

The Most Sentimental Man

Evelyn E. Smith

The lower half of the image features a teal background with a complex, abstract pattern of purple lines and shapes. The pattern consists of various geometric elements: horizontal and vertical lines, diagonal lines, and several triangles of different sizes and orientations. Some lines are solid, while others are thicker or have a slightly irregular, hand-drawn appearance. The overall effect is a dense, layered composition of geometric forms.

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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE MOST SENTIMENTAL MAN ***

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Johnson knew he was annoying the younger man, who so obviously lived by the regulations in the Colonial Officer's Manual and lacked the imagination to understand why he was doing this.... Evelyn E. Smith is famous for her bitter-sweet stories of the worlds of Tomorrow.

**the
most
sentimental
man**

by EVELYN E. SMITH

Once these irritating farewells were over with, he could begin to live as he wished and as he'd dreamed.

JOHNSON went to see the others off at Idlewild. He knew they'd expect him to and, since it would be the last conventional gesture he'd have to make, he might as well conform to their notions of what was right and proper.

For the past few centuries the climate had been getting hotter; now, even though it was not yet June, the day was uncomfortably warm. The sun's rays glinting off the bright metal flanks of the ship dazzled his eyes, and perspiration made his shirt stick to his shoulder blades beneath the jacket that the formality of the occasion had required. He wished Clifford would hurry up and get the leave-taking over with.

But, even though Clifford was undoubtedly even more anxious than he to finish with all this ceremony and take off, he wasn't the kind of man to let inclination influence his actions. "Sure you won't change your mind and come with us?"

Johnson shook his head.

The young man looked at him—hatred for the older man's complication of what should have been a simple departure showing through the pellicule of politeness. He was young for, since this trip had only slight historical importance and none of any other kind, the authorities had felt a junior officer entirely sufficient. It was clear, however, that Clifford attributed his commandership to his merits, and he was very conscious of his great responsibility.

"We have plenty of room on the ship," he persisted. "There weren't many left to go. We could take you easily enough, you know."

Johnson made a negative sign again. The rays of the sun beating full upon his head made apparent the grey that usually blended into the still-thick blond hair.

Yet, though past youth, he was far from being an old man. "I've made my decision," he said, remembering that anger now was pointless.

"If it's—if you're just too proud to change your mind," the young commander said, less certainly, "I'm sure everyone will understand if ... if ..."

Johnson smiled. "No, it's just that I want to stay—that's all."

But the commander's clear blue eyes were still baffled, uneasy, as though he felt he had not done the utmost that duty—not duty to the service but to humanity—required. That was the trouble with people, Johnson thought: when they were most well-meaning they became most troublesome.

Clifford lowered his voice to an appropriately funeral hush, as a fresh thought obviously struck him. "I know, of course, that your loved ones are buried here and perhaps you feel it's your duty to stay with them...?"

At this Johnson almost forgot that anger no longer had any validity. By "loved ones" Clifford undoubtedly had meant Elinor and Paul. It was true that Johnson had had a certain affection for his wife and son when they were alive; now that they were dead they represented an episode in his life that had not, perhaps, been unpleasant, but was certainly over and done with now.

Did Clifford think *that* was his reason for remaining? Why, he must believe Johnson to be the most sentimental man on Earth. "And, come to think of it," Johnson said to himself, amused, "I am—or soon will be—just that."

The commander was still unconsciously pursuing the same train of thought. "It does seem incredible," he said in a burst of boyish candor that did not become him, for he was not that young, "that you'd want to stay alone on a whole planet. I mean to say—entirely alone.... There'll never be another ship, you know—at least not in your lifetime."

Johnson knew what the other man was thinking. If there'd been a woman with Johnson now, Clifford might have been able to understand a little better how the other could stick by his decision.

Johnson wriggled, as sweat oozed stickily down his back. "For God's sake," he said silently, "take your silly ship and get the hell off my planet." Aloud he said, "It's a good planet, a little worn-out but still in pretty good shape. Pity you can't trade in an old world like an old car, isn't it?"

"If it weren't so damned far from the center of things," the young man replied, defensively assuming the burden of all civilization, "we wouldn't abandon it. After all, we hate leaving the world on which we originated. But it's a long haul to Alpha Centauri—you know that—and a tremendously expensive one. Keeping up this place solely out of sentiment would be sheer waste—the people would never stand for the tax burden."

"A costly museum, yes," Johnson agreed.

How much longer were these dismal farewells going to continue? How much longer would the young man still feel the need to justify himself? "If only there were others fool enough—if only there were others with you.... But, even if anybody else'd be willing to cut himself off entirely from the rest of the civilized universe, the Earth won't support enough of a population to keep it running. Not according to our present living standards anyway.... Most of its resources are gone, you know—hardly any coal or oil left, and that's not worth digging for when there are better and cheaper fuels in the system."

He was virtually quoting from the *Colonial Officer's Manual*. Were there any people left able to think for themselves, Johnson wondered. Had there ever been? Had he thought for himself in making his decision, or was he merely clinging to a childish dream that all men had had and lost?

"With man gone, Earth will replenish herself," he said aloud. First the vegetation would begin to grow thick. Already it had released itself from the restraint of cultivation; soon it would be spreading out over the continent, overrunning the cities with delicately persistent green tendrils. Some the harsh winters would kill, but others would live on and would multiply. Vines would twist themselves about the tall buildings and tenderly, passionately squeeze them to death ... eventually send them tumbling down. And then the trees would rear themselves in their places.

The swamps that man had filled in would begin to reappear one by one, as the land sank back to a pristine state. The sea would go on changing her boundaries, with no dikes to stop her. Volcanoes would heave up the land into different configurations. The heat would increase until it grew unbearable ... only there would be no one—no human, anyway—to bear it.

Year after year the leaves would wither and fall and decay. Rock would cover them. And some day ... billions of years thence ... there would be coal and oil—and nobody to want them.

"Very likely Earth will replenish herself," the commander agreed, "but not in your time or your children's time.... That is, not in *my* children's time," he added hastily.

The handful of men lined up in a row before the airlock shuffled their feet and allowed their muttering to become a few decibels louder. Clifford looked at his wrist chronometer. Obviously he was no less anxious than the crew to be off, but, for the sake of his conscience, he must make a last try.

"Damn your conscience," Johnson thought. "I hope that for this you feel guilty as hell, that you wake up nights in a cold sweat remembering that you left one man alone on the planet you and your kind discarded. Not that I don't want to stay, mind you, but that I want you to suffer the way you're making me suffer now—having to listen to your platitudes."

The commander suddenly stopped paraphrasing the *Manual*. "Camping out's fun for a week or two, you know, but it's different when it's for a lifetime."

Johnson's fingers curled in his palms ... he was even angrier now that the commander had struck so close to home. Camping out ... was that all he was doing—fulfilling childhood desires, nothing more?

Fortunately Clifford didn't realize that he had scored, and scuttled back to the shelter of the *Manual*. "Perhaps you don't know enough about the new system in Alpha Centauri," he said, a trifle wildly. "It has two suns surrounded by three planets, Thalia, Aglaia, and Euphrosyne. Each of these planets is slightly smaller than Earth, so that the decrease in gravity is just great enough to be pleasant, without being so marked as to be inconvenient. The atmosphere is almost exactly like that of Earth's, except that it contains several beneficial elements which are absent here—and the climate is more temperate. Owing to the fact that the planets are partially shielded from the suns by cloud layers, the temperature—except immediately at the poles and the equators, where it is slightly more extreme—is always equable, resembling that of Southern California...."

"Sounds charming," said Johnson. "I too have read the Colonial Office handouts.... I wonder what the people who wrote them'll do now that there's no longer any necessity for attracting colonists—everybody's already up in Alpha Centauri. Oh, well; there'll be other systems to conquer and colonize."

"The word *conquer* is hardly correct," the commander said stiffly, "since not one of the three planets had any indigenous life forms that was intelligent."

"Or life forms that you recognized as intelligent," Johnson suggested gently. Although why should there be such a premium placed on intelligence, he wondered. Was intelligence the sole criterion on which the right to life and to freedom should be based?

The commander frowned and looked at his chronometer again. "Well," he finally said, "since you feel that way and you're sure you've quite made up your mind, my men *are* anxious to go."

"Of course they are," Johnson said, managing to convey just the right amount of reproach.

Clifford flushed and started to walk away.

"I'll stand out of the way of your jets!" Johnson called after him. "It would be so anticlimactic to have me burned to a crisp after all this. Bon voyage!"

There was no reply.

Johnson watched the silver vessel shoot up into the sky and thought, "Now is the time for me to feel a pang, or even a twinge, but I don't at all. I feel relieved, in fact, but that's probably the result of getting rid of that fool Clifford."

He crossed the field briskly, pulling off his jacket and discarding his tie as he went. His ground car remained where he had parked it—in an area clearly marked *No Parking*.

They'd left him an old car that wasn't worth shipping to the stars. How long it would last was anybody's guess. The government hadn't been deliberately illiberal in leaving him such a shabby vehicle; if there had been any way to ensure a continuing supply of fuel, they would probably have left him a reasonably good one. But, since only a little could be left, allowing him a good car would have been simply an example of conspicuous waste, and the government had always preferred its waste to be inconspicuous.

He drove slowly through the broad boulevards of Long Island, savoring the loneliness. New York as a residential area had been a ghost town for years, since the greater part of its citizens had been among the first to emigrate to the stars. However, since it was the capital of the world and most of the interstellar ships—particularly the last few—had taken off from its spaceports, it had been kept up as an official embarkation center. Thus, paradoxically, it was the last city to be completely evacuated, and so, although the massive but jerry-built apartment

houses that lined the streets were already crumbling, the roads had been kept in fairly good shape and were hardly cracked at all.

Still, here and there the green was pushing its way up in unlikely places. A few more of New York's tropical summers, and Long Island would soon become a wilderness.

The streets were empty, except for the cats sunning themselves on long-abandoned doorsteps or padding about on obscure errands of their own. Perhaps their numbers had not increased since humanity had left the city to them, but there certainly seemed to be more—striped and solid, black and grey and white and tawny—accepting their citizenship with equanimity. They paid no attention to Johnson—they had long since dissociated themselves from a humanity that had not concerned itself greatly over their welfare. On the other hand, neither he nor the surface car appeared to startle them; the old ones had seen such before, and to kittens the very fact of existence is the ultimate surprise.

The Queensborough Bridge was deadly silent. It was completely empty except for a calico cat moving purposefully toward Manhattan. The structure needed a coat of paint, Johnson thought vaguely, but of course it would never get one. Still, even uncared for, the bridges should outlast him—there would be no heavy traffic to weaken them. Just in case of unforeseeable catastrophe, however—he didn't want to be trapped on an island, even Manhattan Island—he had remembered to provide himself with a rowboat; a motorboat would have been preferable, but then the fuel difficulty would arise again....

How empty the East River looked without any craft on it! It was rather a charming little waterway in its own right, though nothing to compare with the stately Hudson. The water scintillated in the sunshine and the air was clear and fresh, for no factories had spewed fumes and smoke into it for many years. There were few gulls, for nothing was left for the scavenger; those remaining were forced to make an honest living by catching fish.

In Manhattan, where the buildings had been more soundly constructed, the signs of abandonment were less evident ... empty streets, an occasional cracked window. Not even an unusual amount of dirt because, in the past, the normal activities of an industrial and ruggedly individual city had provided more grime than years of neglect could ever hope to equal. No, it would take Manhattan longer to go back than Long Island. Perhaps that too would not happen during his lifetime.

Yet, after all, when he reached Fifth Avenue he found that Central Park had burst its boundaries. Fifty-ninth Street was already half jungle, and the lush growth spilled down the avenues and spread raggedly out into the side streets, pushing its way up through the cracks it had made in the surface of the roads. Although the Plaza fountain had not flowed for centuries, water had collected in the leaf-choked basin from the last rain, and a group of grey squirrels were gathered around it, shrilly disputing possession with some starlings.

Except for the occasional cry of a cat in the distance, these voices were all that he heard ... the only sound. Not even the sudden blast of a jet regaining power ... he would never hear that again; never hear the stridor of a human voice piercing with anger; the cacophony of a hundred television sets, each playing a different program; the hoot of a horn; off-key singing; the thin, uncertain notes of an amateur musician ... these would never be heard on Earth again.

He sent the car gliding slowly ... no more traffic rules ... down Fifth Avenue. The buildings here also were well-built; they were many centuries old and would probably last as many more. The shop windows were empty, except for tangles of dust ... an occasional broken, discarded mannequin.... In some instances the glass had already cracked or fallen out. Since there were no children to throw stones, however, others might last indefinitely, carefully glassing in nothingness. Doors stood open and he could see rows of empty counters and barren shelves fuzzed high with the dust of the years since a customer had approached them.

Cats sedately walked up and down the avenue or sat genteelly with tails tucked in on the steps of the cathedral—as if the place had been theirs all along.

Dusk was falling. Tonight, for the first time in centuries, the street lamps would not go on. Undoubtedly when it grew dark he would see ghosts, but they would be the ghosts of the past and he had made his peace with the past long since; it was the present and the future with which he had not come to terms. And now there would be no present, no past, no future—but all merged into one and he was the only one.

At Forty-second Street pigeons fluttered thickly around the public library, fat as ever, their numbers greater, their appetites grosser. The ancient library, he knew, had changed little inside: stacks and shelves would still be packed thick with reading matter. Books are bulky, so only the rare editions had been taken beyond the stars; the rest had been microfilmed and their originals left to Johnson and decay. It was his library now, and he had all the time in the world to read all the

books in the world—for there were more than he could possibly read in the years that, even at the most generous estimate, were left to him.

He had been wondering where to make his permanent residence for, with the whole world his, he would be a fool to confine himself to some modest dwelling. Now he fancied it might be a good idea to move right into the library. Very few places in Manhattan could boast a garden of their own.

He stopped the car to stare thoughtfully at the little park behind the grimy monument to Neoclassicism. Like Central Park, Bryant had already slipped its boundaries and encroached upon Sixth Avenue—Avenue of the World, the street signs said now, and before that it had been Avenue of the Nations and Avenue of the Americas, but to the public it had always been Sixth Avenue and to Johnson, the last man on Earth, it was Sixth Avenue.

He'd live in the library, while he stayed in New York, that was—he'd thought that in a few weeks, when it got really hot, he might strike north. He had always meant to spend a summer in Canada. His surface car would probably never last the trip, but the Museum of Ancient Vehicles had been glad to bestow half a dozen of the bicycles from their exhibits upon him. After all, he was, in effect, a museum piece himself and so as worth preserving as the bicycles; moreover, bicycles are difficult to pack for an interstellar trip. With reasonable care, these might last him his lifetime....

But he had to have a permanent residence somewhere, and the library was an elegant and commodious dwelling, centrally located. New York would have to be his headquarters, for all the possessions he had carefully amassed and collected and begged and—since money would do him no good any more—bought, were here. And there were by far too many of them to be transported to any really distant location. He loved to own things.

He was by no means an advocate of Rousseau's complete return to nature; whatever civilization had left that he could use without compromise, he would—and thankfully. There would be no electricity, of course, but he had provided himself with flashlights and bulbs and batteries—not too many of the last, of course, because they'd grow stale. However, he'd also laid in plenty of candles and a vast supply of matches.... Tins of food and concentrates and synthetics, packages of seed should he grow tired of all these and want to try growing his own—fruit, he knew, would be growing wild soon enough.... Vitamins and medicines—of course, were he to get really ill or get hurt in some way, it might

be the end ... but that was something he wouldn't think of—something that couldn't possibly happen to him....

For his relaxation he had an antique hand-wound phonograph, together with thousands of old-fashioned records. And then, of course, he had the whole planet, the whole world to amuse him.

He even had provided himself with a heat-ray gun and a substantial supply of ammunition, although he couldn't imagine himself ever killing an animal for food. It was squeamishness that stood in his way rather than any ethical considerations, although he did indeed believe that every creature had the right to live. Nonetheless, there was the possibility that the craving for fresh meat might change his mind for him. Besides, although hostile animals had long been gone from this part of the world—the only animals would be birds and squirrels and, farther up the Hudson, rabbits and chipmunks and deer ... perhaps an occasional bear in the mountains—who knew what harmless life form might become a threat now that its development would be left unchecked?

A cat sitting atop one of the stately stone lions outside the library met his eye with such a steady gaze of understanding, though not of sympathy, that he found himself needing to repeat the by-now almost magic phrase to himself: "Not in my lifetime anyway." Would some intelligent life form develop to supplant man? Or would the planet revert to a primeval state of mindless innocence? He would never know and he didn't really care ... no point in speculating over unanswerable questions.

He settled back luxuriously on the worn cushions of his car. Even so little as twenty years before, it would have been impossible for him—for anyone—to stop his vehicle in the middle of Forty-second Street and Fifth Avenue purely to meditate. But it was his domain now. He could go in the wrong direction on one-way streets, stop wherever he pleased, drive as fast or as slowly as he would (and could, of course). If he wanted to do anything as vulgar as spit in the street, he could (but they were his streets now, not to be sullied) ... cross the roads without waiting for the lights to change (it would be a long, long wait if he did) ... go to sleep when he wanted, eat as many meals as he wanted whenever he chose.... He could go naked in hot weather and there'd be no one to raise an eyebrow, deface public buildings (except that they were private buildings now, his buildings), idle without the guilty feeling that there was always something better he could and should be doing ... even if there were not. There would be no more guilty feelings; without people and their knowledge there was no more

guilt.

A flash of movement in the bushes behind the library caught his eye. Surely that couldn't be a fawn in Bryant Park? So soon?... He'd thought it would be another ten years at least before the wild animals came sniffing timidly along the Hudson, venturing a little further each time they saw no sign of their age-old enemy.

But probably the deer was only his imagination. He would investigate further after he had moved into the library.

Perhaps a higher building than the library.... But then he would have to climb too many flights of stairs. The elevators wouldn't be working ... silly of him to forget that. There were a lot of steps outside the library too—it would be a chore to get his bicycles up those steps.

Then he smiled to himself. Robinson Crusoe would have been glad to have had bicycles and steps and such relatively harmless animals as bears to worry about. No, Robinson Crusoe never had it so good as he, Johnson, would have, and what more could he want?

For, whoever before in history had had his dreams—and what was wrong with dreams, after all?—so completely gratified? What child, envisioning a desert island all his own could imagine that his island would be the whole world? Together Johnson and the Earth would grow young again.

No, the stars were for others. Johnson was not the first man in history who had wanted the Earth, but he had been the first man—and probably the last—who had actually been given it. And he was well content with his bargain.

There was plenty of room for the bears too.

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