



Cat and Mouse
Williams, Ralph

Published: 1959

Categorie(s): Fiction, Science Fiction, Short Stories

Source: <http://gutenberg.org>

Copyright: This work is available for countries where copyright is Life+50.

Note: This book is brought to you by Feedbooks

<http://www.feedbooks.com>

Strictly for personal use, do not use this file for commercial purposes.

The Warden needed to have a certain very obnoxious pest eliminated ... and he knew just the pest-eradicator he needed...

The Harn first came to the Warden's attention through its effect on the game population of an area in World 7 of the Warden's sector. A natural ecology was being maintained on World 7 as a control for experimental seedings of intelligent life-forms in other similar worlds. How the Harn got there, the Warden never knew. In its free-moving larval state, the Harn was a ticklike creature which might have sifted through a natural inter-dimensional rift; or it might have come through as a hitchhiker on some legitimate traveler, possibly even the Warden himself.

In any event, it was there now. Free of natural enemies and competition, it had expanded enormously. So far, the effect in the control world was localized, but this would not be the case when the Harn seeded. Prompt action was indicated.

The Warden's inclination and training was in the direction of avoiding direct intervention in the ecology of the worlds under his jurisdiction, even in the field of predator control. He considered introduction of natural enemies of the Harn from its own world, and decided against it. That cure was as bad, if not worse, than the disease itself.

There was, however, in one adjacent world, a life-form not normally associated with the Harn; but which analysis indicated would be inimical to it, and reasonably amenable to control.

It was worth trying, anyway.

October 3rd, Ed Brown got up to the base cabin of his trap line with his winter's outfit.

He hung an N. C. Company calendar on the wall and started marking off the days.

October 8th, the hole into the other world opened.

In the meantime, of course, Ed had not been idle. All summer the cabin had stood empty. He got his bedding, stove, and other cabin gear down from the cache and made the place livable. The mice were thick, a good fur sign, but a nuisance otherwise. Down in the cellar hole, when he went to clear it out for the new spud crop, he found burrowings everywhere.

Well, old Tom would take care of that in short order. Tom was a big, black, bobtailed cat eleven years old who had lived with Ed since he was a kitten. Not having any feline companionship to distract him, his only interest was hunting mice. Generally he killed a lot more than he could

eat, racking the surplus in neat piles beside the trail, on the doorstep, or on a slab in the cellar. He was the best mouser in interior Alaska.

Ed propped the cellar hatch with a stick so old Tom could come and go as he pleased, and went on about his chores, working with a methodical efficiency that matched Tom's and went with his thinning gray hair and forty years in the woods. He dug the spuds he had planted that spring. He made a swing around his beaver lakes, tallying the blankets in each house. He took the canoe and moved supplies to his upper cabin. He harvested some fat mallards that had moved down on the river with the coming of skim ice on the lakes. He bucked up firewood and stacked it to move into camp with the first snow.

On the fifth morning, as he was going down to the boat landing with a pail for water, he found the hole into the other world.

Ed had never seen a hole into another world, of course, nor even heard of such a thing. He was as surprised as any one would naturally be to find one not fifty feet from their front door.

Still, his experience had been all in the direction of believing what his eyes told him. He had seen a lot of strange things in his life, and one more didn't strain him too much. He stood stockstill where he had first noticed the hole and studied it warily.

It was two steps off the trail to the left, right beside the old leaning birch, a rectangular piece of scenery that did not fit. It looked to be, as nearly as he could judge, about man-size, six by three. At the bottom it was easy enough to see where this world left off and that one began. On the left side the two worlds matched pretty well, but on the right side there was a niggerhead in this world, the moss-covered relic of a centuries old stump, while that world continued level, so that the niggerhead was neatly sliced in two. Also, the vegetation was different, mossy on this side, grassy on that.

On up around the hole, though, it was harder to tell. There was no clear-cut line, just the difference in what you could see through it. In the other world, the ground seemed to fall away, with low scrubby brush in the foreground. Then, a mile or so away, there were rising hills with hardwood forests of some kind, still green with summer, covering them.

Ed stepped cautiously to one side. The view through the hole narrowed, as if it faced the trail squarely. He edged around the old birch to get behind it, and from that side there was no hole, just the same old Alaskan scenery, birch and rose bushes and spruce. From the front, though, it was still there.

He cut an alder shoot about eight feet long, trimmed it, and poked it through the hole. It went through easily enough. He prodded at the sod in the other world, digging up small tufts. When he pulled the stick back, some of the other world dirt was on the sharp end. It looked and smelled just about like any dirt.

Old Tom came stretching out into the morning sun and stalked over to investigate. After a careful inspection of the hole he settled down with his paws tucked under him to watch. Ed took a flat round can from his pocket, lined his lip frugally with snuff, and sat down on the up-ended bucket to watch too. At the moment, that seemed the likeliest thing to do.

It was nearly swarming time, the Harn had many things to preoccupy it, but it spared one unit to watch the hole into the other world. So far, nothing much had happened. A large biped had found the opening from the other side. It had been joined by a smaller quadruped; but neither showed any indication yet of coming through. The sun was shining through the hole, a large young yellow sun, and the air was crisp, with sharp interesting odors.

The biped ejected a thin squirt of brown liquid through the hole—venom of some sort, apparently. The Harn hastily drew back out of range.

The hole into the other world stayed there, as unobtrusively fixed as if it had been there since the beginning of time. Nothing came through, and nothing moved in the other world but leaves stirring now and then with a breeze, clouds drifting across the sky. Ed began to realize it was getting late in the morning, and he had not yet had breakfast. He left old Tom to watch the hole, got stiffly to his feet and went on down the trail to get the pail of water he had started for. From the cabin door, he could still see the hole into the other world. He kept one eye on it while he cooked breakfast.

As he was finishing his second cup of coffee, he noticed the view into the other world becoming duller, dimming in a peculiar fashion. He left the dirty dishes and went over to look more closely. What was happening, he found, was just that it was getting dark in the other world. The effect was strange, much like looking out the door of a brightly lighted room at dusk. The edges of the hole cast a very clearly marked shadow now, and outside this shaft of sunlight the view faded, until a few yards away it was impossible to make out any detail.

Presently the stars came out. Ed was not an astronomer, but he had a woodsman's knowledge of the sky. He could find nothing familiar in any

of the stars he saw. In some way, that was more unsettling than the hole itself had been.

After he had finished the dishes, he cut two gee-pole spruce, trimmed them, and stuck one on each side of the hole. He got some thin thread he used to tie beaver snares and wove it back and forth between the poles, rigging a tin can alarm. It seemed likely someone or something had put the hole there, it had not just happened. If anything came through, Ed wanted to know about it. Just to make extra sure, he got some number three traps and made a few blind sets in front of the hole.

Then he went back to his chores. Whatever was going to happen with the hole would happen when it happened, and winter was still coming.

He set some babiche to soak for mending his snowshoes. He ran the net he had set at the edge of the eddy for late silvers and took out two fish. Old Tom had pretty well cleaned up the mice in the cellar hole, but they were still burrowing around the sills of the lean-to. Ed took a shovel and opened up a hole so Tom could get under the lean-to floor. He got out his needles, palm, thread, and wax; and mended his winter moccasins.

Off and on, he checked the hole into the other world. There was nothing but the slow progression of alien stars across the sky. Finally old Tom grew bored and left to investigate the hole under the lean-to. Shortly there were scutterings and squeakings as evidence that he, too, had got back to business.

Toward evening, Ed got to wondering how a living creature would take transition into the other world. He had no intention of trying it himself until he knew a lot more about it, but he thought he might be able to scare up a surrogate. Out by the wood pile some live-traps were piled under a spruce, from the time when Ed had been catching marten for the Fish and Wildlife to transplant. One was still in pretty fair shape. He patched it up and set it among the cottonwoods at the head of the bar, where there were some rabbit trails.

When he went to bed it was still dark in the other world. He left the cabin door ajar so he could see it from his bed and set his shotgun, loaded with 00 buck, handy.

Nearing sixty, Ed was not a sound sleeper, even when he had nothing on his mind. About ten it started to get light in the other world, and that woke him up. He padded out to look, but there was no change, it looked about the same as yesterday. He went back to bed.

The next morning there was a rabbit in the live-trap. With a pole, Ed pushed the trap with the rabbit in it through into the other world and watched. Nothing happened. After a while the rabbit began nibbling at some spears of grass that pushed through the wire of the cage. Ed pulled it back and examined the rabbit carefully. It seemed healthy and about as happy as a rabbit could expect to be in a cage.

It did not get dark in the other world till about noon, that day; and about seven, when it was dark in both worlds, Ed heard the jangle of the tin can alarm, followed by the snap of one of the steel traps.

He took a flashlight and found a small hooped animal, hardly bigger than old Tom, rearing and bucking with a broken leg in the trap. It had sharp little spike horns, only a few inches long, but mean. Ed got several painful jabs before he got the animal tied up and out of the trap. He re-strung the alarm, then took his catch into the cabin to examine.

It was herbivorous and adult, from the looks of its teeth and hoofs, though it only weighed about fifteen pounds. As an approximation, Ed decided it was female. When he killed it and opened it up, at first glance it looked reasonably familiar, on closer study less so.

The blood, anyway, was red; not blue or yellow or green; and the bones were bones, just odd-shaped.

Ed cut off a slice of heart and tossed it to old Tom. The cat sniffed it dubiously and then decided he liked it. He meowed for more. Ed gave it to him and fried a small sliver of ham. It smelled and tasted fine, but Ed contented himself with a single delicate nibble, pending further developments. Anyway, it was beginning to look like a little exploration would be feasible.

The Harn, also, was well-satisfied with the way things were going. It had been a strain to pass up the juicy little quadruped in the cage, but the inhabitants of the other world seemed shy, and the Harn did not wish to frighten them. At least, it knew now that life could come through the hole, and the small herbivore it had herded through confirmed that passage in the opposite direction was equally possible—plus a gratis demonstration of the other world's pitiful defenses. At swarming time, the whole new world would be open to embryo Harn, as well as this world it presently occupied.

It looked like a really notable swarming. The Harn budded three more planters on the forcing stem, to be ready to take full advantage of it.

It got light in the other world at one in the morning that night. Ed had the days there pretty well pegged now. They were roughly twenty-seven

hours, of which about thirteen hours were dark. Not too high a latitude, apparently, and probably late summer by the looks of the vegetation.

He got up a little before daylight and looked at the rabbit and old Tom. Both seemed to be doing nicely. Old Tom was hungry for more otherworld meat. Ed gave it to him and made up a light pack. After some thought, he took the .450 bear gun he used for back-up when guiding. Whatever he ran into over there, the .450—a model 71 throwing a 400 grain slug at 2100 fps—should handle it.

The first step through into the other world was a queasy one, but it turned out to be much the same as any other step. The only difference was that now he was in the other world looking back. From this side, the niggerhead at the threshold was sliced sharply, but it had been kicked down a little when he came through, and what with shoving the cage through and pulling it back, so that some clods of moss and dirt were scattered in the other world. For some reason, that made Ed feel better, it seemed to make the joining of the two worlds a little more permanent.

Still, it had come sudden, and it might go sudden. Ed went back into his own world and got an ax, a saw, more ammunition, salt, a heavy sleeping robe, a few other possibles. He brought them through and piled them in the other world, covering them with a scrap of old tarp. He cut a couple of poles, peeled them, and stuck them in the ground to mark the hole from this side.

Then he looked around.

He stood on the shoulder of a hill, in a game trail that ran down toward a stream below, in what seemed to be a fairly recent burn. There were charred stumps, and the growth was small stuff, with some saplings pushing up through. There was timber in the valley below, though, and on the hills beyond, deciduous, somewhat like oak. South was where east had been in his own world, and the sun seemed smaller, but brighter. The sky was a very dark blue. He seemed lighter in this world, there was a spring in his step he had not known for twenty years. He looked at his compass. It checked with the direction of the sun.

He studied the trail. It had seen a lot of use, but less in recent weeks. There were sharp hoof-prints of the animal he had caught, larger hoof-prints, vague pad-marks of various sizes, but nothing that looked human. The trail went under a charred tree trunk at a height that was not comfortable for a man, and the spacing of the steps around the gnarled roots of an old slump did not fit a man's stride.

He did not notice the Harn creature at all—which was understandable, it was well camouflaged.

He worked circumspectly down the trail, staying a little off it, studying tracks and droppings, noticing evidences of browsing on the shrubs—mostly old—pausing to examine tufts of hair and an occasional feather. Halfway down the slope he flushed a bird about ptarmigan-size, grayish brown in color.

The trail was more marked where it went into the timber. It wound through the trees for a few hundred yards and came out on a canoe-sized stream. Here it forked. One trail crossed the stream and went up the hill on the other side, the other followed the stream up the valley.

The Harn followed Ed's movements, observing carefully. It needed a specimen from the other world, and this biped would serve nicely, but it might as well learn as much as possible about him first. It could always pick him up some time before he returned to his own world. Just to make sure, it sent a stinging unit to guard the entrance.

All his life, except for a short period in France, Ed had been a hunter, never hunted. Still, you don't grow old in the woods by jumping without looking. Coming into a new situation, he was wary as an old wolf. There was a little shoulder right above the fork in the trail. He stood there for several minutes, looking things over, and then went down and crossed the stream at the next riffle, above the ford. By doing so, although he did not know it, he missed the trap the Harn maintained at the ford for chance passers-by.

On the other side of the creek, the trail ran angling off downstream, skirted a small lake hidden in the trees, climbed over another low shoulder and dropped into a second valley. As Ed followed along it, he began to notice a few more signs of life—birds, small scurriers on the ground and in tree tops—and this set him thinking. The country had a picked-over feel to it, a hunted and trapped-out feel, worse where he had first come through, but still noticeable here.

The Harn did not like to cross water, it could, but it did not like to.

Ed looked at the sun. It was getting down in the sky. If there was any activity at all around here, the ford at dusk would be as likely a place as any to find it. He worked back along the ridge to a point above where he judged the ford to be. The breeze was drawing up the valley, but favoring the other side a little. He dropped down and crossed the stream a quarter mile above the ford, climbed well above the trail and worked

along the hillside until he was in a position where he could watch both the ford and the fork in the trail. He squatted down against a tree in a comfortable position, laid his gun across his knees, and rummaged in his pack for the cold flapjacks, wrapped around slices of duck breast, which he had packed for lunch.

After he had finished eating he drank from his canteen—the water in this world might be good, it might not, there was no point in taking chances till he could try it on the cat—and took an economical chew of snuff. He settled back to wait.

The Harn had lost Ed after he crossed the creek—it used a fallen tree quite a way further up for its own crossing—and did not pick him up again until just before he crossed back. Now, however, he had been immobile for several minutes. This looked like about as good a time as any to make the pickup. The Harn had a stinging unit just about positioned, and it had dispatched a carrier to stand by.

After a while, sitting there, Ed began to feel uneasy. The timber was big here, and open underneath, almost parklike. The nearest cover was fifty or sixty yards off to his left, a little tangle of brush where a tree had fallen and let a shaft of sunlight through.

It looked possible, but it didn't feel quite right. Still, it was about the only place anything big enough to bother him could hide. The feeling was getting stronger, the back hairs on Ed's neck were starting to stand up now. Without visible movement, or even noticing himself that he was doing it, he let awareness run over his body, checking the position and stiffness of his legs—he had been sitting there quite a while—the balance of the gun across his knees, the nearness of his thumb to the hammer.

Thoughtfully, still studying the patch of brush, he spat a thin stream over his left shoulder at a pile of leaves a few feet away.

Thinking about it later, Ed could almost have sworn the tobacco juice sizzled as it hit. Actually, this was probably imaginary. The stinging unit was not that sensitive to tobacco, though it was sensitive enough. As the drops splattered it, the pile of leaves erupted with a snuffling hiss like an overloaded teakettle into a tornado of bucking, twisting activity.

Ed's reflexes were not quite as fast as they had been when he was young, but they were better educated. Also, he was already keyed-up. Almost as it started, the flurry in the leaves stopped with the roar of his rifle. Fired like that, the heavy gun just about took his hand off, but he did not notice it at the moment. He came erect in a quick scramble, jacking in a fresh round as he did so. The scene took on that strange timeless aspect it often does in moments of emergency, with a man's whole being focused on the fleeting *now*—you know, in an academic sort of way, that

things are moving fast, you are moving fast yourself, but there seems plenty of time to make decisions, to look things over and decide what has to be done, to move precisely, with minimum effort and maximum effect.

Whatever the thing at his feet was, it was out of the picture now—it had not even twitched after the heavy bullet tore through it. There was a stomping rush in the little thicket he had been watching. Ed took two long quick steps to one side to clear a couple of trees, threw up the gun and fired as something flashed across a thin spot in the brush. He heard the whack of the bullet in flesh and fired again. Ordinarily he did not like to shoot at things he could not see clearly, but this did not seem the time to be overly finicky. There was no further movement in the brush.

He stood there several long moments, listening, and there was no further movement anywhere. He eased the hammer down, fed in three rounds to replace those he had used, and walked slowly back to the first thing he had shot.

At that range, the bullet had not opened up, but it had not needed to. It had practically exploded the creature anyway—the .450 has two tons of striking energy at the muzzle. From what was left, Ed deduced a smallish, rabbit-sized thing, smooth-skinned, muscular, many-legged, flattish, mottled to camouflage perfectly in the leaves. There was a head at one end, mostly undamaged since it had been at the end of a long muscular neck, with a pair of glazing beady eyes and a surprisingly small mouth. When Ed pressed on the muscles at the base of the skull, the mouth gaped roundly and a two-inch long spine slid smoothly out of an inconspicuous slot just below it.

At middling distances or better, Ed could still see as well as ever, but close up he needed help. He got out his pocket magnifier and studied the spine. It looked hollow, grooved back for a distance from the point. A drop of milky looking substance trembled on its tip.

Ed nodded thoughtfully to himself. This was what had made him uneasy, he was pretty sure. What was the thing in the brush, then? Innocent bystander? He got stiffly to his feet, conscious now of the ache in his wrist that had taken most of the recoil of the first shot, the torn web between his right thumb and forefinger where the hammer spur had bitten in; and walked over to the thicket.

The thing in the brush was larger, quite a bit larger, and the bullets had not torn it up so badly. It lay sprawled with three of its eight legs doubled under it, a bear-sized animal with a gaping, cavernous,

toothless mouth out of all proportion to the slender body which seemed designed mainly as a frame for the muscular legs. It was not quite dead. As Ed came up it struggled feebly to get up, but one of the heavy slugs had evidently hit the spine, or whatever carried communications to the hindquarters. It fell back, shuddering convulsively, and suddenly regurgitated a small, furry animal.

Ed stepped back quickly to bring his rifle to bear, but the newest arrival was obviously already dead.

He turned his attention back to the larger animal. It, too, was dead now. There was an obvious family resemblance to the smaller one he had shot in the leaves. Both were smooth-skinned, many-legged, and now that he looked closely he could see this one had two mouths, a small one just under the nostrils, purse-lipped and tiny in its huge face but quite like that of the other creature. Neither looked even remotely like anything he had ever seen before.

He laid down his rifle and took out his knife.

Ten minutes later, he knew quite a bit about the thing, but what he knew did not make much sense. In the first place, its blood *was* green, a yellowish pussy green. In the second place, the larger mouth, complete with jaws and impressive musculature, opened not into a digestive system, but into a large closed pouch which comprised most of the animal's torso. There was no proper digestive system at all, only a rudimentary gut, heavily laced with blood vessels, terminating at one end in the small second mouth, at the other in an even smaller anus. Otherwise, the thing had no insides except a good pair of lungs and a stout heart—none at all. Bone, muscle, lung, heart—plus the ridiculously inadequate gut—that was it.

What about the small, furry, animal then; the one the other had been carrying in its pouch? There was nothing much out-of-the-way about it—a feline sort of carnivore, something like a marten. The fur looked interesting, and he skinned it out, casing the hide. On the left ham, the skin was punctured and there was a swollen, bluish area—about the sort of wound that would be made by the fang of the first thing he had shot. Ed squatted back on his heels, studying it and putting two and two together. What two and two made was pretty hard to believe, but it fitted the evidence.

He wiped his knife carefully on the grass, put it back in its sheath, and got to his feet. Suddenly, the feeling that he was not alone recurred. He looked quickly around.

Back where he had shot the first thing, a man in forest-green whipcord trousers and jacket was leaning over, hands on knees, looking at the remains. The man looked up and met Ed's eyes. He nodded casually and walked over to the second thing, prodded it with his toe. After a long moment he nodded again to Ed, smiled briefly, and winked out.

Ed stared at the empty air where the other man had been, mouth open. It was just a little too much. A lot of things had happened to him in the last few days, he had been able to take most of them more or less as they came along, but after all, he wasn't a chicken any more, he was pushing sixty, and there is a limit to what a man should have to put up with at that age. The thought of his snug cabin, with a good fire going, moose-meat bubbling in the pot, the gas lantern hissing, and the bottle of Hudson's Bay rum he had tucked under the eaves against just such an occasion as this, was suddenly very appealing.

Besides, it was getting late, and he didn't think he cared to be stumbling around this world in the dark.

He elbowed his pack up, hooked the left shoulder strap, and headed for home, staying off the trail in ordinary caution and watching his footing, but moving pretty fast just the same.

Actually, he need not have been so careful.

The Harn had been surprised and shocked by the explosive violence of the man's reaction to a routine harvesting maneuver. It was a relatively young Harn, but it retained memories of its own world, where there were also nasty, violent things which killed Harn. It was not pleasant to think that it might have evoked some such monster in this hitherto peaceful place.

Then, to top that, there had been the sudden appearance of the Warden. The Harn, of course, saw the Warden not as a man, but in its true aspect, which was not at all friendly.

All in all, this did not seem the moment to start any new adventures. The Harn pulled in all its mobile units, including the stinger it had left at the hole into the other world. It huddled protectively together in its nest, considering these new developments.

By ten that evening, Ed, in conference with old Tom and the bottle of Hudson's Bay, had done considerable hard thinking, pro and con.

Of course, he didn't *have* to go into the other world, just because the hole was there. He could block it off, seal it up with timbers and forget it.

He sat there and thought about this, absently smoothing the strange fur on his knee. For an old-timer like himself, things weren't too hot in

this world. Fur didn't bring much of a price any more, and he couldn't get it in as he had when he was younger. His wants were simple, but there was a certain rock-bottom minimum he had to have. Too, the winters were starting to bother him a little, the arthritis in his hands was getting worse every year, times he hardly had the strength in his left hand, which was the worst, to hold an ax. Another five, ten, years and it would be the Pioneers' Home for him—if he did not get stove up or sick sooner and die right here in the cabin, too helpless to cut wood for the fire. He had helped bury enough others, bed and all when they didn't come down the river at breakup and somebody had to go up and look for them, to know it was possible.

The other world was milder, it had game and fur—good fur, too, from the looks of it, something new that could lick any mutation or synthetic on the market, and the income tax had still left a few fellows who could pay through the nose to see their women look nice.

And, the country was new. He'd never thought he'd have a crack at a new country again, a new, *good* country. Often, he'd thought how lucky people had been who were born a hundred and fifty years ago, moving into an easy, rich country like the Ohio or Kentucky when it was new, instead of the bitter North.

The Harn would be a nuisance—Ed did not think of it as the Harn, of course, but just as "they"—but he supposed he could find a way to clean them out. A man generally could, if varmints got troublesome enough.

And the man in forest-green whipcord, well, he *could* have been just an hallucination. Ed did not really believe in hallucinations, but he had heard about them, and there was always a first time.

Ed sighed, looked at the clock, measured the bottle with his eye—still better than three quarters full.

All in all, he guessed, he'd leave the door into the other world open.

He put old Tom out and went to bed.

The first order of business seemed to be to get better acquainted with the Harn, and first thing in the morning he set about it. He took the rabbit out of the live box and tethered it in a spot in the other world close to the hole, where raw earth had been exposed by a big blowdown, sweeping the ground afterward to clear it of tracks.

Getting better acquainted with the Harn, though, did not mean he had to have it come in and crawl in bed with him.

Before going to bed the night before, he had set half a can of snuff to steep in some water. He loaded a bug gun with this and sprayed the

ground around the hole into the other world. From the reaction yesterday, he judged the stinging units did not like tobacco juice, and this should discourage them from coming through.

He checked his bear snares and found three in good enough shape to satisfy him—the large Harn beast, he suspected, would be about like a grizzly to hold. Three would hardly be enough for a serious trapping program. Ed made his own snares from old aircraft control cable, using a lock of his own devising which slid smoothly and cinched down tight and permanently. He got out his roll of wire and box of locks and started making up some more, sitting where he could watch the rabbit he had staked out.

By the middle of the afternoon the snares were done, but there had been no action with the rabbit, nor was there for the rest of the day.

In the morning, though, it was gone. There were three new sets of tracks in the bare spot—two smaller ones, either of which would have fitted the stinging unit, and what looked like a carrier's. The action was clear enough. The small things had prowled around the rabbit for some time, stopping frequently as if uncertain and suspicious. Finally, one had moved in, with a little flurry of action when it met the rabbit. Then it had moved back and squatted again.

The big tracks came directly to the rabbit and went right out again. They were heavy enough to be clear in the grass beyond the bare spot.

Ed went back to the cabin and rummaged till he found a pair of snake-proof pants a Stateside sport had once given him—heavy duck with an interlining of woven wire. They were heavy and uncomfortable to wear, and about as useless as wings on a pig in Alaska, where there are no snakes; but they had been brand-new and expensive when given to him, and he had put them away, thinking vaguely he might find a use for them some day. It looked like that day might be now.

He slipped them on, took his rifle and hunting pack, and set out to follow the animal that had taken the rabbit.

The trail showed well in the morning dew, going straight away along the hillside as if the thing were headed some place definite. Ed followed along for a quarter mile or so, then found himself on a fairly well beaten path, which presently joined another, and then another, till it was a definitely well used trail. It began to look to him like the thing might have a den of some sort, and he might be getting pretty close to it. He left the trail and climbed up into a lone tall tree, fire-scorched but still struggling for life. From there, he could follow the trail pretty well with his glasses

for a couple of hundred yards before he lost it. Finally, he settled on a spot under an old burnt stump as a likely spot for the den.

He focused the glasses carefully and after a few minutes saw a flash of movement there, as if something had slipped in or out. Nothing else happened for about an hour. Then the grass along one of the trails began to wave and a large beast, similar to the one he had shot, trotted into sight. It slipped in under the stump and disappeared.

For the rest of the morning, nothing went in or out.

There was a very good reason for this, and Ed was it.

All night and day after he shot the stinging unit and the carrier unit, the Harn had stayed in its nest. By the second evening, it was getting hungry. It ventured out and found a few morsels, but the organized hunting network it ordinarily maintained had been disrupted, it had lost track of things, and the pickings were poor. Then it stumbled on the rabbit Ed had staked out.

Its first impulse was to leave the rabbit strictly alone. In spite of its early promise, the other world had so far given nothing but trouble. On the other hand, the rabbit was meat, and very good meat, by the smell and looks of it... .

The Harn kept its observation unit prowling irresolutely around the target for half the night before it finally gave in to appetite and sent in a stinger to finish the rabbit off, a carrier to pick it up.

It was still uneasy about this when it noticed Ed near the nest the next morning, confirming its fears. It promptly broke up the net it had been re-establishing and pulled all units back in. Maybe if it left him strictly alone, he might still go on about his business, whatever that was, and let the Harn get back to its harvesting.

By noon, Ed was getting pretty stiff sitting in the tree. He climbed down and eased over toward the stump, watching where he set his feet. He was pretty sure the snakeproof pants would stop the stingers, but he saw no point in putting them to the test until he had to.

About fifty yards away, he got a good view, and it did look like there might be a sizable hole under the stump. He studied it carefully with the glasses. There was a smooth-beaten mound in front, and exposed roots were worn slick.

As he got closer, he noticed an unpleasant smell, and near the mouth of the den he got a sudden whiff that almost gagged him—a sour, acid, carrion stink like a buzzard's nest. He moved back a little. The hole was

wide and fairly high, two or three feet, but too dark to see back into. Still, he had a sense of something stirring there not too far back.

Ed had considerable respect for caves and dens with unseen occupants—he had once helped carry in the bodies of two men who had poked a stick into a spring grizzly's den. At the same time, he wanted pretty badly to know what was in there. He suspected there was a good deal more than what he had already seen.

The bug gun loaded with tobacco juice was in his pack, and a flashlight, a small light one designed for a lady's purse which he always carried when away from camp. He got them out and leaned his rifle against a root sticking out just to the left of the den. Taking the bug gun in his left hand and the flashlight in his right, he stooped over to shine the light in, keeping as well clear of the entrance as possible.

All in all, he must have got about a five-second look, which is a lot longer than it sounds when things are happening.

His first impression was a jumble—eyes, scurrying movement, and bulk. Then things started to shape up. About ten feet back from the entrance was a huge, flattish, naked, scabrous bulk, pimped with finger-sized teats. Clustered around and behind this were a tangle of slinging units, carrier units, observation units. Some had their mouths fixed to teats.

For a long second or two the scene stayed frozen.

Then the front edge of the bulk split and began to gape. Ed found himself looking down a manhole-sized gullet into a shallow puddle of slime with bits of bone sticking up here and there. Toward the near end a soggy mass of fur that might have been the rabbit seemed to be visibly melting down. At the same moment, the tangle of lesser monsters sorted themselves out and a wave of stingers came boiling out at him.

Ed dropped the flashlight, gave two mighty pumps of the bug gun, and jumped clear of the entrance. For a moment, the den mouth boiled with stingers, hissing and bucking in agony. Ed sprayed them heavily again, snatched up his rifle, and ran, looking back over his shoulder. The stingers showed no inclination to follow, though, the tobacco juice seemed to be keeping them well occupied for the moment.

Halfway home, Ed had to stop and rest for a moment while he took a spell of shuddering and gagging as a sudden picture of the slimy gullet came into his mind, with Ed Brown laying where the rabbit had been, melting down into a stinking soup of bones and gobbets of flesh.

When he got to the hole, his arrangement of tin cans, traps, and tobacco juice no longer looked nearly as secure as it had. He got his ax and

cut two stout posts, framing the hole; built a stout slab door and hung it from them. Then he drove stakes close together at the threshold, to foil any attempts to dig under, and trimmed a sill tight to the door.

His feeling in this matter, as it happened, was sound.

The Harn was beginning to develop a pretty strong dislike for Ed Brown. Three of its stinging units were dead, and most of the rest were in poor shape, thanks to the tobacco spray. It had got a little whiff of the stuff itself, not enough to do any serious damage ordinarily, but right now, so close to swarming time—

Ed was going to have to go.

So far, in this world, the Harn had needed only the three basic types of mobile units. There were other standard types, however, for dealing with more complicated situations. As it happened, a couple of carrier embryos were at just about the right stage. With a little forcing, they could be brought on in not too long a time. Meanwhile, the Harn would do what it could with the material available.

When Ed came through the next day to set his snares, the Harn was prepared to test his snakeproof pants. They held, which was disconcerting to the Harn, but it was a hard creature to convince, once thoroughly aroused. Ed was not too sure of how well the pants would stand up to persistent assault himself. After the third ambush, he took to spraying suspicious looking spots with tobacco juice. He shot two more stingers in this way, but it slowed him up quite a bit. It took him all day to make four sets.

In the next three days he made a dozen sets and caught two carriers. Then, the fourth day, as he adjusted a snare, a seeming root suddenly came to life and slashed at his hand. He was wearing gloves to keep his scent from the snares, and the fang caught the glove and just grazed the ball of his left thumb. The hatchet he had been using to cut a toggle was lying by his knee. He snatched it up and chopped the stinger before it could strike again, then yanked off the glove and looked at his hand. A thin scratch, beaded with drops of blood, showed on the flesh. Unhesitatingly, he drew the razor edge of the hatchet across it, sucked and spat, sucked and spat again and again. Then he started for home.

He barely made it. By the time he got to the hole, he was a very sick man. He latched the door, stumbled into the cabin and fell on the bed.

It was several days before he was able to be about again, his hand still partly paralyzed.

During that time, the situation changed. The Harn took the offensive.

Ed's first notice of this was a rhythmic crashing outside the cabin. He managed to crawl to where he could see the gate he had built to block the hole into the other world. It was shaking from repeated batterings from the other side. Dragging his rifle with his good hand, he scabbled down to where he could see through the chinks in the slab door. Two of the carrier units were there, taking turns slamming their full weight against it. He had built that gate skookum, but not to take something like that.

He noted carefully where they were hitting it, then backed off twenty feet and laid the .450 across a log. He let them hit the door twice more to get the timing before he loosed off a shot, at the moment of impact. The battering stopped abruptly, and through the chinks he could see a bulk piled against the gate.

For a while there was no more action. Then, after a few tentative butts at the door, the battering started again. This time, Ed wasn't so lucky. The battering stopped when he fired, but he got an impression that the carrier ran off. He thought he might have hit it, but not mortally.

In an hour or so the Harn was back, and it kept coming back. Ed began to worry about his ammunition, which was not unlimited. Ordinarily, two or three boxes lasted him through the winter. He got his .30-06, for which he had a sugar sack full of military ammunition. The light full-patch stuff did not have the discouraging effect of the .450, though, and he had to shoot a lot oftener.

Another thing, he wasn't getting any rest, which was bad in his already weakened condition. Every time he dozed off the battering would start again, and he would have to wake up and snap a few shots through the door. He held pretty much on one spot, not wanting to shoot the door to pieces, but the Harn noticed this, and started hitting the door in other places.

The second day of the attack, the door came down. It had been pretty shaky for some time, and Ed had got the cabin ready for a siege, filling butter kegs with water and nailing up the windows. As the Harn poured through, he shot several and then broke for the cabin. A carrier ran at him full tilt, bent on bowling him over. Once off his feet, he would have been easy meat for one of the stingers. He sidestepped, swung his shotgun up in one hand—he had kept it handy for the close fighting—and blew the carrier's spine in half. He had to kick it aside to slam the cabin door.

For a few minutes, then, things were pretty hectic. Ed went from one to another of the loopholes he had cut, blasting first with the shotgun as

the Harn crowded around, then using the .30 as they grew more cautious.

After the first rush, it was obvious to the Harn that the cabin was going to be a tough nut to crack. On the other hand, there was no rush about it either. Necessarily, it had let its hunting go the past several days while it concentrated on Ed. It was pretty hungry, and it was in rich pickings now—Ed had always kept from disturbing game close to the cabin, partly because he liked to see it around, and partly because he had an idea that some day he might be in a fix where he couldn't travel very well, and would want meat close to hand. The Harn felt no such compunctions. The stinging units spread through the woods, and shortly a steady procession of loaded carriers began to stream back through the hole. Ed picked off the first few, but then the Harn found it could route them up the river trail in such a way that he got only a glimpse as they flashed through the hole. After that he did not hit very many.

Ed stopped shooting. He was getting short on ammunition for the .30 now, too. He counted up. There were eighteen rounds for the .450, half a box of 220 grain soft point for the .30 plus about the same amount of military stuff, and a handful of shotgun shells. Of course, there was still the .30 Luger with a couple of boxes, and the .22; but they were not much account for this kind of work.

He looked at the cabin door. It was stout, built of hewed three-inch slabs, but it wouldn't last forever against the kind of beating the gate had got. Even if it did, he was going to run out of water eventually.

Ed thought about that for a while, sitting at the table staring at the little pile of cartridges. He was going to be run out of here sooner or later, he might as well pick his own time, and now seemed about as good as any, while the Harn was busy exploring and hunting.

He sighed and got up to rummage around the cabin. The snakeproof pants had done real good, but he did not trust them entirely. There was some sheet iron laid over the ceiling joists, which he had brought up to make new stoves for his line camps. He got this down and cut it into small pieces. Around the edges he drilled a number of small holes. Then he got out his mending gear and began sewing the plates, in an overlapping pattern, to the legs of the snakeproof pants and to an old pair of moccasins. When he finished, he was pretty well armored as far as his crotch. It was an awkward outfit to move around in, but as long as he was able to stay on his feet, he figured he would be reasonably secure

from the stingers. As for the bigger ones, he would just have to depend on seeing them first, and the .450.

Next, he needed some gasoline. The fuel cache was under a big spruce, about twenty yards from the door. He made the round of his loopholes. There were no Harn in sight, they were apparently ignoring him for now. He slipped out the door, closing it securely behind him, and started for the cache.

As he stepped out, a stinger came from under the sill log and lashed at his foot. He killed it with the ax beside the door, saving a cartridge, and went on, walking fairly fast but planting his feet carefully, a little awkward in his armor. He picked up a five-gallon can of gas, a quart of motor oil, and the twenty feet of garden hose he used for siphoning gas down the bank to the boat. On the way back, another stinger hit him. He kicked it aside, not wanting to set down his load, and it came at him again and again. Just outside the door, he finally caught it under a heel and methodically trampled it to death. Then he snatched open the door, tossed the stuff inside, and pulled it quickly shut behind him.

So far, good enough.

He lashed the gas can solidly to his packboard, slipped the end of the hose into the flexible spout and wired it tight. Then he cut up an old wool undershirt and wrapped the pieces around miscellaneous junk—old nuts and bolts, chunks of leadline, anything to make up half a dozen packages of good throwing heft. He soaked these in oil and stowed them in a musette bag which he snapped to the D-rings of the pack.

One of the metal plates on his moccasin was hanging by a thread, probably he had torn it loose in the scuffle at the door. They weren't going to take too much kicking and banging around, he could see, and once he was on his way, it wouldn't be a very good idea to be caught bending over with his bare hands at ground level to fix them. On the other hand, he couldn't be using all his cartridges on the stingers, either, he had to save them for the carriers. He thought about this some while mending the moccasin, and decided to take the bug gun. It might not kill the stingers, but it ought to discourage them enough so they wouldn't keep pestering him.

With his bad left arm, he had trouble getting the pack on his back. He finally managed by swinging it up on the table first. It was not too much of a load, forty or fifty pounds he guessed. Still, shaky as he was, it was about as much as he could manage. He had intended to just try it on for size, but after he got it up he thought: well, why not now? He picked up

the .450, stowed the extra cartridges in his pocket, checked to make sure he had matches, hung the bug gun on his belt, and opened the door.

It was just getting dusk, but the other world was in broad daylight, the days and nights were almost completely reversed again. As he stepped through the hole, the first stinger struck. He gave it a good squirt of tobacco juice. It went bucking and twisting off and he went on, stepping carefully and solidly.

Luckily, most of the Harn was foraging in the new world. Two more stingers ambushed him, but the tobacco juice got rid of them, and he had no serious trouble till he got close to the den. Two carriers came out and rushed him there. He shot them both and then killed the stinger that was pecking at his shins. He moved quickly now, he had an idea that in about a minute all hell would break loose. He swung the pack down on the uphill side of the den, wet the musette bag with a quick spray of gas, tossed it over his shoulder, jammed the free end of the hose into the den mouth and stabbed the can with his knife to vent it. As the gas poured into the den he lit one of his oil and gas soaked bombs and ran around in front, lighting one after another from the one in his hand and tossing them into the den. The musette bag caught fire and he snatched it from his shoulder and tossed it after the bombs. A whoof and a sheet of flame blew out.

About fifty yards away there was a slender, popplelike tree. Ed had thought if he could make that, he would be reasonably secure while the Harn burned. He ran for it as hard as he could, beating at the flames that had spattered on him from the burning gas, but he never made it.

Harn were erupting everywhere. A carrier suddenly came charging out of the brush to his left. While Ed dealt with that one, the Harn played its ace in the hole. The two special units it had been developing to deal with Ed were not quite done yet, but they were done enough to work for the few minutes the Harn needed them. Ed heard a coughing grunt behind him and spun around to see something new crawling out of the flame and smoke at the den entrance.

This one was a roughly carrier shaped creature, but half again as large, built for killing. It had powerful fanged jaws and its eight feet were armed with knifelike, disemboweling claws. As it came at Ed in a lumbering rush, another came crawling out after it.

Ed shot four times, as fast as he could work the action. The heavy slugs did the job, but not quite well enough. With its dying lunge the

thing got to him and tossed him ten feet like a rag doll. He lit on his bad hand and felt the wrist bones go.

As he struggled to get up, digging his elbow in and using one hand, he saw a stinger darting in at him. He had lost both the bug gun and his rifle when the fighting unit swiped him. He swiveled on his hips and kicked the stinger away. Then he saw the second fighting unit coming. He forgot about the stinger. It still might get to him, but, if it did, it would be too late to matter.

He drew his knife, managed to get to one knee, and crouched there like an old gray rat, stubbly lips drawn back from worn teeth in a grin of pain and rage. This was one he wasn't going to win, he guessed.

Ten feet away, the fighting unit suddenly ran down like a clockwork toy. It toppled over, skidded past him under its own momentum, and lay there kicking spasmodically. Ed glared at it uncomprehendingly. It arched its neck back to almost touch its haunches, stiffened, and was still.

Ed looked around. The stinger was dead too, three feet from his shoulder, and half a dozen more which had been making for him. A cloud of greasy, stinking smoke was rolling out of the den. The Harn was dead.

Ed put his knife away and lay back. He did not quite pass out, but things got pretty dim.

After a while he got hold of himself and sat up. He was not too surprised to see the man in forest green prodding at the bodies of the fighting units. The stranger looked at the smoke still oozing from the den and nodded approvingly. Then he came over and looked at Ed. He clacked his tongue in concern and bent over, touching Ed's wrist. Ed noticed there was now a cast on it, and it didn't hurt so much. There was also a plastic binding around his ribs and shoulder, where the claws of the first fighter had raked as it tossed him. That was a mighty neat trick, because the rags of his shirt were still buttoned around him, and he was pretty sure it had not been off at any time.

The stranger smiled at Ed, patted him on the shoulder, and disappeared. He seemed to be a busy sort of fellow, Ed thought, with not much time for visiting.

Ed felt quite a bit better now, enough better to gather up what was left of his gear and start home. He was glad to find old Tom waiting for him there. The cat had taken to the woods when the attack on the gate first started, he didn't like shooting, and Ed had worried that the Harn might have got him.

Ed slept till noon the next day, got up and cooked a dozen flapjacks and a pound of bacon. After breakfast, he sat around for an hour or so drinking coffee. Then he spent the rest of the afternoon puttering around the cabin.

He packed away the snakeproof pants, disassembled the flame-thrower, picked up the traps by the hole.

Old Tom seemed to have pretty well cleaned up the mice under the lean-to. Ed took his shovel and filled in the hole he had dug for the cat to get at them.

He went to bed early. Tomorrow he would take a long hike around the new world, scout out the fur and game, plan his trap-line and pick cabin sites.

The next morning, though, the hole into the other world was gone.

The posts which had marked it were sheared neatly in half. The remains of the door still hung there, battered and sagging; but it swung open on nothing but Alaska, when Ed stepped through he found himself standing beside the old leaning birch.

He tried it several times before he convinced himself.

He walked slowly back toward the cabin, feeling old and uncertain, not quite knowing what to do with himself. Old Tom was over by the lean-to, sniffing and pawing tentatively at the fresh earth where Ed had filled in the hole. As Ed came up, he came over to rub against Ed's leg.

They went into the cabin and Ed started fixing breakfast.

Loved this book ?
Similar users also downloaded

Stanley Gimble

Breakaway

She surely got her wish ... but there was some question about getting what she wanted.

Charles Stross

Accelerando

The book is a collection of nine short stories telling the tale of three generations of a highly dysfunctional family before, during, and after a technological singularity. It was originally written as a series of novelettes and novellas, all published in Asimov's Science Fiction magazine in the period 2001 to 2004.

The first three stories follow the character of "venture altruist" Manfred Macx starting in the early 21st Century, the second three stories follow his daughter Amber, and the final three focus largely on her son Sirhan in the completely transformed world at the end of the century.

According to Stross, the initial inspiration for the stories was his experience working as a programmer for a high-growth company during the dot-com boom of the 1990s.

Harry Harrison

Planet of the Damned

Hugo nominated in 1962, originally published in Analog Science Fact-Science Fiction as "Sense of Obligation." Brion has just won the Twenties, a global competition to test achievements in 20 categories of human activities -- but before he can enjoy his victory he's forced to leave his homeworld to help salvage Dis, the most hellish planet in the galaxy.

Kelly Link

Magic for Beginners

Link's engaging and funny second collection -- call it kitchen-sink magical realism -- riffs on haunted convenience stores, husbands and wives, rabbits, zombies, weekly apocalyptic poker parties, witches, superheroes, marriage, and cannons -- and includes several new stories.

Henry Beam Piper

Little Fuzzy

The chartered Zarathustra Company had it all their way. Their charter was for a Class III uninhabited planet, which Zarathustra was, and it meant they owned the planet lock stock and barrel. They exploited it, developed it and reaped the huge profits from it without interference from the Colonial Government. Then Jack Holloway, a sunstone prospector, appeared on the scene with his family of Fuzzies and the passionate conviction that they were not cute animals but little people.

Randall Garrett

Brain Twister

In nineteen-fourteen, it was enemy aliens.

In nineteen-thirty, it was Wobblies.

In nineteen-fifty-seven, it was fellow-travelers.

And, in nineteen seventy-one, Kenneth J. Malone rolled wearily out of bed wondering what the hell it was going to be now.

One thing, he told himself, was absolutely certain: it was going to be terrible. It always was.

James Patrick Kelly

Itsy Bitsy Spider

James Patrick Kelly

Burn

Colonization is the theme of this exciting, complex page-turner that provides a provocative and entertaining look at Thoreau's classic eco-text *Walden*. Eccentric billionaire Jack Winter has bought the planet Beekman's Pea, renamed it *Walden*, and created a utopia in which members renounce the technologies of human civilization. Marginalized by these newcomers, the planet's original inhabitants are resisting the colony's dominance by setting fires to *Walden's* artificial ecology. A member of *Walden*, Prosper Gregory Leung is a veteran firefighter who believes in protecting Winter's utopian vision, but when he is wounded, he begins to learn of the terrible price that the people of *Walden* are paying for their paradise. Interwoven with themes of environmental responsibility, political struggle, and courage, this adventure novel nimbly combines political and social relevance with a flawless and gripping narrative from a veteran science fiction author.

Peter Watts

Blindsight

Two months since sixty-five thousand alien objects clenched around the Earth like a luminous fist, screaming to the heavens as

the atmosphere burned them to ash. Two months since that moment of brief, bright surveillance by agents unknown. Two months of silence, while a world holds its breath. Now some half-derelict space probe, sparking fitfully past Neptune's orbit, hears a whisper from the edge of the solar system: a faint signal sweeping the cosmos like a lighthouse beam. Whatever's out there isn't talking to us. It's talking to some distant star, perhaps. Or perhaps to something closer, something en route. So who do you send to force introductions on an intelligence with motives unknown, maybe unknowable? Who do you send to meet the alien when the alien doesn't want to meet?

You send a linguist with multiple personalities, her brain surgically partitioned into separate, sentient processing cores. You send a biologist so radically interfaced with machinery that he sees x-rays and tastes ultrasound, so compromised by grafts and splices he no longer feels his own flesh. You send a pacifist warrior in the faint hope she won't be needed, and the fainter one she'll do any good if she is. You send a monster to command them all, an extinct hominid predator once called vampire, recalled from the grave with the voodoo of recombinant genetics and the blood of sociopaths. And you send a synthesist—an informational topologist with half his mind gone—as an interface between here and there, a conduit through which the Dead Center might hope to understand the Bleeding Edge.

You send them all to the edge of interstellar space, praying you can trust such freaks and retrofits with the fate of a world. You fear they may be more alien than the thing they've been sent to find.

But you'd give anything for that to be true, if you only knew what was waiting for them...

Raphael Rick

Code Three

The cars on high-speed highways must follow each other like sheep. And they need shepherds. The highway police cruiser of tomorrow however must be massively different—as different as the highways themselves!



www.feedbooks.com
Food for the mind