one must have in his veins the untainted blood of the Lords, the racial purity that gave them license to rule Earth. Other races were inferior by law of conquest and by decree of the Lords, who held their power over the mixed stocks of America, as ages ago Americans had enslaved the Negroes. The guards were recruited from the ranks of the Lords, each youth serving a brief military apprenticeship. And under the oligarchy sweated and labored the Helots, their birth-rate limited, hopeless and impotent, their criminals doomed to being hunted down by wolfhounds for the sport of the despots.

Carver could not understand the social forces that had inevitably led to such an end; he simply toiled and hated, one of a million robots working amid the slim, graceful forms of the overbred Lords. Now he trudged through the forest, the ground strange to his sandaled feet which were more used to the rubbery pavements of the City corridors. Once he glanced up at an unfamiliar shrilling in the air, and saw a gigantic silvery torpedolike craft drift down till it was hidden by a wooded bridge. The Ship, returning from its voyage toward Mars. Briefly he wondered what had gone wrong in space.

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But the ship was forgotten as he came to a little cave beside a brook, and saw an old man, gnarled and shrunken, sitting in the sunlight. Carver came forward hastily.

“Ardno,” he said. “Father. You should not—what if they saw you?”

The oldster turned a sightless face, pale and wrinkled, toward Carver. His voice was thin and high.

“I’d die, of course. They’d kill me. And you’d not have to risk your life smuggling food out of the City to me.”

Carver’s quick glance examined the sky. He helped his father into the cave. For almost a year Ardno Carver had dwelt here, since his failing sight had brought down on him the official decree of euthanasia. There was no room in the City for outworn Helots. Death was painless and merciful. But to young Carver it had seemed very horrible that his father should die, and

so he had managed to do the impossible—guide Ardno to this lonely place where the blind man could still live, after a fashion, feeding on the scraps Carver stole.

“Well?” The oldster’s voice was querulous. “What did you bring, eh?”

He was not satisfied till he had fingered each morsel and lifted it in misshapen fingers to his nostrils. “It’ll do,” he said grudgingly. “It’ll have to.” And he fell silent, cramming the food into his mouth.

Carver sat in silence on a boulder, eying his father in the gloom. He remembered when Ardno had been a strong, well-shaped man who had more than once felt the lash because of his moments of insane defiance. A bitter, dry sob shook Carver’s thick body. The father looked up quickly, a crumb of bread on his lip.

“What’s the matter?”

“Nothing.”

Sightless eyes stared in Carver’s direction. But after a moment Ardno returned to his meal.

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The next day there were whispers in the City. The Ship had returned. And the crew were frightened and puzzled. Something had stopped them in space—some force they could not understand. They had returned to Earth, but not under their own power, unable to comprehend what had happened to them.

So much the tales said, furtively murmured among the Helots. There was a curious air of unrest in the City when Carver slipped out that night, and, walking swiftly along the road in the twilight, unaccustomed thoughts stirred in his mind. Apparently the Lords were not omnipotent. They could be defeated. But—Carver smiled bitterly—not by Helots. Not by unarmed slaves.

Abruptly he stiffened. A familiar figure was coming toward him, vague in the distance. With a cold shock he recognized his father, and saw that two men—guards!—were moving swiftly in Ardno’s direction. Blindly the old man walked, gnarled hands outstretched fumblingly, his feet guided by the hard surface of the road.

“No!” Carver tried to shout. “Go back! Back!”

Somehow he knew why Ardno was here. The old man had come to find death that would release himself and his son from an existence that had grown intolerable. No longer would Carver need to risk torture by smuggling food to his father. And, for Ardno, blindness and agony would be over. As Carver raced on, a part of his brain was saying, over and over, “This is best. It’s the best way out.”

The affair was finished before Carver reached the group. Ardno was quite dead, a limp, misshapen huddle beside the road, and the two guards were sheathing their guns. One of the soldiers turned to face him.

“Well? What d’you want, Helot?”

Ever after that Carver was to remember how the sinking sun glowed redly behind the two men, outlining their slim figures with a hazy aura. And he remembered, too, the silhouette of an arm coming up, a gun gripped in a slender hand. Strangely he felt no emotion; he seemed to be outside his body, watching it dispassionately, listening to its hoarse breathing.

“Well?”

If he said the wrong thing—if he revealed his relationship to Ardno—it would mean perhaps death, at least torture. Carver hesitated. His great shoulders shook as he fought for air, through a throat dry and clamped.

One of the guards said something in an undertone. The other nodded, moved forward, his weapon's muzzle not a foot from Carver's chest.

"Helot—back to the City! At once!"

Carver shrank away, looking down at the gun. And beyond it he saw, almost at his feet, the blind staring eyes of Ardno.

The Helot, Carver roared—and the powerful engine that was his body swept into action. One huge hand drove down, clasped the gun and wrenched it free. He scarcely heard the report or felt the bullet tear along his palm. He saw nothing but the startled white face of the guard, and beyond it the other man drawing his weapon.

"He's mad!" the disarmed soldier cried, and screamed in agony as the gun's butt smashed into his face, pulping its delicate features in bloody ruin. He staggered away, still shrieking, and Carver lunged at the other man.

A bullet hit the Helot's side and glanced off his ribs. But that could not stop Carver. Without glancing at the bellowing gun he came forward like the drive of a piston, and his fist cracked cleanly against the soldier's chin. The man went back bonelessly and dropped, his head twisted at an impossible angle.

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The other guard lay limp and unconscious. Breathing harshly, Carver stared around. Cars were approaching. The Helot's side hurt. He touched it, and was surprised by the amount of blood that smeared his hand.

Insensate rage mounted within Carver, and he stood with his fists clenched, facing the City. This will mean death, he thought.

And a new mate for Morna——

The realization stabbed his brain. His lips moved wordlessly. He turned and ran toward the forest, and behind him came a fusillade of shots.

From the woods a man came to meet him—such a man as he had never seen before. Ten feet high, moving with lithe, unhurried swiftness, he was at Carver's side before the Helot had covered three yards. Carver growled an oath, lunged at this new enemy, teeth bared in a snarl.

And without warning came—the inexplicable. Around the two there lifted a wall of cold flame, crackling softly as it grew and came together fifteen feet above the ground to form a dome. They stood within a little hut of fire, springing apparently from the Earth itself.

Fear shook Carver. But in the newcomer he saw only menace, and he leaped forward——

And halted. Some incredible force held him motionless, draining his muscles of power, holding him paralyzed. He stood fighting against invisible bonds, glaring at the other.

It was utterly silent, save for the faint crackling of the flame-wall. Against the pale glow loomed the gigantic figure, and now Carver realized that he was not looking upon a human being.

For this man was cast in human mold, yet about him was an air of alienage—a calm and passionless withdrawal in the pale eyes—that told more than did his abnormal height. He wore a scanty, sleeveless robe, and his muscles beneath ivory skin were those of a colossus. Somehow the fear and hatred in Carver's mind faded and fled away as he looked into the wise, ancient eyes of the giant and read in them a message.

He did not hear it, but words seemed to form within his brain, unmistakable as though spoken by an audible voice. It said softly, "I will not harm you."

From the dome of fire above, a flaming tendril dropped straight for Carver's head. It touched his hair, seemed to probe through skull and brain, an utterly incredible search that

found the secret citadel of the man's being and—examined! To Carver it was as though he lay naked before the eyes of a god. He sensed some incredible communion, a flood of knowledge pouring from him into—what?

The sensation vanished. The finger of light was gone. The giant put a huge, yet somehow graceful hand on Carver's shoulder. Once more a wordless thought came to the Helot.

"You are safe here. Your enemies cannot break through the barrier."

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Carver knew that he should have been frightened, yet he felt only a vast and utterly new sense of peace. The gray eyes of the giant aroused in him a sensation he could not analyze. He seemed to look through them into another world.

The huge man seemed to listen. He bowed his head in acknowledgment. To Carver he said, or seemed to say, "Hearken, for you must remember this. Your masters—they who call themselves Lords—have sent out a craft beyond the atmosphere of this world. And therefore they have brought themselves within the ken of the Watcher."

Carver whispered, "The—Watcher?"

"Aye. A being evolved from Man, but so alien to us that we can comprehend little of his attributes. From a dead Galaxy he came, to guard this Galaxy of ours. For Man is born to serve—but to serve those beneath him, not those above. Far in the future, life in this Galaxy will have evolved to a state where it is sheer energy—a super-intelligence composed of all the beings from all the planets in this star-cluster. From a single cell we go upward, till at last we become as the Watcher—a being of energy, of life itself. And when that time comes, we shall leave our dead group of worlds to find another Galaxy struggling up evolution's path, and we shall guard and guide it as the Watcher guides and guards us. For ages we of Mars have known the Watcher and communed with him. He prevented us, in our days of savagery, from bringing war to the other planets—as he shall do again now."

The walls of flame brightened, casting a white glow over the Martian.

"The Lords rule your world, and rule it unwisely. In time they might learn wisdom, but they must not bring the seeds of folly and war to the other planets. So the Watcher turned back their spaceship and brought me here from Mars to aid him. He—and I—have learned much from the minds of your people. You are the last of fifty we have examined, and the Watcher has decided on the best course."

Carver could not entirely understand, yet a surge of hope mounted in him. "You'll help us kill the Lords?"

Ageless sorrow stood for a moment in the Martian's pale eyes. "No. You are yet barbarians. You have a long road to travel. But in your group—you Helots—there are the germs of courage and strength and truth. So, for a hundred years, all power will be taken from the Earth."

"I don't understand——"

"You cannot. Science has been lost to you for ages. Yet there are dreamers among you, and after the hundred years have expired, you will rediscover the wisdom of your ancestors. Use it; do not misuse it. The Watcher has power over vibration and over energy—you cannot understand that, but know this: the Lords are hereafter weaponless. Their guns are toys. Their great machines will halt for lack of fuel. If they continue to rule the Helots, they must do so by brawn or brain alone—and they cannot succeed in that. From this hour you are equal to the Lords."



A mad little flame of vengeance grew and danced in Carver's eyes. The Martian lifted his hand.

"Wait. You must not begin your task with evil. Seek no revenge on those who were your masters. Leave them; they cannot halt you. Go forth into the fields and forests beyond the cities; learn to live as free men. Learn to till crops and kindle fires. Grow wise. And in a hundred years Earth will have power again."

Carver whispered, "The Lords——"

"They must learn to live, and forget how to rule. Else they will starve in their giant cities. Now wait: with the Watcher's aid I shall speak to the Helots all over your planet. Wait——"

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Carver sensed a strange tenseness in the air, as though it shook under the burden of power inconceivable. Through the man's mind came a thought, and he knew, with a curious certainty, that the same thought came at the same time to the brain of every Helot in the world.

"Come forth from your cities! The Lords are powerless; their rule is broken. Harm no one—but come forth! You are free henceforward!"

The Martian looked down at Carver. His smile was very tender as he placed his hands on the Helot's shoulders.

"You must lead your people now, and give them the Watcher's message. So farewell—brother!"

A blaze of light blinded Carver. He staggered back, rubbing his eyes. When he could see again, he stood alone on the sloping hillside. Martian and walls of flame had alike vanished. Though the Sun had set, a full Moon washed the bulwark of the City, half a mile away, in gleaming brilliance.

A knot of men stood in a puzzled group beside the road, staring toward Carver. Beyond them were several autocars. And further down the road Carver could see other vehicles coasting to a halt.

At this time, he knew, the City should be bright with innumerable carbon-dioxide lamps. Yet its windows were dark. From far away came a faint triumphant shouting.

A few soldiers separated from the others and came toward Carver hesitantly, their guns leveled. He went to meet them, and briefly felt a surge of hatred that dried his throat with its intensity. But he fought it down, as he fought down the momentary fear that arose at sight of their weapons.

The guards squeezed triggers—vainly. They stood undecided finally forming a barrier, shoulder to shoulder, against the advancing Helot.

Without perceptible effort he pushed them aside. They were weaklings, he thought contemptuously. And, strangely, all hatred of the Lords had left him. Before him lay a mighty task, and he could not halt now to destroy those who had been his masters.

The Lords stood staring after him as he swung along the road, a tall defiant figure in the moonlight. From the gates of the City a horde was pouring, men and women who had been Helots—slaves no longer! Among them, Carver knew, was Morna, Morna who would bear his child. Still the mob pressed forward, shouting.

Carver went down to meet his people.