

FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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H. L. Herbert
President

Leo Margulies
Publisher

Beatrice Jones
Editor

Joe Richards
Cover Design

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lost in the future

by . . . John Victor Peterson

They had discovered a new planet
—but its people did not see them
until after they had traveled on.

ALBRECHT AND I went down in a shuttleship, leaving the stellatomic orbited pole-to-pole two thousand miles above Alpha Centauri's second planet. While we took an atmosphere-brushing approach which wouldn't burn off the shuttle's skin, we went as swiftly as we could.

A week before we had completed man's first trip through hyperspace. We were now making the first landing on an inhabited planet of another sun. All the preliminary investigations had been made via electrospectroscopes and electrone telescopes from the stellatomic.

We knew that the atmosphere was breathable and were reasonably certain that the peoples of the world into whose atmosphere we were dropping were at peace. We went unarmed, just the two of us; it might not be wise to go in force.

We were silent, and I know that Harry Albrecht was as perplexed as I was over the fact that our all-wave receivers failed to pick up any signs of radio communication whatever. We had assumed that we would pick up signals of some type as soon as we had passed down through the unfamiliar planet's ionosphere.

Did you ever wonder what might happen if mankind ever exceeded the speed of light? Here is a profound story based on that thought—a story which may well forecast one of the problems to be encountered in space travel.

The scattered arrangement of the towering cities appeared to call for radio communications. The hundreds of atmosphere ships flashing along a system of airways between the cities seemed to indicate the existence of electronic navigational and landing aids. But perhaps the signals were all tightly-beamed; we would know when we came lower.

We dropped down into the airway levels, and still our receivers failed to pick up a signal of any sort—not even a whisper of static. And strangely, our radarscopes failed to record even a blip from their atmosphere ships!

“I guess it’s our equipment, Harry,” I said. “It just doesn’t seem to function in this atmosphere. We’ll have to put Edwards to work on it when we go back upstairs.”

We spotted an airport on the outskirts of a large city. The runways were laid out with the precision of Earth’s finest. I put our ship’s nose eastward on a runway and took it down fast through a lull in the atmosphere ship traffic.

As we went down I saw tiny buildings spotted on the field which surely housed electronic equipment, but our receivers remained silent.

I taxied the shuttle up to an unloading ramp before the airport’s terminal building and I killed the drive.

“Harry,” I said, “if it weren’t that their ships are so outlandishly

stubby and their buildings so outflung, we might well be on Earth!”

“I agree, Captain. Strange, though, that they’re not mobbing us. They couldn’t take this delta-winged job for one of their ships!”

It was strange.

I looked up at the observation ramp’s occupants—people who except for their bizarre dress might well be of Earth—and saw no curiosity in the eyes that sometimes swept across our position.

“Be that as it may, Harry, we certainly should cause a stir in these pressure suits. Let’s go!”

We walked up to a dour-looking individual at a counter at the ramp’s end. Clearing my throat, I said rather inanely, “Hello!”—but what *does* one say to an extrasolarian?

I realized then that my voice seemed thunderous, that the only other sounds came from a distance: the city’s noise, the atmosphere ships’ engines on the horizon—

The Centaurian ignored us.

I looked at the atmosphere ships in the clear blue sky, at the Centaurians on the ramp who appeared to be conversing—and there was no sound from those planes, no sound from the people!

“It’s impossible,” Harry said. “The atmosphere’s nearly Earth-normal. It should be—well, damn it, it *is* as sound-conductive; we’re talking, aren’t we?”

I looked up at the Centaurians

again. They were looking excitedly westward. Some turned to companions. Mouths opened and closed to form words we could not hear. Wide eyes lowered, following something I could not see. Sick inside, I turned to Albrecht and read confirmation in his drawn, blanched face.

"Captain," he said, "I suspected that we might find something like this when we first came out of hyperspace and the big sleep. The recorders showed we'd exceeded light-speed in normal space-time just after the transition. Einstein theorized that time would not pass as swiftly to those approaching light-speed. We could safely exceed that speed in hyperspace but should never have done so in normal spacetime. Beyond light-speed time must conversely accelerate!"

"These people haven't seen *us* yet. They certainly just observed

our landing. As we suspected, they probably do have speech and radio—but we can't pick up either. We're seconds ahead of them in time and we can't pick up from the past sounds of nearby origin or nearby signals radiated at light-speed. They'll see and hear us soon, but we'll never receive an answer from *them!* Our questions will come to them in their future but we can never pick answers from their past!"

"Let's go, Harry," I said quickly.

"Where?" he asked. "Where can we ever go that will be an improvement over this?" He was resigned.

"Back into space," I said. "Back to circle this system at a near-light-speed. The computers should be able to determine how long and how slow we'll have to fly to cancel this out. If not, we are truly and forever lost!"

