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It was purely by accident that he passed Earth in his galactic travels. But it became a matter of design that he land there, because—

# The Vegans Were Curious

by

Winston Marks

THE little sun was almost a light-year out of his way, and he could have made it on to Sirius without stopping. But the thirst within him was strong. The delicious, yellow sun with its rich corona and tiny, tantalizing streamers was too tempting to pass up. Even before its gravitic currents were strong enough to be of utility, he was decided. He would pause. He would gorge himself. He would drink until he was blue-white.

The thought was the first pleasant, sensuous one he had allowed himself on the long journey. In his haste to indulge, he ignored the nine planets which normally would have attracted at least a curious glance from him. Not until he veered physically to avoid the third planet from the sun was he distracted from his goal.

A bevy of the clumsy little spaceships from distant Vega were swarming just outside the planet's

turgid atmosphere. As he approached, one of the Vegans noted his presence and hailed him.

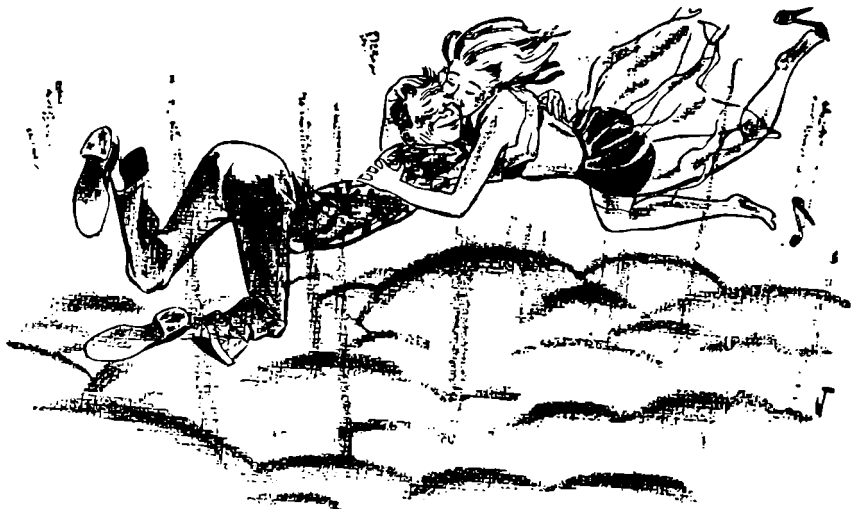
"Greetings, Sirian! Stop a bit and give us your worthy opinion."

Although the message took but half a micro-second, the Sirian was almost past the planet's pale satellite before he could repolarize his photons and reverse his direction. Being the haughty creatures they were, the Vegan's invitation was both unusual and provocative.

The Sirian noted, as he returned, that the flight of one-man-disks seemed gathered about a mushroom-shaped cloud of opaque, gaseous matter, entirely cold except for a modest radio-activity.

When he shot out an open query, the Vegan answered, "They did it! Those incredible little organic creatures down on the surface."

"Creatures? You mean there is an intelligent *organic* life-form on



this planet?" the Sirian asked somewhat incredulously. He had passed this system a hundred times without suspecting such a thing.

"Well, not exactly intelligent in a galactic sense, but likely you'll agree that the principles of fission and fusion are somewhat remarkable to find mastered by a planet-bound life-form as primitive as these entities. They are ordinary, liquid-and-solid, carbon-ring, ferro-protein, bi-symmetrical bipeds — you know, the kind you find scattered about on these oxygen-rich planets. But imagine! Nuclear manipulation!"

The Sirian found the paradox both curious and amusing. Never, to his knowledge, had solid-matter life-forms advanced beyond a

rudimentary use of chemical combustion reactions, and even those who did master fire more often worshipped it than made a sensible use of it.

"Interesting! Interesting, indeed. I think I will have a look."

"We were hoping you would," the Vegan replied. "We've done all the investigating we dare."

"How is that?"

"They've spotted us, we think. Every time we come close to the surface they dispatch little gas-expulsion vessels to chase us."

"Why don't you simply land and establish communications?"

"With our limitations we're not that curious. They're a violent, vicious, suspicious lot — some two or three billion of them. And they

have some nasty little weapons at their disposal. Their nature seems to be to hate what they don't understand. Shoot first and question later."

"Thanks for the warning —"

"Not that you need it. With your metamorphic abilities you can easily —"

"Of course. Now, on what question did you seek my opinion?"

The Vegan was slow in answering, as if the question were still hazy in his mind. Then he said, "Our observations seem to indicate that these creatures are divided into two general categories, but the only distinctions we can detect are so superficial as to be ridiculous. One is in the manner of attiring themselves, and the other —" He paused as if reluctant.

"Yes, yes?"

"Well, this may seem fatuous, but all reproduction appears to be confined to *one of the types.*"

"That would be unique," the Sirian granted.

"But if this is true, there must be more important differences between the two types," the Vegan went on. "Basic differences, one would expect."

"Then your question to me is, what are these differences, if any?"

"Precisely."

How very typical of the superficial Vegan mentality, the Sirian

thought to himself. Worrying themselves over some minor biological detail, when the obviously fascinating mystery lay in the creatures' ability to cause nuclear fission and fusion. These thoughts he screened from them, for the Vegans are quick to take offense, a rather childish lot, for all of their advanced culture.

"Very well, I will look into that, too," he agreed and with appropriate, interstellar amenities, took his leave Earthward.

HE looked for a concentration of "people," and he found one, scattered along two miles of sandy beach adjacent to a nervously lapping body of liquid which was aqueous, saline and incredibly full of lower life-forms.

He hovered over the heads of the bathers at an altitude of less than fifty feet, his person distributed almost the whole two miles of beach. The sun being at its zenith, no one looked directly up, and if they had they would have seen only a faint, golden glow.

He scanned the general atomic-molecular-cellular-structural patterns of the entities, inventoried his own energy content, decided he could just about make it, and set about carefully condensing his photons. As the swirling energy came to a focus, people still did

not stare up, but hundreds sought the shade of their beach umbrellas, donned their sun-glasses or decided they'd had enough for today.

Presently, he had himself organized into a ball of evanescence two-hundred yards in diameter, all ready for the final compression. This was the most tedious metamorphosis he had ever attempted — all those nerve-endings, hair follicles, pores, sweat-glands!

He found a bare patch of sand, some fifteen feet across, just vacated by a family of fourteen. In a rush he sought to complete the transformation before the crowd expanded into it.

But wait! There was one decision more. He had, indeed, discovered that there were two kinds of "humans" on the beach. The physiological differences seemed very minor, and the deciding factor was that one category wore attire only in one place, whereas the other covered its body at two points, thus excluding a bit more of the delicious radiance of the golden sun.

He decided to be a male.

"Well, he's got his nerve!"

"I should say so! Looka the skinny little runt, right in the middle a that nice empty spot."

"Tell 'im to move over Fred. We saw it first."

The Sirian smiled at the palpable

lie. "Please share it with me," he said pleasantly, scooting over to one side.

His move was too precipitous. A long-legged blonde creature, pink and supine, hunched to a sitting position. "Watch it, junior. You kicked sand all over my sun-tan lotion."

"Oh, sorry!" He sent a super-gentle wave of vibratory energy out to wipe off the offending grains of silica.

"Yipe! Why you fresh punk!" Then the blonde discovered that the fresh punk was still six feet away. She turned to her henna-haired companion. "Ye Gods, what a sensation! Goose flesh, yet." She rubbed on some more lotion, turned over on her side and dug her blue-clad hip into the sand under her blanket.

The Sirian studied the shapely back and buttocks, for which, in his brand new orientation, he seemed to possess a peculiar aesthetic appreciation. The intruder called Fred, in the act of spreading his blanket, noticed his stare and laughed. "She's not for the likes of you, Super-mouse."

The idiomatic allusion escaped the Sirian. He had thought he had the language pattern mastered in his initial survey, but the item, Super-mouse, apparently had a remote significance.

**I**NSTINCTIVELY, he lashed out a sub-etheric feeler to probe the man's brain — and just as instantly retrieved it. To his annoyance he discovered an extremely sensitive and complex net-work of brain-waves encasing and protecting the frontal lobes of the man's thinking apparatus. Yes, his "subconscious" mind was easily available, and therein was stored a fabulous assortment of inconsequential, intellectual debris, including a knowledge of the language, but to sift and sort that disorganized nest for one silly term seemed like more trouble than asking what it meant.

So he did.

Fred replied, "You don't know Super-mouse? You should go to the movies. Anyhow, I just meant you could use some meat on your bones, fellow."

He turned and dropped beside the brown-haired female beside him. "What a character!" he told her.

The Sirian looked down at himself and understood the disparaging tone. This point in his intergalactic journey had found his energy store quite depleted, and the best he could "condense" into was a rather grotesque, five-foot caricature of the specimens surrounding him.

His bony feet, knees and elbows wore the minimum allowable thick-

nesses of flesh, but what seemed to amuse the neighbors most was his very pale skin. This was by design rather than accident. Why pigment his skin to exclude the intoxicating solar energy that was flooding his pitiful earthform? If he had dared, he would have changed his translucent skin to complete transparency, but that would have been too noticeable.

He became aware, also, that people were staring at the region of his groin. Before he had time to probe his mistake of attire, however, another couple moved into the shrinking bare spot of sand and challenged his right to three whole square yards.

"Consolidate, will ya, mister?" The male was huge, hairy and small-eyed. The female was the opposite. The only visible hair was a rippling torrent of yellow gold that fell down her back in a graceful sweep. She was tiny, tanned — and —the Sirian fumbled with his new vocabulary — terrific!

Again that peculiar sensation of pleasure sent bubbles of pressure into his throbbing temple veins. He had a name for the weird desire it inspired. *Rut*, it was called, but he had no experience from which to assess it.

Unfortunately, the man before him assessed his emotion swiftly and accurately. "Whatcha gapin'

at, squirt?"

"Why, uh, your female —" The man's face darkened, and the Sirian rushed on searching for a more propitious term, "I mean, your broad, wife, sweetheart, girl, doll, honey —"

Hampered by the sluggish mental equipment in this human format, he was unable to select a semantically acceptable synonym, so he blurted all he could think of.

"Why, you —"

He felt himself hoisted rudely by one thin arm, and suddenly the large, dark face was jammed into his own. "Whadda ya mean, layin' there in a broad's Bikini bathin' suit and callin' my broad a broad? What kind of a queer are you, anyhow?"

"Oh, I'm very," the Sirian managed to strangle out.

"Very what?"

"What you said. Queer." He had no desire to offend these people, but their expression indicated that his progress was poor.

"Are you trying to be insulting?" The man asked the question and seemed to arrive at an affirmative answer simultaneously. He balled a fist and pumped it solidly into the Sirian's midriff.

**A**NTICIPATING pain from the violent gesture, he blocked off the nerve endings, reinforced his

stomach muscles at the expense of some bony tissue, and leaned into the blow. Transmuting the kinetic energy into assimilable light, the Sirian enjoyed the tiny tweak of power.

The big man jerked back his wrist and stared at it. "Like a rock, yet. Huh! Wipe that smirk off, Mac."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Still snotty, huh?" The big fellow slammed two lefts and two rights to the body with no more effect.

The gorgeous blonde said, "Oh stop, Tony. He's one of these whaddayacallems — masochists. He likes to get slugged. Now stop it, I tell you, or the cops will —"

But Tony was unstoppable. Infuriated, he aimed a round-house right at the Sirian's chin, and that individual, fearing for the structural inadequacies of his neck, ducked.

Tony launched himself at full length in the direction of the blue-buttocked blonde but made it only as far as her upright bottle of sun-tan lotion. He crashed to the sand with considerable force. Twisting his neck to save his nose from the sand, Tony brought his temple in deadly line with the little rigid bottle.

From the solid jam of humanity came voices. "Wow, did you see

the little guy counter-punch him?  
Just like lightning."

"Naw, The big guy stumbled. He hit his head."

"On the bottle."

"The little guy? Yeah, he jabbed the big guy with the bottle. Dirty fighting, I call it, even if he is littler."

"Here they come. Hey shorty, here come the cops. Better melt away quick."

Things were out of focus for the Sirian. He lost the opportunity to "melt away" and was shortly in custody.

The hearing and, later, the trial was so farcical as to be fascinating. He hadn't intended an extensive study of the mores and morals of this primitive culture, but the Sirian couldn't resist the intriguing developments that piled one on top of the other.

In the so-called court of law, not a single witness to the actual "murder" appeared, except the terrific blonde. Yet a sizable parade of strangers did appear to identify the accused and testify to his cold-blooded act of violence.

It developed that:

A. Tony was a gangster-politician of some note.

B. Tony had mortal enemies in the underworld.

C. Tony had been deliberately baited.

D. The Sirian had carefully jabbed him in the temple.

C. The crime was premeditated.

D. The Sirian was a well-known judo-killer named Mike Sledge, of the opposing underworld. (This last from the D. A's office).

The verdict was: GUILTY.

The penalty: DEATH.

As a last wish, the convicted man was granted the privilege of immediate execution rather than enduring the usual delay.

This last threw the death-house into quite an uproar, but the Sirian had no intention of languishing for weeks in confinement.

Exactly at midnight, he was led to the death chamber, sleeves and pant-legs slit, head shaved and belly full of fried chicken to which he had taken a fancy.

There was the priest, the press and the other witnesses. The chair looked ugly and uncomfortable, but the crackling jolts of electricity were worth it. They sent trickles of pure ecstasy through the Sirian's power-thirsty being. But they were only trickles, and comparatively short. They tried him at 30,000 volts, 40,000, 50,000. But then he deliberately lowered his body resistance in order to drink up more amperage and blew all the fuses.

They held him twenty-four hours



out of pure curiosity while the doctors had a field day. But the press championed his cause, and he was set free.

THE blonde was waiting in a black Cadillac. The blonde had just collected Tony's insurance and was now obsessed with the thought that any guy who could soak up electricity like that must have shocking possibilities.

The Sirian settled back in the leopard-skin upholstery and sighed. As the vehicle moved off into the darkness, a soft, perfumed arm slipped around his neck. "My poor, poor Mike," the voice came like the purr of a mink. "I'll bet he doesn't feel well. Please don't be angry with little me for testifying against you."

"Don't mention it," Mike replied. "And I feel very well, thank you." This was the truth. With nearly a million watts of pure 60-cycle A. C. under his belt, the Sirian had been able to expand his puny physique slightly. At least his red blood count was up to normal now.

"Only one thing," he remarked, "I am tired of being pestered with reporters. Where could we go to escape them?"

"Oh dear, that is a problem." She looked out the rear window. "They are following, of course.

And they'll have my pent-house staked out like sharks around a desert island."

"That reminds me," Mike said. "This Bikini I was wearing at the time of the crime —"

She giggled. "You did look silly."

"Well, what I want to know is, why did they call my trunks by such a name? My understanding is that Bikini is the name of an island in the Pacific Ocean."

"Yeah, I guess. Where they popped the H-bomb."

"H-bomb?" At last the hazy double meaning became clear to him. His subconscious survey of many human minds had found nuclear energy mixed up with females' scanty bathing attire, and the connection had evaded him until this moment. "Could we see one if we went there?"

"One what?"

"An H-bomb, of course."

"Oh, naturally. The government would just love to show us how they shoot off a H-bomb," she said. He missed the sarcasm entirely. "Matter of fact, they're testing out there again this week. Why don't you call up the president."

"That won't be necessary," he said seriously. In the space of eight micro-seconds, he volatilized, visited the Pentagon, stripped the exact

location of the next nuclear bomb detonation from an agonized general, and returned to the Cadillac. The blonde, of course, was unaware of his brief absence.

"Just as I thought," he told her. "It's a nice, secluded spot where you and I can be all alone for a little while. And I can poke around and see what makes these bombs tick."

"Fine, fine," she purred in his ear. "Let's go."

She thought he was kidding.

It was an hour before dawn on the atoll when he re-materialized the Cadillac, blonde and all, on the coral beach. Only the chauffeur had been left behind.

"What's that sound," she cried a little startled.

"Just the surf."

"Be darned! I don't remember telling Smith to drive us to — oh well, it's quiet, isn't it honey?"

The Sirian sent out a probe and located the tower with the huge nuclear device suspended below it. He was about to close in and focus on the construction and composition when the voice in his ear hissed intimately, "Mike, darling, where are you?"

"Me? Why, I'm right here."

"Hadda feeling you were miles away."

"Not at all. Just about twenty-five yards is all. It's located right

over there."

"What's located where?"

"The hydrogen bomb. Just over that first hump. You can see the tower."

"Don't be silly," she said giggling. "It's jet black out there. Real dark, and private, and Smith's gone off somewhere. We're all alone, darling. Just like you wanted."

AND now the Sirian, alias Mike Sledge, learned that there were other than visual methods of aesthetic appreciation. Hundred-dollar-a-dram perfume assailed his olfactory tissues from her warm body, turning certain miniscule glands within him into busy chemical factories.

Her finger-tips trailed over his shaved head, and he almost threw out a nerve block before he realized that the sensation was psycho-physical rather than electronic.

"Show me!" she whispered.

"Show you what?"

"How you did it. How you fought back all that juice. All that terrible electricity!"

"I didn't fight it. I just soaked it up."

"Soaked it —?" She gasped, and the passion was vibrant in her voice. "It's — it's all in you? Now?"

"Of course."

"Oh, my darling! Kiss me!"

The custom of kissing, was known to the Sirian, but known only on the academic level until this moment. Her lips were moist and full and demanding.

"Fantastic!" she said in a flat voice.

"Well, thank you," he said, sitting back with a ridiculous feeling of smug pleasure at her response.

"Fantastic how a guy can sweat out the hot-seat and kiss like a highschool sophomore." Her tone of voice led him to delve into the idiomatic roots of her words, and he came away deflated.

"I, ah, let's try again," he suggested.

He had been holding himself slightly aloof from the sensation thresholds of this primitive body, but now he let himself sink deeply into the full neuro-muscular morass of feelings and emotions. The effect was astonishing, confusing, overwhelming.

Tearing his lips loose he demanded, "What is it?"

"What's what?"

"This — this, whatever we're doing?" Somehow they had become oddly entwined, and his tactile sensations were blossoming like a nova.

Her head slipped past his face, and her sharp teeth nibbled at his ear. "You *are* a strange one, honey.

It's kissing. It's love-making. And incidentally, you're doing all right now. Kiss me again, honey. All those volts! Make me feel it. Make me —"

He piled his hastily contrived, but entirely functional, orbicular organs upon hers so hard that their teeth clashed. The nova inside him burgeoned and whirled as though feeding on some hidden hydrogen-helium infusion. Minutes flashed into eternity. Then an hour, and the crazy crescendo of emotion was still mounting between them.

Then at the first streak of dawn, his bony arms crushed her to him in a clasp that sent the universe exploding in one solid bath of pure, nutrient energy.

His pores opened, and he drank — for one micro-second, two micro-seconds, three, four, five — and suddenly he found himself reeling into the stratosphere, up, up, out of the cloying air into the comfortable, naked void, trailing neutrons, extravagantly, strewing protons, hiccupping electrons. At last he stabilized his mass-energy ratio, drew in his peripheral photons and shimmered to a trembling focus.

**I**NSTANTLY he was surrounded with Vegans, chittering with curiosity, dipping and oscillating their silvery disks in the raw, unfiltered light of the yellow sun.

"Did you learn anything?"

"A little."

"Did you — metamorphose as a native?" they asked expectantly.

"I did," he admitted reluctantly.

"Well, tell us about it. All about it!"

"I was accused of murder, tried in a court of law, convicted, sentenced to death and executed."

"Irrelevant," a Vegan snapped.

"Tell us about the two categories. Did you find out about that?"

"Yes."

"It there a significant difference?"

"They call it sex," the Sirian temporized.

"Come, come, delete the alien terminology."

"There are men — and there are women," he said, striving to gather his thoughts and his dignity about him. It was no use. The patina of his vastly expanded corona was a dead, pink giveaway. "Just one minute ago," he confessed, "I was a man, juxtaposed with a woman, exploring the differences between the categories."

"Were the differences important? Significant?"

"To the humans, *very!*" He tried to sound detached.

The Vegans wouldn't be put a side. "Naturally they'd be important to the primitives, but how about to you? Subjectively?"

"A few minor anatomical differences, that's all. Added up to very little." His words were belied by tiny streaks of badly polarized photons.

The Vegans radiated ripples of disappointment, losing what little patience they possessed. One blurted out angrily, "Very well, if you can't explain sex, what about the nuclear reactions? You should be an expert on that subject. You appeared to ascend from the very island where they just fused a lithium-hydride bomb."

"Bomb?" the Sirian said dazedly. "What bomb?"

The Vegans circled him and vibrated with cynical laughter. "So this mysterious sex had no impact upon you?"

The void was filled with their noxious, ill-mannered jeers, but the Sirian was still too disorganized to feel very embarrassed.

"What happened to the female — the *woman* you said you were with — what happened to her?" asked a Vegan.

The Sirian involuntarily phased his photons into a mental image of the voluptuous, golden-haired native girl, but without the primitive earth-body with which to react endocrinologically, the vision failed to renew the corpuscular palpitations which were already damping out.

“The woman?” he repeated wistfully turning toward his home star and venting a cosmic sigh. “You might say she met with a Sirius accident.”

THE END