

IMAGINATION

*Stories
of Science
and Fantasy*

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World Without Glamor

By

Milton Lesser

Colonists on Talbor had little time for anything but work, which was bad for morale. So Earth sent a special ship — with a unique cargo.

MARSDEN had filled a basin with well water and began to lather his hands and face with soap when Marie entered their cabin. He looked up and clucked his tongue in disapproval. "Lord," he said. "Look at yourself."

Marie scowled at him as she removed her bandanna and shook loose her short-cropped hair. "How do you expect me to look?" Her plain but pretty face was sweat-streaked. She wore a simple tunic which fell halfway down her thighs and almost matched her sturdy, sun-darkened legs in color, although sweat darkened the back of the garment and left rings of white under the armpits where it had evaporated.

"I know how I'd like you to look."

"Harry Marsden, just what do you mean by that?"

He had felt it for some time now, this smouldering resentment which had wedged its way between them after only two years of marriage. He couldn't talk to her without arguing, not after they had finished working for the day under the broiling sun and returned, bone-weary and stiff-muscle, to their cabin. The routine sickened him: he would come in first, splash cold water on his face, maybe scrub up some. Marie would follow after feeding their chickens (chickens here on Talbor, three dozen long light years from Earth!), strip off her tunic and try to scrub the grime from her body while he looked at her. And if it were warm she'd prepare their simple dinner half-naked, with no thought for modesty, until he knew every plane, every curve of her body and realized it was a body strong for work and not soft

for play, a body good for bearing children, a body which could work all day in the fields like a machine but which would never lose the grit from its pores.

"I didn't mean anything by it. Forget what I said, Marie." Marsden went to the clothing rack and took down his one good suit. He looked again at Marie, then closed his eyes and let a growing eagerness engulf him.

The ship from Earth was coming. Not the ship with more farm machinery, not the battered freighter which reached Talbor twice every year, but a tourist ship—the first one in Marsden's memory. There would be real Earth people on it, men and women. He thought deliciously of the women, wasp-waisted, high-breasted, lithe-legged and delicate. Marie would seem so plain against them, so tragically unfeminine — unless the pictures lied. Born on Talbor, Marsden had never seen a real woman of Earth.

MAYBE Marsden would feel more inclined to watch the patterned years drag by on Talbor if he just once saw the women of Earth. He never told this to Marie, for she wouldn't understand.

"We'd better hurry," she said, "or we won't get to town till after the ship comes in."

Marsden nodded. "Like to see it land. Everyone will be there, I'll bet."

"I suppose so. It's a great deal of trouble, if you ask me."

"Trouble? Don't you want to see the people of Earth?" There it was again—Marsden felt an argument brewing. Marie spoke like an old woman, but she was only twenty-five. You couldn't blame her, though, and every time Marsden's thoughts took that tack he felt sorry for his wife. She had known nothing but Talbor all her life.

"They're people," said Marie. "Just folks." But she carefully removed the frilly dress which had hung near Marsden's suit on the rack and examined it critically.

"You're going to wear that?"

"What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing. You haven't put it on since we got married, that's all."

"We can't scare the Earth people off with a lot of tunics and coveralls."

"Better get dressed," said Marsden, chuckling with grim amusement as Marie struggled with the unfamiliar garment. Marsden's own starched collar threatened to choke him, but the women of Earth would expect it.

"What's so funny, Harry?"

"There must be an easier way to climb into that thing. You look

so funny."

Marie's back was toward him. She took the dress off and threw it across the bed. "All right, I won't wear it. I won't wear anything. I'm not going."

"Now, Marie."

"Don't you 'now' me. I'll stay right here."

"I was joking," said Marsden, squirming uncomfortably inside his collar.

Marie flung the dress from bed to floor. "You can throw it out, for all I care. Or give it away."

"Thank you, I'll stay here."

"For crying out loud!" Marsden said in exasperation. "This is the biggest thing to hit Talbor in years. The Earth people are coming to visit us and you want to stay home."

"They probably will make fun of us."

"If we act like bumpkins they will. If we act—well, sophisticated, they won't."

"I'm not sophisticated." Marie sat down on the bed where her dress had been, drew her legs up, wrapped her arms around her knees. "Do I look sophisticated?"

"Put the dress on."

"I've never been off Talbor, never. We have one town, two hundred people on seventy or eighty farms. Is it my fault I wasn't born on Earth? Do you

think I would have married you if I had much choice?"

"Oh," said Marsden. "I see."

Marie stared at him and shrugged her bare shoulders. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that, Harry. But you don't see. Talbor is all right for you because you're a man and you like to work like that. Don't you think I'd rather be small and attractive, instead of—"

"I think you're very attractive."

"That's a lie. I know how you and Charlie Adcock get together and look at those magazines with pictures of Earth women. Your tongues practically hang out."

"You've been spying on us."

"Really, Harry. Is looking at a magazine so secret I'm not permitted to watch? Why don't you treat me like an equal, anyway? But no, you think of the women of Earth. Well, let me tell you this, Harry Marsden: I'm stronger than them, I can work harder and I'll probably live longer and have more kids. What do you say to that?"

"I'm going into Talbor City. If you don't want to see them, I do."

"Watch that collar doesn't strangle you along the way."

"I'll get used to it," said Marsden, running a thick finger between stiff cloth and raw skin.

"Your face is getting red."

"That's all right."

"Red as a beet."

"Shut up."

"I'll bet you find it hard to breathe."

"Shut up!"

"Try and make me." Marie got off the bed, and when Marsden made a threatening gesture he thought she would run away. Instead, she leaped at him, got her strong fingers under the collar and yanked. The stiff collar burst open, the entire shirt-front ripped. Marie began to laugh.

Marsden went for her with murder in his eyes, but at that moment there came a roaring overhead like a dozen summer storms rolled into one, booming and crashing in the sky over their cabin. Talbor's sullen orange sun had almost set, but bright light flashed in through the window, blinding them.

"I ought to beat you," said Marsden. But he opened the door and went outside into the strong, hot wind which had stirred over their rocky farmland and flapped the torn ends of his shirt against his chest.

The spaceship from Earth had arrived on Talbor.

TALBOR City's one street, dry and dusty from the long day and hot sun, was ablaze with light. Marsden had never seen so many electric lights lit at once, not even on Saturday nights. Even as he

entered the city from the north, taking off his torn shirt and discarding it because no shirt seemed better than a damaged one, he heard the singing.

Charlie Adcock's deep, off-key voice rose stridently above the others, singing a song which was popular among the men of Talbor, but which the women hated.

I want my arms around

A slim, small girl of Earth.

If she don't come to me

I think I'll have to die

For the slim, small girl of Earth.

"Well, Harry! Thought you'd never get here."

"I had some things to do," Marsden lied.

"They already landed. They're here on Talbor. Here. They went to the hotel right away, of course. First time the hotel's been used since the last freighter crew decided to stay overnight. The mayor's declared a holiday. Nobody's working tomorrow."

"Me and Marie got to work," said Marsden, realizing he might be able to make peace with his wife after a day in the field.

"You ain't serious."

Marsden said, "How many of them came?"

"About twenty, half of them women, Harry. You should see the women, Harry. They wear real

frilly things, like you never even saw on Talbor. They're beautiful, friend. You *know* it. I mean beautiful all over. Hair fixed like it would take weeks to unravel. Belly's so thin you could get your fingers around them. Straight, slim legs, not a muscle on them. Such white skin you'd swear it was made out of milk. And the way they walked, Harry—so delicate they could have run across a field of fresh eggs without breaking a shell."

"I think I'll spend the night in town," said Marsden, forgetting all about Marie.

"Oh, didn't Marie come to town with you?"

Marsden shook his head without talking.

"Janie didn't come neither. Say now, that's all right, Harry. That sure is all right. Leave the wife at home on a night like this. You know what? I think I'll take a room right there in the hotel and maybe even get to eat breakfast with the women of Earth. What do you say, Harry?"

"Suits me." Marsden's mind formed a brief image of Marie trying awkwardly to fit into the dress—to please me, he suddenly realized—and then the image faded. With Charlie Adcock he pushed through the crowd on the hotel steps.

MARSDEN felt breakfast heavy mouthful by mouthful, forming an uncomfortable lump inside his chest. It was a long table big enough for thirty people, with the men and women of Earth chatting comfortably on all sides of it, their gay clothing making the dining room appear intolerably drab. Marsden had been on the verge of forgetting breakfast entirely, for when he reached the dining room he found all the seats at the table were taken except one between two delicate, wasp-waisted women of Earth. But Charlie Adcock, who was already seated, had waved him on toward the table with a broad grin, and it was either sit down or forever be a coward in Charlie's eyes.

"Hello," one of the women said while Marsden fidgeted and scooped forkfuls of bacon and eggs into his dry mouth.

Marsden blinked. She was talking to him.

"Good morning, Miss."

"So you're a native of Talbor. Tell me, how do you stand it?"

"Born here, I guess." Marsden found it difficult to talk and eat at the same time. His face grew uncomfortably warm, his tongue seemed to swell until he wanted to spit it out.

"I'm Alice Cooper, Mr.—"

Mister. No one had ever call-

ed him Mister. "Better call me Harry, Miss. Just Harry."

"I want you to tell me all about your primitive planet, Harry. Everything. I've got a camera and I'm going to take pictures and write notes about them so when I get back to Earth I can tell everyone about this quaint planet."

Marsden wished he had a shirt, for it wasn't right for Alice Cooper to have to see his sun-scorched, hair-matted chest while she ate. But Marsden felt somewhat better when he let his eyes rove to the men of Earth. They sat tall and straight in clothing fancier than it was right for a man to wear, but they were thin, pale and—well, a little washed-out looking.

"Why don't you show me around?" Alice Cooper suddenly asked him. "You can't see a place unless a native shows it to you, and we have to leave tonight."

"Tonight?"

"Of course, Harry. We have lots of planets to visit and we can't spend more than a day on an out-of-the-way mote like Talbor."

"Well, now, there are plenty of interesting things on Talbor."

"Oh, I know. I know. Rustic cabins, rocky fields, stolid farmers who work the soil all day and fall into bed exhausted at night. It's all very thrilling."

"We have some mighty nice

scenery," Marsden told her. "Madison falls are two-hundred feet high, and we've got some mountains that—"

"Certainly, Harry. But I can see that sort of thing just anywhere. I want you to show me your farm, your fields. How you people of Talbor can get by on this rocky, God-forsaken place I'll never know. Why your parents came here I could never figure out."

He stood up awkwardly. "I guess—well . . ."

Alice Cooper rose to her feet in a liquid motion beautiful to behold. The top of her head came up to his shoulders and she reached out with one small, dainty hand and touched his upper arm.

"My, but you have big muscles."

Marsden smiled.

"You need them in this grim, dreary place, of course. You probably wish you didn't. You probably would rather be thin and wear glasses maybe and spend most of your time in an air-cooled office and do things like that."

"I don't know. A man would grow bored working in an office."

"See?" Alice Cooper cried. "See? I just knew I'd love Talbor. You're so primitive. Why, you're practically—Cro-Magnon. Come on outside, Harry. I want to take your picture."

She took his big hand and led

him to the door. Marsden looked back uncomfortably and saw Charlie Adcock off in a corner with two of the women of Earth, talking avidly. Strangely, he thought Charlie was scowling about something.

Talbor's strong orange sunlight made him squint while Alice Cooper said: "Tremendous place for a camera enthusiast. I hear it never rains around here. Surprising this place isn't a desert, don't you think?"

"It rains when it has to."

"Here. Stand over here. Yes, facing the sun. Can you do something to show you're almost—almost ancestral?"

"I don't understand, Miss."

"Goodness, I mean your muscles. Flex them. Use them to do something like lifting a heavy object. Break something if you want to. I'm sure those muscles are good for something besides weeding your fields or pulling a plow."

Marsden began to feel foolish but obliged her with a handstand. He lost his balance, though, before she could take the picture and tumbled flat on his back in the dusty street, landing so hard he saw stars.

A COUPLE of men who had been watching from the hotel

steps snickered. "I didn't know Marsden was an acrobat."

"His old lady claims she's going to sell him to the interstellar circus when it comes around."

"What do you say we give him a hand?"

Marsden sat up, rubbed his head. One of the men came over and offered his arm. Cat-quick, Marsden leaped to his feet and thrust the man away from him so hard that he stumbled back, crashed against the bottom steps and fell. Something clicked, and Alice Cooper squealed excitedly:

"I got it! That was perfect, Harry. Thank you ever so much. I caught it just after you started to shove him and now when my friends see this they'll know Talbor is a primitive place. Are there many murders here?"

"I've never heard of one," said Harry, dusting his trousers off. "We're too busy for crime, I guess."

"How terribly dull. Statistics show that more advanced societies are prone to higher crime rates, particularly crimes of passion, since everyone is high strung and capable of flying off the handle as the expression goes. Did you ever think of committing a crime of passion, Harry?"

She stood there, small and frail in the sunlight, delicately, lushly

curved. She wet her lips and they were very red in the sunlight and against her pale white face.

"No," said Marsden thickly. "I'd better take you back inside to your friends, maybe."

"Why, don't be ridiculous. See, they're all outside anyway."

Marsden's gaze took in Talbor City's one street. The crowds had thinned considerably; people moved off toward the outskirts and the farmlands in twos and threes, the Earth people scattered among them and going to see Talbor with them. Marsden felt lost and alone and a little frightened, for he knew he would go off into the country-side with Alice Cooper in another moment, and he hardly trusted himself.

"They're not my friends, Harry. We're traveling together, but we hardly know each other. You don't just make friends with anyone, it isn't civilized. People are always out to get you, to trick you, to make fun of you and take advantage of you. Oh, you've got to be careful, I always say. Shall we see Talbor now?"

"I should go home and start plowing."

"I'm leaving tonight, Harry." Her hand slipped under his arm and nestled there. His bare arm tingled.

"What would you like to see?"

he asked uncomfortably.

"EVERYONE has a different crop to grow," Marsden explained later. "On my farm it's barley."

"Just barley? It must be rather dull, growing barley all year long."

"We have some cattle and chickens, too. But I spend most of my time tending the irrigation ditches. Summertime it's a sunrise to sunset job."

"You poor man. You—" Suddenly Alice Cooper's eyes grew big. She gasped and clutched at Marsden's arm. "Harry, over there! Ooo, Harry!"

Marsden turned, saw a small dog bounding across the field playfully, turning and twisting and barking at its own shadow.

"It's nothing to be afraid of."

"An animal, nothing to be afraid of? Harry, it's coming this way."

The dog had seen them. Yelping, its tail wagging, it came right up to them, nuzzling against Marsden's leg while he crouched and petted it.

"Better take me back to town, Harry."

"There boy, there boy." Marsden scratched the dog's ear, cuffed it gingerly with his big hand, turned it around, thumped its rear and watched it leap away across

the rocky meadow. "Don't worry, Miss. A little dog like that never hurt anyone."

"I feel faint, Harry. I expected wilderness and that's what I came to see—but animals running around loose? That's too much."

"Dogs and men get along fine on Talbor."

"On Earth dogs are in the zoo where they belong." Alice Cooper patted her brow daintily with a handkerchief. "I do wish we could get out of this sun."

A person not liking dogs. It wasn't right, Marsden thought. And hating the sun and the soil out of which crops grew and . . . Well, he couldn't blame Alice Cooper. Everything was so strange and new to her and she was just plain upset.

"I could take you to my cabin," he told her. "It's nearby."

Alice Cooper nodded, took one step forward, turned her ankle and tripped. She fell heavily, catching one of her high heels against the hem of her frilly dress. There was a ripping sound and a long tear appeared in the bottom of the dress.

"It's ruined," said Alice Cooper in despair.

"My wife can fix it."

"Your what?"

"My wife."

"Don't tell me you get married here on Talbor? I knew this was

a primitive society, really primitive—but not to that extent. You get married and—and stay with one partner for life, for your whole life? Really?"

"That's right," said Marsden. "Don't you?"

"Well—you wouldn't understand, Harry. You just wouldn't understand. Here, help me up."

He got her to her feet, but her twisted ankle wouldn't support her. "You'd better carry me."

Marsden nodded, got one hand under her arms from behind, the other in back of her thighs. Cradling her thus, he began to walk. She weighed almost nothing, she was incredibly feather-light, but pleasant to the touch and smelling, this close, of some delightful perfume.

"You're strong," she said.

Gulping audibly, Marsden averted his face from hers, only inches away.

WHEN he pushed the cabin door open with one foot, Marie started to smile at him from inside. The smile faded. "Harry. Oh. Is she—hurt or something?"

"Aren't you the bright one," Alice Cooper said. "I'm too lazy to walk."

"Be quiet, Marie," Marsden said. "What's the matter with

you?"

"Did I say something wrong? I'm sorry."

"It's to be expected," Alice Cooper declared.

"You were gone all night, Harry."

"He can take care of himself, I'm sure," Alice Cooper said.

Harry frowned. "I told you to keep quiet, Marie."

"No, let her talk, Harry. Of course he was gone all night. What's the matter, don't you think he can take care of himself?"

"My Harry is quite a capable man, thank you."

"Marie!"

"Your Harry. That's right, you are fettered to one another all your lives. It's fantastic. Will you be a good girl and bring me something to eat?"

Marie nodded and soon returned with two plates of stew. It was Marsden's favorite food and Marie had probably prepared it as a peace offering, but two plates meant one for him and one for Alice Cooper and Marie would go hungry.

"I'm not in the mood to eat," said Harry while his stomach grumbled.

"You? Not in the mood to eat Talborian stew? I'd like to see the day. Go ahead, I'm not hun-

gry."

"You're both crazy," Alice Cooper said. "Pretending you're not hungry so the other can eat. No wonder this is such a backward place. If someone said that to me I'd gobble the food up quick before he could change his mind. On Earth, naturally, no one would ever say it."

"I'll get some cold cloths for your leg," Marsden said to break the awkward silence which followed.

"Cloths, nothing." Alice Cooper stood up. "Did you think I really hurt myself? I only wanted you to carry me and take me here, but if this hefty wife of yours is here, I guess you might as well take me back to town."

"If I wasn't a lady . . ." began Marie.

"You? That's very good, my dear. A lady wrestler, you mean. Well, Harry, what are you waiting for? Take me back to Talbor City, please."

Marsden looked at his wife's plain, unpainted but still pretty face, at the way days under the bright sun had added glowing highlights to her red-brown hair and Alice Cooper seemed like a wilted flower by comparison. Marsden thought of the long walk with her back to Talbor City and wished it were over already.

THE spaceship blasted off with a terrible clamor. The people of Earth, the men and women, were gone. They had been here on Talbor only a few hours but to Marsden it seemed much longer. He was infinitely glad they could only stay one day.

He met Charlie Adcock near the steps of the hotel. Charlie carried his shirt under one arm and was scowling. "You know," he said, "songs and pictures are funny things. They sure can fool a guy sometimes."

"Yeah," said Marsden.

"I don't know, Harry. I'm still glad they came. We were busting to see something different, either to have them come here, or maybe to take off and forget all about Talbor."

"What do you mean, forget about Talbor? Talbor's a pretty nice place. You work all day, sure, but it's good, clean work and you know your friends are working too, and then Saturday night you can go into town hooting and hollering and no one cares."

"Yeah, Harry. Sure. That's what I mean. You know what? Those women of Earth are kind of skinny."

"It was an accident they came when they did," said Marsden. "A lucky accident. I like Talbor now. I wouldn't change places with any-

one."

"It's still nice looking at pictures and singing songs, I guess, if we can forget about the real women of Earth."

"A lucky accident," said Marsden again. "Just when we got all starry-eyed about things that didn't matter, they came and showed us what we really had."

"Well, see you."

Later, after Marsden returned to his cabin, Marie said:

"I'll wear that dress Saturday nights if you want."

"Fine," said Marsden. "But only Saturday nights. It's silly the rest of the time."

He took Marie in his arms.

Alice Cooper removed the tight corset with a sigh of relief. "The first thing I'm going to do when we get back home is go out to the beach somewhere and get sunburned. Swim and ride horseback, too," she told one of her companions. "I feel all—al scrunched up."

"Little wonder, Alice. Women weren't made to wear these tight things and get all constricted."

"What a job," said Alice. "Sometimes I wonder if it's worth it. We still have three more planets to visit on this trip."

"It's worth it. Sociology Central figures it out just right. When

the folks on one of the out planets get a little disgruntled with what they've got, we're sent. They've built up a mighty splendid picture of Earth and Earth people."

"I know it. So we come along and do everything we can to make Earth look like the worst sink hole in the universe. By the time we leave, the two ideas—their own glorified impression of Earth and our warped play-acting — kind of

merge. They realize they have a pretty good thing on their own home planet."

"That's the way it should be, but I *still* like Earth."

"Me too," Alice smiled. "One of these days, though, my husband is going to make me give up my career and raise a whole crew of children. You know something? I think I'd like that fine."

THE END