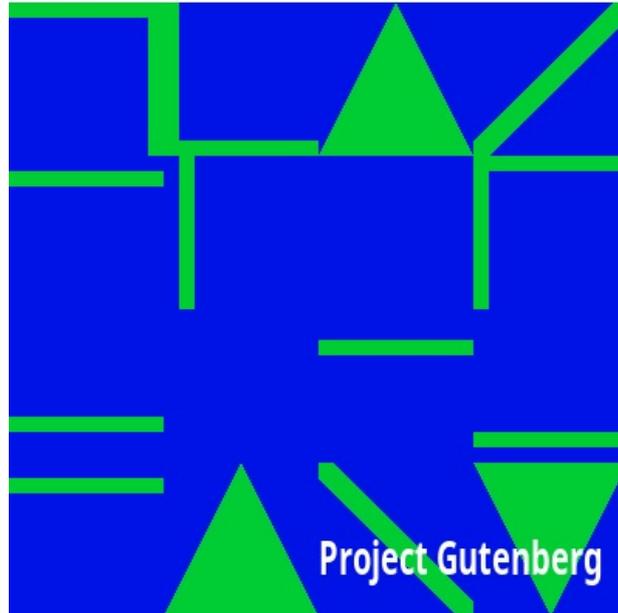

Planet of Dreams

James McKimmey



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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK PLANET OF DREAMS ***

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The climate was perfect, the sky was always blue, and—best of all—nobody had to work. What more could anyone want?

Planet of Dreams

By James McKimmey, Jr.

Illustrated by Paul Orban

IT WAS a small world, a tiny spinning globe, placed in the universe to weather and age by itself until the end of things. But because its air was good and its earth was fertile, Daniel Loveral had placed a finger upon a map and said, "This is the planet. This is the Dream Planet."

That was two years before, back on Earth. And now Loveral with his selected flock had shot through space, to light like chuckling geese upon the planet, to feel the effect of their dreams come true.

Loveral was sitting in his office, drumming his long fingers against his desk while the name, Atkinson, ticked through his brain like the sound of a sewing machine.

Would he be the only one, Loveral asked himself, or was he just the first? In either case, it was up to Loveral, as leader and guiding hand, to stop this thing and stop it quickly.

Loveral stood up and put on his jacket, although there was no need for it, other than the formality it gave his figure.

He stepped out of his office into a clear bright day, where the air was clean and fresh in his lungs, at once like frost and fire and sweet perfume. He walked along a winding path, which was bordered by slim-necked flowers and a short hedge whose even clipped lines were kept neat by tireless robot hands.

Trees pointed to a blue sky, rocking and fluttering their leaves in a soft breeze, and glinting metallic houses lay peacefully beyond in wooded hollows and upon slight hills.

A whole small world was before his eyes, set there upon his direction, maintained by himself with the help of a dozen complex machines which lay locked and sealed in the Maintenance Room for only his fingers to touch.

It was a busy life for Loveral, up at dawn to work until deep night, keeping his flock happy and free from spirit-killing labor. But it was a perfect plan, one which had been tested and turned in his mind for years. If he had to work hard to keep it running smoothly, that was all right. In fact, he had never been happier.

Now, however, there was this business about Atkinson. Loveral was disturbed about that.

He walked on, over the quiet path which would lead to the house where Atkinson and his wife lived. Loveral smiled, in readiness for any happy face that might appear before him, to greet him, to show with thankful eyes appreciation for his wonderful world. But that, too, brought thoughts that were a bit disturbing.

Lately there had been few such faces. Most of his flock no longer seemed to care about walking along the cultivated paths, or smiling, or nodding, or touching a leaf here or a flower there. They preferred, it appeared, to remain deep inside their houses, as though they might have become tired of the soft perfection of Dream Planet. As though they might have become weary of quiet woods and sweet bird-music or a sky which was always blue.

Loveral shook his head as he walked, puzzling out his thoughts. It was strange, but nothing to worry about certainly.

Just this business about Atkinson. That was his only worry.

He came slowly up a hill, the top of which held a low curving house, with a silver roof and wide, sweeping windows. There were yellow and blue and deep red flowers, skirting the sides of the house, and green ivy grew thickly between the glistening windows. The lawn, dotted with small leafy trees and round bushes, sloped down from the front of the house, looking like a carefully arranged painting.

Loveral pressed a button beside a shining door and waited, smiling through his pale blue kindly eyes.

MRS. ATKINSON appeared after several moments and stood blinking at him. She was a thin woman, who seemed to have gotten even thinner, Loveral noticed. She was working her fingers at the neck of her dress. She smiled but her lips wavered.

"My dear," Loveral greeted her in his soft voice, showing the goodness in his eyes.

She nodded her recognition, opening her mouth without speaking.

"May I?" said Loveral finally, waving his long fingers toward the living room.

"Oh, yes," said the woman. "Of course, Mr. Loveral." And as she spoke Loveral had the impression she might suddenly begin crying.

Loveral followed the woman into the house, noticing all over again the precise way everything had been arranged. The rug was soft beneath his feet, and the light came in through the windows in such a way that it, too, became soft. The furniture, molded to hold a human body most comfortably, rested about the room in perfect efficiency.

"Your place is so lovely," Loveral said, out of his old habit from Earth. But his words seemed to ring strangely in the quiet, because it was his own arrangement, like all the other rooms on the planet. And Mrs. Atkinson, standing thin and nervous before him, had nothing, after all, to do with it. The cleanliness was the work of his robot machines, the planning his own. It was like complimenting himself.

He cleared his throat and stood, smiling his most benevolent smile to reassure Mrs. Atkinson.

"Ah, my dear. Is George about?"

Again, the woman's hand skittered to her throat.

"He's not ill, surely?" Loveral asked, although this, too, was silly, because foods, selected and prepared for utmost nutrition, packed and frozen to be doled out in weekly quantities, purified air, disease-killing serums, simply written folders on exercise, and of course Loveral's own philosophies of quiet, peaceful living—all of this guarded well the health of Dream Planet's flock.

The woman shook her head. "No, George is fine. He's just—sleeping, I think."

"Rest is nature's finest tonic," said Loveral, and hearing his voice thought suddenly there was hardly anything he could say any more that might not sound a bit out of place in this peaceful world. Rest to the man who had nothing to do ceased to be a tonic.

"Yes, yes," said Loveral. "May we just sit down, my dear?"

Mrs. Atkinson jerked a hand toward one of the chairs and then wound her fingers.

Loveral sat down and leaned back, smiling his most charming smile. "Perhaps George might awaken after a bit?"

"Oh, yes," the woman said, her eyes flickering, and she sat upon the edge of one chair, like a bird perched upon a thin wire.

Loveral waited, legs crossed, leaning his head back against the silken softness of the chair. It was so good to relax these days. The business of watching and of caring for his flock was trying. When you have brought an entire community of people at great expense through space, guaranteeing to give them a life of constant comfort and ease, so that they might dream and think as they wander through the flowers and the leaves, their thoughts cleansed of worry about work and responsibility, then you have a job. Loveral was most busy, busier than his heritage of wealth ever before had allowed, seeing to all of this.

But he also was most content—with everything except Atkinson.

Mrs. Atkinson teetered on the edge of her chair, as though she might at any moment go flying across the room in a crazy gyration. There was something about her eyes, Loveral noticed, while he peacefully nodded in the chair. Fear, perhaps.

If so, he probably had been right. He tightened himself, listening. There it was again. The sound. Just as he had heard it a day before when he had passed near the house. He leaned forward quickly.

Mrs. Atkinson jumped.

Loveral smiled. "Didn't I hear a noise of some sort, my dear?"

"Noise?" the woman said, as though her own voice were the sound of an echo.

"An odd noise," Loveral said, his eyes searching.

The woman's hands fluttered about her dress.

Loveral stood up. "Would you mind if I just glanced about, my dear?"

The woman didn't answer, but Loveral was already moving across the room toward a door. He opened it and walked down a hall. The noise grew stronger. He threw open another door.

HE STOOD watching while George Atkinson spun around, dark eyes flashing, hair tousled. There was a two days' growth of beard darkening Atkinson's face.

"Why, George," Loveral said, swiftly examining the litter of metal and wood which was spread over a table behind Atkinson. There was a home-made hammer in Atkinson's hand. "What have we here, George?"

"Something for you," Atkinson said, tightening his fingers about the handle of the hammer.

Loveral grinned his famous Loveral grin. "That's fine. What could it be?"

"None of your damned business."

"George," Loveral said, his smile still white but his eyes narrow and quick.

The woman was behind them. Her voice screeched. "George, I told you. Why didn't you listen, George? You should have listened to me. You—"

Loveral held up a hand, still watching Atkinson. "Now tell me, George, what is it you're making for me?"

Atkinson raised the hammer slightly.

Loveral stood very still. "That's a nice hammer, George."

Atkinson's eyes were black beneath his thick brows.

"You made that, didn't you?" Loveral asked.

"Yes, I made that," Atkinson said. "I made that and I made something else. Another minute and I'll have that finished, too."

"George," said Loveral, stepping quietly forward, "I don't like to say this, of course. You've been one of our very best members. But nobody works here, George. We can't allow that. You know the rules."

"I know the rules, all right."

"Well, then," Loveral said, extending his hand toward the hammer, "we'll just destroy this and whatever else you might have been making. We'll just forget it ever happened. We'll get along real fine that way, George. We'll just be such good friends."

"We'll just go to hell," said Atkinson, snatching his hammer away.

Loveral's smile disappeared. "I'll tell you, George. I have to mean business with this. You know the reasons. If we allow anybody to work here, then there's going to be trouble. That isn't our plan. We're here to grow within ourselves and expand culturally. Not to commercialize a beautiful world like Dream Planet."

Atkinson stood unmoving, and Loveral could see the way the man's muscles were tight, like steel springs, and the way his eyes burned deep inside their blackness.

"We've given you everything you need," Loveral explained, trying to adjust the smile on his lips again. "Everybody has everything they want. But, you see, if you sit there and work and make something that someone else doesn't have, then the whole system is destroyed. Then someone will want what you've made. We'll have jealousy and hatred and fighting. This is the stuff of which wars are made, George. You know that. It starts with small things like this, but it grows. When it does, the structure of our life here will collapse. You wouldn't want that, would you, George?"

"Yes!" Atkinson said, his mouth white at the edges. "I'd like to see the whole rotten thing collapsed

and blown to hell!"

Loveral's teeth snapped together and his lips grew tight. He could feel a muscle jumping along his neck.

Atkinson looked at him with furious eyes. "What do you think it's like, living this way? You're busy working twenty-four hours a day, while we wander around this damned prison like the breathing dead. You can feel sweat and aches in your bones from a hard day's work. Sleep is like medicine to you, instead of another stretch of torture. You can forget your own brain for a while by doing something with your hands. You can relax because you can get tired. Not us, by God. Not us!"

"I envy you, George," Loveral said through his teeth.

"Oh, like hell you do. You treat us like we were helpless infants. You feed and clothe us and do all our work, and you're so happy you damned near split your guts."

"I'll take that, if you don't mind," Loveral said, reaching for the hammer, his voice suddenly icy cold.

Atkinson slammed back against the table. "No, you won't. You won't take anything more at all. You've taken our spirit and our pride and the strength right out of our spines. You won't take anything more!"

"George?" Loveral said, but not moving any further.

Atkinson slid the hammer back of him onto the table, and his hands were searching among a dozen scattered pieces of metal and wood. He watched Loveral as he worked. "Let me show you what else I've made," he said.

"I'd hate to do it," Loveral said, "but I can stop your food, your water, everything."

Atkinson's hands moved swiftly, assembling the pieces. He nodded. "You can, but you won't."

"I have the only keys to the storage units. I control everything, George."

"Correction," said Atkinson, holding an assembled revolver in his hands. "You *did*."

LOVERAL looked at what Atkinson had in his hands. He blinked.

"You're nearly dead," Atkinson said.

Loveral looked at Atkinson, into his eyes. "If you wanted to kill me, you could have done it some other way."

Atkinson shook his head. "Just this way. Just with something that took me dozens of days and nights to make. With something that made me sweat and swear to get. It was difficult—with no tools or proper materials—but that made it all the better. Now I've got it finished," he said, pushing a bullet into the chamber, "and ready to use."

Loveral stood frozen, then he turned. "My dear," he said to the woman who moved her mouth as though her voice had been pumped out of her. He reached to touch her shoulder. She recoiled, as though his fingers held poison. "George," he said, turning back to the black-eyed man.

"This is a great moment," Atkinson said, lifting the muzzle of the revolver. "When I squeeze the trigger, it'll be like blowing the lock off a prison door. I'll go yelling to the others, and we'll smash down the whole goddamned place. We'll smash it down, so we'll have to rebuild it. We'll pull apart every robot you've got. We'll tear apart the food lockers and have a celebration for a week, and when we've gotten sick from too much food, we'll start growing some more with our own hands. We'll make forges for the men and looms for the women. We'll burn our clothes and make new ones. We'll grow corn in the fields. We'll pump water from the ground. You're finished, Loveral."

Loveral stared at the revolver. "George," he said, pleading. "The plans. The beautiful, beautiful plans. All of you, you all wanted peace and contentment. Time to think and dream. You all wanted to get away from the work and the worry and the responsibility. You—"

Atkinson fired the gun into Loveral's stomach.

Loveral gestured at the air and fell to his knees. Atkinson threw his gun through a window and grabbed his wife by the hand. "Hurry!" he said, laughing. "Hurry!"

Loveral felt of the blood on his shirt and rested on his knees. He could hear footsteps, racing through the house and out to the yard. He held out his bloody hand and looked at it. Atkinson's voice pealed through the warm clear air. "He's dead! Loveral's dead!"

There was a sound of sudden activity, and everywhere went the cry, "Loveral's dead!"

Loveral sank to his haunches and opened his lips. The blood was there, too. He could hear the shouts and the laughter, and then the tearing of steel, the smashing of glass. He bent over his knees, trembling with a sudden chill. The sound of destruction grew like thunder. "Why?" he said in his dying throat. "Oh, why? It was what they said they wanted."

THE END

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