

BLUNDER ENLIGHTENING

On this world in the system of Altair, Sam Sarno and his wife encountered something humans had never dreamed of. They were prepared for alien life that might be hostile, or fearful, or any variation in between. But the beings here simply and flatly ignored man . . .

TRUDGING homeward over the rolling prairie of planet Altair 3, bright Altair itself sinking swiftly behind him, his shadow lengthening in front, Sam Sarno let his head hang, his shoulders sag, his feet stumble heedlessly among the mossy tussocks. He was tall, blond, husky, and rugged-looking; yet he walked like an old man. He knew it—and for the moment didn't care.

He'd spent the day ranging through a native garden now out of sight to the rear, clambering up and down a high granite cliff that overhung the garden. The exertion hadn't exhausted him—he was young and athletic.

The planet Altair 3 was strange and virgin to human beings. Unknown, unrecognizable dangers might be hiding behind the nearest bush, lurking under the ground, infesting every breath of air. Sam Sarno had been especially selected and trained for duty in such places, was mentally and temperamentally prepared for the strain. Beyond routine precautions drilled into him till they were second nature, he took no heed of



It was defeat that bowed his shoulders—the complete, utter, incomprehensible failure that his excursion had been. He felt weighted down by shame, crushed under the need to admit once again that he'd gotten exactly nowhere in his efforts to contact the natives.

He didn't know what to tell Sally, his wife; he couldn't understand *why* he'd failed. The situation was clear-cut; the prescribed methods of dealing with it, infallible. The rock-paintings on the cliff behind him proved the existence of a culture here, and Sam had been trained to make swift



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Written by

Dave Dryfoos

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Transcription: Yan Viana

Published in: www.atomicvintage.com.br

Email: atomicvintage10@gmail.com

CHAPTER - 01

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Those paintings were really something, Sam admitted to himself. Seen from the ship that had brought him, they'd seemed grander than any works of graphic art on Earth;

and a closer view confirmed their merit. Huge, they were: colorful, abstract, harmonious — obviously the creations of intelligent beings.

Because it is comparatively easy to see through an atmosphere from the top down he'd been able to observe the painters at work, even while still aboard ship. They were odd-looking creatures: small, dingy, grotesque — but cultured, just the same.

It was then that he and Sally had been given the job of contacting these painters; marooned here to live with them for six months; ordered to make an anthropological study of their culture before announcement of the planet's discovery led to an influx of traders who'd bring in new products and methods, missionaries who'd bring new id?

Sam remembered how honored he and Sally had felt when they got their assignment. It was their first major one; and, as he had to admit, easy as such jobs go — especially since neither weapons nor factories to make them had been seen from the ship.

That is — it should have been easy. Altair 3 was in many ways comparable to Earth. Size, mass, radiation received, length of day, chemical composition — all were similar. The Universe having been created all at one time, evolutionary forces must have operated on Altair 3 about as long as on Earth — should have gone about as far. By rights, a terrestrial man should have much in common with these natives; contact ought to have been quickly established.

But it hadn't been. Today, as on all previous days, the natives had completely ignored him; Sam couldn't see why.

OF COURSE, the painters, now — and there'd been three of them again today, at work on widely-separated ledges along the granite escarpment — the painters might possibly have resented his intrusion while they labored. They'd been busy enough, clinging there high above the ground, hanging on with all four feet, spreading with the fingers of both hands the pigments held in gourds suspended from prehensile tails.

They looked like unintelligent bugs, with their oily, lozenge-shaped exoskeletal bodies, only three feet long. Still, they were artists, beyond any doubt. They might be not only intelligent, but temperamental; maybe that was why they'd seemed to look right through him after he'd risked his neck climbing the cliff to get near.

They had eyes, though; the nature of their paintings made it clear that they saw the same things Sam did. And anyway there was no such excuse for that other native — the one who'd been standing in the garden below the cliff. Just standing around, it had been, rubbing its threethumbed, five-fingered hands together, not doing a thing. Yet that one had ignored him, too.

The whole mess was completely frustrating. Sam almost wished the natives had been hostile, or thievish, or frightened; then he'd have known what to do. But never, on any of the sixteen extra-solar planets previously visited, had terrestrial man been simply ignored: it was unbelievable. And Sam would be blamed for it.

No use dwelling on that, though; no use letting Sally see how dejected he felt. Topping the last rise, Sam consciously squared his shoulders, even broke into a shambling trot for the last hundred yards to his prefabricated shack.

Sally waited at the door, dark hair carefully brushed, disposable dress new, full lips brightly tinted. These past few months she'd seemed to grow even prettier than she'd been before.

But her eyes were heavy. Sam often felt — and often said — that his wife's blue eyes were so big, anybody could see through them and tell what she was thinking. Right now, he was sure, she shared his sense of failure.

He kissed her without a word. Then he admitted, "No luck, hon... Anything new here?"

“Ants,” she said, closing the door behind him. “Not real ones, but something like. I followed their trail back to the nest. It was like an anthill, more or less. Social. Cooperative. They seem to like sweets and dislike water. Anyhow, I swept them out and set the table-legs in water filled cans.”

“Lifted the table? In your condition?”

“Exercise is good for expectant mothers,” Sally said, somewhat mockingly. “I can show you where it says in the book.”

Suddenly she cast herself heavily to the cot. “But,” she said. “But, Sam — worry isn’t good for me...”

“No.” Sam walked up and down, accurately gauging his stride to the tiny room. “No, worry isn’t good, and you know that; so not only do you worry, but you worry about worrying. And I worry about your worrying about your worrying. Where does it get us?”

“No place,” Sally said flatly. “That’s why I’ve quit; I’m through worrying about our mission here, our careers, or anything else except our baby.”

SAM TRIED not to show how disturbed he felt. “That’s normal, dear,” he said. “They probably expected this would happen to you; that’s why they’re bringing the ship back in another four months. I’ll attend to everything, meanwhile — you can just take it easy.”

“No, Sam. You don’t know what it’s like, to be left alone all day. Suppose those ant-things had been poisonous?”

“But they weren’t! You’re borrowing trouble, Sal.”

“You mean you don’t care what happens to me?”

“Of course I care, dammit! That’s why I’m working so hard! You know perfectly well that the discovery of this planet will be announced before the ship comes back here. Traders and explorers will be here long before substitutes can be found for us. If we don’t

do the job we were sent here to do, nobody will — and maybe you don't think we won't be fired for that! I'd be lucky to wind up in a dull, routine, underpaid rut as a terrestrial school-teacher, or something!"

"I don't care! I don't want to be left alone here ever again! And I can't go walking all over the place, either!"

No, of course she couldn't... And it was, Sam thought, normal for an expectant mother to make unexpected demands. Should he humor her till the storm blew over? Or put his foot down now? He tried a compromise—reasonableness.

"If we don't make friends with the natives," he said, keeping his voice low and earnest, "they may decide we're enemies."

"Maybe they already have," Sally burst out; "maybe their ignoring tactics are just a blind, while they gather forces. Maybe — maybe if you knew what it's like, puttering around here all alone every day, you'd stay home once in a while."

She began to sob, and Sam tried to comfort her, sitting beside her on the cot, stroking and kissing her, murmuring reassurance into her pretty pink ear.

But tenderness was not enough. The flow of tears would not stop till after he found himself promising to stay home and let the natives go hang.

"And I mean it!" Sally insisted, sitting up and pushing damp hair out of her eyes. "Let them come to us, if they're interested."

"Sure, Sal. Whatever you say," Sam answered. Anything to make her quit crying. Anything! "Tell you what," he added. "I'll build a fire outside and cook up a barbecue. How'd you like that, for a change?" "Don't go too far away after fuel," Sally said dully.

He didn't. He made a point of bustling into the shack every few minutes on some inconsequential errand, loudly whistling and singing as he trotted around.

But Sally was having none of his elaborate good cheer. She lay on the cot and stared at the ceiling, movingly pale and listless.

CHAPTER - 02

SAM COULD think of nothing to do but keep busy. Besides, the day's activity had given him an appetite.

He started a fire, using a chopped-up crate as kindling, and threw on some dried-out local vegetation to make coals. From the cases of food, piled next to the shack for want of space within it, he dug out a tinned ham that had been saved for a holiday treat. Then, while the fire burned down, he concocted a spicy barbecue sauce and got the side dishes ready.

When finally prepared, dinner included soup made of local water and a dried mix; broiled dehydrated potatoes; ham, and the remains of a prepared-mix cake Sally'd made the day before. Sam found he'd forgotten the vegetables Sally needed, and shamefacedly made up for them by giving her an extra vitamin-pill.

Even without vegetables, the meal was a feast, compared to their usual fare; to top off the occasion, Sam had put decorative candles on their small folding table, and set the places nicely. But Sally ate only enough to be polite, and then, complaining of a headache, went right to bed.

Her apathy was infectious. Sam washed the utensils in a bucket at the nearby creek, sloppily, and dried them over the fire to kill any strange organism picked up in the washing. Chores finished, he didn't know what to do with himself. The meal, he felt, had been as much of a failure as the rest of the day's efforts.

For lack of anything better to do, he got out a flashlight, and in its brightness extracted a chocolate-flavored ration-bar from an opened case. Then, after unwrapping it,

he found he had no appetite for chocolate, after all. He stuffed the bar uneaten into a pocket of his jacket and wandered aimlessly up and down in front of the shack, staring at the strange constellations overhead, and testing how far he could see along the moonless landscape under the faintly-glowing permanent aurora, so much brighter here than on Earth.

Back toward the granite cliff, whose top, a good mile off, showed dark and jagged above the plain, was a moving shape; a native. Sam had never before seen one at night, and watched closely to determine if it were approaching the house.

It wasn't, he decided; it was circling the place. A sign of curiosity, he thought vaguely, and felt faint stirrings of hope. But soon the buglike figure disappeared, and Sam lost interest. He flung a few more sticks onto the fire, and groped his way to bed.

He fell asleep as soon as his ear nestled into the pillow. He awakened feeling he'd never slept at all.

Sally was shrieking at him. "Sam!" she cried, shaking his shoulder "Sam! Get up! Sam! The house is burning!"

Dazedly climbing from bed, stumbling out the door in bare feet and pajama-bottom, Sam felt again that congealing sense of failure. Everything was going wrong — even the barbecue he'd staged to amuse Sally.

He discovered the fault wasn't his, this time. The cooking fire was down to embers — it was the stack of crated supplies that burned so luridly and smokily. A trail of smoldering moss led from the barbecue pit to the pile of cased goods, and from there — he ran to see — went out fifty feet from the house. At the end of the singed trail lay a native, his oily surface ablaze, his body shrivelling as it writhed.

The native made no sound, but his searing agony was plain to see. Sam dashed for the bucket, dumped the dishes from it, and raced to the creek. Three times he flung a

bucketful of water over the native's carapace before the flames were smothered. By then it was too late; the creature's life had guttered out.

And the priceless supplies were going! The pile was afire along its outer border, as if the native had tried to scrape out the flames he bore on projecting cases.

And Sally? She was running around barefoot, carrying things from the threatened house.

“Get some clothes on!” Sam shouted. “And don’t lift anything heavy!”

HE DUG INTO the piled goods like a small insect boring through sand, carrying the innermost cases away from the shack’s wall where they’d been stacked. Then, with the hopelessly inadequate bucket, he wet down roof and walls, trying to keep them from burning, putting out the sparks that conspired to leave him homeless.

Time itself seemed to be caught up in the blaze. Sam never knew how often he rushed back and forth from house to creek, flinging water, carrying crates, filling the bucket, glancing occasionally at Sally, then rushing to the creek again for still more water.

Altair was half way between horizon and zenith before the last whisp of smoke had died down. The shack was intact, but its salvaged contents lay strewn over an acre of landscape. Sam was burned, bruised, blistered, and exhausted. And Sally was once more on the verge of hysteria.

“What do we do now?” she wailed.

He kissed her. “Well, that fire’s out,” he said, smiling wanly. “I guess the first thing we do is light another — in the stove.”

Sally made breakfast as if under opiates, while Sam washed, dressed, and hauled back to the shack a few of the things she’d just carried out. It was a dismal mead, eaten in silence. As soon as it was over. Sally got sick. Sam put her to bed, and spent the day trying to bring order out of the chaos that surrounded him.

Disposing of the corpse — simple enough, so far as the work of it went — gave him the most trouble. Sam buried his hopes with those charred remains. On Altair 3 as elsewhere, he decided gloomily, there must certainly be taboos concerning the dead. In the light of native customs that he'd so miserably failed to learn, he was very probably mishandling the body. And even if he weren't, the natives most likely considered him a murderer...

As he repiled crates, carried personal effects back into the shack, fixed lunch, cleaned, swept, and tried to make a few essential repairs, Sam kept looking over his shoulder. It was, he told himself derisively, as if he had a nervous tic.

But he couldn't stop. He couldn't help wondering when the natives would descend upon him, to demand their comrade's body and take revenge for his death.

THEY DIDN'T come all that day. When, having made a light supper and cleaned up after it, Sam felt free to crawl between the sheetless blankets on the cot, he had decided these bug-things must be trying to ignore death itself.

The thought gave him no pleasure. He'd promised Sally not to seek out the natives; he knew that if he did so, he might well be punished as a criminal. But, lying there in the darkness, Sam found himself face to face with a fact he'd been avoiding all day.

He absolutely must get hold of those creatures, now. He'd lost too much food in the fire, was no longer self-sufficient enough to get by without their help. Sally would starve if he continued to fail.

“But you promised!” she said at breakfast next morning. “Besides, they’ll probably kill you!”

“I don’t believe so,” he hedged. “I’ll bet they have no enemies of any kind, and don’t even know what an enemy is. We’ve never seen a single predator here, remember; there probably aren’t any. I suspect that all the local animals are vegetarians — all we’ve

seen eating were. And with the native population as low as it seems to be, I doubt they have to compete for food, either. Most likely the lack of both enemies and competitors is what makes these painters ignore us — we're just nothing for them to worry about."

"They're probably worried now," Sally objected. "One of them died here, and the way he died makes me think he didn't know what fire is. So they can't be very far advanced — not worth investigating, Sam."

"Oh, I don't know," he argued. "They seem to be highly inflammable — on account of their oily surface, most likely. Man could experiment with fire because a minor mistake meant only a minor burn but maybe these creatures can't touch fire without being burned to death."

"They must be awfully stupid, then, because one of them did touch fire."

"He was a painter, maybe. At least, he almost certainly appreciated form and color. Flame and coals are beautiful, and probably were unfamiliar to him. So he picked up a pretty bauble that was a hot coal — "

"You promised! You could at least try to find some local foodstuffs without wandering off after natives. They won't help you. And if they never cook anything, they probably have a lot of foods we couldn't eat."

"All right," Sam said resignedly. "I'll do it your way. But I've got to get out and around. I'll try to see what the local animals eat that looks possible for us, maybe find some berries I can experiment with..."

He pushed back his folding chair, anxious to get away before Sally pursued his plans to their ultimate implications, saw the hazards of his simple scheme.

On the one hand, he remembered that most things poisonous to terrestrial man were also poisonous to other terrestrial life-forms. Sprays and baits harmless to man and

fatal to vermin, for instance were few, and artificially developed. In theory, he might be able to eat what other animals ate.

But if this were a vegetarian world, as he suspected, then toxic secretions would have special survival-value for plants provided with them. There were probably plenty of poisonous plants here. Plenty! He'd have to be awfully careful...

"I don't want you horsing around, Sal," he said from the doorway. "I'll do all the experimenting, understand? And from now on. I'll fix my own meals — the remaining supplies are for you."

"But that's not fair!"

"Well, you've got more than just yourself to be fair to."

"Oh, Sam!" She rose and clung to him. "Don't be gone long, darling."

"Oh, no," he assured her. "I'm just out for a little walk." And to prove it, he left without the belt holding his canteen and emergency rations.

CHAPTER - 03

HE MISSED the weight around his hips. Passing the creek, he felt suddenly thirsty, yet hesitated to drink water that he'd never tasted undistilled. No use experimenting with it, he decided; the still was undamaged.

But thirst grew as he wandered on. He knew it was psychological — a trick of his vagrant mind. He put a pebble under his tongue.

Without conscious thought, he'd started in his usual direction, toward the garden and the cliff behind it. Carefully he observed the small animal-forms that crawled, wriggled, ran, and flew out from under his feet. None of them seemed to be eating at the moment.

Well, if he couldn't eat what they ate, he could possibly eat some of them. American Indians, he remembered, had liked grasshoppers; he was himself fond of shrimp.

But if there were no predators here, it might be a mistake for him to act like one — to make himself feared. Not, of course, that the natives' reactions would matter. He had no intention of getting in touch with them, Sam reminded himself.

Certainly not! He'd only chosen this particular direction to walk in because he knew the way. He was going to the garden as a matter of course, because its obviously artificial plantings might be crops. There wasn't the slightest chance, Sam emphatically told himself, that he'd break his promise to Sally.

But when he got to the garden, Sara could clearly see, as he'd seen many times before, that it wasn't a farm; the several acres contained too wide a variety of plants. The place was more like a horticultural museum than a food-growing area.

Whether the plants were of types selected for food or for ornamentation, he couldn't tell. They were all sizes and shapes — lichens as big as pines, shrubs that looked like miniature hardwoods, flowering plants, and some that seemed downright ugly.

He looked among them for fruits and berries, handicapped by the fact he was not a biologist but a sociologist — remorseful because he'd never before searched out local food-resources. Painstaking effort redoubled his thirst — made him hungry despite the short time since breakfast. And, as Altair rose higher and higher, his appetite acquired a genuine excuse for its clamor.

Regularly, every fifteen minutes, he told himself he must go back before Sally got upset again, just as regularly, he assured himself that in another fifteen minutes he'd find manna.

Under the influence of hunger, his sense of smell became more active. He sniffed the wind like a hound — and found a message in it. There was an odor borne on the light breeze — something he couldn't place, though it seemed familiar. Something pleasant; he decided to trace the scent to its source.

THE SOURCE was a pool in a corner of the garden — slightly scummy, bubbling occasionally, clouded, and brownish. The tall vegetation that grew all around had concealed it from his earlier, more casual inspections.

Leaning over the pool, he recognized its odor, or thought he did. It was yeasty, like a bakery. Or — that was it — a brewery! Something was fermenting here.

He felt an overwhelming desire to taste the product of that fermentation. Thirst, in the back of his mind for hours, now, became a sharpnailed hand, clawing at his throat. Alcohol was a disinfectant, he assured himself; this would be safer to drink than water.

Kneeling, he thrust a hand beneath the scummy surface, finding the fluid warmish, slightly viscid. He cupped his fingers and drew out a small amount. It smelled good.

His hand didn't cool very rapidly in the air — not the way it would have if the fluid had been high proof. There couldn't be enough alcohol in it to hurt him, he decided; he thrust out his tongue and licked up the few drops that had not yet dribbled through his fingers.

They tasted sweetish, as if the fluid were high in sugar content. Perhaps it might give him a little quick energy, stave off hunger as well as thirst. He cupped both hands together, plunged them into the pool, drew out a fairish quantity, and gulped it down.

The drink gave him no pleasure. A sense of guilt had touched his mind before the fluid touched his stomach. He became fully aware that this was an unnecessary risk — mentally acknowledged that, for Sally's sake, he should have been more careful. Furtively he rose to leave.

As he turned away, his attention was caught by a rapid motion seen in the corner of one eye. From halfway around the pool, a native waved its arms vigorously and looked straight at him.

It could have been the one he'd seen in the garden yesterday, Sam thought, but he wasn't sure; all the creatures looked alike to him. Certainly this one displayed excitement, though; it seemed to be waving him away from the pool!

Well, to hell with that, Sam decided. This stuff seemed to be harmless — refreshing, in fact. Besides, if the beast wanted to communicate with him, it could damned well go jump. He'd promised Sally, and by golly he wasn't going to have anything to do with them; defiantly, he took another drink.

By the time he'd risen and wiped his lips on his sleeve and his hands on his pants, the native was upon him, showing unmistakable agitation in the urgent way it waved its arms. Impulsively, Sam thrust out his hand, and mockingly said, "How do you do?"

There was no audible reply. The native stopped waving its arms, took Sam's warm damp hand in a cooler, oily, hard one, and drew him away from the pool, scuttling backward. Mildly repelled, but not frightened, Sam disengaged his hand and followed freely.

He stumbled, though, and had to be helped by a renewed grip of that shell-coated hand. On his empty stomach the alcoholic fluid churned and burned; he was getting drunk, knew it, and was very much amused at the idea.

Sam permitted himself to be drawn into the shade of some trees. Then, suddenly obstinate, he balked. Instead of going further, he lay down, giggling.

Dizziness stopped the giggles. Sam felt dissociated from himself, as if floating free in space, whirling around and around like a planet in its orbit, except that he was sun

as well as planet. The trees around him circled nauseatingly. The native wavered as if seen through heated air.

Sam shut out these sights by closing his eyes. Almost immediately, he was whirled off into sleep.

EVENING'S chill awakened him. His head ached. He was stiff from lying on the ground; he was dizzy; his stomach was upset. For a few seconds he not only forgot where he was, but feared to open his eyes and find out.

When he did open them, it was to squint at a gyrating world only now slowing down from the rotation that had sent him to sleep. As the speed decreased, he made out the sheltering vegetation, and what looked like several natives.

He'd never before seen several natives in a group. He thought he was deluded, and closed his eyes to shut out the hallucination. Then, cautiously, he opened just one eye, and looked again.

No, by golly! He wasn't suffering from double vision! Six unblinking natives stared in a row!

Carefully, Sam moved each aching limb in turn. They felt battered, but more or less whole. And they were unrestrained. He rolled over to his stomach and got slowly to hands and knees. The exertion made him violently ill.

It took five minutes to get to his feet. The natives offered helping hands, but he rudely brushed them off. He washed they'd do something he could blame them for; it would be nice to say this was all their fault.

But it wasn't. He knew exactly where he was, now — and how he'd gotten there. He promised not to leave Sally alone, and had left her alone. He'd promised not to have anything to do with the natives, and had displayed obvious weakness before them. He had

come out to find food, and had gotten drunk. He was, Sam felt, the lowest form of life that had ever fouled up an important assignment.

He must get control of himself. Those beasts were probably plotting some fiendish revenge for the one that had burned. And he could hardly stand without falling.

Maybe another drink would fix him, Sam felt vaguely. Sure — hair of the dog!

Ignorant of the proper direction to take, he staggered off in search of the pool, the natives following in a silent semicircle.

He found it. Guided by odor or submerged memory, he stumbled through the growth around it, flopped to his knees, blew some of the scum away, rested his hands on the bottom, and drank.

A native tugging at his jacket made him stop. He looked around, and saw that the other five were waving their arms frantically.

Sam didn't care. The natives seemed suddenly ridiculous, like a team of cheerleaders from some school for defectives. He was going to settle his — urps! — settle his stomach. And then go home, s'help him.

But after he'd had another drink, and had gotten clumsily to his feet with only the native who clung to his jacket keeping him from falling into the pool, Sam decided he couldn't go home yet, though it was almost dark. Nope! Dark or not, gotta have something to show for this little excursion. Gotta bring home some food!

Since the natives were gesturers, he gestured, making all the signs he could think of for eating, food, hunger, and weakness. They seemed mainly interested in edging him away from the pool. He gave up signalling, therefore, and plucked a lettuce-like leaf from a plant beside him, opening his mouth to eat it.

INSTANTLY the natives closed in, tearing the leaf from his grasp, forcing him to wipe his hand on the ground. They had little regard for his thin skin — scraped some of it off on the twigs and pebbles underfoot, made it to blister.

Sam didn't like that. He lurched away from them down the aisle of plantings to a bush with small berries on it, like pepper-corns. He plucked a few, and tried to eat them.

Again his find was knocked from his hand. This time, though, the natives didn't damage his skin. They'd better not! Sam told himself fiercely.

He tried another plant, tearing a place of soft and rubbery bark from a tree nearby. Once more the material was taken violently from him; this time three of the natives grasped his clothing, trying to pull him in a specific direction.

Out of the garden, he thought. Away from their precious plants. But they had plenty — they could afford to share them!

“No, you don't!” he muttered, and savagely beat them off.

What happened next was never clear to him. All six natives seemed to close in as if by signal. With horny hands they pounded at his legs. The more he struggled, the harder they hit.

Finally, he tripped. Then, with a single sharp blow to the base of his skull, one of them knocked him out.

He came to with the sensation of being carried — horizontally, but face downward; his nose kept bumping something.

Opening his eyes, he found that his nose was bumping the back of a native. He was being carried feet first through the darkness on two of them, while others grasped him with painfully clawlike hands. He felt awful.

An overwhelming desire to escape surged through him. But it had been, he recalled, another overwhelming desire — to drink from that loathsome pool — that had

gotten him into this mess. He lay still, letting consciousness return slowly but fully. Fie was almost sober, now; sober enough to feel both sick and sorry.

And helpless. He'd fought these natives once, and lost. Might lose again. And if he escaped, would they be far behind? He had no place to run but the shack, no desire to lead a group of irate captors to Sally.

Besides, it was dark, now. He couldn't see where he was going. And it wouldn't help anything if he found out. He decided to let them revenge themselves, satisfy themselves. As far from the shack as possible. It was the least he could do...

Fie was feeling quite heroic when they set him on his feet, but that pleasant sensation evaporated when he saw why he'd been released.

They wanted him to open the door of his shack. Obviously they had seen him pass through here, but apparently they didn't know how to work the latch. He realized they must long have been aware that he'd regained consciousness.

What could he say to Sally? Sam wondered frantically. What could he do to avoid shocking her?

He'd never before been brought home drunk. Searching his mind for the right way to greet her, he called, "Company, honey," and waited for her to answer.

CHAPTER - 04

SALLY held a lamp in his eyes as she swung open the door. "Good grief!" she gasped. "Are you all right?"

"Fine," he assured her, grinning as he swayed.

She moved closer, as if to kiss him, suspiciously. She stepped back, and only then noticed the natives standing behind him in expressionless array. She nearly dropped the lamp.

“‘S all right, Sal,” Sam said, shuffling his feet. “These boys are friends of mine.”

He was aware of thickness in his speech, but couldn’t seem to control it.

The impediment served a purpose, he observed. Sally’s initial shock gave way to indignation; she was much too angry to be frightened. “Your friends can put you to bed,” she sniffed, tossing her head. “I certainly won’t.” She stood aside. Without help, Sam managed to cross the threshold and sit on the cot. The natives stared through the doorway. Sam got up, took the hand of one, and led it within. The others followed, and he closed the door.

The natives huddled in the center of the floor, filling the room. Sally shrank into a corner by the stove.

“My own dear Trojan Horse,” she jeered. “Wooden head and all.”

“This is what we were sent here to do, Sal,” Sam said reasonably.

“It’s what you promised not to do,” she reminded him.

“I couldn’t help it,” he said. “They came to me. A good tiling, too, come to think of it; I was trying to eat things in the garden, see? They wouldn’t let me, and now I’m getting the idea they’ve got nothing but poisonous plants there, probably to teach their young. Sure! That would explain why they got so excited. And see, I’ve got a little skin-allergy on my hand, like poison ivy.”

He held it up for her inspection.

A look of sympathy passed swiftly over her face, and was as swiftly repressed. “Do they have a bar up there, too?” she asked, much too sweetly.

“No. But alcohol is a poison, of sorts. So they have a fermenting pool up there. I didn’t drink very much, but I haven’t had anything to eat all day—”

“I’m not going to cook for you now,” Sally stated. “We can’t feed them all, and you can’t just eat while they watch; you’ll have to wait till they go.”

Resignedly, knowing she was right, Sam thrust his dirty hands into his jacket pockets. He felt something, fingered it, and recognized the chocolate bar. Just the thing!

CLUMSILY Sam took out the bar, wiped a few crumbs of dirt from it, and with his pocket-knife cut it into eight small but more or less equal parts. The natives watched fixedly.

He gave a piece to each of them, one to Sally, and kept one. The natives held theirs and watched him.

“This is to eat,” he said, and thrust his entire portion into his mouth, Sally did likewise. Hesitantly, looking from them to one another, the natives nibbled with chitinous mandibles at the small brown squares. One by one, their bits of chocolate disappeared.

“Sally, I think they like the stuff,” Sam said, pleased with himself; “I think they want some more.”

“Well, they can’t have any,” Sally said; “we can’t spare it.”

“All right.” Turning to the silent natives, Sam displayed empty hands, turned his pockets inside out, and shrugged. “No more,” he said, and shook his head. “And I’m still hungry, too.” He rubbed his belly, and pulled tight his jacket’s belt to show emptiness beneath it.

The natives looked at one another and seemed to commune. They turned to the door. Stepping carefully between them, Sam opened it. They marched out single file and disappeared into the night.

“Rude, aren’t they,” Sally said, grinning relievedly” in spite of herself. “When the food runs out, they go home.”

“I don’t know,” Sam said. “All day I’ve been trying to show them we need something to eat. Maybe they have the idea, finally; maybe they’re going to get us something.”

“Yes?” Sally was staring out the shack’s rear window, her face shocked and pale.

“Look! They’ve found the grave! ”

They had indeed. Under the dim auroral light they’d already begun to burrow through the soft, recently-spaded dirt for the body of their comrade. Sam watched with bated breath as they recovered the corpse, loaded it onto the back of one of their number, and bore it av/ay out of sight along the dark and rolling plain.

He reached out to grip his wife’s arm. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m a fool and I know it.”

“Maybe they do, too,” Sally said thoughtfully. She was silent a moment, her forehead puckered in thought...

“You know,” she went on, “seriously, Sam, that might be the key to this whole nightmare. I mean, look — the natives know about these ant-like social life-forms that live here. Those insect-things have a complicated social life, but all on the basis of builtin drives. They just react to endocrine secretions and the like, and don’t think the way we do. Their patterns of action are complicated, but unchanging.

“Maybe the natives ignored us because they thought we were just a pair of strange animals, of no interest since we’re neither enemies nor competitors — you yourself said they have none — going through our complicated, instinctive, unratinalized routine. Today, though, you proved them wrong by going out and acting foolishly, in a way that obviously was not built-in.”

“You’re sweet,” Sam said, “to try making yourself believe that everything I’ve done was for the best. But—”

“I’m not saying that! I’m only saying that rational beings are the ones with wills instead of drives; and it’s will and not instinct that gave you the capacity to go out and make a fool of yourself today. Animals never do so good a job. For instance, they usually

leave alcohol alone unless first driven neurotic by artificial means — that's been proved time and again, experimentally. Animals aren't even likely to play around with something that's none of their business — the way the native did last night trying to steal a piece of our fire. Maybe its mates recognize that we share its capacity for error."

Another thing that rational beings have, Sam reflected briefly, is a conscience. He wondered if it was his feeling of guilt that kept him from accepting Sally's theory. Still... no use eliminating all her hopes...

HE SAID, slowly, "I guess every animal on this planet — except a very young one — knows better than to drink from that pool. And I guess it might be called a clincher that I got drunk, slept, woke, was sick — and then went right back for another drink."

"Oh, you did!" Sally sounded genuinely shocked. "Well, I hope you feel as bad as you look!"

"Worse," Sam assured her. He got up, slopped water into a basin, and washed, avoiding her troubled eyes.

Wouldn't it be nice if she'd figured everything right, he told himself. Wouldn't it be nice if the natives came back with a large supply of tasty and nourishing food.

But what if they'd gone for their soldiers, or their weapons?

He didn't want Sally to think of that. "You might as well turn in," he said with elaborate casualness. "You've had a bad day. I'll sit up a while, in case our guests come back. Have to be polite, you know."

"I'll sit up with you," Sally said sharply. "You might need me to reload."

Sam stared at her, wide-eyed and not wholly grateful that his mind had been so clearly read. But resentment gave way to affection. He kissed her, laid out his guns, and spent the rest of the night hauling in crated supplies and setting them around the interior walls to serve as breastworks.

It was dawn, when the natives returned. By then, Sally ^vas dozing in a chair, and Sam, the cabin crowded to the roof, had stopped work to thoughtfully watch Altair climb the sky in a blaze of scarlet and gold, painting the granite cliff with colors more striking than any that rational beings had ever devised.

“They’re coming,” he warned softly.

Sally awoke, and rose swiftly but stiffly. “How close shall we let them come?” she asked.

Sam hesitated then squeezed her hand as he gave her a gun. “When you said they might understand us, didn’t you mean it?” he asked gently.

“I meant they might — yes.”

“Well, I’m going out to meet them,” Sam said.

“But — but they might kill you!”

“Honey, a while ago you came up with a beautiful theory that rational beings can be distinguished from beasts because rational beings make such dopey mistakes. Well, while you’ve napped I thought up another couple of distinctions to take into account. One is, that only the rational can theorize in the way you did. The other is, that lacking those built-in drives, we rational ones can act in brand new ways when we want to, and actually adapt our behavior to our theories. And that’s what I’m going to do.”

“But Sam! My theory may be an awful mistake!”

“To err is human,” he said, grinning over his shoulder as he opened the door. “And human is what we’re trying to prove we are.”

But apparently Sam’s earlier blunderings had been enough to establish his rationality; for the natives brought nothing but food.