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Robert W. Lowndes

Editor

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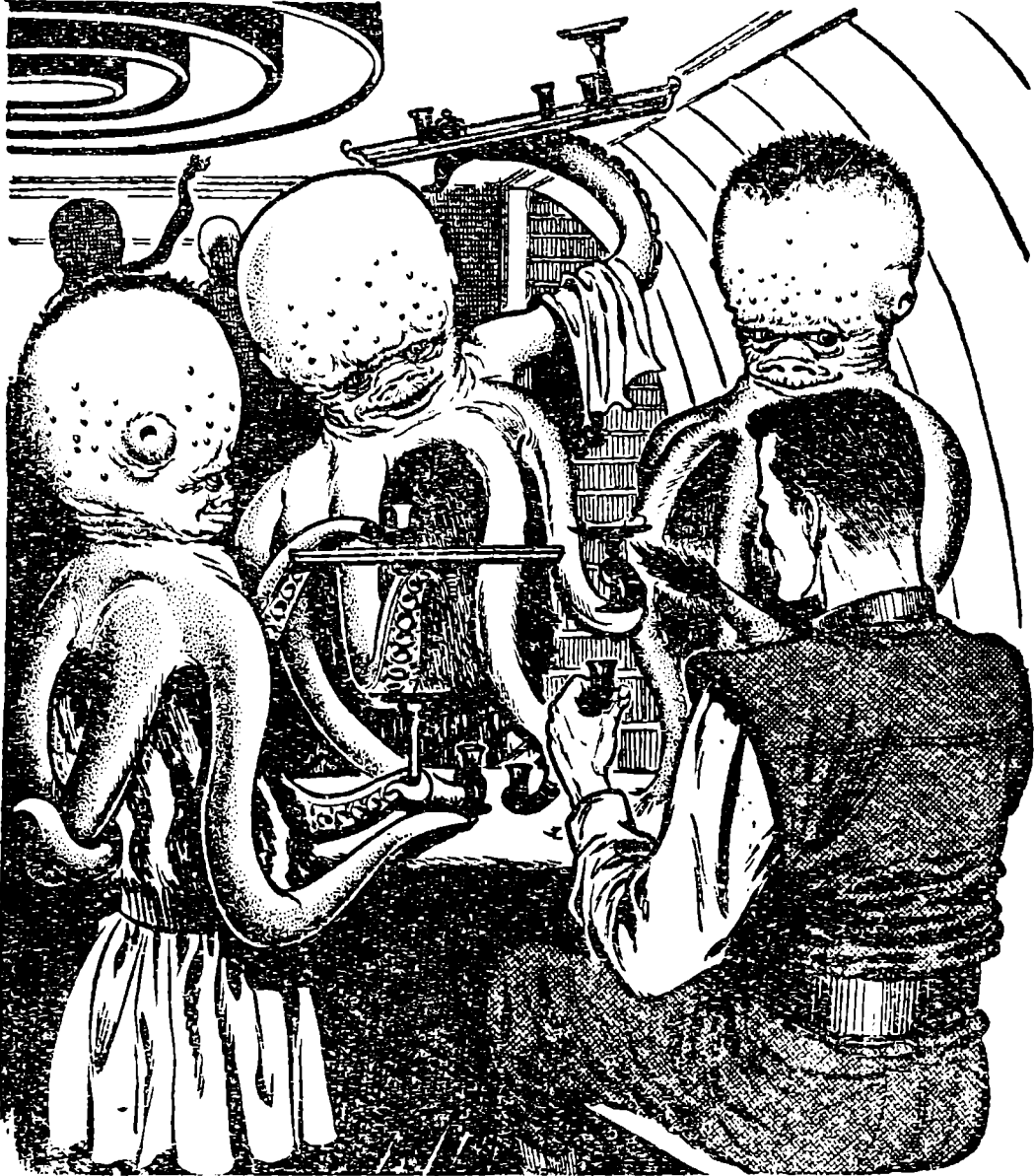
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ROMANCE

by H. B. Fyfe

Life for Vrydans was a very complicated thing, as Carl Leland was more than ready to admit . . .

(illustrated by Luross)



The Vrydan waiter was a marvel; he never mixed an order up, and managed to serve all without spilling.

THE VRYDAN driver yelled shrilly, and the lumpish, many-toothed hulk plodding along on ten stumpy tenacles drooped to a halt between the shafts of the wagon. Immediately, the dust-cloud raised from the

unpaved main street of the town swirled lazily about the occupants. Carl Leland choked and coughed.

"Why did I ever let them talk me into leaving Terra for this job?" he growled.

He mopped his face with a large handkerchief and removed his cap to beat out the dust against his thigh, revealing a headful of crew-cut bristles. Zuahnu, the Vrydan overseer of the farm project they had been inspecting, watched him solicitously.

"The dust irritates your breathing-organ, Leland?" he inquired, preparing to step to the ground. "As I said this afternoon, there are many such examples to show how much more simple than we you are, in physique as well as social custom."

"Yes, I remember," said Leland.

He wished he could forget. Or, better, that he had never learned the little Vrydan he could understand. Ever since he had come to the planet as a co-ordinator for the farming and hydro-electric projects the Terans were helping the natives develop, it seemed that hardly a day passed without some Vrydan boasting that life here was more complicated than Terans seemed to realize.

I guess I can add two and two as well as these squids, he thought. They sound so patronizing. Why, I can't imagine! They had a pretty barren, moth-eaten world here before the Teran Space Commission decided we needed it for an outpost.

Zuahnu jumped down to the baked mud sidewalk, his two walking limbs bending smoothly under the impact. Leland thought of the number of small bones, resembling his own backbone, and resolved to ask sometime whether Vrydians often suffered from broken legs.

He'll probably tell me how complicated it is, he thought.

"We beat them all to town," piped the driver, clambering proudly down after Leland.

"Excellent, Tivam," said Zuahnu. Then his shrill Vrydan voice rose in a shriek. "*Kroee!* Here we are! Look at what prime stalks we harvested!"

Leland watched as Zuahnu, waving a sample brought from the farm, strode over to the Vrydan who had just emerged from one of the buildings. He compared them curiously.

Both were about five feet tall. The features on their nearly spherical heads, though distorted in appearance and arrangement, paralleled his own in general function. Their roundish trunks were supported by flexible legs—modified tentacles, really—and tapered to a smooth junction of the neck and upper tentacles.

Of the latter, Kroee had five but Zuahnu had six, about the maximum as Leland remembered. That was another question he meant to investigate someday. There was great individual variation among the Vrydians, in color of fur and minor features as well as number of tentacles. Perhaps the patterns in the feathery fur were artificial, Leland thought. The portions of Kroee revealed by his kilt were vertically marked in broad, blending stripes of golden and dark brown. Zuahnu was a dull, dirty shade of pink, except for bright red patches atop his head and at the ends of all his limbs. The farm crew now arriving varied in like manner.

Looks like some Terran crossroads on Saturday night, Leland thought, glancing up the street.

ALL HE needed to feel himself back on old Terra, he decided, were a few ancient cowboys with sixshooters. The street of the little town was unpaved, and although the buildings ran mostly to baked mud, the atmosphere was comparable. It was a boomtown, knocked together since the Terrans had started the dam and irrigation project nearby.

"If I had a sixshooter, whatever they were," Leland muttered to himself, "I'd shoot the place up!"

Behind him, he heard the commotion of the other wagons from the farm project unloading. Zuahnu had been so pleased by the day's harvest from what had recently been near-desert that he had declared a holiday.

"Now the squids will crowd into these...these saloons," growled Leland, fumbling for the exact translation, "or cafes, or whatever they are, and slobber over those impossible sweets till they all break out in rashes under their fur!"

Until the Terrans had made their now-famous bargain—expert agricultural help in return for spaceport room and the right to mine Vrydan metals for repair work—the planet had been relatively barren. Even now, the Vrydan idea of carousing was to load up with weird delicacies of staggering caloric content. Leland supposed it was only natural on a world so short of food that the population never grew very large.

As for himself, the bright side was that the Vrydan cafes occasionally served a sort of ale, because of its nutritional value. All through the hot day, Leland had been thinking of it.

"Hi, Leland!" shrilled Kroee, moving forward with the pulpy stalk Zuahnu had brought him gripped at the tip of one tentacle. "Was your inspection interesting?"

"You know very well it was *I* who was on display," retorted Leland. "I already have enough information for my reports. You just like to have the farm workers see a Terran on the job where you ought to be inspecting yourself."

Kroee crinkled the flesh around his little eyes in an expression Leland had learned to associate with amusement. "As area director," he answered, "I would be foolish to number each stalk cut down by the choppers; whereas the presence of the Terran co-ordinator is an inspiration."

Leland tried to scowl but found himself grinning instead. He had grown fond of Kroee during the months they

had worked together. The Vrydan glanced up the street, now swarming with visitors, plus villagers who had popped out to see the excitement. "I have been saving a table and a seat," he said, waving to the door behind him.

Leland followed Kroee and Zuahnu into the cafe with the driver, Tivam, trailing behind. Inside, the latter dropped off to greet an acquaintance as Kroee led the way to a rear corner. "It is indeed a fine sample, Leland," he said, tossing Zuahnu's stalk onto a tiny table of polished green stone.

"Did your Terran projects grow as good?" asked Zuahnu.

"Well, on Terra," explained Leland for the hundredth time, "I was not in charge of co-ordinating such a large project. I was concerned only with my own lands."

Actually, he thought, I'm just a farmer a long way from home. Oh, big-time, big-business, scientifically mechanized, but still I was just a farmer.

He tore at the bristles on his scalp as Zuahnu made the expected remarks about even Terrans abandoning some of their simplicity when they came to Vryda. It was a habit he had not lost, although he knew the Vrydians noticed little difference between a bare and short-haired skull.

And here I am, trying to make friends with the natives on one hand while I try to keep the engineers and the soil experts untangled with the other, Leland reflected.

"You, Leland, will have some ale?" inquired Kroee as a server stopped beside their table.

Leland assented as he sat down. Kroee and Zuahnu dawdled fondly over the list of dishes, and the Terran looked about. The cafe was filling up and he could see more customers through the wide windows flanking the entrance. Tivam had been dragged off to join a group standing around another of the narrow tables. Leland wondered how the Vrydians could enjoy

eating standing up, and was grateful to Kroee for supplying the empty metal box he was using as a bench.

After the server departed with the order, the two Vrydan officials examined the crowd complacently. "They deserve a few free hours," said Zuahnu, waving at the hubbub with one delicately furred tentacle; "I did not expect such good results with a mixed crew."

"Mixed crew?" repeated Leland.

"The yield was so great," explained Kroee, "that I had to get him extras from other projects, who had never before worked together. What a squeal I had with the government assignment office!"

Zuahnu made a noise like a muted siren to express his understanding.

"You, being a Terran," continued Kroee, "would not believe the trouble it is to have a few workers shifted from one place to another quickly. The stonehead in charge offered all sorts of arguments, but I assured him the crop would rot."

"Good for you!" approved Leland mildly.

"In the end, he sent them on my promise to help straighten out their records later for the Records Office."

"Seems like a lot of red tape," Leland remarked.

After he had more or less succeeded in explaining the expression, they agreed that it *was* a lot of red tape.

"It must be strange to live in a society where it is not necessary to keep such detailed accounts," said Kroee.

"Oh, we have a certain amount of it," said Leland.

"But not, surely, as complicated as ours? We are carefully recorded and kept track of from birth on."

Leland sighed, fingering the top of his head. "No," he admitted resignedly, "not as complicated as yours."

THE SERVER ended that line of talk by delivering the orders. Le-

land's amounted to half-a-dozen ales, the sort of thing, doubtless, that helped give Terrans such a peculiar reputation on Vryda. He was thirsty, however, and the ale was served in cups that would have been small for wine. The Vrydans reveled in the pleasures of taste—but in modest quantities, because anything edible was expensive on Vryda.

Kroee and Zuahnu had ordered a kind of spiced fish, which arrived in miniature saucers mounted on long stems. The server produced a thin-necked jug, poured a coating of heavy Vrydan honey over the odorous portions, and left Leland's companions to admire the result. The Terran screwed his eyes shut, tossed off two of his ales, and looked carefully away.

The establishment was by now reverberating to Vrydan noises of cheer and goodwill, all a trifle shrill to Terran ears. Some of the farm workers, who knew a few Terran sounds, paused in their chatter to greet Leland respectfully. Others exhibited friendliness by fluttering tentacle-tips at him. For a moment, the Terran had a recurrence of the feeling that he was watching a scene in a nightmare, but that passed. After several months on Vryda, he was acquiring the knack of looking at the tentacled Vrydans as persons, whatever their appearance.

"Your pardon," said a gray-furred fellow with six tentacles, "but may we not invite you to our conversation for a few moments?"

Leland thought he recognized the speaker as a foreman he had met that morning. He glanced inquiringly at Kroee.

"By all means," advised the latter. "You are popular, because they see what your science is doing for us."

I suppose part of my job is diplomacy, Leland thought as he was escorted over to a table near the front of the cafe.

As a representative of a civilization that hoped to benefit from the current agreement as much as did the Vry-

dans, it behooved him to make himself as pleasant as possible. The metals of the planet were important to Terran spacemen, perhaps not so much for abundance or quality as for being strategically located between Sol and a region of stars now being explored.

He was introduced, in Vrydan with gestures, to the party of four standing around the table. The dialect was slightly strange to Leland, who considered he was doing well enough to speak any Vrydan whatsoever; but he was made welcome by a flurry of tentacles. One of the party was dispatched to fetch the metal case he used for a bench.

"They wish me to make clear that we are honored," said gray-fur. "I am known as Yilo. We would be happy to hear of Terra and your opinions—oh, here comes your seat."

The box was passed along a chain of tentacles to a place of honor. Leland seated himself with a sigh for his tired feet. When a server arrived with their orders, he discovered that Yilo had signalled an extra portion for him.

"Six stemmed saucers without even a tray," murmured Leland. "What a hit *he'd* make in a Terran restaurant!"

"You said?"

"Oh...er, I mean that on Terra I was not accustomed to such experiences in flavor. We live more simply, you might say."

Yilo thumped a tentacle-tip on the table in pleased agreement, and repeated the remark to the others in their dialect. Leland managed to taste the sweetish concoction without making a face, and pretended to be nursing it along as did the Vrydans. He was relieved to find that the main ingredient was not fish.

TWO NEW arrivals created a diversion as they were introduced. Leland gave up trying to remember outlandish names, and contented himself with looking as pleasant as possible.

Silly, he thought. Can't expect them

to interpret Terran facial expressions, but what else can you do?

One of the newcomers said something that attracted a good deal of repartee. He was apparently invited forthwith to join the party, and squeezed into a place at the table although his friend continued on to another group. One of the original four exclaimed piercingly, and glided off in a different direction.

Leland hoped his facial expression had not been misinterpreted by some alien standard. He gazed longingly back to where he had left his ale, but Kroee and Zuahnu were talking so animatedly that it was hard to attract their attention.

"Now that I come to think of it," muttered Leland, "the whole place is buzzing!"

He peered about the cafe. Most of those present were from the farm project. Everywhere, squealing voices mingled with muted excitement. Tentacles gestured nervously. Leland considered going over to ask Kroee what was in the air, but just then the Vrydan who had left the table returned.

Leland recognized him by the horizontal, cinnamon-colored bands in his fur, but was surprised that he brought with him two new individuals. The table was already as thickly surrounded as if it had held a pair of dice instead of refreshments.

The Terran turned to Yilo, expecting the ordeal of more introductions, but the latter was intent on the newcomers. Whatever the discussion, it resulted in one's gliding away, waving a tentacle toward the group from which he had come and to which he seemed to be returning. With the one who remained, Leland counted seven plus himself about the crowded table.

"What is happening?" he asked Yilo.

"Ah...I will explain later," the other answered hastily, and turned back to the heated discussion.

Leland felt his face stiffening.

What the hell! he thought. *They*

asked me over here and now—oh, well, why get sore about it? The whole snaky bunch is a nightmare—squids trying to act like people!

He wanted to leave, but could not see himself rising in indignation from the midst of this interwoven gathering. It was too ridiculous. Still, they might have some consideration. Having been invited to talk, he resented being ignored.

He glanced around again, and was struck anew by the undercurrent of excitement all through the cafe. "Why—they're all staring this way!" he muttered.

STARTLED, he looked covertly at the others to see if his words had been noticed. Probably not, he decided; the Vrydans were not good at picking up low tones. They still conversed rapidly, as if over some problem or difference of opinion. Three or four continually babbled at once. Leland's ears ached.

Then he noticed a bustle at another table across the room. He thought he saw the Vrydan who had stopped with a friend a few minutes before, only to leave after a brief talk. He was pointing toward Leland's table-mates. Several with him seemed to be urging one of their number to join Yilo's group.

"What's all the excitement, Yilo?" Leland demanded.

This time, he was not even noticed; he leaned back and sought for an excuse to leave.

He saw Kroee and Zuahnu beckoning. Glancing about, he thought it extremely unlikely that he would be missed.

Leland slid his feet around to the side of the metal box and rose unobtrusively. A Vrydan who had been leaning on the table with one tentacle arched over the Terran's shoulder edged impatiently into the vacated space.

"A dozen more they don't!" he thought he understood Zuahnu to say to Kroee as he reached them.

The two officials had their money

pouches upon the table. Little stacks of silvery coins were lined up opposite each other. Four long-stemmed dishes, empty, had been shoved aside. Leland wondered what the wager could be.

"How are they making out?" asked Kroee, as soon as he noticed Leland standing there.

"Who?"

"Yilo and all of them over there. Will they get it set up?"

"What do you mean?" snapped Leland. "How should I know what they're doing?"

"Well, you were right there in the middle of it!" shrilled Zuahnu. "Tell us! There is money changing pouches over this!"

"Yes! speak!" urged Kroee. "It is no secret. Everyone in the cafe is—*Whee!* Zuahnu! There goes the eighth over to them! Do you still say a dozen more?"

Zuahnu shoved his stack of coins defiantly forward, but Leland thought he looked a bit doubtful. The Terran saw that the reluctant Vrydan had finally approached Yilo's table. He was being questioned eagerly.

Then a forest of triumphant tentacles shot into the air. The stranger was welcomed boisterously into the group. Someone else broke away to hustle out through the street door as if on an urgent errand.

Here and there on the small tables, coins were pushed to and fro, swept into pouches, or stacked in support of other gleaming columns.

"Will someone please tell me—" Leland began plaintively.

"Presently, presently!" Kroee twiddled a tentacle tip at him absently. "Sit down, Leland! I will order fresh ale."

Leland sighed. "All right," he said in resignation. "I'll be back in a minute; I left my box over there."

He threaded his way between the stone tables and their occupants to the cluster of natives with Yilo. These were too engrossed with each other to notice his approach.

"Would you mind?" he asked loudly, tapping a four-tentacled Vrydan on the tapering bulge corresponding to a shoulder.

The fellow looked around impatiently, and squealed at him in a dialect of which Leland failed to catch a single word.

Another of the ones rushed into this district for the harvest, he thought.

He looked back to Kroee, but the latter was again engaged in counting coins with Zuahnu. Leland saw one visage in the watching crowd that was familiar.

"Tivam!" he called to the driver with whom he had ridden into town. "Come over here and get them to let me have my bench, will you?"

TIVAM OBLIGINGLY hurried over. Leland explained his trouble with the dialect, Tivam explained in a shrill chatter to the four-tentacled one, and the latter squirmed out of the way.

Tivam reached under somebody's tentacle, the tip of which was pounding emphatically upon the table, and fished out the crate. He was about to hand it to Leland when one of the talkers noticed and pounced upon him with an indignant squeal.

"Here! What are you doing with that?" demanded Yilo. "That is for Leland, the Terran. Put it down!"

"It's all right, Yilo," interrupted Leland, reaching over for the box. "I just asked him to pass it to me."

"Oh, you are leaving already? It has been a pleasure to talk with you, a pleasure which I respectfully hope to continue at another time."

"The pleasure has been mine," Leland lied with a reasonably straight face. "Now, if you will excuse me and my friend—"

"I thought I did not recognize him," said Yilo, examining Tivam.

Leland sighed and performed a curt introduction. Having gained complete possession of the box, he spent each ensuing second in the vicinity but grudgingly. Tivam, to his annoyance,

acted as if he enjoyed attracting Yilo's attention. Leland backed off, leaving them engaged in rapid chatter.

He was halfway back to Kroee, twisting in and out with the box to avoid jabbing the other revelers, when a gigantic sigh swept the cafe.

It was succeeded by a dead silence.

Startled, Leland gaped about guiltily. No one, he was relieved to note, was paying any attention to him. Uncomfortably conscious of the padding of his feet upon the hard floor, he slunk back to his friends' table and sat down.

Yilo uttered a clipped exclamation. He swept the stone table out of his path with a single snapping tentacle, and led the way to the door. Tivam and the other six surged after him, but every other Vrydan in the cafe sat still until the group had passed through the door and into the street.

Then there was a general shifting, as everyone left glided toward the front windows, resuming vocal activity.

"Kroee!"

LELAND heard his own voice straining alarmingly toward the pitch of Vrydan speech, and paused to control himself.

"Oh, yes," said Kroee. "I must explain for you."

"If it is not too much trouble," choked Leland.

He went through the motions of running his fingers through his hair, and stopped himself.

"It might be difficult to comprehend," said Kroee, "especially the odds against it. It is another example of the comparative complexity of our life, and why we keep such detailed individual records."

He had been edging toward the front of the cafe as he spoke, and now stretched to peer over the heads of those at the windows. With his Terran height, Leland could see out. The little clump of Vrydans headed by Yilo plodded purposefully through the dust of the street. Few onlookers appeared openly on the sidewalks, though

Leland detected motion at many windows.

"One person just came out of another building to wait for them," he told Kroee. He looked again, recognized the cinnamon-colored bands in the fur, and added, "He was with them before."

Kroee and Zuahnu looked at each other significantly.

"They have done it!" squealed Zauhnu.

"You see," explained Kroee, "they are grouping themselves for an act which, while not exactly illegal, is so difficult to arrange without the Records Office that the government has come to look sourly upon amateur attempts."

"It can be a very annoying situation," said Zuahnu, "which is why everyone is amused at seeing the government by-passed."

Leland saw the ninth Vrydan picked up by the marching octet. All of them bunched together and set off down the street at a determined pace. They charged around a corner out of sight.

"You have told me of the extremely simple forms of love and marriage on Terra," said Kroee. "Imagine how complicated it would be had you not evolved such a standardized physique, so that only two sexes are necessary to carry all your types of genes!"

"That is why so many of us bet against them," Zuahnu put in. "With-

out filing applications at the local Records Office, the odds against gathering all nine sexes by chance out of a limited group of strangers—well, *you* estimate them!"

He and Kroee slowly followed Leland back to their table.

Nine! thought the Terran, groping dazedly for his box. *No wonder they have such a low population! It's the cause, not the effect of so much unimproved land.*

He noted the amused crinkling around Kroee's eyes, and drained one of his tiny cups of ale.

"One aspect is highly amusing," said the Vrydan. "They were on the verge of failure until *you* got Tivam into the conversation. I *must* remember to tell Yilo later!"

"What a story of co-ordination," shrilled Zuahnu in delight. "It took a Terran to arrange it! This will be told for decades!"

Leland groaned, and signalled a passing server. "I'd rather you kept it very quiet," he said.

"But why? Surely your Terran friends will be pleased at the favorable publicity!"

"I'm afraid they wouldn't call it co-ordination," said Leland. "As in so many other things, Terrans have a simpler word for my part in the affair. Order me another dozen ales, will you, Kroee?"

