

★ PLANET ★

★ STORIES ★

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A SMASHING PLANET NOVEL

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The Man From Siykul

By RICHARD WILSON

The Siykulans demanded pay for Myra and Steve's freedom. The price was small—merely the losing of their sanity in the spider's ray-trap.

Illustrated by Graef



"Look," whispered Myra, "he's all over fuzz, like a peach!"

MYRA HORN awoke from her nap on the couch in the control room and looked at her husband. He was hunched over the Simplimatic 50-But-

ton control board of their sleek Skypiercer space-launch, peering through the vision shield with a grim intensity.

Myra turned her involuntary smile into

a wifely frown at his muscular back.

"Steve!" she said sharply. "Will you stop chasing that meteor? Aren't you ever going to grow up?"

Steve Horn glanced at her over his shoulder.

"Hush, dear," he grinned. "Papa's in the money."

Myra sat up and smoothed her satin-leather jumper. She looked again at the meteor they were pursuing. "What a funny color!" she exclaimed.

"The Primary Color," said Steve. "It's a flying goldmine. I think we're gaining on it."

"What are you going to do when you catch up with it?"

"Lasso it," replied her husband. "In half an hour," he paused impressively, "—we'll be Horns of plenty."

Myra made a face at his back. "Bless your heart, darling," she said. "If there were another man closer than Jupiter I'd divorce you."

"I'm captain here," said Steve Horn, "with power of life, death and divorce. You'll do no such thing. Grab the key-board while I trip up our quarry."

Myra slipped into his seat while Steve jumped to a boxlike affair that jutted from the floor on a pedestal. It was one of the "accessories optional at slight additional cost" which Myra had insisted they could do without—a Netaction wireless-grapple capable of exerting a magnetic pull on objects up to half a mile distant.

Myra fell into the spirit of the chase. She accelerated their little craft until they were within snaring distance of the meteor.

"Take it easy," advised Steve. "Don't get too close. You might dent it."

He flicked over a switch on the wireless grapple.

"Got it!" he cried triumphantly a moment later.

"How do you know?" demanded Myra. "You can't see any more than I can—and I don't notice any difference."

"Try decelerating," Steve suggested.

Myra cut the motor. There was a silence they hadn't experienced since the start of their trip to Jupiter, more than two weeks before. It was broken almost immediately by a series of less-deep, sonorous staccato bursts from the Retard-rockets in the nose of the ship.

"You're right, Steve. There is a definite forward drag not caused by momentum."

"'Course, I'm right."

"But, Steve," said Myra abruptly, "that can't be gold. Since when has gold been attracted by a magnet?"

He opened his mouth to argue, then closed it again and looked disgusted.

"Oh, well," Myra said after a moment, "don't let go. Maybe we can sell it to a Jovian museum as a rare curio. Probably worth millions!"

"Probably iron pyrite. Probably worth less than twenty bucks. Pfah!" Steve snorted impatiently. "We'll throw it back. We haven't got time to lug museum pieces around the solar system, however scholarly we may be."

"Okay!" Myra pouted prettily.

STEVE flicked the grapppler indicator to "off." Nothing happened. The retarding rockets continued to blast vainly away. The gold colored meteor sped before them; their ship followed it inexorably.

"What's the matter?" asked Myra. "Change your mind?"

Steve stared at the fleeting meteor in amazement.

"I let go," he said. He indicated the silent grapple. "Look. It's dead."

"Don't tell me," purred Myra sarcastically, "that you're going to let a little hunk of rock kidnap us."

"Hell of a thing," muttered Steve. "Maybe I used too much power. Maybe the thing's charged with magnetism."

"And exerting an attraction strong enough to affect us—half a mile away?" Suddenly the ship lurched sideways. Myra drew herself erect, rubbing a painful nose. "Now I ask you—is that any way for a full grown meteor to act?"

Steve picked himself off the floor, where the sudden swerve of the ship had thrown him. He joined his wife at the shield. The meteor was twisting and turning like a thing demented. The Skypiercer, in its magnetic grasp, followed the crazy course helplessly.

Steve looked very wise. "Something's wrong. I have a hunch it isn't a meteor."

"Hear! Hear!" applauded Myra. "First it isn't a goldmine. Now it isn't a meteor."

What won't it be next, my profound husband?"

Steve ignored her. He cut off the Retarderockets. "Save fuel, anyway," he said.

There was another cessation of sound.

The Horns looked at each other in astonishment. They were slowing down! The meteor drifted slowly through space—then stopped.

"Everything," said Myra softly, "is all wacked up. Where is the physics of yesterday?"

Steve was staring open mouthed at the gold colored piece of rock. "Little demons!" he breathed. "It's turning around. It wants to say hello. Isn't that nice! Pad a cell for me, old fruitcake, I feel a spasm coming on."

The "meteor" described a wide arc that brought it to the side of the Horns' ship, now halted in space. It circled them a few times; then stopped and bobbed up and down in a friendly manner.

"It wants to play," said Steve wearily. "Go shake hands with it."

"If it's a ship," said Myra practically, "it's done a very good job of disguising itself. There aren't any rocket tubes, or ports, or landing gear, as far as I can see."

Their golden companion began to whirl rapidly, like a miniature planet. Above it, English characters appeared against the black curtain of space in lines of fire. They were badly made, and misspelled, but readable.

"GUD MORNIG," they said. "HELO CQ UGH"

"Ugh," said Steve. He put his hands over his eyes and sat down. He moaned. "This," he said, "is too much."

WHEN, in 2021, the government created a Department of Education, it consolidated hundreds of colleges and universities throughout the country and introduced robot lecturers. Hundreds of instructors were left without jobs. One of them was Stephen Horn, Professor of American Literature.

He faced no immediate worry, however. His salary had permitted him to save enough to provide for him and his wife for a few years. Myra Horn, more popularly known as Myra Classon, was a nove-

list whose books had received considerable attention—especially in Steve's American Lit classes, where he shamelessly proclaimed her to be one of the greatest living authors.

After a period of futile searching for another professorial position in America or abroad, Steve came bouncing home one day waving a pink Space-Cable form. It had been addressed to him care of his old University, and read:

"IMPERATIVE NEED FOR LIT PROF HERE SALARY PHENOMENAL STOP WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR LOVE TO MYRA

(Signed) ART WILDER

UNIVERSITY OF JUPITER"

Art, Myra and Steve were old friends, and had attended the same college. But when Steve and Myra married, Art disappeared. They heard nothing of him for three years, until one day there arrived in the trans-spatial mail a copy of Art's home-town paper, marked at an article lauding Wurtsboro's native son for his successful founding of a university at the booming Earth colony of New City, Jupiter.

The upshot of his message was that, after several more cables, Steve went out and bought a space-launch, fully equipped for travel to high and far off places like the Sun's fifth planet.

The Horns hadn't expected an uneventful trip, having once taken a weekend excursion to the Moon. Myra had a vivid recollection of the things that had happened to them at that time: events including coping with a pyromaniac, an undecided suicide who leaped overboard in a space-suit, and a crackpot mutineer who had tried to enlist their aid in overcoming the captain and setting up an anarchist Utopia on Mars with the thirty-two passengers aboard.

But she had never expected to encounter a talking meteor.

"SHALL we ignore it?" she asked her husband. "Or shall we be civil and chat a while?"

"I wash my hands of the matter," said Steve. "If you want to strike up an acquaintance with every impossibility that comes along, it's up to you."

The meteor was getting impatient. It began to bob up and down again, like a balloon caught in an air current. More letters appeared above it in space.

"HELLO?" it said. "EXTRA EGLISH WHAT?"

"Okay, okay," soothed Myra. "Just a minute."

She tore a page out of a notebook and printed something on it. She held it up to a porthole.

The meteor bounded closer, so that it was almost touching their ship. Now they could see tiny mounds on its surface, about the size of walnuts.

"Good grief!" said Steve. "It's got eyes. Like . . ."

"Like a potato," finished Myra.

The meteor bounced off again and stood stationary for a moment.

"What'd you say?" Steve asked.

"I said, 'I'm a married woman. But stick around.'"

"Fine," said Steve. "Nothing like a little comedy to buck one up in moments fraught with suspense. What's it doing now?"

The meteor was whirling again in a state of industrious agitation. Suddenly it stopped. A white, sticky substance began to pour out of it. As it grew it congealed into something resembling frosted glass, which formed a gigantic bubble, big enough to enclose several ships the size of the Horns.

There was a large opening at one point. The transparent bubble drifted toward them. Before they could move they had entered it through the opening. The meteor-ship followed them, then spurted some more of the gelatine substance, sealing the opening.

A nozzle poked its way through the hull of the golden ship. Through the hull of their ship they could hear a hissing noise. Presently it stopped. The nozzle was withdrawn.

Their neighbor hopped over to them again. One of its "eyes" expanded until it was the size of a basketball, and transparent. More letters of fire, much smaller now, appeared within.

"AIR," they said. "EARTH AIR SAFE OPEN DOOR."

A section of the golden ship dropped. On it stood a creature less than two feet

tall, colored a deep bronze. Vaguely terrestrial in shape, it stood on one thick limb which became its body without widening at what might be called its hips. It terminated below in a ball-shaped foot and above in a shapeless bumpy head, featureless, except that each of the bumps seemed to be an eye. Three arms, of various sizes, each with different joints, extended from its body—one just below the head, in front, one halfway down on its left side and one at what should have been the top of its right thigh.

It was a thoroughly unnerving spectacle.

"My two-headed aunt!" cried Steve. "The side show's in town."

"No remarks," said Myra. "You should see yourself in the morning. But what are we going to do about it?"

"Ask it to tea." He twisted a little wheel on the control board. "I'll have the data in a minute. Maybe the little fella isn't lying. Maybe there is air in the bubble."

"Temperature 72°, humidity 84 percent," announced Steve. "Tomorrow fair, with slowly rising food prices."

"Laugh and you laugh alone," said Myra. "I don't understand it, but do we let him in?"

"Sure. Maybe he can play rummy."

Steve stepped on the treadle that started the motor in the airlock. The lock rumbled slowly outward.

"Steve—" Myra's voice was a little uncertain. "Maybe the instruments aren't working?"

Steve sighed. "I like the way you think of these things just *after* the nick of time. If that were so, we'd be frozen corpses by now. The door's open. It's a little muggy, but that's all."

Now they could see the bronze midget more clearly. He looked no more inviting at close range, being wider and heavier than they had imagined, but what he lacked in looks he made up for in affability. He waved all three arms at them once, like a happy windmill.

Steve waved back. "Nice day," he said.

THE creature left off waving at them and signalled his ship. It drifted closer soundlessly, until the two ships were touching.

"Look," whispered Myra. "He's all over fuzz. Like a peach."

Steve craned his neck to look down at their visitor, who had stepped onto the platform of their ship and seemed to be inspecting their knees with great interest.

Steve squatted down until he was almost on a level with their guest. He held out his hand. The fuzzy one let it overflow in one of his curious three-fingered hands and looked at it critically.

He couldn't tell whether he was being looked at and listened to, or not. The creature's eyes were scattered all over its gold-hair-covered head. Their pupils were hairlike, resembling those of a horse.

A low-pitched hum, rising and falling, ceasing occasionally, came from the three-armed one. It emanated from no particular spot, but surrounded him like an aura.

"No savvy," said Steve. "C'mon. I want to see how you walk."

HE got up and stepped backward. The creature followed, in an effortless, gliding motion. He appeared to have a ball set into a socket of his foot, which, combined with a delicate sense of balance, gave him a wonderful mobility.

Abruptly he turned, gave a little hop to his own craft and disappeared.

"What do you make of that?" Myra asked.

"He just remembered a previous engagement," soothed Steve. "What's the matter, darling—jealous?"

In a moment the creature reappeared, carrying a plain black box, about six inches square.

"I told you he played rummy," said Steve. "Look—he brought chips."

He set the box on the floor and threw back a lid. Inside the lid were three fine wires that ended in buttons. He handed one each to Myra and Steve and took one himself.

"Now," said a metallic voice, "we'll be able to understand each other."

The Horns looked at each other, then at the animate piece of bronze fuzz. At the same time the voice had spoken, there had been the hum they assumed to be his method of communication. Steve's eyebrows shot up in inquiry.

"Does that thing act as a translator?"

As he spoke, a hum came from the box.

"Exactly," said the box, while the bronze one hummed.

"Amazing," murmured Myra. "This should take the place of the self-lighting cigarette. Speaking of which, how about one? We'll be burning up Peach's air, not ours."

"I think we both need one," said Steve. He handed her one, popped one in his own mouth. After looking in vain for a mouth on Peachy, he put the pack back in his pocket. They puffed, and smoke curled from the glow that was suddenly at the end.

Peachy looked at them curiously.

"First," he said, "my name isn't Peachy. It's WalmearFgon. Secondly, what are those?"

"Wal. . . ." Steve made a face. "We'll let it go at Peachy. Secondly, these are cigarettes. Also known as smokes, fags, the White Menace and coffin-nails. They stain your fingers, befoul the atmosphere, use up oxygen, give you bad breath and shorten your life-span."

"Then why do you use them?"

Steve shrugged. "I save coupons."

Peachy looked blank. But then Peachy had no way of looking otherwise, so Myra said:

"Where do you come from?"

"Siykul." He waved his two free arms vaguely. "Over there."

"He means he's a Martian," explained Steve. "Aren't you, Peachy?"

"No," he said.

"Venerian?"

"No."

"Mercurian, Jovian, Saturnine, Plutonic?"

"No."

"Oh." Steve looked incredulous. "Solar System?"

"Not this one." He pointed, more specifically this time. "That is my home. In your words it is called Bungula, in Centauri. I lived on the second planet, Siykul."

"Pleased to meet you," said Myra. "Now that the formalities are over with, let's get to the point. To what do we owe the pleasure, as we say, of your visit?"

"I have been on a quest," said Peachy.

"I have traveled through several solar systems looking for two subjects for experimentation. All that I visited, however, I found far too intelligent for my purposes. Now, at last, I am successful."

"Wh-at?" said Steve.

"Imagine," said Myra softly. "This little one-legged, three-armed, potato-headed, noseless squirt of fuzz came um-teen trillion miles just to insult us. Imagine!"

PEACHY'S home, the second of five planets that circled the sun, Bungula, in the constellation of Centauri, was a world about the size of Mars, but more nearly resembling Earth in every other respect. Seven-eighths of its surface was covered with water. The atmosphere they breathed was essentially Earth air. There were two continents on Siykul, on opposite sides of the globe, as well as minor islands scattered here and there in the seas. The poles were covered with ice the year round.

There were two dominant races on Siykul, one on each continent. According to Peachy, each was covetous of the other's land. His race was young, brilliant, industrious and ingenious. Their technicians, inventors and mechanics were unequaled anywhere in the cosmos, so far as he knew.

Theirs were great cities, factories, ships of the sea, land and air. Buildings stretched scores of tiers into the sky and down into the ground as far again. Rich in minerals and raw materials, their race was one with a brief past, but a promising future.

The other continent, however, was shockingly primitive. Vast forests and jungles stretched from one sea to the other. Aircraft passing overhead could make out only scattered and far apart settlements that might, possibly, house life. There were hundred-mile stretches in which no trace of a living thing could be found. The inhabitants, glimpsed occasionally, were immense, red, spidery things, evidently very savage.

Steve and Myra interrupted Peachy's story long enough to make themselves comfortable on chairs and choose fresh cigarettes.

"About how tremendous are these crea-

tures, compared, say—to me?" asked Steve.

"They're about your size."

"Enormous," admitted Steve to the compact two-footer. "Go on."

Peachy didn't seem to be made for any position other than an upright one. He shifted his communication wire to another hand and continued:

"A few years ago my people began to realize that our continent would not be big enough to hold us very much longer. We are already utilizing every available inch of space in our country and we must have more room, otherwise many of our people will starve.

"Spurred on thus, we quickly built a small fleet of extraplanetary ships to seek habitation on other worlds. The fleet became useless when it left our atmosphere, and the eight ships crashed. But we had profited by our mistakes, and the next fleet successfully navigated the upper air."

Steve looked incredulous. "Do you mean to say those were the first space ships you ever made?"

"Yes," said the Siykulan simply. "We had never needed them before."

Steve whistled.

"Look," said Myra. "What was the idea of dashing all over the Solar System for this elbow room, when you have all you needed on the other continent?"

"We had no way of getting there," said Peachy.

"Nonsense," said Steve, "you just finished telling us about your airships, and boats and marvelous inventions—"

"You don't understand," said their tiny guest patiently. "There was no *physical* hardship involved. We had no trouble flying over the continent, or approaching it from the ocean. But the moment we tried to land, from the sea or air, disaster overtook us."

"What sort of disaster?" asked Myra.

"Insanity."

EVERY so often, it seemed, the Siykulans sent an expedition to their neighboring continent. And once in a while—not so often—a member or two of the expedition would return, to babble crazily of monsters and blackness and throbbings in their heads.

They had lost some of their best minds

that way before they gave up. Except for one further experiment. They outfitted a remote control ship with an assortment of animals and sent this to the neighboring continent, accompanied by a ship manned by a higher-order Siykulan who directed the animal craft without himself going close enough to the other continent to be affected.

The animal ship was landed while the controlling vessel hovered high above to note reactions. After a time, the first ship took off and the two sped back to Siykul.

Tests previously conducted had proven that animals could be made insane by inaudible notes of music and by scientifically-induced frustration. But these animals had not been affected by their exposure to whatever it was that had driven their more intelligent neighbors into idiocy.

It was therefore assumed that the malignant aura which hung over the green continent could affect only the brainy, possibly because the aura was electrical in nature and in some way short-circuited the brain through thought, which is another form of electricity.

Hence the pilgrimage of the little Siykulan. Provided with what might best be described as a brainmeter, or intelligence-tester, he had roamed the spaceways in his golden ship searching for a race with a modicum of intelligence, but not too much.

Steve put out his cigarette.

"It's been a very interesting story, Peachy," he said, "if not very complimentary, but I'm sorry we can't oblige you. We have a date on Jupiter."

"Yes," said Myra. "We're sorry to have to chase you out like this, but we must be getting on. Drop in to see us again any time you're in the neighborhood."

Although there was no change in the demeanor of the Siykulan, or in the inflection of the voice that came from him through the black box, he seemed to them suddenly stern and, ridiculous though it seemed in one his size, awesome.

"You must do what I say. You don't seem to understand that upon you rests the fate of five hundred million people. . . ."

". . . like you," said Myra scornfully.

"Like me," said Peachy proudly. "They

are depending on me, and I shall not fail them. You need have no fear of not being compensated—"

"It's not compensation," said Steve. "I don't know what your life span is, but ours is roughly a hundred years, and we aren't anxious to waste any of it on a trip to Centauri."

"So!" said Peachy triumphantly, "since that is your only objection, you will—"

"It's *not* our only objection," said Myra, but Peachy went on inexorably.

"—you will be glad to know that we are already in the atmosphere of my planet."

"Don't be silly," said Steve. Then, uncertainly, "We couldn't be."

"You shall see," said Peachy. He dropped his wire and glided to his own ship. He returned in a moment and with a grandiloquent motion of his hand, indicated the opaque, glasslike bubble.

As they watched, it wavered and grew transparent, then disappeared.

The Horn's space-launch and the meteor ship of the Siykulan were drifting a scant ten miles above an alien planet from which immense buildings, for as far as they could see, reached up to them like greedy fingers.

STEVE HORN flicked cigaret ashes onto the floor of what seemed to be the room of a Siykulan hotel.

"I don't like it one little bit," he said. "It isn't the delay so much as the affront to our intelligence."

"Yes, darling," soothed Myra. "We should have shown them our diplomas and degrees. Or challenged them to a spelling bee!"

"You're not funny," said her husband. "Do you realize that we've been in this hole for a week? Do you realize that Art Wilder and everyone on Jupiter and Earth will think we're dead?" He paused. "Not that we won't be."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean if they stick us in one of those ships of theirs to go explore that mad-aura continent and find out what's behind all the mystery, we'd be better off dead than crazy."

Myra laughed. "What an ego you must have, my husband. It won't permit you to think that it's possible these peach-

people have bigger and better brainwaves than we."

A bell sounded and a blue light went on and off above the door.

"Open it yourself," shouted Steve irritably. "I don't know how."

The door opened. Peachy entered.

Accompanying him was a strictly utilitarian piece of robot machinery. Headless, it consisted of a long steel body terminating in a balled foot at one end and two triple-jointed arms at the other. At the end of each arm was a murderous looking spiked ball, both of which swung idly and menacingly at the thing's sides.

Peachy beckoned to them. When they hesitated, the robot clanged its spiked fists together with an unpleasant ringing sound, then raised them menacingly in the air.

Steve and Myra blanched, and meekly followed Peachy through the door. They walked outside, followed Peachy to a spaceship and entered.

Myra looked at Steve a trifle uncertainly.

"Resistance would have been futile, I suppose?"

Steve tried to make himself comfortable on a tiny seat of the cabin.

"I think so, considering that our only hope of ever getting back to our own System lies in playing ball with these fuzzy Fascists. There may not be much chance of our succeeding in this screw-ball expedition, but the important thing is that there is *some*. Putting up a fight might have been gratifying to the ego, but I doubt that it would have convinced these gangsters that they ought to send us back home."

"I suppose you're right, Steve. But just what exactly do you think our chances are, this way?"

"Looking at it from the scientific angle, we're pretty well off. Here we are scooting along at Lord knows what speed, in what may well be the most up to date ship in the universe, with nothing to do but push Button X when we get to Point Q on—what the hell'd I do with that chart?"

"It's all right," said Myra. "I've got it."

"—And we land without fuss or bother. Providing . . ." A worried look crept into Steve's face.

"Providing we don't go nuts," supplemented Myra.

"We do have to put an awful lot of faith in Peachy's theory that we're subnormal enough, mentally, to escape the spider-people's batty beam. Then all they ask is that we put the beam out of business, or show them how they can."

"Steve!" Myra's eyes reflected inspiration. "Why don't we escape? I mean really escape. Get out of this whole business!"

"You mean off the planet?"

Myra nodded.

"Peachy paid a touching tribute to our allegedly minus intelligence by warning me against any such ideas—for our own good. Our fuel would last, and our food might, and even we might, since it'd take years without Peachy's space-annihilator. The only thing that stands in our way is the fact that this ship isn't space-proof. It leaks air. Compared to our Skypiercer," Steve clutched at a simile, "it is as a hot-foot compared to a holocaust."

"Well," Myra shrugged philosophically, "no one can say Lady Horn ever leaves a stone unturned."

"If you've stopped blowing your own, Horn," said Steve recklessly, "come look at the view. It makes me homesick."

IV

THE tiny ship sped along, a thousand feet above the great ocean that separated Siykul from its neighboring continent. Only a slight mental effort was needed to imagine themselves back on Earth. Long swells swept across the deep, green surface. No sea-craft were in sight, but occasionally a huge fish would break through the surface and quiver in the air as sunlight glinted on the drops of water it shook from its back.

Miles ahead, land appeared, like low-lying clouds on the horizon. Ten minutes of flying brought them over the shore—a wide beach that stretched back half a mile and ended abruptly in a forest.

The forest seemed endless.

"We must have gone a hundred miles inland," said Myra. "When are we supposed to push that fateful button?"

"Point Q is described as a large prairie. We should reach it any minute now."

"What's that up ahead?"

"That appears to be it," said Steve.

He pushed the button with crossed fingers. The ship immediately went into a long glide. The ground came up rapidly. Just when they thought they would surely crash, the nose came up automatically and the ship skidded to a bumpy halt.

Steve shut off the motor. "Last stop," he said.

Myra looked at him closely.

"Steve," she said. "How do you feel?"

"Fine," he replied. "Why? Scared?"

"No. I mean—aren't we supposed to be . . . well, affected, somehow?"

"Oh." Steve looked at her and scratched his head in thought. "Well-I, I do feel a trifle crazy."

"How?" Myra looked concerned.

Steve grinned impishly. "I feel like kissing you."

Myra puffed out her cheeks in mock anger, then smiled.

"You know," she said, "I feel the same way."

They didn't see the two creatures that stood outside the ship, watching them through the transparent door.

Myra's eyes opened. She looked over her husband's shoulder.

"Steve," she whispered.

"Mmmm?" he said dreamily.

"Remember your American history? Apaches, Utes and Algonquins?"

"You mean the good old days, before spaceships and the machine age?"

"Yes. And we're back in it. Look."

Steve turned around.

"Good grief!" he said. "Indians!"

For a long time the two parties stared at each other without moving. Gradually their faces broke into smiles, the natives' of polite interest and the Horns of relief at having found the "spider people" of Peachy's description to be simply human beings like themselves.

Finally the two outside came a little closer. The older one raised his hand, palm outward.

Steve, hoping it meant friendship, did the same. He opened the door of the ship.

The men outside were about six feet tall and burned a deep copper color by the planet's bright sun. They wore breech clouts of soft leather and moccasins of

the same material. Their faces were fine and intelligent, with high brows and prominent noses. The elder had a shock of stiff, gray-white hair, while the hair of the younger was black. Their bodies, even in the older man, were muscular and powerful-looking.

Steve and Myra hopped to the ground. Now that the possibility of being captured and enwebbed by giant red spiders had been discarded, Steve's spirits soared. He addressed the younger native jocularly:

"You don't happen to know of a good hotel around here, do you?"

The young man evidently understood the tenor of the question, for his face broke into a smile and he rattled off a string of gutturals in a speech that was reminiscent of something Steve had heard, but no more understandable than the voice of the wind souging through the trees above them.

The elder of the two had more sense than any of them. Evidently he realized that these one-sided conversations might go on all day. He motioned to the rest to follow him.

Steve, with a look at the ship, hesitated a moment. Then he remembered Peachy and his mechanical mace. He made a grimace of distaste, took Myra's arm and followed.

THERE were no walls around the village. It began abruptly in a semi-cleared space half a mile from where their ship had landed. Dwarfed by the huge trees that surrounded it, it looked like something a gifted child might have built with a mechanical construction set.

The houses were mostly two and three room affairs, one-storied and square, all made of green steel. From a distance, the village blended perfectly with the surrounding forest, making it invisible from the air.

The houses had been set up in no preconceived pattern and gave a pleasant, haphazard effect to the scene. Nowhere had a tree been felled to make way for a house. Here nature and man shared a sylvan paradise, nature always given preference.

Steve and Myra had been led to one of the larger buildings which consisted of one huge dining room with tables and

chairs of the same green steel and here they were given food and drink not unlike what they had known on Earth. Myra's very faint misgivings about the quality of the food were allayed when their two hosts sat down to eat with them.

At the conclusion of the meal, Steve was somewhat astonished when the two accepted the cigarettes he offered and smoked them with apparent enjoyment.

A tour of the village impressed the visitors with the ease and contentment in which these simple people lived. Men and women worked in their gardens, or sat in the doorways of their houses fashioning the soft, leather garments that seemed to be their sole articles of dress. Children played between the trees, and in them, shrieking with young laughter. Many of the people showed curiosity about the visitors, but respectfully kept at a distance.

Their hosts led Steve and Myra to a tiny building that looked like an old subway kiosk. With no thought of being on their guard, they entered, and were taken by surprise when the floor dropped away beneath them.

"My astral aunt!" exclaimed Myra. "An elevator!"

"Why not?" asked Steve. "Any race that can make steel ought to be able to build an elevator."

The car stopped after a long descent, and the party stepped out into a high-ceilinged underground room, filled with hurrying people and, what was more apparent, noise. Sounds of machinery in feverish action crashed upon their eardrums in rhythmic, deafening beats. The giant machines themselves could be seen through great casings of glass-like material. Men sat at lever-studded desks here and there, evidently in control of the metal prometheans.

Their guides led them quickly through the large room and out through a corridor at the far end. They passed many such rooms that branched off from the hall, but none so large as the first.

At length they came to a platform. Beside it there was a strip of slowly moving steel. Next to this was another, moving faster. There were several more, each moving a bit faster than its predecessor, and the last one, on which there were

seats, moving at thirty miles per hour.

Carefully they made their way across these strips and sat down in the leather seats. Presently they were whizzing through a dimly illuminated tunnel.

Steve and Myra took part in all these proceedings with interest, while questions mounted in their minds. They made many suppositions to each other, some of them fantastic. On the whole, they were enjoying themselves.

Steve estimated they had gone about five miles when the moving strips rounded a curve and their hosts signed that they were to get off. They made their way over the more slowly moving strips onto another platform and through a door.

Beyond the door was a wide corridor with an arched ceiling. The whole was a faint green, the effect achieved by painting the green steel of which the tunnel was constructed with white paint, which Steve reasoned had a luminous quality, since the light evidently came from the walls themselves.

AS the faint rumble of the transportation strips died away behind them, they walked through a silence that was almost reverent. Their guides, who had heretofore carried on a pleasant guttural conversation between themselves, became silent, almost grave. A feeling of inexplicable awe crept over the visitors.

The corridor stretched ahead in a straight line, without a bend to mar its symmetry. Just when they thought it would go on interminably, a great double door appeared at the far end. It took up the whole width and height of the tunnel, and, contrastingly, was of wood, carved over all in intricate designs.

When they came to it, the older man knocked on it with the ball of his palm. The echoes of the sound reverberated throughout the tunnel. Slowly the door swung inward and revealed a dimly-lit room twenty feet high and about fifty square. A dark red carpet covered the floor. Heavy, comfortable-looking armchairs had been placed against the walls, and an immense wooden table occupied the center of the room. What light there was came from an ornate glass chandelier which hung halfway between the floor and ceiling.

Steve and Myra took two involuntary steps into the room and stopped, to stare about them for several minutes without moving. The thing that struck them so forcibly was the extraordinary resemblance between the manner in which the room was furnished and one on Earth.

Finally the spell broke and almost simultaneously they turned around. Their guides were gone. They could see them just within sight at the other end of the long corridor. They were about to go after them, when a voice said, in *English*:

"Won't you come in?"

V

STEVE and Myra turned around at the sound of the voice and automatically stepped back into the room. It wasn't until a few seconds later that they realized what had happened. Someone here, light years away from Earth, had spoken to them in their own language! They looked at each other with amazement, then looked around for the speaker.

"I'm over here," the voice said, "to your right."

In that dimly-lit part of the room they made out the figure of an old man sitting in a high-backed chair, his hands stretched out on its arms.

"Please come in," he said.

Slowly they went over to him. He was a very old man, his face and hands deeply wrinkled, with white hair brushed neatly away from his intelligent forehead. There was a curious immobility about him that half-frightened them, but his eyes were kindly.

Steve and Myra sat down. There was silence for a minute. Then:

"I am very wise," the old man said abruptly.

Unable to help himself, Steve chuckled. Myra looked at him reprovingly.

"You mustn't laugh at me," said the old man. "I know much. What I say is true. You must remember that. And if you will be patient and humor me, I will tell you where you are, and how you came to be."

"You mean how we came to be *here*," corrected Steve.

"You mustn't interrupt me, either," said the old man irritably. "I mean what I

say. I will tell you how you began and how you are related to me and many other trivial things like how you will leave here when you have decided to go."

"We were on our way to Jupiter," said Myra, "when we got kidnaped. Steve was going to teach at college there."

"It is a good thing to teach," the old man said. "Of course, you know very little, but it is admirable to teach those who know less. I have always been a teacher. . . ." He trailed off into silence.

"Just what do you mean by 'always,'" asked Steve, "as long as we're being rude to each other. Just how old are you?"

"Who knows?" the old man answered slowly. "Hundreds of thousands of years."

Myra gave a little yip.

"Steve," she gasped. "His lips aren't moving!"

The oldster took this with equanimity.

"True," he said. "Because they aren't mine. At least not any more. You see, the real me is up here, in this vat. I'm just a brain. That thing you've been talking to is just a corpse. I hope you don't mind."

Myra shuddered.

"It's all right," the voice continued. "It's sanitary. They used the best embalming fluid."

"How come you speak English?" asked Steve.

"I don't," said the voice. "You might as well ask why people understand music written by people who speak different languages. I'm not speaking; I'm thinking out loud, if you will pardon the idiom. Music and thought are universal."

"Now I will tell you a story. Many millions of years ago there was a great planet, the greatest in the universe. On it was bred a race of geniuses. Mentally, the planet was ideal; physically, it was less fortunate. Our sun was about to become a nova. As a result, the day came when our scientists were forced to warn their people that they would have to leave the planet before it was burned to a cinder.

"There was one scientist who was more renowned than the others, and with good reason. It was he who had isolated the *gion* beam, as it was called, which had the property of breaking down a sub-

stance to its component atoms and sending it wherever directed.

"To make the story easier to tell, I will admit that I was that scientist, and that my name is Gion, which you may call me, if you can do so without interrupting me."

He paused for a moment, as if marshalling his memories.

"Our scientists searched the universe with their instruments, seeking another planet. Finally this one was located. But it was too distant to be reached within a lifespan by means of the antiquated space ships we had then. Only one method was possible—the *gion* beam.

"Even this method was not completely satisfactory, because it would require terrific power to transport anything here and we hadn't fuel for more than one shipment. Therefore, it was necessary to make a careful selection of those who were to go and what they were to take with them.

"About three hundred were chosen—two hundred women and a hundred men, all unmarried and all about twenty. The emphasis was put on human beings, and not on equipment, so only certain surgical supplies were taken.

"It was decided that one master-scientist was to go, regardless of his age, to act as guide and counselor to the new race. I was chosen, and it was a very bad choice. You see, I was dying of cancer of the stomach at the time. Naturally, I protested, but they paid no attention. Instead they killed me."

"WHAT?" gasped Myra.

"Exactly," said Gion. "They killed my body and locked my wise old brain in this glass case. Would you believe it—sometimes I get bored."

Steve laughed. "You know, Mr. Gion, you're amazing. Tell me, did your party ever get here?"

"No I'll tell you about the hairy people," said Gion reprovingly. "After we had set up our village and things were going along nicely, we met the people who lived on the planet long before we arrived. Those peach-colored scoundrels you've already met. Pack of thieves. They used to come around at night and steal anything they could lay their hands

on. They would also watch up for hours while we worked and later imitate what we did. It didn't take them long to develop from dumb animals to malignantly intelligent creatures. Naturally we had to get rid of them.

"We drove them down to the sea. As we might have expected, they played a foul trick on us. They stole one of our ships and escaped across the ocean. Ever since they've been getting brighter and brighter and breeding like rabbits, until now they've overrun their continent and want ours. Naturally, we had to take steps."

"So you surrounded your continent with a field of insanity, producing vibrations to send them back gibbering?" asked Steve.

The voice laughed. "Is that what they told you? Crazy beasts—we did no such thing. It would be too much bother, too expensive and—well, impossible. Our defense is much simpler. We merely let them land and get out of their ships—then biff them with our insanity beam. And since we don't want any idiotic foreigners running around our forests, we pile them back into their ships and shoot them back home. Nothing to it."

Gion paused. Myra, who had been waiting for a propitious moment, said:

"I thought you were going to tell us how *we* began?"

"I am. I am," he said. "Our new civilization was about a century old, when we began to receive messages from far out in space. They were from a ship that had taken off from our old planet just before the explosion, manned by an intrepid group of people who knew that they would never live to reach another land, but who hoped that their children might.

"The messages were pathetic. They were from the sole survivor of the original travelers, who said that their children had revolted against the rigid discipline he had tried to maintain, and that the ship was in a state of bedlam. Only the fact that he had sealed the engine room against them had prevented them from reaching the controls and destroying themselves. Inertia kept the ship on its course.

"Further messages from this old man reached us, saying that the rebels had reverted practically to wild beasts and

were living in a state of indescribable filth. Our records show that the ship didn't reach your Earth until sixty years later, so you can imagine the condition its passengers were in when it finally landed. And those were your ancestors."

"A pretty picture," grimaced Steve. There was a moment's silence. Then said: "Why do you live underground, or at least work down here? Isn't it impractical?"

"On the contrary," explained Gion, "it's very practical. You see, we're a peace-loving people. We don't like trouble, and we don't believe in waging war to keep out of trouble at some future date. Consequently, we build all our factories underground, so that the hairy people can't blow them up whenever they feel like it by flying over and dropping bombs. Another reason is that we like the forest and believe it's healthy for our children to grow up there. We don't build cities

resplendent green spaceship waiting on the take-off ways.

So simple was the ship in construction that less than an hour of intensive instruction from Gion, on a model control board set up in the underground room, was sufficient to acquaint him perfectly with the management of the craft.

It almost frightened him to think that he and Myra were about to undertake a journey in a ship so swift that they would arrive on Jupiter, in an inestimably distant solar system, almost as soon as they would have in their Skypiercer, had they not been interrupted by Peachy.

At last, all was ready. Steve and Myra waved good-bye to the people they had come to know as friends in such a short time, and sealed themselves inside the ship.

Steve consulted the charts for a second, then sent the ship into a noiseless take-off that soon left the field far below, al-

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to make targets for the potential enemy—human or bacterial, whichever it might be—but try to live in as close cooperation with nature as possible. Does that make sense?"

"It makes perfect sense," agreed Myra. Steve nodded.

"And now," said Gion, "if I read your minds correctly, you'd like to get away from this garrulous old man and see some more of our country before you continue your interrupted journey to Jupiter."

VI

WHAT had seemed to be a long flat meadow was in reality, just beneath the surface, an emergency airport that was used in place of the moving chairs or the underground freight-railway when speed was imperative. Seldom used, but always in a state of preparedness, the port now buzzed with activity as the roof of simulated grass rolled back, disclosing a

ready being retransformed into a green meadow. He followed his instructions carefully and kept the ship at a moderate speed, to wait until the gravitational pull of the planet had been left behind before beginning the almost unbelievable acceleration of which the ship was capable.

Myra sat in thought for a moment, then: "Steve," she said, "I don't want to seem skeptical, but doesn't Gion's theory about the beginning of man on Earth sort of conflict with our time-honored theory of evolution? Apes and men from the same source, and all that?"

"Not exactly," Steve said. "The evidence seems to point to the fact that those third-generation refugees landed on North America a few ages ago, and founded the Indian nations. It's the only tenable explanation of the origin of the American Indian that I've ever heard."

The planet was rapidly growing smaller behind them.

"If only they hadn't mutinied against

discipline, it's probable that with their advanced knowledge, the Indians would have discovered Europe long before Columbus—or Lief Erickson—crossed the Atlantic. Their culture, if they had kept it, might have been a better incentive to European development than theirs was—

"Brrr!" Myra shivered suddenly. "I get the creeps when I think of talking to a corpse."

Steve Horn chuckled. "Don't ever accuse me of being dead, again," he said mockingly. "At least, I can get up and walk around."

He flipped the drive control, sent the green space-ship whipping past a darting meteor. He spun the ship again, in a tight circle, thrilling to the surge of power released by the light touch of his hand on the controls, then laughed aloud at Myra's instant cry of ecstatic alarm.

"Hush, Infant," he said, "I'm just practicing up for the time when I sell the rights to the constructing of ships identical to this. Boy, will the shekels ever roll in!"

Myra tucked in a loose strand of hair, bent over and kissed Steve on the lobe of his right ear. He squirmed, wriggled, jerked the ship off-course by an inadvertent twitch of his hand, growled playfully, then let the ship travel uncontrolled while he kissed the ear of his wife in return.

"Steve, pulleeze!" Myra said faintly.

"What were you saying about the Indians, dear?" she asked finally.

"Lo, the poor Indian," Steve misquoted, "he has gone the way of all—*Damn!*" His words were bitten off by the sudden jerking of the ship.

Myra frowned. "Maybe those Indians didn't build this thing so well," she said worriedly. "Remember Peachy said the first few ships built by his people wouldn't fly. It would be just our luck to try and ride an experimental job back to Jupiter."

Steve jiggled the controls.

"Something grabbed us," he said. "Something just reached out and jerked us off-course—tried to hold us back."

"I don't believe it," Myra said. "You're just—"

The ship whipped to one side, then bucked playfully like a trout riding a fisherman's line.

"Ugh!" said Steve faintly, struggled to pull his body back into his seat.

"Steve," I'm frightened!" Myra wailed.

"Nonsense!" Steve said stoutly. "There isn't a blamed thing to be afraid of—"

SUDDENLY the ship began to toss crazily, like a rat shaken in a terrier's teeth. Steve and Myra were thrown to the floor. Unsteadily making their way to a window, they saw a little golden meteor-ship, such as had been the beginning of all their trouble. Evidently they were caught in its magnetic field. Steve tried accelerating, but they were powerless to escape.

Myra burst into helpless tears. "Oh, Steve, this is too much. We *can't* go back there again."

"Damn those peach-creatures!" said Steve. "Just when I thought we'd never see them again."

Again letters of fire appeared above the little golden ship. "RETURN," they said, simply.

"You're not going to do it?" asked Myra.

"There's no use getting killed." Steve shrugged disgustedly.

He was about to reverse the ship's course when a long snake-like flame streaked up from the planet below with a menacing rumble that could be felt through the hull of the ship.

The golden craft saw it coming and tried to escape, but the lash of flame followed its frantic dodgings inexorably. Suddenly, like a striking snake, it straightened. Its tip touched the meteor-ship. There was an eye-blinding flash.

When they could see again, nothing was visible but the planet below, looking serene and peaceful on the wooded half of its surface turned to them. Of the attacking ship or the instrument of its doom there was no sign.

Steve Horn looked for the last time at the planet before climbing back into the control seat. He wiped his eyes with a self-conscious gesture.

"Thanks," he said.

And flicked the drive-beam that was to send them home.