

SUPER-SCIENCE FICTION

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WOMAN'S TOUCH

by EVELYN E. SMITH

illustrated by EMSH

The orders were to leave the natives of the new planet strictly alone. But those surveyors' wives were women, and women don't obey orders — or leave people alone!

“NOW, don't get the idea that this is a universe-shaking assignment,” Captain Harnick warned the four young people. “The planet's of no particular importance; otherwise we would never have assigned an untried team.”

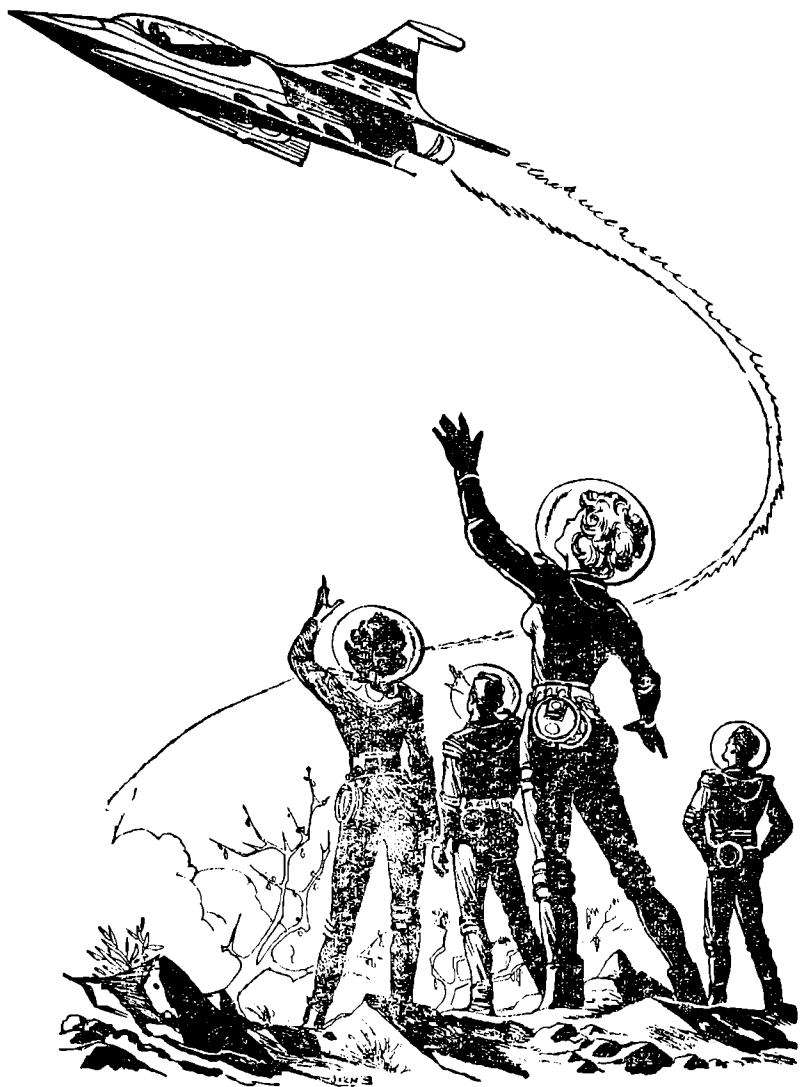
“-Yessir,” Ned McComb and Danny Field said dutifully. However, Harnick wasn't worried about them; it was the anticipatory gleam in their wives' eyes that he didn't like. Pity the men had to be allowed to take their spouses along, but the Extrasolar Survey Service would never be able to get anyone to accept a five-year term of duty on a remote planet without that accomodation. And, of course, he

thought with sour complacence, at the end of the five years the men would be even sorrier than he was.

“True, it's an Earth-type planet, but only in the sense that it has an atmosphere we can breathe.... And, I repeat,” he added, looking straight into Judy Field's snapping black eyes, “please remember that we have no intention of colonizing Furbish. It's much too far from the other inhabited systems for such a project to be economically sound.”

“Yessir,” Judy said meekly. “We just want to set up a fueling and repair station here....”

“...and maybe look over



the minerals," Jane McComb finished, "to see if there's anything which could be used in running the station and/or worth transporting to other systems."

"Er—yes." Captain Harnick was gratified to see that his lectures during the voyage had not fallen upon deaf ears; on the other hand, he was not exactly pleased to have words taken out of his mouth. "We would like to have the planet charted as thoroughly as possible, of course, but please do not try to go beyond the scope of your admittedly limited means."

"Yessir," Ned and Dan agreed.

"Now comes the part about the natives," Judy said to Jane in what might have been intended as a whisper. They nodded at each other.

Captain Harnick managed to keep his temper by reminding himself that he wasn't going to see the whole lot of them again for five years. "As far as we know from Commander Furbish's preliminary survey, there are no hostile life-forms on the planet. However, it might be as well to take precautions."

"I should think so, indeed!" Judy put in.

"The highest life-form present—in fact, the only life-form on the planet outside of vegetation—does appear to be humanoid in structure, but—again I cannot stress this fact too strongly—the creatures are far from being human. They are of a very low order of intelligence, probably even lower than the terrestrial great apes, since they not only have no group organization, but do not appear able to communicate with one another in any way. Fortunately, I might add, because this precludes the possibility of any accusation of the exploiting and enslaving of inferior races, with which the terrestrial government has so often been charged—unjustly, of course."

The four members of the survey team nodded solemnly, if a trifle uncomprehendingly.

"The creatures have shown no disposition to interfere with us, and your orders are to leave them alone. Do not, on the one hand, attempt to domesticate them, or, on the other to hunt them...for food or any other purpose."

Judy and Jane gave indignant gasps.

"Your attitude toward the indigenous life-forms is a *most* important factor." The captain looked fiercely at the girls. It was the women, he had found, who tended to cause most trouble in this area. "The Terrestrial Government does *not* wish to assume responsibility for any local fauna. All we want of Furbish is to check it, map it, and establish one small station here; is that clear?"

"Yessir," the survey team said.

"Very well, then, I—" The captain looked at the prefabricated structure of metal and plastic, tiny against the bleakness of the Furbishian landscape, and swallowed. They were brave kids to have volunteered to spend five of the best years of their lives on this barren little world, even if they were going to get paid a fabulous sum for so doing, and he was sorry he had ever thought harshly of any of them. "I—I trust you'll be comfortable. Good-bye, and good luck."

He shook hands all round; then blasted off in the little scout ship to join the parent

vessel, which circled patiently overhead. One of the natives, plodding past with a sack half-full of vegetation, looked up incuriously, then continued to gather roots.

THE two young couples stood outside their cottage, regarding the landscape. Short greyish-blue grass covered the barren plain and rolled up over the low hills some kilometers away. Stunted bushes, bowed down by the huge, bladderlike leaves the natives used as sacks were scattered sparsely about. There were no trees or flowers. Above, a dim, red sun hung in a cold, green sky. Although the post was nearly at the equator, the terrestrials felt chilly, even in their snug heat suits.

"Kind of dismal, isn't it?" Danny ventured.

"But it's ours," Judy said cheerfully. "I think it has a sort of wild charm."

Jane nodded her blonde head "Our own little planet," she murmured.

The local fauna, passing by on their separate ways, carrying loads of vegetation—presumably for food, since they

did not have fire—and bladders full of the scarce water, gazed at the terrestrials without interest, if the Earthmen happened to be in their line of vision; otherwise, the natives paid them no attention.

"Not really humanoid, are they?" Danny asked. "More like goblins, if anything."

His description was a fair one. The Furbishians were skinny, large-headed little bipeds, two to three feet high, and generally of a slate blue or dirty mauve color. They trudged back and forth, carrying food and water and other unidentifiable objects of desire, appearing to be only remotely aware of one another although they seemed to see well enough.

"I think they're cute," Judy said.

Danny took her plump arm in a firm grasp. His brown eyes were worried. "Now, Judy, remember what the captain said."

"They look intelligent too," she persisted. "I think Harnick's just a snob. And a skinflint. He doesn't want us to give this people the benefits of culture, just because it might

cost the Terrestrial Government a little money." And she tossed her smooth dark head.

Big Ned McComb gave a superior smile. "You're being anthropomorphic, kid. Just because they look something like people doesn't mean they *are* people. For instance, would any race with a minimum of brains act like that?"

For two of the natives, each absorbed in his own purpose and destination, had collided.

Their dull faces lit up with momentary glares of anger; then the customary lack of expression returned and each continued on his apathetic way.

"Well, the poor things can't communicate," Jane sprang to the defense. "Maybe they don't have vocal cords."

"Listen, shug," Ned said, "you don't have to have vocal chords in order to communicate. There are other ways of getting a message across besides talking."

"You mean like telepathy?"

"I mean like gestures, hitting a stone with a stick... anything. The only reason these things don't communi-

cate is because they have nothing to say."

"Anyhow, they do have vocal cords," Danny contributed. "Listen!"

One of the natives who had been in the collision had looked over his shoulder for a parting glare at his opponent and had, therefore, run smack into a third native who was gathering roots with his eyes on the ground. Apparently this was too much for Native A. He threw a stone at Native C. Native C uttered a hoarse cry of rage—which was what had led Danny to deduce the existence of vocal cords in the species—and threw a sizeable stone at Native A. Both stones missed their targets. Native A and Native C continued on their respective ways, each glaring back at the other. It was obvious that both would presently be involved in similar encounters.

"Well," Judy commented, "they can communicate anger at any rate."

THE days and weeks went on, and the charting team carried out its orders faithfully. Judy and Jane took care of

the house and allied domestic problems, while Ned and Danny explored the planet in the helicopter. The whole habitable area of Furbish proved to be much the same as the part where they had landed. Further north and south, the men reported, there was ice and snow and no life—not even of a vegetable nature.

But still it wouldn't be safe for the girls to go exploring, their husbands pointed out, because the surface of the planet was still unscratched. The natives—of which there didn't seem to be more than a couple couple of hundred all told—lived in caves in the hills; what else might be lurking in more effective concealment they could not, as yet, tell.

"If you ask me," Judy said, as the women watched their men depart on another reconnaissance flight, "the planet is as safe as houses. The fellows are just making sure they don't have to do any of the dirty work."

"You may be right," Jane concurred. "In fact, I'm sure you are...and I'm sick of housework." For most of the labor-saving devices that made

domestic servitude a joy on Earth—according to the manufacturers, at least—were impracticable on this remote planet, where power came in cans and had to be conserved. The women had been told they were to serve as integral members of the team; this was hardly their idea of integration.

“Look, Jane!” Judy cried, inspired by an idea which, though it had been hatching in her brain for some time, she thought best to offer as a sudden flash of genius, “why couldn’t we train one or two of the natives to help with the housework? After all, that doesn’t take much mental ability.”

“*Judy!*” Jane exclaimed, not as aghast as she pretended, for the same concept had been trying to wheedle its way out of her subconsciousness. “You know what the captain said!” It was only fear of authority that motivated her reluctance; there was no question in her mind but that any creatures who looked so much like brownies must be capable of whatever brownies could do, and everyone knew that brown-

ies were marvellous for housework.

“The captain must be light years away by now! And we’re not going to see him for another four years and eight months objective time anyhow.” Judy’s black eyes flashed. “Why shouldn’t we try to make use of the natives and, at the same time, uplift them? We pay taxes, don’t we?”

“But...he said something about exploitation...”

“Naturally we’re not going to make slaves of them. We’ll pay them...oh, something. Besides, the Terrestrial Government *has* been accused of slavery—Captain Harnick said so, didn’t he? And where there’s smoke there must be fire. So I don’t see why we should be penalized because of someone else’s mistake.”

Jane was unable to follow this line of reasoning clearly, so she fell back on, “We might get into trouble.”

“Nonsense! The natives are obviously harmless, and we can take the portable communications unit along with us, so the boys’ll never know we left the cottage.”

"I really don't know-ow."

"Nothing ventured, nothing won," Judy declared. "I'm going, even if you aren't."

"Well, in that case, of course I can't let you go alone."

Donning their heat suits, the two girls sallied forth into the bracing air of Furbish, ready for adventure. Not that they hadn't been outside before, of course, but never with such definite intent to break regulations.

It was summer and almost warm. The grass was a little bluer, the sun a little redder, the sky a little greener. Had there been birds on Furbish, they would have been singing. "If the natives turn out to be intelligent enough," Judy murmured dreamily, "we could really be queens—and kings, of course—for five years. Or even longer. The ESS couldn't make us take another post once we'd brought the native populace under control."

"Judy Field!" Jane's blue eyes were wide with horror.

"Oh, well," Judy apologized, "one does get carried away. . . . Look, there's a native over there." She set the radio unit on the ground. "Let's accost

him. In a nice way, I mean, of course."

"Good morning, sir," she began. "We have been looking forward to making your acquaintance. . . . I know he can't understand the words," she explained to Jane, "but it's the tone of voice that counts."

THE native glared at Judy out of malignant pink eyes, and attempted to duck under her right arm. She sidestepped him neatly. "We are your friends."

He tried to get past her on the other side. "We're friends!" Judy yelled, chasseeing left. "We come in peace."

The native whirled and found Jane behind him. "Don't be fu-fu-frightened," she quavered. "We're your fu-fu-fu-friends."

With a cry of rage, the native lowered his head and charged. He was out-weighted, but Jane was unnerved. She fell sprawling. The native walked across her prostrate body and made off. When he was a few meters away, however, he paused to look at

them. Apparently they had succeeded in arousing some interest.

"Copter calling cottage!" the radio chose to announce at that moment. "Copter calling cottage! Over to you!"

"Help, Judy!" Jane screamed. "Hay-ulp! I can't get up."

Judy ran to tug at her prostrate comrade, but Jane, although more slender, was taller, and weighed a lot in the heat suit. Moreover, she was so stiff with fright that she couldn't move.

The radio continued to squawk, "Copter calling cottage! Can you hear us? What's the matter?" Judy straightened up and looked about her wildly. "Copter calling cottage. Copter—"

She ran over to the radio and threw the switch. "Cottage to copter," she replied, gasping for breath. "Everything's just fine."

"Help. Ju-dee!" Jane screamed again, just before Judy switched the set over. Judy rushed back to her fallen comrade.

"What's the matter?" Ned's voice demanded frantically.

"Why was Jane screaming? What's wrong? *Answer me, for God's sake!*"

Having managed to haul Jane to a sitting position, Judy wiped the hair off her own grimy forehead, and dashed back to stoop over the radio. "Lunch was burning!" she panted. "Everything is—"

"Ju-dee, he's throwing stones!"

Sure enough, the native had decided that hurling rocks at them would be interesting and appropriate. With their huge—in his terms—terrestrial forms, bulking even larger in the heat suits, the girls made much more satisfactory targets than the spindling members of his own species, though he did not classify other life-forms according to species. There were others and then there was himself.

"Everything is under control," Judy finished. "Nothing's the matter. *Ouch!* Over to you." She rubbed her plump bottom and glared at the native.

"Arrr," said the native happily. He had thrown stones before, but never had he suc-

ceeded in hitting anyone. "Arrrrrr!" Pride of achievement filled his scrawny bosom.

Dan's voice took over. "You're keeping something from us, Judy!"

"It's nothing, nothing!" Judy babbled. "Just spilled hot fat on my arm—that's all. *Ouch!* Quit it, or I'll wring your skinny neck! Over to you."

"Arrr!" howled the native, catching Judy in the shin. "Arrr-aff!"

Two more natives came up—separately, of course—to watch. It was rarely that Furbish had any such entertainment to offer. They regarded the scene with interest. But somehow spectator sport, while excellent in itself, does not give the full joy of actual participation....

"Arrr," said one, tentatively shying a stone at Jane. It got her in the hip. "Arrr-aff!"

"Arrr!" shrieked all three natives, joyously hurling rocks. "Arrr-affff!"

"Wherever you girls are," the radio barked, "you get right back into the cottage and stay there!"

"That's what we were try-

ing to do," Judy snapped, "when you oafs mixed in!"

EXCEPT for a few bruises, the girls were none the worse for their experience. However, the disappointed natives soon discovered that the cottage made an even better target for their rocks than the people. Since the prefabs were intended for use on a variety of planets, and hence had been built to endure storm, flood, and fire, as well as unanticipated indigenous disasters, the mere bouncing of rocks off their metal and plastic sides could not inflict any serious damage, but the incessant thumping against the walls got on the girls' nerves, particularly as the natives' numbers, as well as their skill, seemed to be on the increase.

It was a relief to hear the sound of the helicopter. Fortunately, the Furbishians did not shift their attention to the vehicle or to the husbands inside it. Not being human, they were not sportsmen, and so preferred a large stationary target to a small moving one. They threw stones at the men

only when they got between them and the house, which, of course, the men had to do in order to get inside.

"What is this?" Dan asked, when they had finally forced their way in. "A siege?"

"No, darling," Judy replied joyously. "A group enterprise. You see, the natives *are* capable of communal effort once they're given an incentive, in spite of what old Harnick said. I told you they were intelligent."

Both men groaned.

Since the natives' intentions were obviously not hostile, retaliatory measures were out of the question. So the Earthmen spent the next few days in using some of the same rocks to build a large wall some distance away from the house, hoping that it would provide a still more attractive target. However, there were several scores of the creatures involved in the game by then and only part had their activities successfully diverted.

"Well, every little bit counts," Danny tried to soothe the angry Ned, who had been trying to show the natives that *building* with the rocks was

more fun than *throwing* them and, for his pains, had received a stone in the solar plexus.

On their last mission, the two young men had been absorbed in mapping an interesting valley in the north polar regions—a pursuit which they had no intention of giving up. A few days after they had finished the work, therefore, they announced their intention of taking the helicopter out again. "And, remember, girls," Ned adjured them, "don't go out of the house at all until we come back."

"We need fresh air," Jane said.

"The air inside is a lot fresher than out," her husband retorted, "because it's purified. So, mind you, don't set foot out of the door until we return."

"Except in an emergency," Judy told him.

"Maybe we'd better leave the valley for later. . . ." Danny murmured.

"Oh, *come on!*" Ned protested. He had been dragooned into washing the dishes several times during the weeks they'd spent at home building the wall for the natives, and had no in-

tion of letting the same misfortune befall him again. "What kind of emergency could there be?"

"If Judy has her heart set on an emergency," Dan prophesied, as he allowed himself to be led off, "there'll be an emergency."

"I don't know how the boys expect us to stand this," Judy remarked querulously as she and Jane sat listening to the thumps and bumps and "arrrs" outside.

"Well, they didn't start it. . . . And," Jane added, as Judy opened her mouth, "I don't suppose they can stop it either. . . . It does seem to me, though," she remarked, less out of actual observation than out of the desire to placate, "that they aren't making as much noise as usual."

Judy went to the window. "Of course they aren't. They're dying like flies."

"What!" Jane looked through the clear plastic pane. Sure enough, many of the natives had fallen to the ground. Since they were still writhing, they didn't seem to be actually

dead; that was an academic point, however, because they wouldn't last long, what with the other natives stomping upon them in the excitement of the game.

"Maybe their life spans are shorter than ours?" Jane suggested.

Judy threw her a contemptuous glance. "More likely three weeks of rock-hurling has proved too strenuous for their fragile little bodies. And it's all our fault!" She burst into tears. "We've sapped their energy."

"Judy!" Jane laid a hand on the other girl's arm. "I just happened to think—since they started throwing rocks, I haven't seen any of them gathering roots. Maybe they're just starving."

The girls looked at one another. "That's it!" Judy exclaimed. "We must heat up lots of soup—just the thing for starving people." She began busily to pull cans off the shelves.

"But you know, Captain Harnick said they weren't people, so maybe they can't eat the same kinds of things we

do. Our soup might be poison for them."

"Being poisoned isn't worse than being starved." Judy expertly manipulated a can opener. "Not much worse anyway," she amended. "It's a chance we'll have to take."

"You mean it's a chance *they*'ll have to take." Jane herself thought that porridge would be better, because everyone knew how mad brownies were for porridge, but it was always easiest to let Judy have her own way.

So, bearing a large kettle between them, the two girls staggered out of the cottage between the flying stones—which were not coming as thick and fast as before owing to the fact that almost half the native populace had collapsed.

They set the kettle down by the nearest prostrate figure. "Look," Judy said to him. "Soup. Nice soup."

The native turned a dull glance on them. "We'll have to feed him," Judy decided. "You hold his head up, Jane."

Although she could not repress a shudder of loathing at contact with the alien, Jane obeyed, as always. "Open your

mouth, that's a good boy," Judy told him, and opened her own mouth wide to set an example.

The native lifted his heavy, pointed head and looked down her throat with feeble interest. "No, that's not what I mean. Drink this. Nice soup." She prodded his lips with the dripping spoon. The lips parted and the soup passed into the alien interior.

Suddenly the creature's eyes bulged. He began to choke loudly. "There," Jane cried in anguish, "you *have* poisoned him!"

"Or maybe he doesn't eat with his mouth, like us," Judy speculated. "I never thought of that. Perhaps I poured soup down the equivalent of his ear."

But, once the convulsion was over, the native opened his mouth for more. Despite Jane's cry of protest, Judy poked in another spoonful. "Soup," she said. "Nice soup."

A faint, strange, utterly foreign expression contorted the native's dusty violent face. He was smiling. "Arrr-aff!" he said.

"That's what they yell when

they score a hit with the rocks!" Jane exclaimed excitedly. "He likes it! But, oh, Judy, supposing it should be poisonous to him after all!"

"Nothing ventured, nothing won," Judy repeated. "Here, have some more soup."

"Oup," the native said. "Arrr-aff!"

Jane and Judy looked at one another proudly.

"Oup," said a wistful voice near them. "Oup?"

The stone-throwing had almost entirely stopped. "Oup?" several voices took up the cry. "Ooooooup?"

"You'd better go put another kettle on, Jane," Judy told her.

“WHAT’S happened?”

Ned McComb asked, as the two men came back from their voyage. "How did you get the natives to stop throwing rocks? And why are they standing outside chanting something like 'oup?'"

"It's supper time," Judy explained, looking up from the stove with a flushed face. "Hand me the salt, Jane—they like a lot of salt."

"They? You mean you've

been feeding the natives!"

"We couldn't let them starve," Judy replied defiantly. "And, after all, it was all your fault they weren't gathering roots for food. If you hadn't gone and built them that handball court..."

Ned looked accusingly at Danny. Danny lowered his eyes. "I suppose," he murmured to his wife, "'oup' means soup."

"You suppose correctly. And, if you two weren't such stubborn mules, you would realize that it was very clever of them to have learned the word. Get me the dehydrated potatoes, please, Jane; they're very nourishing."

Danny took off his helmet and ran his hands through his thick brown hair. "All right, so what if they do have a higher intelligence than Furbish thought? That still doesn't make them people. Still less does it make them our responsibility. How long are you proposing to run this soup kitchen, dear? You know, we were left with food supplies for four, not forty, or four hundred."

"They don't eat as much as we do," Jane put in, obvious-

ly quoting, "because of being smaller. And there are a lot of emergency stores in case Captain Harnick and the ship never come back, on account of being eaten by monsters or something. You thought we didn't know about that," she said proudly, "but we did."

"We don't have *that* amount of supplies, of course," Judy rushed to inform them before either of the men could protest. "As soon as I've got the natives organized—" Ned and Dan exchanged glances—"I plan to teach them more efficient ways of gathering roots, so that they'll have time for both work and play."

"And I don't suppose you had planned to organize a few to do your housework, had you?" Dan asked penetratingly.

"Well, naturally, I would be spending a good deal of time on this project, so I should expect to get what help I could with my regular duties."

"The captain said—" Ned began.

"The captain said the natives weren't intelligent and he only warned us not to make pets of them or kill them. He

said fortunately we couldn't exploit them, which, of course, I wouldn't do, even if we could. Anyhow, I believe it was Ned who tried to get them to help build the handball court, wasn't it?"

"What can we do?" Danny asked. "Harnick isn't here and she is."

"**N**OW, remember this, girls," Ned admonished them, for the men were off on another mission, to chart the south pole this time—not that it was really so urgent, but the cottage had begun to take on the aspect of a Salvation Army Mission and was no longer homelike. "Feed the natives, if you must, but don't let any inside the house."

"How will we train them to do the housework then?" Judy wanted to know.

"It'll be a long time before you can get them to do that," Dan said diplomatically. "Why not try to teach them English first? They'll need to know it in order to follow your directions."

"That's true," Judy admitted.

"And it'll be a nice, healthy,

out-of-doors occupation for you two." Ned pinched his wife's pale cheek. "You've been knocking yourself out, shug."

"I haven't worked half as hard as Judy has," Jane protested loyally. "And she does all the thinking besides."

"Yeah," said Ned. "She sure does. Why don't you take yourself a rest too, Jude?"

When the copter had gone, Judy sat herself down at the table with pencil and paper. "We must compile a list of suitable words to teach them. Let's figure out which ones are most important. . . . *Broom,*" she said aloud as she scribbled, "and *sink* and *dust* and *laundry*. . . ."

There was a thump at the door. They looked at each other. Under the lure of food, plus the attractions of a second handball court, the natives had been persuaded to withdraw their athletic endeavors from the vicinity of the house, so the knock could not be the result of a fortuitous stone.

Jane looked out of the window. "It's a very little native, and he's banging a can on the door. How cute!" Since there

weren't enough serving utensils, cans had been distributed to the natives to be used as dishes. Even so, there hadn't been sufficient to go around, and the fact that this individual had been canny enough to pre-empt one for his exclusive use argued a superior mentality.

Judy got up and opened the door. "Oup," said the native, thrusting his tin forward suggestively. "Oup."

"It isn't time for supper, dear."

The native gave her a winning smile, and proposed an alternative. "Orridge," he said. "Orridge."

Both girls gasped. The natives had been fed other things besides soup, but heretofore none had used any word other than "oupe" to describe food generically or specifically.

"Obviously he has linguistic aptitude," Judy decided. "Just the one to start teaching English to. Come on in, dear." She opened the door wider.

"Judy! You remember what Ned—what the boys said!"

"Oh, them! I can't give English lessons outside with all the

natives throwing stones and howling. Besides, this is such a little fellow, he couldn't matter too much. And he is in already."

Which was undeniably true. The diminutive creature was not only in but engaged in tasting Judy's pencil. "Orridge," it said dubiously.

"No, dear. Pencil." Judy removed the implement from his grasp and made demonstrative marks on the paper.

"En-cil," the native agreed, putting out a small, slate-blue hand for it.

After a moment of hesitation, Judy allowed him to have the pencil. He took the paper and made marks of his own. "Oo-dee," he said proudly, handing the paper back to her.

His satisfaction was entirely justified, for on the paper there was a primitive but very life-like drawing of Judy herself.

"It isn't really so surprising," she said stoutly. "After all, they do live in caves. . . . And why are you wrinkling up your nose like that, Jane?"

"Oh, not the picture—it's just that—well—I didn't like to say it, but it is a little close in here and. . . ." Jane looked

apologetically at the native. He beamed at her. "I expect it's a difference in metabolism."

"I expect it's dirt," Judy contradicted. "I've often wondered whether they'd stay the same color if they were washed. Now's my chance to find out. How would you like a nice bath, dear?"

"Ath?" the creature repeated. "Orridge!"

"After your ath—bath, that is." Judy was already filling a large basin with warm water.

"But, Judy, maybe he isn't washable!"

"What do you think he'll do—shrink? Or run?" Judy looked at the native. "Come to think of it, he might run at that. Why don't you get out some of the music tapes, Jane, and play them to distract him?"

But the native loved being bathed. He loved the music tapes. And, at the end of his ablutions, he stood revealed as the possessor of not only a beautiful cerulean skin, but a fine, true soprano.

By the time Ned and Dan had returned from the south

pole, the Furbishian Glee Club had been formed.

“I’D hoped to have come and gone before Christmas,” Captain Harnick sighed discontentedly. “These isolated outposts are so depressing at holiday time.”

“But think of the personnel, sir,” the pilot told him with gentle reproach. “They have to spend *all* their time here.”

“You’re right, Wilkins,” the captain admitted shamefacedly. “It’s a hard, dull life for them. And Furbish is particularly bad. Only four people on an otherwise uninhabited planet. They must go mad with the monotony. The weeks must seem like months, the months like years, the years—”

“Uninhabited, did you say?”

Wilkins interrupted. “I could have sworn I saw a village down there. Of course it is growing dark, but still—aha, there it is!”

The captain leaned forward and peered into the dusk below. “By George, you’re right! There seem to be a good two dozen houses there. Now, how could that have happened?”

“Good solid stone buildings too—definitely not native huts.”

“Of course the survey team was composed of both males and females,” the captain muttered, “but, no, reproduction alone couldn’t account for this, not in five years, even if you do allow for the mysterious influence of cosmic rays.”

“What’s all that light!” Lieutenant Wilkins exclaimed. “Damned if it doesn’t look like a Christmas tree.”

It was a Christmas tree, thirty feet tall, composed of interlaced branches and illuminated bladders. And, as the scout ship settled gently to the ground, its occupants could hear a chorus of sweet, true voices coming to them through the frosty air: “Ark uh er-ald an-gels ing/ O-ry oo uh oo-orn ing; / Eace on Urbish and ercy i-yuld . . .”

“It’s a hallucination,” the captain said, rubbing his eyes. “We’ve been too long in space.”

Lights came moving toward them through the darkness, and there was the babble of excited voices. “Captain Harnick!” Ned McComb cried.

"We thought you were never coming!" All four members of the survey team crowded around the scout ship, shaking hands and talking at once. They looked fit, the captain noticed, although thin and strangely pale in the torchlight.

"We have so much to tell you!" Judy cried. "So much has been happening here we've hardly had time to turn around. I never knew five years could pass so rapidly."

Harnick and Wilkins looked at one another. They climbed out of the ship, and saw the choristers—a dozen small creatures in soft, lovely hues of blue and violet, standing in a semicircle nearby, regarding the newcomers without fear, as they continued to pipe lustily: "I-lent ight, O-ly ight;/ All is alm, all is ight. . . ."

"You were entirely wrong about the natives, you know." Judy linked her arm through the captain's as she drew him through the cottage. "They're not only remarkably intelligent, but talented. Don't they sing beautifully? And you should see the murals they've done!"

"*The natives!*" Suspicion became certainty. "Then this," the captain thundered, pointing to the neat rows of stone houses, "is their work. You've enslaved them!"

"But you said there was no intelligent life on this planet, sir," Wilkins protested, bewildered.

The captain shrugged. "The fauna didn't seem to be intelligent, but the preliminary survey was sketchy. We may have been mistaken. We didn't even think they could communicate with one another."

"They couldn't," Judy told him. "It simply had never occurred to them to communicate, because they hadn't anything to say at that time."

"But we gave them something to say," Jane added happily.

"And something to do, also," the captain grunted. "You've exploited the poor beasts. Making them build houses and—"

"Don't misunderstand, captain," Dan said, with a peculiar smile. "The natives aren't exploited. They love what they're doing. . . and what's being done for them."

"And besides," Ned contributed, "it was we who built the houses for them. Shame they should have to live in caves like animals. There aren't nearly enough buildings yet, but, after all, there were only four of us. I think we did pretty well, considering."

"And it's been so rewarding, too." Jane flung open the door of the prefab, as she spoke. It was, Harnick noticed, by far the least imposing edifice in the community. "You must listen to some of the music they've composed! Lucky thing we brought a recorder with us; you'll undoubtedly want to take some of the tapes back with you."

"Elcome oo Urbish, entlemen," they were greeted by a bright blue native, who was lolling in the best chair and showed no signs of rising. "Oodee," it, or he, complained, "it's oo ot in ere."

"I've shown you how to work the thermostat, dear," Judy said gently, as she adjusted the device. "They don't seem to have any aptitude for mechanical things," she explained, as she removed her heat suit, "but they're so mar-

vellous in the arts you couldn't really ask for more."

"I'm afraid, sir," Wilkins whispered, "that the Terrestrial Government has another colony on its hands." The captain nodded gloomily.

THEY removed their heat suits. The temperature of the room was much too low for terrestrial comfort. And there was a peculiar odor which seemed to be emanating from a large pot that bubbled on the stove. None of the standard rations allotted to the team could possibly smell like that, Harnick knew; he hoped the young people had not been experimenting with the local vegetables. There was a regulation against that.

Either there was something wrong with the light or with his eyes, for the faces of the four team members appeared to have a distinct bluish tinge. On the other hand, Lieutenant Wilkins' visage seemed as comfortably rosy as ever.

"You won't recognize the place, sir!" Ned declared enthusiastically, as he took their suits. "We've built them tennis courts and a swimming

pool; they're as apt at sport as art."

"Only thing they don't seem to take to," Danny Field murmured, "is work."

The other three glared. "Culture is far more important!" his wife snapped. "And I trust you'll be able to spare us a lot more personnel for the post," she addressed Harnick, "because we need to build a stadium. And possibly a museum. And a school, of course."

"You don't want to go back then?" Wilkins asked curiously.

All four shook their heads. "We have a mission here now," Judy said.

"Look," Harnick protested, knowing it was no use, "the Earth Government's intention was only to use Furbish as a fueling and repair station."

"Fuel!" Judy snorted. "I don't know whether it would even be right to let the government ships land here. Those coarse, uncultured crews might contaminate our natives;

they're so impressionable, you know."

"But isn't it wonderful," Jane, the peacemaker, put in, "how they've thrived on terrestrial food. I think that must have a lot to do with the remarkable way they've developed."

Harnick's anger was lost in shock. "You mean you've been giving them your rations? But surely there wasn't that much food, even with the emergency stores!"

"Well," said Judy, "they don't eat as much as we do, of course. And you'd be surprised how tasty the native roots are. We've grown quite fond of them; in fact, I doubt whether we'd be able to stomach terrestrial food by now."

The odor from the pot grew stronger and even less appetizing. There was nothing wrong with either the light, Harnick realized, or his eyes. The faces of the four members of the survey team were really quite blue.

THE END