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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK SOLAR STIFF ***

SOLAR STIFF

By

CHAS. A. STOPHER

Totem poles are a dime a dozen north of 63° ... but only Ketch, the lying Eskimo, vowed they dropped out of frigid northern skies.

PROBOS FIVE gazed at the white expanse ahead, trying to determine where his ship would crash. Something was haywire in the fuel system of his Interstar Runabout. He was losing altitude fast, so fast that all five pairs of his eyes couldn't focus on a place to land.

Five pairs of arms, each pair about three feet apart on the loglike body, pushed buttons and rotated controls frantically, but to no avail. In a few short minutes it would all be over for Probos Five. Even if by some miracle he remained unhurt after crashing, he would die shortly thereafter. The frigid climatic conditions of the third planet were deadly to a Mercurian. He thought once of donning his space suit but decided against it. That would merely prolong the agony. From Planet Three, when one has a smashed space cruiser, there is no return. Probos Five knew that death was riding with him in the helpless ship. The situation did not unnecessarily dismay him; Mercurians are philosophers.

Probos Five ceased to manipulate the unresponding controls. Stretching his trunklike torso to its full twenty feet, four heads gazed through observation ports at the four points of the compass while the remaining head desultorily watched the instrument panel.

Since die he must, Probos Five would meet his end stoically, and five pairs of stumpy arms folded over five chests in a coordinated gesture of resignation.

Probos Five thought fleetingly of his wife Lingua Four and remembered with some annoyance that she was the author of his present predicament. A social climber, Probos Five thought to himself, but aside from that a good wife and mother in addition to being a reigning beauty. Lingua Four was tall even for a Mercurian. Already she scaled seven dergs, or in Earth terms, fourteen feet and was beginning to show evidences of a fifth head. Five heads were rarely found on females and Probos Five was justly proud of his good fortune. In all Mercury at the present time, he knew of but two females possessing five heads and soon Lingua Four would be the third of her sex to be thus endowed.

Yes, thought Probos Five, a woman to be proud of; for today after three vargs of marriage the memory of her trim trunk with four pairs of eyes laughing mischievously, filled his five brains with flame. Slim as a birch she stood in his memory, and eight eyes whispered lovers' thoughts across space and time.

Probos Five recalled his five minds from their nostalgic reverie and gazed at the contour of the Earth that was rushing up to meet him. White, blazing white reflecting the rays of the midnight sun covered the region as far as the eye could reach.

"Good," thought Probos Five, "the Polar regions. That means the end will come quickly. One or two seconds at the most of that bitter cold would be enough."

TURNING away from the windows Probos Five let his thoughts return to Lingua Four, to Probos Two, his son, and his home on the first planet from the sun. Ah, that is the place to live, thought Probos, the temperature an unchanging 327°; just comfortably warm, where

one could enjoy a life of warmth and ease. Too bad that he would not live to see it again. Thirty vargs, he reflected, is such a short time. With luck, perhaps he may have lived to see a hundred vargs slip by. And perhaps in time he may have added three more heads and five dergs in length to his towering trunk.

He thought of Probos Two and wondered idly if his son would also visit the barbarian worlds to collect data for Lingua Four.

He wished that he could have seen more of Probos Two. There's an up-and-coming lad, he thought, not quite two vargs old and two heads already. Yes, indeed, he's quite a boy, Probos Five remembered proudly; maybe his mother will keep him at home instead of running him all over the universe to get material for her committees.

He wished that Lingua Four would settle down and be content as a housewife, but he doubted that she would. Social ambition was boring like a termite under her bark.

Lingua Four was determined to be the first lady of Arbor, the capital city of Mercury. To this end Lingua Four had labored unceasingly. She was president of half the women's clubs of Arbor. She could always be depended upon to furnish the best in new and diverting subjects.

She headed almost all committees for aid or research on any type of problem. It was owing to Lingua Four being president of the Committee for Undernourished Arborians that Probos Five was making this ill-starred trip. His purpose was to capture a few of the upright, divided trunk animals that inhabited the third planet.

They were to be transported to Mercury and given over to scientific study as to their edible qualities. If it were found that the divided trunk creatures were fit for Mercurian consumption, the problem of undernourishment would no longer exist since the supply of divided trunks was seemingly inexhaustible. Mercurians had made expeditions to the third planet before and every report concluded with—"Divided trunk creatures increasing in number."

Privately Probos Five doubted the possibility of using the divided trunks for food, since the last expedition once again reported a complete lack of captives due to the frail and tenuous bodies of the divided trunks. Then, too, transportation and preservation posed a tremendous problem, not to mention the difficulty of trying to eat something that might vaporize on your fork. But then these questions may never arise, he decided, for of all the reports perused by Probos Five not one expedition had succeeded in bringing a divided trunk to Mercury.

All reports were read to the last letter by Probos Five before assembling equipment for his own trip. In the reports he had noted many of the difficulties of the earlier missions. Planet Three was impossible for a Mercurian without a heated space suit. The temperature of Planet Three was so low that it would literally freeze a Mercurian stiff in a matter of seconds.

The casualties of the early expeditions had been numerous. Many Mercurians had succumbed to the bitter cold due to flaws in space suits and other accidents. A break in the suit meant instant death. The victims of such mishaps were invariably buried in the isolated, sparsely inhabited Polar regions to avoid alarming the divided trunk creatures.

It was strange, mused Probos Five, that the divided trunks were seemingly unable to bear the slightest increase in temperature. Their bodies disintegrated upon contact with a Mercurian. Some were roped and dragged from a distance up to the doors of the space ships, but no inhabitant of Planet Three had been closer to Mercury than the air lock of the space cruisers. As the divided trunk people were dragged into the air lock, warm air from the ship would be pumped into the lock to dispel the frigid air of Planet Three. As the warmth of Mercury enveloped the divided trunks they became quite red, began to melt and finally dissolved into a gaseous state, leaving a small pile of ashes and a disagreeable odor in the air lock that sometimes lingered for days.

Probos Five believed he had the solution for these obstacles in the path of scientific study of the divided trunks. He had decided to use guile in place of strength. For this reason he had come alone and in a small space runabout to put his solution to the test. But his solution now could never be tried, he remembered morosely.

IN THE aft compartment Probos Five had constructed a refrigeration plant. By maintaining a constant degree of frigidity he hoped to deliver a pair of each species of divided trunks to Mercury. He hoped especially to capture a complete set and perhaps a few over to make up for breakage and losses. As to what form of sustenance the divided trunks were accustomed to, he had no idea whatsoever. He had intended to bring samples of earth, vegetation and anything else that may have suggested a source of food for the divided trunks.

The thought too had occurred to him that possibly the divided trunk creatures ate one another. On the possibility of this Probos Five had determined to capture three black ones, three white ones, three yellows, three browns and three reds, and three of any other color that he might find. He rather doubted that more colors or combination of colors existed. All previous expedition reports had mentioned only the five colors. However, Probos Five had determined to keep several eyes open on the off chance that he might find a new and different species.

His refrigerator was modeled along the architectural lines of the dens of the divided trunks. The main room of the refrigerator opened to the outside of the ship by means of a small air lock. A

Mercurian size air lock was not needed for the divided trunks, as few had been found to be much over three dergs in height.

Winches and cables to pull the divided trunks into the refrigerator were installed in the refrigerator room itself to avoid burning the divided trunks with hot cables from other parts of the ship.

In addition, Probos Five had cunningly devised a refrigerated trap. This too was designed to simulate the caves of the divided trunk creatures but was smaller. It was constructed with entrances readily seen and exits well hidden. Probos Five had expected great things of his trap. He had conceived the idea after reading the report of a Mercurian expedition that explored the dens of the divided trunks at some place marked "Coney Island." According to the reports the divided trunks showed no hesitancy in entering these types of dens. In fact, the writer of the report gave it as his opinion that the divided ones perhaps played games in these types of caves. It also mentioned that some of the dens were equipped with flat shiny surfaces that cast reflections or images. Probos Five had incorporated the image-making surfaces into his trap design. A pity that all this effort must be wasted, thought Probos as he once more turned to the observation ports to check his remaining distance from the planet's surface. Seeing that his time was short, Probos Five turned all five faces forward in the Mercurian gesture of disdain for death. A moment later came the shock.

A WEEK later the proprietor of a novelty shop in Fairbanks watched two natives with their dog team pulling something loglike through the snow toward the trading post. Turning to a customer he remarked,

"Here comes Ketch and Ah Koo dragging in another Totem Pole. Guess that Ketch must be the biggest liar ever produced by the Eskimos. He tried to tell me that Totem Poles fall from the sky. Says he can always find one if he sees it fall because it's so hot it melts the snow around it. Personally I think he should be elected president of the Liars' Club, but I'll buy the Totem Pole anyway. Those pesky tourists always whittle a chunk out of my Totem Pole for a souvenir.

"I'm glad he's bringing me another one," the storekeeper concluded, "the one he sold me last year is about whittled away."

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*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK SOLAR STIFF ***

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