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Illustrating a scene from "Winged Planet"

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A MOMENT OF PEACE

By WILLIAM P. SALTON

An age of war, then an age of peace. This pattern, repeated endlessly, forms the backdrop of history. But a question: Which is the dreadful interlude preceding the other?

THE ship was brought down in a smooth landing by Commander Ajax Holcomb. He slumped forward in his seat, bone-tired, brain-tired, soul-tired.

Beside him, Siebold woke with a start, he twisted around, and peered out through the port at his elbow. The landscape came into focus—vast, rolling, green and empty. No trees. No landmarks. Only the green, green earth. So long unvisited. He turned and laid his hand on Ajax's shoulder. "We're home!" he said.

"Home!" Ajax sighed and rubbed a rough hand over his gray, cropped head. Slowly his thin, lined face relaxed into a smile. "Home," he said.

"Yeah," Siebold grunted.

"A couple of bloody heroes. Where's the reception committee? Where's the dancing in the streets? In fact, where the hell are the streets?"

Ajax laughed. "You'll get your dancing soon enough. "Come on, old son. See how the earth fits your feet."

Outside, they took a few cautious steps; drew in great gulps of air. Gradually their muscles relaxed. Then Siebold threw himself face down on the earth.

"Grass!" he muttered, and buried his face in it. "After five years of satellite-hopping!" He pulled a blade with great care and chewed it thoughtfully. Then he turned and looked up at Ajax.

"Did you *know* it would work—the purification?"

"It had to work! Even twelve years of hydrogen warfare couldn't wipe out every living thing. The humans, yes. And probably most of the larger animals. But given time, the earth had to live again!"

"Five years! The best years of our lives. And what did we do with them? After the war, after complete victory—just when we should have been able to come home, to marry and settle down. What happened?"

"A few years delay. But we're back now. Come on. We've got to make us a new world."

Siebold looked around at the rolling land that sloped gently down toward a ribbon of blue water. Once fertile farms had dotted this land, with houses and people. Now it was up to him and his few hundred remaining comrades to bring it all alive again. There were so few of them and the earth was so vast. Siebold looked up into the sky. "They'll be waiting," he said.

"Better signal them in."

The sky was soon filled with the whine of motors as the ships came in low over the horizon. In twos and threes, they circled in, swung overhead and swooped down

to abrupt, jolting landings.

The men shouted and danced, waving their arms as each new crew debarked.

The voice of Commander Holcomb boomed out over a loudspeaker, "Attention, men! You know the plans. We'll unload and start at once."

The men went to work. Prefab buildings began to take shape. Power lines were strung. Motors began to hum. Siebold tramped back and forth among the men, directing, encouraging, scolding.

By noon, a field kitchen was in operation. The men rested, talking of their plans, wondering how long it would be before the women and children would be brought back.

Holcomb stood watching anxiously as the sonar station was made ready for its first test. A foolish worry kept nagging him.

"Get on with it, boys," he urged them.

Finally the last piece of equipment was in place. He stepped forward then, his face grim. "All right, Hank," he told the senior sonar engineer. "Throw it!"

This was it. Now they would find out if their calculations were correct. If they

were, really, the only humans left on earth.

The motor gave a low hum and whir. Then, distinctly, the waiting men heard the soft twitter of birds. From somewhere, a wind sounded through branches of trees. Earth sounds. Peace sounds.

Holcomb drew a deep breath. He let his shoulders relax slowly. He nodded to Hank and started to turn away. Then he heard it. The shrill, metallic click and whine that meant only one thing. Men. Men at work somewhere on the earth. Men, busy with machines, laboratories, factories. He twisted the dials and the

screen glowed. Swiftly he made some calculations on a pad. Six, seven thousand miles away. Somewhere across the earth other men were at work. And Holcomb knew where.

"Get Siebold, Thomas and Quentin," he told Hank.

By the time the men arrived, his decision was made.

"The laboratories are ready," he said grimly. "All the blueprints are prepared. You have just two weeks to turn out enough bombs to wipe the enemy off the earth. Get to work." Then he turned and walked away—across the good green Earth.

THE END