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RECEPTION COMMITTEE

by

Len Guttridge

What sort of reaction could the aliens expect from an Earthman's first sight of them? They had considered all possibilities — but one!

THEY floated down out of a cloud-littered spring sky, landing softly on the neat grass. The leader waited for the rest of the advance party to assemble. His second-in-command drew up, floundering unsteadily. Then another, a third, a fourth. They struggled across the alien ground, weak from long confinement in the vessel now moored out of sight beyond the clouds.

Seven, eight, nine. They grouped around the leader and their limbs waved gleefully while the several mouths of each set up an excited chatter. They were safe. They were alive.

They were safe although it was

broad daylight and a few *men* creatures of the planet turned heads in their direction. The leader noticed the straight paths, the tidily-cut grass, the orderly white-and red buildings (doubtless dwellings for the *men*) in the distance.

Above all, he watched the *men*.

As they slowly approached, he felt a new confidence. Their appearance was not entirely a shock. He had been well briefed on earth shapes during the planning course for this expedition. Still, with their simple symmetry of limbs, their (at first) repulsive lack of mouths—they had only one each—there was a signally monstrous austerity about them.

But his team had been carefully trained to conquer any instinctive fear, hostility or disgust that direct contact with earth life might produce. They had, in fact, been intensively conditioned to respond to strange shapes with one primary reaction—friendliness.

The leader was relieved to observe that the oncoming *men*, for their part, had clearly defeated whatever revulsion his party's appearance caused. There was, naturally, a certain hesitance in their step. And when the leader ordered his crew to silence, the *men* faltered and paused.

The nearest one spoke. "Is anybody taking care of you?"

The leader groped in his mind for the earth-words he had acquired. His chief criticism of the preparatory course back home had been the inadequacy of the basic language phase. Now he felt ill-equipped to match such a matter-of-fact greeting.

"We are friends," he said finally.

The sun burst between two clouds and flooded the scene with bright warmth. The leader was suddenly moved by the high and awful importance of this moment. He shook with emotion. Again he said, "We are friends," and could not convey the words through only one mouth.

Evidently, though, the *men* continued to regard this as a most casual encounter rather than the greatest thing that ever happened. One said, "You fellows are a bit early, I think. Mr. Spence is supposed to meet you. Sort of show you around."

Questioning murmurs and grunts came from the visitors. Mouths opened and twisted at each other and the sky, puzzled eyes flashed and blinked, a small forest of shiny limbs shrugged and pointed. The leader studied the *men* keenly. Some wore half-amused but amiable expressions. Others, farther off, strolled contentedly across the grass or sat on blue benches under the trees, or stood in small groups, talking. All quite unconcerned and certainly, unafraid.

"Tell you what," said the nearest earth creature with a youthful eagerness, "Ronnie here and I will take you to Mr. Spence's house. On the way, anything you want to know, just ask. Of course," he chuckled, "we won't be too good at it, you understand. But we'll do our best. Eh, Ronnie?"

He nudged his companion who smiled. Ronnie looked much older than the first *man* and stooped slightly. But he straightened now and there was a military ring in his voice as he commanded, "Ready? Then follow us."

THE two *men* set off along the gravel path towards the far building. In single file behind them, the leader and his crew plodded and shuffled. All the leader's mouths smiled at the solemn manner in which they tried to pace their ambulatory limbs in strides similar to those of the *men*. The effect was faintly comical but assured the leader that his group was confident, if curious. Already they were imitating, perhaps unconsciously, the habits of their hosts. It was a good sign.

Ronnie called over his shoulder, "Any you chaps speak English?"

The leader said, "Some words. Not many. We are friends." And felt sheepish.

"I suppose you came a long way. How did you get in? Coach? Plane?"

The leader's mind examined this for some moments. Then brightly he answered, "We fly."

"Good for you." Ronnie fumbled in his pocket and wheeled on the followers. The first pang of fear pierced their complacency and they crowded together. The *man* pointed a small box at them with white cylinders protruding. He said, "Smoke, anyone?"

The leader's eyes narrowed. A side mouth spoke rapidly to his second-in-command. Orders were passed along to the others and

weapons, long sheathed, were readied. The leader said, "No."

The man took a cylinder, placed it in his mouth, made fire with his hands and brought it up carefully to the thing in his mouth. One of the leader's limbs waggled swiftly in mid-air. The weapon vanished. The tension died.

The procession of two earthmen and the visitors who were unimaginably unlike them, drew nearer the building. The path curved gracefully and a massive gate came into view with ornate railings stretching on both sides. Ronnie said, "Guess you're all pretty tired. Don't know what sort of a program Spence has fixed up for you. First item on it should be chow, eh?"

The followers exchanged stares. They shuffled in silence.

"Yes," said their leader.

"Yes. Yes," said all the mouths at once.

"Quite a party," said Ronnie to his companion. "Spence'll have a shock."

"Oh, I don't know. It isn't as if they weren't expected. Say," he said over his shoulder, "you're not all from the same place, are you?"

Pause. Shuffle. Shuffle. "Yes." "Yes, yes."

"A government delegation? Or private?"

"We are friends. Spence. He

is your ruler?"

"Ruler? Old Spence?" The *man* laughed. "You might call him that."

Ron said, "Well, he'll handle you better than we can." He grasped the other's arm abruptly. "Wonder if there are any Indians in this bunch?"

"Lord knows. Why?"

"Might make better progress. Try out a little Hindi I picked up during the war." He turned and addressed them in Hindi. They smiled at him without comprehension. One of them extended an affectionate purple limb. Before it could contact, the leader tugged it back, three mouths growling a warning.

"No one from India?" said Ronnie. "Well, no harm in trying."

THEY had reached the buildings. Through the trees, beyond the railings, the leader could see large colored vessels running to and fro. A quick, loud shriek switched his attention back to the buildings. He saw faces, which he remembered as earth *women*, fill windows, like little pale wedges of terror, then vanish with more screams.

A sick dread seized him and touched the others. "What's all the racket?" said Ronnie up ahead, walking to a half-opened door.

Then he called, "You there, Mr. Spence? That foreign delegation's arrived to tour the home. All set to meet them?"

A short fat *man* emerged. Gently he moved Ronnie to one side and stared at the visitors. "My God," he said. "Oh, God, oh, God." Quickly he pulled the other two inside and slammed the door.

The leader's heart beat fiercely, stepped up by a confused fear. Earthmen still walked over the placid green not exhibiting the horror Spence had. A few had paused at the uproar and now resumed their strolling.

But an angry mistrust burned within the leader now. Swiftly he slithered across to the gate, the others following. They were on the highway down which the colored vessels raced. There were many more *men* out here. They stopped, then ran, screaming. Some fell. The vessels banged into each other and flamed. Chaos spread up and down the highway.

As more vessels gathered and *men* sprang from them levelling hateful weapons, the visitors huddled together, countless mouths quivering, furious limbs threshing the air. The leader snapped orders for defense but lulled by the friendliness on the other side of the gates, his crew were oh, so slow in responding. The damage had

been done.

Fire and metal tore their flesh and they fell, one by one, dismayed and bewildered by this new attitude of the *men*. They fell, utterly incapable of the drastic psychological change essential to their self-preservation.

As the leader backed clumsily against the railings, new earth words were added to his store, words tossed and screamed and shudderingly sighed from the great crowd of *men* now closing in.

"God, how ugly . . . "

"Ghastly . . . revolting . . . "

Then he was hit and flopped to the ground. As his second-in-command whipped supporting

limbs about him, all his mouths hurled bitter words into the tranquil region beyond the railings. "Deceivers . . . pretending to be friends . . . while guiding us to THIS!"

The leader's crew were scattered around him, lumps of death on an alien world. He tumbled into the gutter with a last lingering notion that perhaps, *perhaps* there was a mistake, something overlooked, omitted back home . . .

Just before he died, the leader looked up at the sign over the gate, *Birkwood Home For The Blind* and didn't know what it meant.

The End
