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The Seventh Planet

By LES COLLINS

ILLUSTRATOR SCHROEDER

There have been complaints that s-f writers take incredible liberties when visualizing possible life forms in the reaches of the universe. This may well be true, but let's consider it from this angle: Would not a writer on a planet umpteen light years beyond X galaxy possibly be ridiculed for visualizing our life forms—say a turtle or a zebra or a man or even a rose bud—accurately? Actually, writers like Les Collins do Creation honor by refusing to set limits on her versatility.

AT LAST! After 50 years of fruitless searching, Earth finally was to make contact with another culture, another civilization.

Intelligence brought Captain James Sturgis the news shortly after the expedition had made the planetfall. For a few brief moments, Sturgis allowed the

waves of satisfaction to sweep over him. This was Man's moment—Sturgis thought of the many expeditions and men who'd gone into the depths of space, some never to return, in search for a "brother" civilization. They were good men all, and he accepted the instant on behalf of them. Now the people of Earth would no longer feel alone.

Ten years it had taken. Ten years since the faster-than-light drive had been perfected. Sturgis thought, too, of his friend, Dr. Ray Nolan, who'd worked all his life to get that drive and who hadn't lived to see this moment.

The mood broke: Sturgis was pre-eminently a practical man, and there was much work to do. He called a staff conference.

They shuffled into the room, in the fashion of the typical spaceman's walk, and, midst the scraping of chairs, lighting of cigarettes, and bits of shop talk, settled down. There was something a bit different about this conference, however: tension. It was in the air, perhaps communicated to these men by the captain himself, perhaps as a result of the wild tales circulating about the ship.

"Well, gentlemen," Sturgis began incisively, "I suppose you've heard the rumors. They're true—the planet we're approaching has traces of a high order of civilization!"

His deep bass tones echoed

throughout a silent room, hanging in the air for a second; then full realization of what he'd said came to the others. Their enthusiasm bubbled.

When he finally had quieted them, Sturgis continued. "I want all exploration teams carefully re-instructed as to procedures. They are to stay together under the direct control of each team leader.

"In particular, I want no miscellaneous touching of anything unless the natives so offer, and I will not stand for souvenir hunting. Please bear in mind the lesson of Mars in the early days of space exploration: we almost ruined the planet for the archeologists with our heedless desecration of the temples, and the garbage after a picnic floating in the canals.

"What we've seen so far are a series of city-like entities, scattered randomly about the planet. Our approach will be as follows . . ." The rest of the meeting consisted of technical details devoted to this First Contact of races.

They landed outside one of the cities and waited. For the hundredth time, Sturgis contacted the Linguistics Section.

"Everything set?" he asked into the intercom.

"Yes, sir." The reply was tired.

"What about the Transcencphalator?"

"Sir!" There was a touch of annoyance in the answering

tones. "We spent several years developing that gadget. We found out how to break patterns of thought into components, convert them into several varying currents, and reassemble into a transducer for vocal pickup. You know we've been able to contact a chimpanzee, though on a low level. The thing does work, and I guarantee it will work on this planet, if whatever we're going to meet has thoughts and a body so I can adjust the machine to it. We'll make contact, rest assured." Church, head of Linguistics, emphasized the last statement slightly, to express disapproval of what he considered nagging.

"Right," said Sturgis, breaking contact and shaking his head. He hadn't the heart to remind the other of the numerous failures that occurred, the misinterpretations given because of variation in waveforms. The simple truth was that the Transcenccephalator was not completely reliable. Nevertheless, they *had* done wonders with it; most of the time the electronic miracle could be depended on.

The captain then checked, in order, Chemistry, Biology, Morphosapology—once known as Anthropology till remains of other intelligences were found—and even Paleopathology. They were all ready. He had nothing to do but wait. And wait . . . and wait . . .

Finally, Sturgis yielded to the

urge which had helped make him a man: curiosity. He ordered a team from the ship—under his command, of course, and they set out.

The haunting dread that had begun to make itself felt to him—that here, as on Mars, was a planet deserted—now appeared to be more and more a strong possibility. The streets were empty.

The city itself was peculiar. It consisted of block after block of shed-like one-story buildings. Randomly scattered here and there were two-foot cubes of nonmetallic, graycolored substance. On one face was a small cone, about three or four inches in altitude, arranged parallel to the ground. And that was all. Nothing stirred except the soft breezes that played tag in the streets.

The question *Where are the occupants of this city?* burned their lips, their hearts, and their minds. And then a violent argument broke out which Sturgis had to arbitrate.

"Sir, I know you've given orders against it, but if we could open up one of those cubes . . . after all, *we're* not souvenir hunting—" said Royale of Geology.

"No!" roared Bailey, the morphosapologist. "Perhaps these things have a definite purpose. How do we know, for instance, that the missing race isn't a migratory one? How do we know they won't suddenly ap-

pear, ready to occupy their summer quarters?"

Sturgis agreed. They continued looking, not touching, but it was the same throughout the city. When they'd finished, Sturgis finally realized they had to enter the buildings. With some trepidation, he okayed the entering—"Breaking and entering," he said crankily.

The building was long and low. It seemed to ramble in an angular sort of way. There were no doors; the entrance was low, about four or five feet from threshold to lintel.

Inside, the ceiling was lower than what the Earthmen were used to; it wasn't much over six feet. A long hallway led to the end of the building—and a series of small rooms were arranged on either side of the hall.

In hushed tones, White, the chemistry man, said, "I don't know; perhaps it has some religious significance. Makes me want to whisper."

"Yes," Sturgis agreed, also in low tones, "it looks sort of familiar to me in some way. Wish I could remember what it reminds me of . . ."

They entered one of the rooms. Dominating it, in the center, was a small truncated pyramid, the top area supporting another of the cubes they'd seen outside. However, this one was about twice the size of the others.

Royale, bending close to ex-

amine it, answered Sturgis's admonishment. "No, no, I wasn't going to touch it. But look—there's a small crack running down the middle. It's almost as if two of the cubes were joined together." They examined it but came to no conclusion. They examined the rest of the room, the other strange shapes: coils, almost at floor level, hanging from the ceiling; translucent tertartoids piled up Christmas-tree fashion.

In room after room, the story was the same. The place was obviously deserted. What they were seeing had some meaning; of that they were all agreed. But for each man there was a different interpretation of that meaning.

The only real differences anywhere in the building were in the cubes. A third type was found, and it actually was the most common. One face of it was concave, also in the form of a small cone.

"We have, then," said Sturgis, "two or three of these cubes. One with a convexity, one with a concavity, and a third form which might be a combination of the other two."

There were arguments about this statement, the whole dominated by Royale's reproachful, "Until we take one apart, we'll never know . . ."

They tried another building, and discovered what they already knew instinctively. It, too, was deserted; it, too, was the same in layout and design.

Another . . . and another. Farther and farther apart became their selections, to no avail. Even to the most die-hard, it became obvious the city was, in fact, deserted.

Discouraged, they returned to the ship.

Sturgis called another staff conference. "All right," he said, "I have dispatched the helicopter to the closest city for more exploration. How many cities did you observe as we approached?"

"Eight, all told," answered Briggs, Geography, "though there may be more. Further study will indicate—"

"We won't need any more," interrupted Sturgis. "Five or less, chosen at random, will tell us what we want to know."

"I'll be willing to go out on a limb with that information right now," drawled Church, the Linguistics man.

"I'm no happier about this than you," answered the leader, "for a more personal reason. I will be relieved of my command if we fail this trip. This is my last crack at the job—HQ feels it has to turn its commands over, for morale purposes." He paused, bitterly feeling the unfairness; then he continued, "Be that as it may, from all the signs we have here another empty planet—a shell, devoid of the life which once made it throb with vitality. I said 'another empty planet' deliberately. There have been others."

Briggs looked puzzled. "We know. The ancient traces—"

"I don't mean those!" Sturgis snapped an interruption. "I've been digging into the *Official Historical Record* that is given to each captain before the expedition departs. It is the latest summary of knowledge: volumes of space worked, the years involved, results, and the like. In the last half-century, five other expeditions ran into this same situation."

"Same?" questioned White.

"Yes—a planet, as though recently deserted, with the same architecture and the same cubes lying about. And the same problem facing the other captains, too. The primary mission is to find intelligent life; time is important. It would be nice if we could afford to stay and study, but we must go on. It was the obvious solution to the others; it is mine, too."

He sagged inwardly, washed by waves of disappointment. But then, Sturgis—a man devoted to a cause—straightened and fought his continuing, eternal fight. "No one claimed this would be an easy job; you didn't have to hire on. From the time we were apes, we've battled Nature. We controlled fire and caused a ripple; we utilized atomics and kicked Nature in the shin. Now we're interstellar, and by the stars themselves, we'll pick up this Universe and shake it till intelligent life falls out. We are among the privileged few explorers carrying out

the highest mission our species has afforded us.

"Perhaps it won't be this landing, or this year, or in our span of time, but find it we shall!"

It was the shot in the arm they all needed, the strengthener to brace against after their hopes, risen so high, had been dashed. And dashed they were. Day after day, from city after city, came the report: nothing stirred.

Wearily, Sturgis grounded the helicopter and ordered departure. In the midst of preparations, Royale visited him.

"What about this planet?" Royale asked.

"What about it?" the captain asked in reply.

"Are we to leave it, the mystery still unsolved?"

"Listen, Royale," said Sturgis, "I'm just as curious as you about what happened here. Remember, this is my last command. Unfortunately, our mission is to find intelligent life, not the remains of it. This planet has been duly charted; in a century or two, the archeology boys will follow behind us. Sorry."

"We still have some time before takeoff. How about letting me return to the city till then?" asked the geologist.

Sturgis mulled over the request. Then he grinned. "As a matter of fact, I know you've been sneaking in there despite my orders. And I've been wondering myself ."

The two men stood once more in the city. The sun was approaching the horizon; odd shadows, not present on their first trip, now twisted eerily through the alien metropolis.

"Something's not right," said Royale nervously.

"You've noticed it too?" asked Sturgis.

"Yes—can't say what it is, but it reminds me of one of those psych tests where they ask you to pick the two similar pictures from a group of ten. They all look very much alike yet you know there are differences, there are—"

"That's it, that's *it!* You've got it!" cried Sturgis.

"What?"

"Don't you see? The cubes—there are dozens more, and the others have been moved. I remember now: that one there wasn't in the intersection of those streets but on the corner." Sturgis pointed, to emphasize the cube he had in mind.

The two men stood beside the object, staring curiously at it.

"*Now* can we take it apart and see how it ticks?" asked Royale.

Sturgis gaped at it, trancing. Then he looked up at the geologist. "Hell, no—not if my theory is correct. You wouldn't want to be carving up the inhabitants, would you?"

Royale's jaw dropped. Sturgis continued, "What if these cubes are living intelligences, but with a metabolism so slow their

movements to us would seem imperceptible?"

Royale nodded. "It would fit—it'd sure fit."

"Well then, let's get back to the ship with this thing and test the theory. Let's see if we can talk to it on Church's Transencephalator."

Each man picked up a cube, and the two made tracks back to the ship.

They turned the specimens over to Church and went to Sturgis' cabin to await results. Rumor spread like wildfire: within moments most of the staff had appeared, and they too waited, pacing.

Shortly after came the knock at the door they most wanted to hear, and Church entered.

"Sorry," he said, "but it's mostly negative. I can't get anything through *to* it, and the sounds coming out of the machine are a weird collection of bass noises."

"Wait a minute!" Sturgis' voice cut through their gloom. "If it lives so much slower than we, perhaps it thinks slower too. Slow down your tape, and try again."

"Of course—!" Church flew from the room.

Again they paced. The time dragged by interminably until Church once more appeared. Now they would know the success or failure of Man's highest mission; now they would know if there was to be a meeting of the minds, the spirit.

Church shook his head. "It's

alive all right, though on a very primitive level. Listen, if you don't believe me."

He dialed the ship's central data recording system, ordered playback, and the familiar metallic tones spoke in alien thoughts to the men: . . . *pleasure—what a brood! . . . hungry . . . we have six planets, good, huh? . . . six, six, sex . . . what a brood! . . . brood, where's the brood? . . . This babe had the most—*

The description that followed was liberally interspersed with four-letter nouns. Church, hands spread with palms turned upward, shrugged helplessly. "We programmed it with the simplest, most descriptive words possible. The cube is still thinking in its own terms; what you get are equivalents."

Sturgis said angrily, "I don't care if it swears in fourteen languages—it's the content that's of significance. You can almost hear a small trickle of metallic drool coming from one corner of its mouth; the thing is an idiot. What about the other?"

"Same."

The captain sighed. "Well, it isn't much, but at least we can take some of these home."

White, with a strange look, commented, "Like Columbus and the Indians?"

"These aren't as intelligent. I doubt if they are more than sub-mental at best."

"There is another possibility,"

Royale suggested. "They might be the end result of species that have deteriorated." He paused in thought, then continued somewhat pedantically, in the fashion of geologists, "I rather lean to that theory, in view of the reported findings elsewhere, the cities, and the cube's own thoughts about 'planets.'"

Sturgis nodded. "Possible, but that blasted machine has its limitations. Church, what are the possibilities of any one word, especially a complex word expressing knowledge of astronomy, being translated exactly?"

The Linguistics man shook his head. "Not good, but—"

"It's really academic, in any case. We're leaving tomorrow. Royale, take some men to collect a few more of the cubes; bring back assorted shapes and sizes. Church, go sit on those things until you find out what they eat—stay with it all night, if necessary. White, get the biochemists to analyze the cubes—"

"Where do I get samples?" came the quiet interruption.

"I was coming to that. Bailey, you're the morphosap; if these things have any sort of culture, they must bury their dead. Find the graveyard. Briggs, geography should fit in somewhere... you can help undig the graves. Let's move!"

They moved; departure activity became intense; and in the course of that afternoon and night, events of significance occurred:

At 1800, Galactic, Royale re-

turned with 10 cubes of the three different types and of different sizes.

At 0439, Church went to bed—after a bleary-eyed report that the cubes dined, basically, on sodium silicofluoride.

At 0744, Bailey and party were recalled for takeoff. They had failed to find any dead, and they had failed to find any semblance of a graveyard in "that crazy beehive of a city."

Of these three significant events, the last carried the most import . . .

Captain James Sturgis was not unintelligent. If he failed to integrate logically all data, it was because of his emotional turmoil: worrying about the departure and returning to Earth relatively emptyhanded and—worse—losing his command. But with the three-day flight home, in and out of hyper, he had time to think. He grew uncommunicative, sullen, and wore a frown.

It was on the third day, just as the time neared for the re-entry approach, that Royale entered the captain's cabin. Royale, too, had a sober face.

"I've done some thinking in the last three days; come to some weird conclusions," the geologist said.

Sturgis drummed nervous fingers on a desk, uttered no sound, waiting.

Royale continued, "We've been feeding the cubes synthesized silicofluoride. They thrive on it . . . too well. I just took a

count: there are now fourteen of them, and four are quite small."

"They're breeding, of course!" came the husky reply. "That's why we found two different types, two sexes, and the third—two cubes coupled together—was . . ."

"Something else, Captain. They're trying to build a city in Starboard Two hold. It's rudimentary but definitely cube architecture; there wasn't enough room, so the bulkhead has been corroded and . . . shoved aside."

Sturgis snapped his fingers. "Now I remember what that building reminded me of, the first time we entered. Bailey unknowingly recognized it, too, when he said 'beehive of a city.' Royal breeding chambers of social insects—"

The intercom squawked a tinny interruption: "Five minutes!"

Sturgis ignored the warning. "It goes together like the answer to a puzzle," he mused, then abruptly changed the subject. "What do you think of death?"

Royale straightened, looked at him with level gaze. "It has to come, later . . . or sooner."

Sturgis nodded slightly and called Church. "Hook up one of the cubes in the Transencephalator; make it direct contact—I'll be right down!"

"What?" came the intercom reply, "do you realize it's less than five minutes to—"

"Don't argue!" Sturgis commanded, cutting off. He motioned Royale out, started to accompany, then stopped. "Oh, yes. I almost forgot: the panic button." Quickly, he dialed Emergency Control.

Emco. The tones were flat, unemotional.

Sturgis took one deep breath, then: "Seven no trump!"

Double. Still unemotional, but how could a machine feel?

"My partner can't take me out," Sturgis said, "Redouble!"

The connection went dead. The captain looked around the cabin once, then walked out with Royale.

In Linguistics, Sturgis talked to a cube for the first time. "Listen, idiot! Try to listen, anyway. I know your secret; it isn't really a secret to you because you're practically unreasoning, a blob of instinct. Yet you almost defeated Man who is intelligent, capable. I said *almost*. It's too late to turn the ship, and I can't take a chance on landing—some of you might escape. However, and I hope this penetrates to you, individualistic man has certain qualities as good as socially-organized life forms. Sacrificing for the good of all is one. What you don't know is that any moment this ship will blow space-high. If you aren't destroyed, you'll become incandescent from falling through our atmosphere. If that doesn't do it, you'll hit Earth at a speed close to twenty miles a second. Now laugh!"

But the slow, stupid answer was: . . . *no hungry, full . . . where is that sexy broad for the brood? . . . what a dish . . . exoskeleton is a highly stable, inert silicon plastic . . . indestructible . . . where is that*

babe? . . . have to start . . . now we have seven planets . . .

No one on Earth noticed the brief flash of light nor the cube-like debris alone that reached the surface of the planet.

THE END