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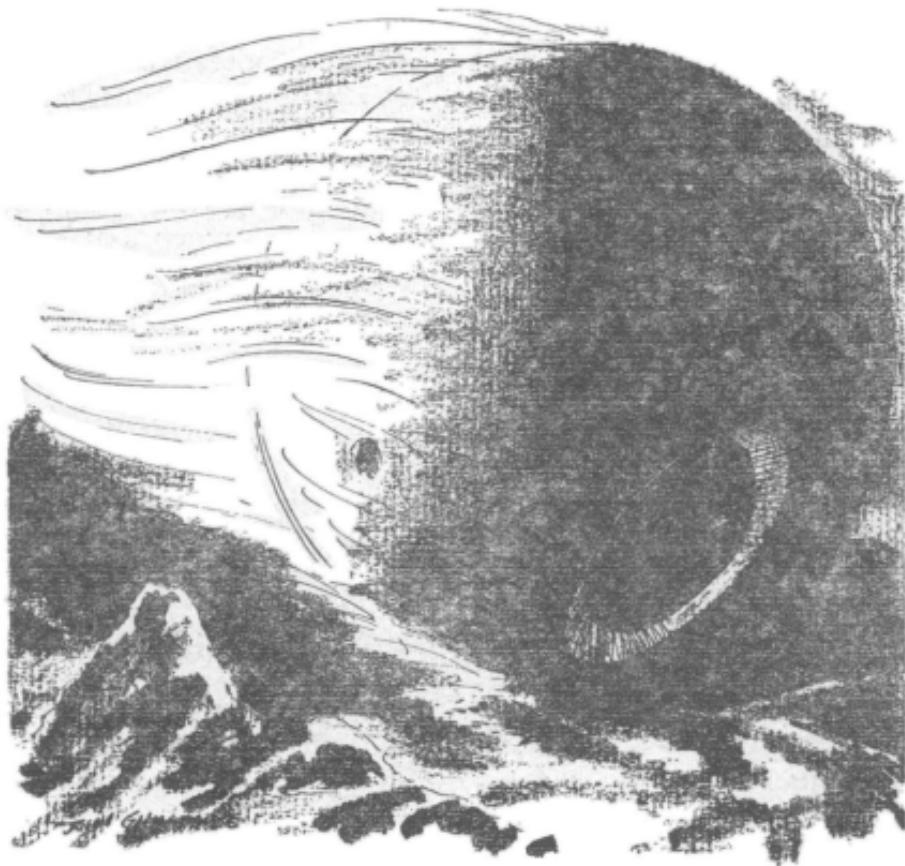
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THE EARTHMAN

Nobody on Tolliver's Planet liked a freak!



by Milton Lesser

WHEN AUGIE HALLER trudged inside the ship from the south acres, he went straight to where his father was sitting in what, two generations before, had been the control cabin.

"Pop," he said, "I plan to walk over to Space City and

get myself fashioned. I ain't fooling."

"You can't do that, Augie," Haller said, putting down the newspaper which came by pneumotube every second day from Space City. Haller was a big, lethargic, raw-boned man with a complete lack of nerv-

ous energy. He stood as if at parade rest with his hands behind his back, looking at his son. He could stand that way for hours without moving a muscle. Augie had seen him do it.

"Anyhow," Augie said stubbornly, "I aim to."

"Augie, listen to me. You're crew, not colonist."

"Pop, it's the way they look at me. The way I know they laugh behind my back. The girls over at Space City—they were looking and laughing like that all the time we went to Services at Space City last Sunday. I been thinking."

"Sure you're different," Haller said, still standing at parade rest. "It ain't like it will be permanent, though. We're crew. We're not staying on here at Tolliver's Planet."

But Augie shook his head. "That's just what grandpop used to say when I was little. Besides, almost all the crew people have gone and got themselves fashioned. And grandpop is dead now. He never got to leave Tolliver's Planet, did he?"

"Augie, I don't like you talking like that. He figured it was some kind of mistake, your grandpop. He always figured

the ship from Earth would come soon and take us back. Mark me, Augie. They will. But even if they don't, no Haller is going to get himself fashioned."

"We Hallers got the poorest farmland in the region," Augie said, licking his dry lips and tasting the saltiness of caked sweat on his face.

"What has that got to do with it?" Haller asked. "This ain't farmland. It's spaceship landing land. It's where the first colonist ship to Tolliver's came down. It's where we stay until they come to take us back to Earth."

"Pop, they ain't never coming. I just know it."

"Don't talk like that, Augie."

"Don't people back on Earth get themselves fashioned, too?" Augie wanted to know.

"'Course not. They got no reason to."

"Well, I have."

Without changing expression Haller said, "I'll take a strap to you if you carry on like that in front of your mom."

Augie could hear his mother bustling about in the galley half a hundred yards a rearships. Even this had become a sore spot with him. Even be-

fore he was born, most of the families had gone and built themselves cabins and houses, but the Hallers still lived in the ruins of the first of the colonizing spaceships, which Grandpop Haller, now dead, had brought down on Tolliver's Planet himself. It was all temporary, Grandpop Haller had always said. Why build a cabin if it's only temporary? Augie was eighteen years old. It had been temporary going on into the third generation.

"No more crazy talk about getting fashioned," Haller said.

Augie nodded. "All right. I won't talk about it."

THAT NIGHT, Augie waited until his folks were asleep, then crammed a field pack full of salted pork so mean it tasted like dry, flakey brine. He filled three canteens with water, knowing that the brackish water found in the lowlands between the ship and Space City couldn't be trusted. He figured if he kept on walking all night, he could reach Space City, nearly thirty miles away, by sunrise. "Twinrise, they called it on Tolliver's Planet, remembering that Earth had but one sun.

It was a hard, masculine

country, the gnarled rock-heaped cliffs and buttresses falling off steep and sudden to the swampy lowlands. On the other side of Space City, the south side, was the good farmland, the rich black earth, the soft-curving, lushly green feminine hills. It was there that most of the fashioned people lived and worked. Though, come to think of it, Augie could recall only two other families here on the north side of the city who were still unfashioned. The Jacksons and the Muldoons, holders on Pape Svenson's farm. Unfashioned trash, like the Hallers.

By midnight, Augie reached the edge of the escarpment which looked, in daylight, as if it had been hacked away by a giant's knife, leaving a sheer drop of five hundred feet and more to the lowlands. Augie's feet trod surely upon the one safe ledge snaking its way down the escarpment. The fashioned mountain people never had this trouble, of course. They could negotiate the steepest upcountry passes like the families of goats which had been brought, fifty some years ago, from Earth.

The fashioned swamp people swam with natural flippers.

You never heard of a fashioned swamper drowning, but only last year one of the unfashioned Muldoons had been lost in the bitter waters of the swamps. It had been on the way back from Sunday Services, and the Muldoons had not gone since. *It's unfair*, Augie thought. *They don't ever bring the Services up here to the hill country. If we want anything, we unfashioneds have got to go down to Space City and claim it.*

Insects humming and droning about his head, Augie cut out across the sponge-soft swamp path. The insects were hissing, shrilling, biting, invisible devils. Naturally, the fashioned swampers secreted in their sweat a hormone which the insects found distasteful. Well, Augie wouldn't return to the ship without being fashioned.

AUGIE REMAINED in an alley between the Fashioning Center and a grain elevator until it was time for the Center to open. While he was free to walk the streets of Space City like any other citizen of Tolliver's Planet, Augie preferred to remain hidden. He loved the city. He wanted to

see it. But he would strike someone down if the looks and secret little laughs followed him through the streets.

At last a bent old man, a fashioned city dweller with roller feet, came gliding down the street to the door of the Fashioning Center. Once this had been the very heart of Space City, Augie knew, but years ago the bulk of fashioning had been completed. Since a boy had to follow in his fashioned father's footsteps because somatoplasm and germplasm were fashioned in the same operation, the city had developed south away from the Fashioning Center, leaving it in a rundown area for upland grain storage.

Augie waited until the old man disappeared inside the building, then hurried out of the alley and walked up to the entrance. Two swampers came by, their flipper feet cased in metal walking boots. The younger one looked like he was going to make some snide remark about Augie, but just then a fashioned city dweller came rolling by swiftly. The swampers clomped awkwardly out of his way, cursing as he streaked by.

The older one said, "The

lousy roller would sink like a stone in the swamps."

"He ain't in the swamps, Pa."

Forgetting Augie, they walked down the street. Augie went swiftly to the entrance of the Fashioning Center. He was about to open the door when he saw the faded sign on the wooden planking.

STOP!

Are You Sure?

*Fashioning is Permanent
Decide Upon Your Proper
Orientation
Brochure on Request*

Yes, Augie was sure. There would be hell to pay with pop, but Augie would have to drift away from the Haller family anyway. A fashioned city dweller didn't hobnob with the few remaining unfashioned people. And Augie would be that: a premature sense of pride in his new station had engulfed him unexpectedly as he saw the roller flash by, leaving the two awkward swampers in his wake. Augie would be a fashioned city dweller. He pushed the door in and sought out the bent old man.

THE SMALL man looked up from his desk in surprise as Augie approached him. "Well now," he said. "You're unfashioned, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Then your name would be Jackson, Haller or Muldoon. Which is it, son?"

"It's Haller, sir," Augie said timidly.

"These days, I'm mostly a watchman. It's been better than three years—no, more like four years—since anyone wanted to get fashioned. Guess I still remember the routine, though. How old are you, son?"

"Eighteen," Augie said. The old man looked like he was in his sixties. He had probably been a boy somewhat younger than Augie on the spaceships.

"You've got parental consent in writing?"

"You mean from my father?"

"Yes. You'll need it, by law."

No one had told Augie about this. But then, most people were already fashioned and had been so from birth. They didn't mix socially with the few who weren't. "Please," Augie said desperately. "My father is Jake Haller. Maybe

you knew his father, Sam Haller, on the spaceships?"

"Captain Sam?" the old man's faded eyes gleamed momentarily. "You bet I knew him. Never met your father, though, young fellow. Captain Sam was a cantankerous guy, but what a sweet astrogator." The faded eyes grew misty as remembrance crowded the brain behind them.

Augie said, "My Pop is like that, too. Stubborn. He won't give permission, but I'm eighteen—"

"You've got to be twenty without parental consent. Why don't you run along home, son, and either get that permission in writing or wait two years. Maybe by then you'll change your mind, anyway."

"I can't go home," Augie said. "I don't want to go back there. I belong in the city. I want to be a roller like you."

"Roller, huh?"

"That's right."

"Son, I wish I could help you. But you know, sometimes an old roller like me gets to wish he had normal feet like normal people are supposed to have."

"You mean me? I'm normal? I'm a *freak*," Augie said hotly.

"Here on Tolliver's Planet,

maybe. Not home on Earth."

"This is home, right here."

The old man smiled. "Well, don't mind the older generation, son. I guess you're right."

"At least show me what it's like," Augie said. His eyes were suddenly wet and hot. He had to see the fashioning machinery. Maybe then he could wait two years, but not otherwise. He needed something concrete he could look forward to.

"I don't see any harm in that," the old man said. "Come along with me."

Augie nodded eagerly, following the old man across the floor toward a doorway. On the doorsill, dust was piled thickly. Augie knew it was a long time since someone had walked this way. His heart pounding up in his throat, Augie watched the old man open the door.

Just then, there was the sound of a high, piercing whistle outside. The old man cocked an ear as if the sound were as strange and as rare as Augie's presence here at the Fashioning Center.

"Hey, now!" the old man called, rolling toward the front door. "That's the general alarm. Haven't heard that since three drunk swampers

shot up Space City one night four-five years ago!"

AUGIE FOLLOWED the old man out into the street. An electric truck which ran on an underground cable rolled by. A microphone blared:

"Attention! Attention! The Uplands Observatory sighted a spaceship coming in towards Tolliver's Planet." The voice, oddly metallic, became tremulous. "A ship from Earth will be landing here soon, folks. A ship with real honest to goodness Earth people on it."

Upland-swamper-roller enmity was forgotten in the excitement of the moment. Augie saw swampers clomp out of the way as rollers rushed by, the swampers not resentful, the rollers not haughty; uplanders on ungainly three-jointed stilt-like legs talked to swampers, to rollers.

"She's coming in over the city now!" the metallic voice cried.

A rushing sound could be heard, a far roaring of thunder. In the reddish sky, twenty degrees from where the small white sun of Tolliver's Planet followed the swollen red sun across the heavens, a black

speck appeared. It circled and grew like a fly homing in on a vat of molasses.

"Someone better let them know they can't land in the swamps near the city," Augie told the old man. "Maybe it looks solid from up there."

"They know what they're doing," the old man said, his eyes misty again. "They're Earthmen."

But Augie went on: "The only place they can land safely is in the uplands where my folks and the Muldoons and the Jacksons live. Unless they want to land halfway around the planet somewhere."

"You'd say that," the old man said bitterly. "You're unfashioned. For you it doesn't matter where they land. You can go just anyplace. We rollers couldn't go off into the uplands if we wanted to. We couldn't cross the swamps, either. You think we don't want to see the people from Earth? We're human too, aren't we?"

The old man's outburst disturbed Augie strangely. It was totally unexpected. He always thought the rollers lorded it all over the swampers, uplanders and few remaining unfashioned people. He thought the uplanders and swampers, in their

turn, lorded it over the unfashioned. On the bottom of the social scale, the unfashioned could do nothing but sulk, like most of the Muldoons, or remain in stolid stoicism, like his father, Jake Haller, on the mean farms, or squat in dumb, animal-like stupor on their small holdings on the good Svenson land, like the Jacksons.

The roaring black dot overhead had now assumed spherical shape and was flecked with hints of brilliant silver. The sound it made increased in volume and rose in pitch until it threatened to burst Augie's eardrums. From the bottom of the silver-black sphere appeared a tentative jet of flame, licking out like a probing, questioning finger. Soon it became long and steady, like a great column of red-hot metal. Down its length, as if enveloping what it had spawned, came the spaceship.

"They're going to miss the city!" Augie cried.

"They couldn't land in the city," the old man told him.

"They're heading for the swamps. That spaceship will sink in the swamps."

"Just calm down, young fellow. You're not thinking

straight because you wanted them to land in the uplands."

The spaceship, dropping slowly now, disappeared a mile or so beyond a row of grain elevators on the edge of the city. Seconds later, there was a great splashing sound, then complete silence.

The metallic voice said: "The spaceship has landed."

It was unnecessary. Rollers, uplanders and swampers were moving toward the edge of the city in a great surge of fashioned humanity. Augie forgot his feelings of inferiority and ran with them.

Five hundred yards in from the edge of the swamps, on a small island of solid earth, the spaceship was burning.

A WAILING arose from the ranks of fashioned people on the edge of the swamps. "Get the swampers in after them," someone shouted. "They're in trouble."

Tongues of bright red flame were licking up around the spherical spaceship. Several swampers began unfastening their cumbersome metal boots. The boots would have to be laced and carried around their necks, though, for they

couldn't manage their flippers on the small island without them. It would be slow going, and unless someone reached the spaceship soon and found out why the Earthmen didn't leave it, the ship might become their funeral pyre. Augie knew instinctively that the hungrily licking flames had nothing to do with the pillar of fire on which the ship had descended. It was something else, it was wrong, and it meant trouble.

Augie floundered into the muddy swamp while the swampers were still unfastening their boots. Seeking out and finding the water channel which flowed sluggishly from north to south and quite close to the island on which the burning spaceship rested, Augie began to swim, exhaling the brackish water from his nose and mouth in sneezes and coughs.

It was a long, tiring five hundred yards to the small island. Yesterday, or even an hour ago, Augie would not have struck out on his own so boldly across swamper country. It was not that the swampers would stop him; instead, they would make fun of his awkward efforts to swim. Now, though, they had to unfasten

their boots on the edge of the city and carry them along as they struck out for the island.

As Augie waded up on dry land, he saw the swampers treading water behind him, their boots draped across their necks, their broad flippers churning the muddy waters and keeping them afloat.

"Hurry," one of them said to Augie. "If you don't get them out of there soon, there won't be anything left to get out. We're right behind you, boy. But *hurry!*"

AUGIE RAN across the island toward the spaceship. This close, he expected it to be much larger. One side of the sphere, which was some fifty feet in diameter, was already enveloped in flames. Augie could feel the intense heat as he came closer. He realized that even at this distance, too much exposure to it would blister his skin. And he still had to get closer, assuming he could do anything to help the men who were evidently trapped inside.

The ship had not landed on its bottom. Augie could see half of the cylindrical rocket tubes exposed, covered with mud as if the ship had come down

properly and then fallen over on its side. Also covered with mud, half a dozen feet from the tube ends, was the airlock. The flames, which seemed to come from the very surface of the ship's hull, had begun to eat around to this side.

Augie recoiled from the terrible heat. His hands felt hot and clammy as if the fire was summoning the moisture from his body. If the people inside the ship hadn't come out, they were probably dead now anyway. Why should Augie risk his life in a futile attempt to save them?

Because they're my kind, Augie thought. Because they're plain, unfashioned Earthmen.

Because maybe—just maybe—they can take me back to Earth with them. The idea came to him now, unbidden. Although it surfaced to his awareness for the first time, he realized that it had been in the back of his mind ever since the announcement of the spaceship's coming.

The metal of the spaceship hull was so hot it shriveled Augie's skin on contact. He half-expected the airlock door to be stuck, but when he forced the huge bolt back, he heard the inner bolt slide with it.

The door opened toward him, shedding hot, gummy, rubberoid insulation.

The corridor inside the ship was like a furnace. There was air inside, but Augie couldn't breathe in the fierce heat. He saw no smoke; apparently the fire was burning somehow on the outside of the ship only.

Augie staggered down the corridor toward the front of the ship, his feet painfully hot through the thin shoes he wore. He found the Earth people in the control cabin of the spaceship. There were three of them: a man, a woman and a girl of about fifteen. They were strapped to crash-hammocks and all three were unconscious.

Augie unstrapped the girl first, draped her limply across his shoulder and carried her unconscious form to the very edge of the island, as far from the burning ship as possible. One of the swampers, wearing partially fastened boots over his flippers, stumbled across the dry land to her. Augie ran back to the spaceship for the others. Unconscious, he had thought. He assumed they were unconscious. They could have been dead for all he knew.

The woman was somewhat heavier than the girl, but Augie

could manage her. His arms and legs trembled with the heat and the loss of salt and moisture from his body. When he went back a third time, he found he was too weak to carry the man. Instead, Augie dragged him from the burning ship. When he reached the airlock with his burden, swampers were standing there to help him. He remembered letting them take the man. He remembered—but vaguely—lurching outside the oven of the ship. Then he remembered nothing until much later.

“THE FIRE was in the temperature unit of the ship,” Dr. Jack Peters explained to Augie the next day. Dr. Peters spoke strangely, the words more hurried but paradoxically less slurred than those with which Augie was familiar. “Refrigeration and heating, you know. A safety device will let the fire burn only one way, outside. Ordinarily, in space, that means no fire.”

“Are you going back to Earth soon?” Augie asked. His hands were swathed in bandages and a soothing ointment had been applied to his feet at the Space City hospital. He was feeling fine.

Dr. Peters laughed. “Not in that ship. Not for a long time, if at all.”

Just then Mrs. Peters and her daughter Nancy came into the room. “We heard what you did, young man,” Mrs. Peters said. “We want to thank you.”

Nancy smiled. “You’d think he were the Earthman, not us. They’re all calling for him outside. They know he saved us. He’s a regular hero.”

“You mean the rollers?” Augie asked in surprise. “The rollers are saying that?”

“The city people, yes. Father will have years of work ahead of him here on Tolliver’s Planet.”

“It hardly matters if the ship can’t be salvaged,” Mrs. Peters said.

“Just what kind of doctor are you, Dr. Peters?” Augie wanted to know.

“I’m a social anthropologist, Augie.”

“A what?”

“I study how people live together in different groupings. That’s why Earth sent me out here to Tolliver’s Planet. This experiment is unique, you know. I mean, the adapted, fashioned people.”

“They don’t like us unfashioned,” Augie said. “They look

down at us and make fun of us."

Dr. Peters nodded. "You're different. You're peculiar. But deep down inside, Augie, they're envious. It's harmless enough if you don't let it get you down."

"Envious? Of the Hallers? The Muldoons? The Jacksons?"

"Envious, yes. You don't conform in adapted variations. What few of you people are left are real Earthmen. Who besides an unfashioned can live in your uplands, your swamps and your cities, wherever he chooses?"

"But the swampers can swim better than I can and the city folks, the rollers, can glide around their sidewalks all day without getting tired. And the uplanders—"

"They're all over-specialized. The experiment was tried here on Tolliver's Planet. No place else. Eventually, when another Earth ship picks me up, I'm going to recommend that the damage be undone in future generations. Of course, I may be jumping to conclusions, but there's plenty of time to verify or refute my judgment."

"He was the only one able to rescue us," Mrs. Peters said.

"That's good enough for me."

At that moment, the door to the hospital room opened. Mayor Tompkins of Space City rolled into the room with two or three other men. The Mayor smiled at the Earth people and said polite things. Obviously, he was nervous and ill at ease.

"They'll all want to hear about Earth," he said finally. "All of our people."

"My wife should help in that," Dr. Peters said.

"You there, Haller," the Mayor said, turning to Augie. "On behalf of all Tolliver's Planet, I want to thank you for what you did yesterday. I guess you Hallers are a differen' breed from the Jacksons and Muldoons."

"No, sir," Augie answered. "We're the same. We're all Earthmen."

Mayor Tompkins frowned. "You are. You sure are. But what about the rest of us? Aren't we Earthmen, too?" There was a difference, Augie sensed. He was *being asked* for approval, not asking for it himself. He swelled his chest and said, "We're all Earthmen here."

Nancy said, "Someday maybe you can go back to Earth

with us, Augie. If you want."

But Mayor Tompkins shook his head. "He's an Earthman, but he's a Tolliver's man too. Aren't you, boy?"

"I guess so."

"Just why are your people living on that bad north land, anyway?"

"We thought we'd be intruders any place else."

The door opened, admitting another group of people. They were mostly rollers, but a few swampers came in too, and a pair of stilt-legged uplanders. They all shook Augie's hand as if they had met him—or one of his kind—for the first time.

"It would seem to me that if Mrs. Peters teaches us some of the Earth ways we've forgotten," the Mayor said, "it's Haller here and his people who can best get us started in the old

ways again. Isn't that so, Haller?"

Augie nodded. His eyes were smarting. Suddenly, he saw the bent old man from the Fashioning Center in one corner of the room. The old man looked at him questioningly. The look said: I know it isn't legal, but if you still want to be fashioned, I think in this one case we can forget about your age.

But Augie was thinking of his father, another one of the unfashioned Earthmen on Tolliver's Planet, and of how his father's face would change with the feel of good south soil between his work-hardened fingers.

Augie looked steadily at the bent old man and shook his head.

THE END