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PALIMPSEST

By ROGER DEE

*Care to sire a brand new race?
Then get aboard the Terra IV, only
spaceship to escape demolished
Earth, and enter the new-born
Venusian sweepstakes.*

THE FIRST Venusian ship to reach Earth found a single isolated tribe of human beings roving the bushlands of a large island in the southern hemisphere. The Earthmen were without exception dark



of skin and eye, and their hair, which was jet-black, was as kinky as koola wool. All were backward to the point of savagery, fleeing in superstitious terror before every attempt at communication.

Val Conna and his crew—nine tall young men, fair-skinned and lordly and alike enough to have been brothers—made an exhaustive search that carefully bypassed ruined cities still radioactive past the safety point, and after ten days abandoned their quest in disappointment.

"I find no resemblance between this remnant of Earth's people and ourselves," announced Macb Bren, expedition anthropologist, "except a bipedal structure which only bears out our theory of like species developing on like worlds, and this similarity is sharply negated by impossible divergence in racial characteristics. Neither people could have changed so greatly during the four thousand years we know our culture has existed on Venus, and therefore it is obvious that we did not stem from Earthmen nor they from us."

There was no argument.

"Then the puzzle of our origin is still unsolved," said Val Conna, and gave the order to blast off. So they left Earth for home, already planning further expeditions to the outer planets in search of the world of their birth . . .

SOMEHOW Hanlon had wormed his way into their quarters and was waiting when Geddes and Lowe and Hovic, crew of the *Terra IV*, returned to base from their final interview with the press. Hanlon had been drunk for days, and was in pitiable condition. His hand shook violently and the bloodshot shine of his eyes was like a reflection to the fiery red of his unkempt hair.

"I had to say good-bye before the blast-off," he said, with a sorry attempt at his old assurance. "After all, I was one of you until a couple of months ago, and I . . . well, I wanted to wish you luck. I wish I were going to Venus with you."

They considered him without particular emotion, three dark, compact men in their late twenties, calm with the nerveless poise of long indoctrination and utterly sure of

themselves. Hovic, bluntest of the three, ignored Hanlon and went directly to the bathroom to brush his teeth.

"You lost your chance when you flunked training, Hanlon," Geddes said. "Just now you're a definite irritant, and we can't afford being upset just before the flight. You'll have to go."

Hanlon avoided his eyes, looking thoroughly hangdog and disreputable. He needed a shave badly and his careless clothing had been slept in more than once.

"I could have borne the surgical operations," he said. "A man's appendix and tonsils and teeth can be dangerous in space or on another planet where he can't get medical attention—but their damned psycho-conditioning was too much. How could I know what I'd really be like when those cold-blooded Foundation specialists got through with me?"

"It takes a specially adapted kind of man to beat space," Geddes pointed out patiently. "We can't risk neurosis out there, any more than we can risk appendicitis or abscessed teeth. The Foundation learned a lot from those first three failures, Hanlon. This time it's not repeating its old errors."

Hovic came out of the bathroom, replacing his dentures. He was the heaviest of the crew, a muscular Slav with the unimaginative man's natural directness. "You're washed up, Hanlon. Why don't you get out and leave us alone?"

At the door Hanlon hesitated, his face averted. "You'll be blasting off in another six hours, leaving everything behind. You will be heroes when you come back and you'll be rich . . ."

Geddes felt his lip curling. "But right now we've no use for our spare credits, is that it? You'd like to make a last touch before we go, and if we don't come back the debt won't worry you, Hanlon."

Lowe came between them, digging out his wallet. He was a slender, sensitive sort, the only one of the three who had been really friendly with Hanlon before the Irishman's congenital wildness led to his discharge.

"Let it go, Ged. What do a few credits mean to us now?"

He emptied his wallet, dropping yellow notes into Hanlon's ready hands. After a

moment Geddes followed suit, but Hovic stood fast.

"He can stay sober for my part," Hovic growled. "Let him go back to his gambling friends and his wenches if he wants a hand-out."

Hanlon pocketed his alms and grinned at Geddes, the hangdog look melting before his old recklessness. "Keep a close eye on my pal Hovic, Ged. Ten to one he cracks up on you at null-area and finishes the trip under hypnol."

THEY forgot him the instant he was gone, turning to their last-minute packing, laying out the heavy coveralls they would wear during the flight, shaving and showering before their final nap.

In the shower, Geddes caught Lowe fingering the pale scar of his appendectomy and frowning thoughtfully. Without his dentures Lowe looked older and uncertain and somehow shrunken, and in spite of his conditioned calm Geddes felt a cold stirring of alarm.

"Forget Hanlon's carping," he said. He punched Lowe in the ribs, trying to be jocular. "Those Foundation medics know what they're about. Come on, we've got to get our beauty sleep before the jumpoff."

When they awoke three hours later and dressed for the flight they found that Hanlon had paid them a second visit and had stolen all three of their wrist chronometers, expensive instruments easily negotiable for their weight in platinum.

"Cheap at the price," said Geddes, and shrugged away the loss with conditioned equanimity. Lowe had no comment. Only Hovic grumbled.

"Those chronos will keep him in Irish whiskey for weeks," he said. "I hope the louse drinks himself to death on it."

On that note they went down to the Foundation staff car that waited to take them to the launching site—three calm, resolute young men, serenely confident and prepared for anything.

They arrived at dusk, just as the last supply drum was being hoisted into the vertical bronze spindle of the *Terra IV*. They went up the tall personnel ladder, undisturbed by the actinic lightnings of

photographers' flash-bulbs, and vanished one at a time into the belly of the ship that was finally to bridge the emptiness between Earth and Venus. They sealed the port, checked the instrument gauges and the medicine cabinet with its hypnol equipment, and strapped themselves down on jointed pneumatic acceleration couches.

A red-glowing bulb on the instrument panel turned amber and then green. Geddes pressed the firing button . . .

Weight bore them down like a giant hand. They were not disturbed. Inured to acceleration and knowing the exact instant when their discomfort must cease. They waited patiently, eyes closed, blackout fended off by past conditioning in centrifuges and endless sessions of psychological preparation.

They were free of Earth's atmosphere in a matter of minutes. At the end of an hour the chemical jets cut out and atomic propulsors took over, shoving the *Terra IV* on at a lessened acceleration that would bring her to Venus, allowing for orbital drift corrections, in exactly twenty-seven days.

Communicating with the Foundation later was in theory a simple matter of narrow-beam linkage. The *Terra I* had proved that in 1969, twenty-nine years before, when frozen fuel lines sent her drifting derelict into space. The catch was that the atomic drive with its monstrous din of interference must be shut off before the radio could operate.

It was eight days before null-area was reached, but long before that time—on the second day out, to be exact—the *Terra IV's* first emergency struck.

Lowe, making a routine check of supply crates lashed to bulkhead eye-bolts in the hold, heard a frantic hammering that originated, not from the outside hull as his first startled fancy had it, but from inside an airtight drum stenciled "*FILM*."

He called Geddes and Hovic, more for moral support than for assistance, and together they ripped open the drum. Inside they found Hanlon, unconscious upon a litter of food tins and exhausted oxygen flasks.

There was also a whiskey bottle among the ruck. Hanlon, true to form, was very drunk.

THEY carried Hanlon out of the hold and strapped him into the radio chair, a position not to be used for another six days. They clamped an oxygen mask over his purpled face and fed him intravenously, and finally his impossibly resilient constitution threw off the effects of acceleration, Irish whiskey and near-asphyxiation.

He laughed in their faces when they asked why he had stowed away.

"I'm dodging the draft," he said. "There's going to be another war any day now—the last one."

Hanlon was quite sane in spite of the punishment he had taken at blastoff and later in the stifling prison of his hideout, and his prophecy shook them more than they dared admit.

"It's been coming to a head for months," he said. "They wouldn't have told you at the Foundation, because they didn't want you distracted from training, but the bombs will be dropping before we reach Venus. You'll see when you get the radio working."

They kept Hanlon strapped to the radio couch, knowing better than to trust him, giving him temporary freedom for the physical necessities only when all three were on hand to guard him. They made their astronomical readings and orbital corrections as their instructions prescribed, concealing even from each other their eagerness for the day when the atomic uproar of the propulsors could be cut and they could assure themselves via tight-beam that Hanlon was wrong.

They spoke little among themselves, but Hanlon talked incessantly, chafing against his bonds and lapsing periodically into near-delirium until his first insistent craving for alcohol wore off. Later he set himself to assess their chances of landing safely on Venus, ignoring after his headlong fashion everything that had been taught him before his discharge from the Foundation.

"The *Terra I* missed, back in 1969," he said once. "The Foundation picked up her signals clear out past Jupiter when she went derelict. They never did quite prove that the *Terra II* was lost in 1980. The boys at Palomar claimed that her fuel pile went up just outside Venus' atmosphere, but they didn't have time for a spectroanalysis. It

could have been an electrical discharge instead—there's bound to be a hell of a difference in potential between worlds, or between a space-irradiated ship and a planet as close to the sun as Venus."

They tried to ignore his arguments, resisting the thought that after all their preparation they might not be the first to set foot on the new world. Too, they could not lay claim to Venus as a Foundation possession if the *Terra II* had landed first. She had been a privately owned ship, manned, along with his family, by a reckless and fabulously rich Irish misogynist named Sean Connors.

The *Terra III*, which was built by the Foundation but manned by Army personnel, made the jump in 1991, and fell pilotless into the sun when her crew mutinied against their single officer.

And if Hanlon had guessed right, the *Terra IV* in 1998 might be the last.

They endured his theorizing until even their conditioned calm wore thin, and silenced him finally by threatening to put him under hypnol for the remainder of the trip. Hanlon lapsed into sullen silence and worked secretively at his bonds. The situation stagnated endlessly until the eight-day acceleration period was up, when they released Hanlon from his couch in order to use the radio.

In their eagerness to make contact with Earth they neglected to bind Hanlon again, which was a mistake, since he had not been conditioned as they had against the weird physiological reaction to weightlessness that followed the cutting of the drive.

To Hanlon it was like being dumped suddenly into a bottomless shaft down which he fell endlessly. His heart came into his throat, his ears roared, the instinctive fear of falling inherited from arboreal ancestors knotted his stomach with terror and drove out all reason.

"I'm falling!" he screamed, and snatched at a guide-rail. "Falling . . ."

Disoriented mechano-controls reacted wildly, refusing him balance, and he smashed into a bulkhead. Geddes and Lowe tackled him while Hovic tried to fend all three gyrating bodies from the instrument board, but Hanlon was not to be quieted. He screamed and threshed like a

maniac, his limbs jerking with spastic over-compensation to every movement.

They pinned him down finally and shot enough hypnol into him to keep him unconscious for days. They left him floating limply with his belt snapped to a bulkhead ring and turned their attention to the tight-beam communicator, coddling into intelligibility the first blurred signal that reached them from Earth.

It was as well that Hanlon was not conscious, since his prophecy was fulfilled to the letter. On Earth, war had come—and gone.

They never picked up more than that single dying signal, but before it flickered out they understood that the cataclysm had been atomic, planet-wide, and final. And when that last wavering link with Earth was gone they looked at each other palely over the dead radio and felt the impossible realization of racial extinction rising up like madness behind the psycho-blocks of their carefully-conditioned sanity.

"So Hanlon was right, after all," Lowe said, and choked on the words.

They found nothing to say after that until the impressed urgency of their mission reasserted itself and they turned back to the job at hand. There was still Venus . . .

THEY did not rouse Hanlon from his hypnol stupor until the *Terra IV* fell into her spiral orbit for planetfall. Geddes broke the news to him then, steeling himself against Hanlon's biting irony.

"So you were right," Geddes finished baldly. "Earth is done for. Dead." He was thinking at the moment in terms of cities and governments and cultures, and the Irishman's reaction was sharply disconcerting.

"Done for?" Hanlon said, and hid his face in his hands. "God—all the little people!"

He was so quiet after that that the others, busy with the precarious business of landing, forgot him. He was still silent when the *Terra IV* dipped into the first milky mists of atmosphere and a sudden great blaze of white fire lashed up from the planet below and struck her with the crash of a million thunderbolts.

The *Terra IV* staggered, rolled half over

and righted herself with a thin scream of straining gyros. The atomic propulsors faltered, recovered and drove them on into the roiling mists.

"Static charge," Geddes heard himself saying flatly. "So Hanlon was right again. It would have looked like a fuel pile letting go, if anybody were left on Earth to see it."

There was, miraculously, no serious damage. They brought the ship down, stern first, upon the waiting breast of Venus.

"The Silver Planet," Lowe said in the sudden quiet. "It was to have been the New Earth, remember?"

It was not until then that they learned the reason for Hanlon's quiet. Under cover of the landing he had plundered the supply cabinet for a plastobottle of medicinal alcohol, and was far into the process of drinking himself blind.

He cursed them thickly when they took the bottle from him. "Go out and claim your planet, you synthetic heroes. I don't want any part of it. I wish to hell I'd stayed on Earth."

They went, prompted by a conditioning that fell just short of posthypnotic suggestion, but this time they did not make the mistake of leaving their stowaway free. They overpowered the raging Hanlon and strapped him to the radio couch again before they put on their airsuits and went outside.

They climbed down the long personnel ladder and stood together on alien soil, feeling the brief thrill of accomplishment anticipated and allowed for by their Foundation mentors. But their elation was short-lived. They remembered what had happened to Earth and that there was no going home again, and there remained only the dreary routine of exploring a world that would never be used.

The ship had landed beside a clear, shallow river, a sluggish tributary feeding a larger river that emptied in the distance into a steaming, horizon-bound sea. The sky above was a smooth silver shell, with a vast circular rainbow surrounding the spot where Sol hid behind miles of vapor-laden air. The terrain undulated, closely turfed and dotted with wooded knolls, from the river upward to a low line of foothills that guarded a purple range of mountains be-

yond. Between the ship and the hills, undisturbed by the uproar of the *Terra IV's* landing, a scattered herd of fat, piebald creatures grazed comfortably.

They set about their business methodically, filling their little sterilized boxes with samples of air and soil and vegetation. Lowe went down to the edge of the shallow river and drew a bottle full of water, leaving behind him in the mud great shapeless tracks that looked more like the spoor of a mailed monster than of a man.

He brought it back to Geddes and Hovic, and the three of them stood with their prizes in their hands and looked at each other dumbly.

"Why do we have to go on with this?" Lowe asked. "Why don't we just go into the ship and push the pile up to critical mass and go up with it? What's the use?"

THEY were trying to think of an answer when they saw the boat coming across the river—a clumsy thing jerry-rigged from salvaged sheets of alloy, rowed by two women who were unmistakably human. Both women were dressed in brief utilitarian garments fashioned from pale green parachute silk. Their bare arms flashed white in the silver sunlight. Their red hair blew long and free in the wind.

Hovic found his tongue first. "Hanlon was right again. The Connors brought the *Terra II* down safely after all!"

The makeshift boat touched shore. The girl at the bow stood up, cradling an outmoded blast rifle in her arms.

"Throw away your weapons," she called peremptorily. "And take off those stupid airsuits. We'll have a look at the kind of men you are before you're welcomed to our planet!"

They discarded their belt guns gladly and shucked off the clumsy airsuits, breathing the warm air with the relief of men suddenly awakened from nightmare. They went down to the water's edge with the feeling of destiny upon them.

In the boat, their first shock was the knowledge that they were not guests, but prisoners. The two women retreated warily to the stern, significantly holding the blast rifle ready. Geddes and Hovic rowed. Lowe tried patiently for conversation.

He learned little except the bare fact of their presence. The girl with the rifle was Myrna Connors, and her sister was named Glenna; Their mother and an older brother had been killed in the landing crash of the *Terra II*, and Sean Connors himself, a hopeless paraplegic from the same catastrophe, waited at the camp for his daughters to return. Both women were under thirty, handsome in an elemental fashion, patently hostile and utterly without feminine restraint of manner.

They listened without comment, either uninterested or uncaring, to Lowe's account of what had happened to Earth. Neither of them, Geddes thought, could have been more than seven or eight years old when the *Terra II* crashed. They had seen no human being except their father for eighteen years and they felt no compassion for a world they had all but forgotten.

They reached the Connors' camp in mid-afternoon, when the solar halo was just touching the western horizon. They were on the higher ground of the foothills now, where the air was cooler and the few open swales were carpeted with fragrant, butter-yellow little flowers. The camp itself was a primitive thing, a hundred-foot stockade of wooden stakes driven Kaffir-wise into the soft soil to enclose three flimsy, thatch-roofed huts.

Myrna Connors held them with her blast rifle outside the central hut while her sister went in. There was a brief murmur of voices, the girl's mingling with a man's hoarser muttering. When Glenna came out again her attitude had altered indefinitely, and when she looked the three men over her eyes held an odd speculation.

"Father will see you now," she said. "Don't argue with him. He's very weak, and argument upsets him."

They found Sean Connors propped upon a ragged couch made from a salvaged acceleration chair, a frail and twisted old man with a bald, freckled scalp and a wild tangle of bristling red beard. The piercing blue stare he turned upon them had the unnatural heat of a mind brooding long past the point of safety.

"So they killed themselves off," he whispered, and made a coughing sound that might have been laughter. "And you're the

best they could send to keep the race going."

He blinked angrily when Geddes tried to speak. "Don't argue—why else do you think you were sent here, with Earth an ash heap behind you? But there's one too many of you. You'll have to draw lots."

He flew into a senile rage when they stood silent, and they saw that he was wholly obsessed by the idea. "Would you argue with Fate, you fools? Or did they send me a crew of unnaturals, with no use for women?"

He went into a fit of coughing, choking on his own fury. When they went out again he had subsided into a querulous muttering, the vacant babble of his voice lost in his tangled beard.

The two women were waiting outside. Myrna Connors had put aside her rifle and her stare had taken on some of her sister's brazen speculation.

"Father's right," she said. "Glenna and I have talked it over, and there's something about the three of you that makes you too much alike for a choice. You'll have to draw lots."

"You'd settle it like that?" Hovic demanded incredulously. "You'd have us just toss a coin, or draw straws?"

She bent her head toward the hut to listen to the old man's ravings. "Father won't live longer than another month or two. After that, what else is there? What difference does it make?"

They stood there blankly while the prismatic solar halo slipped down to the vague, far skyline. A cool wind sprang up, heavy with the smell of the yellow turf-flowers, and somewhere on the plains below the piebald grazers hooted at each other with a sound like the muted lowing of doves.

"You're right, of course," Geddes said. "We've got the race to think of, as well as ourselves. We'll draw lots."

THEY moved away to the compound wall, leaving the women to stare after them with open impatience. Geddes took up a dead twig and broke it into three pieces, two long and one short.

"There's more to it than this," he said, keeping his voice down. "Regardless of our opinions. And our opinions aren't what they

would be if we hadn't been so thoroughly conditioned to—"

"You forgot something, Ged," Hovic cut in. "What about Hanlon?"

"I haven't forgotten Hanlon," Geddes said. "That's why I wanted to talk to you in private. Because we've been given a chance, by a miracle, to start over again from scratch, this time with knowledge enough not to make the old deadly mistakes. We're stable, and Hanlon isn't—that's why the Foundation chose us and rejected him. And we can't take the chance of having Hanlon cutting in here with his carping hedonism and his way with women, don't you see? We can't risk letting a wild strain like his into the new race. It isn't going to be easy, because we're conditioned against personal violence, but we've got to get rid of Hanlon."

They stared at him, digesting the idea.

"It doesn't have to be violent," Geddes argued. "He's under hypnol already. We've only to keep him that way."

Lowe shook his head. "I couldn't do it, Ged. I couldn't force myself to it."

Hovic was tougher. "It's the only way. Hanlon begged a handout from us and then stole our chronos to smuggle himself here. He'd never let us alone. He'd make such trouble that we'd have to kill him in the end. Why not now, when it's easier?"

"Then it's settled," Geddes said. "Two of us, the winners, stay here. The loser goes back to the ship and to Hanlon. Ready?"

They nodded. Geddes held out his closed fist, the tips of his twigs barely showing.

Lowe, his underlip bitten palely between even dentures, drew the first long straw. Hovic drew the other. Geddes opened his hand and stared down at the short twig on his palm. Somehow it had not seemed possible that *he* should lose; it was like death, a thing that happened only to others.

"Good enough," he said. "After all it was my idea, wasn't it?"

He moved away with the twig still clutched in his hand. By nightfall he had retraced his way to the river and the *Terra IV*.

HE WAS sitting on the dew-wet turf with his back against the personnel ladder when he heard them coming. A cone

of light fanned into the darkness from the open port above him, poking a yellow finger into the mists and shedding a diffuse glow that reached to the river below.

Hanlon lay on the grass beside him, shaved and bathed and dressed in clean shorts and singlet. He had eaten enormously after Geddes woke him from the hypnol, and under the tedium of their waiting he had dozed off, his chest rising and falling in the even rhythm of sleep.

Hovic and Lowe splashed through the water and came up out of the darkness, their hair streaming, eyes shining whitely in pinched faces. They were muddy and dirty—and beaten.

"You didn't do it," Hovic said hoarsely when he saw Hanlon. "Thank Heaven for that. How did you guess?"

"I've sat here all night, thinking about it," Geddes said. "I thought about the two of you up there claiming your rights as winners, and I should have gotten a vicarious excitement out of it. But I didn't, and finally I knew why. They threw you out, didn't they?"

They avoided his eyes. "It was awful," Lowe said miserably. "They were—furious. I wanted to die."

"So Hanlon was right again," Geddes said. "Doesn't that mean something to you, that he was right every time? He knew instinctively from the start that a man's natural belligerence springs directly from his sex, and that the Foundation wouldn't risk its making trouble among us on the trip. So they—eliminated it. That's why I brought Hanlon out of hypnol, because they hadn't gotten that far with him before he washed out. Because he is our last hope of keeping the race alive."

The three of them stood and watched the play of dreams across Hanlon's sleeping face with something like awe in their eyes.

"I was just wondering," Lowe said, "if something like this may have happened before? If the whole thing may not be like one of those old parchment writings the archaeologists dig up, where an earlier story has been erased and a newer one written over it? A palimpsest, I think it's called . . . How do we know where *we* came from, in the beginning?"

Geddes stooped and shook Hanlon awake. "You'll find the boat by the river," he said. "You're starting out fresh with a new world, Hanlon. Take care of it."

THEY had climbed the personnel ladder and were closing the port behind them when they heard the splashing of water as Hanlon swam the river. A moment later his high, ringing yell drifted back and was lost without echo on the plain.

"He didn't waste time on the boat," Hovic said, enviously.

They were strapping themselves in for the *Terra IV's* final flight when Geddes laughed for the first time since the blast-off.

"I think Lowe's right," he said when they stared at him. "I wish I could come back again, after a few hundred generations. I wonder what a whole planet of Hanlons would look like?"

" . . . and therefore we can say with certainty that we did not descend from Earthmen," Mach Bren concluded his report to the Venusian Archaeological Society. "For how can we possibly conceive of kinship with a people whose skin and hair are black?"

The meeting was widely televised, and over the face of the Silver Planet a hundred million other red-haired Venusians shook their heads in shocked wonderment and agreed with him.