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RETURN ENGAGEMENT

By
Margaret St. Clair

The Earthman made the mistake of breaking a law on the alien world. Naturally he had to be chastised — in a manner to suit the aliens!

“THE ingratitude of humans,” McBream said broodingly, “is amazing. Loan a Martian a couple of I.U.’s when he’s in a spot, and he’ll send you greeting cards on the anniversary for the rest of his life. Fish a



terrestrial out of the water when he's drowning, and he sends you a bill from the tailor for resurfacin' his suit. Passengers!" McBream spat in the direction of the lucite cuspidor.

I picked up the book from McBream's desk and examined it. It was beautifully printed on outsize sheets of silky preemitex, and bound in smooth, deep-garnet Vellumium. On the spine of the book, in shining miraloy, ran the words, FARQUARSON'S ENCHIRIDION OF

EXTRA - TERRESTRIAL COOKERY.

"This what you're so sore about?" I asked.

"Sore?" McBream snorted. "Who's sore? Only petty, small-souled individuals get sore at things. Me, I'm suffering from an attack of righteous wrath. I'm not vindictive, but I hope Farquarson chokes over one of his own recipes."

"The name sounds familiar," I ventured.



"It should be. Farquarson is culinary editor of *Pro Homine*, the super-sharp magazine for men. You must have heard of him. That book in your hand is supposed to be his masterpiece. Masterpiece!" McBream snorted again.

"It isn't as though he hadn't plenty of room for it," my friend continued in an aggrieved tone after a silence. "The first ten pages of the book are taken up with acknowledgments and expressions of gratitude—you know, stuff like, 'My deep thanks, too, are due to Logarithmia McCloy for her skillful and patient typing of this book's manuscript.' And it's dedicated to his hexapod, Waldmeister Schnitzel V. Lufttraumzug, 'My six-legged friend and constant companion.' But does he mention Joseph McBream, first mate of the *S. S. Tisiphone*, anywhere in it? Just once? Just one single time? He does not. And yet, if it hadn't been for me that book would never have been written."

"Did you help him with the recipes?" I asked.

"I did not," Joseph returned decisively. "I'm no greasy groon-slinger. The recipes in the ENCHIRIDION—agh, what a flossy way to say handbook—came out of Farquarson's own little head. No, I didn't help him with the recipes. I only saved his life."

"Tell me about it," I said.

"HE got on the *Tisiphone* at Marsport," Joseph McBream

said, "with a sky-blue hexapod, four robot porters to carry his luggage, and a beautiful blonde secretary who couldn't spell even using phonemes. About half his stateroom was taken up with cooking stuff. He had pressure vats and tenderizers and relayed casseroles, more damned junk than you ever saw outside a museum. He probably had a couple of alem-bics and an athanor. It was all of it breakable, and the Old Man told everyone on board to be careful of it. Farquarson was some dynast's brother-in-law, and he didn't want to go offending him."

"What was he like personally?" I queried.

"Farquarson? Oh, dignified. God-awful dignified in a loose-jointed intellectual sort of way. He always wore sports clothes and talked with a sort of lazy drawl. His manners were beautiful. Everybody on board hated him.

"The first night out he got into a fracas with the cook about the proper way of barbolizing bollo ribs. Marno, being half-Venusian, was a sort of excitable gesell anyhow, and pretty soon we heard noises like everything in the galley had been thrown on the deck and was being jumped up and down upon. It practically was, too, and though of course all that stuff is made of Fraxex, the bollo ribs got badly burned while the discussion was going on. All we had for dinner that night was clear soup, vigureen salad, and a sweet.

"The second night out of Mars-

port Farquarson came to my cabin—Johnny and I were bunking together then—and said he had a request to make. He'd been told, he said, that 'spacies' (I wish you could have heard him trying to use slang; it made you feel like there was a skin growing over your teeth)—that 'spacies' had a special drink they, ah, manufactured surreptitiously on certain occasions when they were in space. Its name he, ah, believed, was jet juice. Did we know anything about it? Could we furnish any information concerning it to him?

MCBREAM paused. His lips had drawn down in a sour grimace. It was obvious that he had become absorbed in memories as unpleasant as a dose of picrin would have been.

"And did you?" I prompted.

"To the everlasting discredit of our common sense, we did. Afterward, when Johnny and I talked it over, we couldn't understand what had got into us. It wasn't as though either of us liked him; and we knew perfectly well how the Old Man felt about jet juice on board his precious *Tisiphone*. We acted like a couple of girls from the satellites all overcome by the glamorous lights of the big space port. Farquarson must have hypnotized us with his fine emporium clothes and his lazy drawl. An' the worst of it was, it was a wonderful batch of juice.

"I don't think I ever made a tastier. It had some bilial berries and kono shoots in it I picked up in Aphrodition, and the usual assort-

ment of Martian fungi and grains. Just before we'd left Terra I'd had an inspiration and I'd put in three mangosteens and a big piece of durian. They were to give it body and depth. Then of course we revved the mixture up with a bottle or two of soma and some cocla extract, and put it away to stew in a dark corner of the hold in free flight, away from the artigravs. It came out a kind of cloudy peach green, smooth as satin and warm and deep and rich. It was a wonderful batch.

"Johnny got a bottle from under his bunk, where he kept it inside his depilitating kit, and poured Farquarson a drink. The old yap tasted it and his eyebrows went up. 'Extraordinary!' said he. 'Ah—could I have some more?'

"From first to last he finished two and three-quarter bottles of the drink. When he went to his little bed that night, he was floating up to his ears. He kept talking about the deadly paididion that was following him, and wanting Johnny to let him come to grips with it.

"The next day the Old Man came down on us like a ton of osmium. He called us up to the bridge and said things that—well, I'm not a young man any more, but they made me feel like I was about fifteen, and Johnny had tears in his eyes before he was done. Then he sent a couple of crewmen into the hold and they smashed the carboy and poured out the juice. One of them told me afterward that there were tears in *his* eyes, too.

"It seems that that black-hearted ape, Farquarson, had woke up with the hangover of the eon. Instead of taking his medicine like a little man, he'd gone loping to the captain for 'remedial agents.' And then, of course, the fat was frying merrily.

"To do Denis (that was Farquarson's first name, Denis) justice, I don't think he realized what he was letting us in for. The 'surreptitious' in the speech he'd made us about jet juice hadn't really registered with him. He probably thought the captain took a kind of 'spacies will be spacies' attitude with us.

"But Zinck fined us each two months' pay and ordered us confined to quarters except for necessary duty until we hit the first of the Rafts in the Ring. The confinement to quarters was all right, bein' disciplinary, but the pay docking, bein' financial, shouldn't have been imposed without a board meeting, an' we took it up with the union. There was months and months of rowing, and at the end the board affirmed Zinck's fine and slapped another month's penalty on us on its own account."

There was a dispirited silence. "About your saving his life . . . " I murmured.

McBREAM brightened. Plainly I had touched on a more pleasant segment of his recollections. The corners of his mouth, which had been austere turned downward, began to right themselves. "Oh, that," he said.

"In order to know what happened,

you got to know what the set-up was. Farquarson had already 'coped with' the cookery of the terra-type planets, and done what he could with the farther, bigger ones. It's pretty hard to get chummy with the inhabitants of Jupiter, even if their food was adapted to human digestions, and I notice Farquarson has only three Jovian dishes in his book. But anyhow, he was finishing up with the fringes, the cookery of the satellites, and he'd booked passage on the *Tisiphone* because we touched at so many of them.

"Like I said, he was related to some dynast with a lot of tug, and the Old Man, after checking with an inspector at Marsport, agreed to let him have the use of the yellow life craft when he wanted it. It was sort of against regulations, but not too much.

"The craft's bein' yellow was important. Conformably to regulations, all the *Tisiphone's* life craft were painted in the psychological primary colors, to make assigning personnel to them for evacuation easier, and all of them carried two paint bombs to 'provide adequate means for prompt renewal of said paint, pigment, enameloid, or tint.' You want to keep your eye on those paint bombs, because they come into the picture later on.

"Well, Farquarson got along all right on the first couple or so satellites. He didn't speak anything except terrestrial languages, which was rather a handicap, and there never were any interpreters. He laid the

fact that he was sick as a dog three or four times from things the natives gave him to eat, to difficulties of communication. Myself, I thought somebody got annoyed with the trick he had of looking down his nose and bleating 'Oh, rea-l-ly?' every few minutes, and decided to take direct action.

"Anyhow, he was still in pretty good condition when we got to Iapetus. Iapetus is under a universal dome. The first day he spent mooching around the port and buying things in native markets, but the next day he asked for the life craft and started off by himself. We didn't think he'd get into any trouble. He wasn't the soul of tact, of course, but the Talipygians are usually a pretty mild bunch, good-tempered and fond of a joke."

"Talipygians?" I asked.

"The secondary inhabitants of Iapetus. You can't photograph them easily, because they're partly electrical energy, and they're practically impossible to describe. They look like big maroon hedgehogs, as much as anything, with erectile electric crests over their heads, and lots of white sharp teeth.

"**W**E were having supper on board the *Tisiphone* when Sparks came in and spoke to the Old Man. He'd happened to be running over the afternoon wire on the reproducer, and he'd come across Farquarson's call for help. The blasted idiot hadn't sent it in code, which would have automatically set up

alarm signals, he'd just yelled 'Help!' into the 'phone a couple of times, and he hadn't even thought to give his position when he did it.

"Well, I got sent. In a way, it was a logical choice, because I knew as much as anybody on board about the Talipygians. Extra-terrestrial anthropology's always been a sort of hobby of mine. The beauteous blonde secretary was having hysterics and the hexapod was howling its head off in sympathy when I left. Just before I zoomed, Zinck said something in a stern voice about expecting me to return with Farquarson alive and in good condition, or he'd consider it a breach of discipline. He knew I didn't like him.

"I had a real devil of a time finding Denis. We get in the habit of talking as if a planet were about the size of California, and a satellite no bigger than an amusement park. Take it from me, that's nothing but pure woola wash. A satellite the size of Iapetus seems as big as Terra itself when you're hunting a small object on it, and that life craft was only about five meters long. Iapetus has mountains and rivers and woods and ravines and all sorts of stuff. I had object detectors, of course, but Iapetus has lots of ore-bearing rocks, and anyhow, detectors are of very little use unless you're near the thing, and I had no idea where it was. I put in nearly fourteen hours hunting before I found the craft, and even then it was just luck that I stumbled on it.

"It was down in a gully on the

edge of some woods. Everything looked peaceful and quiet, and Farquarson wasn't anywhere about. I hovered for a while and thought it over, and then decided to land.

"I had side arms, of course, but I wasn't planning on using them. For one thing, Farquarson might just have turned his ankle and considered it a catastrophe which warranted sending a call for help, and for another, the Talipygians are protected by interplanetary law. They've been classified as a 'non-humanoid species of limited intelligence,' and that means that if you bother one of them all hell pops loose. Quite right, too." Joseph's manner was solemn. "The non-human species of the system are one of our greatest natural resources.

"BUT as I was saying, I decided to land. I came down easy on quarter-jet, got out, and started toward the yellow life craft. I heard a noise in the brush and turned to look. And the next thing I knew, there I was inside the life craft with my head aching like I'd been drinking eagle spit.

"I figured out later that one of the Talipygians had knocked me out with a discharge from his erectile electric crest. They hardly ever do it, because it's a psychic drain on them, and I'd overlooked the possibility of it.

"Farquarson was inside the craft, looking dignified and distressed. His hair was rumpled up and his nethers had completely lost their press. 'I'm glad you've come, McBream,' he said

as soon as my eyelids began flutter-in'. 'Perhaps the two of us can contrive some way out of this predicament.'

"I sat up moaning and holding on to my head. It hurt so much my eyes felt crossed. I could just make out, on the port side of the life craft, a cooking pot with a mess of some reddish stuff in it. My side arms, by the way, were gone. That's one of the things that makes me wonder if that phrase 'limited intelligence' in the description of the Talipygians is entirely justified.

"Anyhow, I helped myself up by pulling on the back of the pilot's seat. Farquarson watched me, his expression intellectual and lugubrious. 'What's been happening?' I asked.

"He shook his head. 'I don't quite know,' he answered. 'I landed the life craft in this spot, picked a quantity of an unknown deep red fruit, and was just trying it out in a dish to which I thought it would be suitable, when I discovered that I was surrounded by a number of large purple animals. They looked threatening. I managed to call "Help!" into the receiver, and then I was knocked unconscious. Stunned.

"When I recovered consciousness, I found that the craft had been disabled and the means of communication were gone. The animals, McBream, are still surrounding us.'

"I TOTTERED over to a viewing port and looked out. What I saw made my blood run cold. The

Talipygians were bumping around the life craft in a circle, sliding on their behinds the way they always do, and from time to time one of them would rear up and sort of shake his crest. It didn't look so alarming in itself, but as I said, I know a few things about the Talipygians, and that dance or whatever you'd call it is the thing a poetically minded anthropologist christened 'The Prelude to the Sacrifice.' I told you the Talipygians had lots of teeth.

"I can't imagine why they attacked me,' Farquarson said in a querulous voice. 'I was only engaging in cookery.'

"I couldn't imagine, either. Usually all the Talipygians want is to be left alone. Then I had a sudden wild idea. I stumbled over to the cooking pot and looked in it. Heaven help us! Do you know what that double-barreled fool of a Farquarson had selected to cook?"

"No," I replied.

"A bunch of Tomato Babies."

McBream obviously expected me to be impressed with this piece of information. I struggled with it for a time and then gave up. "I never heard of them," I said.

"Never *heard* of them? What do they teach you kids on Terra nowadays? Why, when I was going to school we had course after course in extra-terrestrial subjects, and you couldn't graduate unless you got at least a passing grade in Solar History. No wonder people are only half-educated these days!" McBream

sounded outraged.

I had been thinking. "Wait, now," I said, "it seems to me I read a piece in a digest about the Tomato Babies a couple of years ago. Yes, I do remember. It was by a professor of Folklore in Ares City College, and he said that the myth of the Tomato Baby proved that the folklore theme of the external soul—you know, like the stories in Grimm about the giants who can't be killed because their souls are in magical eggs or crystals—that that theme was system-wide."

McBream looked at me. "It isn't a myth," he said with a hint of indignation, "it's perfectly true. The Folklorist who wrote that article didn't know what he was talking about. The Tomato Babies are a big red ovoid fruit that grows on floppy vines in a few odd places on Iapetus. They're hollow inside, and the Talipygians put their souls in them."

"*Hunk?*"

"**W**ELL, more or less their souls. You remember I told you the Talipygians were hard to photograph because they were partly electrical energy. When one of them is sick or wounded, the others take his soul out—the electrical part of him—and put it inside one of these fruits. The Tomato Babies, as far as we can find out, are a sort of natural Leyden jar. Or maybe more like a storage battery. Anyhow, the point is that a sick Talipygian doesn't have to suffer for months and months while he's getting well. His electrical component is popped into

one of these containers, and his body can devote itself quietly and painlessly to the business of recovering."

"And you mean Farquarson cooked—?" I asked, boggling.

"Yes. Of course after the containers had been destroyed, the electrical charge was lost. It wasn't quite as bad as murder, because the Talipygians say that when their personal electrical charge is released, it reshapes itself into a higher form; all the same, Farquarson had wiped out twenty or thirty relatives and friends of the beings who were bumping around outside the life craft in their sacrificial dance. When the electrical charge is dissipated, the bodies wither away. No wonder the Talipygians were sore.

"I wobbled back to the viewing port and looked at them. I'd always thought they were quiet, harmless creatures, for all their nearly human size; now they seemed to be all teeth. I'd never realized before what particularly vicious lower jaws they had.

"The thing to do was to try to get into communications with them. Now, I don't speak Talipygian. In my opinion, nobody does, though you'll meet a few space rats who'll tell you they could write a grammar of it. But the traders on Iapetus have worked out a system of conventionalized signs, noises, and so on, for talking to the Talipygians, and it works well enough most of the time.

"I began trying to attract their attention, making burp noises and

wriggling my hands. For a long time they went on just as if they didn't notice me. Then one of them, a faint shade bigger than the rest, left the circle of bumpers and came and stood in front of me. His teeth were bigger, too. (I say 'his' but it might have been 'her' or 'its'—all I could really be sure of were the teeth.)

"At first I tried to apologize and explain. The Talipygian listened for a while and then made the noise that means 'No.' He wasn't interested. Then I tried threatening. I told him there'd be space cruisers hunting us, punitive expeditions, all that sort of thing. He didn't say anything at all this time, but I had the impression he was bubbling over with laughter inside.

"**H**E was perfectly right, of course. Humanoid citizens of the system are supposed to know their rights and liabilities in dealing with non-humanoid species. If Farquarson had got into trouble with the Talipygians, it was strictly his own lookout. Under the circumstances, if they carved us up, all the government would do would be to send regretful letters to the names in the 'whom to notify' spaces in Farquarson's and my dossiers.

"Bribery was the idea I got next. I turned my pockets out for trinkets and attractive junk. I waved a hunk of fossilized edelweiss and one of those 'Halmjin' crystal games that were so popular last year in his face. No soap.

"The Talipygian flapped his flip-

pers, erected his crest, and said 'gunk' a couple of times. That meant, why bother? He'd get all of our belongings anyhow after we were dead.

"Finally I asked him what they were planning to do with us. Eat us, the answer came back like a flash. Of course I'd known it before, but it still was a little disconcertin'. I'm not quite sure, but I think he said he was sorry I'd get eaten along with Farquarson. He couldn't help it, though.

"I went back inside the life craft and sat down to think. I was dead tired from all the work I'd put in hunting for Farquarson earlier, and my head still ached. And Farquarson kept dancing around me asking idiotic questions and wringing his hands.

"I pulled out of my mind all I'd ever heard about the Talipygian character; and went over it. It wasn't much. They were said to have mild, peaceable natures, lay eggs, engage in ritual dances now an' then as a prelude to slaughtering the local animals, and be fond of a good laugh. The mild and peaceful nature wasn't much in evidence just at present; the eggs weren't relevant; *we* were going to take the place of the local animals in the sacrifice, and how did the sense of humor help? I couldn't tell them funny stories in sign language, could I?

"As far as that went, I'd only seen a Talipygian amused once. That was when we were in port on Iapetus on the trip before. A fat Venusian had been comin' down the steps of

the Tashkent Import and Export Exchange. He'd slipped on the top step and gone all the way down to the bottom, touching only the third and eighteenth steps on the way. It had been quite spectacular. Of course he'd had to go to the hospital afterward and have five stitches taken, but the Talipygian couldn't have known that at the time. Maybe it wouldn't have made any difference if he *had* known—I had a feeling that his people liked their humor practical and rough.

"Farquarson came up to where I was sitting with my head in my hands, and nudged me. 'They're moving faster,' he said in a nervous tone. 'Those things on the tops of their heads are flashing more and more frequently. Do you suppose it means anything?'

"**I** WENT over to the port fast, and looked. Just as I'd feared, it meant all too much. Judging from the signs, the Talipygians were getting ready to make ritual hash of us.

"I tell you, I was desperate. Of course we could, and would, make a rush for it, but there were forty or fifty of them to two of us; we were unarmed, and each and every Talipygian could deliver a stunning electric shock. I could feel my mind giving off loud clicks like a Geiger counter near a rich source. What to do, what to do? Then my eyes lit on the rack holding the bomb with the yellow paint.

"Inside two minutes I had all the clothes off Farquarson except his sli-

skin shorts. At first he was too surprised to complain, even though he turned out to have a considerable paunch. But when I took the paint bomb and began paintin' big bright daisies on his shoulders, back, and tummy-tum, he started to heat up; and when he found out what my idea was, he really did get talky and obstreperous. 'I won't do it,' he said vigorously, 'I absolutely refuse. Not before these animals. Have you no conception, McBream, of dignity? I'd rather—' he glanced out of the port toward the toothy Talipygians and winced a little—'I'd rather be dead.'

"I tried to be reasonable with him. 'Listen, Denis,' I told him, 'it's absolutely immaterial to me whether they eat you or not. In fact, I'm all in favor of their cutting you up in little pieces for a mess of shis-kebab. It would be the finest thing to happen to the System since the discovery of Alpha-Omega power. Jet juicer!' (My feelin's overcame me a little when I thought of all the trouble Farquarson had got me in.) 'But if they eat you, they eat me too, for a side dish, and we can't have that. On your way! Get!' I had to give him a push or two, but he got."

"A push?" I queried. Joseph's narrative was becoming interesting.

"With my foot. It was all to the good, I think—it limbered him up. Well, we went outside the life craft, hesitated a second or so, and went into our dance.

"I was prepared to do my part. I'd painted big yellow flowers all

over myself too, and I didn't mind how big a fool I looked, provided it saved my life. But it was plain right from the start that Farquarson, reluctant as he was, was the star of the show. The Talipygians hardly noticed me. They stopped bumping almost immediately and clustered around Denis with their crests popping off and on like space port signal lights.

"That guy really had talent. The idea of him writing a cook book with a fancy title when he could perform like that! After he got started he jumped up and down like one inspired, and once when he fell down, probably accidentally, you could have heard the noise the Talipygians made applaudin' with their flippers on the other side of Iapetus. Funny! Why, he'd have made a fortune on the stereo. All he needed was a little well-timed encouragement."

"Encouragement?" I questioned.

JOSEPH cast down his eyes. "Well, you know," he said vaguely, "things . . . After a while the Talipygians themselves got the idea, an' whenever Farquarson showed signs of slowin' down they shot long, slow, low-voltage sparks out of their electric crests at him. One missed him once and hit me instead; it was just like being stuck with a long, sharp pin.

"Pretty soon Farquarson got so warm the daisies on his tummy began runnin'. The Talipygian chief gooped and guggled and geeked at me until I got the idea and fetched

the bomb and painted them on real bright again. I had to renew his daisies three times before we got out of there."

McBream's expression was smug and self-satisfied. He looked like a weetaareete which, having finished a jug of bovula cream on one side of a theo table, knows that there is another jug, equally full and equally accessible, on the other side.

"But what finally happened?" I asked.

"Well, the blue and green life craft from the *Tisiphone* came after us. Zinck was on the blue one himself—he thought it was that important. Farquarson was doin' splits and then jumpin' high up in the air, almost to the dome, when they got there. The daisies on his tummy were good and bright.

"Zinck got out of the blue craft, trying hard to keep from smiling, and presented his compliments to the head Talipygian. They glooped and gunked for a minute or two, an' then any remainin' signs of a smile disappeared from Zinck's face. For the trouble was this. The Talipygians didn't want to let Farquarson go.

"The conversation went something like this: Zinck: 'Gloop. Wheepee. Geet.' Intricate wiggle of hands.

Talipygian: 'Nee. Neeeee.'

Farquarson: 'What is happening, McBream?'

Me: 'Be quiet.'

Zinck: 'Gleed! Damn it, Gleed!'

(turning to us) 'They say they're going to hold him as recompense for all their relatives he murdered.'

Farquarson: 'It was purely an accident!'

Zinck: (scurly) 'You should have been more careful, Mr. Farquarson, really you should — 'Gleep. Wheepies. Blee.'

"The upshot of the matter was that Zinck negotiated a contract with the Talipygians. They agreed to release Denis on condition —" here McBream seemed to be smacking his lips— "on condition that he return on the same date each year and perform for them. His costume, it was expressly stipulated, was to be the same, includin' the daisies.

"Farquarson didn't cut up as rough about the terms of the contract as I'd expected him to. I think he had the idea that a contract between a human an' a non-humanoid species wouldn't be legally binding. But when we got back on the *Tisiphone*, Zinck explained to him that such contracts are always made between the human on the one hand and the Interplanetary Government, acting for the non-humanoid species, on the other. Bindin'! It was more bindin' than a barrel full of nuclear-bond glue."

"And does he—?" I murmured after a silence.

"Yes, every year. He'll be leaving for Iapetus day after tomorrow for his annual pilgrimage. He always gets a lot of bon voyage gifts. Funny, isn't it? He begged Zinck and me—especially me — to keep the terms of the contract quiet, and Zinck said he would. But like I said Farquarson always gets a lot of bon

voyage gifts and— isn't it odd? — they're always flowers. Baskets and baskets and baskets of daisy flowers."

The corners of McBream's mouth, which had been somewhat elevated, began to turn down again. "But is-

n't it ungrateful?" he said indignantly. "After I saved his life and all that! Wouldn't you think mere elementary decency would have made him mention me in his book?"

"H'um," I said.

THE END