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RESTRICTED AREA

By ROBERT SHECKLEY

The universe is a house of many rooms. They come in all sizes, shapes and colors, those rooms; and entering any one of them is always exciting and occasionally rewarding. What will be found in each new world? Weird vegetation? Strange animals? Humans or freaks, friend or foe? What heights has its culture reached — or has the peak long been passed and a period of degeneration set in?

A writer with an ingenious imagination and a keen sense of humor can have a field day under those circumstances. Robert Sheckley is well endowed with both!



NICE looking place, isn't it, Captain?" Simmons asked with elaborate casualness, looking through the port. "Rather a paradise." He yawned.

"You can't go out yet," Captain Kilpepper said, noting the biologist's immediate disappointed expression.

"But Captain —"

"No." Kilpepper looked out the port at the rolling meadow of grass. Sprinkled with red flowers, it appeared as luscious as it had two days ago when they had landed. To the right of the meadow was a brown forest shot through with yellow and orange blossoms. To the left was a row of

hills, colored in contrasting shades of blue-green. A waterfall tumbled down one of the hills.

Trees, flowers, all that sort of thing. The place was undeniably pretty, and it was for that very reason that Kilpepper distrusted it. Experience with two wives and five new ships had taught him that a lovely exterior can conceal almost anything. And fifteen years in space had added lines to his forehead and gray to his hair, but hadn't given him any reason for altering his conviction.

"Here are the reports, sir," Mate Manella said, handing him a sheaf of papers. Manella had a petulant expression on his broad,

rugged face. Behind the door, Kilpepper could hear shuffling feet and whispering voices. He knew it was the crew, assembled to hear what he would say this time.

They wanted outside, but bad.

Kilpepper skimmed the reports. They were the same as the last four groups. Atmosphere breathable and free of dangerous micro-organisms, bacteria count nil, radargraph all clear. Some form of animal life in the nearby forest, but no energy manifestations. Detection of a large metallic mass, possibly an iron-rich mountain, several miles south. Noted for further investigation.

"That's fine," Kilpepper said unhappily. The reports vaguely annoyed him. He knew from past experience that there was usually something wrong with every planet. It paid to find it at the start, before costly accidents resulted.

"Can we go out, sir?" Manella asked, his short body stiffly erect. Kilpepper could almost feel the crewmen behind the door holding their breath.

"I don't know," Kilpepper said. He scratched his head, trying to think of some good reason for refusing again. There *must* be something wrong.

"All right," he said at last. "Post a full guard for the time being. Let four men out. No one goes beyond twenty-five feet of

the ship." He had to let them go. After sixteen months in the hot, cramped spaceship, he'd have a mutiny on his hands if he didn't.

"Yes sir!" Mate Manella said, and dashed out the door.

"I suppose that means the scientific team can go out," Simmons said, his hands jammed in his pockets.

"Sure," Kilpepper said wearily. "I'll go with you. After all, this expedition is expendable."

The air of the unnamed planet was fragrant after the musty, recirculated air of the ship. The breeze from the mountains was light and steady and refreshing.

Captain Kilpepper sniffed appreciatively, arms folded across his chest. The four crewmen were walking around, stretching their legs and breathing in great lungfuls of fresh air. The scientific team was standing together, wondering where to begin. Simmons bent down and plucked a spear of grass.

"Funny looking stuff," he said, holding it up to the sunlight.

"Why?" Captain Kilpepper asked, walking over.

"Look at it." The thin biologist held it higher. "Perfectly smooth. Doesn't show any sign of cell formation. Let me see —" He bent over a red blossom.

"Hey! We got visitors!" A crewman named Flynn was the first to spot the natives. They

came out of the forest and trotted across the meadow to the ship.

Captain Kilpepper glanced at the ship. The gunners were ready and alert. He touched his sidearm for reassurance, and waited.

"Oh, brother," Aramic murmured. As the ship's linguist, he eyed the advancing natives with intense professional interest. The rest of the men just stared.

In the lead was a creature with a neck at least eight feet long, like a giraffe, and thick, stubby legs, like an hippopotamus. It had a cheerful expression on its face. Its hide was purple, sprinkled with large white dots.

Next in line came five little beasts with pure white fur. They were about the size of terriers, and they had an owlishly solemn expression. A fat, red little creature with a green tail at least sixteen feet long brought up the rear.

They stopped in front of the men and bowed. There was a long moment of silence, then everyone burst into laughter.

The laughter seemed to be a signal. The five little ones leaped to the back of the hippo-giraffe. They scrambled for a moment, then climbed on each other's shoulders. In a moment they were balanced, five high, like a team of acrobats.

The men applauded wildly.

The fat animal immediately started balancing on his tail.

"Bravo!" shouted Simmons.

The five furry animals jumped off the giraffe's back and started to dance around the pig.

"Hurray!" Morrison, the bacteriologist, called.

The hippo-giraffe turned a clumsy somersault, landed on one ear, scrambled to his feet and bowed deeply.

Captain Kilpepper frowned and rubbed one hand against another. He was trying to figure out some reason for this behavior.

The natives burst into song. The melody was strange, but recognizable as a tune. They harmonized for a few seconds, then bowed and began to roll on the grass.

The crewmen were still applauding. Aramic had taken out his notebook and was jotting down the sounds.

"All right," Kilpepper said. "Crew, back inside."

They gave him reproachful looks.

"Let some of the other men have a chance," the captain said. Regretfully, the men filed back inside.

"I suppose you want to examine them some more," Kilpepper said to the scientists.

"We sure do," Simmons stated. "Never saw anything like it."

Kilpepper nodded and went back into the ship. Four more crewmen filed past him.

"Morena!" Kilpepper shouted. The mate came bounding into the

bridge. "I want you to find that metal mass. Take a man and keep in radio contact with the ship at all times."

"Yes sir," Morena said, grinning broadly. "Friendly, aren't they, sir?"

"Yes," Kilpepper said.

"Nice little world," the mate said.

"Yes."

Mate Morena went off to collect his equipment.

Captain Kilpepper sat down and tried to figure out what was wrong with the planet.

Kilpepper spent most of the next day filling out progress reports. In the late afternoon he put down his pencil and went out for a walk.

"Have you got a moment, Captain?" Simmons asked. "There's something I'd like to show you in the forest." Kilpepper grumbled out of habit, but followed the biologist. He had been curious about the forest himself.

On the way, they were accompanied by three natives. These particular three looked like dogs, except for their coloring — red and white, like peppermint candy.

"Now then," Simmons said with ill-concealed eagerness, once they were in the forest. "Look around. What do you see that strikes you as odd?"

Kilpepper looked. The trees

were thick-trunked and spaced wide apart. So wide apart, in fact, that it was possible to see the next clearing through them.

"Well," he said, "you couldn't get lost here."

"It's not that," Simmons said. "Come on, look again."

Kilpepper smiled. Simmons had brought him here because he made a better audience than any of his preoccupied colleagues.

Behind them, the three natives leaped and played.

"There's no underbrush," Kilpepper stated, after walking a few yards further. There were vines twisting up the sides of the trees, covered with multi-colored flowers. Glancing around, Kilpepper saw a bird dart down, flutter around the head of one of the peppermint-colored dogs, and fly away again.

The bird was colored gold and silver.

"Don't you see anything wrong yet?" Simmons asked impatiently.

"Only the color scheme," Kilpepper said. "Is there something else?"

"Look at the trees."

The boughs were laden with fruit. It hung in clumps, all on the lower branches, of a bewildering variety of colors, sizes and shapes. There were things that looked like grapes, and things that looked like bananas, and things that looked like watermelons, and —

"Lots of different species, I guess," Kilpepper hazarded, not



Illustrator: Greisha Dotzenko

sure what it was Simmons wanted him to see.

"Different species! Look, man. There are as many as ten different kinds of fruit growing on one branch!"

Examining closer, Kilpeppersaw it was true. Each tree had an amazing multiplicity of fruit.

"And that's just impossible," Simmons said. "It's not my field, of course, but I can state with fair certainty that each fruit is a separate and distinct entity. They're not stages of each other."

"How do you account for it?" Kilpepper asked.

"I don't have to," the biologist grinned. "But some poor botanist is going to have his hands full."

They turned and started to walk back. "What were you here for?" Kilpepper asked.

"Me? I was doing a little anthropological work on the side. Wanted to find out where our friends lived. No luck. There are no paths, implements, clearings, anything. Not even caves."

Kilpepper didn't think it unusual that a biologist should be making a quick anthropological survey. It was impossible to represent all the sciences on an expedition of this sort. Survival was the first consideration — biology and bacteriology. Then language. After that, any botanical, ecological, psychological, sociological or any other knowledge was appreciated.

Eight or nine birds had joined

the animals — or natives — around the ship when they got back. The birds were brilliantly colored also; polka dots, stripes, piebalds. There wasn't a dun or gray in the lot.

Mate Morena and Crewman Flynn trudged through an outcropping of the forest. They stopped at the foot of a little hill.

"Do we have to climb it?" Flynn asked, sighing. The large camera on his back was weighing him down.

"The little hand says we gotta." Morena pointed to his dial. The indicator showed the presence of metallic mass just over the rise.

"Spaceships ought to carry cars," Flynn said, leaning forward to balance himself against the gentle slope of the hill.

"Yeh, or camels."

Above them red and gold birds dipped and sailed, cheeping merrily. The breeze fanned the tall grass, and hummed melodiously through the leaves and branches of the nearby forest. Behind them, two of the natives followed. They were horse-shaped, except for their hides of green and white dots.

"Like a bloody circus," Flynn observed, as one of the horses capered a circle around him.

"Yeh," Morena said. They reached the top of the hill and started down. Then Flynn stopped.

"Look at that!"

At the base of the hill, rising slim and erect, was a metal pillar. They followed it up with their eyes. It climbed and climbed — and its top was lost in the clouds.

They hurried down and examined it. Closer, the pillar was more massy than they had thought. Almost twenty feet through, Morena estimated. At a guess he placed the metal as an alloy of steel, by its gray-blue color. But what steel, he asked himself, could support a shaft that size?

"How high would you say those clouds are?" Morena asked.

Flynn craned his neck. "Lord, they must be half a mile up. Maybe a mile." The pillar had been hidden from the ship by the clouds, and by its gray-blue color which blended into the background.

"I don't believe it," Morena said. "I wonder what the compression strain on this thing is." They stared in awe at the tremendous shaft.

"Well," Flynn said, "I'd better get some pictures." He unloaded his camera and snapped three shots of the shaft from twenty feet, then a shot with Morena for size comparison. For the next three pictures he sighted up the shaft.

"What do you figure it is?" Morena asked.

"Let the big brains figure it out," Flynn said. "It ought to

drive them nuts." He strapped the camera back together. "Now I suppose we have to walk all the way back." He looked at the brown and green horses. "Wonder if I could hitch a ride."

"Go ahead and break your stupid neck," Morena said.

"Here, boy, come on here," Flynn called. One of the horses came over and knelt beside him. Flynn climbed on his back gingerly. Once he was astride he grinned at Morena.

"Just don't smash that camera," Morena said. "It's government property."

"Nice boy," Flynn said to the horse. "Good fellow." The horse got to his feet — and smiled.

"See you back in camp," Flynn said, guiding the horse toward the hill.

"Hold it a second," Morena said. He looked glumly at Flynn, then beckoned to the other horse. "Come on, boy." The horse knelt and he climbed on.

They rode in circles for a few moments, experimenting. The horses could be guided by a touch. Their broad backs were amazingly comfortable. One of the red and gold birds came down and perched on Flynn's shoulder.

"Hey, hey, this is the life," Flynn said, patting the glossy hide of his mount. "Race you back to camp, Mate."

"You're on," Morena said. But their horses would move no faster

than a slow walk, in spite of all their urging.

At the ship, Kilpepper was squatting in the grass, watching Aramic at work. The linguist was a patient man. His sisters had always remarked on his patience. His colleagues had praised him for it, and his students, during his years of teaching, had appreciated it. Now, the backlog of sixteen years of self-containment was being called to the front.

"We'll try it again," Aramic said in his calmest voice. He flipped through the pages of *Language Approach For Alien Grade Two Intelligences* — a text written by himself — and found the diagram he wanted. He opened to the page and pointed.

The animal beside him looked like an inconceivable cross between a chipmunk and a giant panda. It cocked one eye at the diagram, the other eye wandering ludicrously around its socket.

"Planet," Aramic said, pointing. "Planet."

"Excuse me, Skipper," Simmons said. "I'd like to set up this X-ray gadget here."

"Certainly," Kilpepper said, moving to let the biologist drag the machine into place.

"Planet," Aramic said again.

"Elam vessel holam cram," the chipmunk-panda said pleasantly.

Damn it, they had a language. The sounds they made were cer-

tainly representational. It was just a question of finding a common meeting ground. Had they mastered simple abstractions? Aramic put down his book and pointed to the chipmunk-panda.

"Animal," he said, and waited.

"Get him to hold still," Simmons said, focusing the X-ray. "That's good. Now a few more."

"Animal," Aramic repeated hopefully.

"Eeful beeful box," the animal said. "Hoful toful lox, ramadan, Samduran, eeful beeful box."

Patience, Aramic reminded himself. Positive attitude. Be cheerful. Faint heart never.

He picked up another of his manuals. This one was called *Language Approach to Alien Grade One Intelligences*.

He found what he wanted and put it down again. Smiling, he held up a finger.

"One," he said.

The animal leaned forward and sniffed his finger.

Smiling grimly, Aramic held up another finger. "Two." A third. "Three."

"Hoogelex," the animal said suddenly.

A diphthong? Their word for one? "One," he said again, waving the same finger.

"Verescrevef," the animal replied, beaming.

Could that be an alternate 'one'? "One," he said again.

The animal burst into song.

"Sevef hevef ulud cram, aragan, biligan, homus dram — "

It stopped and looked at the *Language Approach* manual, fluttering in the air, and at the back of the linguist who, with remarkable patience, had refrained from throttling him.

After Morena and Flynn returned, Kilpepper puzzled over their report. He had the photographs rushed through and studied them with care.

The shaft was round and smooth, and obviously manufactured. Any race that could put up a thing like that could give them trouble. Big trouble.

But who had put the shaft up? Not the happy, stupid animals around the ship, certainly.

"You say the top is hidden in the clouds?" Kilpepper asked.

"Yes sir," Morena said. "That damn thing must be all of a mile high."

"Go back," Kilpepper said. "Take a radarscope. Take infrared equipment. Get me a picture of the top of that shaft. I want to know how high it goes and what's on top of it. Quick."

Flynn and Morena left the bridge.

Kilpepper looked at the still-wet photographs for a minute longer, then put them down. He wandered into the ship's lab, vague worries nagging at him. The planet didn't make sense, and

that bothered him. Kilpepper had discovered the hard way that there's a pattern to everything. If you can't find it in time, that's just too bad for you.

Morrison, the bacteriologist, was a small, sad man. Right now he looked like an extension of the microscope he was peering into.

"Find anything?" Kilpepper asked.

"I've found the absence of something," Morrison said, looking up and blinking. "I've found the absence of a hell of a lot of something."

"What's that?" Kilpepper asked.

"I've run tests on the flowers," Morrison said, "and I've run tests on the earth, and tests on water samples. Nothing definitive yet, but brace yourself."

"I'm braced. What is it?"

"There isn't an ounce of bacteria on this planet!"

"Oh?" Kilpepper said, because he couldn't think of anything else to say. He didn't consider it a particularly shocking announcement. But the bacteriologist was acting as if he had announced that the subsoil of the planet was one hundred per cent pure green cheese.

"That's it. The water in the stream is purer than distilled alcohol. The dirt on this planet is cleaner than a boiled scalpel. The only bacteria are the ones we

brought. And they're being killed off."

"How?"

"The air of this place has about three disinfecting agents I've detected, and probably a dozen more I haven't. Same with the dirt and water. This place is sterile!"

"Well, now," Kilpepper said. He couldn't appreciate the full force of the statement. He was still worried about the steel shaft. "What does that mean?"

"I'm glad you asked me that," Morrison said. "Yes, I'm really glad you asked me. It means simply that this place doesn't exist."

"Oh, come now."

"I mean it. There can't be life without microorganisms. One whole section of the life cycle is missing here."

"Unfortunately, it does exist," Kilpepper pointed out gently. "Have you any other theories?"

"Yes, but I want to finish these tests first. But I'll tell you one thing, and maybe you can work it out for yourself."

"Go on."

"I haven't been able to detect a piece of rock on this planet. That's not strictly my field, of course — but we're all jacks-of-all-trades on this expedition. Anyhow, I'm interested in geology. There's no loose rock or stone anywhere around. The smallest stone is about seven tons, I'd estimate."

"What does that mean?"

"Ah! You were wondering also?" Morrison smiled. "Excuse me. I want to complete these tests before supper."

Just before sunset, the X-rays of the animals were finished. Kilpepper had another surprise. Morrison had told him that the planet couldn't exist. Then Simmons insisted the animals couldn't exist.

"Just look at these pictures," he said to Kilpepper. "Look. Do you see any organs?"

"I don't know much about X-rays. . . ."

"You don't have to. Just look." The X-ray showed a few bones and one or two organs. There were traces of a nervous system on some of the pictures but, mostly, the animals seemed homogeneous throughout.

"There isn't enough internal structure to keep a tapeworm going," Simmons said. "This simplification is impossible. There's nothing that corresponds to lungs or heart. No bloodstream. No brain. Damn little nervous system. What organs they have just don't make sense."

"And your conclusion —"

"That these animals don't exist," Simmons said, in high good humor. He liked the idea. It would be fun to do a paper on a non-existent animal.

Aramic passed them, swearing softly.

"Any luck on that lingo?"
Simmons asked him.

"No!" Aramic shouted, then blushed. "Sorry. I tested them right down to intelligence grade C3BB. That's amoeba class. No response."

"Perhaps they're just completely brainless," Kilpepper suggested.

"No. The ability to do tricks shows a certain level of intelligence. They have a language of sorts, also, and a definite response pattern. But they won't pay any attention. All they do is sing songs."

"I think we all need supper," Kilpepper said. "And perhaps a slug or two of the old standby."

The old standby was much in evidence at supper. After a fifth or two had been consumed, the scientists mellowed sufficiently to consider some possibilities. They put together their facts.

Item, the natives — or animals — showed no sign of internal organs, no reproductive or excretive equipment. There seemed to be at least three dozen species, not counting birds, and more appearing every day.

The same with the plants.

Item, the planet was amazingly sterile, and acted to keep itself so.

Item, the natives had a language but evidently couldn't impart it to others. Nor could they learn another language.

Item, there were no small rocks or stone around.

Item, there was a tremendous steel shaft, rising to a height of at least half a mile, exact height to be determined when the new pictures were developed. Although there was no sign of a machine culture, the shaft was obviously the product of one. Someone must have built it and put it there.

"Throw it all together and what have you got?" Kilpepper asked.

"I have a theory," Morrison said. "It's a beautiful theory. Would you care to hear it?"

Everyone said yes except Aramic, who was still brooding over his inability to learn the native language.

"The way I see it, this planet is man-made. It must be. No race would evolve without bacteria. It was made by a super race, the race who put that steel spire there. They built it for these animals."

"Why?" Kilpepper asked.

"This is the beautiful part," Morrison said dreamily. "Pure altruism. Look at the natives. Happy, playful. Completely devoid of violence, rid of all nasty habits. Don't they deserve a world to themselves? A world where they can romp and play in an eternal summer?"

"That is beautiful," Kilpepper said, stifling a grin. "But — "

"These people are here as a reminder," Morrison continued. "A message to all passing races

that men can live in peace."

"There's only one flaw in that," Simmons said. "The animals could never have evolved naturally. You saw the X-rays."

"That's true. . . ." The dreamer struggled briefly with the biologist, and the dreamer lost. "Perhaps they're robots."

"That's the explanation I favor," Simmons said. "The way I see it, the race that built the steel spire built these animals also. They're servants, slaves. Why, they might even think *we're* their masters."

"Where would the real masters have gone?" Morrison asked.

"How the hell should I know?" Simmons said.

"And where would these masters live?" Kilpepper asked. "We haven't spotted anything that looks like a habitation."

"They're so far advanced they don't need machines or houses. They live directly with nature."

"Then why do they need servants?" Morrison asked mercilessly. "And why did they build the spire?"

That evening the new pictures of the steel pillar were completed and the scientists examined them eagerly. The top of the pillar was almost a mile high, hidden in thick clouds. There was a projection on either side of the top, jutting out at right angles to a distance of eighty-five feet.

"Looks like it might be a watchtower," Simmons said.

"What could they watch that high up?" Morrison asked. "All they'd see would be clouds."

"Perhaps they like looking at clouds," Simmons said.

"I'm going to bed," Kilpepper stated, in utter disgust.

When Kilpepper woke up the next morning, something didn't feel right. He dressed and went outside. There seemed to be something intangible in the wind. Or was it just his nerves?

Kilpepper shook his head. He had faith in his premonitions. They usually meant that, unconsciously, he had completed some process in reasoning.

Everything seemed to be in order around the ship. The animals were outside, wandering lazily around.

Kilpepper glared at them and walked around the ship. The scientists were back at work trying to solve the mysteries of the planet. Aramic was trying to learn the language from a mournful-eyed green and silver beast. The beast seemed unusually apathetic this morning. It barely muttered its songs, and paid no attention to Aramic.

Kilpepper thought of Circe. Could the animals be people, changed into beasts by some wicked sorcerer? He rejected the fanciful idea, and walked on.

The crew hadn't noticed anything different. They had headed, en masse, for the waterfall, to get in some swimming. Kilpepper assigned two men to make a microscopic inspection of the steel shaft.

That worried him more than anything else. It didn't seem to bother the other scientists, but Kilpepper figured that was natural. Every cobbler to his last. A linguist would be bound to attach primary importance to the language of the people, while a botanist would think the key to the planet lay in the multi-fruit bearing trees.

And what did he think? Captain Kilpepper examined his ideas. What he needed, he decided, was a field theory. Something that would unify all the observed phenomena.

What theory would do that? Why weren't there any germs? Why weren't there any rocks?

Why, why, why. Kilpepper felt sure that the explanation was relatively simple. He could almost see it — but not quite.

He sat down in the shade, leaning against the ship, and tried to think.

Around midday Aramic, the linguist, walked over. He threw his books, one by one, against the side of the ship.

"Temper," Kilpepper said.

"I give up," Aramic said. "Those beasts won't pay any at-

tention now. They're barely talking. And they've stopped doing tricks."

Kilpepper got to his feet and walked over to the animals. Sure enough, they didn't seem at all lively. They crept around as though they were in the last stages of malnutrition.

Simmons was standing beside them, jotting down notes on a little pad.

"What's wrong with your little friends?" Kilpepper asked.

"I don't know," Simmons said. "Perhaps they were so excited they didn't sleep last night."

The giraffe-like animal sat down suddenly. Slowly he rolled over on his side and lay still.

"That's strange," Simmons said. "First time I saw one of them do that." He bent over the fallen animal and searched for a heart beat. After a few seconds he straightened.

"No sign of life," he said.

Two of the smaller ones with glossy black fur toppled over.

"Oh lord," Simmons said, hurrying over to them. "What's happening now?"

"I'm afraid I know," Morrison said, coming out of the ship, his face ashen. "Germs."

"What are you talking about?"

"Captain, I feel like a murderer. I think we've killed these poor beasts. You remember, I told you there was no sign of any microorganism on this planet?"

Think of how many we've introduced! Bacteria streaming off our bodies onto these hosts. Hosts with no resistance, remember."

"I thought you said the air had several disinfecting agents?" Kilpepper asked.

"Evidently they didn't work fast enough." Morrison bent over and examined one of the little animals. "I'm sure of it."

The rest of the animals around the ship were falling now, and lying quite still. Captain Kilpepper looked around anxiously.

One of the crewmen dashed up, panting. He was still wet from his swim by the waterfall.

"Sir," he gasped. "Over by the falls — the animals —"

"I know," he said. "Get all the men down here."

"That's not all, sir," the man said. "The waterfall — you know, the waterfall —"

"Well, spit it out, man."

"It's stopped, sir. It's stopped running."

"Get those men down here!"

The crewman sprinted back to the falls. Kilpepper looked around, not sure what he was looking for. The brown forest was quiet. Too quiet.

He almost had the answer. . . .

Kilpepper realized that the gentle, steady breeze that had been blowing ever since they landed, had stopped.

"What in hell is going on here?" Simmons said uneasily.

They started backing toward the ship.

"Is the sun getting darker?" Morrison whispered. They weren't sure. It was mid-afternoon, but the sun did seem less bright.

The crewmen hurried back from the waterfall, glistening wet. At Kilpepper's order they piled back into the ship. The scientists remained standing, looking over the silent land.

"What could we have done?" Aramic asked. He shuddered at the sight of the fallen animals.

The men who had been examining the shaft came running down the hill, bounding through the long grass as though the devil himself were after them.

"What now?" Kilpepper asked.

"It's that damned shaft, sir!" Morena said. "It's turning!" The shaft — that mile-high mass of incredibly strong metal — was being turned!

"What are we going to do?" Simmons asked.

"Get back in the ship," Kilpepper muttered. He could feel the answer taking shape now. There was just one more bit of evidence he needed. One thing more —

The animals sprang to their feet! The red and silver birds started flying again, winging high into the air. The giraffe-hippo reared to his feet, snorted, and raced off. The rest of the animals followed him. From the forest an

avalanche of strange beasts poured onto the meadow.

At full speed they headed west, away from the ship.

"Get back in the ship!" Kilpepper shouted suddenly. That did it. He knew now, and he only hoped he could get the ship into deep space in time.

"Hurry the hell up! Get those engines going," he shouted to the gawking crewmen.

"But we've still got equipment scattered around," Simmons said. "I don't see any need for this — "

"Man the guns!" Captain Kilpepper roared, pushing the scientists toward the bay of the ship.

Suddenly there were long shadows in the west.

"Captain. We haven't completed our investigation yet — "

"You'll be lucky if you live through this," Kilpepper said, as they entered the bay. "Haven't you put it together yet? Close that bay! Get everything tight!"

"You mean the turning shaft?" Simmons said, stumbling over Morrison in the corridor of the ship. "All right, I suppose there's some super race — "

"That turning shaft is a key in the side of the planet," Kilpepper said, racing toward the bridge. "It winds the place up. The whole world is like that. Animals, rivers, wind — everything runs down."

He punched a quick orbit on the ship's tape.

"Strap down," he said. "Figure it out. A place where all kinds of wonderful food hangs from the trees. Where there's no bacteria to hurt you, not even a sharp rock to stub your toes. A place filled with marvellous, amusing, gentle animals. Where everything's designed to delight you."

"A playground!"

The scientists stared at him.

"The shaft is a key. The place ran down while we made our unauthorized visit. Now someone's winding the planet up again."

Outside the port the shadows were stretching for thousands of feet across the green meadow.

"Hang on," Kilpepper said as he punched the takeoff stud. "Unlike the toy animals, I don't want to meet the children who play here. And I especially don't want to meet their parents."

