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Editor

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YACHTING PARTY

By Fox B. Holden

While their crew worked feverishly to repair the damaged rocket ship, the passengers set out to explore the planet. Thus they met the Hairy One . . .

THE girl, Marla, trembled, yet she was not afraid. Ronal had told her at the outset of the cruise that although Krist's friend Logan was young for a space pilot, he was a good one, and had trained in the old fuel-propelled ships that men had first flown Space in before the new warp-drive had been perfected. But Logan was sweating visibly.

The blue planet loomed up, and Krist, who owned the trim Space-yacht and had suggested the cruise, jumped noticeably when the first shrill whistle of atmospheric resistance pierced the tense quiet of the well-appointed control room.

They were half-falling, half gliding downward, and despite Logan's attempts to check their descent with the clogged free-drive maneuvering jets, their downward speed seemed to increase each second.

"My fault," Ronal muttered so only Marla could hear. "Had we stayed on the warp we charted and not followed my suggestion to go adventuring on free-drive in some system none of us have ever heard of, we wouldn't be in this mess."

"Not your fault, dear," Marla said to her husband. "Even Logan couldn't have known the free-drive would fail and leave us too far from our warp-point to make it back, and—"

The stricken craft lurched again, and the polished nose began an almost imperceptible up-swing. The shrill scream of the rarefied atmosphere began descending the scale like a gigantic siren running down.

"Flat on the deck!" Krist yelled.

Lush, green forests stretched but scant miles below. The sound of a heavy, rich atmosphere now racing past their gleaming hull dropped to a low, moaning note and then the sound of it was gone.

The nose came up.

There was a wrenching jar and the nerve-shattering cry of tearing, scorched metal. The control-room rocked crazily, then was suddenly still, cocked at a nightmare angle, as a shuddering impact brought the wildly slewing craft to a punishing halt.

And for the four of them, there was sudden oblivion . . .



"MARLA was as lucky as the rest of us," Ronal said. "Just the wind knocked out of her. She's coming around." The girl's silver-flecked eyes were already open and for a moment there was forgetfulness in them. "We splattered a little," Ronal told her. "You move all right?"

She was shaken, but unhurt. He helped her to a standing position on the canted deck, and saw that Krist and Logan were already taking a rapid inventory of the yacht's available tools.

"Got to look around outside," Logan was saying, shaking his bruised head a little, "before I can tell you

how bad we are. But I think Krist and I can get her back into one piece."

"Can if we can go out," the tall, athletic-looking owner of the pleasure craft said. "We'll need the suits."

"Maybe not," Ronal said. "There was plenty of atmosphere waiting away—"

"Five credits gets you 20 it's all pure poison," Logan retorted. He was standing at one of the metaloglass ports, surveying the colorful terrain speculatively. They joined him.

The ship had hit in an oblong clearing, perhaps five miles in length and half that in width. Surrounding the open, grassy spot were the depths of an untamed, riotously colored jungle.

"I'll give it a try in a suit," Logan said. "The sooner we patch up and get out of here the better. No telling what's in that." He gestured toward the clearing's mile-distant edge.

Ronal helped him into the bundle-some plasti-seal space-suit, then watched tensely with the others as the starboard airlock hissed, and Logan stepped onto the thickly-carpeted clearing floor.

"He's a cool kid," Ronal said. "For all we know, he's just—"

"He's a cracker-jack mechanic," Krist interrupted. "If we've got a couple of straight rivets left, he'll get us out of here. I'm just glad that he picked out this planet to

come in on instead of the first or second out from this system's sun. It's plenty hot even here." They were all perspiring freely; the atmosphere conditioner had ceased operating from the shock of landing.

Logan's voice cracked from the still-functioning communications panel.

"Not too bad. Forehull plates got a little bashed in — couple of rips in the speed-skin. Take us maybe four, five days to get her Space-worthy again. Can unlog the free-drive jets in a day easy. But the guy who thought of leaving modern yachts equipped with free-drive units oughtta be hung from a comet tail."

THEY could see Logan near the nose of the ship. His hands were working at his helmet.

"Take it easy!" Krist called. They could hear a soft hiss in the intercom.

"Letting some of this stuff in, a cubic millimeter at a time, grandma! If I can breathe it, I'll let you know. If I can't — Anyway, if we can work without the suits, it'll get us out of here that much sooner. Don't know about you kids, but I didn't even bring a sling-shot along . . ."

Krist traded looks with Ronal. There wasn't so much as a hand-gun in the whole ship. Neither said what was in his mind but Ronal drew Marla a little closer and broke the silence.

"You'd think they'd equip even pleasure craft with a few of these scientific gadgets you hear about, instead of taking up room with a lot of old-fashioned fuel tanks and jets that nobody needs. With an atmosphere or gravity tester things like this would be a lot less risky. Got to admire Logan's nerve."

"He's got his suit off!"

It was true. Logan was walking slowly, experimentally about, eyeing the surrounding terrain to estimate their situation, unhampered by the suit. He moved slowly, but not laborably.

"Let's get some tools out there!" Ronal said. "The three of us can—"

"There's only the emergency kit. Tools enough for two, working simultaneously. You better stick with Marla, Ronal, and both of you can keep a weather-eye out for — anything — while we're putting this egg together again."

"How about trying to contact some Stellar Patrol outpost? They—"

"No good. We're way off our warp. Even if we had the power, it'd take our beam, like our ship if it had enough free-drive fuel—about eighty thousand years to reach the nearest one. Remember, kid, we had warped some fifty thousand light years out before you talked Logan into leaving the warp to fool around in free Space for awhile. Until we can jet our way back to warp-point, we can forget about communica-

tion."

Ronal understood too clearly what Krist was talking about. Travel in "free" Space, the ordinary three-dimensional kind, was measured in miles; warp-travel was measured in parsecs. "Free" speed, with old-fashioned fuel-eating jets which were supposed to be carried as emergency power units only, was forty thousand miles a second at best—warp-speed, depending on the dimension you used, had a top of better than a thousand light-years a minute. Leaving your warp to poke around in ordinary three-dimensional Space on jets was like leaving your surface-car parked on a speedway to hike up a side-road on foot. You had to get back to the speedway to get home. And if you broke a leg—

KRIST was already outside, lugging tool-carriers to a spot Logan had selected to begin. Ronal turned to his wife.

"Well, we can't keep a weather-eye out for bug-eyed monsters in here," he said. "Might as well go brave the Great Unknown ourselves. C'mon!"

The heavy grass was wet and soft beneath their feet, and had a distinctive aroma of its own. Ronal thought to himself as they walked that perhaps the red, desert covered fourth planet would have been a better bet after all—at least cooler.

"We shouldn't get too far from the ship," Marla said.

"We won't. But I just want to look around — want a closer look at the jungle from the edge of the clearing. Always wanted to be able to tell people I'd been exploring on some strange, exotic planet somewhere—"

"It's strange enough. But quiet up to now, anyway. Maybe all that—"

They had reached the clearing's edge.

And saw the Hairy One for the first time.

Marla stopped in mid-sentence, and they stood transfixed.

The Hairy One regarded them evenly with small, narrowly-spaced black eyes. He remained as immobile as the two from the ship.

"Like a man, but smaller," Marla whispered tautly.

"But covered with hair! And on all fours," Ronal said. Marla started to speak again, but he silenced her with a nervous gesture. The ape-like creature cocked its head, as though listening. A light breeze made ripples in the thick hair on his narrow, sloping back, but for long moments he did not stir, nor did Marla or Ronal advance toward him.

The Hairy One fixed his gaze on Marla, then shifted it to her husband. Then, as though at a signal, he turned abruptly and shambled off into the dense undergrowth at a rapid pace without so much as a backward glance.

"Better be on our way back," Ronal said. "If he's displeased with

us, he'll have his whole tribe on our necks."

To run a mile's distance had never been difficult for either the man or woman before, but on this lush planet with its heavy, sweet atmosphere and slightly greater gravity than that of their own home sphere, it seemed to both that the distance between them and the ship would never be covered. Ronal glanced over his shoulder twice as they ran, but there were no signs of activity at the jungle's edge. But the heavy foliage would make perfect camouflage for an entire army . . .

KRIST dogged the airlock shut. "The best bet," he said, "is to barge right in and let them all see us. If we can let them know, or get them to understand, that we're weaponless and harmless, they won't attack."

"That would only work if their thinking is based on our system of logic," Logan said. "We don't know that it is. It could easily be suicide to step one inch inside that seething tangle."

"But you've both missed the big point," Ronal said. "I doubt very much if he, or they can 'think' at all as we know thought. He is no more than a beast—a jungle beast, and would behave according to what I've read is the first law of the wild—exterminate the intruder to protect yourself. And I think if he and his kind did attack, it would be under cover of darkness."

"He might've killed us both an hour ago," Marla said then. "But he didn't. He showed no sign of hostility."

"She's right on that," Ronal admitted. "He ran!"

There was silence for a moment, and then Logan spoke again.

"We could go on like this for hours and get nowhere. Hours that could be a lot better spent. We know nothing of the situation on this planet beyond the hull of our own ship. I think our best protection is completing repairs as quickly as possible and getting out. Ronal and Marla can still keep an eye out. If anything happens, we can always get into the ship before they reach us. We'll all have to remain within the ship at night, of course. And without any weapons, that's all there is to do."

IN the days of feverish work that followed, the life that they all could feel was teeming within the hot, moist jungle that surrounded them gave little hint of its presence save for an occasional beast-like scream and the cries of birds. And the nights were quiet save for the sound of warm breezes riffing their way through lush foliage.

"But I can feel a thousand eyes upon us for every move we make," Marla said.

"It'll be all over in a day or so," Ronal reassured her. "Logan says that we'll be able to blast off without even trying to shift the ship's posi-

tion. Chances are we won't even set eyes on our hairy friend again, much less any of his tribesmen. Don't worry."

But it was the next morning that they saw the Hairy One again.

"He's trying to get up into that tree with the fruit on it," Marla said, "but the trunk's too big around for him to climb, and the lowest branch is too high for him to reach."

"He seems to be alone," Ronal said.

"And he doesn't even seem to know we're still here."

"I wonder if he really cares," Ronal said, and began walking slowly toward the clearing's edge.

"You aren't going to—"

"Got a funny feeling. And I want a closer look. He could get that fruit, if—"

"If he could *stand!*" Marla completed. The implications of what Ronal suggested came fully upon her for the first time. Quite evidently, she understood now, the all-fours attitude of the Hairy One was not just for ease of jungle travel. It was a permanent attitude because the beast had not yet attained the ability to stand erect!

"I've an idea," Ronal said. He quickened his stride. "But you'd better go back with Krist and Logan. It's possible that—"

"I will not! And what danger is there? For nearly a week we've been here, and although we've all felt uneasy, this is the first we've seen him since that first day. There

hasn't been even a hint of hostility. What more can he be than just a harmless, stupid beast?"

The Hairy One halted his tree-climbing efforts when he saw them, but made no move to either retreat or advance. As before, he stood immobile and watched. Ronal and Marla approached with the palms of their hands opened and outward, hanging limply at their sides. And as they approached, Ronal swept the jungle edge with his eyes, to peer as deeply into its tangled growth as he could. Nothing moved.

Within scant yards of the beast, they stopped.

The Hairy One was watching Marla.

RONAL dropped to all fours. And it was a peculiar, silent melodrama that followed then. A highly-cultured man from a well-ordered, civilized galaxy, making a crude attempt to teach a beast to walk, on the face of a planet which, but a few days before, he had never known existed.

Why? Marla wondered. What fascination had there always been between alien cultures, that had always made one attempt to instruct the other in its ways? Certainly Ronal was no scientist, no explorer. Yet, as though he were an appointed ambassador of his own kind, he was attempting the always risky job of finding a common level of understanding with an alien mind.

Or perhaps it was just natural

curiosity, and an overabundance of self-confidence!

Ronal had imitated the creature's all-fours shamble until he was beneath the tree limb.

"Careful," Marla said. "Don't give him the idea you're trying to steal his fruit, or we will be in trouble."

Far out from where the fruit hung, Ronal stood up slowly. Then he raised his arms, opened his hands, touched the limb with his fingers.

Then he dropped back to the all-fours position, and repeated the standing up process.

Then at length, he pointed to the Hairy One, to the position under the limb above which the fruit swung, and backed slowly to where Marla stood, fascination in her eyes.

The Hairy One remained immobile. There seemed no flicker of comprehension in his flat, black eyes. Then suddenly, for the quickest flash of an instant, he came almost erect, his arms half upraised!

Then he dropped back, as though exhausted and baffled by the effort.

"He did it!" Ronal exclaimed. "He can understand!"

Ronal went through the weird pantomime again, but although the Hairy One stood once again and even accomplished two staggering steps forward, he dropped back once more without having reached the fruit.

"We had better go back," Marla said. "He—it—I don't think you should've, Ronal."

"No harm done. But before we give up my little experiment—"

Ronal reached up, plucked the fruit and in one fluid motion tossed it to the Hairy One. And deftly, it was caught!

And as quickly thrown forcefully to the ground!

"You've angered him, Ronal! You've—"

"But he could see I wasn't stealing it—"

The Hairy One did not move. Crouched, he watched them; watched Marla.

SUDDENLY, Ronal was clearing a small area of the thick, carpet-like grass. Then in the soft, rich dirt which he had exposed, he began making swift, simple diagrams. They depicted the ship, surrounded by a forest. Then, pointing first to his crude drawing, then to the Hairy One, to themselves, then to the ship, Ronal waited.

But the beast did not move.

"Take him along? Back with us?" Marla whispered.

"Why not?" Ronal answered. "If our experts could communicate with him, or at least study him, there's no telling — wait!"

The Hairy One had started to stand, step forward, then stopped.

"We had better go, Ronal." Marla was frightened, now. "You've made him resent us. We should leave him to this world where he belongs, and we should return to ours where we belong."

"One more try. Then, if it doesn't work—"

Ronal, almost as though caught in a trance, began to take a slow, cautious step toward the immobile beast before him. And stepped back quickly!

For the Hairy One had in an instant grabbed from the ground a heavy, club-like stick! Yet he had not raised it, but merely held it meaningfully, pointed downward.

Ronal stood motionless. The Hairy One watched Marla, then Ronal. Then he dropped his club, silently picked up the fruit he had thrown to the ground, and turned. Then he vanished once more into the jungle.

A day later, for merely a moment before Logan punched the acceleration warning buzzer for take-off and switched on the jet detonators, they saw the Hairy One for the last time.

"Look, Krist! Marla! There he is! And by Betelgeuse if he isn't *standing up!*"

Even at a mile distance they could discern the erect figure of the mute, enigmatic denizen of this strange, new planet—immobile, watching, but on two feet.

"And on those forelegs of his were more hands than feet—and what someday might be a thumb, to oppose his fingers!" Ronal was saying quietly.

Marla and Krist knew what was in Ronal's mind. And Marla was

glad they were about to blast off. There had been something in the way the beast had watched them, had watched her—

They knew what Ronal was thinking. But it was all they would ever know.

They took their places in the acceleration hammocks.

Seconds later, with a great, shuddering roar, the gleaming Space-yacht leaped skyward and disappeared into the blue vault of the sky.

* * *

The Hairy One watched for min-

utes afterward, then dropped back to all fours and shambled through the jungle. His legs hurt strangely, and his arms—

Perhaps he should have accepted their offer and gone with them to their bright, shining world.

Or, perhaps, taken the woman and started—started what? He could not remember.

He stumbled awkwardly into the overgrown ruin of shattered masonry and twisted steel wherein he slept, and laid down.

He felt very tired.

THE END