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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK COLLECTOR'S ITEM ***

We've often wondered what would happen if Robert Young should cease to be a lyrically intense writer for a story or two, forsaking the bright, poetic worlds of MISS KATY THREE and THE FIRST SWEET SLEEP OF NIGHT to become dispassionately analytical on a cosmic scale. Now we know! He'd chill us to the bone by setting two squixes to brooding over a never-to-be born Earth, exactly as he has done here. And thrill us, too—with the liveliest kind of entertainment.

collector's item

by ... Robert F. Young

Very trivial things can go into the weaving of a nest. The human race, for instance—

THE CONDENSATION of the histories of ten thousand races into a text concise enough to fit into a single volume had been a task of unprecedented proportions. There had been times when the Galactic Historian had doubted whether even his renowned abilities were up to the assignment that the Galactic Board of Education had so lightly tossed his way, times when he had thrown up his hands—all five of them—in despair. But at last the completed manuscript lay before him on his desk with nothing but the final reading remaining between it and publication.

The Galactic Historian repeatedly wiped his brows as he turned the pages. It was a warm night, even for Mixxx Seven. Now and then, a tired breeze struggled down from the hills and limped across the lowlands to the Galactic University buildings. It crept into the Galactic Historian's study via the open door and out again via the open windows, fingering the manuscript each time it passed but doing nothing whatsoever about the temperature.

The manuscript was something more than a hammered-down history of galactic achievement. It was the ultimate document. The two and seventy thousand jarring texts that it summarized had been systematically destroyed, one by one, after the Galactic Historian had stripped them of their objective

information. If an historical event was not included in the manuscript, it failed as an event. It ceased to have reality.

The responsibility was the Galactic Historian's alone and he did not take it lightly. But he had a lot on his minds and, of late, he hadn't been sleeping well. He was overworked and over-tired and over-anxious. He hadn't seen his wives for two Mixxx months and he was worried about them—all fifty of them.

He never should have let them take the Hub cruise in the first place. But they'd been so enthusiastic and so eager that he simply hadn't had the hearts to let them down. Now, despite his better judgments, he was beginning to wonder if they might not be on the make for another coordinator.

Wives trouble, on top of all his chronological trouble, was too much. The Galactic Historian could hardly be blamed for wanting to see the last of the manuscript, for wanting to transmit it to his publishers, potential hiatuses and all, and take the next warp for the Hub.

But he was an historian—the historian, in fact—and he persisted heroically in his task, rereading stale paragraphs and checking dreary dates, going over battles and conquests and invasions and interregnums. Despite his mood and despite the heat, the manuscript probably would have arrived at his publishers chronologically complete. So complete, in fact, that schoolteachers all

over the galaxy would have gotten the textbook they had always wanted—a concise chronicle of everything that had ever happened since the explosion of the primeval atom, a history textbook that no other history textbook could contradict for the simple reason that there were no other history textbooks.

As it was, they got the textbook, but it did not contain everything that had ever happened. Not quite.

Two factors were responsible for the omission. The first was an oversight on the part of the Galactic Historian. With so much on his minds, he had forgotten to number the pages of the manuscript.

The second factor was the breeze.

The breeze was the ultimate archfiend and there can be no question as to its motivation. Nothing short of sheer malice could have caused it suddenly to remember its function after neglecting that function all evening.

All evening it had been tiptoeing down the hillsides and across the lowlands as though it was afraid of disturbing a single blade of grass or a single drooping leaf. And then, at the crucial moment, it huffed and puffed itself up into a little hurricane, charged down upon the Galactic University buildings and whooshed through the Galactic Historian's study like a band of interstellar dervishes.

Unfortunately, the Galactic Historian had begun to wipe his brows at the very moment of the breeze's entry. While the act was not a complicated one, it did consume time and monopolize attention. It is not surprising, therefore, that he failed to witness the theft. Neither is it surprising that he failed to notice afterwards that the page he had been checking was gone.

He was, as previously stated, overworked, over-tired, and over-anxious and, in such a state, even a Galactic Historian can skip a whole series of words and dates and never know the difference. A hiatus of twenty thousand years is hardly noticeable anyway. Galactically speaking, twenty thousand years is a mere wink in time.

The breeze didn't carry the page very far. It simply whisked it through a convenient window, deposited it beneath a xixix tree and then returned to the hills to rest. But the choice of a xixix tree is highly significant and substantiates the malicious nature of the breeze's act. If it had chosen a muu or a buxx tree instead, the Galactic Historian might have found the page in the morning when he took his constitutional through the university grounds.

However, since a xixix tree was selected, no doubt whatever can remain as to the breeze's basic motivation. Articles of a valuable nature just aren't left beneath xixix trees. Everybody knows that squixes live in xixix trees and everybody knows that squixes are collectors. They collect all sorts of things, buttons and pins and twigs and pebbles—anything at all, in fact, that isn't too big for them to pick up and carry into their xixix tree houses.

They have been called less kind things than collectors. Thieves, for example, and scavengers. But collectors are what they really are. Collecting fulfills a basic need in their mammalian makeup; the possession of articles gives them a feeling of security. They love to surround their little furry bodies with all sorts of odds and ends, and their little arboreal houses are stuffed with everything you can think of.

And they simply adore paper. They adore it because it has a practical as well as a cultural value.

Specifically, they adore it because it is wonderful to make hammocks out of.

When the two squixes in the xixix tree saw the page drift to the ground, they could hardly believe their eyes. They chattered excitedly as they skittered down the trunk. The page had hardly stopped fluttering before it was whisked aloft again, clenched in tiny squix fingers.

The squixes wasted no time. It had been a long while since the most cherished of all collector's items had come their way and they needed a new hammock badly. First, they tore the page into strips, then they began to weave the strips together.

—1456, Gut. Bi. pr.; 1492, Am. dis.; 1945, at. b. ex. Almgdo.; 1971, mn. rchd., they wove.

—2004, Sir. rchd.; 2005-6, Sir.—E. wr.; 2042, Btlgs. rchd.; 2043-4, Btlgs.—E. wr.

They wove and wove and wove.

15,000, E. Emp. clpsd.; 15,038, E. dstryd.; Hist. E., end of.

It was a fine hammock, the best the two squixes had ever wove. But they didn't sleep well that night. They twisted and turned and tossed, and they dreamed the most fantastic dreams—

Which isn't particularly surprising, considering what they were sleeping on. Sleeping on the history of Earth would be enough to give anybody nightmares.

Even squixes.

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