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"The 39th Dynasty shall fall with the Mating of the Moons. An Outlander shall seize the Queen—" so ran the Prophecy

The VIRGIN of VALKARION

A Barbarian-Worlds Novel

by POUL ANDERSON

The TIMELESS ONES

by FRANK B. LONG



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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK SIGN OF LIFE ***

SIGN of LIFE

By **DAVE DRYFOOS**

The death-winds of Venus screamed with glee as George Main lay dying. Then the winds brought strange shapes to haunt him—and a stranger hope—

[Transcriber's Note: This etext was produced from Planet Stories July 1951.

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George Main lay dying in the wreckage of the space-ship. Dying—and cursing the deadly wind of Venus. It had killed his mates. It would soon have him.

The wind was trying to finish him off right now. It shrieked, moaned, whispered and shouted through the smashed hull where he sprawled in his space-suit. Laughed, too. The wind was a murderer—and was glad.

All but he were dead. Soon the grit-laden wind would bury them and their ship. Then all the effort, the skill, the faith—all the ingenuity and labor expended on the expedition—would be wiped away, as invisible as the wind that buried them.

Thinking of that, thinking back over each agonizing hour since his landing on Venus, George Main wondered what he should have done, what he could now do, to prevent the utter waste of their efforts and their lives.

The wind was his enemy—and the wind couldn't even be seen. Only the dust it carried was visible. Too visible. Dust was so thick in the upper atmosphere that the scope-readers had mistaken dust-clouds for solid ground.

With ports blinded by dust, the possibility of that error had been obvious enough. The navigator knew the risk. He chanced it—and lost the toss.

George knew he was still alive only because he'd acted like a childish eager-beaver. And had been tolerated by the others because he was the crew's youngest member.

Ever since he could read and dream, he'd wanted to be the first man ever to

Ever since he could read and dream, he'd wanted to be the first man ever to touch the soil of Venus. So, having no duties connected with setting down the ship, he'd gotten into his space-suit and had waited by a hatch. He was standing there when the ship went into the twenty-mile free fall that smashed it.

George didn't know who opened the escape hatch and shoved him out. That man was dead, along with the rest of the crew. Unlike George's suit, the space-ship had no parachute.

He'd landed blind, in dust so thick he didn't know he was down till he got there. For forty-eight hours he'd lain where he fell, waiting for a lull in the storm so he could see the ship.

When the wind finally quit, the ship was already half buried. Thirsty, hungry, stinking in the hot suit, George had staggered over windrow after windrow of dust to reach it.

He'd broken out an emergency-jug of water, found some uncontaminated food, erected within the hull a small gas-proof tent, and then passed out before he could crawl in the tent to eat and drink.

Later he'd gone out while the lull continued, to search for bodies. Like the hull itself, they were scattered over a wide area. Some were already buried in dust. The wind had buried them.

The wind—the murdering wind. The wind of formaldehyde that poisoned every drop of water it touched, every bit of food. The wind that limited George's supplies to unbroken containers—of which there were tragically few.

The wind mocked him, then and thereafter. It mocked his efforts to find the ship's log and continue it. It mocked his efforts to live.

He tried to fight back. He lay prone and relaxed because that took less oxygen. He lay in the suit and not in the tent because that took less oxygen. He ate and drank but once a day because that took less oxygen.

So he had run out of water while there were still some potassium oxides left to refresh his thrice-breathed air, some oxygen for the tent.

George Main wanted to live, knew he would die. And was enraged at the thought

that he would die without having accomplished anything. He and his friends, and the pioneering scientists back of them, had put too much effort into trans-System travel to have it all come to nothing like this.

Stubbornly he noted in the log that he was now dehydrated to the point of occasional delirium. And that he hated the wind.

As if that wind had not already done enough, it now sought to destroy his last remaining moments of sanity. It brought a horde of odd shapes to haunt him.

The shapes literally rolled into the dust-filled metal cavity where he lay writing. The wind rolled them. But when they got into shelter—had rolled to one side or the other of the holes through which they'd come—the shapes began to move, slowly, under their own power.

They all looked alike. There were a couple of dozen, maybe—George counted ten and gave up because counting was too much like work. They were teardrops—eight-inch yellow teardrops with the point down. And each point rested on an extensible foot that looked like a blue starfish, about four inches across its seven points.

They came in, rolling along the ground as the wind took them, and then extended their stars from some hidden place and moved on them when out of the wind.

That is, they seemed to. But whether they were in the hull or in his mind, George was by no means sure.

Nothing could live in this wind. Nothing could live on a planet with no water, where the air was full of formaldehyde ready to react with proteins, the basis of life.

He lay motionless, watching idly. There was no sound but the wind. The yellow teardrops scattered out. They could have been exploring—or seeking shelter—or nonexistent.

When he got tired of watching them, George put the log aside and slept.

He awoke to find a small congregation of teardrops surrounding the watch strapped outside the suit on his left wrist. The watch was going—wound through habit every twenty-four hours, though that was but a third of a day here on

habit every twenty-four hours, though that was but a third of a day, here on Venus. The teardrops were curious about it.

How he got the idea they were curious, George didn't quite know. They seemed attracted to it, was all. There were no eyes, so far as he could tell—no ears. If these things had senses, they were not like terrestrial senses. But the teardrops did have an attitude of attention.

George removed his watch, laid it before them. Two teardrops detached themselves from the group to examine his right hand, with which he'd slipped off the wrist-band. Three others perched on the dust-covered deck, the watch between them and him.

George flexed his right hand, twiddled his fingers. The teardrops seemed unafraid. He chose one and lifted it. It seemed light in weight. Its star-foot was slightly prehensile, and grasped his glove with tiny claws arranged in rows on its bottom surface.

The claws seemed for clinging, not for seizing. George put down the teardrop, turned it over, and found no opening anywhere on the surface. If these things lived, he decided, they must be plants, synthesizing their food—they had no way to eat as animals do.

Vaguely, George made up his wavering mind that the things existed outside his imagination. They were alive. They felt curiosity about him. Leathery, he found them—hard and smooth, except for the foot.

When he set down the teardrop he'd been examining, the three by his watch took up a rhythmic motion. The center one stood in place, swaying slowly above the watch like a bit of seaweed in a quiet lagoon.

Each of the other two had somehow obtained a pebble. They set their pebbles down near the watch. Each then tapped with a star-point, first at the pebble, then at the watch. Back and forth they swayed, their motions synchronized—perhaps directed by the center one.

Interesting—but meaningless. It was equally meaningless when the two teardrops at his right began to dance. They found an empty food-can lid, pushed it near his hand, and began a concerted swaying and pointing that took them between hand and can.

Idly, George led the dance with a waggled forefinger. The teardrops promptly changed their motion. They stood in place, no longer pointing alternately at lid and finger, but swaying between them in time with George.



Idly, George led the dance with a waggled forefinger....

They were slow, though—he could easily have left them behind. But if he moved his finger slowly enough, they kept perfect time.

The dance at the watch had stopped. Many teardrops gathered around the pair that followed the beat of his right index finger.

It must have amused them. But it soon tired George. He stopped.

He needed all his remaining energy to think with. He knew these teardrops were sentient. They were curious, they communicated with each other, and they danced. They had minds, therefore.

George remembered hearing that Man had danced even before he learned to speak, in a primitive effort to express his feelings. He knew some birds dance, too—as a courtship procedure. Insects, even.

But why did the teardrops dance?

What was the significance of rhythmic motion between a pebble and a watch? A tin lid and a man's hand? What did the pebbles mean?

The pebble was a native object, known to be lifeless, inanimate. The watch was a strange something that moved. The can-lid did not move. The hand—gloved, though they could not know that—was an object that moved.

The dance was a question, therefore. Alive, or dead? The teardrops wanted to know. Is the watch that moves by itself alive? The strangely symmetrical lid of a can, is it alive? The oddshaped hand?

These teardrops had good minds—could grasp abstractions. In a sense, George felt the difference between animate and inanimate objects in an abstraction. In

But, the difference between animate and inanimate objects is an abstraction. In his dying state, the notion amused him.

Smiling, he placed a pebble on the watch, another on the lid. He sat up, moved his weakened body so they could perhaps tell it was a unit. He picked up a teardrop in each hand, held them at his visor, rolled his eyes, and opened and shut his mouth. He spoke to them. He sang to them. He swayed with them to show he too could dance.

They made no sign of reply. None that he could recognize, at any rate.

Carefully he felt and looked at the entire surface of a teardrop, putting one down to devote both hands to the other. He thought perhaps the lack of organs and openings might simply mean they were clothed or armored in some way. But the thing was apparently naked. The surfaces he touched were probably skin. He didn't know.

And they, would they know what a man was? Were they even certain he was alive?

One of them was behind him, dancing before the tent. Seeing that, he was certain the teardrops hadn't yet distinguished the animate from the inanimate in the objects around them here.

And George had little time to teach them. Already he was dull and listless. His vision was playing tricks on him.

Like as not he'd be dead before they knew for certain he'd been alive. Dead in the grotesque space-suit. Preserved in an atmosphere of formaldehyde. His body would seem like a machine that had run down. There would be no discernable difference between himself and his watch.

But if they knew he'd been alive? They might remember, then. They were intelligent, could communicate with one another. By rights they should have some kind of legends or traditions or history. If they did, if they knew they'd seen alien life, they'd keep the memory alive.

They'd recognize the next man to land on Venus, might find means to tell of this first expedition. Might lead a man to the buried space-ship, the bodies, the ship's log.

At least they could defeat the wind. The teardrops could keep his life and the lives of his mates from going utterly to waste. Whether men ever found out or not, the teardrops themselves would know that the expedition had reached Venus.

But first, George had to prove he was alive, like them—not some strangely mobile meteorite, nor oddly contrived machine.

His very lack of strength, his real nearness to death, provided George with the means he sought. Already he was half anesthetized by weakness and shock. He didn't have to worry about pain.

Holding his breath, he took off his helmet. He picked up a teardrop with each hand, held them to his hot cheeks. Then he let himself breathe.

He knew the physical changes to follow would be obvious to the intelligent little dancers he held in his hands. He hoped they wouldn't get hurt, when they fell.

Hurt or not, they'd soon figure out he'd been alive—once he was dead....

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK SIGN OF LIFE ***

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