

THE SPECIAL EXHIBIT

It was fascinating, the one sure solution to the problem marriage



by ROBERT SHECKLEY

THE Museum was unusually deserted that morning, Mr. Grant thought, as he led Mrs. Grant across the marble-floored lobby. Which was just as well, under the circumstances.

"Good morning, sir," said the red-cheeked old museum attendant.

"Good morning, Simmons," Mr. Grant said. "This is Mrs. Grant."

Mrs. Grant nodded sulkily, and leaned against a Central American war canoe. Her shoulders were on a level with those of the paper-mâché paddler; but broader by far. Looking at them, Mr. Grant wondered, for a moment, if the Special Exhibit would work. Could it succeed on a woman so large, so strong, so set in her ways. He hoped so. Failure would be ridiculous.

"Welcome to our museum," the attendant said. "I believe this is the first time we've had the pleasure, Mrs. Grant."

"Haven't been here since I was a kid," Mrs. Grant said, stifling a yawn behind a large hand. "Mrs. Grant is not particularly interested in the storied past," Mr. Grant explained, leaning on his cane. "My work in ornithology leaves her quite unimpressed. However, she has agreed to accompany me to the Special Exhibit."

"The Special Exhibit, sir?" the attendant asked. He consulted a notebook. "I don't believe—"

"Here is my invitation," Mr. Grant said. "Yes, sir." The attendant examined the card carefully, then handed it back. "I hope you enjoy it, sir. The Special Exhibit hasn't been shown often. I think that Dr. Carver and his wife were the last to view it."

"Of course," Mr. Grant said. He knew the mild, balding Carver quite well. And Carver's thin, nagging, red-haired wife was a good friend of Mrs. Grant. The Exhibit must have been effective, for Carver had been perceptibly more cheerful at work. The Special Exhibit was, of course, a far more effective problem solver than marriage counseling, psychiatry, psychoanalysis or even simple forbearance.

It was uniquely the Museum's project. The Museum liked to have its employees happy and contented, for only then could they serve Science properly. But aside from that, the Special Exhibit was educational, and filled a distinct gap in the Museum's program.

The general public had not been informed of it, for the general public was exceedingly conservative in the face of scientific necessity. But that was as it should be, Mr. Grant told himself.

The attendant fished a key from his pocket. "Be sure to return this to me, sir," he said.

Grant nodded, and led Mrs. Grant down the hall, past glass cases inhabited by Siberian tigers and giant pandas. A water buffalo stared glassy-

eyed at them, and a family of Axis deer continued grazing in eternal peace.

"How long's this gonna take?" Mrs. Grant asked.

"Not long at all," Mr. Grant said, remembering that the Special Exhibit was noted for its swiftness.

"I've got some deliveries coming," Mrs. Grant said. "And some important things to do." Leading her past a muntjac and a spotted chevronian, Mr. Grant allowed himself to wonder, momentarily, what those important things might be. Mrs. Grant's interests seemed to center in television by day, and motion pictures by night. Of course there were the deliveries.

Mr. Grant sighed. They were so obviously ill-matched. To think that he—a small, rather delicate fellow with a large mind—would voluntarily marry a woman of such heroic proportions and meager mentality. But it happened to others; Dr. Carver, for example.

Mr. Grant smiled wilyly at the fiction of attracting opposites, at the entire romantic principle. Hadn't his work in ornithology taught him anything? Did the yellow-rumped Siskin mate with the condor? A single wild fling! How much better, he thought, if he had been content to join the French Foreign Legion, spend his inheritance in riotous living, or take to voodoo. Such ventures could, in time, be lived down. But marriage? Never. Not with Mrs. Grant as comfortable as she was.

Unless, of course, the Special Exhibit . . . "This way," Mr. Grant murmured, leading her down an unexpected corridor concealed between glass cases.

"Where is this exhibit?" Mrs. Grant demanded. "I gotta be home for my deliveries."

"Just around here," Mr. Grant said, leading her past a door marked in red, NO ADMITTANCE. He wondered about those deliveries. There seemed to be a tremendous number of them. And the delivery boy left a vile brand of cigar in the ash trays.

"Here we are," Mr. Grant said. He unlocked an iron door and walked into an immense room. The setting simulated a clearing in the jungle, and in front of them was a thatched hut. Behind that was a smaller hut, half hidden from view.

Several savages lounged on the vine-tangled ground, chattering at each other.

"They're alive!" Mrs. Grant exclaimed. "Of course. This is, you see, a new experiment in descriptive anthropology."

To one side was an ancient wrinkled woman, adding wood to a fire that crackled under a large pot. Something was bubbling in the pot.

The warriors got to their feet when they

noticed the Grants. One of them yawned and stretched, his muscles crackling.

"Magnificent fellows," Mrs. Grant whispered. "Yes," Mr. Grant said. She would notice that.

Strewn around the ground in front of the first hut were decorated wooden swords, long, slender bows, sharp cane knives. And the room was filled with a continual background chirping. Breaking into it was a frenzied clucking. A bird hooted angrily and something piped a reply.

Mrs. Grant said, "Can we go now—oh!"

One of the natives, wild and strange with his long coarse black hair and painted face, was standing beside her. Two others stood behind him. Looking at the group, Mr. Grant thought how savage Mrs. Grant really was, with her lavishly applied cosmetics, her fox skins and clanking jewelry.

"What do they want?" Mrs. Grant asked, eyeing the half-naked men with something less than fear.

"They'd like you to examine the village," Mr. Grant said. "It's part of the exhibit."

Mrs. Grant noticed that the first native was eying her with an admiring look and she allowed herself to be led forward.

She was shown the cooking pot, the weapons, the decorations on the first hut. Then the natives led her to the second hut, and one of them winked and beckoned her inside.

"Educational," she said, winking back, and followed him in. The other two natives entered, one picking up a cane knife before he went in.

"You didn't tell me they were supposed to be head hunters!" Mrs. Grant's voice floated faintly from the hut. "Have you seen all the shrunken heads?"

Mr. Grant nodded to himself. It was amazing, how hard those heads were to come by. The South American authorities had begun cracking down on their export. The Special Exhibit was, perhaps, the sole remaining source of this unique folk skill.

"One's got red hair. It looks just like Mrs.—"

"There was a scream, and then the sound of a furious battle. Mr. Grant held his breath. There were three of them, to be sure, but Mrs. Grant was a very strong woman. Certainly she couldn't—"

One of the natives came dancing out of the hut, and the hag by the fire picked up a few ominous instruments, and went inside. Whatever was in the pot continued to boil merrily.

Mr. Grant sighed with relief and decided that he had seen enough. After all, anthropology wasn't his line. He locked the iron door behind him and headed for the ornithology wing, deciding that Mrs. Grant's deliveries were not sufficiently important to require his presence. #