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Farewell To Fuzzies

The Fuzzies had been Wilson's only friends for six months. Their lives, it seemed, meant more to him than his own!

By Henry Hasse



CRAIG WILSON stood at the entrance of his portable iron shack and looked down the length of the narrow valley floor. On each side, perhaps fifty yards apart, the black serrated cliffs reached sheerly upward. Wilson's gaze swung up, beyond the lip of the

cliff, and searched the blackness of space beyond. But there was no hope in his gaze. He really didn't expect to see the blast of a rocket-ship out there; he was beyond that now. This uncharted asteroid, this twenty-mile rock, had been his world for—how long had it been?

He looked down at the wall of the iron shack, covered with rows of white chalk marks. Ostentatiously he drew a chunk of chalk from his pocket and placed another mark there. Then he laboriously counted them. Finished, he nodded as though satisfied. He stepped out, looked along the line of cliffs; then he cupped his hands to his mouth and called:

"Fuzzy-fuzzy-fuzzy!"

At the base of the cliffs were shallow little caves fronted by a sparse, pale vegetation. At Wilson's call, innumerable furry little animals stopped nibbling at the growth and came scampering to him; others left the caves and did likewise. Soon there were scores of them sitting in a semi-circle around the shack, staring up at him, a dawn of wonder in their large brown eyes and their big funny ears alert.

Wilson, looking down at the native "Fuzzies," gulped. He couldn't help it. Those eyes! They were almost human eyes! He had never quite gotten over that.

"Oog?" said one of them in the front row, meaning well what's it all about.

Wilson cleared his throat, remembering he had a little speech to make.

"My dear Fuzzies," he began. "My very dearest friends: I have been among you quite a while now. I like you, and I think you like me. But d'you know, I haven't been able to determine whether you are animals or people! In many of your actions you are very intelligent, sympathetic creatures; you always listen, enthralled, to the sound of my voice. I doubt if you ever know what I'm talking about, but I want you to know I'm grateful anyway; if it weren't for you I'd probably be stark, raging mad by now. But," he sighed, "you're *not* very good conversationalists. If only your vocabulary consisted of something besides that single solitary word!"

"Oog!" one of them said solemnly, meaning so sorry!

"That expresses my feelings exactly," Wilson replied. He turned and pointed to the chalk marks on the wall. "Look, Fuzzies! My calendar. Know what day this is? Anniversary! I've been stranded here six Earth months—well, I may be a few days wrong, but what's the difference—we're going to celebrate! For myself I'm going to open my last can of black-berry jam; and for *you*—well you didn't know I had six large bars of chocolate hidden away!" He stopped and smiled down on them. Months ago they had robbed him of all his sugar and most of his chocolate.

They continued to look wonderingly up at him. Then seeing he was finished, loud and many were the "Oogs" that sounded in the tenuous atmosphere; probably meaning chocolate! Lead us to it!

WILSON walked over to the space cruiser a few yards from the shack. It was battered and scarred, but still intact—except it had no rocket tubes! He entered, found the chocolate bars and broke them into tiny pieces. These he scattered out among the Fuzzies, who quickly confiscated them and scampered back to their caves.

Wilson stood there and watched the pitch-black shadow that crept the length of the chasm floor, swallowing up the sunlight. He had watched it numerous times before. That was due to the asteroid's axial rotation. When it reached the little promontory that jutted out from the cliff, the shadow would swallow the rest of the chasm in one sudden gulp. He continued to watch until this happened. There! That made his six months official.

He turned back into the cruiser, and clicked on the light. He frowned. The light seemed much dimmer than last time. He'd tried to conserve it, but the cruiser's tiny power plant was failing fast. And the utter *night* on this hellish world was about six times as long as the brief strip of

sunlight. Wilson hoped madness wouldn't come when the power plant failed. . . .

Quickly he opened his last can of jam, his last luxury. All that was left now were tinned sardines and beans. Lord, how sick he was of them—but how he wished he had more! He counted the cans and estimated he had enough for one more week, on half rations. He knew he wouldn't celebrate another six-month anniversary. . . .

When he had finished his frugal meal, he crouched under the dim light and opened his only book: Spurlin's *Advanced Principles of Space Navigation*. He tried to read, then cast it from him. Lord, he knew it by heart! He chuckled. If by some miracle he ever got off this rock, he could certainly pull down a first-class job with any of the Space Lines! He'd been a novice spaceman when all this started.

He shut off the current and lay there in the utter dark, remembering back. He was lucky at that! He'd found this deep chasm where the tenuous atmosphere clung. Up above, on the rugged surface, was sunlight—eternal sunlight if he wanted it. But he couldn't go up there any more, he'd used the last of the oxygen tanks. Besides he didn't want to. Up there, on the opposite side, lay five corpses who had been his friends. George Perrin, Matt something, and—Funny! He'd even forgotten the rest of their names! Anyway it didn't matter. There'd been no place to bury them, so he had covered them with heaps of rocks up there.

He did remember how they'd died, though; remembered vividly. He could still see that strange, black, blunt-nosed spaceship blasting up and away, leaving his five friends lying there in a little huddled group. It had been a single man, with an atom-blast pistol—ruthless. . . . From a ridge a little distance away Wilson had seen him load the last of their uranium in his black ship. Wilson had

been away prospecting for another vein.

And when he rushed to their cruiser, vengeance in his brain, he saw that the black pirate had dismantled and stolen every rocket-tube with its precious fuel. . . .

Wilson had wandered, then, until sanity came again. He'd found this deep chasm with its precious pocket of air. He'd hauled their portable iron shack here, laboriously; and he'd rolled their rocket cruiser here, over half the surface of the asteroid. Those days of labor alone had prevented madness. And just before the last of the oxygen tanks was exhausted, he had hurried back to his friends and stripped them of their clothing—light-colored, mostly. He patched this together into a huge square, which he anchored up above near the lip of the chasm. Then, here below, on the floor of the chasm where the sunlight daily crept, he'd made a huge symbol of black rocks—a circle with a cross in it, the interplanetary signal for help. If any wandering spaceship saw that white square patch up there on the black surface, it would come closer to investigate; then it would be sure to see the distress signal down in the nearby chasm.

But that had been six months ago . . . and none had yet come. . . . Suddenly the awful utter darkness seemed to crush in upon Wilson like a living thing, cutting off his breath. In rising panicky terror he turned on the light again, the dim light, and once more tried to read. He wished the sunlight would hurry, the few hours of palely creeping sunlight. . . .

AGAIN Wilson stood in front of his shack. Again he called the Fuzzies to him, but now there was no humor in his voice and when he spoke it was a little wildly. It was a week later . . . for four days he had endured those long stretches of utter blackness bordering on madness. His power plant had failed.

And his food was gone. He waved an empty tin around his head as he shouted half deliriously:

"Look Fuzzies! The last of my grub! It was inevitable, but—what am I to do now? I might try that—that damned duffle-weed out there that you eat, but I don't think I'd like it. Or I might try . . . I—I might . . . yes, I'll have to. . . ."

His voice failed. He stared down at the semi-circle of them. They stared ever so trustingly up at him. Then he wiped the sweat from his brow, as he staggered a little at the thought. Sure, he'd thought of that before! But not as a necessity. Now it was a necessity.

Maybe if he could manage to lure just a couple of them at a time behind that promontory of rock, away from the caves . . . they were so trusting. . . . But he knew how those eyes would look, those human eyes, and he knew he could never do it. And he remembered the first night when he'd stumbled down this chasm half dead with exhaustion, and he might have died from the cold save for these Fuzzies who had huddled around him giving him the warmth of their bodies until the sunlight came. . . .

Wilson suddenly found himself still looking down at all those Fuzzies who still stared wonderingly up at him waiting for him to continue his speech. Wilson was very hungry but he knelt on his knees and began to cry.

"I won't do it, oh God I can't do it," he cried. "Never. I'll starve first."

The Fuzzies had never seen him like this before. They moved restlessly, and the multitude of "Oogs" that surged out from them were sympathetic "Oogs"—but helpless. They knew Wilson was unhappy and they wished, from the very depths of their little hearts, that they could help.

Then, startlingly sudden, all their cries turned from sympathy to astonishment.

They weren't staring at Wilson any more, they were staring upward. Wilson looked at them and then he stared upward too.

For one single instant he thought he had lapsed into delirium; and then he knew he hadn't. Full sanity and clear concise thought came flowing back. He still knelt there and he continued to cry, but now he was praying too—a prayer of thanks for this miracle.

At last a space-ship had come.

SLOWLY Wilson rose to his feet and watched the spacer slowly descend—right into the chasm. As it settled, repulsion tubes still blasting, the Fuzzies scuttled back to their caves. Then a man stepped out.

As though from far away, Wilson heard the multitude of little "Oogs" from the caves, meaning what! Another of these tall creatures? What's our world coming to? And then Wilson was looking at the men who had stepped out.

And the man was looking at him. He didn't move away from his ship, he just stood there. He had an atom-blast pistol levelled at Wilson. . . .

Wilson didn't recognize the man. But he knew the ship. In a single stunning, horrified instant he knew it. A black ship. A strange black ship . . . and strangeness lying in the absurd, blunt nose. And the man held an atom-blast pistol. And up there on the surface of the asteroid lay five corpses. . . .

Wilson leaped wildly forward, weaponless, hands reaching out.

"Back! Back there!" the stranger called, centering the atom-pistol squarely on Wilson's leaping body.

From somewhere a shred of sanity came back to Wilson as he glimpsed that pistol. A remembrance. . . . He caught himself on his toes, stood poised a few yards away, hands clenching.

The stranger sneered. "I saw your signal up there. Clever! I came down

to investigate, all ready to rescue you. But you seem to know me. . . ."

"I do!" Wilson's voice was tense, he hardly opened his teeth.

The man nodded, his eyes narrowing. He stared around in the pale chasm sunlight, and saw Wilson's cruiser with the rocket-tubes missing. He moved over to it. His body tensed.

"Now I know you too!" he snapped. "I must have missed you. These big asteroids look all alike, it's funny I should stumble on the same one after six months! I've been over to Ceres for supplies. Going back to my base."

Wilson didn't say anything.

The man looked up at the rim of the cliff and smiled.

"Yes," Wilson grated, "you left five corpses up there!"

"Thanks! I wanted that confirmation. When you said that, mister, you sealed your death-warrant. I can't rescue you now, and I very obviously can't leave you here alive. There's the possibility of some other wandering spaceman descending to investigate your ingenious signals."

Wilson seemed to go limp all at once, mentally and physically. Somehow he didn't care any more. Rescue . . . death

. . . it would all be the same, release. Release was all he wanted. So he wasn't surprised to hear his own voice say, devoid of any emotion:

"Okay. Might as well make a complete job of it . . . six instead of five." And he shrugged wearily. At the same time, with hardly any shock at all, he recognized the man as DeCreve, an outlaw once wanted on three worlds but now thought dead. Wilson recognized the thin, dark face with the little strip of mustache, and the white scar zagging down his left cheek. So—DeCreve wasn't dead. Wilson wished he'd hurry up and press the release button on that atom pistol.

DeCreve smiled, raised the pistol a little so it centered exactly on Wilson's chest. He started to press the button . . . and something at his feet said:

"Oog?"

DeCreve looked down. Wilson did too, dispassionately. One of the Fuzzies, a little bold and a little curious, hadn't retired to the caves with the others.

DECREVE, a sudden light of interest in his eyes, bent down and touched the Fuzzy with his finger, ruffling its fur. The Fuzzy scampered away out of reach.

They didn't like to be touched, Wilson knew that; their skin was tender or something.

But DeCreve had seen enough. He straightened up and his eyes were glowing. He looked at Wilson and laughed. "Well, this is my lucky day. Have you noticed the fur on those animals? Talk about chinchilla! Compared to these things, chinchilla fur is rough as a whisk broom! Many of 'em here?"

"A few hundred," Wilson said, his weary mind failing to grasp as yet what DeCreve was driving at.

DeCreve chuckled. "And me robbing you fellows of your uranium ore. Why, these animals are worth their weight in uranium! What a price they oughta bring on the fur market at Ceres! Too bad I have my ship full of supplies now. I think after I get rid of you I'll just leave your distress signal pat, and come back here pronto. . . ."

Wilson heard these words through a dawning comprehension. These Fuzzies were his friends! They'd saved his life once, and they had certainly saved his sanity later. Wilson suddenly wasn't dispassionate any more, and now he didn't want release—not at the end of an atom pistol. He didn't know how, but he wasn't going to let DeCreve come back here to butcher these Fuzzies, his friends!

And then Wilson saw the atom pistol still centered on him. He saw DeCreve still smiling thinly, watching him. . . .

With cold reason flowing back, Wilson began to talk. Later he didn't remember what he talked about, but he remembered he tried to keep his voice still dull and dispassionate. For Wilson realized only one thing: here in the sunlight, if DeCreve released that atom-blast button, he couldn't miss at that short distance. As he talked Wilson glanced over DeCreve's shoulder down along the chasm and saw the shadow creeping again, swallowing up the sunlight. When it reached the pro-

montory where the chasm suddenly veered, the darkness would sweep over them in the space of a second. Then, and not until then, would he dare to take a chance at the pistol . . . but he judged the darkness wouldn't reach there for four or five minutes.

For four or five minutes that seemed a nightmare, Wilson talked. DeCreve answered leisurely, suspecting nothing. Wilson must have asked how he had escaped the Patrols which had looked everywhere for him—because he heard the outlaw answering willingly, even boastfully, in minutest detail.

"I don't mind telling you this," he heard DeCreve conclude arrogantly, "because you're not going to leave this rock alive."

Wilson nodded dully, but his brain was writhing. He asked another question. DeCreve answered. Wilson hardly heard, he was watching the swallowing darkness. Would it never come? Had the asteroid stopped in its rotation? It must have been five minutes already . . . ten minutes. Wilson felt curiously rooted there. He felt the palms of his hands moisten. He hoped DeCreve didn't notice his tenseness.

What was DeCreve saying?

"Well, it's been a nice visit, mister. Understand, there's nothing personal in this. I merely can't have anyone alive who's seen me out here—especially after what I've just told you. Now, if you've any last requests, within reason . . ."

"Yes, I do have," Wilson said very slowly. "Just one." He hesitated, glancing at the atom pistol in DeCreve's steady hand. Wilson didn't have a request at all. He was merely drawing out his life to the end of the last long thread, trying to gain every precious second now.

DeCreve waved the pistol impatiently and said: "Well?"

"It's—it's like this," Wilson went on hoarsely, not even knowing what he was going to say. . . .

BUT HE didn't have to say it. In that instant the darkness, complete and total, swept upon them. DeCreve was startled. He cursed and let his pistol blast out. But Wilson, awaiting the instant, had collapsed as though his legs were suddenly rubber. He felt the singing power of the beam as it passed perilously close to his shoulder. Then he was on his back. He sensed, rather than saw, DeCreve leaping forward. Wilson's legs shot out and his feet caught something; he had the satisfaction of hearing a surprised grunt from DeCreve as the latter sailed backward.

Wilson heard a whole host of Fuzzies scampering out from their caves. He knew they had been watching all the time. He could see the soft glow of their eyes now, adaptable to the dark, as they circled close to the two men. "Oog! Oog!" shrieked the creatures, meaning goody, a fight!

DeCreve was a small man, but he was tough and wiry; Wilson realized that instantly, as they grappled. He didn't know whether DeCreve still held the atom pistol. And then he did know, as the power of it beamed out so close to his side that he could feel the swirling heat. His hands fumbled for DeCreve's right arm, found it and clung fiercely. Wilson lunged forward, and they both went down heavily. The pistol jarred from DeCreve's hand and went skidding across the rock. They both scrambled for it. Wilson reached it first, being much more familiar with sounds in this darkness. He brought it crashing down upon DeCreve's head, and the outlaw went limp. Wilson almost did too. He suddenly felt very tired.

But he managed to drag DeCreve over to his own spaceship, open it and turn on the welcoming light. He found ropes and bound DeCreve securely. Then Wilson slept, waiting for the strip of sunlight to come around again . . . the last time he ever hoped to see it on this world.

WILSON woke with the sun, as he always did. He saw DeCreve struggling with his bonds. He walked over and tightened them again.

"Listen, fella," DeCreve said, "there's no reason we can't call a truce and work together. There's enough of those furs out there to make us both rich."

At the words, Wilson felt a hot flood of anger sweep over him. He raised his hand to slap the outlaw, then changed his mind. He opened the door of the spacer and dragged DeCreve out.

"I want to show you something," Wilson said. Again he called to the Fuzzies and they came scampering from their caves to greet him, always ready to listen to one of Wilson's speeches.

He turned to DeCreve and said: "See? I just wanted you to know they're all friends of mine, and I'd sooner blast a rat like *you* to dust than harm a single one of 'em.

"Come to think of it, this has been a prosperous six months for me after all! I've assimilated Spurlin's *Advanced Principles*, there ought to be a reward for *you*, DeCreve, and I've saved all my little friends' lives."

Wilson wanted to do just one more thing before he left the Fuzzies forever. He searched DeCreve's supplies, found two hundred-pound sacks of sugar and some chocolate. He placed it all out on the rock.

Climbing back into the ship, he called to them: "That ought to last you a little while. Wish I had more. Well, it's been fun knowing you and I kind of hate to leave. Farewell, Fuzzies!"

Wilson could have sworn they looked up at him with a very human regret in their eyes. And the last thing he heard before he closed the spacer door was their chorus of Oogs, very solemn Oogs, meaning so long old pal and thanks for the sugar.

THE END