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pink
grass
planet

by . . . Sam Merwin Jr.

A man may grieve his heart out for a paradise left behind. But five short years of human folly may make that world a nightmare.

THE STARSHIP landed at night. When Ricardo Webb stepped out on the ramp, the first thing he did was take a deep breath of the sharp, strange-familiar air of Earth. When he exhaled, in the glow of the fluorescent field-lamps, he could see a little cloud of vapor emerge and dissipate quickly against the brisk November night.

He told himself he would never curse a terrestrial winter again. After five years in the tepid showerbath air of Lri-gTu-riANa, he even looked forward to shoveling snow. This was Earth, this was home—and it felt good to be back. Better than good, in fact.

He stared about him, searching for a warmth and a radiance that would make his happiness complete. Then Carla spun out of the whirling group of reporters, officials and just plain people who had come to meet the starship, and flung herself into his arms. "Ricci, darling!" She whispered, twisting her pretty face so that her lips met his almost vertically.

He thought, *I'll have to do something about that.* He held her sup-

In offering this delightful new Sam Merwin story to you we may be inviting just about the worst disaster that could befall an editor of a science-fantasy magazine. For, given man's eternal restlessness and his all-too-frequent subservience to fads and fancies, the tragedy so vividly depicted here may someday come true. Then we'll be accused of being an accessory before the fact, and suffer the harsh fate of prophets everywhere. A dire risk, truly!

ple softness off at arm's length and said, "Do I know you?"

"Idiot!" She laughed and kissed him again. "Come on," she said. "Mother's cooking a turkey, and dad can't wait to ask you about fishing on Liguria."

Lri-gTu-riANa — Liguria. The contraction simplified the name for Earth-tongues, but it sounded odd to Ricardo. He hoped not too many of the once-familiar place names of Earth would sound odd to his ears. He wanted to forget about Lri-gTu-riANa for awhile, and rejoice in the incredible bright wonder of his homecoming. He said: "They use needle-rays instead of dry flies on—Liguria. It's not the same."

"Idiot!" she said again, affectionately. "I don't give a *fringo* how they catch fish on Liguria—that's for dad. I'm just glad you're back." She hugged his elbow. "I've got an aircar waiting."

Fringo! He wondered where Carla had picked that one up. It was a Lri-gTu-riANa expression, not entirely decent by accepted terrestrial standards. But no one who had not been to Lri-gTu-riANa would know. He wondered if he'd ever get used to calling the planet of his exile Liguria.

A Vidar newscaster intercepted them before they reached the aircar beyond the administration building. Ricardo enjoyed the man's nasal, staccato chatter after the soft slow accents he had been forced to listen to from dawn to dusk for

five long years. The man said, turning his vidamike toward Carla so that she, too, would appear on two hundred million precision-tuned screens, "Mr. Webb, I see you've got a real honeycomb with you. Tell me, how does she look to you after the Ligurian *Fraislies*?"

"Great—just great!" said Ricardo sincerely.

He wondered, feeling a pang of conscience, just how much people on Earth knew about the *fraislies*—and how much they could accept without lifting their eyebrows. Everything was so different on the first civilized planet man had discovered. And Ricardo had discovered how thoroughly even the most pleasant exoticism can pall. He was relieved when the newscaster moved on to another returnee.

Carla and he took off as soon as his luggage had been inspected and cleared. He gave her the ring which he had had fashioned of a single chunk of pale blue, luminous Ligurian jade. She kissed him again as she slipped it on her fourth finger, atop the diamond-and-platinum engagement ring she had been wearing for five years.

"Oh, *darling!*" she murmured. "This is the loveliest thing! The other girls will hate me for having it—and for having you."

This time, when their lips met, he held her face upright between his palms. But when he moved his hands lower to caress her, she twisted her head again so her lips crossed his almost vertically. But

so ardent was the embrace that he didn't really care. It was pleasantly dark and warm in the aircar, and the cushions were soft, and the automatic pilot was doing all the work . . .

Carla's mother, wearing a plas-tapron, met them at the door. She was a pale, plump woman, who twittered like a fluttering, migratory bird. She had set her face sternly against her daughter's engagement to Ricardo but now that he had returned indisputably famous she chose to believe that the selection of Carla's fiancé had been hers alone.

Ricardo was relieved when she fled to the kitchen, twittering over a bare pink shoulder, "I had the bird stuffed with *loocoo-sran* berries, in honor of your arrival, Ricci. Won't that be divinely nice?"

He was sure the berries would spoil his meal. If there was one thing he had developed a hatred for, beyond all others on Lri-gTu-riANa, it was the all-pervasive sweet-sour tartness of the *loocoo-sran* ingredient in that planet's cuisine. It was a standing joke in the Earth-colony that their hosts used *loocoo-sran* berries to brush their teeth, so the flavor would remain with them between meals to bolster up their egos.

Carla darted into her room and Mr. Baker put an arm across Ricardo's shoulders and led him to the servabar at one end of the living room. He was a large, hearty man with a booming voice. He

said, "It's good to have you back, son. I think the occasion demands a little liquid refreshment. I picked up a case of *praglian* yesterday, in honor of your arrival.

Praglian! The thought of its thick, sweetish flavor made him physically ill. There had been a time, during the early portion of his stay on Lri-gTu-riANa, when he had enjoyed drinking the stuff. There had also been a time, before he went to Lri-gTu-riANa, when he would simply have told Mr. Baker he'd rather have whiskey—good straight Earth whiskey, 90 proof. But five years of Lri-gTu-riANan politeness had made such candor impossible. He drank *praglian*, and tried not to make a face.

Carla came wandering in, wearing snowy white boots, shorts and bolero jacket. She looked adorable, and she felt adorable as she snuggled close to him and took a sip from his glass. There was just one flaw. Now that she had her hat off, he saw that her naturally auburn hair had been dyed a pale Ligurian green.

"Why did you do it, honey?" he asked her, no longer able to obey the inner compulsion toward politeness he had acquired on the alien planet.

She thrust a laughing face up at him and said, "Isn't it *crspaltish*? All the girls are doing it lately. It's the absolute rage."

Of course, she mispronounced *crspaltish*. But Ricardo didn't correct her. The less Ligurian he heard,

he told himself bitterly, the better he was going to like it.

To his surprise, he enjoyed the dinner. Apparently, the *loocoo-sran* berries had been adulterated to suit terrestrial palates, or else he was so used to the flavor that his own taste had become blunted. At any rate, the radar-cooked turkey was marvelous—crisp and brown on the outside, and unbelievably tender and white within. And the rest of the food was untainted with Ligurian seasonings. He ate until the lastex band of his clout made groves against the skin of his stomach.

Satiated, he sat on the living room sofa, his fingers entwined with Carla's, and wondered why anyone should want to go to Lri-gTu-riANa when Earth was so much better, so much more suited to the race of men. In the dim light, he had to look hard to see that Carla's hair was Ligurian green. He didn't strain his eyes.

Mrs. Baker, in the rockofit chair, was wearing the *flausmraka* bolero he had brought her, and Mrs. Baker, in his layback seat, was puffing on the tube of the Ligurian *clisra*-pipe Ricardo had dug out of his luggage right after dinner. He hadn't quite mastered the technique and made faint slurping sounds at regular intervals.

"I'm so glad you're back," Carla whispered, close to his ear. "It was worth waiting five years for. Or an eternity," she added, snuggling even closer to him.

Ricardo gave her hand a squeeze. This was Earth. This was home. This was Carla, glorious in bolero jacket and snowy boots.

At nine o'clock the vidar announcer appeared and said, "And now, Rafflex Exterminator, the exterminator that terminates, presents its long-awaited ninety-minute super-spectacular in tri-di triple-color—*Life on Liguria!* See the famous authentic *shlastric* festival, learn how the seductive *loofabs* select their mates, thrill to the excitement and danger of a *kifs*-hunt in the deadly *snree-achian* jungle, all brought to you by courtesy of Rafflex Exterminator, the ex—"

"Come on, honey," said Ricardo, getting to his feet. "Let's take a walk. Will you excuse us, Mrs. Baker?"

Mrs. Baker was so deeply engrossed in the vidar that he had to repeat the question twice.

Outside, the night was warm—Carla lived almost a thousand miles south of the spaceport—and the moon was as large and mellow as a lump of unsalted butter. It looked dangerously huge and close to Ricardo, accustomed as he was to the four swift and tiny satellites of Lri-gTu-riANa. But the poplars whispered in the soft breeze and the grass of the lawn was crisply tender beneath his feet.

Carla kissed him—sideways, Liguria-style again—and then said with a sigh, "That's what I love about you most, Ricci. You're so courtly and polite. Asking mother

if we could take a walk! I don't even mind your having had a *loofa* on Liguria."

"What makes you think I had a *loofa*?" he asked.

"Silly! Doesn't everyone?" she countered. "When in Rome . . ."

"As a matter of fact, there wasn't much choice," he told her.

He was glad, in a way, that she had accepted the fact that his years on Lri-gTu-riANa had not been celibate. Yet her easy acquiescence bothered him a little. It seemed—un-Earthlike. It would have been more in character if she had given him hell. It would have been more flattering to his ego. In her casual acceptance of a biological frailty, she seemed almost like a *fraislie*.

No one who had not lived on the planet could ever really understand its society. Not that the natives weren't surprisingly human. In sober fact they came as close to being human as any race could without actually belonging to the same species. But their society had developed along more temperate lines. After all, Lri-gTu-riANa was a milder planet than Earth.

There were no sex crimes on Lri-gTu-riANa, because there was no sexual repression. Mating had been reduced to a mere social pleasure—almost as casually accepted as the custom of shaking hands on Earth. The only thing outlawed on Lri-gTu-riANa was ugliness in any shape or form. That hatred of ugliness had been the most difficult factor for the Earth visitors

to adjust to. No matter how useful anything was, no matter how sorely needed—if it was ugly, it was out—O-U-T, *out!*

Without closing his eyes, Ricardo could see in vivid visual retrospect his red-headed chief, Captain Luders, turning scarlet with exasperation. He had not been allowed to employ a water-purifier simply because the natives hadn't thought it looked beautiful enough.

He could hear Luders storming, in the seclusion of the inner office, "Damned pink, candy-box world! I'm beginning to feel like the little man on a wedding cake. For five credits, I'd . . ."

What Luders would have done for five credits had been both obscene and explicit. But the incident had occurred during the early months, before one of the loveliest *fraislies* on Lri-gTu-riANa became the captain's *loofa*. Luders had lost a lot of rough edges in the years since, and had become a great stickler for beauty, naked and unadorned.

Ricardo was brought back to Earth with a thud. Carla was talking about plans for their wedding, talking joyously and excitedly about showers and luncheons and bridesmaids costumes. He heard himself say, "Can't that wait till tomorrow, honey? I'm a little beat."

Instantly he wondered why he'd said it. For five years, he had lived with the constant, gloriously sustaining thought of marrying Carla the moment he got back to Earth.

It had been like the proverbial bottle of whiskey at the end of the ditch. He had even feared that she might turn faithless, or be swept off her feet by another man. He had inwardly denied himself full, and traditionally customary satisfaction with his own *loofa*, preserving a tiny part of himself for her alone.

They had thought him a cold fish on Lri-gTu-riANa, because of Carla. Yet here he was, putting off the very thing he'd held himself aloof for. Aloof—a *loofa*. As he undressed for the night, he wondered if space-cafard hadn't got him. Certainly his behavior and feelings had not been wholly rational. Quite the reverse . . .

When he awoke the next morning, the sun—Earth's sun, *his* sun—was shining low and bright in the east. Birds—Earth-birds—were singing their morning songs and a faint, wonderful aroma of coffee came through the window from the kitchen wing of the house. All the confusion, all the uncertainty, all the self-doubt of the night before had been washed away. Ricardo stretched lazily, then rose and shuffled across the carpet to look out the window.

He actually cried out with horror at what he saw.

It seemed like nightmare, but—it wasn't at all. The neat lawn and trim poplars were a rich, familiar pink. If it hadn't been for the green of the hills west of the town, he'd have thought himself still on Lri-

gTu-riANa. Dazed, he turned away from the shocking spectacle just as Carla, who had heard him cry out, came into the room.

He said, "What's happened to the trees, to the lawn?"

She looked pleased, even a little smug. She said, "Isn't it simply *crspaltish*, Ricci? We were the very first in town to use chlorodyll on our grass. You know, the stuff that makes the foliage pink on Liguria."

"I know," Ricardo said grimly.

"The best part of it is that it won't turn green again," she told him proudly. "And it doesn't spread, so no one can use it who hasn't paid for it."

"Praise Allah for small blessings," said Ricardo, appalled.

"What's that?" Carla wanted to know.

"Oh, nothing," he muttered, running a hand through his hair.

"Now almost everybody has chlorodyll grass," the girl went on. "Out West, in farming districts, the big owners hire aircars to dust the prairies. In a few years, the whole world will be pink."

Ricardo thought despairingly of the green hills of Earth, for which he had longed for so many years. He thought of the dark tropical forests, of the mosses of the Arctic tundra, of the great grasslands of Africa, Asia and South America. All pink, passionate cake-frosting pink! Or soon to be. He closed his eyes.

Carla kept on talking. "And tonight, they're having a ball in

our honor at the country club. It's going to be just like a *sbrastlic* festival and some of the girls say they're going to be real *loofas*. It's becoming quite the thing. But mother and I don't think it's exactly proper unless they're married. I want you to see my costume, right after breakfast, to be sure it's a hundred per cent authentic."

He opened his eyes. He said, "Beat it, honey, will you? I want to take a shower and get dressed."

He didn't shower at once. Instead, he sat on the edge of the bed, being careful to assume an angle that forbade his seeing the pink foliage outside. He thought of the young people of Earth, ardently pursuing Ligurian customs, turning the planet into an imitation of Lri-gTu-riANa. He thought of girls like Carla turning *loofa*. At least, on Lri-gTu-riANa, it was the real thing.

He packed his bag and got dressed and walked through the French window, across the pink grass to the street. He hailed a passing vehicle and was given a lift to the skyport. There, he caught an aircab north to the spaceport.

The interstellar official looked at him curiously as he reported. He was a man of native curiosity, which was why he held the job he did. It was a job where questions were important. He said, "You're sure you want to go back for a ten-year hitch. Not that we

aren't glad to have an old Liguria-hand back. But you haven't given yourself much time here on Earth. Your girl run out on you?"

"No," Ricardo didn't want to waste time talking. He wouldn't feel safe until he was aboard the big gleaming starship awaiting its payload at the end of the ramp outside. "Just say, I think I'm better suited to life on Lri-gTu-riANa after five years there."

"Sure you don't want a little more time to adjust. It's a big decision. And ten years is—"

"Ten years is the longest hitch I can sign for," said Ricardo. "I intend to stay on Lri-gTu-riANa for life."

"Well, we're not going to stop you," said the official. "Care for a spot of *praglian*? One for the road?"

"Why not?" said Ricardo as the official bent to open a drawer. He was going to drink *praglian* from now on and like it. He clinked glasses with his host and downed the Ligurian brew. It was warm and sweet and not unpleasant on his tongue.

"By the way," said the official, nodding toward a large carton that stood beside Ricardo's bags, "if it's not hush-hush, would you mind telling me why you're spending credits taking seeds to a fertile planet like Lri-gTu-riANa?"

"Because," said Ricardo, speaking slowly, "I'm going to turn the whole damned planet green."