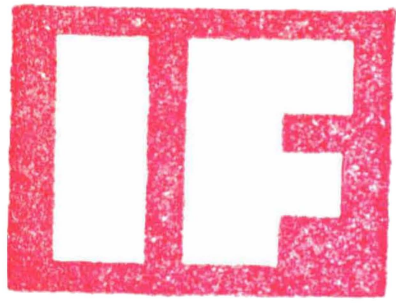


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**ALL NEW
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THE CAR POOL

BY FRANK BANTA

**Never play poker with a worm—
especially when it's an alien!**

The leader worm, known in the Earth translation as The Hell Of A Long One—he was three meters long and approximately one-half-meter thick — wriggled happily on his white porcelain throne. “What beautiful porcelain we shall have with the calcined bones of these two Earthmen, Cards Wartson and Novice Howard!”

The other three worms were also overjoyed, as well as sycophantic. “Such lovely, lovely porcelain!” they chanted, wriggling in time.

Cards Wartson and Novice “Nosy” Howard, lying guarded on the

floor, saw objections to the plan. Cards reminded the worms, “You can just quit wriggling for joy now. You can't use our bones, because we've still got *us* wrapped around them!”

“That can be remedied,” crooned the leader. “And it should be, when Earthmen come around we Martians and want to play poker, and then can't pay off when they lose.”

The other worms tittered delightedly.

“You gave me a fast shuffle with those thousand legs of yours,” complained Cards. “Those cards whizzed

around in a circle so fast I couldn't follow them at all."

"Yes, but he'd have won anyway, with you always trying to fill those inside straights," interjected Nosey critically. Then he looked at his captors. "But *I* don't owe you worms anything. I wasn't even playing cards with you."

"No," retorted The Hell Of A Long One, "you were just snooping around where you had no business to be. Probably prying into our porcelain making secrets. And you upset a cabinet of my clay tablets, breaking half of them."

"I can't help it if you don't have paper on this planet," shrugged Howard. "We'd trade you paper if you wanted it. When you make everything out of sand and dirt it's bound to be brittle."

"Especially when clumsy spies come around," leered the leader, once again exciting the merriment of the other worms.

"As art dealers, we of course are interested in your porcelain art objects," replied Howard stiffly, trying to cover his idle snooping with a little dignity.

"Anyway interrupted Wartson, "what ever makes you want to put *bone ash* in your porcelain paste? You'll just come out with medium hard paste. There surely isn't any sale for anything but hard-paste porcelain — why, this medium-paste stuff isn't worth the freight to Earth."

"Bone ash is so rare on this planet," explained The Hell Of A Long One dreamily. "We worms have no bones, nor have any of the other

fauna on the planet. Only fossils remain to us."

"But still," Wartson said in disgust, "soft paste is soft paste."

"Ah, but the new pastels! The new, delicate shades we shall discover!" breathed the leader worm ecstatically. "Who would want to *sell* beauty such as that?"

Wartson and Howard could see they weren't going to talk the monster out of it. "Well, let's deal another hand," said Cards resignedly, reaching for the deck. "Double or nothing, what do you say?"

It had all begun earlier in the day, when the four art dealers drove down the dried-up canal in their jointly owned space car toward Erlanger, the home village of The Hell Of A Long One. They had had premonitions — from long experience — of the disasters to come.

Jock Hickerson was driving, and he gave the first admonition. "Cards," he rasped, "quit trying to beat these natives at poker!"

"Now you know that with a reasonable amount of luck —"

"Which you haven't had any of the last twenty years!"

"I got the old finesse, anyway," said Cards proudly.

"Sure you have!" flung back Jock. "You fill those inside straights of yours one out of every 565 times!"

"I wish you could miss banging up the flaps of this space car that often," retorted Cards.

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Jock loftily.

"Just stop this can for a minute and I'll point out its scars to you!"

returned Cards. "I swear, I don't know how she holds air out in space any more. Can't you keep away from these stone canal walls?"

"I have to dodge the sand dunes."

The other art dealer member of the car pool, a half-breed Indian named Teepee McGuzzle interposed sadly, "This sure is a dry place."

"I hope those worms haven't got anything to make it wetter for you either," said Howard. "All we need is to have you on another roaring toot."

"You can't roar when you toot," pointed out Teepee with some justification.

"You make a mighty fine try at it," said Jock.

"It was dirty of you fellows to thief away my grog at the space port," mourned Teepee. "People are so undercover any more that a fellow doesn't know what to think. Twenty years ago if people wanted to be dishonest they did it out in the open, where you could see them. Nowadays people are so sneaky you can hardly tell what they are doing — even if you watch them."

"You should have stayed on the reservation," advised Cards.

"If I had stayed on the Seminole reservation we wouldn't have this space car pool and be saving oodles of travel expense, because I'm the one who got the idea in the first place," said Teepee.

"Here's the town we're looking for — Erlanger," interjected Howard as a hundred half-oval, white porcelain structures loomed up in the early morning dust.

A few minutes later they were

conferring with The Hell Of A Long One — or rather, Cards was. Ignoring his business as a porcelain art dealer, he drew a deck of cards from his pocket and proceeded to explain the principles of stud poker to the worm. The other art dealers were unable to get in a word. Novice Howard wandered into another room of the ovular structure and snooped where he did not belong. Teepee went hunting for alcohol. Jock dozed in a corner.

The two disasters happened together. Just as Cards Wartson got to owing far more than he could pay, the worms heard a crash in the next room. Rushing in, they discovered the broken clay records. Jock awoke at Teepee's urgent nudging.

"Come on, we gotta get outa here!"

"What's going on?"

"Cards owes them a pot of money and Nosey broke something. They are going to kill both of them! Let's get out of here before they grab *us!*"

"Why should they grab us? We haven't done anything."

"Wait until they find out I drank up all their moss squeezing!"

"Good God!" said Jock, running for the door. The two men did not stop running until they were safely locked in the space car.

"Well, let's get back to the space port," urged Teepee when they had got their breath.

"What for?" asked Jock, surprised.

"To get some weapons. Rescue Cards and Nosey."

"We don't need any weapons at all to whip those monsters."

"I'm not wrestling with any three-meter worms," Teepee said decisively.

"Me either. So here's what we're going to do. We'll crash into the side of the building, on the side the worms are on, and before the worms get over the surprise we'll grab up Cards and Nosey and be on our way."

"Don't you think maybe those porcelain walls are too thick?" objected Teepee. "Maybe we'll just tear up our ship."

"Not if we hit her hard enough! Let's just slide back the plastic top now, so we'll be ready for a fast grab when we crash in!"

"Let her rip!" said Teepee, drunkenly sliding back the greenhouse.

They embarked upon the crazy scheme, backing off a hundred meters and then ramming the building at the vehicle's top ground speed. However, the space sedan, instead of breaking into the white porcelain, ran up the slick side of the building. Just as it arrived at a large ventilator hole in the top of the oval structure, it flipped over, and the two men tumbled down into the waiting grasp of the monsters.

Teepee was the first to get to his feet. "There's just one little old thing I want to say," he declared, weaving a little, "and that is, I'm so glad to be here!"

"I am glad you enjoy our company," returned The Hell Of A Long One.

"It's not that," said Teepee. "It's just that I want to confess. If there's anything I can't stand, it's an undercover thief."

"Kindly continue."

"I drank up your moss squeezings," Teepee said humbly.

"Stole our nectar!"

"Drank every drop."

"You'll catch it now! More calcined bones!"

"I suppose so. That fermented spinach was the lousiest nectar I ever drank, too. Sure wasn't worth what I'm going to pay for it."

Nosey Howard felt the urge too. "I also want to confess. When I broke your clay plates I was really snooping into your sex lives. I thought there might be some dirty jokes on them."

"Dirty jokes?" the H. A. Long One asked, mystified.

"You know. Slightly abnormal sex practices."

"I can't imagine what you mean."

"Well, on Earth for instance, a male and female after consorting for two or three evenings without mating may —"

He whispered busily. "You mean they may not mate the instant they sight each other?" asked The Hell Of A Long One, as he and his fellow monsters burst into frenzied fits of laughter. "So that's what dirty jokes are! No wonder you go to such extreme lengths to get new ones. Tell us more dirty jokes."

"Well," said Nosey Howard, riding high, "there was this old maid — I mean this female — who never did —"

"Never did! Stop it, you are excruciating! I can't stand it!" gasped the worm, writhing his thousand legs together in merriment. "She never did!"

Do you have to keep scraping this can against the sides of the canal?" complained Wartson as the foursome made their way down the canal, weaving around the sand dunes in their battered space car. "You're going to break this whole case of porcelain figurines.

"That's the thanks I get for getting us out of that mess," Jock said complacently as he recklessly whizzed from one side to the other of the stone-walled throughway.

"Yes, you were a *big* help," answered Nosey Howard caustically. He tenderly cradled his armload of Martian clay tablets. "Instead of going to the spaceport for weapons, you dump your no-good selves right back in there again! *I* was the one

who got them back in good humor." He added with pride, "Wait until they get that Emily Post book I promised them; they'll tear themselves apart laughing!"

"How about that Everglades moonshine I promised them?" queried Teepee McGuzzle, waving a souvenir nectar pot. "It'll turn that yellow fuzz of theirs a mildew green!"

"They'll never see another poker hand like the one I wound up with though," said Cards Wartson cunningly. "Instead of watching me, they were watching you two tumbling down through the hole in the ceiling. First time I ever drew three cards to an inside straight flush!"

END