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NOW
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CENTS

WONDER Stories

HUGO GERNSBACK
EDITOR

July

SHORT-SHORT
STORY
PRIZE
CONTEST
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THE BEST IN SCIENCE FICTION

THE BIPEDS OF BJHULHU

By KENNETH STERLING

● With tense expectancy we watched the rapid approach of the whirling disc from Bjhulhu.* Now, at last, we would be compensated in part for our patient, incessant travail by viewing the culmination of the fruits of our labor. As the disc drew near, we recalled the uncounted aeons we had toiled.

* * *

With the fulfillment of our pledge to aid in civilizing young worlds in view, we maneuvered our asteroid around into a convenient position looking down on the northern hemisphere of Bjhulhu, the third planet from the sun. Having carefully examined the various types of creatures inhabiting the blue-green world by means of our electro-telescope, we came to the conclusion that the two-footed mammal was the species most capable of being developed into a civilized race. This animal generally walked erect, on two feet, seldom using his two other limbs for any purpose save fighting and eating and occasionally for locomotion through the trees. Although the insects seemed more advanced in some aspects, it appears they had no period of mental infancy, that is, each individual came into the world with the identical instincts and mentality (if such it may be termed) of the parent, leaving no opportunity for advancement. On the other hand, in the case of the bipeds, each infant was born with his mind almost a perfect blank, and while he had to devote much time to learning such things as his parents had already learned previously, (unnecessary, of course, for an insect) he might acquire new knowledge, and for this reason we decided to

● This little story was awarded the Second Prize in our July, 1936 Short-Short Story Cover Contest. Written around the illustration on that number, it presents a decidedly unusual plot.

attempt to cultivate the intelligence of these beasts. After having set up our thought-wave projector aimed at Bjhulhu, we adjusted it to the thought-pulsations of the bipeds. At first they were unresponsive to our thought messages, but by the time Bjhulhu had made two hundred odd revolutions about the sun, the thought-waves we were broadcasting began to show results in the actions of the bipeds. We had been sending out the idea of using stones as weapons against their enemies, and now all over the blue-green planet the bipeds were commencing to arm themselves with stones to combat the huge carnivores which attacked and preyed upon them. However, to our great astonishment, these queer creatures often used their armaments against one another for no apparent reason. We were at a loss to explain the cause of these actions, except that perhaps they were engaging in battles amongst themselves for the purpose of practicing and increasing their skill in the use of their weapons. But that these were sham fights seemed unlikely since many bipeds were killed in them, and besides, it is doubtful if they had the intelligence to drill in contemplation of improvement. We never fully understood their motive for mutual destruction, and though we continually broadcast thought-waves urging the cessation of this wanton practice, we never accomplished this end.

With perseverance, we were able to impress upon the bipeds the possibility of communication of thoughts by producing audible vibrations. We chose to teach them

*Earth.

this method of speech rather than any other because they were sensitive to sound and could modulate and vary the sounds they made with their mouths. Before our advent, the bipeds had used their voices to express such fundamental emotions as joy, fear, anger, etc., but we had taught them by means of the thought-projector to exchange more complex thoughts and ideas. As the time passed, the inhabitants of the blue-green world began to handle the weapons and the various other implements we had taught them to use with greater ease, and soon their upper limbs were being used almost exclusively for this purpose. Before long they could converse with facility. As a result of constant use of the mind, their mental powers were increased and sharpened. Yet this anti-social spirit still seemed to prevail to the same degree it always had. Although this impeded them greatly, they were able to progress with our aid in spite of this inborn stumbling-block.

We then proceeded to telegraph to the bipeds the idea of making miniature representations of objects they observed. At first their attempts were rather crude, but later on they improved greatly. The next step was for them to express the ideas of sound combinations they uttered in pictures or symbols. This operation, like the sound communication, was not mastered in a short time but gradually developed into more organized forms of writing as the race advanced in mental capacity.

In the meantime we had not neglected the utilization of the forces of nature and the understanding of laws of mechanics. We had projected the idea of using fire and also the principle of the lever. Then followed the principle of the wheel and the other basic elements of mechanics and physics. From this point the bipeds advanced onward by leaps and bounds. Being able to make permanent records of their knowledge, it was preserved from generation to generation.

The impetus we gave the bipeds kept them coasting on their momentum, as it were. For example, when we projected the principles of the lens to them, they

developed the telescope and microscope and other optical instruments of their own accord. In these more complicated ideas, we had to narrow down the range of the thought-oscillations so that the idea would be impressed only on the minds of those very few individuals who could properly understand it, and the most receptive of these few would be the first ones to expound the conception to the third planet. In some cases two or more individuals were equally receptive to the thought and so the idea was imparted to these simultaneously.

By this time the scheme of things on Bjulhu was organized in such a way that each individual did that certain type of work for which he was best fitted. The race had by now become rather adept at all manner of craft. But still it was more primitive socially than even the protozoa, the lowest forms of life, which in many instances live in colonies in perfect coördination and coöperation. Frequent wars ravaged Bjulhu, wars in which the bipeds fought among themselves for no apparent cause. There was no need of war any longer, for nearly all common enemies of the race had been wiped out. We were unable to check this inherent lust for mutual destruction and it often tore down what we had built up. Notwithstanding, with the help of our thought-wave projector, we still continued to develop the civilization of the bipeds at an accelerated pace, and they progressed onward, ever onward.

Until the bipeds had been making voyages out into space and to the moon with their space navigation discs for many decades, our presence had been unknown to them. We had always kept the asteroid enveloped in a screen of invisibility, and the only perceptible indication of our existence was the *aurora borealis* which was caused by the electrical disturbances that the thought-waves made. However, we decided that it would be quite fitting that the bipeds should learn of their unknown benefactors. Accordingly, we removed our screen of invisibility and at the same time projected thought impres-

sions to them containing the history of how we had aided and accelerated their mental development. Now, although we were able to send out thoughts by means of the projector, we had no way of knowing what was passing in the minds of the inhabitants of the third planet except by observing their actions. We saw that they were considerably excited by the sight of our asteroid, and were beginning to build an especially large space-navigation disc. Presuming that our thought message had been received, we concluded that the appreciative bipeds were preparing to pay us a visit to express their gratitude. In an amazingly short time, the construction of the disc had been completed. We had made ready to welcome our protégé with open arms.

* * *

Our reminiscences were interrupted abruptly, for now the space-disc was circling about just a few thousand feet above us. We experienced a thrill of excitement. The craft was swooping downward as if about to land.—What happened next was such an unforeseen contingency that we were completely stupefied.—The ship suddenly swerved and headed toward our thought-projector. A bolt of lightning leaped from the disc to the projector. The

vessel withdrew as quickly as it had come.

Later examination showed that the bolt had done considerable damage and caused five deaths, but it was chiefly the principle of the thing that disturbed us. The only plausible explanation we could find for these inconsistent, warlike tactics is that the bipeds' minds were not receptive to the thought message which told the true history of their race, as it was far too incredible to even register on their brains. When the bipeds saw our asteroid and the projector mounted on it, they fancied, with their ever-present hostility and suspicion, that we were preparing to invade Bjhulhu and that the thought-projector was a weapon of some sort. Without any investigation, they had rashly attacked us. We now realized that it would have been better, perhaps, to have remained in concealment, but on the other hand, the inhabitants of the third planet would have discovered us eventually anyhow.

After due deliberation, we decided to leave this inherently unfriendly race to its own resources. As punishment for their hostile attitude, let the bipeds of Bjhulhu fare for themselves, advancing slowly and gropingly, remaining at a stand-still, or degenerating into the beasts they were when we discovered them.

THE END