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*As hard a task as a science fiction writer can set himself is the consistent, convincing depiction of an alien mentality — which is at once most effective and most difficult when written purely from the alien point of view. H. B. Fyfe's last appearance in F&SF was with an all-out farce, The Well-Oiled Machine (December, 1950); this time he offers a sober and ironic story of Earth's first contact with a feudal society on a remote planet — and a perfect technical model of how to present a comprehensive and comprehending picture of another race with a complete abstention from direct exposition.*

## Ransom

by H. B. FYFE

It was the day after Theot-Tu tried to kidnap me that I first saw the Earth beings who landed in my fields. At that time, I did not know they called themselves of Earth and came from the stars — in fact, their ship was not even to be seen from the castle because of the giant ferns to the south.

Theot-Tu had time in the dungeon to learn who was a fool. My rear guard had caught him fleeing the unsuccessful ambush.

"Very well, Kakhaw!" he gasped. "Two of my best row-ships and fifty slaves to work them."

I motioned the attendants of the place to put aside the hot chains and pincers. Theot-Tu was not the warrior he used to be, giving up the ships before I had so much as plucked a single feather from his head. I was rather disappointed.

Just then, a slave was hustled in by a pair of warriors. From the way the wing-muscles anchored to his breastbone quivered, I could see he was bursting with news. The philosophers claim the bone-ridges on our backs were free wings long, long ago and that our prehistoric ancestors could fly. This fellow seemed as if he might, at any moment. I pointed a claw at Theot-Tu.

"Take him out the rear gate and give him a *zinh* to ride back to his castle," I ordered. "I do not mean to doubt your given word, Theot-Tu, but I shall keep your warriors to work for me until the row-ships arrive."

He flung me an insulted glare at that, but prudently swallowed his protests.

Upstairs, the slave blurted out his story.

“. . . and when I approached, two more came out of the ship, making seven. They brought a small machine. Believe me, Lord Kahkaw! With the machine, before I knew, they spoke to me, though they talked a wondrous strange gabble among themselves. Believe me!”

“Enough!” I commanded, turning to the warriors. “This I would see. Bring *ziphis* to the courtyard and find if any of my offspring are about, to accompany me!”

They located Turrtr and Hoo-Wup, the others being out hunting. Hoo-Wup, I noticed, was growing to be a handsome fellow with bulging muscles beneath his tanned skin. His crest feathers had a fine, blue-green sheen. But I had trained Turrtr myself, and knew him more reliable with lance or blowgun.

We rode out with ten warriors, the slave running before to show the way. It was not far. We crossed the river by the stone bridge, then bore seaward for the trail through the ferns. When we came out into the light again, there it was.

I looked at the panting slave, who had flung himself down to rest, but decided he had meant well enough. I, however, could see that it was not exactly a ship, though it lay high on the dunes along the beach.

At my wave, the warriors spread out and we rode forward. Before we reached this big thing of shining metal, a gate opened in its flank and some Earth beings came out. Immediately, I knew they were not of this world, unless they were evil spirits.

One of the warriors raised his blowgun, but I motioned him back. It is always good to learn a new thing. It might add to one's wealth or help in holding castle and lands.

It was as the slave had said. One of them brought out a machine in a small box, and then they could talk back to me.

“How do you do that?” I asked, seeking to put them at ease by pretending they knew more than I.

“We analyzed the speech of your companion this morning,” one answered. “The machine translates as we speak into it.”

He was a husky fellow, but his skin was pale and his face strange. He had no crest at all, just a sort of brownish down covering a big round head; and the soft-looking lump shaped almost like a beak was really not his mouth at all.

I glared into his bluish eyes — which both faced squarely forward — but decided he had meant no insult.

“He is not Kahkaw's companion,” I said. “He is my slave.”

Alien as he was, he had the wit to apologize. His name was Bill-something-or-other, and the others had similar funny sounds for names. They told me

about their flight from their star to our world, and in such detail that I was of half a mind to believe them.

As they talked, I examined them. They were built somewhat like us — shorter and flatter in the body but longer in the legs. Their claws were soft and I do not think they *ever* had wings or feathers. Two were about as tall as I, one quite small, and the other four were in between.

The little one, which I took to be half-grown, had very long, thick, black down hanging down the neck to the shoulders. The ones of medium size had short thatches of different colors — brown, yellowish, and even red — and were sturdier, like warriors. The two big ones hung to the rear and never changed expression. They seemed to wear metal suits and masks.

“And why have you come here?” I asked Bill, when he had told his tale.

“We are exploring for other worlds with intelligent life.”

“For what purpose?” I asked, lest they be spies.

“To exchange wisdom, and perhaps to trade goods.”

“What?” I demanded. “Surely you are not mere merchants!”

He hesitated, then said they were not. It sounded like half a truth, but it was not worth a challenge yet.

In the end, I gave permission for them to remain on my land for a time, and to show me their ship the next day — it would be good excuse for a little ride.

Turrrt led up my *zinh*, but before I could mount, something caught my eye. The Earth beings had another small machine, which looked like a long tube sitting on three sticks.

“What is that for?” I asked.

They tried to tell me it was to look at stars so they could explain to others exactly where they were — obviously some kind of sorcery. The brown-topped one, Bill, showed me how to look through it.

By my last egg!

It happened to be pointing along the shore, and a spot half a day’s ride away popped into view as though under my castle walls.

They said it was done with curved pieces of glass. Whatever worked it, it was just the thing for my watch tower. With a machine like this, it would be a lucky band who rode across my domain without yielding a juicy ransom. I saw myself becoming the richest lord in the countryside.

But no matter how extravagantly I admired the thing, the boors pretended not to understand, and declined to give it to me.

“Lord!” hissed Hoo-Wup, ashamed. “Must we watch Kahkaw lay himself open to the mockery of these slaves?”

“No!” I answered grimly, turning away to my *zinh*. “If they don’t understand that ‘a present handsome is advanced ransom,’ they will learn it soon!”

I even said farewell, but my temper stirred as we rode off. At the edge of the ferns, I bade the slave lurk and watch.

Early the next morning, the strategy was rewarded. A runner brought word that two of the aliens were walking on the beach. I summoned Turrnt, Hoo-Wup, and the warriors.

It was so easy it was hardly fun.

We swooped out of the ferns as they plodded back from the river toward their ship. One of the metal-suited ones led the way, carrying many small boxes, and the half-grown one followed. I pointed to the second figure. Turrnt and Hoo-Wup closed in amid a cloud of sand flung up by the claws of their *zinhps*.

A moment later, we were back in the dark of the ferns. The prisoner's companion did not even try to follow but continued on his way after one glance back at us.

We did not have long to wait. Before the midday meal, two of them showed up at the castle gate. The warriors brought in the brown-topped Bill I had talked with and one of the frozen-faced fellows. That one had the small talking-machine under one shiny, blue-black arm.

I wasted no time in tale-telling. With the warriors behind, we went right down to the dungeon where the little one was chained to the wall.

"Why did you do this?" cried Bill. "What do you want? Whatever you like — just name it. If I can manage at all, you shall have it!"

"You should have spoken this way yesterday," I reproved him, "instead of being so rude."

There was a great deal of babble over so simple a matter, what with the one in the cell crying out to the ones not yet in, and so on; but when I mentioned the seeing-machine, they agreed promptly.

I assured them I would not for the world doubt their word, but Bill insisted on remaining while they sent the shiny one off to get the present. Even when I had all the chains and instruments removed from sight, that pair persisted in acting extremely nervous. I had them brought up to the great hall, where they huddled together in a disgusting, weak fashion.

When the seeing-machine was brought, I freed them promptly, as befitted my honor as lord of the district. Then we took the machine up to the watch tower. May I lay a square egg! It was marvelous!

I had a watch kept on the ship the next day. They went about their foolish business of looking at the plants of the fields and the wiggling things along the beach.

It was then that it occurred to me I had been too modest in my requests. The seeing-machine was all very well, but what if I could make them carry me and my warriors through the air in their ship!

Some might laugh at that idea, but I am known as a lord with rare imagination. I pictured Theot-Tu's wide eyes when our band dropped straight down into his courtyard to earn another pair of row-ships.

Accordingly, I sent Turrtr and Hoo-Wup forth to catch another one. Knowing the obvious deep bonds between these Earth beings, I anticipated no complications.

Shortly before dark, they brought in the one with the red head. He had performed very defiantly, obliging them to lay a lance-butt across his crest. We waited for one to come with the talking-machine. Sure enough, the yellow-crested one arrived with the darkness.

"Now what do you want?" he asked in a manner I deemed insolent.

For the moment, I overlooked that. I informed him of my desire. To my indignation, the pair of them flatly refused!

"You may not understand what will happen," I warned them.

"We can't help what you do," said the red one. "The others would never think of giving up the ship, nor would we ask them!"

The argument lasted a long time. Of course, I might have brought it to an end by other means, but I rather liked the stupid fellows. They acted more like warriors than the first pair. They also sounded as if they were telling the truth about planning to fly off the next night and the others' being willing to abandon them.

"But the last time," I objected, "I got prompt results."

"Oh," said the red-thatched one, "that was only because Ellen is Bill's wife. He couldn't leave *her*. But they can run the ship without us."

"What is a wife?" I asked, waving back Turrtr, who thought they were mocking.

"What's a wife? What do we have to do — tell you the facts of life?"

"You are in a poor place to joke," I told him sternly. "And I'll have you know I have as many offspring as the next."

"Well, then, you know what a wife is," he persisted. "How did you get your children and who brought them up?"

"You stupid *zinh!* They cracked out of their shells by themselves!" I roared. "And I brought them up! *Who else?*"

The next thing I knew, he was trying to tell me that on their world, it took more than one individual to make a living egg. I admit I did not swallow all of it, but clearly there was need of beating them at their own game of wits. Besides, I remembered that there *did* seem to be several kinds of them.

Turrtr wanted to fling them into the fire, and Hoo-Wup ranted about hot chains; but I overruled them both. The story must be an allegory — plain if it could be solved — and they *had*, after all, borne themselves boldly as warriors should.

I let them go, taking them on *zinpfs* across the river to the beach, and accepting no other present than a little machine they had for making light in the dark without burning anything.

"You are losing your wits," grumbled Turrrt on the ride back. "I shall soon be lord of the castle if you keep on."

"Patience!" I answered. "I want them to think I have given up the idea, but I am still plotting a way!"

I thought long about how they obtained their offspring, till it began to seem there might be something to it. I remembered that we have little animals in the jungles and some swimming-things in the sea whose eggs have never been seen — yet which multiply in vaster numbers than seems possible. And too, these Earth beings did look varied.

I had had two varieties in my dungeon, but only the first time had I held all of any one kind. . . .

*That must be the answer*, I decided.

Shortly after dawn the next day, we rode out again. I was sure that I would out-trick them this time.

The little one called Ellen was not seen; but we lurked in the ferns until we caught together the other two I wanted. The red-headed one was with them, ordering them about with burdens, but my warriors drove him off.

"Do not hurt him!" I called. "I may need him in the ship."

Then we started to load the prisoners on the backs of the led *zinpfs*. There was a great bustle, but my fellows were terribly slow about it. At last, five warriors heaved one of the aliens across the pack-pad and tied him down. He just kept moving his legs as if he still walked.

"How many arms have you broken?" I snapped to Hoo-Wup, as his gang struggled to lift the other one. "Do you want to be here still, knee-deep, when they come from the ship with weapons?"

"He's heavy!" Hoo-Wup gasped. "It's easy to perch up there and sneer down your beak at us. It isn't *your* wing-muscles he's pulling loose!"

*My molting azure crest!*

I swarmed down from my *zinhf* to show him, but I might have saved my dignity. Hoo-Wup was right; the fellow was heavy as stone. It took six of us.

At last, we rode off — and just in time. Even as we slipped into the ferns, some of the Earth beings ran out the gate in the flank of their ship and made loud *bangs* at us. Some things *zzzzmmmmmed* through the ferns all around. Then an object at least the size of my head screamed past to one side, trailing a wake of fire behind it.

"Never mind," I said. "This time I have them between my claws."

We made it to the castle all right. Behind the stone walls, I awaited their next emissary with confidence. ,

"There are three kinds of them," I explained to Turrtr. "You remember how soft they were when we had the little Ellen? Now I have all of *this* kind. They will never leave without them!"

"I hope so," he answered dubiously.

"They themselves revealed the reason. It is simple. They must desire offspring as much as we."

I was so sure of this that when the watcher came down to report the Earth ship gone, I thought to cast him into a cell. But it was true! I was in time to see for myself the long trail of flame high in the night sky.

The warriors looked at the two frozen-faced metal wearers when I came in, for they know my temper, but I thought it might be a trick. I decided to wait for the ship to come back.

I am known as a patient lord, when I want to get my way, but they never did come back. Nor could I get anything out of the prisoners. They sat where they were tossed in a corner and ignored us. We had no talking-machine, and so could not understand the clicking and buzzing under their suits.

During that winter, even that stopped; and after a while their iron suits and masks rusted. I think they must have died inside even before Turrtr broke the white-hot pincers on them.

"You and your ideas about their needing many to make one egg!" he shouted in a rage. "The only egg *these* could ever lay would be as hard as your head!"

I am beginning to think he was right.

