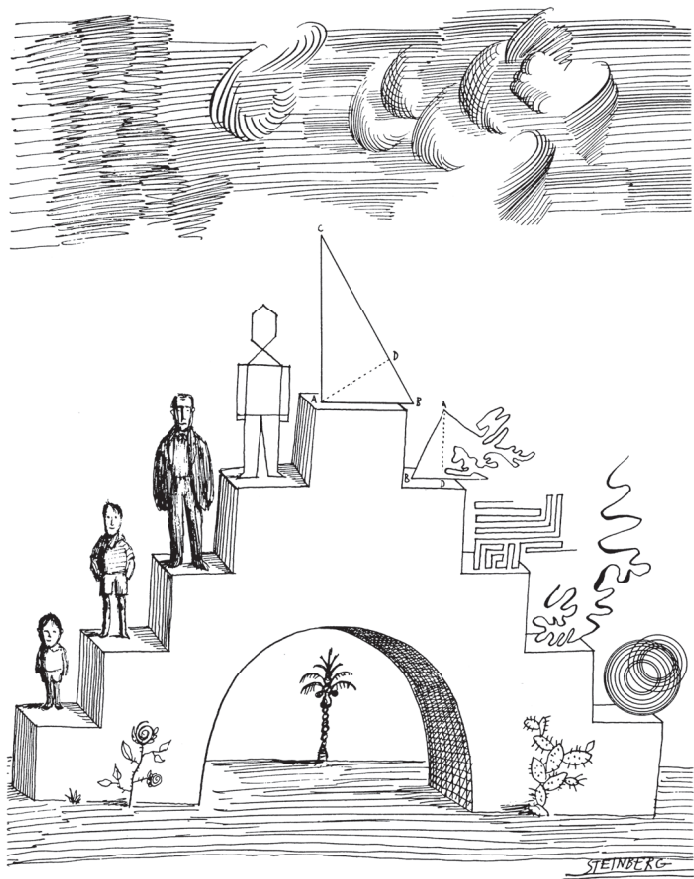


Untouched by Human Hands

Robert
Sheckley



Untouched by Human Hands

Robert Sheckley (1928–2005) was born in New York City and raised in New Jersey. He joined the army and served in Korea in 1946–8, where, he said, he worked as ‘38th parallel guard, assistant newspaper editor, contracts and payroll clerk and, finally, guitarist in an army dance band’. On returning home to New York, he gained a degree and took a job in an aircraft factory, which he gave up on selling his first story to a magazine. His work appeared regularly in science-fiction magazines such as *Galaxy*, *Fantastic* and *Astounding Science Fiction* throughout the 1950s and 1960s. In 1965, the story ‘Seventh Victim’, from his debut collection *Untouched by Human Hands*, was made into the cult classic film *The 10th Victim*, starring Marcello Mastroianni and Ursula Andress. In total, Sheckley wrote more than four hundred short stories and fifteen novels, including the classic *Dimension of Miracles* (1968). In 2001, he was made Author Emeritus by the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America.

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Untouched by Human Hands

ROBERT SHECKLEY



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To Barbara

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The Monsters

Cordovir and Hum stood on the rocky mountain-top, watching the new thing happen. Both felt rather good about it. It was undoubtedly the newest thing that had happened for some time.

‘By the way the sunlight glints from it,’ Hum said, ‘I’d say it is made of metal.’

‘I’ll accept that,’ Cordovir said, ‘but what holds it up in the air?’

They both stared intently down to the valley where the new thing was happening. A pointed object was hovering over the ground. From one end of it poured a substance resembling fire.

‘It’s balancing on the fire,’ Hum said. ‘That should be apparent even to your old eyes.’

Cordovir lifted himself higher on his thick tail, to get a better look. The object settled to the ground and the fire stopped.

‘Shall we go down and have a closer look?’ Hum asked.

‘All right. I think we have time – wait! What day is this?’

Hum calculated silently, then said, ‘The fifth day of Luggat.’

‘Damn!’ Cordovir said. ‘I have to go home and kill my wife.’

‘It’s a few hours before sunset,’ Hum said. ‘I think you have time to do both.’

Cordovir wasn’t sure. ‘I’d hate to be late.’

‘Well, then, you know how fast I am,’ Hum said. ‘If it gets late, I’ll hurry back and kill her myself. How about that?’

‘That’s very decent of you.’ Cordovir thanked the younger man and together they slithered down the steep mountain-side.

In front of the metal object both men halted and stood up on their tails.

‘Rather bigger than I thought,’ Cordovir said, measuring the metal object with his eye. He estimated that it was slightly longer than their village, and almost half as wide. They crawled a circle around it, observing that the metal was tooled, presumably by human tentacles.

In the distance the smaller sun had set.

‘I think we had better get back,’ Cordovir said, noting the cessation of light.

‘I still have plenty of time.’ Hum flexed his muscles complacently.

‘Yes, but a man likes to kill his own wife.’

‘As you wish.’ They started off to the village at a brisk pace.

In his house, Cordovir’s wife was finishing supper. She had her back to the door, as etiquette required. Cordovir killed her with a single flying slash of his tail, dragged her body outside, and sat down to eat.

After meal and meditation he went to the Gathering. Hum, with the impatience of youth, was already there, telling of the metal object. He probably bolted his supper, Cordovir thought with mild distaste.

After the youngster had finished, Cordovir gave his own observations. The only thing he added to Hum's account was an idea: that the metal object might contain intelligent beings.

'What makes you think so?' Mishill, another elder, asked.

'The fact that there was fire from the object as it came down,' Cordovir said, 'joined to the fact that the fire stopped after the object was on the ground. Some being, I contend, was responsible for turning it off.'

'Not necessarily,' Mishill said. The village men talked about it late into the night. Then they broke up the meeting, buried the various murdered wives, and went to their homes.

Lying in the darkness, Cordovir discovered that he hadn't made up his mind as yet about the new thing. Presuming it contained intelligent beings, would they be moral? Would they have a sense of right and wrong? Cordovir doubted it, and went to sleep.

The next morning every male in the village went to the metal object. This was proper, since the functions of males were to examine new things and to limit the female population. They formed a circle around it, speculating on what might be inside.

'I believe they will be human beings,' Hum's elder brother Esktel said. Cordovir shook his entire body in disagreement.

'Monsters, more likely,' he said. 'If you take into account—'

'Not necessarily,' Esktel said. 'Consider the logic of our physical development! A single focusing eye—'

‘But in the great Outside,’ Cordovir said, ‘there may be many strange races, most of them non-human. In the infinitude—’

‘Still,’ Esktel put in, ‘the logic of our—’

‘As I was saying,’ Cordovir went on, ‘the chance is infinitesimal that they would resemble us. Their vehicle, for example. Would we build—’

‘But on strictly logical grounds,’ Esktel said, ‘you can see—’

That was the third time Cordovir had been interrupted. With a single movement of his tail he smashed Esktel against the metal object. Esktel fell to the ground, dead.

‘I have often considered my brother a boor,’ Hum said. ‘What were you saying?’

But Cordovir was interrupted again. A piece of metal set in the greater piece of metal squeaked, turned and lifted, and a creature came out.

Cordovir saw at once that he had been right. The thing that crawled out of the hole was twin-tailed. It was covered to its top with something partially metal and partially hide. And its colour! Cordovir shuddered.

The thing was the colour of wet, flayed flesh.

All the villagers had backed away, waiting to see what the thing would do. At first it didn’t do anything. It stood on the metal surface, and a bulbous object that topped its body moved from side to side. But there were no accompanying body movements to give the gesture meaning. Finally, the thing raised both tentacles and made noises.

‘Do you think it’s trying to communicate?’ Mishill asked softly.

Three more creatures appeared in the metal hole, carrying metal sticks in their tentacles. The things made noises at each other.

‘They are decidedly not human,’ Cordovir said firmly. ‘The next question is, are they moral beings?’ One of the things crawled down the metal side and stood on the ground. The rest pointed their metal sticks at the ground. It seemed to be some sort of religious ceremony.

‘Could anything so hideous be moral?’ Cordovir asked, his hide twitching with distaste. Upon closer inspection, the creatures were more horrible than could be dreamed. The bulbous object on their bodies just might be a head, Cordovir decided, even though it was unlike any head he had ever seen. But in the middle of that head, instead of a smooth, characterful surface was a raised ridge. Two round indentures were on either side of it, and two more knobs on either side of that. And in the lower half of the head – if such it was – a pale, reddish slash ran across. Cordovir supposed this might be considered a mouth, with some stretching of the imagination.

Nor was this all, Cordovir observed. The things were so constructed as to show the presence of bone. When they moved their limbs, it wasn’t a smooth, flowing gesture, the fluid motion of human beings. Rather, it was the jerky snap of a tree limb.

‘God above,’ Gilrig, an intermediate-age male, gasped. ‘We should kill them and put them out of their misery.’ Other men seemed to feel the same way, and the villagers flowed forward.

‘Wait!’ one of the youngsters shouted. ‘Let’s communicate with them, if such is possible! They might still

be moral beings. The Outside is wide, remember, and anything is possible.'

Cordovir argued for immediate extermination, but the villagers stopped and discussed it among themselves. Hum, with characteristic bravado, flowed up to the thing on the ground.

'Hello,' Hum said.

The thing said something.

'I can't understand it,' Hum said, and started to crawl back. The creature waved its jointed tentacles – if they were tentacles – and motioned at one of the suns. He made a sound.

'Yes, it is warm, isn't it?' Hum said cheerfully.

The creature pointed at the ground, and made another sound.

'We haven't had especially good crops this year,' Hum said conversationally.

The creature pointed at itself and made a sound.

'I agree,' Hum said. 'You're as ugly as sin.'

Presently the villagers grew hungry and crawled back to the village. Hum stayed and listened to the things making noises at him, and Cordovir waited nervously for Hum.

'You know,' Hum said, after he rejoined Cordovir, 'I think they want to learn our language. Or want me to learn theirs.'

'Don't do it!' Cordovir said, glimpsing the misty edge of a great evil.

'I believe I will,' Hum murmured. Together they climbed the cliffs back to the village.

That afternoon Cordovir went to the surplus female pen and formally asked a young woman if she would

reign in his house for twenty-five days. Naturally, the woman accepted gratefully.

On the way home, Cordovir met Hum, going to the pen.

‘Just killed my wife,’ Hum said, superfluously, since why else would he be going to the surplus female stock?

‘Are you going back to the creatures tomorrow?’ Cordovir asked.

‘I might,’ Hum answered, ‘if nothing new presents itself.’

‘The thing to find out is if they are moral beings or monsters.’

‘Right!’ Hum said, and slithered on.

There was a Gathering that evening, after supper. All the villagers agreed that the things were non-human. Cordovir argued strenuously that their very appearance belied any possibility of humanity. Nothing so hideous could have moral standards, a sense of right and wrong, and above all, a notion of truth.

The young men didn’t agree, probably because there had been a dearth of new things recently. They pointed out that the metal object was obviously a product of intelligence. Intelligence axiomatically means standards of differentiation. Differentiation implies right and wrong.

It was a delicious argument. Olgolet contradicted Arast and was killed by him. Mavrt, in an unusual fit of anger for so placid an individual, killed the three Holian brothers and was himself killed by Hum, who was feeling pettish. Even the surplus females could be heard arguing about it, in their pen in a corner of the village.

Weary and happy, the villagers went to sleep.

The next few weeks saw no end of the argument. Life went on much as usual, though. The women went out in the morning, gathered food, prepared it, and laid eggs. The eggs were taken to the surplus females to be hatched. As usual, about eight females were hatched to every male. On the twenty-fifth day of each marriage, or a little earlier, each man killed his woman and took another.

The males went down to the ship to listen to Hum learning the language; then, when that grew boring, they returned to their customary wandering through hills and forests, looking for new things.

The alien monsters stayed close to their ship, coming out only when Hum was there.

Twenty-four days after the arrival of the non-humans, Hum announced that he could communicate with them, after a fashion.

‘They say they come from far away,’ Hum told the village that evening. ‘They say that they are bisexual, like us, and that they are humans, like us. They say there are reasons for their different appearance, but I couldn’t understand that part of it.’

‘If we accept them as humans,’ Mishill said, ‘then everything they say is true.’

The rest of the villagers shook in agreement.

‘They say that they don’t want to disturb our life, but would be very interested in observing it. They want to come to the village and look around.’

‘I see no reason why not,’ one of the younger men said.

‘No!’ Cordovir shouted. ‘You are letting in evil. These monsters are insidious. I believe that they are capable of – telling an untruth.’ The other elders agreed, but when pressed, Cordovir had no proof to back up this vicious accusation.

‘After all,’ Sil pointed out, ‘just because they look like monsters, you can’t take it for granted that they think like monsters as well.’

‘I can,’ Cordovir said, but he was outvoted.

Hum went on. ‘They have offered me – or us, I’m not sure which – various metal objects which they say will do various things. I ignored this breach of etiquette, since I considered they didn’t know any better.’

Cordovir nodded. The youngster was growing up. He was showing, at long last, that he had some manners.

‘They want to come to the village tomorrow.’

‘No!’ Cordovir shouted, but the vote was against him.

‘Oh, by the way,’ Hum said, as the meeting was breaking up. ‘They have several females among them. The ones with the very red mouths are females. It will be interesting to see how the males kill them. Tomorrow is the twenty-fifth day since they came.’

The next day the things came to the village, crawling slowly and laboriously over the cliffs. The villagers were able to observe the extreme brittleness of their limbs, the terrible awkwardness of their motions.

‘No beauty whatsoever,’ Cordovir muttered. ‘And they all look alike.’

In the village the things acted without any decency. They crawled into huts and out of huts. They jabbered

at the surplus female pen. They picked up eggs and examined them. They peered at the villagers through black things and shiny things.

In mid-afternoon, Rantan, an elder, decided it was about time he killed his woman. So he pushed the thing who was examining his hut aside and smashed his female to death.

Instantly, two of the things started jabbering at each other, hurrying out of the hut.

One had the red mouth of a female.

‘He must have remembered it was time to kill his own woman,’ Hum observed. The villagers waited, but nothing happened.

‘Perhaps,’ Rantan said, ‘perhaps he would like someone to kill her for him. It might be the custom of their land.’

Without further ado Rantan slashed down the female with his tail.

The male creature made a terrible noise and pointed a metal stick at Rantan. Rantan collapsed, dead.

‘That’s odd,’ Mishill said. ‘I wonder if that denotes disapproval?’

The things from the metal object – eight of them – were in a tight little circle. One was holding the dead female, and the rest were pointing the metal sticks on all sides. Hum went up and asked them what was wrong.

‘I don’t understand,’ Hum said, after he spoke with them. ‘They used words I haven’t learned. But I gather that their emotion is one of reproach.’

The monsters were backing away. Another villager, deciding it was about time, killed his wife who was standing

in a doorway. The group of monsters stopped and jabbered at each other. Then they motioned to Hum.

Hum's body motion was incredulous after he had talked with them.

'If I understood right,' Hum said, 'they are ordering us not to kill any more of our women.'

'What!' Cordovir and a dozen others shouted.

'I'll ask them again.' Hum went back into conference with the monsters who were waving metal sticks in their tentacles.

'That's right,' Hum said. Without further preamble he flipped his tail, throwing one of the monsters across the village square. Immediately the others began to point their sticks while retreating rapidly.

After they were gone, the villagers found that seventeen males were dead. Hum, for some reason, had been missed.

'Now will you believe me?' Cordovir shouted. 'The creatures told a *deliberate untruth*. They said they wouldn't molest us and then they proceed to kill seventeen of us. Not only an amoral act – but a *concerted death effort*!'

It was almost past human understanding.

'A deliberate untruth!' Cordovir shouted the blasphemy, sick with loathing. Men rarely discussed the possibility of anyone telling an untruth.

The villagers were beside themselves with anger and revulsion, once they realized the full concept of an *untruthful* creature. And, added to that was the monsters' concerted death effort.

It was like the most horrible nightmare come true. Suddenly it became apparent that these creatures didn't

kill females. Undoubtedly they allowed them to spawn unhampered. The thought of that was enough to make a strong man retch.

The surplus females broke out of their pens and, joined by the wives, demanded to know what was happening. When they were told, they were twice as indignant as the men, such being the nature of women.

‘Kill them!’ the surplus females roared. ‘Don’t let them change our ways! Don’t let them introduce immorality!’

‘It’s true,’ Hiram said sadly. ‘I should have guessed it.’

‘They must be killed at once,’ a female shouted. Being surplus, she had no name at present, but she made up for that in blazing personality.

‘We women desire only to live moral, decent lives, hatching eggs in the pen until our time of marriage comes. And then twenty-five ecstatic days! How could we desire more? These monsters will destroy our way of life. They will make us as terrible as they.’

‘Now do you understand?’ Cordovir screamed at the men. ‘I warned you, I presented it to you, and you ignored me. Young men must listen to old men in time of crisis.’ In this rage he killed two youngsters with a blow of his tail. The villagers applauded.

‘Drive them out,’ Cordovir shouted. ‘Before they corrupt us!’

All the females rushed off to kill the monsters.

‘They have death-sticks,’ Hum observed. ‘Do the females know?’

‘I don’t believe so,’ Cordovir said. He was completely calm now. ‘You’d better go and tell them.’