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Allegorical short stories are about as out of style these days as the political poem or pamphlet, and who is to say that the world is a better place as a result? Yet, as -we have already noted, there is more than a hint of allegory in the best science fiction. Mr. Smith's story is both brief and entertaining so that his allegory can only be accepted as a happy bonus.

IN THE IMAGICON

George Henry Smith

Dandor leaned back on the warm silk of the lounge and stretched, letting his eyes wander up to the high ceiling of his palace and then drop down to the blonde who knelt at his feet. She was putting the finishing touches on his carefully manicured toenails while the voluptuous brunette with the mobile hips and the full red mouth leaned forward to pop another grape into his mouth.

He studied the blonde, whose name was Cecily, and thought about the other service she had performed for him last night. That had been nice . . . very nice. But today he felt bored with her, just as he was bored with the brunette whose name he couldn't remember at the moment, and with the cuddly redheaded twins and with ...

Dandor yawned. Why were they all so damn worshipful and always so eager to please?

It was almost, he thought with a wry grin, as though they were products of his imagination, or rather and he almost laughed aloud of that greatest of all man's inventions, the Imagicon.

"There now, don't they look nice?" Cecily said, sitting back to admire his finished pedicure with pride.

Dandor looked at the ten shining objects of her gaze and grimaced. It made him feel pretty silly.

Then Cecily made him feel even sillier by leaning over and kissing his right foot with passionate red lips. "Oh, Dandor! Dandor, I love you so much," she murmured.

Dandor resisted the temptation to use one of his newly pampered feet to give her a healthy kick on her round little bottom. He resisted it because even at times like this, when his life with these women began to seem unreal, he tried to be as kind as possible to them. Even when their worship and adoration threatened to bore him to death, he tried to be kind.

So instead of kicking Cecily, he yawned.

The effect was almost the same. Her blue eyes widened in fear, and the brunette raised wide eyes from the grape she was peeling, her lips starting to tremble.

"You ... you're going to leave us, aren't you?" Cecily asked.

He yawned again and patted her head absentmindedly. "Just for a little while, darling."

"Oh, Dandor!" the brunette wailed. "Don't you love us?"

"Of course I do, but"

"Dandor, please don't go," Cecily begged. "We'll do anything to make you happy!"

"I know," he said, getting to his feet and stretching. "You're both very sweet. But somehow I just feel drawn to"

"Please stay," the brunette pleaded, falling at his feet.

"We'll have a party with champagne. Any kind of pleasure you desire. We'll go get the other girls ... I'll dance for you..."

"I'm sorry, Daphne," he said, finally remembering her name, "but you girls are beginning to seem unreal to me. And when that happens, I must go."

"But" Cecily was crying so hard she could hardly get the words out-"when you leave us . . . it's a-almost . . . as th-though we were . . . turned off."

Her words saddened him a little because in a way it was true. When he left it was almost like turning them off. But true or not, he couldn't do anything about it because he felt himself being drawn irresistibly toward that other world.

He took one last look around at the incredible luxury of his palatial palace, at the beauty of his women and at the warm sun shining through the windows, and then he was gone.

The first thing he heard when he came out of the Imagicon was the howling of the wind and the first thing he felt was the numbing cold.

The next thing that assaulted his ears was the rasping screech of his wife's voice. "So you finally came out of it, did you?" Nona was yelling. "It's about time, you good-for-nothing little runt!"

So he was really back on Nestrond, back on the coldest hell of a colonial world in any universe. He had often thought that he would never return. But here he was . . . back on Nestrond and back with Nona.

"You've been gone long enough!" Nona said. She was a big, rawboned woman with stringy black hair, a broad, flat face with thin lips and uneven, yellowish teeth.

God but she's ugly, he thought as he stared at her. Beside her, Cecily and the others are goddesses.

"It's a good thing you got back 'cause the ice wolves *is* actin' up and we need frozen ice moss for the fire and . . ."

Dandor just stood there and listened as she went on with the long list of chores that needed doing. Why, he wondered, didn't she get one other boy friends from down at the mines to do these things? He knew without being told that her lovers had been around while he was "gone." Nona was as faithless as she was ugly. And since there were twenty men to every woman on this planet, she had plenty of opportunity.

"... and the cattleshed needs a new roof," she finished. When he didn't answer immediately, she thrust her face close to his. "Did you hear me? I said there's things to be done!"

"Yes, I heard you," he said.

"Then don't stand there like an idiot. Sit down and eat your breakfast and then get out and get to work!"

Breakfast was a thick, greasy piece of rancid pork and a bowl of lukewarm grits. Dandor choked on it but finally forced it down. Then he put on his thermal suit and furs and started for the door.

"Here, stupid!" Nona said, picking up a face mask from a pile of litter *en* the table and fimgmgitat him. "**You** want to freeze *yom* nose off?"

He slapped the mask on quickly so she wouldn't see the anger on his face, opened the door and plunged out. The wind hit him in the face, hurling jagged ice crystals against his mask. Nestrond! My God, why Nestrond? He thought longingly of the comparative warmth of the cabin as he stared out at the bleak landscape. He thought of the black box that was the Imagicon. It sat in the one clear corner of the cabin and Was the only way back to . . .

But no, he couldn't go back yet. There were too many things to be done here. So with an axe over his shoulder, he started across the frozen waste to the ancient peat bog where they cut their fuel.

All morning long, with the wind raging at him and the bitter cold making every breath an aching torment in his chest, he cut and stacked the frozen peat. Then when the pale yellow sun peeked through the clouds of ice crystals for a moment and he saw it was almost directly overhead, he tied up a large bundle of the brick-like slabs and hoisted it onto his shoulder for the trip back to the miserable huts of Nestrond.

Nona slapped a bowl of thin soup and a piece of stale bread down in front of him and called it lunch. He ate in silence and then went out behind the cabin to spend the afternoon digging the new cesspool.

This made the work of the morning seem like a rest cure. The ground had been frozen since Nestrond first started to roll around its inadequate sun. By evening, his back and legs and thighs ached tormentingly. With only a foot of ground excavated, he had to give up when night fell and staggered back toward the cabin with only one thought in mind ... sleep.

The howl that wrenched him from his first troubled slumber seemed to come from the deepest pits of hell.

"Wha . . . what's that?" he asked.

"Ice wolves, you fool!" Nona screeched. "They're after the cattleshed! Get out there and stop them!"

Dandor staggered to his feet and fumbled for his clothes as another howl rent the night. He reached for his laser rifle while Nona yelled again. "Hurry up! Those things can rip logs off a shed like it was kindlin'."

He was out the door then with flashlight in one hand and rifle in the other. He saw them at once. There were two of the six-legged terrors. One of them was raised up on its four back legs, its massive jaws ripping at the timber of the shed. Dandor could hear the terrified bellow of the cattle inside.

He ploughed through the snow toward the creature. It heard him and turned fiery red eyes in his direction. It kept on slashing at the logs for a second and then whirled and came at him in, great leaping bounds.

Caught by surprise, he had no time to drop the flashlight and lift the laser rifle to fringe position. He had to fire from the hip and the beam caught the monster in the shoulder.

It wasn't good enough. He sidestepped as the huge body hurtled past him and then blasted its head off. "Then he almost died himself as the decapitated thing went slithering through the snow, spurting blood everywhere. He almost died because for a split second he had forgotten its mate.

He remembered only when the creature struck him from behind and sent him sprawling on the frozen ground. The monstrous beast was on top of him and he screamed as a claw ripped flesh away from his thigh and the powerful jaws moved toward his throat.

The flashlight had been flung from his hand but the real rifle was still resting in its sling attached to his shoulder. He found the trigger and fired at full power. The laser beam tore off a leg and haunch of the ice wolf, and it fell away from him as he blasted it again. Then blackness closed in over him.

When he came to, he was lying on the table in the cabin. Nona and a strange man were bending over him.

"Well, you got yourself in a pretty mess this time!" Nona

said as his eyes opened.

"That leg is going to have to come off," the stranger said.

"Are you a doctor?" Dandor asked in a husky croak.

"Only one this side of Alpha Centaury," the man said.

"The pain . . . can't you give me something for the pain?"

"I gave you the last morphine I had. Back on Earth we might have saved that leg, but here" He made a helpless gesture.

White-hot flame seemed to envelop the slashed leg. Dandor winced and then saw the half smile on Nona's lips as she said, "With no more morphine or anything else, cutting off that leg is gonna hurt like hell, ain't it. Doc?"

"I got some whiskey in my car," the doctor said. "I'll go get it."

HewMtlIcfcblng off, and Nona leaned overDandor and looted iafO his eyes. "It's really gonna hurt, sweetie. It's gOnna hurt like it hurt me all those times when you went off ted left me. When you went off in your black box."

"No, Nona, no! It didn't hurt you. You're not" He almost said she wasn't capable of being hurt. But he stopped, because he didn't know for sure if that were true.

"With only one leg, you're not gonna be able to get in that damn thing by yourself," she said. "You're gonna have to stay here and be nice to me."

"Nona!! No, you don't understand!" He started to plead with her, but then the doctor was back with a quart of whiskey and his black bag.

"Here, drink this fast," the man said, handing Dandor the bottle.

He drank deeply and quickly. But it didn't help much.

As the doctor cut and sawed, Dandor was sure his screams would burst his skull. At times he wondered why his curses didn't snap the straps that held him down or drive off the two tormentors bending over him.

"Well, I guess that's it," the doctor was saying when the agony dragged him up into consciousness again. "We're gonna have to cauterize this stump or he'll bleed to death. I ain't got nuthin' but fire to do it with either. Come help me heat up the poker, woman."

Dandor came fully awake as he caught the over-the-shoulder look Nona gave him and saw her eyes dart toward the Imagicon. It was almost as though she had said aloud, "You'll belong to me now . . . only to me. There won't be no more of that goin' off."

But she couldn't! How could she? Through the haze of morphine, alcohol and pain, Dandor tried to ask himself ... why should she treat him ths way? He couldn't think of any answer.

And as they hurried off to prepare the cauterizing iron for the bloody stump of his leg, the black coffin-like shape of the Imagicon filled his eyes and his mind.

If the pain hadn't already been more than reason could bear, he wouldn't have had the courage to roll off the table and begin crawling toward the black box, leaving a trail of blood behind him. The black box. Somehow he knew it represented a surcease from pain, a promise of ultimate safety.

He reached it without their being aware of his actions, and by making a supreme effort, he pulled himself up high enough to press his palm against the sensor that identified him instantly and was the only thing in this or any other universe that could open it.

He collapsed, more dead than alive, into the Imagicon and it closed silently over him.

Then there was a bright, warm world around him, and bright young faces above him.

"Oh, Dandor, darling! Darling," Cecily cried, putting her soft, warm arms around him.

"Sweetheart, you've come back!" Daphne whispered.

"We're so happy to see you!" the redheaded Terri murmured.

"We're so happy to see you!" her twin, Jerri, repeated.

"And I'm the happiest of all!" Dandor assured them, gazing down at his leg . . . at his perfectly whole, intact leg which felt no pain whatever. "Thank God! Thank God, I'm back!"

The Imagicon had worked! It had worked once again! It had taken him to the world of imagination and back again to reality . . . to wonderful, wonderful reality!

Dandor sat up and looked around at his own warm, marvelous world. It was the world of Earth in 22300, the world a hundred years after The Plague. The Plague which had attacked the male genes and reduced the male population to a few thousand and made each man the center of an eager and worshipful harem of women.

Many of the surviving men had not been able to stand the strain. Too many years of adoration, too many years of having everything and every woman they wanted had proved too much for them.

Then there had come the Imagicon, the invention that made any world a man desired seem absolutely real. Some men had used it to create even more exotic and wonderful worlds than the one they lived in, but that had been only more of a good thing and had made them more dissatisfied than ever.

Dandor had been wise. With his Imagicon, he had created an entirely different kind of world . . . a world of cold and terror called Nestrond. Dandor had known a great truth.

What good was paradise without something to compare it to? Without a taste of hell from time to time, how could a man appreciate heaven?