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ALL THE TIME IN THE WORLD

By J. HARVEY HAGGARD

ILLUSTRATED by GRAYAM

The boy was tall and handsome and...red. ...This boy, whom he had always thought of as his son.



STEPHAN Wentworth had not had such a good laugh for as long as he could remember. He had spent twenty arduous, triumphant years on

Nereid, fifteenth planet of the star Alpha Centauri. Some star-maps actually listed the little world as Wentworth's Planet because of huge land

grants given him by the natives. The people of Nereid, though extremely generous in their traits, were naturally slothful. Stephan Wentworth had driven them to their tasks. He had hounded the migrant earthmen, equally lazy. Men hated him for accumulating such wealth and prestige on another planet—but *this!* Doc Lezen was a card all right. It was the tallest tale he'd heard in many a Nereidian moon.

Coming naked from the germicidal mist-shower that ended the medical examination, Stephan Wentworth stood in a jet of warm drying air. He was a large man, big-boned and heavy, but even at fifty-two this red-haired giant did not display the usual flabbiness of that age. He reached in the locker for his clothing, consisting of the silvery met-aline tunic, breeches of planetary white, soft gravity slippers with cushion soles. Then the humor of it overcame him. He staggered around laughing, one foot in the breeches, the other out. An incredulous look transformed the usual severity of his strong face, making him appear younger than he actually was. Exertion in this thin rarefied air sent pain stabbing into his

pleural regions, made him gasp. Remembering his oxy-tank, the one he usually wore at all times, he saw it on a table.

After a puzzled moment, Dr. Frank Lezen joined in the merriment. Old Frank was not huge like Stephan Wentworth. He was sixty-four. There would be a time, not long hence, when he would hang up his stethoscope forever and retire to one of the pleasure planets. Laughter racked and threatened to injure his frail body in its loose garb of sanitary white plastic-cloth. His thin face was crowned by tufts of white hair like quotation marks, underlined by a short but imposing beard. Now the face became a writhing morass of wrinkles as his mouth gaped open and his laughter emerged as a dry cackling.

“Sent a fleet of fifty ships to space yesterday!” Stephan Wentworth had bragged. “Every one loaded to the hilt with cargo. We loaded them in three days and two nights and four hours and five minutes. That’s a record, let me tell you, even for Stephan Wentworth.” No doubt of his physical fitness bothered him. He could hardly remember the day he’d been sick.

Dr. Lezen was a company

doctor, working for Wentworth Enterprises Of Space, Inc. In a way, Wentworth owned him, like everything else on the planet. The only trouble with old Dr. Lezen was his insistence, like other earthmen, for piddling around and taking his own good time. He loitered at everything he did, despite the fact that he was an excellent physician and surgeon and had attended to all of Wentworth's medical needs since first stepping foot on this world.

Few people had a passion for hard work like Stephan Wentworth. Since the atmosphere on Nereid was more tenuous than that of earth, he invariably wore the oxy-tank strapped to his left shoulder. Its weight was slight, its assistance enormous. With this extra source of air, Stephan Wentworth could do twice as much work as others and work twice as hard. He always worked rapidly, looking for short cuts, as though he sought to make the efforts of others seem puny by comparison. Or as though—Dr. Lezen had said it—the devil were on his tail.

Panting, he staggered across the floor. Dr. Lezen, seeing his dilemma, secured the oxy-tank and extended it.

Fastening it quickly to his shoulder harness, Wentworth adjusted the thin tubing to his nostrils and inhaled deeply. Dr. Lezen stepped back relievedly as the palor of Stephan's face was replaced by a normal ruddy hue. This was more like them.

"Steve, you're a living wonder. Twenty years in high blast." Dr. Lezen spoke with wonder rather than admiration. "The old engine never breaks down. Strong heart. Pressure normal. Your pace would kill an elephant. But money isn't everything. Why don't you slow down for a while?"

Stephan Wentworth had sucked with greedy impatience on his oxygen inhalator. Feeling much better, he shuffled around, shadow boxing. A red-haired behemoth, he looked tough and destructive. And he could be just that. Dr. Lezen moved away, almost instinctively.

"Man, I was born in a hurry," Wentworth bantered, now fully recovered. "Someone has to be a pusher. Take a look at the ticker tape some time. You should see how high we're rating on Interspace Interchange."

The other's indirect criticism had penetrated a chink in his secret armor. Devotion

to his work was a deep unswerving passion with him.

"You can die in a hurry too. One opponent you can't beat is time. Let's see. Now that you own Nereid almost entirely there'll be a day for you to be stepping down. Who's to replace the king of this little planet? You do have a son?"

At times the physician's ideas were like probes, gouging into the inner conscience. But Wentworth let his impatience die and beamed proudly at the memory.

"Five kids. Four of them girls, of course—but Donelly's the oldest. Proud of him, Doc. Big, strapping, handsome. Takes more after his Nereidan mother than me though. He's half earthman, Doc. I'll account for that, and for him it's going to make a lot of difference."

It was then that Dr. Lezen offered him a cigarette, which he refused, and proceeded to tell him the prize winner. Matter-of-factly, without beating around the bush. No fancy trimmings. Just a short fantastic yarn with no superficial details. Straight from the shoulder. For a moment Stephan Wentworth believed it. He'd been about to dress when the full humor of it hit

him like a battering ram. He'd come near falling, tangled up in the metalmesh cloth of his breeches.

Now, oxy-tank back in place, he jabbed his elbow into Dr. Lezen's ribs. That set them off again. They continued laughing until exhausted.

"Well, that's the way it is," gasped Dr. Lezen finally.

"Yes. That's the way it is," said Stephan Wentworth, winking broadly. He was now sobered somewhat.

"If you want I'll run one more check," said Dr. Lezen. "Not that I doubt the indications. It's been on your chart all the time. Steve, if you can stay for a while, come over to the lanai. I've a bottle of sherry, brought all the way from earth. Priceless stuff. But what's a vintage without sharing between friends? There's no actual hurry—"

He was speaking to thin air. Stephan Wentworth had stalked swiftly away, lifting a hand to denote farewell. His gravity racer was perched on the second floor landing platform. Almost before his foot hit the accumulator the vehicle went soaring up over Wentworth City. His city. His planet. Dr. Lezen watched him go at a window, patting a handkerchief to his forehead to absorb the dampness.

"Whew!" he said. "And I thought the old goat was going to take it hard."

The "old goat" had his hands clutched tightly to the throttle control of the grav-car. Blue veins crawled and grew, knotting on his neck and forehead. His hand writhed snakelike toward a glove compartment, withdrew an object.

The object was an electron gat, slender, mounted on a blue-and-gold plasticene hilt, not much larger than a hypodermic needle. Yet deadly. His eyes mere slits, Stephan Wentworth stared down at the tiny instrument of annihilation. It was as though he had never seen it before, not actually. In his horror-struck eyes was reflected the untenable thought that had begun growing in the back of his mind. He was thinking of killing his own son!

The grav-car, propelled forward on a gravity warp, soared across Nereid like a dragonfly. Below, areas of cultivation marched to the rear, giving a neat, parklike appearance to the little world. The space intercom buzzed three times before he heard it. Reaching to the vido box, he slipped it. The worried, pudgy face of Pierre Bardot, his

Superintendent of North Polar Regions, filled the elliptical mirror. He'd been talking before contact was made.

"—torrential, unseasonal floods," Bardot was saying. "The siphon action caused by magnetic disturbances in space has resulted in an overflow of the main reservoir. Two cerrama dikes washed out, endangering field crops in sector nine, thirteen and twenty-five."

Wentworth was too preoccupied at the moment to be deeply disturbed by the news. Plainly, this wasn't what Bardot expected.

"Any ideas?" he wanted to know.

"Why, yes sir," returned Bardot, flattered. "Blast out a dike in the first sector. Flood thirteen. Nine may suffer, but it will save the other regions from premature exposure."

The idea wasn't bad. Despite this, Bardot was an idiot, little more than a shiftless worldcomber. Stephan had thought more than once of requiring all his personnel to wear auxiliary oxy-units to bring up the efficiency level. The only thing that stopped him cold was an obsolete interplanetary law that should have been repealed decades ago.

"You have the necessary

equipment at hand? Blastors, trunion ejectors?" When Bar-dot nodded he said, "Get on with it then."

"Thank you. There's a tape recording of your directive. Mind authenticating it?"

"Blast first sector dike, flood thirteen. This is Stephan Wentworth directing."

The superintendent had scarcely vanished from the visor when he was replaced by another. This time it was pompous Gilden Georges, mayor of Wentworth City.

"Sorry to disturb you, sir," said Georges, smiling unctuously. "But it's time for the native ceremonials of the *Lahalla*. You know—the time of the glowing. Could you attend any of the tourist functions at the main auditorium? There'll be a carnival following the rites."

"They'll have to do without me this year." Wentworth's refusal was so curt the mayor looked surprised, bubbling out an apology that was all but incoherent. His face melted away, grinning obsequiously.

Below, the surface of the planet was already beginning to glow with violet emanescence. A shooting star arched a long finger from outer space, followed by another, and another. With the coming of the

meteorites it was time for the "glowing." There was danger of being struck by a stray bit of space shrapnel, of course. Stephan Wentworth ignored it. Below the grav-car the planet was undergoing a strange metamorphosis.

Every fourth year—by earth reckoning—the phenomenon recurred. The fields and canals, ridges and buttes, took on a weird luminescence, like radioactive mineral under black light. The natives had waited impatiently for this to happen. It was peak time for admonishing their favorite deities. Intricate ceremonials and symbol-dancing were finished. The Feast of the Seven Nights was yet to come. They would don their heathen regalia, kneel in the omnipresent glowing. Now they could worship Ghachna, the invisible force of universal creation, life, love, wrath, fertility, conception, death. Ghachna was the religion to which all Nereidans would secretly be true, regardless of the influx of terrestrial teachings.

Wentworth didn't worship. He scowled down at the planet from his space racer, hoping to see one of his giant tobacco trees, limned in opaline fire. That would be a truly inspiring spectacle. Unfortunately, the lush tobacco fields were all

in the polar sectors. Wentworth was not stirred emotionally by the phosphorescence. He knew the true nature of the glowing.

He'd seen the same shimmer in space in the wake of a comet, in the long glittering tail sweeping back into space. That was what it was, a meteorite or comet, caught up in the Nereidan gravity field in some distant past, disintegrated under gravitational stresses. Crushed to meteoritic particles, the clouds of ionic radiation continued to trace a ghostly orbit in space. When Nereid intersected its orbit there was a rain of particles and radiation. That was all there was to it.

Wentworth's huge lips were trembling. He wasn't seeing the planet, the strange glowing, or interplanetary space around him. His massive shoulders shook convulsively. He felt helpless as a child before this torrent of emotions. Wentworth didn't want to kill his son. He would have given anything to see another way out.

Wentworth's mansion overlooked a precipitous equatorial canyon. One of the few picturesque spots on Nereid, it was searched for often by tourists. Colonial in design, it

stood away from the broken surface on giant white columns of berylumin. The grav-scooter braked automatically. Its relays clicked and it was cushioned on a repulsion wave, then lowered gently to a platform that extended to meet it. Wentworth could never remember the entering, the going through the upper hallway, or the emergence into the combination sundeck and library. He was conscious only that the monstrous house echoed his hollow footsteps, that it was haunted by a feeling of abandonment.

Through the broad oval window at one end of the sundeck he looked down upon a compelling scene. All of the Nereidan servants were outside, participating in the revelry.

The plains stretched away brokenly, a deep valley unfolding beyond, gashed harshly by steep fissures and abyssmal pits. Here and there a roadway bridged the pits, then stretched gracefully to the horizon, a gossamer web attesting the fact that intelligent life had spanned this majestic desolation. Eerie light danced across the terrain. Here and there he distinguished crumpled, writhing figures, flat to the ground. The natives were prostrated

before this final manifestation of inexplicable power.

Wentworth's gaze climbed one sharp shale to another, followed a high broken escarpment to where it fell into glittering shards along the orifice of the pits. Somewhere there, unrecognizable in the distance, would be his pretty, superstitious native wife, humbling herself with the rest. Nereidans aged slowly. Lyr Zhene retained the lovely figure of youth. But there would be a difference. There would be a look of exultation on her pretty face, more intense than when she was with him, even in ardent embrace.

Not that he envied Ghachna. The Nereid god was merely a concept, an outgrowth of superstition. Not an actual entity. But now, with Dr. Lezen's taunting words hot in his memory, Wentworth wondered. He began to consider the fanatical religion of Ghachna as something very material and alive, something that could deny him everything.

It was Donelly he must find.

The worshippers were unaware of this giant earthman stalking in their midst, calling the name of his son again and again.

Stephan Wentworth was

no fool. Coming from a poverty-stricken city of earth in the Depression of 8979, he had become one of the richest men of interplanetary space by this year of 9021. While others sought precious space minerals, he had instead brought seeds from earth to other worlds, experimented with their culture. Tobacco, he found, grew to treelike heights on Nereid, requiring little cultivation. After he managed to exploit its uses across the astral worlds, the rest was easier. He had achieved the legendary stature of an industrial tycoon.

"Lucky. That's all," Dr. Lezen had once commented. It was irritating how the thoughts of the little doctor kept creeping up again and again. "I came here for health's sake, naturally couldn't expect any bonanza. Just prolonged life. But you, Stephan. Everything you touched made money."

Stephan had chuckled.

"It happened like that on Earth a long time ago," he told the wizened physician. "Captain Cook found the South Sea Islands. The natives thought the intruders were gods. Lyr Zhene thought I was some representative from Ghachna, I'm sure. When our spaceship landed,

the planet was glowing. Under radiant bombardment of the dead comet, of course. She saw me walking through the glowing and knelt before me, kissing my hand. I was no fool. I took her, that was all. Of course, I observed the usual formalities. Even yet, after all that's happened, she must think I'm some sort of underling of Ghachna. But I don't mind."

"Donelly. Donelly." Here were the carven gods of the forest, the nightmarish descendants of Nereidan folklore. The one he sought was here, somewhere among these mesmerized creatures. Their chanting was incoherent, an uncanny, babbling sound. His own voice was amplified by distortion, echoed back from the peaks. Hearing his own voice reminded him of little Donelly, only nine months old, just learning to navigate on rubber legs. He'd held out his arms. Come, Donny, he'd said. Walk to daddy. You hear me, Baby?

"Donelly!" Come get it, son. Got to kill you. No other way out. Everything I've slaved for, these long twenty years, is at stake. If I don't kill you, son, I myself die. Don't you see how it is, boy? Basic law of self-preserva-

tion. That's all it is. Self-preservation.

The glowing was lessened now. Natives were regaining their feet, laughing hysterically, shrieking out the last throes of delirium. A few took notice of him, this giant more wrapped in emotional frenzy than any of them. Those who saw murder lust in his eyes shrank away.

Finally, near exhaustion, Wentworth retraced his steps to the veranda of his house. How long he'd spent in useless search he couldn't know. Perhaps hours. The potted vegetation in the foyer gave way to the large reception hall.

"Hi, dad! What's with you!"

Donelly at last. Huge, handsome, red. Not red like an earthman. Red like a Nereidan, like his mother. Red like a native, and like a native still dressed in loincloth, painted garishly in swathes of blue and green clay. He looked exhausted, barbaric. Only the boyish grin was civilized.

Lyr Zhene was here too. She rose from where she had reclined on a sofa. She had an air of regality in her priestess regalia, the feathered headdress, the bands of sparkling jewels strapped flat

across her shapely body. When she saw the electron gat her green eyes filled with alarm.

"No. Stephan, no," she screamed in quick panic.

"Dad. What's with the blaster?" Donelly had not comprehended.

"Stand back," ordered Wentworth. Donelly hesitated, obviously puzzled. Then he appeared to come to a decision, and stepped forward.

"Stay back, I tell you. Don't come any closer."

But his son would not hear. He was coming, each step so slow it measured an eternity. Lyr Zhene gave out a piercing scream as she flung herself at him. He caught her bodily, hurled her aside to the floor.

Donelly, seeing an advantage, lunged for the gun.

Wentworth ducked and evaded him. Donelly whirled and came in again, snatching for the weapon, but Wentworth regained his balance and danced away. Donelly shrugged, looking first to his father, then to his mother, for explanation. When none was forthcoming, he faced Wentworth determinedly.

"All right, dad. I've had all I want of this silly joke. I'm coming in to take the gun."

He walked slowly forward.

He was so close it would be impossible to avoid killing him when the trigger was pressed. So close, so unafraid. Such a huge giant of a man. Wentworth's son?

He raised the gun, aimed it straight at the crimson chest where it would blast away the heart.

"No, no, no." His wife was on her feet again, crying, sobbing, flinging her arms to envelope him, trying somehow to thwart his intention.

There was that single instant. That one forlorn instant that widened across time. The moment when a twitch of his finger would reach out and obliterate this threat that had risen to challenge his supremacy.

In that instant Wentworth remembered Dr. Lezen's thin, academic face.

"Happens to lots of earthmen," Dr. Lezen had explained, selecting his words carefully. "Exposure to space radiation when he voyages between planets. Even the most delicate shielding fails to turn aside all the cosmic rays. Before earthmen reach other planets—ninety out of a hundred are sterile."

Wentworth had sneered disbelievingly.

"You see for yourself. In

my twenty years on Nereid I've begat five children. They will stay to take the place I've carved for them in this universe. When I go, I leave a son to carry on."

Dr. Lezen had shook his head in solemn negation.

"Five children. Four years apart. Each . exactly four years apart."

"I can't see where that—"

"There is an instinct for perpetuation of species. We struggle and die for it, just as the natives do, here on Nereid. For them, it is a foregone victory. For us, a lost cause. Listen. There is a strangeness here. Statistics prove it. After the comet passes, every fourth year, there's a tremendous increase in population."

"Are you suggesting infidelity in my wife?" Stephan had exploded.

"No, Wentworth. Back on Earth it was thought that life originally came from outer space. Arrhenius, an ancient earthman, was the first to perceive that life must have come from outer space in the form of lifespores. If life could be carried in spores, why not something more basic? Why not primitive radiation? If this truth came from the beginning, why is it impossible that the seeds of

life could be carried from the depths of space, sheer radiation on the tail of a comet, or that once it has fallen to the fertile ovum, could cause conception?"

That was when Wentworth started to laugh. Not at the humor of it. Deep down inside he was so hysterical, so frightened. Bewildered as he'd never been before. The only answer had seemed to be in killing Donelly. Right away before he weakened.

Look at it that way and his son was a stranger. Look at it that way and no earthman could conquer Nereid. Oh, a conqueror might step in seize controls, live out his own life, but after death, what would remain? There would be nothing to carry him forward. Wentworth hated to think that all he had fought and sacrificed for would come to nothing when it was tossed back into the hands of a native.

Donelly walked toward him. Slowly, the electron gun lowered.

"Gosh, Dad," Donelly was saying. "Some nightmare you're having."

He let it go at that. Some nightmare. But then, maybe it was.

Some time later Wentworth

called Dr. Lezen by radio-phone.

"Well, Stephan," began Dr. Lezen.

"About that—er—"

"Speak up, man."

"About that sherry. Does the invitation still go."

"It certainly does."

"Something else. When I came from Earth, we used to play a game on shipboard. Little discs, and a checkered board."

"I've a checkerboard here some place, if that's what you're hinting at."

"Think maybe I could take you."

Pleased understanding was on Dr. Lezen's face.

"At checkers? There's a guy I've been playing with on Galaxy Four. By space radio, of course. He considers me an ace."

"Then I challenge you."

"I accept," returned Dr. Lezen, rubbing his hands in anticipation. "Shall I come over there or will you come here?"

"I'll be there," said Stephan Wentworth, "tomorrow. Or the next day."

He cut off the spacephone. He was sitting with Lyr Zhene, his wife. Her hands rumpled his hair.

"Can't you understand, darling?" she said. "I love

you. Nobody else, just you. I'd give everything in this world, my heart, body and soul, to pamper your every wish. Don't you think it has hurt me too, Stephan? We Nereidans know. We've all known for a long time. But I've been so afraid, all these years, wondering what you'd do when you found out."

Wentworth drew her close. "I love you too, honey," he said. "I guess it took a long time to realize just how much. And—I love Donelly and always will, no matter . . ."

"He's your son. No matter what. He's your son, Stephan."

"Then I believe."

Lyr Zhene nestled snugly to him. She traced the outline of his face with her fingertips, so softly the touch was like that of falling flower petals. He'd been missing a lot of things, zooming along at that thunderbolt pace he'd set for himself.

"When you say that," Lyr Zhene told him, closing her eyes contentedly, "your gods and mine have answered all my prayers."

He held her closely. Not with the frenzied desire to be through with it, but slowly, luxuriating in each passing moment. Perhaps something had really died within him,

there in that instant when he had realized he could not slay his son. It didn't seem important now. His wife, his family were all he cared for. In these old familiar surroundings he had suddenly become aware of a better life.

Wentworth unfastened the oxy-tank. It clattered as it struck the floor. Now—inhale deeply, slowly. And move—move the same way. The taste of the air was so sweet and clean he was astonished and pleased.

Breathing deeply, leisurely, he soon became accustomed to the thin atmosphere and found that it was a real pleasure. A peaceful relaxation suffused him. It was surprising how good he was beginning to feel.

Lyr Zhene raised her face and their lips met in a long slow kiss. Their need for each other had always been genuine and they made no sham of it now. From the distance came the last muted sounds of native chanting. Somewhere in the house a space-phone buzzed insistently, then stopped when there was no answer.

No need for hurry now, Stephan Wentworth thought. No rush . . . not ever again. From now on he had all the time in the world. **THE END**