

Mysterious Ways

by Steven Utley

When the pain in his body began in earnest and forced him to admit to himself that his time had finally come, the last man in the world went to his crude cot, to lie trembling amid ancient, smelly blankets. He lay there, waiting, almost until dawn.

Nothing was revealed.

The man sighed softly and fell into an exhausted sleep.

Later that morning, his animal friends came as they always had to the garden in the lot behind the ruined supermarket. They had grown fond of listening to the stories he told and the songs he sang in his high, brittle voice. When he failed to appear, some of the beasts crept into the disintegrating building and slipped into his little room to wait quietly in the shadows beyond a wavering perimeter of light cast by stub candles at the head of the cot.

The last man sensed their presence after some time had passed. He raised his head with painful effort and smiled into the darkness. "My friends," he murmured, "my good and dear companions, I am dying."

They knew. The odd cat gave a brief, whining howl. The big, strange dogs whimpered and ducked their heads. The lesser things that had come shifted nervously on small padded paws and sniffed the close air, trying to determine the nearness of death.

"It is nothing to fear," the man gasped weakly as he sank back into his pile of blankets. "Remember that, my little ones, that and all the other things I have told you."

* * *

Not that it really mattered, but *Homo sapiens* the very last had once been called Alexander something, or something Alexander, perhaps -- there had come a time when he found himself unable to recall either the missing part of his name or whether "Alexander" had come before or after.

He had been a minister, a man completely dedicated to God. He had lived in a little brick house located next to a large brick church, and then, early one morning, the world had ended all around the little brick house. Miraculously unhurt by the final, fatal human folly, Alexander had gone out to find the earth scoured clean of his own kind.

He had been thirty-four years old at the time (not that that really mattered, either, because he had soon afterward lost track of his years) and was convinced that the Lord God in Heaven had spared him, singled him out, for some great reason that would presently manifest itself.

So Alexander had worked hard to insure his survival while awaiting the bolt from the blue that would make the nature of his mission clear to him. He had raised vegetables in his garden and made friends with such beasts as still sought the company of a human being, and he had kept on waiting.

When the last man in the world was very, very old, a slow, gray sickness had begun to creep through him and gnaw at his insides. For several weeks, he had coughed often and long, choking and spitting up thick, fibrous clots of blood and mucus, but he had continued to putter about in the garden, conversing with his mutely expressive animal friends, singing his own hymns to them, lying to himself.

Finally, however, he had had to face the truth.

He was dying.

No purpose had been revealed unto him.

No reason had been given for his exemption from the extinction of the human race.

It made everything seem rather pathetic and futile.

* * *

One of the strange dogs whimpered again and moved nervously from corner to dark corner. Smaller creatures scurried out of the way in panic as the jittery beast's nails clicked on the smooth stone floor.

The man stared up at the ceiling, his eyes bright in the deep, black-rimmed sockets of his pale and fleshless face. The pain inside his chest increased steadily as the long day wound to a close. He began to cry out at dusk and kept it up intermittently until well after midnight. His waiting, watching animal friends stayed in the room the whole time.

Shortly before dawn, he grew quiet and lay with his arms pressed tightly against his chest. He tried to focus his gaze on the watching beasts and, failing, closed his eyes.

"Remember," he said again. "The songs, the stories, this place. Remember me. If you can."

He settled himself more deeply into his blankets and thought, Dear Heavenly Father, the meek are truly about to inherit the earth. Is *this* what you spared me for? Is this all?

He waited hopefully for the revelation that would snuff out the ember of angry doubt in his mind.

Nothing was revealed.

The last man in the world died as the sun came up. The beasts edged forward one at a time to sniff at the cooling corpse on the cot. The odd cat slunk away, meowing piteously, and the lesser furry things quickly followed. The strange dogs remained by the deathbed until mid-morning.

Then they gathered up their friend, bore him out to the garden, and gave him a decent Christian burial.

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Steven Utley, a founding member of Texas' Turkey City writers group in the 1970s, is the co-editor (with Geo. W. Proctor) of an anthology of fiction by Texans, *Lone Star Universe* (Heidelberg Publishers,

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