



Earthlight (Arthur C. Clarke Collection)

By Arthur C. Clarke

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On the Moon, a government agent from Earth is hunting a suspected spy at a prominent observatory. He is caught up in the larger political struggle between Earth's government and that of the Federation, and ultimately must struggle for his life-in the beautiful and barren landscape of the Moon under Earth's light.

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Editorial Review

From the Publisher

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About the Author

Sir Arthur C. Clarke is the author of "2001: A Space Odyssey" and many other award-winning books of science fiction and fact.

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The Monorail was losing speed as it climbed up out of the shadowed lowlands. At any moment now, thought Sadler, they would overtake the sun. The line of darkness moved so slowly here that, with a little effort, a man could keep abreast of it, could hold the sun balanced on the horizon until he had to pause for rest. Even then, it would slip so reluctantly from sight that more than an hour would pass before the last dazzling segment vanished below the edge of the Moon, and the long lunar night began.

He had been racing through that night, across the land that the first pioneers had opened up two centuries ago, at a steady and comfortable five hundred kilometers an hour. Apart from a bored conductor, who seemed to have nothing to do but produce cups of coffee on request, the only other occupants of the car were four astronomers from the Observatory. They had nodded affably enough when he came aboard, but had promptly lost themselves in a technical argument and had ignored Sadler ever since. He felt a little hurt by this neglect, then consoled himself with the thought that perhaps they took him for a seasoned resident, not a newcomer on his first assignment to the Moon.

The lights in the car made it impossible to see much of the darkened land through which they were racing in almost complete silence. "Darkened," of course, was only a relative term. It was true that the sun had gone, but not far from the zenith the Earth was approaching its first quarter. It would grow steadily until at lunar midnight, a week from now, it would be a blinding disk too bright for the unprotected eye to gaze upon.

Sadler left his seat and went forward, past the still-arguing astronomers, toward the curtained alcove at the front of the car. He was not yet accustomed to possessing only a sixth of his normal weight, and moved with exaggerated caution through the narrow corridor between the toilets and the little control room.

Now he could see properly. The observation windows were not as large as he would have liked; some safety regulation was responsible for that. But there was no internal light to distract his eyes, and at last he could enjoy the cold glory of this ancient, empty land.

Cold--yes, he could well believe that beyond these windows it was already two hundred degrees below zero, though the sun had sunk only a few hours before. Some quality of the light pouring down from the distant seas and clouds of Earth gave the impression. It was a light tinged with blues and greens, an arctic radiance that gave no atom of heat. And that, thought Sadler, was surely a paradox, for it came from a world of light and warmth.

Ahead of the speeding car, the single rail--supported by pillars uncomfortably far apart--arowed into the east. Another paradox; this world was full of them. Why couldn't the sun set in the west, as it did on Earth?

There must be some simple astronomical explanation, but for the moment Sadler could not decide what it was. Then he realized that, after all, such labels were purely arbitrary, and could easily get misplaced when a new world was mapped.

They were still rising slowly, and there was a cliff on the right which limited vision. On the left--let's see, that would be south, wouldn't it?--the broken land fell away in a series of layers as though a billion years ago the lava welling up from the Moon's molten heart had solidified in successive, weakening waves. It was a scene that chilled the soul, yet there were spots on Earth as bleak as this. The Badlands of Arizona were equally desolate; the upper slopes of Everest were far more hostile, for here at least was no eternal, ravaging wind.

And then Sadler almost cried out aloud, for the cliff on the right came to a sudden end as if a monstrous chisel had sliced it off the surface of the Moon. It no longer barred his view: he could see clear round to the north. The unpremeditated artistry of Nature had produced an effect so breathtaking that it was hard to believe it was merely an accident of time and place.

There, marching across the sky in flaming glory, were the peaks of the Apennines, incandescent in the last rays of the hidden sun. The abrupt explosion of light left Sadler almost blinded; he shielded his eyes from the glare, and waited until he could safely face it again. When he looked once more, the transformation was complete. The stars, which until a moment ago had filled the sky, had vanished. His contracted pupils could no longer see them: even the glowing Earth now seemed no more than a feeble patch of greenish luminosity. The glare from the sunlit mountains, still a hundred kilometers away, had eclipsed all other sources of light.

The peaks floated in the sky, fantastic pyramids of flame. They seemed to have no more connection with the ground beneath them than do the clouds that gather above a sunset on Earth. The line of shadow was so sharp, the lower slopes of the mountains so lost in utter darkness, that only the burning summits had any real existence. It would be hours yet before the last of those proud peaks fell back into the shadow of the Moon and surrendered to the night.

The curtains behind Sadler parted; one of his fellow passengers came into the alcove and took up a position by the window. Sadler wondered whether to open the conversation. He still felt a little piqued at being so completely ignored. However, the problem in etiquette was solved for him.

"Worth coming from Earth to see, isn't it?" said a voice from the gloom at his side.

"It certainly is," Sadler replied. Then, trying to be blasé, he added: "But I suppose you get used to it in time."

There was a chuckle from the darkness.

"I wouldn't say that. Some things you never get used to, however long you live here. Just got in?"

"Yes. Landed last night in the Tycho Brahe. Haven't had time to see much yet."

In unconscious mimicry, Sadler found himself using the clipped sentences of his companion. He wondered if everyone on the Moon talked like this. Perhaps they thought it saved air.

"Going to work at the Observatory?"

"In a way, though I won't be on the permanent staff. I'm an accountant. Doing a cost-analysis of your

operations."

This produced a thoughtful silence, which was finally broken by: "Rude of me--should have introduced myself. Robert Molton. Head of Spectroscopy. Nice to have someone around who can tell us how to do our income tax."

"I was afraid that would come up," said Sadler dryly. "My name's Bertram Sadler; I'm from the Audit Bureau."

"Humph. Think we're wasting money here?"

"That's for someone else to decide. I've only got to find how you spend it, not why."

"Well, you're going to have some fun. Everyone here can make out a good case for spending twice as much money as they get. And I'd like to know how the devil you'll put a price tag on pure scientific research."

Sadler had been wondering that for some time, but thought it best not to attempt any further explanations. His story had been accepted without question; if he tried to make it more convincing, he would give himself away. He was not a good liar, though he hoped to improve with practice.

In any case, what he had told Molton was perfectly true. Sadler only wished it were the whole truth, and not a mere five per cent of it.

"I was wondering how we're going to get through those mountains," he remarked, pointing to the burning peaks ahead. "Do we go over--or under?"

"Over," said Molton. "They look spectacular, but they're really not so big. Wait till you see the Leibnitz Mountains or the Oberth Range. They're twice as high."

These are quite good enough to start with, thought Sadler. The low-slung monorail car, straddling its single track, bored through the shadows on a slowly rising course. In the darkness around them, dimly seen crags and cliffs rushed forward with explosive swiftness, then vanished astern. Sadler realized that probably nowhere else could one travel at such velocities so close to the ground. No jet liner, far above the clouds of Earth, ever gave such an impression of sheer speed as this.

If it had been day, Sadler could have seen the prodigies of engineering that had flung this track across the foothills of the Apennines. But the darkness veiled the gossamer bridges and the canyon-fringing curves; he saw only the approaching peaks, still magically afloat upon the sea of night that lapped around them.

Then, far to the east, a burning bow peeped above the edge of the Moon. They had risen out of shadow, had joined the mountains in their glory and overtaken the sun itself. Sadler looked away from the glare which flooded the cabin, and for the first time saw clearly the man standing by his side.

Doctor (or would it be Professor?) Molton was in the early fifties, but his hair was quite black and very abundant. He had one of those strikingly ugly faces that somehow immediately inspire confidence. Here, one felt, was the humorous, worldly-wise philosopher, the modern Socrates, sufficiently detached to give unbiased advice to all, yet by no means aloof from human contact. The heart of gold beneath the rugged exterior, Sadler thought to himself, and flinched mentally at the triteness of the phrase.

Their eyes met in the silent appraisal of two men who know that their future business will bring them together again. Then Molton smiled, wrinkling a face that was almost as craggy as the surrounding moonscape.

"Must be your first dawn on the Moon. If you can call this a dawn, of course--anyway, it's a sunrise. Pity it'll only last ten minutes--we'll be over the top then and back into night. Then you'll have to wait two weeks to see the sun again."

"Doesn't it get a trifle--boring--being cooped up for fourteen days?" asked Sadler. No sooner had he spoken the words than he realized that he had probably made a ...

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