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the
small
bears

by . . . Gene L. Henderson

**The aliens looked cute as Koalas.
But there was a little matter of
a graveyard of dead space-ships.**

BILLOWY WHITE CLOUDS hid the entire surface of the mystery planet and the space-cruiser cautiously searched, seeking an opening. A wind disturbance momentarily split the misty blanket and like an arrow the ship darted through.

The sudden movement had caught some of the men unprepared and Dr. Dick Boyette hurried past fully-manned battle stations to answer a call from the control-room. It required but a couple of minutes to revive a technician who had stumbled into a panel and afterward Boyette stood in the background, watching.

Everywhere, as far as the eye could see, the terrain was dotted by patches of woods and green meadows. The perpetual cloud blanket was two miles high, thin enough so that it barely diffused the sunlight. Enough, Boyette thought, so that the planet would have been a mystery even without the disappearance of all ships that had visited it.

"No sign of life," growled Commander Kellews, breaking the silence.

"I don't like it," the gunnery officer added uneasily. "There must be life or what could have happened to all the other ships that vanished here?"

A STORY THAT SHOWS WHAT PERIL MAY LIE UNDER A FUR COAT.

"That's what we're here to find out," said Commander Kellews. He gazed around with a fighting man's pride in the finest weapons that Earth science had been able to devise. This one ship itself could destroy the entire planet that lay so peacefully beneath them.

As Boyette knew, the mystery planet was necessary for further expansion from the solar system, lying as it did between their system and the nearest one. Yet, it had swallowed all ships that had landed.

"Look!" shouted the lookout, "that plateau's covered with ships."

Brisk instructions were relayed throughout the craft. The crew readied for any possible emergency. The *Assault* cruised forward, turrets bearing on the targets now dead ahead.

"Why, those are Earth-ships!" Commander Kellews exclaimed.

"And that's the *Conquest*!" Boyette blurted, forgetting himself.

All eyes centered on the sleek heavy cruiser squatting on the ground. She was a sister ship of the *Assault* and the first Patrol craft sent to investigate the planet. Practically every man aboard the *Assault* had personally known someone on her crew.

Smoke trailing from the center of the plateau caused brief excitement among the watchers. Their hopes fell when it was seen to emanate from a small lake of boiling lava. The molten rock seethed and

bubbled, an indication of the fiery core that lay beneath.

The *Assault* landed and search parties were immediately organized. There were only enough men left behind to adequately man the ship's defenses. Boyette was assigned to the main party after convincing the reluctant Commander that he might be needed.

All of the ships were empty. There was no sign of disorder or confusion. Tools and equipment had been left lying when their owners had quietly left. Not one clue could be found to account for the disappearance of their crews. A feeling of awe began to temper the initial exuberance of the crewmen.

The main party was almost ready to return to its ship when a movement at the edge of the plateau caught the attention of the men. They froze in their tracks, weapons ready, then a small animal crawled into sight. It stood only about a foot high and to Boyette resembled a small Teddy Bear.

Relieved the men relaxed and one laughed. At this the creature stood up even higher and barked softly, bringing others into sight. Squad leaders half-heartedly endeavored to keep their men together but the temptation was too great to resist. Each man wheedled and coaxed until the Teddy Bears had allowed themselves to be brought within reach.

Boyette alone stood aloof and one of the animals made its way towards him. It even avoided at-

tempts by the crew members to catch it. In fact, Boyette noted, nowhere did he see more than one of the Bears to any one man. He frowned thoughtfully, remembering that there was no sign of any other form of life.

The animal stopped in front of him and waited expectantly. A desire to pet it crept over Boyette, one so strong that his hands tingled. He almost gave in to the impulse when a dark suspicion made him draw back. Why hadn't he felt the same emotion before the Bear had reached him?

One of the men noted his backward motion and yelled, "What's the matter, Doc, afraid that it'll bite you?"

Boyette only smiled by way of reply. The brief moment of introspection had served to strengthen his willpower. He determined from now on to look before leaping. Nothing was above suspicion until the mystery of the deserted space-ships had been solved.

Loud laughter caught his attention and brought a brief smile to his normally serious face. One of the men had been smoking and dropped some tobacco on an animal. It dug at its hide frantically in an effort to dislodge the particles. Once freed of the irritant it promptly made its way back to the same crew-member.

Boyette pondered the act. All of the Bears seemed to have a purpose in mind and the intelligence to direct it. There wasn't any biological

reason a thinking and intelligent creature should have a human form. Perhaps . . . at least it was worth considering, Boyette mused.

He now became interested in a faint path leading towards the lake of molten rock. It appeared too large for the Bears and not too old. Besides, he reasoned, what would any living creature want at the lake? He followed the path to a high promontory overlooking the lake. He stood there, fascinated by the thought of the terrific energy necessary to melt the planet's substance itself.

There was a movement against his legs and he looked down. There was the same Teddy Bear that had followed him, rather than stay with its fellow creatures. The display of affection almost led him to lean over and stroke the beast. However he remembered his resolve barely in time and snapped erect. The desire disappeared immediately and he glared down at the Bear.

It appeared saddened and sat back on its haunches, searching his face with button-like black eyes. Again Boyette turned to the lake, reminded of the old swimming hole back home. Many a time he'd stood on its high bank, similar to this, then leaped far out to join the rest of the gang.

It looked so peaceful below, he thought. If one were to leap or fall, there'd be no pain. And to be released from the worries of life in such beautiful surroundings, who knew what wonderful existence

might lie in store for him? He moved closer to the edge and tensed, ready to leap.

A lingering doubt crept into his mind, struggling to overcome the urge to jump. Would the others follow him? He forced his head around and saw them cavorting with the Teddy Bears on the grass below. The one that had followed him was standing erect, eagerly watching his every move.

His resolve to consider every action was smothered under. Once again he teetered on the lip of the rock, trying to edge back but finding that his muscles refused to obey. Fragments of thought flitted through his mind, each being erased after a brief flash.

All at once he remembered the Teddy Bear that had become so frantic at the tobacco that had fallen on it. Accustomed to analytical approaches to problems in the lab he suddenly wondered if the creatures were capable of implanting suggestions in human minds?

The mental struggle caused perspiration to break out in beads over his forehead. He slowly dug a heel into the dirt, then straining, scattered soil into the face of the animal behind him. Instantly it seemed as if bonds had been cut from his limbs and he recoiled in horror from the bubbling rock below.

Boyette shoved by the animal, frantically brushing dirt from its face and hide. It was now quite evident that the creatures needed

full concentration to work their will. He also determined not to let himself fall under their power again.

At least he was convinced where the expedition's peril lay. He headed for the ship, determined to act now. Intent on his own thoughts he didn't see the figure that loomed up before him.

A hearty voice roared, "Well, Doctor, why the gloomy look on such a fine day?"

He looked up in surprise. The voice had come from Old Man Snead, Exec of the Patrol-ship. Not only was he astonished at being addressed by the dour old man but was almost made speechless by the sight of the Exec fondling one of the Teddy Bears.

"You won't find anyone there," Snead said. "Everything was so peaceful that the Skipper gave permission to all hands to alight." He stared at the Teddy Bear which refused to leave Boyette. "Nice looking pet you have there. Sure tame, aren't they?"

Boyette looked down and saw the Bear gazing up at him reproachfully. Again he felt an inclination to lean over and stroke the beast. He resisted with no difficulty as the Exec strolled off. With him went Boyette's last hope. The Exec's noted aversion to pets of any type had made him the man most likely to resist what appeared to be a suggestive hypnosis being applied by the alien beasts.

The subtle delving at his mind

was still apparent but easier now to resist than at first. The capture of the Exec's will left no one to turn to, so a plan began to form in Boyette's mind—one which he must carry to completion all on his own.

He pretended to fall under the power of the Teddy Bear and leaned over, picking it up. To all outward appearances he was just as absorbed with it as the rest of the crew were with theirs. The only difference was that he promptly headed for the ship rather than out on the meadow with the others.

The ship did prove to be empty and he placed the Bear on a workbench in his lab. It sat watching intently, a gleam of intelligence every so often breaking through the innocent mask of blank innocence. Boyette moved around aimlessly, aware of the scrutiny and trying to appear busy. However the ruse was giving him an opportunity to think over his plan.

His main problem right now was to verify his suspicions. And the only way to do that would be through one of the animals itself. Then would follow the disclosure to the skipper and crew. First, though, they'd have to be released from their hypnosis.

A Brain Emanation Recorder would be just the thing of course. It was used to transmit the thought pictures of one mind to another. Its primary function was to detect brain deterioration caused by radiation in space but other experiments had been made. Pure thought knew

no language barriers, so the difficulty didn't lie there. It was getting the Bear to cooperate. He could overpower it but its evident mental control would enable it to blank off its thoughts.

The crew would be returning before long and Boyette was becoming desperate. His gaze fell on a vial of the new Martian truth serum and the solution fell into place like tumblers in a lock. Still he had to be careful. Some Earth animals no larger than the Bears packed a pretty mean wallop when aroused or cornered.

A tray was blocking the cabinet so Boyette shoved it to one side. Immediately a shrill raw sound cut across his nerves like a hot knife. He saw where a protruding piece of the tray had scraped along the metallic table top. A low moan froze him and he saw that the Teddy Bear had squeezed against a wall and lay there quivering. The animal was seemingly in agony for a short while but quickly recovered and sat up.

Boyette frowned thoughtfully. Even though the aliens strongly resembled small bears, their characteristics were proving to be more like those of canines. At least he was learning more about them and might be able to put it to good use in the future.

He filled a hypodermic needle with the truth serum, not even so much as looking at the Bear down the work bench. Then, casually walking by the animal, he suddenly

turned and grasped it by one hand. The creature exploded into action, almost knocking the needle from his hand. Boyette shifted his left hand to the loose skin around the neck of the animal. The needle was then efficiently planted at the base of the skull. There was a brief struggle, then the Bear slowly lay down, a glaze coming over its eyes. The effect would last for an hour, long enough for his purpose.

Boyette next obtained a magnetic recorder from the electronics lab. Speed was essential and he was thankful that the ship was empty. The recorder would enable him to save the innermost thoughts of the telepathic beasts. This would be necessary, he well knew, to convince a skeptical Commander Kel-ews of his suspicions.

His own lab contained the Brain Emanation Indicators. One cap was fitted over the erstwhile *pet*, the other over his own head. The recorder would transcribe the electrical waves so that they could be played back through the Analyzer at a later date.

The apparatus was still a recent enough invention to give Boyette a thrill whenever he used it. There was no actual exchange of words but the illusion made it seem that there had been. Neither had he ever *seen* a picture of what was being thought in another brain. Rather he sensed what the other would have said if he'd spoken in an understandable language. This would be very valuable in the com-

munication between the alien's and his brains.

"What happened to crew-members of all the other Earth-ships on your planet?" was the first question Boyette put to the drugged creature.

"They all jumped into the lake of fire," came the reply.

"Why?" asked Boyette.

There was no hesitation in the Bear's return thought. "Because it was suggested by us and their minds were unable to resist. Our Council decided that it was the only way to save our planet from being overrun by the peoples of Earth."

"Then why haven't the members of this last Expedition suffered the same fate?" Boyette inquired.

"The Council has come to realise that the people of Earth will keep returning as long as they are able. Since we have developed a high mental science rather than the physical ones, sooner or later our secret would be discovered."

"What do you plan on doing?"

"The minds of Earthmen indicate a fondness for what they call pets. We have used that weak emotion as a means for their destruction. We'll be carried back to Earth where, by careful infiltration, we can cause destructive wars. Eventually it is planned that everyone on Earth will be destroyed, thus removing our danger at its source."

"What will—" At that moment he was interrupted by a clamor at the outer space-lock. A quick check disclosed an angry group of men

led by Commander Kellews and the Exec.

Boyette cursed his stupidity in overlooking what should have been a glaring fact. The alien creatures had such a high degree of telepathic development that his had called for help when threatened. Only the quick action of the truth serum had prevented its fellow creatures from locating him instantly. Their control over the rest of the crew could even lead to his death if he were careless.

Quickly hiding the recorder Boyette went to the lock and opened it. The entire crew came pouring in, each man accompanied by one of the aliens.

"What have you been up to, Doctor?" demanded Commander Kellews belligerently.

Boyette glanced around at the ring of hostile faces and replied, "Just some work in the lab, sir."

"Where's the animal you had?" asked Snead.

Boyette pretended surprise. "Why, in my lab."

"Bring him along," instructed the Skipper and Boyette was hustled into the lab with as many men as could squeeze their way in. The drugged alien was beginning to stir feebly and the others showed their agitation with short barks as they swarmed around him. Boyette tensed. He'd have to make a break for it against impossible odds, if they discovered that he possessed their secret plans.

He concealed a sigh of relief

when the investigation again was applied through the Commander and the Exec. "What were you doing, Doctor?" Kellews asked.

"Just examining the animal, sir." Suddenly he felt inspired, "I thought what nice pets they'd make back on Earth and wanted to find out if their physical structure would permit space-travel."

The men's faces relaxed. Boyette knew his answer couldn't have been more satisfactory in view of the alien Council's plans. Still, he'd have to find some way of releasing the crew from its hypnosis before he dared reveal his discovery. He knew that the beasts' power over men depended upon full concentration. The aliens were meticulously clean and at the same time very similar to Earth canines in physical structure.

The Skipper—under compulsion from the alien attached to him—still seemed dissatisfied. "What's wrong with the creature now?" Kellews persisted.

"I injected a mild sedative to quiet it for examination."

"Wasn't that a little high-handed?" inquired the Exec testily.

Boyette carefully considered the question, realising it might be a trap. "Why, sir?" he asked. "I've examined the lower animals on other planets, even dissected them. Why should those on this planet be any different?"

Again the answer was correct. However the restless movements of the aliens indicated that his refer-

ence to them as *lower animals* must have rankled their high intelligence.

"Well," growled the Exec, "Why don't you bring him out of it? And then forget about further experiments."

There was a possibility the alien might remember something damaging when it regained its full senses. But there was an immediate danger in not complying so Boyette made a great show of cooperation. His mind darted about, trying to figure a solution for his present dilemma. He could stall only for so long—then the aliens, by their use of suggestion, might resort to direct action. He shivered, thinking of the disappearance of all the crews of the ships lying outside.

Several of the aliens again moved restlessly and he hastened the revival of the one now on its feet. He felt more and more the despair of working all alone. He accidentally brushed against one of the trays and stopped. What had happened the last time he moved one of them? The scraping noise had hurt the alien, of course! There, then, lay the solution to his problem in releasing the crew.

Boyette almost groaned aloud. How could he ever be able to produce the shrill noise continuously enough to do any good? Even one of the supersonic dog-whistles would work—if he only had one. The distraction afforded by such a noise would bring about the crew's release. Or would the aliens' superior mentality enable them to

overcome their aversion to high-pitched sounds? If they could and his purpose were diagnosed . . . Boyette preferred not to dwell on the possibility.

"What's the hold-up?" growled the Exec.

"I can't find my bottle of stimulant," Boyette replied.

His glance fell on the intercom microphone. He was desperate by now and his mind ran rapidly over the possibilities the mike opened. Every crewman was familiar with the fact that when one was opened in front of a speaker a shrill howl would result.

It was due to a feed-back of course but the important part was that the sound did result. The only drawback was that the position must be just right or he'd get nothing but a low growl. The mike was within reach so he casually moved it closer to the wall-mounted speaker.

He picked up the bottle he'd purposely overlooked until now and was reaching for the mike-button when a command was growled.

"Wait a minute!"

Boyette turned slowly and carefully to see the burly Exec bearing down on him. He considered staking everything on a quick movement but gave up the idea. If the mike wasn't in the proper position it would avail nothing.

"Yes?" he answered.

"What's in that bottle?" the Exec asked.

Boyette felt his pulse slow down

to normal. "Just the stimulant I was looking for," he explained.

"Let's see it." The bottle changed hands and the Exec examined it carefully, finally returning it with a short, "All right."

Boyette moved the still groggy and doped alien closer to the microphone, then shot the stimulant into him. The reaction was quick in coming, the animal arose to its feet with a dazed look. The rest of the aliens clustered around, silent but obviously questioning by telepathy.

For the moment Boyette was unnoticed and with no sign of haste he depressed the mike-button. There was a low hum over the intercom system, almost inaudible. Evidently it was much louder to the ears of the aliens since several peered around uneasily for the source.

He moved the mike slightly and immediately a high-pitched wail broke out. Even Boyette flinched as it grated across his nerves but to the aliens it must have represented pure physical torture.

Those still being held by crewmembers tore frantically to be free, some even biting in their frantic haste. There was a confused milling about the room, then a mass exodus through the door and out the airlock.

The men inside were almost as rattled by the time Boyette had shut off the mike. He rushed to close the outer lock with every alien now outside the ship.

He returned to the lab and laughed at the bewildered expressions on rough-and-ready crewmen. Even the normally belligerent Exec meekly looked to him for an explanation. Boyette explained the train of events since the alien animals had been contacted and what had happened to the crews they had come seeking.

Only Commander Kellews questioned his explanation, sharply inquiring, "Just a moment. How could you discover all this?"

"I'll show you," Boyette said. Before long the amazed Commander was receiving the much amplified telepathic confession of the alien.

At the end he grimly took off the helmet and announced, "Mr. Snead, have all hands go to their battle stations and stand by for takeoff. As soon as we're ready systematic destruction of every living thing on this planet will commence. Their invasion of Earth is going to backfire."

"Are you sure that such a policy of destruction would be wise, sir?" Boyette asked quietly.

The Exec's mouth dropped open in horrified astonishment at this questioning of a military order. The Commander raised a hand to forestall what he knew would be an outburst.

"That's all right, Mr. Snead. Since the Doctor was instrumental in saving all of us I believe he has a perfect right to raise an objection." He turned to Boyette, "Now

then, why shouldn't we destroy them? After all they did their damndest to destroy us."

"Well, sir," began Boyette confidently. "This is the first alien intelligent life we've run across in our space expansion. What happens now could very well determine our relations with other forms of life contacted later on.

He paused, then added, "Actually they were just defending themselves against what they considered an invasion."

"But their superior mental powers could still be dangerous to any future colonization," argued the Commander. "How do we know they won't try it again?"

"We don't," Boyette said. "Unless we convince them that we intend no harm either to them or their planet."

Commander Kellews seized this eagerly. "But how could we ever believe them if they did agree? And what assurance have we that they'll even consider cooperating? They're tricky little devils."

"I've thought that out too," Boyette said. "It all came about as a result of my examination of the one I had in here. The animals are scrupulously clean—perhaps you noticed that?"

The Commander frowned briefly, then nodded in assent.

"Also," Boyette continued, "to

control effectively a human's mind they require full concentration on the task. What I propose is the importation of common fleas from Earth. Judging by the complete absence of other forms of life I believe the lowly and ever-busy flea will be something entirely new in their life."

He grinned. "Gentlemen, have you ever watched a mongrel dog industriously rooting a flea from his hide? I believe you'll agree an alien would require quite a bit of willpower for these friendly little fellows to forget all about them."

"Well, it might just conceivably work," the Commander reluctantly agreed.

"I'd be willing to wager it would," insisted Boyette. "In addition it would leave our reputation intact. For full cooperation we could even distribute limited amounts of flea-powder. Enough so that they could remain comfortable but not enough that—in the event it should be cut off—their lives would become one long itching misery."

The old Exec chuckled. "Boy!" he roared, "You've got something. I've won a lot of battles in my life but this tops them all. This is the first time my side ever managed to win a major victory because the enemy went to the dogs!"