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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK GROVE OF THE UNBORN ***

Glamorous Lyn Venable of Dallas, Texas, makes a first appearance in these pages (but by no means her first appearance in this field), with this sensitive story of a young man who needn't have run. A contributor to William Nolan's (OF TIME AND TEXAS, November, 1956, Fantastic Universe) famous Ray Bradbury Review, Miss Venable wants, very very much, to be a part, albeit small, of the comeback of science fiction that is seen today, as she wrote us recently.

grove of the unborn

by ... LYN VENABLE

Bheel still stood on the patio, transfixed with horror. He heard the terrified cry "Dheb Tyn-Dall"—and then the vigilant Guardians got him....

TYNDALL heard the rockets begin to roar, and it seemed as though the very blood in his veins pulsated with the surging of those mighty jets. Going? They couldn't be going. Not yet. Not without him! And he heard the roaring rise to a mighty crescendo, and he felt the trembling of the ground beneath the room in which he lay, and then the great sound grew less, and grew dim, and finally dissipated in a thin hum that dwindled finally into silence. They were gone.

Tyndall threw himself face down on his couch, the feel of the slick, strange fabric cold and unfriendly against his face. He lay there for a long time, not moving. Tyndall's thoughts during those hours were of very fundamental things, that beneath him, beneath the structure of the building in which he was confined, lay a world that was not Earth, circling a sun that was not Sol, and that the ship had gone and would never come back. He was alone, abandoned. He thought of the ship, a silver streak now in the implacable blackness of space, threading its way homeward through the stars to Sol, to Earth. The utter desolation which swept over him at the impact of his aloneness was more than he could endure, and he forced himself to think of something else.

Why was he here then? John Tyndall, 3rd Engineer of the starship *Polaris*. It had been such a routine trip, ferrying a group of zoologists and biologists around the galaxy looking for unclassified life-supporting planets. They had found such a world circling an obscure sun half way across the galaxy. An ideal world for research expedition, teeming with life, the scientists were delighted. In a few short months they discovered and cataloged over a thousand varieties of flora and fauna peculiar to this planet, called Arrill, after the native name which sounded something like Ahhrhell. Yes, there were natives, humanoid, civilized and gracious. They had seemed to welcome

the strangers, as a matter of fact they had seemed to expect them.

The Arrillians had learned English easily, its basic sounds not being too alien to their own tongue. They had quite a city there on the edge of the jungle, although, in circling the planet before landing, the expedition had noted that this was the only city. On a world only a little smaller than Earth, one city, surrounded completely by the tropical jungle which covered the rest of the world. A city without power, without machinery of any kind, and yet a city that was self-sufficient.

Well-tilled fields stretched to the very edge of the jungle, where high walls kept out the voracious growth. The fields fed the city well, and clothed it well. And there were mines to yield up fine

metal and precious gems. The Earthmen had marveled, and yet, it had seemed strange. On all this planet, just one city with perhaps half a million people within its walls. But this was not a problem for the expedition.

The crew of the *Polaris* and the members of the expedition had spent many an enjoyable evening in the dining hall of the palace-like home of the Rhal, who was something more than a mayor and something less than a king. Actually, Arrill seemed to get along with a minimum of government. All in all, the Earthmen had summed up the Arrillians as being a naive, mild, and courteous people. They probably still thought so, all of them, that is, except Tyndall.

Of course, now that he looked back upon it, there has been a few things ... that business about the Bugs, as the Earthmen had dubbed the oddly ugly creatures who seemed to occupy something of the position of a sacred cow in the Arrillian scheme of things. The Bugs came in all sizes, that is all sizes from a foot or so in length up to the size of a full human.

The Bugs were not permitted to roam the streets and market places, like the sacred cows of the Earthly Hindus. The Bugs were kept in huge pens, which none but a few high-ranking priests were permitted to enter, and although the Earthmen were not prevented from standing outside the pens and watching the ugly beasts munching grass or basking in the sun, the Arrillians always seemed nervous when the strangers were about the pens. The Earthmen had shrugged and reflected that religion was a complexity difficult enough at home, needless to probe too deeply into the Arrillian.

But The Time had been something else again, bringing with it, the first sign of real Arrillian fanaticism and the first hint of violence. Tyndall and four companions were strolling in a downtown section of the city, when all at once a hoarse cry in Arrillian shattered the quiet hum of street activity.

"What did he say?" asked one of Tyndall's companions, who had not learned much Arrillian.

"I—I think, 'A Time! A Time!' What could ..." he never finished the sentence, all about them Arrillians had prostrated themselves in the rather dirty street, covering their faces with their hands, lying face down. The Earthmen hesitated a moment, and a priest of Arrill appeared as though from nowhere, a wicked scimitar-like weapon in his hand and a face tense with anger.

"Dare you," he hissed in Arrillian, "dare you not hide your eyes at A Time!" He pushed one of the Earthmen with surprising strength, and the latter stumbled to his knees. All five men hastened to ape the position of the prostrate Arrillians; they knew better to risk committing sacrilege on a strange planet. As Tyndall sank to the ground and covered his eyes, he heard that priest mutter another sentence, in which his own name was included. He thought it was "You, Tyn-Dall ... even you."

A few moments later a bell sounded from somewhere, and the buzzing of conversation began around them, along with the shuffling, scraping sound of many people getting to their feet at once. A hand touched Tyndall's shoulder and an Arrillian voice, laughing now, purred, "Up stranger, up, The Time is past."

The Earthmen got to their feet. Everything about them was the same as though nothing had happened, people strolling along the street, going in and out of shops, stopping to chat.

"I guess that was the all-clear," commented one wryly.

The others laughed nervously, but Tyndall was strangely troubled, he was thinking of the strange words of the priest, "You, Tyn-Dall, even you." Why should he have known, and not the others? He tried to forget it. Arrillian was a complex tongue with confusing syntax, perhaps the priest had said something else. But Tyndall knew one thing for certain, the mention of his name had been unmistakable.

The mood hung on, and quite suddenly Tyndall had asked, "I wonder about the children. Why do you suppose it is?"

One of the men laughed, "Maybe they feed them to the Bugs." At no time, during their stay on Arrill, had they seen a single child, or young person under the age of about twenty-one. The crew had speculated upon this at great length, coming to the conclusion that the youngsters were kept secluded for some reason known only to the Arrillians, probably some part of their religion. One of them had made so bold as to ask one of the scientists who politely told him that since his group was not composed of ethnologists or theologians, but of biologists and zoologists, they were interested neither in the Arrillians, their offspring nor their religion, but merely in the flora and fauna of the planet, both of which seemed to be rather deadly. The expedition had had several close calls in the jungle, and some of the plants seemed as violently carnivorous as the animals.

It was just a few days after the incident that the Arrillians kidnapped Tyndall. It had been a simple, old-fashioned sort of job, pulled off with efficiency and dispatch as he wandered a few hundred feet away from the ship. It was late, and he had been unable to sleep, so he had strolled out for a smoke. The nightwatch must have been somewhere about on patrol, probably only a few hundred feet away, on the other side of the ship. It happened suddenly and silently, the hand clapped over his mouth, the forearm constricting his windpipe, his legs jerked out from under him, and a rag smelling sickly-sweet shoved under his nose, bringing oblivion.

When he came to consciousness, he found himself in this room, and he knew that since then, many days and nights had passed. His wants were meticulously attended to, his bath prepared, his food brought to him regularly, delicious and steaming, with a generous supply of full-bodied Arrillian wine to wash it down. Fresh clothes were brought to him daily, the loose-flowing, highly ornamented robe of the Arrillian noble. Tyndall knew he was no ordinary prisoner, and somehow, this fact made him doubly uneasy.

And then, tonight, the ship had blasted off without him. Tyndall could easily reconstruct what had happened when his crewmates had inquired about him, at the palace and in town. "Tyn-Dall?" Then, a sorrowful expression, a shrugging of the shoulders, a pointing toward the death-infested jungle, and a mournful shaking of the head, sign language which in any tongue meant, "Tyn-Dall wanders too far from your ship. He becomes lost. Alas, he does not know our jungle and its perils." Those who spoke a little English would make some expression of sympathy.

Maybe the crew was a little suspicious, maybe they thought there was something fishy about the thing, and then they thought of the unhappy results of what was commonly referred to as an "interplanetary incident." Ever since the people of the second planet of Alpha Centauri, in the early days of extraterrestrial exploration, had massacred an entire expedition because the captain had mortally insulted a tribal leader by refusing a sacred fruit, such incidents had been avoided at all costs.

And so, they dared not offend the Arrillians by questioning the veracity of their statements. And the jungle was deadly, so they looked a little longer, and asked a few more questions. After a little while, the scientists had completed their work and were anxious to get home, and so, the ship blasted off, without him.

All this had passed kaleidoscopically in Tyndall's mind as he lay on the couch in his luxurious prison, too numb to weep or even curse. His reverie was broken by the clicking of the lock and he raised up to see the door opening. An Arrillian servant stood there, his silver hair done up in the complicated style which denoted male house servants. He was unarmed. The houseman smiled, roared in imitation of a rocket, made a swooping gesture with one hand to indicate the departing ship, then pointed at Tyndall and at the open door. The servant bowed and departed, leaving the door slightly ajar. Now that the ship was gone, he was free to leave his room.

Tyndall stepped cautiously out of the room and found himself in a long hall, with many doors opening from it on either side, much like a hotel corridor. One end of the hall seemed to open out onto a garden and he started in that direction.

The doorway opened out into a patio which overlooked a vast and perfectly tended garden. The verdant perfection of the scene was marred only by one of the Bugs, sunning itself and gnawing on the stem of a flower. Tyndall was impressed again with the repulsive ugliness of the thing. This one was the size of a small adult human, and even vaguely human in outline, although the brownish armored body was still more suggestive of a big bug than anything else known to him. There were even rudimentary wings furled close to the curving back, and the underside was a dirty, striped gray. Tyndall shuddered, wondering why the Arrillians, who so loved to surround themselves with beauty, should choose so horrendous a creature as the object of their worship, or protection.

He heard running footsteps behind him, and turned to see the Arrillian houseman, breathless, with an expression of greatest concern on his face. The servant bowed respectfully before Tyndall, then gestured at the garden, shook his head vigorously from side to side and tugged at the Earthman's sleeve.

"Forbidden territory, eh? Okay, old fellow, what now?"

The servant motioned for Tyndall to follow him, and ushered him down the hall from whence he had just come, and into another of the rooms opening off from it. The very old man reclining upon the low, Roman-like couch, Tyndall recognized at once as his host, the Rhal of Arrill.

The Rhal touched the fingertips of both hands to his forehead in the Arrillian gesture of greeting, and Tyndall did the same. He noticed several male Arrillians standing near the back of the room, although the servant had bowed and retired.

"Well, Tyn-Dall, how do you enjoy the hospitality of Ahhreeel?" He, of course, gave the native pronunciation to the name which was almost Teutonic in sound and unpronounceable for Tyndall because of the sound given to the double aspirate, for which he knew no equivalent.

"Your English, Dheb Rhal, has improved greatly since our last meeting," commented Tyndall guardedly, using the Arrillian prefix of extreme respect.

The old man smiled. "Your friends were kind enough to lend me books and also the little grooved disks that make voice." He gestured toward an old-fashioned wind-up type phonograph which Tyndall recognized at once as being standard aboard interstellar vessels, and for just such a purpose. The Rhal continued, "For teaching English very fine. How are you enjoying our hospitality, I ask again?"

Tyndall was stuck on Arrill and he knew it. There was no need to cook his own goose by being deliberately offensive. "I appreciate the hospitality of Arrill, I express my thanks for the consideration of my hosts but—if I may ask a question?"

"Yes?"

"What, in the wisdom of the Dheb Rhal, is the reason for my—er—detainment?"

"To answer that, Tyn-Dall, I must tell you something of the past of Ahhreel, and of her destiny." At these words, the other Arrillians in the room drew closer, and the Rhal motioned them to a couch at his feet and nodded toward Tyndall, requesting that he join them. Tyndall noticed that the others were gazing up into the old man's face with an expression of raptness, even of reverence. He knew that the Rhal did not possess an especially exalted position politically, even though he was head of the city. He guessed therefore that the Rhal must be the religious ruler of Arrill as well.

The Rhal began, intoning the words as though he were reciting a ritual, "There was a time, many thousands of Khreelas ago, when the kingdom of Ahhreel was not one small city, as you see it now, but a mighty empire, girdling the world in her vastness. But the people of Ahhreel had become evil in their ways, and her cities were black with sin. It was then that Xheev himself left his kingdom in paradise and appeared to the people of Ahhreel, and he told them that he was displeased, and that bad times would fall upon Ahhreel, and that her people would dwindle in number, and become exceedingly few, and the jungle would reclaim her emptied cities. One city, and only one, would survive and prosper, and the people of that city would be given the chance to redeem Ahhreel, and remove the heavy hand of Xheev's terrible punishment.

"All this came to pass, and in the dark Khreelas that followed, all of Ahhreel vanished except this city. Now, for many, many thousands of Khreelas, the people of this city have striven to redeem Ahhreel by obeying the sacred laws of Xheev.

"Xheev had promised that when the punishment was ended, he would send a sign, and his sign would be that a great silver shell should fall from the heavens, and within would be Xheev's own emissary, who must wed the ranking priestess of Xheev, establishing again the rapport between the kingdom of paradise and the world of Ahhreel."

When the Rhal had finished, the other Arrillians in the room fastened the same look of reverence upon Tyndall which they had formerly reserved for the Rhal.

Tyndall chose his words carefully. "But there were many aboard my vessel. Why did you, Dheb Rhal, select me as the emissary of Xheev?"

"Xheev selected you, I recognized you, as of all your companions, you and you alone have the sun-colored hair, which is the sacred color of Xheev."

Tyndall was able to question the Rhal almost coolly, the trap was already sprung, the ship was gone. Now, he only wanted to know the how, and the why. An accident of pigmentation, only that had brought him to this. Sun-colored hair!

"But, Dheb Rhal, did my friends and I not often tell you of ourselves, of the place from which we came? A world, a world like your own?"

The old man smiled. "Do not think me naive, Tyn-Dall. I am quite aware that you are but a man, a man from another world, although quite an incredible world it must be. I know also that you were, until this hour, unaware of your destiny. I knew that when my priest reported that you ignored the Ritual Of The Time, until literally forced to obey. That is why we had to use ... devious means to make certain that your companions would not prevent the fulfillment of the prophesy. Now, of course, you understand.

"I do not think the priestess Lhyreesa will make you unhappy, Tyn-Dall."

This was not Earth and these people were not Earthmen. The thought now did not bring the bitter pain it had at first, right after the ship left. Earth already was becoming hazy in Tyndall's mind, a lovely globe of green somewhere ... somewhere far, and home once, a long time ago.

No, the Arrillians were not Earthmen, but they were human, and an attractive, gracious race. Life would not be bad, among the Arrillians, especially as the espoused of the ranking priestess of Arrill. Tyndall fingered the rich material of his Arrillian robe; he thought of the food, the wine, the servants. No, he decided, not bad at all. One thing, though—this priestess Lhyreesa ...

"I have, then, but one request to make, Dheb Rhal, I would like to see the priestess Lhyreesa."

The old man almost chuckled, "That is understandable, Tyn-Dall, but it is not yet The Time."

Tyndall, reveling in the strength of his position, grew bolder. "I would like very much, Dheb Rhal, to see her now."

The Rhal's face darkened. "Very well, Tyn-Dall, but I warn you, do not enter the Grove. There is death there, death that even I am powerless to prevent. The Guardians will not harm her, but any stranger ... will not live many minutes in the Grove."

"I will not enter, Dheb Rhal."

"Tyn-Dall, The Time is very soon, possibly this very hour. Will you not wait?"

"I prefer not to wait, Dheb Rhal."

The Rhal gestured to a young Arrillian. "Bheel, show Tyn-Dall to the Grove of the priestess Lhyreesa."

The younger man protested, "But, Dheb Rhal, so near The Time, what if ..."

"Do as I command," snapped the Rhal.

Bheel turned silently, motioning for Tyndall to follow. The young Arrillian led Tyndall the length of the corridor, back to the patio he had stepped onto by mistake earlier in the day. Bheel stepped respectfully aside. Tyndall looked out into the garden: the sun was beginning to set, the long shadows stretched across the dim recesses of tropic greenery. The huge insect-like thing was still there, stretched out in a narrow strip of sunlight, catching the last failing waves of warmth from the sinking sun.

Tyndall turned to the Arrillian. "Where might I find the priestess Lhyreesa?" he asked.

"There, Dheb Tyn-Dall."

"I see no one. Where do you say?"

Bheel pointed. "There, Dheb Tyn-Dall, where I point, you see the priestess Lhyreesa taking the late afternoon sun ... unless your eyesight is exceedingly bad, Dheb Tyn-Dall, you cannot fail to see...."

Tyndall's eyesight was exceedingly good. He followed that pointing finger, past the pillar that supported the roof of the patio, past the first row of alien green plants, past the second and third rows, to the clearing, to the little patch of sunlight, to the thing lying there. That monstrous, misshapen Bug.... The Bug.... The Priestess Lhyreesa!

Tyndall felt a pounding, skull-shattering madness closing in on him. This was a joke, of course. No, no joke. A dream then? No, not that either. In only a few split seconds it happened. Tyndall had leapt the rail around the patio, and was streaking through the Grove, heading for its outer boundary. The city—if he could get out of the Grove, there would be places to hide in the city. Narrow streets, empty cellars, dim, dim alleys. They'd never find him there! Run now, run before he was overtaken!

But he was not being pursued. Bheel still stood on the patio, transfixed with horror. He heard the Arrillian's terrified cry "Dheb Tyn-Dall...!" And then a rope shot out and grabbed him by the ankles. Not a rope really, a green something, and there were others around his arms, his chest, his hips, wrapping him in their sticky green embrace. The Guardians! He tried to cry out but one of the verdant fronds enveloped his throat so tightly he could not utter a sound. The innocent green things of the Grove were vigilant guardians indeed. They seemed to be merely holding him immobile, but Tyndall realized with sick horror that their pressure was increasing, so little at a time, but so steadily.

And something was happening out there in the sunlight too. The creature had convulsively grasped the branch of a bush and was clinging weakly to it, great tremors wracking its body. It seemed to be struggling, suffering, dying ... even as he was. In his agony, Tyndall laughed.

"A Time! A Time!" The voice came from the patio. Tyndall saw Bheel throw himself face down on the floor, covering his eyes with his hands. He heard the cry echoed within the palace, and then like a mighty roar outside in the city. And then there was silence, silence broken only by the sound of his own breathing as he dragged his tortured lungs across his shattered ribs.

He saw the Bug give a great heave, and then it seemed to split open, the entire skin splitting in a dozen places and a hand ... A HAND reached from within that dying hulk and grasped the bush to which it clung. A white slender hand on a fragile wrist, and then the arm was free, a woman's arm, a beautiful arm.

Tyndall began, dimly, and too late, to understand.

A leg kicked free ... the slender ankle ... the amply fleshed thigh.

Tyndall clung to consciousness doggedly. The Guardian was crushing the last dregs of life out of him now, and even the pain seemed to recede. His mind was very, very clear. So that was it. A word once heard in a long forgotten classroom, and then the scientists of the expedition. Metamorphosis ... he had meant to ask them what ... but he remembered now ... what it meant. A passing from one form into another.... Had he failed a biology test once because he didn't know what metamorphosis meant ... dimly ... dimly ... he saw ...

The last thing Tyndall ever saw was the Priestess Lhyreesa as she stepped out of the empty hulk, kicking it away with a disdainful toe. Breathless from her ordeal, she sank to the grass, her breasts heaving with exhaustion.

She sat there for a few minutes in the sunlight, then she tossed her head and spread her long raven hair out on her shoulders, the better to dry it in the waning sun.

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*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK GROVE OF THE UNBORN ***

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