



Pebble in the Sky (Empire)

By Isaac Asimov

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One moment Joseph Schwartz is a happily retired tailor in Chicago, 1949. The next he's a helpless stranger on Earth during the heyday of the first Galactic Empire.

Earth, as he soon learns, is a backwater, just a pebble in the sky, despised by all the other 200 million planets of the Empire because its people dare to claim it's the original home of man. And Earth is poor, with great areas of radioactivity ruining much of its soil--so poor that everyone is sentenced to death at the age of sixty.

Joseph Schwartz is sixty-two.

This is young Isaac Asimov's first novel, full of wonders and ideas, the book that launched the novels of the Galactic Empire, culminating in the Foundation series. This is Golden Age SF at its finest.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Isaac Asimov was the greatest science-fiction writer of all time. No matter how vast his scope, he always put distinctive, memorable characters at the heart of his stories, and he told his tales with flawless, clear prose. Without his ground-breaking work, science fiction today would be radically different--and infinitely poorer."

--Robert J. Sawyer, Hugo Award-Winning author of *Rollback*

"One of the world's premier science fiction writers." --*Newsday*

"Isaac Asimov is the greatest explainer of the age." --Carl Sagan

"For fifty years it was Isaac Asimov's tone of address that all the other voices of SF obeyed....For five decades his was the voice to which SF came down in the end. His was the default voice of SF."

--*The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*

About the Author

Isaac Asimov was one of the great SF writers of the 20th century, and his hundreds of books introduced many thousands of readers to science fiction. Born in Brooklyn, he lived in Boston and in New York City for most of his life.

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Chapter 1

Two minutes before he disappeared forever from the face of the Earth he knew, Joseph Schwartz strolled along the pleasant streets of suburban Chicago quoting Browning to himself.

In a sense this was strange, since Schwartz would scarcely have impressed any casual passerby as the Browning-quoting type. He looked exactly what he was: a retired tailor, thoroughly lacking in what the sophisticates of today call a "formal education." Yet he had expended much of an inquisitive nature upon random reading. By the sheer force of indiscriminate voracity, he had gleaned a smattering of practically everything, and by means of a trick memory had managed to keep it all straight.

For instance, he had read Robert Browning's Rabbi Ben Ezra twice when he was younger, so, of course, knew it by heart. Most of it was obscure to him, but those first three lines had become one with the beating of his heart these last few years. He intoned them to himself, deep within the silent fortress of his mind, that very sunny and very bright early summer day of 1949:

"Grow old along with me!

The best is yet to be,

The last of life, for which the first was made . . ."

Schwartz felt that to its fullness. After the struggles of youth in Europe and those of his early manhood in the United States, the serenity of a comfortable old age was pleasant. With a house of his own and money of his own, he could, and did, retire. With a wife in good health, two daughters safely married, a grandson to soothe these last best years, what had he to worry about?

There was the atom bomb, of course, and this somewhat lascivious talk about World War III, but Schwartz was a believer in the goodness of human nature. He didn't think there would be another war. He didn't think Earth would ever see again the sunlike hell of an atom exploded in anger. So he smiled tolerantly at the children he passed and silently wished them a speedy and not too difficult ride through youth to the peace of the best that was yet to be.

He lifted his foot to step over a Raggedy Ann doll smiling through its neglect as it lay there in the middle of the walk, a foundling not yet missed. He had not quite put his foot down again . . .

In another part of Chicago stood the Institute for Nuclear Research, in which men may have had theories upon the essential worth of human nature but were half ashamed of them, since no quantitative instrument had yet been designed to measure it. When they thought about it, it was often enough to wish that some stroke from heaven would prevent human nature (and damned human ingenuity) from turning every innocent and interesting discovery into a deadly weapon.

Yet, in a pinch, the same man who could not find it in his conscience to curb his curiosity into the nuclear studies that might someday kill half of Earth would risk his life to save that of an unimportant fellow man.

It was the blue glow behind the chemist's back that first attracted the attention of Dr. Smith.

He peered at it as he passed the half-open door. The chemist, a cheerful youngster, was whistling as he tipped up a volumetric flask, in which the solution had already been made up to volume. A white powder tumbled lazily through the liquid, dissolving in its own good time. For a moment that was all, and then Dr. Smith's instinct, which had stopped him in the first place, stirred him to action.

He dashed inside, snatched up a yardstick, and swept the contents of the desk top to the floor. There was the deadly hiss of molten metal. Dr. Smith felt a drop of perspiration slip to the end of his nose.

The youngster stared blankly at the concrete floor along which the silvery metal had already frozen in thin splash marks. They still radiated heat strongly.

He said faintly, "What happened?"

Dr. Smith shrugged. He wasn't quite himself either. "I don't know. You tell me. . . . What's been doing here?"

"Nothing's been doing here," the chemist yammered. "That was just a sample of crude uranium. I'm making an electrolytic copper determination. . . . I don't know what could have happened."

"Whatever happened, young man, I can tell you what I saw. That platinum crucible was showing a corona. Heavy radiation was taking place. Uranium, you say?"

"Yes, but crude uranium, and that isn't dangerous. I mean, extreme purity is one of the most important

qualifications for fission, isn't it?" He touched his tongue to his lips quickly. "Do you think it was fission, sir? It's not plutonium, and it wasn't being bombarded."

"And," said Dr. Smith thoughtfully, "it was below the critical mass. Or, at least, below the critical masses we think we know." He stared at the soapstone desk, at the burned and blistered paint of the cabinets and the silvery streaks along the concrete floor. "Yet uranium melts at about 1800 degrees Centigrade, and nuclear phenomena are not so well known that we can afford to talk too glibly. After all, this place must be fairly saturated with stray radiations. When the metal cools, young man, it had better be chipped up, collected, and thoroughly analyzed."

He gazed thoughtfully about him, then stepped to the opposite wall and felt uneasily at a spot about shoulder height.

"What's this?" he said to the chemist. "Has this always been here?"

"What, sir?" The young man stepped up nervously and glanced at the spot the older man indicated. It was a tiny hole, one that might have been made by a thin nail driven into the wall and withdrawn—but driven through plaster and brick for the full thickness of the building's wall, since daylight could be seen through it.

The chemist shook his head, "I never saw that before. But I never looked for it, either, sir."

Dr. Smith said nothing. He stepped back slowly and passed the thermostat, a parallelopiped of a box made out of thin sheet iron. The water in it moved swirlingly as the stirrer turned in motor-driven monomania, while the electric bulbs beneath the water, serving as heaters, flicked on and off distractingly, in time with the clicking of the mercury relay.

"Well, then, was this here?" And Dr. Smith scraped gently with his fingernail at a spot near the top of the wide side of the thermostat. It was a neat, tiny circle drilled through the metal. The water did not quite reach it.

The chemist's eyes widened. "No, sir, that wasn't there ever before. I'll guarantee that."

"Hmm. Is there one on the other side?"

"Well, I'll be damned. I mean, yes, sir!"

"All right, come round here and sight through the holes. . . . Shut the thermostat off, please. Now stay there." He placed his finger on the hole in the wall. "What do you see?" he called out.

"I see your finger, sir. Is that where the hole is?"

Dr. Smith did not answer. He said, with a calmness he was far from feeling, "Sight through in the other direction. . . . Now what do you see?"

"Nothing now."

"But that's the place where the crucible with the uranium was standing. You're looking at the exact place, aren't you?"

Reluctantly, "I think so, sir."

Dr. Smith said frostily, with a quick glance at the name plate on the still-open door, "Mr. Jennings, this is absolutely top-secret. I don't want you ever to speak about this to anyone. Do you understand?"

"Absolutely, sir!"

"Then let's get out of here. We'll send in the radiation men to check the place, and you and I will spend a siege in the infirmary."

"Radiation burns, you mean?" The chemist paled.

"We'll find out."

But there were no serious signs of radiation burns in either. Blood counts were normal and a study of the hair roots revealed nothing. The nausea that developed was eventually tabbed as psychosomatic and no other symptoms appeared.

Nor, in all the Institute, was anyone found, either then or in the future, to explain why a crucible of crude uranium, well below critical size, and under no direct neutronic bombardment, should suddenly melt and radiate that deadly and significant corona.

The only conclusion was that nuclear physics had queer and dangerous crannies left in it.

Yet Dr. Smith never brought himself to tell all the truth in the report he eventually prepared. He made no mention of the holes in the laboratory, no mention of the fact that the one nearest the spot where the crucible had been was barely visible, the one on the other side of the thermostat was a trace larger, while the one in the wall, three times as far away from that fearful spot, could have had a nail thrust through it.

A beam expanding in a straight line could travel several miles before the Earth's curvature made the surface fall away from it sufficiently to prevent further damage, and then it would be ten feet across. After that, flashing emptily into space, expanding and weakening, a queer strain in the fabric of the cosmos.

He never told anyone of that fancy.

He never told anyone that he called for the morning papers next day, while still in the infirmary, and searched the columns with a definite purpose in mind.

But so many people in a giant metropolis disappear every day. And nobody had gone screaming to the police with vague tales of how, before his eyes, a man (or would it be half a man?) had disappeared. At least no such case was reported.

Dr. Smith forced forgetfulness, eventually.

To Joseph Schwartz it had happened between one step and the next. He had lifted his right foot to clear the Raggedy Ann doll and for a moment he had felt dizzy—as though for the merest trifle of time a whirlwind had lifted him and turned him inside out. When he placed his right foot down again, all the breath went out of him in a gasp and he felt himself slowly crumple and slide down to the grass.

He waited a long time with his eyes closed—and then he opened them.

It was true! He was sitting on grass, where previously he had been walking on concrete.

The houses were gone! The white houses, each with its lawn, squatting there, row on row, all gone!

And it was not a lawn he was sitting on, for the grass was growing rank, untended, and there were trees about, many of them, with more on the horizon.

That was when the worst shock of all came, because the leaves on those trees were ruddy, some of them, and in the curve of his hand he felt the dry brittleness of a dead leaf. He was a city man, but he knew autumn when he saw it.

Autumn! Yet when he had lifted his right foot it had been a June day, with everything a fresh and glistening green.

He looked toward his feet automatically as he thought that and, with a sharp cry, reached toward them. . . . The little cloth doll that he had stepped over, a little breath of reality, a—

Well, no! He turned it over in his trembling hands, and it was not whole. Yet it was not mangled; it was sliced. Now wasn't that queer! Sliced lengthwise very neatly, so that the waste-yarn stuffing wasn't stirred a hair. It lay there in interrupted threads, ending flatly.

The glitter on his left shoe caught Schwartz's eye. Still clutching the doll, he forced his foot over his raised knee. The extreme tip of the sole, the part that extended forward past the uppers, was smoothly sliced off. Sliced off as no earthly knife in the hand of an earthly cobbler could have duplicated. The fresh surface gleamed almost liquidly in its unbelievable smoothness.

Schwartz's confusion had reached up from his spinal cord and touched the cerebrum, where it finally froze him with horror.

At last, because even the sound of his own voice was a soothing element in a world otherwise completely mad, he spoke aloud. The voice he heard was low and tense and panting.

He said, "In the first place, I'm not crazy. I feel inside just the way I've always felt. . . . Of course, if maybe I were crazy, I wouldn't know it, or would I? No—" Inside, he felt the hysteria rise and forced it down. "There must be something else possible."

He considered, "A dream, maybe? How can I tell if it's a dream or not?" He pinched himself and felt the nip, but shook his head. "I can always dream I feel a pinch. That's no proof."

He looked about him despairingly. Could dreams be so clear, so detailed, so lasting? He had read once that most dreams last not more than five seconds, that they are induced by trifling disturbances to the sleeper, that the apparent length of the dreams is an illusion.

Cold comfort! He shifted the cuff of his shirt upward and stared at his wrist watch. The second hand turned and turned and turned. If it were a dream, the five seconds was going to stretch madly.

He looked away and wiped futilely at the cold dampness of his forehead. "What about amnesia?"

He did not answer himself, but slowly buried his head in both hands.

If he had lifted his foot and, as he did so, his mind had slipped the well-worn and well-oiled tracks it had followed so faithfully for so long . . . If three months later, in the autumn, or a year and three months later, or ten years and three months later, he had put his foot down in this strange place, just as his mind returned . . . Why, it would seem a single step, and all this . . . Then where had he been and what had he done in the interval?

“No!” The word came out in a loud cry. That couldn’t be! Schwartz looked at his shirt. It was the one he had put on that morning, or what should have been that morning, and it was a fresh shirt. He bethought himself, plunged a fist into his jacket pocket, and brought out an apple.

He bit into it wildly. It was fresh and still had a lingering coolness from the refrigerator which had held it two hours earlier—or what should have been two hours.

And the little rag doll, what about that?

He felt himself beginning to go wild. It had to be a dream, or he really was insane.

It struck him that the time of day had changed. It was late afternoon, or at least the shadows were lengthening. The quiet desolation of the place flooded down upon him suddenly and freezingly.

He lurched to his feet. Obviously he would have to find people, any people. And, as obviously, he would have to find a house, and the best way to do that would be to find a road.

Automatically he turned in the direction in which the trees seemed thinnest, and walked.

The slight chill of evening was creeping inside his jacket and the tops of the trees were becoming dim and forbidding when he came upon that straight and impersonal streak of macadam. He lunged toward it with sobbing gratitude and loved the feel of the hardness beneath his feet.

But along either direction was absolute emptiness, and for a moment he felt the cold clutch again. He had hoped for cars. It would have been the easiest thing to wave them down and say—he said it aloud in his eagerness—“Going toward Chicago, maybe?”

What if he was nowhere near Chicago? Well, any large city; anyplace he could reach a telephone line. He had only four dollars and twenty-seven cents in his pocket, but there was always the police . . .

He was walking along the highway, walking along the middle, watching in both directions. The setting of the sun made no impression upon him, or the fact that the first stars were coming out.

No cars. Nothing! And it was getting to be really dark.

He thought that first dizziness might be coming back, because the horizon at his left glimmered. Through the gaps in the trees there was a cold blue shine. It was not the leaping red he imagined a forest fire would be like, but a faint and creeping glow. And the macadam beneath his feet seemed to sparkle ever so faintly. He bent down to touch it, and it felt normal. But there was that tiny glimmer that caught the edges of his eyes.

He found himself running wildly along the highway, his shoes thudding in blunt and uneven rhythm. He was

conscious of the damaged doll in his hand and he tossed it wildly over his head.

Leering, mocking remnant of life . . .

And then he stopped in a panic. Whatever it was, it was a proof of his sanity. And he needed it! So he felt about in the darkness, crawling on his knees till he found it, a dark patch on the ultra-faint glow. The stuffing was plumping out and, absently, he forced it back.

He was walking again—too miserable to run, he told himself.

He was getting hungry and really, really frightened when he saw that spark to the right.

It was a house, of course!

He shouted wildly and no one answered, but it was a house, a spark of reality blinking at him through the horrible, nameless wilderness of the last hours. He turned off the road and went plunging cross-country, across ditches, around trees, through the underbrush, and over a creek.

Queer thing! Even the creek glowed faintly—phosphorescently! But it was only the tiniest fragment of his mind that noted it.

Then he was there, with his hands reaching out to touch the hard white structure. It was neither brick nor stone nor wood, but he never paid that the least mind. It looked like a dull, strong porcelain, but he didn't give a hoot. He was just looking for a door, and when he came to it and saw no bell, he kicked at it and yelled like a demon.

He heard the stirring inside and the blessed, lovely sound of a human voice other than his own. He yelled again.

“Hey, in there!”

There was a faint, oiled whir, and the door opened. A woman emerged, a spark of alarm in her eyes. She was tall and wiry, and behind her was the gaunt figure of a hard-faced man in work clothes. . . . No, not work clothes. Actually they were like nothing Schwartz had ever seen, but, in some indefinable way, they looked like the kind of clothes men worked in.

But Schwartz was not analytical. To him they, and their clothes, were beautiful; beautiful only as the sight of friends to a man alone can be beautiful.

The woman spoke and her voice was liquid, but peremptory, and Schwartz reached for the door to keep himself upright. His lips moved, uselessly, and, in a rush, all the claggiest fears he had known returned to choke his windpipe and stifle his heart.

For the woman spoke in no language Schwartz had ever heard.

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