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AN EXPERIMENT IN GUMDROPS

by RUSS WINTERBOTHAM

Oelm despised earthmen and Larky Lawson was here. Larky and the Terrans before him had continually asked questions, probed, trying to find out how Oelm and others like him kept alive on Frigid Pegas.

Oelm regretted having learned their language, but it was too late now to pretend he didn't understand Larky Lawson.

How Oelm survived was his own business. The answer was as simple as the way he lived. Dig in the frozen ground. It kept you warm. Eat the small organisms that lived in the cold soil. They nourished you. That was simple, wasn't it? Larky thought it was too simple. He asked about Oelm's love life, the social structure of Pegas, and, most horrible of all, whether Pegasans considered themselves cultured and intelligent.

Of all things! Oelm was intelligent. Oelm was cultured. Different, maybe, but that was beside the point.

Someday Oelm would lose his temper and kill Larky, crushing

him as he crushed a rock, or slashing him in two with his knife-sharp digging claws.

"What is your culture?" Larky asked.

Oelm used his cup-like claws to burrow deeper. His snout-like mouth muzzled out some juicy tidbits which he chewed with relish. He didn't answer the question, but that wouldn't stop Larky. The only effective way to silence him would be murder.

"What is your aim in life?" Larky asked.

"Go away," said Oelm.

"You're neither hospitable nor cooperative," said Larky. He sat down on a rock. The earthman wore furs and only his face was visible. A big, red face with a sharp nose and two little eyes that seemed to sparkle from the reflection of the torch he carried. He was about the same size as Oelm, but quite decadent. Anybody could see he was decadent because he didn't work to keep warm. He just wrapped himself in furs.

Oelm was built for work. To



him all work was digging. His claws were shovels, his body small and narrow, his head hard and flat on top. His head was useful to crack rocks.

"There are easier ways to live than yours," said Larky.

"I like my way of life," said Oelm. "It's the only way I know. Now go away and let me live it."

"You don't have to dig all the time," said Larky. "I brought you food."

He reached in his pocket and pulled out a plastic bag. He took off his mittens and the cold seemed to hurt his hands as he reached inside and pulled out a small something and put it beside Oelm.

The Pegasan sniffed it. An agreeable odor, strange and exotic. His instinct told him it was edible. He ate it. Most delicious. He resumed his digging.

"Eat the rest," said Larky.

"I must dig to keep warm," said Oelm. "What was that thing?"

"Gumdrop," said Larky. He took the bag and poured part of its contents on the frozen soil.

Oelm looked at it, shook his flat head, and continued to dig. "Mustn't freeze," he said.

"I've got something for that too," said Larky.

He took the pack off his shoulders and from it he brought a small box made of metal. He put it near Oelm and twisted a little button on the side. There was

a click. The little box grew warm. Heat flowed outward and made Oelm stop digging.

"A-a-ah-h-h!" said Oelm.

"You like it, eh?" Larky put his mittens on again.

Like it? Who wouldn't like to be warm without working and to have food given to you? It was so easy it seemed almost sinful.

"So that's your philosophy, your aim in life, your culture, your whole existence!" said Larkey. "Food and warmth."

"Almost," said Oelm.

"I've given you everything you want."

"I should hate it," said Oelm, "but I don't hate anything now." For a moment he stopped hating earthmen.

"Why should you hate success?"

"Because, after you take it away, I'll have to work to keep warm and I'll be discontented with finding my food in the old-fashioned way," said Oelm.

The earthman paid no heed. He was running his mittened hands through the gravel that Oelm had removed from his burrow. He picked out a crystal. Oelm always discarded crystals like those because they were hard and dulled the edge on his claws. Besides, they were indigestible.

"This diamond," said Larkey, "would represent success on my planet. With it a man could get anything he wanted. He could buy hundreds of fission stoves like the one that makes you warm."

"A being would be a fool to trade a stove so cheaply," said Oelm. "Those crystals are no good."

Larky laughed. "I believe you're right," he said. "There are many things I could find more useful. But on the earth men have killed each other to obtain smaller crystals than this."

"Your planet is crazy," said Oelm. "You can have all you find here. Can I keep the stove?"

"It's yours and I'll throw in the rest of the gumdrops," said Larky. He dropped the bag on the ground beside the Pegasan.

Oelm tore the bag with his front diggers and he ate slowly. He enjoyed the taste. Each bite was more delicious than the last and he had the sensation of getting food and warmth without working for it. Something for nothing.

"The earth must be a wonderful place," he said between bites. A moment before he had hated the earth and the earthmen. He hadn't changed his mind about Larky, but he had to admit the earth might have advantages over Pegas. On a planet like that a being would have nothing to do but make love, which was quite enjoyable, but Oelm seldom had much time for it.

The gumdrops were almost gone and Oelm felt sad. Perhaps the stove would lose its heat too. He wished there were more stoves and more gumdrops. Enough to

last a lifetime.

"I know where there are many carbon crystals, earthman," said Oelm.

"No sale, Crab-foot," said Larky.

"What do you mean?"

"I thought you and I had the same opinion about diamonds. That there were other things more desirable."

"But you said—"

"I said men of my planet regard them highly, but I happen to regard other things as more important."

"If there is anything here that you want . . . can I answer questions, perhaps?"

"I think I know enough about you," said Larky. "What you want are more gumdrops and more stoves."

Damn the earthman! He seemed to read Oelm's mind.

"But if there is something you want, I'll trade," said the Pegasan.

"Yes, there is something I want," said Larky, "but you don't have it."

Oelm groaned. He saw a lifetime of digging and freezing ahead of him and the end of paradise. Damn the stove! Damn the gumdrops! And damn earthmen again! He'd had a taste of real living and he'd give his soul to spend the rest of his life in luxury like this.

"Perhaps you can get what I want for me," said Larky.

Oelm's heart skipped a beat

"How? I'll do anything! Anything you ask!"

The cave was getting warm and Larky pushed back his parka. His hair was black and curly. "Do you have a wife?"

Oelm blinked his large round eyes. "What is a wife?"

"A mate. A creature you love. A female."

"Many wives," said Oelm. "You can have all of them."

Larky smiled. "Are they like you?"

"Exactly—" he paused. "With a few differences, of course."

"As the Frenchmen say, 'Vive le differencel' " said Larky.

"In the summer, when it is not quite so cold and when I do not have to work so hard to keep warm, I visit many wives. I make love. But even the summer is cold and I do not make love very much."

"Are there other males near you?"

"Not if I know about it," said Oelm. "When I see one, I kill him. Too many males make females independent. They are apt to attach themselves to one and keep the other females away from him. That is why it is better to have many females and only one male."

"An ideal arrangement," said Larky, "unless you're one of the males that gets killed. And you say the females are just as good at digging as you?"

"Of course," said Oelm. "They

must eat and keep warm just like I do."

Larky seemed to know from observation the prodigious digging that went on through the soil of the planet. Without tools or explosives Oelm could burrow through solid rock and frozen mud.

"You want a mate?" Oelm asked finally.

"Good heavens, no!" said Larky. "At least not a woman with shovels for hands and feet and a pick-ax nose and sledgehammer head. I was just wondering if your mates would like warmth and gumdrops."

"Do not feed them," said Oelm. "They would grow independent. Females should have nothing unless they earn it."

"Supposing I took you and supplied them with food. Would they dig for me?"

There was a glint in Larky's eyes that did not pass unnoticed. Oelm knew the earthman was up to something and Oelm suspected it was not quite honest. But Oelm had received something for nothing and that is the first step that lures men into lives of crime.

"They might," said Oelm. "As for me, I find it quite comfortable to keep warm by a stove and to eat gumdrops."

"I would need someone to explain things and to keep the females at work," said Larky. "Supposing you were given warmth and food providing you kept the

females at work?"

"Such an idea would be appealing, but why dream of impossible things?" said Oelm. The thought of such luxury made his surroundings seem painful.

"I am making such an offer," Larky said. "Take as many of your harem as you wish." The earthman picked up a few more diamonds and put them in his pocket. Oelm thoughtfully put the remaining gumdrops into his massive jaws. Earthmen were stupid, but if they had no better sense than to pay well for practically nothing, he might as well accept it as a windfall.

The long trip to the earth was not without its problems. Oelm pointed out that it was not wise to expose the females to luxury, lest they be unwilling to work later on.

Larky arranged quarters for them in an unheated portion of the spaceship. Oelm kept them warm with his love-making, which the females accepted as a substitute for hard work.

At first Oelm enjoyed his task of entertaining his six wives. But he had little opportunity to enjoy the warmth and comfort of Larky's end of the ship. Besides his task was arduous.

After the ship reached the earth, the women were busy hatching young ones, and digging burrows into the high mountains near the spaceship's landing site.

The earth, much to Oelm's surprise, was not much different from Pegas. It was snow covered and intensely cold. Oelm had envisioned a warm planet with live gumdrops crawling all over it.

Larky explained that this was one of six continents on the earth. The name of this one was Antarctica and it was almost uninhabited.

"The reason I brought you here is to change the area into a garden spot," Larky explained. "We are going to start a real estate development."

By the time six young ones were hatched and the females had hollowed homes for themselves in the mountains, huge airplanes had brought small mountains of equipment to the edge of the range. Larky paid for the equipment with the diamonds he had brought with him from Pegas.

Oelm accepted this as more earthman stupidity. The boxes and crates seemed purposeless and the diamonds had no use whatever. It was a case of trading nothing for nothing. Well, not exactly nothing, since some of the crates contained gumdrops.

Larky was very disagreeable too. He objected to Oelm's suggestion that the males that had been hatched—three of them—be destroyed. Oelm knew that when they grew to maturity he would have to fight them to maintain his position as bull of the tribe.

"Perhaps we can condition

them to accept monogamy," said Larky. "At any rate, I will see to it there's no fighting."

Oelm did not reply. He did not want to reveal that Larky would not be here when the young ones were grown.

But the young ones were willing to work. Larky was amazed as he saw them burrow into the rock. Already they could claw their way through tons of rock in a few hours.

With other workmen, the crates were unpacked and installed in huge caves that the women and offspring hollowed in the hillside. Small stoves warmed the caverns after they were finished and presently a mass of metal equipment rose in the chambers. Larky began to study the rock that was taken from the mountains.

Larky used one word over and over: "*Uranium!*"

The sun sank behind the Antarctic range. There was darkness for a long time. The cold grew bitter, like the winter cold on Pegas. The females dug and had more offspring. Larky remained in the heated area, working with the ore that was taken from the hills. Oelm grew fat and lazy. He spent much time trimming his claws, which had to be cut now that there was no digging to wear them away. And Oelm thought a great deal.

He began to revise his estimate of Larky, and the small group of

earthmen who assisted him. Instead of giving Oelm and his polygamous family something for nothing, they were giving a great deal to Larky.

This uranium was very important. Oelm knew this from unguarded remarks that Larky and his assistants made. Perhaps it begot this inexplicable warmth! It might be the basic substance from which all gumdrops were made! Without Oelm and the Pegasans, Larky could not get it, yet Larky gave them only as much as they could eat in a day and sufficient warmth for Oelm to repay him for passing along orders to the females and offspring.

Actually all this uranium was rightfully Oelm's! If he only knew how to turn it into warmth and gumdrops.

Cautiously, so as not to arouse suspicion, Oelm investigated. Presently he found one cavern he was not permitted to enter.

"Don't go in there," Larky told him. "There's danger of radiation."

Ah! That was the process that made gumdrops.

"Radiation? I do not understand." Oelm had learned that Larky thought him as stupid as he formerly thought Larky was.

"Radiation is like heat," Larky explained, "but a kind of heat you don't feel until it is too late. It can destroy you."

Oelm pretended to accept the explanation, although he knew

it was a pack of lies. There was not enough heat anywhere to destroy a person. Heat only made a person feel good. This forbidden room was where uranium was transformed into gumdrops!

Oelm pretended to obey, never going near the room. But each time he met Larky, he made a point of asking subtle questions about this strange uranium. Sooner or later, Larky would reveal a secret that would be the key to the whole business.

Instead of being suspicious, Larky was pleased with Oelm's questions. One day he grew talkative.

"I guess I've underrated you, Crab-foot," the earthman said. "I never gave you credit for having the slightest curiosity about anything that didn't deal with food and warmth, and occasionally sex. What do you want to know?"

"This uranium," said Oelm. "It is the basic thing of the universe, is it not?"

Larky studied the question. "In a way it is," he said. "It's permitted us to unlock a lot of secrets, let's say."

"Is that why you went first to my planet?"

Larky nodded. "Yes, I went there because I'd heard about you creatures from other explorers. You see there's a vast amount of uranium in these mountains, but they were so inaccessible that there was no way to dig it out. Hauling machinery in to dig it,

and ore out to refine posed a lot of difficult problems. And the climate here isn't very good for large scale operations.

"But you Pegasans could endure the climate and dig like machines. I decided to set up a refining plant right here. The diamonds I picked up on your planet financed the cost and here we are."

Oelm pretended to believe everything Larky told him. Presently Larky was thrown off guard and was explaining the operation of various machines. Oelm learned, for example, that when long rods were pulled out of the wall at certain points, heat increased. When they were pushed in, there was not so much warmth.

And then one day, Larky left him alone in the great laboratory and Oelm entered the forbidden room.

Through the middle of it was a high wall and above it was mirrors. Looking into the mirror, Oelm saw on the other side large numbers of containers. There were contraptions made to fit the forepaws of earthmen that permitted the handling of these containers.

Oelm tried to operate one of those, but his paws would not fit. He realized that this was one of Larky's clever methods of making the material for gumdrops inaccessible to the Pegasans. Perhaps Larky was stupid after all! Didn't Larky realize that Oelm could tunnel through the wall and get

to these materials in as short a time as it would take an earthman to operate the mechanical hands?

"Oehml!" A sharp voice came from the doorway.

Turning, Oelm saw Larky standing there. His usual good humor was gone. He was angry because Oelm had discovered the secret of the gumdrops.

"I've told you never to come in here," said Larky. "If you did the wrong thing, you might set off a chain reaction."

"So you said," Oelm replied in a quiet voice. "But I didn't believe it then, and I don't believe it now."

"I don't give a damn what you believe," said Larky savagely. "Get out of here and don't come back again!"

Perhaps Larky thought Oelm was obeying as the Pegasan turned and moved slowly toward the door, where the earthman was standing. It was only when Oelm got near, that Larky understood. Perhaps Larky saw murder in the big eyes of the shovel-footed creature from space.

Larky drew back just in time as the sharp claw swung at him. One slash would have cut the soft body of the earthman in two.

"You've gone crazy!" shouted Larky, moving backward through the door.

"Where would you be without me, earthman?" Oelm said.

"A great deal better off," said Larky. "Be sensible! You've never had it so good! Why do you want to spoil things now?"

Larky was in a corner. He could not escape. "I'm going to have things better now," said Oelm. "I'll have the heat and the gumdrops that you've been holding back from me. I'll be the richest man in the universe."

His claw slashed. Larky's scream stopped suddenly and silence settled down in the cave. Oelm sidled back into the forbidden room. Larky hadn't told him how to make the gumdrops, but the stuff was all there. Oelm could experiment till he found the right method by trail and error.

His claws crunched down on the retaining wall. Within seconds he was through the wall and his hands clawed at the containers on the shelves. He pulled out rods. He mixed containers.

Neutrons ran wild, but Oelm did not feel them. The heat grew and Oelm felt pleasantly elated. Then he grew unpleasantly hot.

It was impossible! It was mad. There couldn't be heat like this!

Oelm never heard the explosion, nor did any of his six wives and numerous offspring digging not far away.

But for a brief instant, Oelm was warmer than he had ever dreamed of being. And he had no desire for gumdrops.