

TABLE OF CONTENTS

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JULY ISSUE ON SALE
MAY 27th

Stories

SLAVES TO THE METAL HORDE

(Novel—25,000 words)by *Milton Lesser*..... 6
Robot armies had conquered Earth, yet Johnny Hope refused to surrender—alive!

RECEPTION COMMITTEE

(Short—1,500 words)by *Len Guttridge*..... 68
If you came face to face with an alien, would you welcome him to Earth—or run!

... THE WORLD IS BUT A STAGE

(Short—6,500 words)by *Daniel F. Galouye*..... 74
Craig began to hate puppet work—the day he discovered he had a few strings too!

EARTHMEN DIE HARD!

(Short—1,800 words)by *Richard O. Lewis*..... 94
Before colonization the planet had to be sterile—free of one particular germ—man!

BEWARE THE STAR GODS

(Short—4,300 words)by *S. J. Byrne*.....100
Kuru's people were certain Frank was a God—but then, a true God is indestructible!

THE SCANDALIZED MARTIANS

(Short—1,300 words)by *Arnold Marmor*.....112
David Fry wanted his movie to be realistically out of this world. And it nearly was!

Features

INTRODUCING THE AUTHOR..... 2
THE EDITORIAL4
NO ABSOLUTE ZERO?.....93

SCIENCE FICTION LIBRARY.....116
FANDORA'S BOX118
LETTERS FROM THE READERS.....124

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Kuru stood his ground bravely as the ship flamed down from the sky. Truly this was a great and terrible moment. He must warn his people to —

Beware The Star Gods

By

S. J. Byrne

KURU paused, his stone knife poised above the half-skinned kill. He listened, at the same time twitching his sensitive nostrils in an effort to read the messages of the wind. But there was nothing in the air for his nose to read. Rather, it was sound that gave him warning.

He stood up and looked through the trees at the small valley beyond the ridge on which he stood. He could hear the raucous cry of birds and the tree people.

Kuru wanted very much to run to his people, but if he should do so what would he tell them? That he was running from that which he had not even looked upon with his own eyes? That Kuru ran from the cry of birds and tree people?

Now the tree people saw him and they paused in their flight, concentrating their numbers in the trees over his head, looking down at him and chattering and gesticulating with their busy little furry

arms. He was aware that they recognized him as a hunter and the enemy of the murder-beast, and he was proud, knowing that they were appealing to him now in the face of this new and greater enemy, whatever it was. He could see that they were pointing at the sky.

The sky! Only the gods lived in the sky! He felt the hair along the base of his neck stand out stiffly.

Something great and terrible was coming out of the sky!

THE thing was long and rounded and shone brightly like the stars. It sparkled in the blue-white light of the triple suns like a love-stone brought from the Faraway Caves beyond the Great River. And it was floating down on pillars of fire toward the valley. It was becoming bigger and bigger, as were Kuru's large, black eyes.

Fear began to give place to Kuru's wonder. How had such a



thing ever come to be? And what was it doing in the sky? What was it?

It was big, far bigger than Kuru could have imagined. When it came to the ground it crushed and burned dozens of great trees. And there it sat, motionlessly and without sound, as though a mountain had dropped from the sky to stay there forever.

Suddenly, in the shining surface of the great sky-jewel a long, black hole appeared, and even as he watched something glittering began to emerge from it. At first it seemed that this was some sort of gigantic cocoon, breaking open to release the wing of an unimaginable insect. But in another moment he received the biggest surprise of all.

"Men!" he gasped. "What are men doing in that sky-jewel? They could not have made it and come out of the sky—unless they are gods!"

The "man-gods" wore strange garments. They were amazingly frail and beautiful looking people, like women in their fairness of skin and their almost complete lack of hair on their bodies. Kuru felt that he could have broken one of them with each hand. But what strange strength of magic did they possess to make this shining cave that brought them from the sky?

He heard a ferocious roar which emanated from the region of the sky-cave. It was a murder-beast. He saw several of the "man-gods"

run to a gleaming sort of fence at the edge of the wing that had extended itself out of the black hole. They were looking downward.

Now here was something Kuru could understand. In the face of the terrifying murder-beast he would be able to tell whether or not these people were weaklings. He saw one of them extract a small object from his garments. When this small object was pointed downward in the direction of the roaring murder-beast, a thin, bright line of light appeared below it, and the murder-beast's roar was cut off.

Kuru's teeth chattered slightly. Undoubtedly, he was looking upon the representatives of a race of gods. They could command the powers of lightning.

Still, he could not run away even now, because only a female would come screaming home to tell of what she had merely seen from afar. A hunter like Kuru, who was already a respected member of the family council, would investigate and have something more to tell other than how frightened he was. On the contrary, he must show how brave he could be. He must get closer to the sky-cave of the gods and watch them for a while . . .

* * *

"Infra-red picked it up. It's something pretty big, over in that tall tree. Been there since before sundown."

"Hmmm . . . Patience, cunning,

warm-blooded, large size. Do you think—"

"Now don't let's get back on *that* again!"

"But Henderson said he saw one with his binoculars, up on that ridge, early this afternoon."

"Good God, Frank! Can't you realize you're being victimized by an old complex? Why is it we *have* to find human beings on other worlds? We've been searching the stars unsuccessfully for more than a millenium."

"This is our farthest reach out into the galaxy—"

"Yeah. By God, it's almost six hundred light years, twenty years by chronology, and two for us even under trans-C time contraction. *That*, my friend, is some traveling!"

"It's a beautiful planet—just like Earth was supposed to be once. You know, sometimes I think civilization is a disease."

"That's a *great* idea! So we're microbes infesting the universe!"

* * *

THAT night Kuru returned to his family, which consisted of his father, his mother, his father's three other wives, his two sisters, his five younger brothers, half-sisters, half-brothers, and dozens of uncles and aunts and scores of cousins numbering one hundred and twenty-two males and females. Council members from three neighboring "families" had already gathered on Coun-

cil Rock, because some had seen the shining thing descend out of the sky. But only Kuru could tell them facts about it, which added tremendously to his prestige.

"It is a flying cave they have built," he concluded. "They are gods from the country of the sky."

"This must be true," said Bortu, his father. "You say they killed a murder-beast with lightning?"

"As though it were a crawly-bug under their feet."

The elder members of the council and the younger hunters all looked at Kuru in silent admiration. But admiration was mixed with fear. The stars above them were big with mystery and wonder. Why had the gods come down to visit their world?

"What do they want?" asked Gurgo, the father-chief of the Snake Lake family.

"I do not know. I heard them talking among each other, but it is some strange twist of tongue that makes no meaning."

Now Fulkudu, father-chief of the Cloud Valley family, rose to speak. He had thrown the sacred white fur of the river-cat over his shoulder, which meant that his was an official decision.

"We must appease these gods," he announced. "We must show them at once that we are friendly to them. A sacrifice must be presented." Whereupon, he sat down again and was silent.

The rest of them remained silent, too, because this recommendation

gave rise to a much more important question. If the other father-chiefs agreed with Fulkudu, then someone would have to go to those powerful gods and present the sacrifice. No one wished to be embarrassed by having to confess his fear. Who would be brave enough to take the sacrifice to them?

As though by common accord, all council members slowly concentrated their attention upon Kuru. Words were unnecessary to express the general idea. Kuru was a very brave hunter. He alone knew more about the gods who had come from the sky than any other among them.

Kuru looked into the eyes of his father and saw the message written there. He had made his father proud. To back out now was to lose all the prestige so far gained. Kuru thought of the thin bolt of lightning that had killed the murder-beast, and he fought to keep his teeth from chattering.

Slowly, he stood up, throwing his own white fur over his brawny shoulder. "I will present the sacrifice," he said. And his own voice sounded strange to him. It was hard to believe he had said such a brave thing as this.

with her long black hair and her large black eyes and firm young breasts. He, himself, had killed the murder-beast whose fur encircled her shapely hips.

"I would be with you in this danger," she answered, pleadingly. "None of the other males dared to go with you. Our father's pride would be complete if a female of the Great Cliffs were as brave as Kuru."

"But you must go back. I do not know what these gods will do. They may kill me."

Derla ran forward to her brother's side, placing her hands on one of his hairy arms. "Then this is a greater reason for me to be with you, brother!—so that your spirit will not travel alone into the sky country."

Kuru looked down into his sister's eyes and grinned. "You are my favorite sister," he said. "Come! Perhaps when they see you they will not think of killing!" He shouldered the horny-head beast again, and the two of them continued across the floor of the valley toward the shining sky-cave of the gods. . .

* * *

"**D**ERLA!" Kuru exclaimed. "What are you doing here?" He lowered the heavy horny-head beast to the ground and looked at his sister in amazement.

She was almost his own age, and the prettiest female in the family,

"MOTHER of God! Frank!"

"What is it?"

"Seeing is believing. Look down there in that small clearing. . ."

"Oh no. It can't be!"

"Well, you were the guy that was saying they might be here!"

"What I need is witnesses then. I'll signal general call. You get cameras and the recorders out!"

"BY God, it's incredible—yet it's true! The first extra-terrestrial humans ever discovered, in over a thousand years of space exploration!"

"This will be something to stir up their blood back home. People were beginning to lose interest even in galactic exploration. This is it, boys! We've finally discovered our own kind!"

"I wouldn't go so far as to say that. Those are obviously primordialials. That male is half hair."

"And the other half is all brawn. The female is surprisingly clear-skinned. For a primordial gal she isn't bad!"

"What are they doing down there? Looks like they're waiting for us to do something."

"Don't you get it? We're from the stars. Therefore we're gods. That quadruple-horned goat-like animal at their feet is a sacrifice. We're supposed to accept it."

"Hell, we'll accept them all! Let's get 'em on board!"

"Hold it a minute, men. Keep your voices down. You're gods now, not monkeys. Take it easy. Can't you see how the female cringes behind the male? Both of them are half scared out of their wits. By their own evaluation, they are braving death to do us honor. We have to gain their confidence."

"Well, if they're defying death,

itself, maybe they'd come on board if we lowered the ladder to them."

"We can try it, but let it down slowly—and smile! Remember, you are benevolent gods . . ."

* * *

"IF they intended to kill us, Derla, they would have done so by now. See? They smile at us!"

"Look! Something is coming down!"

"It is a shiny-fence."

"It is like the vine-steps for climbing cliffs."

"That's it, Derla! Either they are coming down, or—or—"

"Kuru! They want us to come up!"

The two of them stood there in the small clearing, looking at the vertical shiny-fence that had come down to them from the great ledge where the man-gods stood, up at the top of their sky-cave. Again, Kuru's great muscles twitched with the instinct to run. Had he been alone, he might have done so. But in the eyes of his brave sister he could not do this, even though it might cost him his life. Still, the god-men looked very friendly. They were beckoning to him to come up.

Gritting his teeth and emitting a low growl to give himself courage, Kuru threw the horny-head beast across his shoulder and approached the shiny-fence. "You stay here," he told his sister.

"No, Kuru! I will come behind you, no matter what happens!"

He shrugged, ashamed of his own fear in the presence of her surprising courage. He grabbed cross-pieces of the shiny-fence and began to climb, knowing that Derla was close at his heels.

The great, smooth ledge with the shiny-fence around it was larger than he had expected. A group of twelve man-gods stood there, waiting for him. None of them, he noticed carefully, had a lightning stick in his hand, although at least five of them carried the terrible weapons at their sides. After pausing once to make sure that he was not to be attacked, Kuru climbed up onto the ledge and threw his sacrifice down. Then he turned to help Derla up. The two of them stood facing the people from the sky.

Finally, Kuru said to them, "We bring you sacrifice and make peace. The gods are welcome to this land."

Derla tugged at his arm. "We should bow down," she advised.

Brother and sister fell to their knees, with bowed heads.

* * *

"That ought to make a good picture for you, Henderson. They're eating out of our hand already!"

"Here, fellow, get to your feet. You too, black eyes!"

"Don't forget the sacrifice. Better accept it so's they won't be offended. Besides, maybe it's edible. We could do with some fresh meat

—maybe."

"Maybe is right. I don't think my system could get used to real steaks again. That looks like some sort of goat. May be just like mut-ton."

"Hey Frank! That cave girl sure goes for you! Look at her take you in with those big eyes!"

"Guess that's because Frank's more their size. Open your shirt a little more. Frankie old boy. Show 'em the hair on your chest!"

"Shut up, you guys. Do you realize what this means?"

"Yeah. Love at first sight!"

"Men! Pipe down. Whether you like it or not, this is quite a historical moment. Now the first problem is one of communication and contact with the rest of their people."

"We could get out the flier and take them home."

"That's right. We'll do that when we've tried talking to them and taken some more pictures and recordings. What do you make of that fellow's language, Ken?"

"Primitive, but with a pretty good smattering of syntax. There were some definite inflexions. I'd say they were about ready for writing."

"By God, that guy must have the strength of a gorilla. This sacrifice animal weighs a ton. Give me a hand, Mike."

"Where I come from, that expression he's wearing is a snarl. But

I guess he is trying to smile. Well? Who's going to shake hands? Okay, Frank. You be the hero."

"You'd think he'd never seen a hand before. He's afraid to touch you. No, he's going to—"

"Ouch!"

"Yipes! If he can hurt Frank then I'm not shaking hands with him! I'll shake hers, though. They say women used to go around like *that* in Bali."

"Now just take it easy, men. I think that hairy fellow is doing a splendid job as it is. Can't you see how nervous he is? He's broken out into a sweat. He's watching us like a wild animal. Instinct is struggling with intelligence. Don't make any quick moves. You'll notice he keeps watching our guns as though he knew what they were for. That's pretty good observation. He'll probably jump the first one who draws, so just remember that . . ."

"They're getting in because they saw you two get in, but they may not know it's a flier. The minute you take to the air they may get panicky. So watch yourselves! We'll follow in the other two rigs. Take it slow, because we want to catch some aerial fotos of the terrain . . ."

"Say listen, Frank. These people have been entertaining us all for a week. We've found a perfect, utterly peaceful world that has never known war or privation.

It's the biggest find in history, and here you sit moping. I haven't seen you smile once since we got here. What's eating you?"

"I think you just hit the nail on the head."

"What do you mean?"

"We have found a perfect, utterly peaceful world that has never known privation."

"So?"

"Remember what I said about civilization being a disease?"

"Oh, so that's it! Well, they don't seem to object to the contamination."

"How could they? We're wonder gods, and our gadgets are magic toys. What do they know about the rest of it? In forty or fifty years the colony ships will arrive here and set up shop. There'll be scientific development, mass production, regimentation. Just consider the implications of bringing an alarm clock to this world!"

"That's pretty good squeezein's they make out of those roots, but don't let it make you morbid, old boy!"

"Within two generations those rugged brutes will be helping us build factories here. They'll be wearing work clothes and numbers. Our society is necessarily collective because of past history and possible future dangers of aggression among ourselves. What do these people need collective security for?—and mass production—only to feed us as we come in among them and spawn more millions who will soon

make it necessary to expand again and find another world like this to spoil!"

"Frank, you're going off your rockers. Oh! Oh! Here's something to take your mind off of social philosophy. Look at this!"

"What cooks? Looks like a delegation of all the best looking women in the tribe. Guess they're going to dance for us or something."

"There's Dark Eyes again. She's got you picked out already."

"Picked out?"

"Sure! Ken said he thought this would happen. They've made several overtures before."

"What are you talking about?"

"Children of Paradise, pal! They think this is the truest form of hospitality, and in a way—"

"You mean—!"

"Yeah. That's what I mean. And Dearborn says we shouldn't offend them. So what am I going to do?"

"But—!"

"Don't keep Dark eyes waiting, pal!"

* * *

"YOU were only supposed to please the gods, not fall in love with them, Derla."

"I love only one."

"I know. It is the big one who never smiles except when he looks at you and me. Then he smiles with sadness. But he is not liked by the other gods. I have seen him argue with the others and shout at them and wave his arms about—and they

have stopped smiling at him. If he is in disfavor, it is dangerous to have anything to do with him. He carries his lightning stick at all times, and I know it is because he fears attack from his own kind, not from us. You must stay away from him."

"He does not seek me. I fail to please him."

"He is a god and you are woman."

"But Sigala, and Bulbini—"

"I know. Some of the gods have been lonelier than the others. That is the only reason."

"The big one who is called Fronk—has not yet—"

"It is just as well."

"Not even that night when we first—"

"Derla, you will have to forget about him and stay away from him."

"But he was kind. . ."

"And he is not liked by the other gods. Your father forbids it!"

* * *

"FRANK, this obsession of yours is getting serious. The men have asked me to have a talk with you. If you don't get hold of yourself it might even mean the big, man. Now I want you to tell me just what's behind all this."

"Well, sir, it's just that I think we're dead wrong in coming here at all. What we ought to do is *protect* these people from civiliza-

tion. We discovered them. When we go back and report it, they will be the property of modern materialism. Our supposed gifts to them will be nothing short of exploitation. I say we erase our discovery from the records."

"What?—I can see now why a couple of the boys had a fight with you. It's insane! For over ten centuries we have looked for other humans—"

"And now that we've found them, we plan to force them into our own way of life, as though *we* had found the only answer!"

"Frank, I'm sorry to put it this way, but this is an order. Keep your personal opinions to yourself. You're on probation and you're going to be watched. Dismissed!"

* * *

"THE big one has stones in his head, Derla. Look at him up there on the clifftop. He has grown a beard. Each day he looks less a god and more a man. But he drinks *qaval*-juice too much. He stays away from us and he stays away from the other gods. What is the matter with him?"

"I do not know, Kuru. He is very strange. Beautiful things make him sad. I know when he is sad, because then he really drinks and goes away to sleep it off somewhere."

"What do you mean—beautiful things?"

"Well, it is when we are happiest

in the mornings when the suns are still too low in the sky to drink the dew from the leaves and grasses, when we bathe in the river and laugh and play. Or when many of us sit around the great fires at night and listen to the old ones' stories. He watches us then, and he drinks, and after a while he goes away. He is very sad."

"Soon they will all be gone. I saw them bringing many things to the sky cave . . ."

"I will be sad to see them go."

"You will be sad to see the crazy big one go."

"Yes. There is something in his eyes—a kindness that is for all of us—and there is even something in his eyes for me."

"You believe in the things you wish for. But that does not make them true."

"Kuru. Where do you think they go?"

"Now *that* is a question for a woman to ask! Is it not obvious? They go into the sky, whence they came . . ."

ONE morning the large families of the Great Cliffs, Snake Lake and Cloud Valley were startled out of their sleep by a shaking of the ground and a blinding light in the sky. Before they could rub the sleep out of their eyes, a giant, invisible hand swept over the country, bending trees almost to the ground. And then a terrible roar smote their ears. They did not know if the gods of the mountains had

spoken or if this were some new manifestation of powers on the part of the sky gods who were soon to depart. When they saw the angry cloud and the fire in the sky they fell to the ground, trembling with fear, and praying. They did not know how they had angered these strange new gods, but there could be no doubt that they were angered.

Hours later, when the angry cloud began to fade away in the sky above that valley where the sky cave was located, the father-chiefs and hunters gathered at Council Rock.

"Our bravest hunters must go to appease them with great sacrifices," announced Bortu. "They must go at once. And my son, Kuru, will lead them."

So it was decided. The fattest horny-head beasts were killed and skinned. Kuru and nine other hunters shouldered their sacrifices and started toward the Valley of the Gods, as it was now called. Over three hundred members of the three great families stood on the Great Cliffs and watched them go, hoping that the gods would not destroy them in their mysterious wrath.

Suddenly a great cry of alarm arose from the watchers. The hunters paused on the edge of the forest. Before them stood the sky god, the big crazy one with the beard. The one called *Fronk*. In his hand was a lightning stick, and he pointed it at the hunters. He made signs to them which were unmistakable. They were not to approach the Val-

ley of the Gods.

Derla could not help it. She ran across the intervening space and stood beside her brother, Kuru, staring at the god she loved, in desperation and amazement.

He was crying. His face and his beard were streaked with tears. He was crying, almost screaming at them—but he would not let them pass . . .

* * *

"I didn't mean to kill them! Mother of God, why didn't you take me instead! Only wanted to cripple the power so they'd be stranded . . . All right! Keep back! You, too, Dark Eyes! Those sacrifices mean nothing now, boys . . . Just a smoking pit back there filled with radiation. But what would you know about that? Thank God now you'll *never* know! That's the first and the last mushroom cloud you'll ever see. Go on back to your Paradise. Maybe you'll never know I saved it for you . . . Go on! Beat it!"

* * *

"He killed all the other gods, Derla. In his madness he destroyed the great sky cave, and now not even he can return to the country of the sky."

"I don't think he meant to kill the others. He cried for days about it."

"And got terribly drunk! We had to stop giving him *qaral*-juice. It was making him sick so that he could not eat, and he grew thin."

"But he has been gone for many, many suns. Do you think he is dead?"

"He is a god. Perhaps he will never die. He went away because he knew we were afraid of him. In fact, he is not welcome in any of the families.

"He is a lonely God. I have made up my mind, my brother. I am sad because he is sad. If our people will not comfort him then I must. I am going to him. I will try and

make him a happy God once more."

Derla turned away from Kuru then and walked into the dark forest. Kuru watched her go and then shook his head. "You are a strange one, my sister. But go to your God. You will never be happy unless you do." He shrugged then and turned his thoughts to other more important matters.

And Derla went to find her God. She was eager, and happy. . .

THE END