

PLANET STORIES



VOL. 5, No. 12 •

A FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE •

MAY, 1953

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T. T. SCOTT, *President*

JACK O'SULLIVAN, *Editor*

MALCOLM REISS, *Mgr. Editor*

PLANET STORIES • Published bi-monthly by Love Romances Publishing Co., Inc., 1658 Summer St., Stamford, Conn. The entire contents of this magazine are copyrighted, 1953, by Love Romances Publishing Co., Inc. Reentered as second-class matter September 30, 1952, at the Post Office at Stamford, Conn. Additional entry at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. All rights reserved. Price 25c per copy. One-year subscription: \$1.50; additional postage for Canada, 15c; foreign countries, 30c. For advertising rates address: Advertising Director, Fiction House, Inc., 1658 Summer Street, Stamford, Conn.



CON-FEN

By JAMES R. ADAMS

The Shisti and the Assistant Shisti of Mars chose Chicago, U. S. A., for their vacation spot. No worries; they were invisible. Plenty of rich food; the joint was loaded. A whole year of frolicking in store. Only one thing they overlooked—there was a curious convention going on.

THE landing on the green planet, Koosh told himself in satisfaction, was one of utmost perfection. Not that that made it unusual, since the Martian craft all but handled itself and invariably performed almost one hundred per cent flawlessly.

But Koosh did feel that this landing was a little, just a little, better than average, and his ability as pilot had made it so.

Thuko apparently thought the same, for he touched the other on the back of the neck in brief compliment.

Twirling his eye-stalks in pleasure, Koosh pressed a button on the control panel and arose to follow Thuko to the opening airlock, hopping on one leg, which happened to be all that he or any Martian possessed.

They emerged into warm, late summer air. For a moment they stood, filling their lungs, reveling in the rich, heady atmosphere that was so unlike their own.

"Wonderful, Thuko!" Koosh enthused. "And to think we have a full year of it ahead of us!"

"You are no less pleased than I," Thuko agreed. "But we must take care that nothing happens to the ship in that time. Loss of it would mean the end of all this."

He did not need to mention the reason. Koosh knew that it was because the small craft was the only one in existence. At least, as far as Mars was concerned. And of course that was because—well, actually it was not a Martian ship.

Thousands of years ago a lone, exploring Jovian had landed on Mars. After brief inspection of the machine, the Martians had decided it was a thing much worth having. They promptly murdered the Jovian, thereby neatly solving the problem of how to gain the gleaming silver sphere for themselves.

Operation of the ship had proved only a matter of learning the right buttons to push. And the Martians were more than capable of making the few simple repairs it required from time to time. But they were stumped completely by the anti-gravity plates that drove it. All attempts to duplicate them had ended fruitlessly. The original would have to serve them until another Jovian came.

"Where shall we put it for safekeeping?" Koosh asked. Then, answering his own question, "I imagine a likely place would be on the roof of an unoccupied building in whatever city we choose as our initial—ah—host."

"That is a good suggestion," said Thuko. "A rooftop would be ideal. Let us proceed to find one in a suitable metropolis."

Reentering the ship they took it aloft and skimmed over Earth's surface, presently coming above a large city. A Terran would have recognized it as Chicago. Eye-stalks pressed to the quartz window, the alien

pair scrutinized closely each building they passed over.

"There's one!" exclaimed Koosh. He pointed with the longest three of his nine tendril-like appendages. "See it, Thuko?"

"I see it. Yes, it is obviously empty of life and has been for some time. Set down the sphere, Koosh."

Ten minutes later they were standing on a gravelled rooftop, sucking in more of the wonderful air of this hospitable world.

"And so we begin our vacation on Earth," Koosh murmured softly, reverently. "A year, Thuko! a year of breathing this nectar . . . of stuffing our poor starved bodies with fine foods unknown to Mars' barren soil. A year of abundance!"

Vacation. The Martians had acquired, however dishonestly, the means of travel through interplanetary space, and could think of no better purpose for it than hauling them to vacations on Earth, a world they had long known to be rich in those things vital to life.

Unfortunately for the masses of Mars, the sphere could only carry two passengers a trip, with one acting as pilot. Therefore its use had been strictly limited to high officials. Too bad for the masses; but lucky for Koosh and Thuko, since they both held important offices. They were merely the Shisti and Assistant Shisti, respectively.

The Assistant Shisti spoke now, the round orifice in the center of his face rapidly dilating and contracting. Ignoring the other's ecstatic bubbings, he said, "This will be fine, Koosh. Little could happen to the ship here, unless the building collapsed. And of course we need not worry too much about the place remaining untenanted. That really makes small difference."

KOOSH drooped his eye-stalks in agreement. "Except that the chances of accident would be increased somewhat. But now, let us leave here. This gravel punches through my sandal and hurts my foot."

On the street, they paused to consider their next move. While they stood there debating, a seedy, stoop-shouldered human came shuffling along the walk and passed between them unheedingly, mumbling something about, "Need dough. Gotta get wine money . . ."

The Shisti casually watched him out of sight around the corner, then said, "Astounding, Thuko, astounding. He gave no indication of having seen us. I must admit I don't completely understand it."

"Who does?" countered Thuko. "It is something that science cannot satisfactorily explain. All the savants know is that most of these Earthlings do not believe in our existence, and somehow that nonbelief acts to prevent them from acknowledging the evidence of their senses that we are among them. Furthermore, wherever we go, if even one human in the immediate vicinity refuses to accept our reality, then we are apparent to none, though we stand before a thousand.

"The same thing applies to the ship. Not only that, but suppose I steal an object right out of the hands of a human and place it elsewhere. To his mind it ceases to exist—never did exist. There was nothing to move it; it could not move itself; so his weak intellect takes the easiest way out by rejecting the whole affair.

"All in all, we are about as safe as we could be. As long as there is one non-believer somewhere near us."

"It is a good thing," remarked Koosh. "The Earthmen might resent us if they knew of our presence."

"Yes." Thuko abruptly dismissed the subject and said, "I am increasingly aware of the pangs of hunger. Perhaps we could best launch our sojourn on Earth with a festive orgy at some food emporium.

Koosh liked the idea and forthwith they hopped off in search of a supermarket, of which they had heard much from returning vacationers. Enough to start them drooling in anticipation.

In the first two blocks they bounded past a dozen or more pedestrians, each of whom paid them no attention.

Five blocks more and they found what they were looking for. It bore the name of a well-known chain, though the colorful sign was meaningless to the Shisti and his assistant, since the Martians had never taken the trouble to learn any of Earth's multifarious languages, either written or spoken.

They entered, and at once their organs of scent were assailed by such a profusion of saliva inspiring odors that Koosh all but

collapsed in an ague of rapture. He grasped a wheeled contrivance for support.

Thuko wasted no time in such preliminaries, but hopped frantically down the aisle into the produce department, grabbed a huge cabbage and began eating with all the gusto of a circus fat lady down to her last three hundred pounds.

Nearby the produce clerk leaned drowsily against the sacked potato display, enjoying the respite offered by a mid-morning slack period. Oblivious to the theft of the cabbage and the crunching sounds resultant therefrom, he speculatively eyed an under-dressed blonde tripping by the window.

Thuko finished the vegetable and without pause started on a stalk of bananas. Meanwhile, in another aisle, Koosh had discovered the delights of Gro-Pup and was well into his second box. There was a lifetime of near-starvation to counterbalance, and if that could be done in one short year this voracious team would obviously accomplish it.

They moved slowly along the shelves, stowing away incredible amounts of food and drink. When at last their paths met in the canned goods section, Thuko picked up one of the cylindrical objects and stared at it, thinking. Koosh waited patiently. A minute passed and it seemed the problem would defeat the Assistant Shisti. But then his eye was caught by the butcher wielding a cleaver on a side of beef.

Bells rang in Thuko's head. He hopped behind the meat counter, obtained a second cleaver from its hanging place and returned. Great was his triumph as he lopped off the tops of two of the containers, spattering Koosh with stewed tomatoes. With hunger redoubled by the delay, the Martians emptied can after can of fruits, vegetables, juices and meats, tossing the decapitated tins behind them in the aisle.

A plumpish woman shopper approached, waddling along unhurriedly, pausing occasionally to squint at a grocery list and take an item from the shelves. As she neared Koosh and Thuko, she reached out for a can of peas and in so doing brought her hand against the back of Koosh's head.

Koosh grunted in annoyance and moved his head out of the way. The woman made another try and this time secured the can

of peas. She placed it in her cart and moved on, apparently unaware that anything out of the ordinary had happened.

Not much later she would develop leprosy. For that, incredible as it seems, was just how every leper throughout time had contracted the disease. By coming in accidental contact with a vacationing Martian.

The Martians did not know of it, of course. But even if they had, it would have made no difference to them. Should it be their worry if a blundering Earthian caught from them an incurable ailment? One which to them was not even a disease? Obviously not.

The Shisti and his assistant went on eating, squealing in delight with the first delicious taste of each new food.

THE beginning of their second day on Earth found Koosh and Thuko hopping along the street in quest of new pleasures. The air was damp and raw. Overhead a leaden sky threatened the world below, hinting at the unpleasant equinoctial weather soon to come. But the two Martians took no notice, accustomed as they were to the awful winds and cold of their home planet. This was paradise in comparison.

Koosh reddled a little song with his eye-stalks as they bounded through downtown traffic, but took care not to lose himself in it to the point of coming down in the path of one of the whizzing cars. The terrifying machines did not need to believe in their existence to smash them to bloody pulp.

In front of a swank hotel, Thuko called a halt and motioned with a tendril. "This would be a likely place to find thrilling luxuries. My friend Yemma told me that on his vacation he lived a month in the kitchen of one of these structures and when he came out was so fat he could scarcely hop."

Koosh dribbled spittle. "Wonderful, wonderful. We shall outdo Yemma. We shall spend three months and come out fat even in our tendrils!"

Thuko opened the door and they entered. The lobby was empty except for a clerk behind the desk, who was at the moment engrossed in a newspaper. Ignoring him, they crossed the room in panic haste as a faint but delectable fragrance floated

into their scent organs.

The spacious dining hall was crowded with humanity. At one table a tall, thin man was speaking into a microphone, while all eyes turned in his direction. Most raptly attentive of all were the great number of youthful diners, who seemed to regard the speaker with an awe that bordered on worship.

Onto this scene came Koosh and Thuko, hot on the trail of eatables and drinkables. Spying the door to the kitchen, they hurried toward it between the tables, gabbling at each other in passionate conjecture at the delicacies awaiting them.

They were little prepared for the furor that followed.

It began at the first table they passed. A woman sitting there glanced their way, pointed at them, opened her mouth in a piercing scream and fainted dead away on the floor.

The man with her jumped to his feet, shouting something in a hoarse voice. It sounded like: "They're here! It's finally happened! Now let's see them call us crazy!"

Others stood up, attracted by the hubbub. They craned to see; and when they did, they too began yelling and gesticulating, until the dining hall was one vast sea of sound and motion.

The Shisti and his assistant hesitated, hopped forward again, stopped finally in utter confusion. For the first time on this planet, fear caught at them. Could this truly be? Was it really possible that they had been detected? Did all of these humans believe in the Martians' existence?

Plainly, they did.

"We must flee, Koosh!" Thuko bawled in terror. "Return to the ship!" And suiting action to words, he turned and went leaping back the way they had come. Koosh followed close on his heel, with an alacrity unusual for that individual.

"Wait! Wait, please!" someone called. "We won't harm you!"

Others took it up. But of course Koosh and Thuko did not understand. They rushed on. And the crowd poured after them like a tidal wave, pleading with them to stop.

Through the lobby, out the front entrance, down the steps, the Martians hopped with speed born of desperation. They started

across the street, unheeding of the traffic, intent only on escape from their howling pursuers. Consequently they did not see the huge truck bearing down on them.

Nor did the driver of the truck see them. Not that he was unalert. No, it was merely that he did not believe in Martians. Just as dozens of other motorists and pedestrians close around did not believe in them.

The truck rolled forward. There was a crunching, squishing sound. A blue fluid splattered over the hood and chunks of spongy flesh rained down under the wheels as the delicately built aliens came apart in a thousand pieces. An eye-stalk, twitching violently, bounced off the cab roof.

The truck rumbled on, the driver whistling a cheery tune. Bits of Koosh and Thuko rode with him, caught in the grill. So ended the Shisti and Assistant Shisti's vacation on Earth . . .

Most of the diners had gone back into the hotel. They had stood for an indecisive moment, looking this way and that. Baffled by the disappearance of the alien beings, they had straggled inside one by one. Few words were spoken among them, since each was mentally busy forming a theory to explain the occurrence.

Two of those who dallied behind, both youths, had already come up with explanations, and were telling them to each other

with great zealously and many a gesture.

"Listen," said Bicks. "I tell you they used invisibility belts. Something got out of whack with them just when those beings entered the dining hall and we saw them. They high-tailed it, working on the belts as they ran. By the time they reached the street, they had them repaired. Zap!—just like that, they were invisible again and we lost them. It's simple."

"It's too simple," said Paul scornfully. "Why would both belts conk out at once? My idea is that they came out of another dimension. Looking Earth over for conquest, maybe. But when they found themselves in the hotel surrounded by a lot of people—we'd be monsters to them, you know—they got panicky and ran. Then they recovered, switched on whatever gadget they use, and returned to their own dimension. I'd bet my life that's the real answer."

Bicks didn't agree. He ridiculed the theory, improvised a joke about it. His companion answered hotly. Immersed in argument they walked slowly up the hotel steps.

Both glanced briefly at the large banner stretched above the door. The banner which read:

WELCOME TO THE CHICON II!
10th WORLD SCIENCE-FICTION
CONVENTION