

FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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beanpeas in the afternoon

by... *David C. Knight*

Mark Grindle was one of the Colony Chaplains. It wasn't in his nature to suppress any truth, no matter how painful.

FROM a green knoll of the system's fourth planet Schofield watched his wife picking beanpeas in the valley below. He and Grindle paused and let the warm radiation from 61 Cygni strike their backs. It was just past noon and the double sun had shrunk both their shadows to twin blobs at their feet.

Despite the shock of Grindle's news, Schofield could still thrill to Tavia's movements. They were fresh, alive, utterly youthful; the movements of a contented woman of twenty-eight. Like others of the Colony who had married Suspension Volunteers, Schofield preferred to think of his wife's age in terms of Active Span.

He preferred not to think of it in terms of Total Span.

As they had done aboard ship, the colony of star-migrants had continued to use the Julian calendar, although the practice now was to describe the year as Arrival *plus* the number of years on their new home. In two weeks it would be New Year's, January 1st, Arrival-plus-Five and he and Tavia would be celebrating their second wedding anniversary.

At times Schofield himself found

David C. Knight, a New York editor, will be remembered for his lovely THE AMAZING MRS. MIMMS (FU, August 1958) and his earlier THE LOVE OF FRANK NINETEEN (FU, Dec. 1957). As he has previously written, and proves here,— "you can have gimmicks and human interest too!"

it difficult to believe that Tavia's age was officially 330, Total Span. Stop and figure it out, he used to tell himself. Tavia's Pre-Suspension age was twenty-six plus a few odd days. Then you added the Post-Suspension age of two, exactly the number of years they had been married after the epidemic of January, Arrival-plus-Three. That gave you twenty-eight, Tavia's Active Span. Of course when you added the official Flight Duration Constant of 302 established by the Colony's Astrophysical Society, you got Tavia's Total Span of 330.

Weird? Not really, thought Schofield. Not when you considered that the Suspension Volunteers had originally been provided for just such an emergency as the epidemic of three years ago. After all, forty other colonists besides himself had taken them as spouses, too. And in most cases they had turned out to be happy marriages like his own.

But now something unusual had come to light. Something as shocking to Schofield as it had been to Grindle who had come across it in re-indexing the Colony's flight logs and documents for permanent transfer to the administration building.

Tavia saw them now and waved. She shouted something which the warm wind whipped away across the valley into silence. She motioned eagerly to her husband to hurry and pointed down at the ground. Then she pointed to her mouth and made eating motions; her tiny daughter did the same in childish imitation.

"Beanpeas," she repeated into the wind. "We're having beanpeas for lunch. You know how you love beanpeas." Tavia smiled at the name they had given the alien vegetable. It reminded her of the ancient truck farms in Delaware.

"Don, I'm a fool," Grindle said suddenly. "Eugenics Code or no Eugenics Code, there was really no need of telling you this. Tavia's Pre-Suspension son died over two and a half centuries ago. Certainly sufficient time has intervened . . ."

"But Tavia's son was aboard nevertheless—where he had no business to be," Schofield reminded him. The words were edged with bitterness.

The two of them had spent the entire morning in the Archives Room of the cannibalized ship. Grindle had shown him the proof. Together they had left the shell of the huge rocket which had been their home for so long and walked across the fields toward his farm.

Mark Grindle was one of the Colony Chaplains. He had married them himself soon after the epidemic. Schofield knew it was not in Grindle's nature to suppress any truth, no matter how painful. Even as boys together on the ship Schofield had never known him to lie. It was Grindle who had built the first church from logs he had felled and material from the rocket.

"She hardly talks of the ancient wars or people of Earth any more," mused Schofield. "She tries to forget. She wants this to be the only world for her now."

"The human mind wants to forget evil," said Grindle. He put a hand on Schofield's shoulder. "Don, I know it seems unjustly ironic. A freak. And yet nothing happens in this universe that is not God's Will. I believe that."

"Perhaps," Schofield said. "I wonder what he was like, Tavia's son? Was he blond, too? Did he have the same laugh?"

Tavia might never have happened to him at all except for the epidemic, he reflected for the thousandth time. The heavy seals might never have been broken on the nearly-forgotten compartment of the Refrigeration Deck. The rows of mute Suspension Volunteers — chilled, kept perfect for over three centuries in their cubicles — might never have been disturbed in their Numylmethane slumber. But the deadly virus of Arrival-plus-Three had ripped into the Colony without warning like a malignant snake. Before their scientists could isolate even primary antibodies to combat it, the bug had reduced their numbers seriously, and among them had been Schofield's first wife. Now only in very private moments did he allow himself to think of that first wedding just a few short years ago (it was in Arrival-minus-Two) and afterwards the cheery apartment in Quadrant South of the ship and all the planning they had done in anticipation of Arrival.

They had had three happy years.
Then the bug.
And then, Tavia.

The Eugenics Commission had had no alternative but to invoke the so-called Suspension Article, a clause of the Constitution formally titled Emergency Colonial Reproduction Through Mass Espousal. Originally all Suspension Volunteers had been carefully screened and, as nearly as possible, ideal specimens of both sexes had been chosen. (Schofield recalled the writings of the then-contemporary historian, Spencer Samuel, describing the crowds of potential volunteers, eager to escape the savage Population Wars, which had to be turned away from every starship.) Spouse selection had been arranged by the Eugenics Commission in the fairest procedure possible—by lot. Each colonist who required a new mate drew a number, waited his turn and then was ushered into the suspension cubicles where he had forty minutes to make his selection. On the face of it, Schofield reflected, the whole affair seemed like a cold and calculated laboratory experiment, yet in his heart realized the necessity for it. Unless the Colony wished to run the risk of losing the battle for survival, the usual time for natural selection and normal courtship had to be eliminated. Moreover, the Commission had strongly recommended that reproduction begin as soon as practicable after the de-suspension of spouses.

Eventually Schofield's own turn had come and he had found himself alone among the eerie cubicles, clad in heavy clothing against the cold,

and faced with the task of selecting a life-partner in something less than three-quarters of an hour. He remembered how his breath hung in the air like a frosty balloon. He did nothing at all for perhaps ten minutes because it had seemed like some kind of macabre dream being alone among the cubicles of bluish crystal all tilted at precisely 45° for optimum inspection. On the left of the aisle were the suspended men to be chosen by bereaved women colonists; on the right were the women, among whom he must select one. Glancing suddenly at his watch which had been synchronized with the Commission's official timepiece, he saw that he only had some twenty-nine minutes or so left. He began down the aisle peering into the motionless faces, about each of which swirled a faint mist of the suspension agent.

All of the women were young and all of them were beautiful. And then suddenly among all the faces there was just one face. Tavia's.

On her cheeks had been droplets of moisture—tears—which the chemical had caught and preserved for more than three centuries.

Fifteen minutes ahead of time Schofield had emerged from the cubicles and the Eugenics Commission had recorded his choice.

As a matter of form they had given him an extract of the Terrestrial inventory which concerned Tavia. It was sketchy enough. Octavia Ogden was a young widow. Her husband, Ivan Ogden, had perished in the

struggle for land domination near a region called Baffin Bay. Shortly after hearing of his death, she had applied to her local Star Migrant District. The lists however had been so discouragingly long that she had presented herself as a Suspension Volunteer instead, and been accepted. The extract made a brief mention of her son and that was all.

Tavia waved again and held aloft the beanpeas dripping their curious foliage. She made an imploring gesture, knowing that Don wouldn't hear her words. Cupping her hand against the wind anyway she called: "It's getting late, darling, please hurry; the child is hungry; it's almost afternoon." To indicate the passage of time she pointed to the fantastic purples and golds of the double star that was their sun.

"You're a lucky man, Don," Grindle murmured. "She's lovely."

Schofield hardly heard. His mind was still a puzzled, churning thing. He tried to focus it clearly on the morning's research. Generations. Family trees. Spidery genealogical tables diligently kept throughout the centuries. Somewhere, something. A little boy, Tavia's son, who shouldn't have fit the picture, and yet did. From the vivid Samuel accounts Schofield could almost picture those times . . . the press of war . . . the restless waiting lists . . . the urgency to blast off . . . the hasty inventory and countdown . . .

"Somehow they overlooked him," Schofield said at last. "I'm sure of

it. Somehow Tavia's son got aboard and they didn't know it. Maybe Tavia herself arranged to have him smuggled aboard. Maybe she couldn't bear the thought of his growing up and getting killed like his father. However it was I'm not going to ask her about it. Tavia has my daughter now. She belongs to this world."

"Certainly they couldn't take the boy back after blast-off," added Grindle. "I suppose once they discovered him there wasn't much they could do except move over and make room for him. He was little more than a child at the time anyway."

"It was the fault of the original Eugenics Commission," blurted Schofield in sudden anger. "It was their job to see that the bloodlines were kept clear. Surely there were always enough people on board to avoid the slightest bit of inbreeding. Any child who's read a fraction of Samuel knows that the first requirement a Suspension Volunteer had to meet was that he or she possess absolutely no blood relationship with the crew or any of the star-migrants. And yet Tavia's son was allowed to marry—to have issue—and now the whole affair's back full circle."

Schofield's anger slowly subsided as the Chaplain spoke:

"Don, I thought at first I might have made a mistake in the indexing. I went over and over those old notations. You saw them yourself. In those days they made notes of everything. The yeomen of the First Flight Century were famous for

their detail and I'm familiar enough with their handwriting to be perfectly sure there couldn't have been falsification. Of course if Tavia's son had had male issue, and succeeding generations had had male issue, your name might have been Ogden, too, instead of Schofield. You might have wondered why your names were the same . . ."

Schofield laughed.

"But our names weren't the same," he said. "Even if they had been it wouldn't have mattered. I never thought of reading her name on the lid, frankly. I just kept looking at her face and thinking, 'the blonde in the 5th cubicle, she's the one I want for my wife.'"

Beanpeas in the afternoon, thought Tavia. It sounded almost like the title of a book she'd read as a girl. She watched the diffuse rays of 61 Cygni catch the bright metal nosecone of the rocket; it was purely a trophy of Arrival now mounted triumphantly on the white slab of concrete on the opposite hill. Around it a herd of indigenous cat-sheep ranged peacefully. That other was so long ago, thought Tavia. She waved again.

Schofield felt Grindle's arm lightly on his shoulder before he started down into the valley. He felt very hungry now. Tavia was laughing and waving the beanpeas saucily. It wasn't every man, Schofield was thinking, who could be married to a beautiful wife and at the same time to his great-great-great-great-great-grandmother.