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# PROBLEM PLANET

by

*Russ Winterbotham*

**A spacewreck presents many complications not in the rule book. Take survival—it's quite a basic instinct—but to some, so is politics!**

**Q**UIBBLERS may shove dictionaries in my face till the end of the universe and I will always maintain that almost anything you can name is a matter of good luck or bad. Every great man owes his success to luck of some sort. What made him great is what he did with his luck after he got it.

Had I been born eleven years before Senator Clive Littlebrook, I might have been brilliant to the point of stupidity, as he was. Nobody planned that I should be 24 when he was 35, and a space pilot instead of a senator. He had eleven years to get smarter than me. But all of his brilliance and all of my youthful innocence couldn't have prevented our being spacewrecked on a lonely, uninhabited planet. We knew it was lonely and thought it was unin-

habited, as it almost was. It was the second planet of an unimportant sun, Yuga 16, which lay unexpectedly in our path through hyperspace while I drove him to an important committee meeting on Arcturus III. As a result I had to dump our fuel to alter our mass in order to avoid a direct collision. And naturally there was nothing else to do but land on II Yuga 16.

So we were marooned and even if our radio had been powerful enough to send out an S O S it would take years for our message to get anywhere.

Clive was philosophical about it. After cussing me for three hours, he decided that we'd better make the best of our situation. We could fight when we had less important things to do.

"I have always maintained," he said, "that even in its smallest



detail, a human settlement must be political. And I've also believed that politics must be designed to fit environment."

He always talked like that, so I wasn't particularly impressed till he had talked a few minutes more, expanding his point.

"—so on this planet we will have a one-party, autocratic rule. I will be the head of the government, and you will be my constituency."

"Huh?"

"It is perfectly clear. Dave," said Clive. "I have had experience

in political matters, therefore I'm more suited to governing the planet. You follow my orders and do all the work, and I'll do the planning and thinking."

These might not have been his exact words, but that was what he said. I was mad enough to want to sock him right there. But I knew that we might get rescued someday and he could throw his weight around almost anywhere. The only time I had the authority to shove Clive Littlebrook around was when he was a passenger on my spaceship, which he certainly wasn't now.

"The first thing to do will be to find shelter, food and water," he said.

"Don't be silly," I said, "we've got all those things on our spaceship."

"We don't know how long we'll be here," said Clive. "Since the supplies on our ship are limited, we must try to be self-supporting."

I've always liked that fable about the oak and the willow trees. One was big and strong, the other wasn't, but the willow tree lasted longest because it bent and swayed before the wind. So with Senator Clive Littlebrook, I made like a willow tree. I humored him.

**I** started out to explore the spot where our ship landed. A

couple of miles away were some rolling hills, covered with trees. Since we had seen a number of small animals, I figured there would be game there, probably water too.

Clive came with me, not to explore, but because he couldn't order me around at long distance and there's nothing worse to a politician than not being able to do any politicking. I was stuck with him.

We hit a jackpot. Not only was there a clear stream running through a valley in the hills, but there was an abundance of small game. And there was a ruined city.

Sometime in the past, this planet had been inhabited. Then something happened. Epidemic, war, famine, drought or something we didn't know about had wiped out the intelligent life to a man. This had happened so long ago that even the bones had turned to dust. But the shell of his cities remained.

"Too bad," said Clive, "this is going to make your task more difficult."

"Why?"

"You'll have the added duties of being the police force, the sanitary commission and the city council," he said.

"But there's no need for those things," I protested. "There's no-

body to govern."

"You will also have to be the populace."

I could see that I was going to have the splittingest personality in the galaxy.

"We'll also have to establish a monetary system," Clive went on. "Unless there's trade, our city will perish."

"That's one thing we don't have to do," I said. We had been standing in the stone framework of a building and I had kicked a pile of dust with the toe of my boot. Under the dust was a mound of square, flat objects of gold. Coins.

"We've already got money."

Clive pounced on them. "My word," he explained. "We're wealthy!"

"Nuts," I said. "What can you buy with it?"

"It's gold," he said. "There may be a bank in these ruins!"

"You were talking awhile ago about food, shelter and water," I said. "We've got the shelter and water, but we still got to have food, unless we want those little rabbits for a steady diet." The animals weren't rabbits, but they were about rabbit-size.

"We've got to have economics," said Clive. "I'll pay you for all the food you bring in, and you can buy your food from me."

It sounded crazy, but I made like a willow again.

In order for him to have enough money to pay me to work, I had to find a bank. A good candidate seemed to be a building larger than the others that nestled against a hillside, surrounded by trees. It had a facade supported by fluted columns and it was in pretty good shape since the hill probably sheltered it from a lot of the weather that had taken such a toll from the other buildings.

With Clive at my heels, I went inside. It was light, since the roof had rotted away. It was a temple with a hollow square sacrificial altar in the center of a large hall. And it was better than a bank.

Scattered everywhere were gold coins, such as we had already found. In addition there were bars of blackened silver, glass jugs filled with precious stones, solid gold candlesticks, ornaments and jewelry.

"You will be well paid, my subject," said Clive. "People of every planet in the universe will envy the people of this planet."

"What's the name of our planet, by the way?" I asked.

The answer came in a different voice: "Up to now it's been Lonesome."

I had my hands full of coins, but as I heard the voice they slipped out of my fingers and fell to the stone floor with a clanking

sound. I wheeled around and in the red sunlight that streamed through the broken roof, I saw a human figure. A woman.

At first I thought she was smiling, and then I saw that her lips were grim and tense. What made her look more formidable than anything was what she held in her hand. A large-size, old fashioned thirty-eight on a forty-five frame.

She wasn't the ghost of a vanished race. She was real, from the top of her wavy, black hair, to the crude hand-made sandals on her feet. Her eyes were soft and brown, but they glinted like the flash of polished steel. Her figure was well proportioned and graceful in its curves, but there was no mistaking hardened muscles. Her clothing, which included shorts and a sack-like blouse, seemed to have been woven from grass fibers, and animal skins.

I got tired of trying to watch the gun and her curves at the same time, so I forgot about the gun, since she wasn't pulling the trigger.

"Yes," she said, "it used to be Lonesome, but now it looks like we'll have to call it the Problem Planet."

"Good heavens," said Dave. "A fifty-percent increase in population!"

"Let's not talk about increasing the population just yet," said the

girl. "Let's get acquainted." She smiled and it made her look lots nicer than when she was grim. She spoke to me. "Drop your pistol holster on the floor and then frisk your friend."

I'd been so used to acting like a willow that it was no trouble at all to obey. Besides, I figured it was only custom that made a king outrank a queen. On a new planet a little change might work wonders.

"My name's Rosemary," she said, when I had finished. "This is my planet and you're trespassing."

"Fiddlesticks," said Clive. "This is not your planet. I'll admit you might have squatters rights on a limited portion of it, but you can't possibly claim it all."

"Here's my deed," she said, waving the gun. "Who are you?"

"He's Senator Clive Littlebrook," I explained. "I'm Dave Camptain, a space pilot."

"I'm also the supreme court on this planet," said Clive, "and I'm handing down a decision right now. Your claim to the whole planet is invalid." While Rosemary looked as if she wanted to pull the trigger, he turned to me. "You're the clerk of the court, so write down my decision: State vs. Rosemary —uh, what's your last name, my dear?"

"None of your business," said Rosemary.

"Oh well," said Clive. "Adam and Eve didn't have last names, and until the population is heavier, we won't need last names here."

"Here it's going to be Eve and Adam—if things progress that far," said Rosemary.

"My dear," said Clive, "you must realize that you belong to the minority party. It will give us a chance to practice democracy in its simplest form. The first thing we'll vote on is disarmament. All in favor, say Aye!"

"Aye!" I said.

"All opposed, signify by the usual sign."

"No!" said Rosemary.

"I shall have to cast the deciding vote," said Clive. "In view of peaceful relations, I shall have to vote Aye." He smiled and extended his hand. "Give me the gun, my dear."

"No," said Rosemary.

"My dear, you are establishing a bad precedent. Your stand may lead to war later on. You wouldn't want the blood of millions to be on your head?"

"I don't want my blood to be on yours either," said Rosemary.

Clive turned to me. "Dave, as chief of the police, it is your duty to disarm the woman. She is violating the law by possessing fire-

arms."

"We won't harm you, Rosemary," I said. I could see her point of view, but on the other hand nobody likes to have a gun pointed at him.

"No," said Rosemary.

"Listen to reason," I said. "There are two of us and only one of you. Sooner or later you're going to have to sleep, while we can take turns sleeping. You can't keep that gun pointed at us forever. So you might as well be a good sport."

"Uh-uh," said Rosemary.

"My dear," said Clive, "you are an earthling, certainly your instincts must be for the democratic way of life. A gun speaks of tyranny."

It wasn't hard to figure she was an earthling. She spoke perfect English and a thirty-eight on a forty-five frame isn't found on other planets, unless earthmen brought them there. While I was curious about her origin, I figured that at the moment there were more important problems to solve.

This one looked near solution. As I recovered from my initial shock of seeing a beautiful girl pointing a gun at me, I noticed the gun more than I did at first. There were unmistakable signs of rust, and a rusty gun is often more dangerous to the shooter than to the shootee. It was so

rusty, in fact, that I doubted if it would fire.

So I simply stepped forward and grabbed it.

She seemed to have been waiting for this move. No sooner had I jerked the gun out of her hand, than she seized my wrists, turned, and pulled me over her shoulder in a snap mare. The next thing I knew, I had landed in a heap.

"Want to try two falls out of three?" she asked.

"No thanks," I said. I got up and examined my bruises.

"As long as Rosemary is disarmed," said Clive, "we'll go ahead with our plans for a democracy. The first step is a free election. I'll nominate myself for president and general manager of the planet."

"I'll nominate—" Rosemary began.

"Sorry," said Clive, "nominations are closed. Since there is no oppositon, I'll move and second that I'm elected unanimously. May I congratulate you on your wisdom, since I'm the only one of our group who has had political experience."

"Hey," I said, "aren't you pushing this thing a little fast?"

"It is necessary to establish a civilized government quickly," said Clive. "And I assure you, I'll

be bi-partisan in my government. I'll appoint you, Dave, as secretary of state, and you, Rosemary, as secretary of—hmm, let's see—how about secretary of labor?"

"No," said Rosmary.

Clive didn't seem to be upset. "Well, we must expect opposition from the minority party. It's your privilege to refuse the nomination."

"Comes the revolution," said Rosemary.

"I was hoping we'd have no subversion," said Clive, "but if there is, it will be dealt with promptly." He turned to me. "Now I think we'd better go about checking our national resources." He leaned over and picked up a handful of gold coins and stuffed them into his pocket. Then he helped himself to some diamonds, emeralds and rubies.

Rosemary turned on her heel and walked toward the door. When she reached it, she turned a moment: "When you get hungry, or need me, I'll be around." Then she was gone.

"That reminds me," said Clive. "We'd better look for food."

He stooped and picked his gun off the floor.

"Uh-uh," I said. "You ruled against armament."

Clive hesitated. "But we should protect ourselves against wild animals."



"Rosemary has been living here for quite a while, I said. "She admitted her gun was useless, so I don't think there are any dangerous animals. And I'm certainly not going to let her laugh at me by carrying a gun to protect myself from her, even—even if she is a lady wrestler."

Clive nodded. "I see your point. But if we leave the guns here, she may get them."

"I'll take care of that." I picked up both weapons and hunted till I found what probably had been a well. I dropped them into it, albeit with misgivings. Still, a woman's laughter is something that masculine pride would rather die than face. Women do laugh at men, but they do it politely, or where men can't hear them. Maybe Rosemary was laughing now.

Without the guns, though, we had a more difficult food problem. We would have to trap animals, or depend on fish, if fish existed in the stream that ran through the ruined city. And there were.

I sharpened a couple of sticks with my knife and we tried spearing fish. We decided that it would take a lot of skill, and probably days of practice. We'd have to weave some nets, and this would take time too. I was about to suggest that we go back to the spaceship and live on what we had, when Clive found a clam.

It was different from the terrestrial clam, in that it was almost egg-shaped, but there was no mistaking what it was. Presently Clive had dug up quite a pile of them from the stream and I had a little fire glowing under some stones. On top of the stones. I piled wet moss to steam the clams and I was just about ready to have a clam bake, when Clive started to groan.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"I ate a clam," he said. "Raw. It-it's poisoning me!"

Presently he was lying on the ground, writhing.

I was trying to stick my fingers down his throat when Rosemary appeared. "He won't die," she said. "But I wouldn't advise eating those clams. Nearly all of the fish are poisonous. He'll be all right in a few minutes."

"What are we going to eat?" I asked. "Not that we're starving, but the supply of food on our spaceship won't last forever."

"I have a garden," said Rosemary, "and I've domesticated some livestock."

"My—uh—dear," said Clive, between groans. "I appoint you Secretary of Agriculture."

"Let's get some things straight," said Rosemary. "This planet is not going to be like the earth."

"But a democracy, my dear—"

"Okay, it's a democracy. I'm

not opposed to freedom of government, but there are a lot of things outside government that need changing. Back on earth, man is the dominant sex. On this planet, woman will be."

"But there are two men, only one woman," Clive said. He was breathing a little easier now and I judged he was recovering.

"All the more reason why woman should be dominant," said Rosemary. "I'm more valuable."

"We're stronger. Women must have men to protect them."

"Any time you want to test your theory that you're stronger than I am, I'm willing," said Rosemary. And she looked perfectly able to take care of herself. I didn't know then how long she had been on the planet, but she was hard as a rock. She'd taken care of herself in all kinds of weather, done everything a man could do in fighting against nature. Being a spaceman is no way to develop your biceps and neither is being a senator.

"Hmm," said Clive. "Perhaps there should be more equality between the sexes. But most of the things that women misinterpret are not discrimination, but adoration."

"I don't care what it was," said Rosemary. "and I didn't say anything about equality. Starting tomorrow, you boys will do what

I tell you to."

"But I'm the President!" Clive protested.

"And I'm the boss," said Rosemary.

We fixed up some of the better preserved buildings into houses.

We made tools out of sticks, stones, gold and silver. We trapped animals and domesticated them and we planted gardens and wove clothing out of grass and fur.

Rosemary showed us how to do most of the things and then left us to do them while she explored the ruins and dug up items that told how the vanished race lived.

"They were humanoid," she told us once. "I found a frieze that pictured the inhabitants. While the art was primitive, it was easy to see that they were a great deal like men. Probably their civilization would compare favorably with that of Rome in Caesar's time, although I haven't found much bronze. Probably they had iron which has rusted away. I still haven't found what killed them, but for that matter no one really knows what killed the dinosaur. It's probably due to the fact that there's a critical point in the development of any species, when that point is reached, the species dies."

"But man went farther on earth than here," I said.

"Sure, because the critical point on the earth is higher than on Problem planet." She paused, and added: "At least that's what my father thought."

"Your father?"

"Yes. He was an astro-archeologist," she explained. "He brought me here when I was a little girl, only twelve years old, and he died here. I've lived alone in this ruined city ever since."

"Didn't he have a spaceship?"

"Sure. But I didn't know how to run it."

"You mean it's still here? Can it operate?"

"I suppose so. I don't know anything about spaceships."

I almost yelled. "Why didn't you say so? We could have been on our way to civilization long ago!"

She nodded toward Clive "He's so happy here, being the President of Everything."

"Good heavens, girl!" I said, "Clive's a politician. He's got to have people. A whole planetful of people to really be happy. Right now he's—"

I stopped. Rosemary had tears in her eyes.

Clive had been busy grinding some nuts into a sort of flour and when he noticed Rosemary wiping her eyes, he rose and came

over to where I'd been weaving while I talked to her.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

I decided to break the news by easy stages. "Supposing we had a way to get off this planet. To go to the earth, or III Arcturus, or somewhere we could live like human beings again. Wouldn't you want to go?"

Clive laughed. "I've never had so much fun in my life," he said. "Here I'm everything I wanted to be. I've got a nice political boss, and I'm the chief executive of a whole planet. I'm also the Supreme Court and one third of the voters. I've got more wealth than a nabob, and no pressing appointments with people I don't like."

Rosemary looked up at him.

"You like me?"

"Certainly," Clive said. "Woman has always been the dominant sex—the stronger sex if you like. On earth she invented the idea that man was the Big Shot, but that was to keep men from being discontented. Equality of the sexes always has been a myth, but I didn't realize it until civilization was reduced to its simplest form."

"What about you, Dave?" Rosemary asked.

"Personally, I like life on easier terms," I said. "Not that it isn't pleasant here, but we have to work so hard. And we've been

lucky not to have had any real sickness, except for the time Clive ate a clam and that wasn't serious. But sooner or later were going to need the science of medicine. And if we don't need that, we're going to have to have something else that civilization has and we haven't. Furthermore, man is a gregarious animal. He may kid himself about how nice it would be to live on a desert island, but no matter how anti-social he is, he doesn't feel right without others around him. Even if it's only to be disagreeable with them."

"Isn't civilization a lot like the gold and precious stones in the temple?" asked Clive. "The stuff is no good unless we need it."

"But it's wrong to have useful things and not use them," I said. "It's miserly."

"Okay," said Clive. "But we have no other choice."

"But we have," Rosemary broke in. "I just told Dave that I have a spaceship. You can go away if you wish, or stay. It's up to you. I didn't tell you before, because I hadn't made up my own mind. Now I have."

"It's my mind that has to be made up," I said. "I'm the only one of us who can pilot a spaceship. No matter what you want to do, I've got quite a say in the matter."

Clive sat down on the ground beside me. "So you're the most important one. You're the king for a day. If we want to go back to civilization, you're the only one who can take us."

"Right," I said. "When we landed, you were top man because you were a big wheel. Right away Rosemary took the sceptre because she was a woman, and women are scarce. Now I'm President of Everything."

"It's a democracy," said Rosemary. "We'll vote on it."

"In view of the importance of the occasion, we should have a debate first," said Clive.

"You first, Dave," said Rosemary.

"Okay," I said. "We've shared everything and since you've both probably guessed it anyhow, I'll admit that I'm in love with Rosemary. She hasn't given me the chance to tell her alone, so I'll tell the world. Here I've got a 50-50 chance of getting her, maybe better, because I'm nearer her own age. But away from here the odds go down. I'll go if Rosemary goes, and if she'll have me. Otherwise, we'll stay. Maybe Clive and I will have to fight for you, Rosemary."

"You next, Clive," said Rosemary.

"If Rosemary goes with you, Dave," said Clive, "we'll fight."

We're about evenly matched. Perhaps you're a little younger, but I'm still in my prime and I've got experience. If Rosemary stays with me, and lets you go away, there'll be no fight. In either event, it looks like I'm stuck here, because I can't imagine you taking Rosemary and I back to civilization if you lost her."

I looked at Rosemary. "Your vote," I said.

"You see, Dave," she said, "I'm still the most important person on this planet. I can have almost anything happen, just by the decision I make."

"What is your decision?" asked Clive.

She looked at me, then at Clive. "You started out playing politics," she said. "and it all comes back to the same old thing. Man and woman. Maybe that's politics, because nations are based on the family. But we have proved one thing anyhow. Even in a civilization of only three people, each one has his moments of supremacy. And there must always be compromise, or bloodshed. If we stay, the compromise must be polyandry. I must accept both of you as mates. If we go, one of you must be compensated for losing me. Supposing one takes all the gold we can carry away, the other takes me?"

"If Clive will take the gold," I

said.

"If Dave will take the gold," said Clive.

"See?" she smiled. "Gold isn't the most important thing in the world. I'm much more valuable than all the gold you can ever use."

"There must be other women in the galaxy that Dave can console himself with," Clive said. "That gold would certainly help him find her."

"I was just about to suggest the same thing, pertaining to you," I said. "But as far as I'm concerned, Rosemary is my choice. She doesn't care whether I'm wealthy or not."

"There must be a solution to this problem," Clive said.

"There is," said Rosemary.

Clive rose to his feet and I did too. Rosemary didn't seem to expect this and she was late getting up.

"In politics," said Clive, "it is known as the coup d'etat."

He swung and I swung. Then we both swung while Rosemary screamed. Suddenly everything got black.

When I woke up, I thought I had underestimated Clive, but I saw him sleeping peacefully and I also observed he had a lump on his head, like I had. Rosemary was sitting on a chunk of marble watching us, holding a small stout

club in her hand.

"As soon as you feel strong enough," she said, "you can start loading gold onto my space ship. It's over in the next valley. We're all going back to civilization. The wars there are more impersonal."

"You've made your choice?" I asked.

"I have," she said, "but to avoid bloodshed, I'll not reveal it till we get home—unless one of you figures it out."

"What happens then?"

"The loser gets locked up or placed under guard. I don't think, if you're the loser you'd do anything silly, like cracking up the space ship. After all, there'll be a fortune in gold and consolation with another girl. I'm sure there is another girl in the universe."

At the time, though I didn't think there was.

When we landed on Earth, we divided the spoils three ways because Rosemary decided not to take either of us.

"Neither of you asked me to choose between you," she said, "and that was the way to decide. You should have said: 'Take one of us and the other will abide by your decision.' That is what is known as compromise, even if it doesn't seem that way. The trouble with men is that few of them can lose gracefully. They've got to start a war rather than a compromise."

"But losing isn't compromising," I pointed out. "If you give up something and gain something, that's a compromise."

"How do you know you haven't gained by losing me," she said.

I often wonder which of us she preferred back on Problem Planet. But considering the fact that we were probably the first men she got to know after her father died, I think she made a wise choice. Clive married a woman lawyer, and I married a chorus girl.

Rosemary? She married a wrestler that could throw her.

THE END

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