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"THEY HAD RHYTHM!"

by
Kent Casey



Private Kelton finds the home-planet of the jitterbugs

CAPTAIN CARROLL had finished his breakfast and was thumbing over the file of radio flimsies received during the night. There were the usual sheaf of routine schedule reports, the usual number of

messages to Corporal This and Private That regarding baby's new tooth and "Did you register the allotment?" One suddenly caught his attention for it was addressed to him.

"Orion reports deposit believed to be

tantalum pentoxide crystals in stream at Long. 128° W., Lat. 30° 15' N., on planet Merovingia in Formalhaut System. Earth's supplies of tantalum practically exhausted. *Beagle* directed to delay arrival at Rigel VI to investigate and confirm discovery. If crystals tantalum take formal possession according Interplanetary Treaty of August, 2483. Advise."

"Orderly," called Captain Carroll, "ask Mr. Stoney to come here, please."

Commander Stoney read the order and looked up, questioning. "I hope it's true," he said. "The visor illuminators we've been getting recently are terrible. Visors all blurry and flickering. The shops back home could use some tantalum, all right."

Carroll nodded. "Yes, it's a valuable find if true. But what I am wondering—we're shorthanded now, and the Base on Rigel VI needs every man of this garrison company we're bringing them. The treaty is specific as to legal claim to a mineral discovery. To make Earth's title clear we must leave at least one man in residence for forty-five days, during which he must actually do some work on the claim. We can't spare any of the officers, and we need all our men, too."

Stoney rubbed his jutting chin thoughtfully. "Captain, how would Kelton do? He's bright, and he knows a lot of stuff—but he's completely worthless aboard ship most of the time. Works well when he decides to work, but that isn't often. Chronic ship jumper, too. Marooning him for two months might do him good."

Carroll looked up interested. "The very man!" he said. "He won't do much work on the claim, but if he picks up one crystal a day, it will satisfy the law. Orderly! I want Private Kelton."

When Kelton appeared, he was obviously worried. Summons to the cabin usually meant trouble. He had thought

that, for the time being, his conscience was clear—he could remember no fault committed since his last punishment. He saluted stiffly and stood silent.

"Kelton," Carroll began, "do you know anything about crystals?"

"Not much, sir. A little."

Carroll explained the *Beagle's* new orders and what they implied. "And I think," he concluded, "that this detail may be for your benefit as well as ours. You will be left with plenty of provisions and supplies, and you will of course have a force-pistol in case you encounter any dangerous animals. Merovingia is supposed to be uninhabited, but nobody knows very much about it. If there are human or semihuman people there, endeavor to avoid any trouble with them. To make the claim legal, you must find and store at least one crystal every twenty-four hours, for the forty-five days' work must be continuous. The ship will be back to pick you up two months after you land."

KELTON still kept silent, but his eyes showed lively interest. "Remember," the captain continued sternly, "that you will be on duty twenty-four hours a day! You will have food and medical stores, but nothing to drink. During your stay, besides the crystals, you must put up a marker with the name of the ship, your own name, and the dates of your residence deeply carved. Understand?"

Kelton saluted again. "Yes, sir. When do I begin?"

"Day after tomorrow. That's all, Kelton. Have your kit ready for inspection by tomorrow afternoon."

"I hope he doesn't go to sleep on this job," Stoney commented as the private left the cabin.

"I don't think he will," rejoined the captain. "He's a queer fish. Apparently can't work unless he's interested. When he is, he's a good man. Scatter-brain. He must have something new all

the time. Well, he's getting a big dose of novelty this time."

News never remains long a secret in a cruising ship. Orderlies overhear, yeomen who have taken dictation look wise until cornered and "reluctantly" made to tell, radio men gossip. When Kelton slouched into his seat at the mess table, he was at once bombarded with questions and commiserated.

"Golly, sixty days all alone on a strange planet! I'd rather be in the brig!" commented Carson.

"That's what comes of being a bum!" grimly admonished Sergeant McClure. "If you behaved yourself and worked now and then you wouldn't get a detail like that."

Kelton yawned and waved a hand airily. "You birds annoy me. You have no spirit of adventure at all. It would suit you fine and dandy if nothing ever happened. Little busy bees, you are. Me, I'm different. Excitement is what I like."

"Yeah, excitement! Doing your own cooking and policing your own camp. Picking up pebbles and building a claim marker. Merovingia's uninhabited, they say. There'll be no bright lights and beer."

"Well, it'll be sixty days I won't have to listen to your chatter, Big Boy. Two months of my own company won't be so bad."

When Merovingia came into view the chaff grew heavier. "Will you look at the size of that mudball! Kel, you're going to have about double gravity to fight from the looks of it. Those big feet of yours will weigh a ton apiece!"

"Then I'll lie down and roll!" Kelton retorted. "And anyhow, I'd rather sit still."

WITH LITTLE difficulty, the stream in question was located—wide, shallow, and coursing over a glistening gravel bed. As the air was still, the *Beagle* swung low to a repeller anchor rather than land; and an exploring party scrambled down a short rope ladder to

the river bank, pawing over the gravel. Rhombic crystals were scattered all through the deposit.

"Looks like tantalum pentoxide all right," Commander Stoney said. "We'll take a couple aboard and give 'em a flame test to make sure. *Oof!*" he grunted as he straightened up and started back toward the ship. "Kelton, you ought to develop some leg muscles before you leave here. I feel like I was carrying a wardrobe trunk!"

Analysis having proved the crystals to be tantalum without a doubt, a tent was quickly set up on the river bank and ample provisions stacked across one end of it. Kelton groaned inwardly as he lugged his field kit and tool chest to his new quarters; and his banjo with its steel-rimmed head was a real burden. The effort to lift his feet made him roll from side to side like a dancing bear. "Here's one place you won't run away from!" he muttered to himself.

Nevertheless, he kept a superior and grinning countenance as he waved farewell to the departing ship. The *Beagle* slipped out of sight rapidly. Kelton began to realize that he was alone.

Laboriously he trudged the few feet to the river bed. His heavy feet, dragged by the tremendous gravity, stumbled; and he fell to his hands and knees. The shock of his increased weight numbed his wrists. "*Wheew!*" he whistled. "I got to be careful or I'll bust a bone. And *that* wouldn't be funny!" He rubbed his wrists back to normal, and still on his knees, looked at the gravel.

Without moving, he was able to pick up three of the colorless, rhombic crystals. "Well," he philosophized, "there's three days' work done! Nothing to do till tomorrow." Moving gingerly, he slowly plodded back to his tent and, lying flat on his back, stared at the clear sky. Little wander-clouds drifted lazily across the blue and the soft breeze kept

the forest murmuring. Kelton went to sleep.

It was mid-afternoon when he aroused, cramped from sleeping on the hard gravel. Getting up was an effort. "Damn this heavy planet! How is a guy to do anything weighted down like this?" Hunger forced some effort, however. He opened a can of beans and slowly devoured them, with an effort tossing the empty can out into the current of the stream. It acted as though a rubber band snapped it to the ground. After a time, though not so hungry, from sheer boredom, he broke into a can of corned beef and sat munching gloomily. Sixty days like this! He had forgotten to bring anything to read. "Doggone if I won't be forced to work in self-defense," he sighed.

He went to his tool chest and selected the lightest maul and chisel he could find, and a piece of chalk. He plodded to the cliff face behind his camp and began to lay out his marker inscription, chalking the letters carefully and viewing the effect with head cocked on one side.

ALAN KELTON, PVT. S. P., SS.
BEAGLE OF TERRA CLAIMS THIS
DEPOSIT OF MINERALS IN THE
NAME OF THE TERRAN GOVERN-
MENT. IN COMPLIANCE WITH
LAW THIS CLAIM HAS BEEN
WORKED FROM AUGUST 19, 2499,
TO OCTOBER 1, 2499, INCLUSIVE.
CLAIM RUNS FROM SOURCE TO
MOUTH OF RIVER.

"That's too darned much stone to cut," he admitted to himself and rubbed out his legend. After several attempts at composition, he at last got it to his liking.

A. KELTON, TERRA, SS. BEAGLE,
8/19/2499 10/1/2499. MINING
CLAIM ENTERED ENTIRE RIVER.

"That's better," he said to himself, picked up his maul and chisel and wearily cut the letter "A." "A crystal

a day and a letter a day. Let's see . . . no, there are sixty-three letters. That won't do." Solemnly pondering the question, he changed the word "entered" to "make." That came out just right!

Back in his tent, he finished the corned beef, and, as the sun had set some time before, rolled onto his cot and slept till morning.

Daybreak found him awake and his first movement taught him that his muscles were lame and stiff. Huh! This gravity sure is something! Couldn't be lamer if I'd swung a pick all day yesterday. Damn! Now I've got to work or something to get this soreness out.

Creaking and groaning, he waded into the shallow stream and sat neck-deep in the sunlit water. After soaking luxuriously for half an hour, he left the water, picking up crystals as he waded for shore. "Combining business with pleasure, by gosh! I've worked the claim this day already."

By the time he had gathered enough driftwood for a fire, made coffee and scrambled a small package of desiccated eggs his legs felt better. "I'm beginning to get the hang of it, I guess. But my arms feel like lead. Kel, old-timer, it's good the gang can't see you. They'd razz your life out. Old Private Kelton working when nobody's looking! Huh!"

Maul and chisel were set to work. It was hard to lift his lame arms at first, but by the time the sun and his appetite told him it was again mealtime, he had chipped "KEL" in the soft limestone following the "A." of last night. He looked at his work with an approving eye. He tried to loaf through the afternoon, and he took another bath in the river. Once or twice he reached for his banjo, but his weary arms decided to let it lie. Aching and bored, he again went to sleep.

AT THE END of six days, the bag in the tent held nearly a half-bushel of

tantalum crystals and the marker was more than half done. Leg muscles were beginning to bulge at calf and thigh and his arms felt almost natural. Life here wasn't so bad after all, but he wished he'd something to read or a pup to play with. Again he reached for the banjo, and this time it didn't feel so drearily heavy. As he started to settle it on his knee he found the butt of his pistol in the way. Unslinging the belt he hung the gun on his tent pole. His evening fire was blazing brightly in front of the tent, throwing flickering red lights over the shadowy forest. He tuned the banjo and began idly to strum an ancient, jingling tune, improvising words as he played. He hummed for a few bars and then lifted up his clear, high tenor.

"*There's a Geiger tube in the dynamo room,*" he carolled.

*"It fills my days chock-full of gloom!
When I want to have fun and start to
get gay,
'Tut! Tut! Tut!' says the Cosmic Ray!"*

Da! De, di, do! Plink! Plunk! rattled the banjo. Then Kelton stopped, listening intently. Was that something moving back there in the trees? But he could hear nothing besides the forest rustle, so he again began to pluck the strings.

*"Oh, the work in the dynamo room is
tough.
I do what I can, but it never is—"*

His breath left him in the middle of a note and he stared, appalled. An eighteen-inch, copper-colored hand had grasped his front tent pole—the one on which his gun was hung. There was a wrench and a snapping of guyropes, and his tent was flung up and back toward the cliff, leaving him sitting on his cot and staring into the grim, expressionless faces of half a dozen tawny giants. They appeared eight or nine feet tall to his bewildered eyes, and about four feet

across the shoulders. Lank black hair fell around their faces, and they wore clumsily made tunics of what looked like smoke-tanned cowhide. They gazed down at Kelton, their eyes unwinking, and muttered excitedly to each other. The banjo slipped from Kelton's nerveless hands and fell to the ground with a musical crash.

One of the giants immediately picked it up, staring with puzzled eyes. He gently poked the strings with a great, blunt finger, and the banjo's resultant "Brrrrmp!" so startled him that he nearly dropped it. The banjo passed from hand to hand in a flurry of guttural chattering, then one of the giants held it out to Kelton.

"Doggone! He wants me to play it again!" With shaky hands, a shiver down his spine, Kelton twanged at the strings. The giants squatted in a ring around him. He began to play jigs, rags, dance tunes with intricate breaks. The giants swayed in unison. As the music grew livelier, they rose to their feet and began to stamp and swing. Now and then one of them would bay like a moon-struck hound.

"Why, darn their big hides, they've got rhythm! They're whacky!" and Kelton's fingers flew still faster.

Then with a shout, a giant seized Kelton, banjo and all, and swung him to his shoulder. Half running, half dancing, the giants trotted into the dark up river, grunting in time to their pounding feet. Whipping branches slashed across Kelton's face, and as he put up his arms to avoid them, a giant took the banjo from his hands. Then an overhanging bough gave him a sharp rap on the forehead and Kelton lost consciousness. But the giants ran on.

THE *Beagle* had found the fuel tanks on Rigel VI almost depleted, so the ship had to wait for nearly two weeks until a tanker arrived with fresh supplies. When at last she was able to start her

return voyage, both captain and executive were anxious. "Kelton had a good lot of stores, but he's so damned careless. We've got to make time getting back to him," Stoney said nervously.

Carroll nodded silently. Even without the delay, he had been dubious at times, and wished that he could have left at least two men behind. After Stoney's description of the gravity-pull of Merovingia he had often had an uneasy vision of Kelton alone with a broken leg. Parks, the engineer, was jamming on every ounce of speed of which the old ship was capable; but Merovingia was a long way off.

Arrived at last, no time was lost in getting down to the river bank. At the deserted camp site the horrified captain saw Kelton's tent torn and collapsed in a tangle of broken guys and snapped pegs. The majority of his provisions, untouched, lay in a tumbled heap. The gravel was trodden, but was too loose to have retained anything resembling a footprint. To Carroll's intense relief he could find no bloodstains—"but it might have rained," he warned himself.

His first surprise stopped him in his tracks as the little party reached the cliff face. In deep, four-inch capitals appeared the legend, "A. KELTON, TERRA SS. *BEAGLE*, 8/19/2499-10/1/2499. MINING CLAI—"

"Something got him before he could finish his marker," Carroll said sadly. "Why didn't I leave two men?"

"Captain, look there!" cried Corporal Mellor, and pointed. Stacked neatly against the cliff were over a hundred great bags of untanned hide, each filled to the lip with crystals. Smearred in some red pigment on the side of each was "SS. *Beagle*. A. Kelton, Pvt. S. P."

"He must have worked like a beaver!" Carroll said. "From the looks of his supplies he can't have been much more than a week here."

"Kel never did all that, captain!" Mellor insisted. "I'll go bail he's made

friends somehow and had help. Besides, where would he get bags like that?"

"That's true! I hope you're right, Mellor. We must find what became of him anyhow. Scatter and look for traces, lads."

It was laborious trudging, and the men had to stop every few feet to rest from the strain of working against the gravity. In a wide fan they spread out and slowly worked their way up the river. In the first hour they barely succeeded in covering a quarter mile. Carroll was about to call a halt for rest when Carson yelled from the river bank. "I've found something, sir! Good Lord, come look at this!"

At the edge of the trees, where gravel gave way to humus, the appalled men saw a number of footprints. But what footprints! Nearly twenty-four inches long, but undoubtedly human. A well-worn path through the forest led up the hill.

"And they told us this dump was uninhabited!" grunted Mellor.

CAPTAIN CARROLL looked grim. "Applegate," he ordered, "go back to the ship and tell Commander Stoney what we have found. Tell him that if I am not back on board by nightfall he is to send a heavy-armed search party tomorrow morning. But meanwhile, keep all hands on board and keep a bright lookout, with ladders up. Mellor, Carson—you two come with us. Keep your pistols handy, but don't shoot at anything unless I give the word. Up the trail!"

For another painful hour they trudged, the path becoming plainer and plainer. At last it forked, and the three leg-weary men halted gratefully to consider which path to follow. The question was soon decided for them. Around the bend of the right-hand branch there came five huge, copper-colored men at a swinging run, a great leather bag of crystals on the back of each. Their eyes

and mouths opened as they spied the trio of Earthmen, but they did not slacken their pace. As they flashed past, the expression of their blank faces might have been a grin or a snarl—just a toothy slit in a swarthy expanse of brown skin. Startlingly, they shouted in unison as they passed.

"*Ta! Ta! Ta! Sissa kaumy kray!*" they roared like a trained cheering section, their great feet thumping in time with the words.

For the first time, the captain's face began to clear. "I begin to think you're right, Mellor. Kelton must be alive, for those bags were marked in his writing and the paint was still wet! He's found some way to get those giants to help him."

"Kel would! He's just the boy to do it," Mellor chuckled. "I wish I could run in this damn gravity the way those big guys can. Golly, what muscles they've got!"

"I wish I knew what they were saying," Carroll said. "Still, they showed us the way. Let's go."

Carson was frowning. "They sounded to me like they were trying to sing," he said. "To sing something I know . . . the tune anyhow. '*La, la, la, la, la, la*—' yeah! Captain, I bet Kel taught 'em that tune! 'And another little drink won't do us any harm!' Don't you get it?"

"Well, we'd better find him. Come ahead," Carroll laughed. "Uh! This is hard walking!"

But just then the path behind them trembled again under the feet of the giants, returning without their burdens, running in perfect step with each other. They halted as they overtook the Earthmen, and broke into an elaborate wing dance. "*Haw! Paleema! Habby fee!*" they bellowed. Before the three could lift a finger, each was seized and perched on a giant shoulder. The skipping, dancing run started again.

"And this is hard riding!" Carson

panted. "Whoa there, Dobbin, you're makin' me seasick!"

"Listen!" warned Carroll suddenly. Far ahead could be heard a rhythmic trampling of many feet. *One, two, three, four! One, two, three, four!* A roar as of many deep voices boomed through the trees, "*Ta! Ta! Ta! Sissa kawmy kray!*" followed by faint tinkling notes, then a single, faraway tenor.

"It's Kel! Listen!" cried Mellor. Faintly the song came down the wind.

*"In the dynamo room the work is tough,
I do what I can but it never is enough!
If I try to catch a moose in the middle
of the day,*

'Tut! Tut! Tut!' says the Cosmic Ray!"

"*Ta! Ta! Ta! Sissa kawmy kray!*" came the crashing chorus, and the ground trembled to the stamp of heavy feet. The five runners sped faster, but never lost the rhythm.

*"Some day I'll be even with that damn
little tube!*

*I'll pay it for making me feel like a
boob!*

*When the work's all done, I'll have a
right to play*

And thumb my nose at the Cosmic Ray!"

Da! De, di, do! Plink, Plunk! throbbed the banjo as the party burst from the trees into a large clearing surrounded by grass huts. Kelton, on top a high boulder, was strumming intricate variations. "All together, now, bullies!" he shouted. "All . . . policemen . . . have . . . big . . . feet!"

"*Haw! Paleema! Habby fee!*" sang the crowd, and the ground again quivered to their thundering shuffle.

CARROLL, Mellor and Carson were set gently on the ground just as Kelton slid from his boulder and saluted, grinning sheepishly. His uniform strained over swelling new muscles, and his cheeks were round with good living.

Hands on hips, Carroll frowned down at him, but the corners of his mouth

were twitching with relief and amusement.

"Well, Kelton?" he asked dryly.

"Why, sir," Kelton said, stammering a little, "I was working the claim all right, and had got the marker most done, when I started to play the banjo one night. A crowd of these big boys smashed my tent and made me play for 'em. Goofy about music and dancing, they are. They kidnaped me and brought me here. Wanted me to play all the time, but I wouldn't until I'd picked up some crystals every day. Finally they got the idea—no crystals, no sing-song. More crystals, more songs. They've been piling them down by the marker, sir. Did you see 'em?"

"Yes, about as big a cargo as we can carry this trip. You look as if they had been feeding you and treating you well."

"Swell, sir! And . . . and . . . I kind of made them a promise. You know that funny old music-box in the crew's quarters—the one you turn a crank? Everybody aboard is sick and tired of it, but these guys would eat it up. If they could have that box, I bet they'd gather crystals every day and stack 'em before they play it. All the ship would have to do would be to come get 'em, and maybe bring these fellows some sort of musical instrument. They're crazy about rhythm, sir. They've got it. They're regular jitter-bugs."

The tallest of the giants exploded into guttural speech, and the four Earthmen were picked up and carried into the largest of the huts. "Hope you don't mind, sir," Kelton explained. "I told 'em when you came back I'd have to go. Rule of the tribe, sir—no visitor can go until he's had a meal with the chief. The chow's good, sir. It really is."

Spread on the dirt floor of the chief's house were a dozen mammoth wooden platters. Sitting on their heels, the

Earthmen found that they were ravenously hungry—and what was set before them was not the desiccated, preserved, concentrated ration of the skies.

"Kel, you lucky bum!" mumbled Mellow with his mouth full. "Fresh meat, fresh fish, fresh eggs, fresh milk and fresh bread!"

"No wonder you got fat," added Carson.

"Yeah," admitted Kelton. "But like a nut I forgot to bring my tobacco when I came ashore."

CAPTAIN CARROLL took a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and tossed them. "Kelton, you have done a good job! I really don't think anybody else could have done as well. I couldn't, I know. I haven't 'got rhythm' as you seem to have."

As the four rose, each was again grasped and settled on a huge brown shoulder. One giant handed Kelton his banjo. A thundering rumble of drums almost deafened the party.

"This is my contribution!" rivate Kelton shouted through the syncopated din. "They were pounding logs for rhythm when I came. I showed 'em how to stretch a hide over a hollow stump."

The entire tribe followed the bearers down the trail at a dancing trot. When they reached the cliff, each reached for

and shouldered a heavy bag of crystals.

"Great jumping Pegasus!" cried Stoney as the prancing parade ran into view of the ship.

"Open a cargo hatch and rig a whip!" shouted Carroll when within earshot. "And send down that old hurdy-gurdy in the mess room!"

Rapidly the bags of crystals were hoisted aboard and the four men climbed into the ship. "Prepare to take off," ordered Carroll.

Private Kelton stood in the air-lock door and grinned at the milling crowd below. His fingers swept his banjo strings. *Da! De, di, do! Plink! Plunk!*

The gravel of the shore spurted under the flying heels of the big brown men. "*Haw! Palecma! Habby fee!*" chanted the Merovingians in rhythmic unison.