

# PLANET STORIES



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# MEEM

A Short Story by **MARGARET ST. CLAIR**

**The fog-shrouded marshlands of Vaudria seethed with man-hunt . . . and Duncan, with his stolen secret, sought refuge in the Earth-Ship GORGO. Safe behind steel . . . until, faraway, a strange Lorelei shaped its song . . .**

THIS TIME LAST YEAR DUNCAN had been junior commissioner for protocol at the Terrestrial Embassy. Discreet, hard working, popular with his male and female colleagues alike, the future had seemed to hold nothing for him but a series of comfortably merited advancements to full consular rank. Now he crouched under the bridge in the chilly dankness of the Vaudrian night, holding on to the upright and shivering uncontrollably, while he prayed, prayed to everything in his nebulous pantheon, that the Vaudrian patrol wouldn't find him. It wouldn't be so bad if they merely shot him, but he doubted they would let it go at that.

The meem, snuggled warmly under his jacket, stirred lethargically. He could feel the tiny ticking of its thoughts going past his. "Safe," they ran, "safe? So tired. Safe on Earth."

Duncan grinned lopsidedly. Safe? Not by a damnsight! He wouldn't be safe until he was on board the *S. S. Gorgo*, if then. From the respected member of a respected profession he had turned, degree by degree, into a hunted man. He was a human explosive, the potential disseminator of a biological scandal of major size. If he ever got back to earth, what he had to tell would rip the heavy fabric of terrestrial-Vaudrian relations from bottom to top. And yet it had happened so imperceptibly!

The conversation with Nickerson that afternoon last year had been the starting point. The Embassy staff had been clustered on the roof of the Embassy building, watching excitedly, through binoculars, opera glasses, and a variety of optical aids, the Vaudrian throngs streaming into the already-packed great circle that marked the city's heart. The influx had ceased only when it was physically impossible for another Vaudrian to push his way into it. There had been a second of tense silence, when the huge crowd was utterly still. And then, thrillingly audible through the calm air, a single high note had poured out of nearly a million Vaudrian throats.

The people on the roof of the Embassy building had leaned forward intently. Nickerson, standing beside Duncan, had jogged his shoulder to be sure he was watching. Slowly the doors of the circular temple on the edge of the great circle had parted. The temple statue, visible on this day only, was revealed.

Duncan had seen it clearly; it was quite as impressive as people said. The group represented two persons, a seated man and a girl-child. The man's left hand was resting lightly and tenderly on the shoulder of the girl who stood between his knees. His other hand pointed past the girl's head into the distance, and the girl's rapt, dreaming gaze followed it. The inner



*The weird lights drew nearer in the fog . . . the Vaudrian patrol was ringing him in!*

meaning of fatherhood—loving, uplifting, fostering—had never been more beautifully expressed.

**A** SHUDDERING long-drawn *Oh* had gone up from the Vaudrians. Then the doors of the temple had begun to close again. Duncan had time to observe that the group was made of some frosty silver metal and that the object at the feet of the father was probably a meem, the universal Vaudrian pet. Then the temple doors had gone to, not to open for another year, and the silent crowd began to disperse. Tomorrow was Father's Day, but it would be observed without ceremonial, within the quiet confines of millions of Vaudrian homes.

Duncan had begun to put his field glasses away. "By the Father and the Daughter," he quoted from the Vaudrian ritual to Nickerson; "I'm glad I saw it. It was impressive and beautiful, worth waiting a year for."

"Yes . . ." Nickerson had fidgeted with the straps of his binoculars. The rest of the Embassy staff was going down the escalator, chattering in subdued tones, but Nickerson seemed to want to linger on the roof and talk. Since he was Duncan's superior, Duncan waited respectfully for him to speak. Nickerson had cleared his throat and leaned toward him. "Did you know . . . that they're not mammals, my boy?"

Duncan had been taken aback. The point had never occurred to him. Like most Terrestrials, he had found the Vaudrians unsympathetic except where their father-daughter cult was concerned, but he had never questioned their basic likeness to himself.

"But . . . they're warm-blooded and they suckle their young," he said after a moment. "They look like us, except for their greater height and their bluish pigmentation."

"There's more to being a mammal than warm blood and suckling," Nickerson had said. "Besides, did you ever notice that they don't suckle their children when they're very young?"

(How much had Nickerson surmised or guessed? Duncan wondered. He shifted his numb fingers on the clammy wood of the bridge and tried not to cough. Everything?

No, the remark about the suckling must have been no more than a coincidence.)

Nickerson had pulled at his sandy moustache for a moment. "Of course you understand this is in *strict* confidence, my boy," he had said. Duncan had smelled the heavy sweetness of phlomis on his breath. "One of the chaps at the Embassy here whose hobby was biology told me a few things he'd found out about them." He had hesitated; and if he had stopped there (Duncan thought, listening to the cold lapping of the water under the bridge), everything would have been all right. Duncan would have been sitting in front of one of the Embassy fires now, sipping a nightcap of champagne and thinking that it was about time for bed. But Nickerson had gone on, he had gone on and ruined everything.

"They reproduce by parthenogenesis," he had said. Duncan could feel now, as vividly as if it had been yesterday, the shock the slow words had given him. "Inokeye assured me it was by parthenogenesis."

"But—but—" Duncan had stammered. He had stared blankly at Nickerson, expecting a hint that the older man was making a joke. "That's impossible! What about their cult of fatherhood?"

Nickerson had shrugged for answer.

"But—" Duncan had repeated. "But I always understood that in parthenogenesis no males were born."

**N**ICKERSON had looked all around him before answering and then, though there was no one on the roof except themselves, had lowered his voice.

"You really must keep this to yourself, Duncan," he had said warningly. "Terrestrial industry—I don't think it's altogether a good thing—has become so dependent upon large-scale imports of benite from Vaudria that we can't risk offending them. Vaudrian touchiness in these matters is really remarkable. Did you know that no Terrestrial has ever seen, been allowed to see, I mean, a Vaudrian text on biology?—But Inokeye thought the answer to your point about males being born might lie in the fact that they aren't *functional* males."

"You mean there's no mating?"

"There not only isn't, there couldn't possibly be." And Nickerson had gone into anatomical details. He had finished with a

further warning to Duncan to keep what he had learned strictly to himself.

Nobody could possibly have heard the conversation. Duncan and Nickerson had been alone on the roof, in the open air. But next week Nickerson had been unexpectedly transferred to Mars—kicked upstairs, as Embassy scuttlebutt had it—and Duncan had begun to notice a certain thickening in the atmosphere that surrounded him personally. He had laughed at himself for his suspicions, but he had set traps. As a result of the trap-setting, he had found that his papers were being searched regularly twice each week.

His colleagues in the Embassy were not quite so friendly as they had been. Toby, Nickerson's successor, called Duncan in for a long, pointless interview, in the course of which he expressed admiration for the Vaudrian Father-Daughter cult and pleasure that it was being extended to Earth. Duncan had perceived that he was being tested, that his loyalty was being checked. But loyalty to what? To whom?

Even then it might have died down gradually, except for the lettergram from Nickerson and Duncan's friendship with Jrar. Jrar was a young Vaudrian chemist who had come to the Embassy to try to arrange for the importation of some special terrestrial chemical apparatus he wanted. Duncan had helped him with the papers and discovered a tepid liking for him. They had lunched together once or twice.

Jrar had been somewhat less reticent than most Vaudrians. Duncan had learned that he was twenty-two, that he wasn't married yet (highly unusual for a Vaudrian), that though he had good prospects he wasn't altogether satisfied with them.

It was toward the end of the second lunch date that the significant thing (Duncan realized it now) had been said. Jrar had been holding the restaurant's meem on his knees, stroking its thick blackish fur absently, and Duncan had said something or other about wondering why meems were so universally popular. They were, he thought, too sluggish and unresponsive to make good pets. Jrar had looked at him for a moment and then, in a voice unlike his usual one, had said, "Did you ever notice, Duncan, how the meems disappear after Father's Day?"

That had been all. Jrar had changed the subject quickly after that.

DUNCAN SHIFTED his position, trying to ease his cramped limbs. His hands were so cold that he was afraid he might lose his grip and fall. He leaned forward abruptly, apprehension waking in him. Had he seen, about half a mile off through the light mist, a spot of light that seemed to waver and slowly expand? That would be the patrol, and if it was, he'd have to get out. Where could he go? His rendezvous with the *Gorgo*'s third mate wasn't due for another two hours. He'd wait a little, wait and hope and keep his fingers crossed.

The friendship with Jrar would have stopped anyway. The two men had not enough in common to keep their interest up. But the next day Toby had called Duncan into his office and told him sternly that, as Duncan must already know, friendships between Vaudrians and Terrestrials were not encouraged. There had been complaints about his seeing Jrar from a Vaudrian high-up. Duncan must drop the acquaintanceship.

Duncan had listened and agreed, fuming inwardly. He had been too angry to defend himself. He'd gone back to his room and read the lettergram from Nickerson again, more and more puzzled by it. It seemed on the surface to be merely a friendly letter, full of personal news and trivialities. But it didn't sound quite like Nickerson, and after a good many hours Duncan had succeeded in decoding it. Nickerson advised him urgently to make contact with the *S. S. Gorgo*'s third mate. The *Gorgo* wasn't due in port for a month yet. Next week the Vaudrian newscaster had announced, among other items, that the body of a young Vaudrian chemist, a man named 803 Jrar, had been found in an abandoned house.

Duncan was tall enough to pass for Vaudrian, and the blue pigment could be simulated. He decided to try to pick up Jrar's trail.

He had been very, very careful. He had, on the whole, had considerable success. He had found, as he thought, that Jrar had been murdered. And he had found—

It was the patrol. He would have to leave the bridge immediately. The spot of

light had been much nearer this time. That meant that they were "ringing" the area where he was, piece by piece.

Duncan began to work his way toward land, jumping from trestle to trestle of the bridge. Once he missed his footing on the slippery rounds and nearly went into the deep, icy stream. His alarm must have registered in the meem's little mind, for he could feel the instant patter of its thoughts. "Be careful, Duncan. Not safe. Get to Earth. Be safe."

**H**E STOOD hesitating when he had reached the shore. Where could he go? In his dirty, exhausted condition, the disguising pigment gone, the first Vaudrian who saw him would call the patrol. He'd try the *Gorgo*, on the chance that the third mate might be around somewhere.

His physical activity seemed to have aroused the meem from its lethargy. Its thoughts were coming in a thick stream now. Occasionally Duncan answered them. Discovering that meems were telepathic and how to contact them had been one of his most valuable achievements in the period during which he had been following Jrar. The discovery had enabled him to pick out a meem which was discontented and afraid and hence would cooperate.

The *Gorgo* was a long way off, and though Duncan tried to hurry, the days of exposure and strain had told on him. Once he looked back and saw the expanding ring of light near where he had been on the bridge. An involuntary quiver passed over him. What would have happened to him if the patrol had caught him? What happened to the meems, probably. It was characteristic of Vaudrian psychology to make the punishment fit the crime.

Finding out about the meems had been pure accident. Duncan had been sitting in a third-rate bar, drinking the licorice-flavored pap that passed for intoxicating liquor on Vaudria. The bar hostess had stepped out to get change for the bill he had given her. And then her baby, in the room behind the ill-lit bar, had begun to cry.

Duncan had hesitated. But the baby had kept on crying, louder and louder, until finally Duncan, in his role of Vaudrian male, had stepped into the back to try to comfort it. He'd jounced the crib up

and down several times—it was suspended on springs from the ceiling—and when the infant kept on screaming had put out his hand uncertainly toward its cheek.

The baby was very young, less than a month. But it had turned its head toward Duncan's fingers with uncanny rapidity. And while he had still been wondering at the movement, it had licked fiercely at his hand.

Duncan had let out an amazed cry. The child's tongue had been as hard and rough as a file. His wrist was smarting and stinging where it had rasped the flesh from it.

Then the outer door had banged and the bar hostess had come running in, all apologies for the accident. (Fortunately she hadn't seen the color of the blood oozing from Duncan's wrist.) She had picked up the child and soothed it expertly, and when it hushed had said, as if in explanation, "His meem died too soon. He misses it."

Duncan had had another drink and left. That night he had stolen the meem.

**H**E COULD SEE the *Gorgo* now through the thin mist, a mile-high bulk. The ship was loading cargo. He could hear the whine of the winches and see the aureoles of its sodium lights through the haze. Ingots of benite were moving steadily into the ship's dozen holds. In the confused activity of loading, he might be able to get close and look for Picket, the third mate.

An instant later Duncan felt despair invade him. Twenty or so Vaudrian soldiers were standing about the open holds, as if they were on guard. Their officer (an elderly woman, as always) was talking to the *Gorgo*'s second mate.

Had the message from Nickerson been detected? If so, the soldiers were on the lookout for him, Duncan, and Picket must be already under arrest. Duncan came closer, thankful for the cover given by the mist, and listened intently.

What he heard reassured him. The Vaudrian officer's high voice carried well; she and the mate were discussing smuggling and he was assuring her that the Vaudrian government would have the full cooperation of the *Gorgo*'s personnel in

seeing that nothing went in or out of the ship illicitly.

The message, then, hadn't been discovered, and Picket was still at large. But what was Duncan to do? He looked behind him and saw, with painful apprehension, that the expanding lights of the "ringing" process were getting close again.

The meem stirred beneath his jacket. "Rope," its thoughts came; "Duncan, climb little rope."

Duncan looked about, wondering what the creature meant. (It was apparently somewhat clairvoyant, as well as telepathic, since it couldn't see from its hiding place.) After a moment, he located the rope. It was a slender electrical cable to one side in the shadow. It went up to a ring that was near an open hatch. The cable was used, Duncan knew, for grounding the huge charge of static electricity the *Gorgo* had picked up in space. He tested the cable, and it was solidly tied. He only hoped the insulation was sound on it.

He waited an instant, taking deep breaths. Then he caught hold of the cable and began to haul himself up on it, hand over hand.

He was wickedly tired. His weight wrenched at his shoulder sockets, and his muscles felt soft and hot. The cable was slack, and that increased the difficulty of his climb. The fog thickened as he went up.

He was two thirds of the way to the ring, fifty or sixty feet from the ground, when there came a burst of shouts at him from below. A light shone up dimly through the fog; somebody had seen him. A second later there came the long roll of a stun gun.

The meem was frightened; its thoughts went screaming past Duncan in almost vocal hysteria. The stun gun trilled again. Duncan bit his lip until he tasted blood. Then he let himself slide down the cable about ten feet, and, with a precise coordination of which he never would have believed himself capable, used the momentum thus imparted to swing in at an open port-hole below him and to the right.

He almost missed it. He caught the edge of the frame with his fingernails, and clawed his way over it; then he was in a softly-carpeted corridor and running down

it desperately.

He made two turns before he found a stateroom whose door had been left ajar. He darted in, barricaded the door, and collapsed against it. His whole body was shaking with his heart's desperate thuds.

He wasn't safe. They knew he was on the ship, and they'd search the ship for him. He might be able to hide for a while, but sooner or later he'd be found. He'd exchanged the frying pan for a pot of similar temperature.

He couldn't go any further. He'd have to rest. He sank down on the padded bunk, so tired that he hardly cared if he was caught.

The meem poked its flat head out. Its dull eyes looked at him. "The man, the man you want. Near here," came the patter of its thoughts.

"How do you know?" Duncan asked aloud.

"He is thinking of you."

DUNCAN LOOKED at the meem for a moment. It had lain down again, as if exhausted by its recent activity.

"Where is he?" Duncan asked.

"To your right."

Duncan scrubbed his face hastily with the end of a damp towel—he might meet someone in the corridor—and smoothed his hair. His image in the mirror was still desperate and hollow-eyed. He stepped into the corridor.

He found Picket leaning up against one of the bulkheads, his hands in his pockets, whistling idly. The stripes on his blue sleeves identified him clearly enough. Duncan softly gave him the countersign.

"You're not mixed up in anything—uh—serious, are you?" Picket asked when the two men had gone back to the cabin. His sleepy, good-natured face wore a disconcerted look. It was clear that Duncan's unexpected arrival and hunted, harrried appearance had discomposed him.

Duncan hesitated. He was too tired to think. He decided on the exact truth. "I stole this," he said, indicating the limp form of the meem. "Taking them from Vaudria is forbidden by interplanetary agreement. But they would have killed it if I'd left it here."

Picket's face cleared a little but re-

mained dubious. He jingled the keys in his pockets uncertainly and frowned at the meem. "I guess it'll be all right," he said at last. "Old Nickerson did me a good turn once, and I'd like to pay it back. He said you were in some sort of mess with the Vaudrians."

"Are they searching the ship?" Duncan asked.

Picket looked surprised. "Why, no," he said. He halted and grinned boyishly. "You and old Nick seem to have Vaudria on the brain. The last time I saw him, all he could talk about was how Vaudrian trade was getting too important to earth. I haven't cared much for the Vaudrians I've met, but they're not sinister. Nickerson's wrong about that. They're just like anybody else."

Duncan bit his lip and made no reply. Was this the attitude he'd have to buck when he got back to earth? Business as usual and no slanders, please, on the Vaudrians? But he had the meem, and examination by a biologist would show that what he had to say was true. He could convince them, he knew he could.

"You look worn out, old timer," Picket said sympathetically. "Lie down and rest, and I'll go see the purser and have him put you on the passenger list. I'll fix it up with him about your passport, too." He cleared his throat. "I don't know why you stole that thing, and I'm not going to ask. But the Vaudrians won't get you now. We're jetting for Terra tomorrow at 16. You're safe here."

Where else was there to go, what else could he do?

"I hope so," Duncan said.

**I**N THE OFFICE of the Vaudrian overseer of police, a kilometer or so from the space port, 429 Bood was remonstrating respectfully with his immediate superior.

"Would it not be well to take them now, my lady? They must not escape. We know they are on the ship. We could apply to the captain for license to search the ship."

88 Etath smiled at him indulgently. "And if he refuses it?" she said. "That would be unpleasant. It is better this way, Bood." She put her lean bluish fingers together. "Are you forgetting what day tomorrow

is?"

"Oh," said 429 Bood.

"There will be no trouble, no unpleasantness. It will happen quietly. He is bound to be affected. I have seen it before with men from Earth."

"Oh," said Bood once more.

"Bring your wife with you when you report for duty tomorrow," said 88 Etath, dismissing him. "And see that the men under you bring theirs."

\* \* \*

Duncan was roused from apprehensive reveries next morning by Picket's discreet rap on the cabin door. Picket had brought breakfast and, in a musette bag, a change of clothing. There was a worried expression on his pleasant face.

"When you've finished, I think you'd better get out of here," he said to Duncan as he ate. "I brought one of my old suits for you."

Duncan pressed one hand to the back of his neck. "Is—are the Vaudrians searching the ship?"

"No, it's just Vaudrian sightseers. Mainly women, and only one or two of the men are armed. The old man gave them permission to go over the ship."

"But we're not taking on passengers until twelve, and they might wonder about you if they saw you. I think you'd better change into my old clothes and go up to the chart room with me. If they see you there, they'll think you're an officer. What about that thing, though?" Picket indicated the meem, which, as inert as a feather stole, was lying on the edge of the bunk. "What can we do with it?"

Duncan pressed his hand once more to the base of his skull. The meem's eyes were open, so he knew it was not asleep, but he could no longer make contact with its thoughts. "It can hide under my tunic. I've carried it that way all along."

Picket's face relaxed a little. "Can it be trusted to keep still, though? You said stealing it was forbidden by interplanetary agreement. You might get into a mess if it gave you away."

"It'll be quiet," Duncan said abstractedly. "It wants to get to Earth just as much as I do. It would be killed if it stayed here." He stood up, staggering a little. He had to catch at the bracket above his head to get his balance back.

Picket looked at him in quick alarm. "What's the matter?" he said. "Are you sick?"

"I've got a splitting headache, that's all. I might be a little feverish."

"Oh. You'll feel better when we're in space, I guess."

DUNCAN began to change into Picket's uniform. There was, as he had foreseen, room enough for the meem inside the tunic. He picked the animal up and arranged it against his chest. As if the movement had disturbed it, the sluggish current of its thoughts began flowing again ("Safe? Safe? So far to earth."), and it cooperated with him lethargically.

"Now, where do we go?" Duncan asked when he had finished. For a moment he pressed both hands tightly to his head. "Lord, how my head hurts. I took two tablets from the aid chest when I woke up, but they didn't help. I don't feel quite myself."

Picket looked at him but made no comment. He led Duncan out into the corridor and turned to the left. A hundred steps further, and they turned to the left again.

"The chart room's on the next level," Picket said softly. "The shafts aren't turned on, so we'll have to walk up the emergency stair." They moved on a few steps.

"Hey, where are you going?" Picket cried in sudden amazement. "The sightseers are down that way! Come back here! Come back!"

Duncan made no answer. With rigid energy he shook off Picket's grip on his arm. He began walking down the corridor toward the distant group of sightseers with long, stiff steps, shaking his head from side to side.

Picket stared at him unbelievably for a second and then came after him. He caught him by both shoulders and held on. "Stop it!" he hissed. "Are you out of your mind?"

With no perceptible exertion Duncan broke away from him. His face was darkly flushed and his lower jaw hung loose. He

made a faint, miserable noise. Then, as if obeying some irresistible call, he started toward the Vaudrians again with the same stiff, bouncing walk.

Picket hesitated. It was already too late. Heads were turning toward them, voices were being raised. His face a mask of bewilderment, Picket leaned back against the bulkhead and incredulously watched.

As Duncan drew nearer the group of sightseers, it shaped itself smoothly into an open square. There was something faintly menacing about the formation, but Duncan did not even slow down. When he was about five feet from the Vaudrians he stopped and, with fingers whose stiffness was apparent to Picket even at that distance, began to unbutton his tunic. The meem hopped out.

Four silenced stun guns hissed softly together. Duncan fell as if he had been poleaxed, stiffly and in one piece. 88 Etath gave a low order to her men. They closed evenly around Duncan and picked him up.

The meem paid no attention to what was going on behind its back. It was wholly occupied with frisking and curveting around the alluring females of its race. Their attraction—the wonderful attraction which had reached into the cabin seeking the meem and enmeshed Duncan at the same time—held the animal irresistibly.

It knew what would happen to it, but it no longer cared. Since Duncan had stepped into the corridor with it in his tunic it had ceased to struggle and resist. After the mating there would come the egg laying, after the egg laying the long period when the young Vaudrians would feed painfully on its still living flesh.

What did it matter? The desire whose contagion, received telepathically by Duncan, had driven Duncan straight toward the Vaudrian stun guns, burned brightly and compellingly in the meem. Duncan would probably share its final fate as food for the Vaudrian young. What did it matter? The meem was the Vaudrian functional male, the semi-parasitic father of the next generation. Its females were before it. Today was Father's Day. The meem wanted to mate.