

A nice little speculation

Lighting his pipe, Matthew Ryan leaned back against the cool rock, breathed smoke into the night air and watched its curling shape outlined against the starry sky. Beside him, visible only by the dim glow of the ship's night beacon, sat Dr. Ralph Fieldston, official healer to the crew of the interplanetary testing service ship *Observer*. The two had been sitting silently for some time, a pastime both practiced and enjoyed during the free night hours on these strange planets. The exploration of a new planet was interesting intellectual work, but relaxing in the cool darkness of an alien world, hearing night sounds or night silences other men had never heard, being aware of contact with surroundings that were new, unsensed by men before them: this was a pastime that appealed to the emotions, calmed the spirit and brought a feeling of comfortable peace that both men enjoyed.

Dr. Fieldston was the first to break the silence.

"Matt, I hear you gave your report to Captain Andrews today. Mind if I ask what your recommendation was?"

Ryan exhaled a slow stream of smoke, watched it fade into the night before answering.

"What do you think it was, Ralph?"

"You're the ecologist, Matt, I'm just a physician and damned glad I'm not in your shoes," the doctor answered, smiling.

Thus begins a short-story that's called *A Nice Little Niche*. Some people, myself included, can't help wondering if this story was by Edmund, although, interestingly, the author is given as Herbert L. Cooper. To those of you who have read a lot of Edmund's work, particularly short-stories such as *Welcome Home*, and *The Enlightened Ones*, the lines I've given above may well seem very Edmundesque; indeed, the whole scene seems to be very typical Edmund style. The names: Ryan, Matthew, Andrews, Dr. Fieldston, Ralph, all seem like likely Edmund names. *Observer* the name of their ship, also seems like it could be the sort of name Edmund might give a spaceship; and that one of the men is smoking, on another planet, and that one of them uses the phrase 'damn glad' - the whole story just says Edmund all over it.

Basically, without giving too much away (to those tempted to track the story down) the crew become afflicted by a 'bug' that makes them ill.

Another character, the doctor's assistant, is called Henderson, and others are Johnson, Hall, Dingle.

As in *Ferry Rocket*, communications within the ship utilize a tube system whereby messages are 'shot' through to different parts of the ship. 'Just then a small packet of papers dropped onto the doctor's desk from a delivery tube.' Also, reference is made to the guys at 'bac-tee', which seems somewhat Edmundesque.

Generally, the story has a lot of dialogue, and a lot of this is quite scientific, some of it of a medical bent, and in this way, although speculative in nature the story can be regarded too as hard SF. In some ways, the story is a bit like an early version of the *Expendables* books, but without the frank discussions of non-PC topics.

It doesn't look like Herbert L. Cooper ever wrote anything else. I have tried to find other titles by him. If anyone can tell me more about him, please post

something up on this site. Anyway, for those who like the style of Edmund's SF stories, particularly the ones involving spaceships visiting new planets, I thoroughly recommend A Nice Little Niche. I don't know if it's Edmund's, or not, but it's a damn good story and very much in his style.

It was in Astounding Science Fiction, British Edition, Volume X11, No. 8, August 1956. Other stories are by Murray Leinster (Exploration Team), Algis Budrys (Man In The Sky), Eric Frank Russell (Minor Ingredient), and the second of a three-parter, Double Star by Robert Heinlein. Thanks to Jon for sending me the story. In the bit I've quoted, I've edited out a mistake.

The Cloud Walker

I remember very clearly the time Edmund told me that he was dying. We were driving back home, I sitting in the back of the car. We came to the dark corner by The Kennels, where there are lots of yew trees, and he told me that the doctor had told him he had but five years left to live.

In Almost Tomorrow, and my piece about commandos, I've used such terms as 'prophesy', 'clairvoyant', 'second sight' in connection with him, and elsewhere here have indicated Edmund's interest in numerology. Alas, what I had to say on the subject in Almost Tomorrow was edited a bit.

I write my dreams down and have been doing so for years, so I know that there have been instances where I have dreamed about something that subsequently happened. Maybe it was the same with Dad. I know of a dream he had about someone in his family that from that point onwards greatly affected his relationship with that child - and not in a good way at all. Did he feel threatened, because in the dream that person had seemed threatening? Anyway, back to The Cloud Walker.

On the second page of Chapter 3, Hobart, the creative type who drinks a lot, knows that the 'summers left to him would not reach double figures'. But he was 'determined to live at least the eight years' that his apprentice, Kieron, needed to become established. That is: he was determined to live at least eight more years, but he knew he would not see ten summers.

Edmund wrote The Cloud Walker in 1972, knowing that it would be published in 1973. Jason was nine in 1973, and eight years later, seventeen in 1981, by which time he'd have passed the age (sixteen) when he could leave school. I am not saying that the hero, Kieron, is based on my brother, and indeed, Edmund makes this clear too by having Kieron at the end of the novel have a son called Jason.

So, when The Cloud Walker was published in 1973, did Edmund already know that he would die in nine years time, before summer, but was determined to live at least as long as it took to see the last of his children finish school? He died nine years later, in early March.

This review of The Cloud Walker was in The Sunday Times, midsummer's day, 1973. 'After self-destruction of two world technological civilizations, a medieval society ruled by the anti-machine Luddite Church grows up in Britain. Kieron, the Cloud Walker, dreams heretically of flying. His ingenious struggles against 'religious' orthodoxy and brutal pirates makes engrossing reading.'

And, from cloud walkers to sky walkers. Having read Five To Twelve a few times,

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I often wonder where young Luke Skywalker of Star Wars fame got his surname from, when, at the end of Chapter 7, Juno watches Dion's antics as he flies up in the sky: she does not care much about what she sees, having previously had experiences with 'off-lane sky walkers bent upon their own destruction'. Another phrase mentioned in the novel is 'total recall'.

Shaun