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Fish Fry

by

Arnold Marmor

Lots of strange things happen at sea. But this was a new twist, a fish that really wasn't a fish at all. So the question, who hooked what?

OFF Key West in the Florida Strait, with the bucking of the motor launch under the seat of my pants, and a rod and reel in my hands, I could relax. I mean really relax. Sometimes a cool current from the Gulf of Mexico would engulf me and it would be like something a man dreams about. Alone, under a blue sky, with one's thoughts. And then the thoughts would vanish as that familiar tug on the line meant a struggle was coming up. A battle between man and fish.

I love deep sea fishing. I was on a vacation with nothing to do but relax. Oh, there were women, all right. But one gets tired of women. But not fishing.

So here I was, this bright sunny afternoon, in my motor launch, when that tug on my line made me sit erect, and my brain became a-

lert. You have to think clearly. You have to know when to let out line and when to pull in line. When the fish got tired you could tell. It all comes through experience.

From the pull of the line I thought I'd hooked a sailfish.

I reeled in fast, then started letting out line. But the line didn't get taut. It was loose. At first I thought I'd lost it.

And then it climbed into the launch.

I got up fast and made ready to dive overboard.

"Hold on, fella," it said. "Don't get into a panic."

I stared at it. It was about four feet tall, with scales and two thick stubs that was supposed to be tails. It stood on its tails and blinked enormous eyes at me.

"The creature from the black lagoon," I said.

"To you I'm a creature," he said. "To me you're a creature."

"What kind of a fish are you?"

"I'm not a fish. I'm a Grenarian."

"You mean you eat vegetables?"

"I'm from the planet Grenaria."

"Look," I said. "You want this boat? Keep it. I'm off for Tampa. It's about time I took up drinking."

"You hate me."

"No, I don't. Honest. I'm just not used to these things."

"It happens all the time. What you don't understand you hate."

"But I don't. Honest. And where did you learn to talk?"

"I learned English from a professor. He understood my plight and tried to help. He was fishing the same as you when I caught hold of his line and we met."

"What happened to him?"

"He went back to tell his colleagues. I never saw him again."

"He's probably in the booby hatch," I said.

"What's that?"

"Where I'll be if I ever tell anyone this."

"This is a cruel world," he said "By the way my name is Hrodes."

"And mine is Carol Engelholtz. Now that the formalities are over, what the hell are you doing here?"

"My orders were to make contact with this solar system. My

ship is at the bottom of the sea. I have to be near water or die. And every time I try to make contact I'm left alone on a craft of this sort."

"You mean they jump overboard?"

"That's exactly what I mean."

"You're from another galaxy?"

"Yes. My planet is covered with water. Your planet is the best one in this system which has water on it. That's why I'm here."

"But you're not in water now."

"My gills can still absorb it. As long as I'm near it."

"Well, what do you want me to do?"

"I want to meet someone with responsibility."

"I wouldn't be able to get anyone to come out here with a story like that. They wouldn't believe me. I'd end up with the professor."

"Then take me with you."

"But you wouldn't be near water. Wait a minute. I can leave you in the tub."

"Anything. I just want to get this mission over with."

"I can wrap you up in wet towels. I can drive you to my place and go bring someone back with me."

"Anything. Anything. Just let's get on with it."

"Why, I might be making history. I may become famous."

"Will you please start this craft back to land?"

"Sure thing. Just a second," I started the motor and headed for land.

Me. Carol Engelholtz. A liaison between two planets. I never felt so excited in my life. Why, it was more exciting than hooking a sailfish.

"There's my lodge," I shouted, pointing at the bluff just over a rise.

"You stay there alone?" Hrodes asked.

"I have a cook and a housekeeper. But they won't bother you. You'll stay in the tub in my bathroom while I go fetch somebody. But who do I go fetch?"

"Anyone with responsibility. I want to get this over with."

"Yes, yes, I know. Your mission." I docked the launch, soaked towels, wrapped them around Hrodes, carried him—or she—to my car, and in fifteen minutes I was home.

I left Hrodes in the tub and went back to the car. Miami was too far off. There was a small town called Chesterville a few miles away. It seemed the only place to go.

"There ain't no F. B. I. branch here," a deputy behind a battered desk said. He was about sixty, with

a skinny neck that was covered with half dollar size blotches. "Better try Miami. Why? What's the matter? Find some subversives? A lot of subversives in Florida."

"No, no. nothing like that. Look, there must be a school or some kind of place for learning here."

"Shore thing. We gotta school."

"Isn't there a professor teaching there, maybe?"

"Nope. But we got old Mrs. Henshaw. Husband died about six years ago. Old bag. I think she's been running around lately with some tourist from Iowa. Now if you're just lookin' for any old professor, then—"

"That's right," I said, grasping at a straw. "Any old professor. Is there one in town?"

"Professor Klugelmeyer. Used to teach at some eastern college. Kind of dopey, though, I think. Funny old gaffer. Believes in flyin' saucers. Can you imagine?"

"When do I reach him?"

"He's stayin' at Mrs. Kirpatrick's roomin' house. Poor Mrs. Kirpatrick. Got a bad case of food poisoning. She ate—"

I ran out of the building and inquired for the rooming house. I found it and Professor Klugelmeyer.

"What? What? Hard to believe—Hard to believe. Once heard the

same story from Professor Dickson. The poor fellow was put away. You must be mistaken, old man. You must be. Take my advice. Give up drinking. Bad for the liver, too, you know."

"That old deputy told me you believe in flying saucers," I said.

"I do. I really do. From Mars, probably. But they certainly won't turn out to be fish. Fish talking? Come now."

"I didn't believe it at first myself. Listen, Professor, come with me. See and hear for yourself."

"Well, I don't know."

It took me an hour before I had him half convinced. I almost dragged him to my car.

"This had better not turn out to be a practical joke," he said. The professor was somewhere between sixty and seventy. He was kind of thin and he sported a long white mustache.

It was getting toward evening when we got to the lodge.

I ushered him in to my room. "There," I said, flinging open the bathroom door.

"Where?" he said.

"There."

"Where?"

I looked. I blinked. I looked again. The tub was empty.

I raced through the house.

In the front room I saw Mrs. O'Brien, my housekeeper.

"Where's Hrodes?" I asked her.

"Who?"

"He was in the tub. I left him there."

"You mean that big fish?"

"Yes, yes. Where is he?"

"He's in the kitchen. We're having him for dinner."

"What!"

"Sure. Yat has it in the oven now."

"You murderer!"

"What are you talking about? It's only a fish. Didn't you catch him so we'd have fish for dinner?"

"No. Didn't he tell you who he was?"

"Are you crazy? He didn't tell me nothin'. Besides, I didn't see it till Sun Yat had it all cut up and laid out for cookin'."

Sun Yat, my Chinese cook. Hrodes had met someone who couldn't understand his plight or be scared out of his wits. Sun Yat was a deaf mute!

The professor was clucking sadly at me as he stomped out of the house.

Me? There was nothing to do but eat my dinner . . .

THE END