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**Title:** A World by the Tale

**Author:** Randall Garrett

**Illustrator:** Leo Summers

**Release Date:** December 31, 2009 [EBook #30816]

**Language:** English

**Credits:** Produced by Sankar Viswanathan, Greg Weeks, and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <http://www.pgdp.net>

\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A WORLD BY THE TALE \*\*\*

### Transcriber's Note:

This etext was produced from Analog Science Fact & Fiction October 1963. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed.

## A WORLD BY THE TALE

This is about the best-hated author on Earth. Who was necessarily pampered and petted because of his crime against humanity....

**BY SEATON McKETTRIG**

**ILLUSTRATED BY LEO SUMMERS**

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**E**xactly three minutes after the Galactic left the New York apartment of Professor John Hamish McLeod, Ph.D., Sc.D., a squad of U.B.I. men pushed their way into it.

McLeod heard the door chime, opened the door, and had to back up as eight men crowded in. The one in the lead flashed a fancily engraved ID card and said: "Union Bureau of Investigation. You're Professor Mac-Lee-Odd." It was a statement, not a question.

"No," McLeod said flatly, "I am not. I never heard of such a name." He waited while the U.B.I. man blinked once, then added: "If you are looking for Professor MuhCloud, I'm he." It always irritated him when people mispronounced his name, and in this case there was no excuse for it.

"All right, Professor McLeod," said the U.B.I. agent, pronouncing it properly this time, "however you want it. Mind if we ask you a few questions?"

McLeod stared at him for half a second. Eight men, all of them under thirty-five, in top physical condition. He was fifteen years older than the oldest and had confined his exercise, in the words



of Chauncey de Pew, to "acting as pallbearer for my friends who take exercise." Not that he was really in poor shape, but he certainly couldn't have argued with eight men like these.

"Come in," he said calmly, waving them into the apartment.

Six of them entered. The other two stayed outside in the hall.

Five of the six remained standing. The leader took the chair that McLeod offered him.

"What are your questions, Mr. Jackson?" McLeod asked.

Jackson looked very slightly surprised, as if he were not used to having people read the name on his card during the short time he allowed them to see it. The expression vanished almost instantaneously. "Professor," he said, "we'd like to know what subjects you discussed with the Galactic who just left."

McLeod allowed himself to relax back in his chair. "Let me ask you two questions, Mr. Jackson. One: What the hell business is it of yours? Two: Why do you ask me when you already know?"

Again there was only a flicker of expression over Jackson's face. "Professor McLeod, we are concerned about the welfare of the human race. Your ... uh ... co-operation is requested."

"You don't have to come barging in here with an armed squad just to ask my co-operation," McLeod said. "What do you want to know?"

Jackson took a notebook out of his jacket pocket. "We'll just get a few facts straight first, professor," he said, leafing through the notebook. "You were first approached by a Galactic four years ago, on January 12, 1990. Is that right?"

McLeod, who had taken a cigarette from his pack and started to light it, stopped suddenly and looked at Jackson as though the U.B.I. man were a two-headed embryo. "Yes, Mr. Jackson, that is right," he said slowly, as though he were speaking to a low-grade moron. "And the capital of California is Sacramento. Are there any further matters of public knowledge you would like to ask me about? Would you like to know when the War of 1812 started or who is buried in Grant's Tomb?"

Jackson's jaw muscles tightened, then relaxed. "There's no need to get sarcastic, professor. Just answer the questions." He looked back at the notebook. "According to the record, you, as a zoologist, were asked to accompany a shipment of animals to a planet named ... uh ... Gelakin. You did so. You returned after eighteen months. Is that correct?"

"To the best of my knowledge, yes," McLeod said with heavy, biting sarcasm. "And the date of the Norman Conquest was A.D. 1066."

Jackson balled his fists suddenly and closed his eyes. "Mac. Loud. *Stop*. It." He was obviously holding himself under rigorous restraint. He opened his eyes. "There are reasons for asking these questions, professor. Very good reasons. Will you let me finish?"

McLeod had finished lighting his cigarette. He snapped his lighter off and replaced it in his pocket. "Perhaps," he said mildly. "May I make a statement first?"

Jackson took a deep breath, held it for a moment, then exhaled slowly. "Go ahead."

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"Thank you." There was no sarcasm in McLeod's voice now, only patience. "First—for the record—I'll say that I consider it impertinent of you to come in here demanding information without explanation. No, Jackson; don't say anything. You said I could make a statement. Thank you. Second, I will state that I am perfectly aware of why the questions are being asked.

"No reaction, Mr. Jackson? You don't believe that? Very well. Let me continue.

"On January twelve, nineteen-ninety, I was offered a job by certain citizens of the Galactic Civilization. These citizens of the Galactic Civilization wanted to take a shipload of Terrestrial animals to their own planet, Gelakin. They knew almost nothing about the care and feeding of Terrestrial animals. They needed an expert. They should have taken a real expert—one of the men from the Bronx Zoo, for instance. They didn't; they requested a zoologist. Because the request was made here in America, I was the one who was picked. Any one of seven other men

could have handled the job, but I was picked.

"So I went, thus becoming the first Earthman ever to leave the Solar System.

"I took care of the animals. I taught the Galactics who were with me to handle and feed them. I did what I was paid to do, and it was a hard job. None of them knew anything about the care and feeding of elephants, horses, giraffes, cats, dogs, eagles, or any one of the other hundreds of Terrestrial life forms that went aboard that ship.

"All of this was done with the express permission of the Terrestrial Union Government.

"I was returned to Earth on July seventeen, nineteen-ninety-one.

"I was immediately taken to U.B.I. headquarters and subjected to rigorous questioning. Then I was subjected to further questioning while connected to a polyelectro-encephalograph. Then I was subjected to hearing the same questions over again while under the influence of various drugs—in sequence and in combination. The consensus at that time was that I was not lying nor had I been subjected to what is commonly known as 'brain washing'. My memories were accurate and complete.

"I did not know then, nor do I know now, the location of the planet Gelakin. This information was not denied me by the Galactics; I simply could not understand the terms they used. All I can say now—and all I could say then—is that Gelakin is some three point five kiloparsecs from Sol in the general direction of Saggitarius."

"You don't know any more about that now than you did then?" Jackson interrupted, suddenly and quickly.

"That's what I said," McLeod snapped. "And that's what I meant. Let me finish.

"I was handsomely paid for my work in Galactic money. They use the English word 'credit', but I'm not sure the English word has exactly the same meaning as the Galactic term. At any rate, my wages, if such I may call them, were confiscated by the Earth Government; I was given the equivalent in American dollars—after the eighty per cent income tax had been deducted. I ended up with just about what I would have made if I had stayed home and drawn my salary from Columbia University and the American Museum of Natural History.

"Please, Mr. Jackson. I only have a little more to say.

"I decided to write a book in order to make the trip pay off. 'Interstellar Ark' was a popularized account of the trip that made me quite a nice piece of change because every literate and half-literate person on Earth is curious about the Galactics. The book tells everything I know about the trip and the people. It is a matter of public record. Since that is so, I refused to answer a lot of darn-fool questions—by which I mean that I refuse to answer any more questions that you already know the answers to. I am not being stubborn; I am just sick and tired of the whole thing."

Actually, the notoriety that had resulted from the trip and the book had not pleased McLeod particularly. He had never had any strong desire for fame, but if it had come as a result of his work in zoology and the related sciences he would have accepted the burden. If his "The Ecology of the Martian Polar Regions" had attracted a hundredth of the publicity and sold a hundredth of the number of copies that "Interstellar Ark" had sold, he would have been gratified indeed. But the way things stood, he found the whole affair irksome.

Jackson looked at his notebook as if he expected to see answers written there instead of questions. Then he looked back up at McLeod. "All right then, professor, what about this afternoon's conference. *That* isn't a matter of public record."

"And technically it isn't any of your business, either," McLeod said tiredly. "But since you have the whole conversation down on tape, I don't see why you bother asking me. I'm well aware that you can pick up conversations in my apartment."

Jackson pursed his lips and glanced at another of the agents, who raised his eyebrows slightly.

McLeod got it in spite of the fact that they didn't intend him to. His place was bugged, all right, but somehow the Galactic had managed to nullify their instruments! No wonder they were in such a tizzy.

McLeod smiled, pleased with himself and with the world for the first time that afternoon. He decided, however, that he'd better volunteer the information before they threatened him with the Planetary Security Act. That threat would make him angry, he knew, and he might say something that would get him in real trouble.

It was all right to badger Jackson up to a certain point, but it would be foolish to go beyond that.

"However," he went on with hardly a break, "since, as you say, it is not a matter of public record, I'm perfectly willing to answer any questions you care to ask."

"Just give us a general rundown of the conversation," Jackson said. "If I have any questions, I'll ... uh ... ask them at the proper time."

McLeod did the best he could to give a clear picture of what the Galactic had wanted. There was really very little to it. The Galactic was a member of a race that McLeod had never seen before: a humanoid with red skin—fire-engine, not Amerindian—and a rather pleasant-looking face, in contrast to the rather crocodilian features of the Galactic resident. He had introduced himself by an un-pronounceable name and then had explained that since the name meant "mild" or "merciful" in one of the ancient tongues of his planet, it would be perfectly all right if McLeod called him "Clement." Within minutes, it had been "Clem" and "Mac."

McLeod could see that Jackson didn't quite believe that. Galactics, of whatever race, were aloof, polite, reserved, and sometimes irritatingly patronizing—never buddy-buddy. McLeod couldn't help what Jackson might think; what was important was that it was true.

What Clem wanted was very simple. Clem was—after a manner of speaking—a literary agent. Apparently the Galactic system of book publishing didn't work quite the way the Terrestrial system did; Clem took his commission from the publisher instead of the author, but was considered a representative of the author, not the publisher. McLeod hadn't quite understood how that sort of thing would work out, but he let it pass. There were a lot of things he didn't understand about Galactics.

All Clem wanted was to act as McLeod's agent for the publication of "Interstellar Ark."

"And what did you tell him?" Jackson asked.

"I told him I'd think it over."

Jackson leaned forward. "How much money did he offer?" he asked eagerly.

"Not much," McLeod said. "That's why I told him I'd think it over. He said that, considering the high cost of transportation, relaying, translation, and so on, he couldn't offer me more than one thousandth of one per cent royalties."

Jackson blinked. "One *what*?"

"One thousandth of one per cent. If the book sells a hundred thousand copies at a credit a copy, they will send me a nice, juicy check for one lousy credit."

Jackson scowled. "They're cheating you."

"Clem said it was the standard rate for a first book."

Jackson shook his head. "Just because we don't have interstellar ships and are confined to our own solar system, they treat us as though we were ignorant savages. They're cheating you high, wide, and handsome."

"Maybe," said McLeod. "But if they really wanted to cheat me, they could just pirate the book. There wouldn't be a thing I could do about it."

"Yeah. But to keep up their facade of high ethics, they toss us a sop. And we have to take whatever they hand out. You *will* take it, of course." It was more of an order than a question.

"I told him I'd think it over," McLeod said.

Jackson stood up. "Professor McLeod, the human race needs every Galactic credit it can lay its hands on. It's your duty to accept the offer, no matter how lousy it is. We have no choice in the matter. And a Galactic credit is worth ten dollars American, four pounds U.K., or forty rubles Soviet. If you sell a hundred thousand copies of your book, you can get yourself a meal in a fairly good restaurant and Earth will have one more Galactic credit stashed away. If you don't sell that many, you aren't out anything."

"I suppose not," McLeod said slowly. He knew that the Government could force him to take the offer. Under the Planetary Security Act, the Government had broad powers—very broad.

"Well, that isn't my business right now," Jackson said. "I just wanted to find out what this was all about. You'll hear from us, Professor McLeod."

"I don't doubt it," said McLeod.

The six men filed out the door.

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Alone, McLeod stared at the wall and thought.

Earth needed every Galactic credit it could get; that was certain. The trouble came in getting them.

Earth had absolutely nothing that the Galactics wanted. Well, not absolutely, maybe, but so near as made no difference. Certainly there was no basis for trade. As far as the Galactics were concerned, Earth was a little backwater planet that was of no importance. Nothing manufactured on the planet was of any use to Galactics. Nothing grown on Earth was of any commercial importance. They had sampled the animals and plants for scientific purposes, but there was no real commercial value in them. The Government had added a few credits to its meager collection

when the animals had been taken, but the amount was small.

McLeod thought about the natives of New Guinea and decided that on the Galactic scale Earth was about in the same position. Except that there had at least been gold in New Guinea. The Galactics didn't have any interest in Earth's minerals; the elements were much more easily available in the asteroid belts that nearly every planetary system seemed to have.

The Galactics were by no means interested in bringing civilization to the barbarians of Earth, either. They had no missionaries to bring new religion, no do-gooders to "elevate the cultural level of the natives." They had no free handouts for anyone. If Earthmen wanted anything from them, the terms were cash on the barrelhead. Earth's credit rating in the Galactic equivalent of Dun & Bradstreet was triple-Z-zero.

A Galactic ship had, so to speak, stumbled over Earth fifteen years before. Like the English explorers of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries, the Galactics seemed to feel that it was necessary to install one of their own people on a new-found planet, but they were not in the least interested in colonization nor in taking over Earth's government. The Galactic Resident was not in any sense a Royal Governor, and could hardly even be called an ambassador. He and his staff—a small one, kept more for company than for any necessary work—lived quietly by themselves in a house they'd built in Hawaii. Nobody knew what they did, and it didn't seem wise to ask.

The first Galactic Resident had been shot and killed by some religious nut. Less than twenty-four hours later, the Galactic Space Navy—if that was the proper term—had come to claim the body. There were no recriminations, no reprisals. They came, "more in sorrow than in anger," to get the body. They came in a spaceship that was easily visible to the naked eye long before it hit the atmosphere—a sphere three kilometers in diameter. The missiles with thermonuclear warheads that were sent up to intercept the ship were detonated long before they touched the ship, and neither Galactics nor Earthmen ever mentioned them again. It had been the most frightening display of power ever seen on Earth, and the Galactics hadn't even threatened anyone. They just came to get a body.



Needless to say, there was little danger that they would ever have to repeat the performance.

The national governments of Earth had organized themselves hurriedly into the Terrestrial Union. Shaky at first, it had gained stability and power with the years. The first thing the Union Government had wanted to do was send an ambassador to the Galactic Government. The Galactic Resident had politely explained that their concept of government was different from ours, that ambassadors had no place in that concept, and, anyway, there was no capital to send one to. However, if Earth wanted to send an observer of some kind....

Earth did.

Fine. A statement of passenger fares was forthcoming; naturally, there were no regular passenger ships stopping at Earth and there would not be in the foreseeable future, but doubtless arrangements could be made to charter a vessel. It would be expensive, but....

If a New Guinea savage wants to take passage aboard a Qantas airliner, what is the fare in cowrie shells?

As far as McLeod knew, his book was the first thing ever produced on Earth that the Galactics were even remotely interested in. He had a higher opinion of the ethics of the Galactics than Jackson did, but a thousandth of a per cent seemed like pretty small royalties. And he couldn't for the life of him see why his book would interest a Galactic. Clem had explained that it gave Galactics a chance to see what they looked like through the eyes of an Earthman, but that seemed rather weak to McLeod.

Nevertheless, he knew he would take Clem's offer.

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Eight months later, a shipload of Galactic tourists arrived. For a while, it looked as though Earth's credit problem might be solved. Tourism has always been a fine method for getting

money from other countries—especially if one's own country is properly picturesque. Tourists always had money, didn't they? And they spend it freely, didn't they?

No.

Not in this case.

Earth had nothing to sell to the tourists.

Ever hear of *baluts*? The Melanesians of the South Pacific consider it a very fine delicacy. You take a fertilized duck egg and you bury it in the warm earth. Six months later, when it is nice and overripe, you dig it up again, knock the top off the shell the way you would a soft-boiled egg, and eat it. Then you pick the pinfeathers out of your teeth. *Baluts*.

Now you know how the greatest delicacies of Earth's restaurants affected the Galactics.

Earth was just a little *too* picturesque. The tourists enjoyed the sights, but they ate aboard their ship, which was evidently somewhat like a Caribbean cruise ship. And they bought nothing. They just looked.

And laughed.

And of course they all wanted to meet Professor John Hamish McLeod.

When the news leaked out and was thoroughly understood by Earth's population, there was an immediate reaction.

Editorial in *Pravda*:

The stupid book written by the American J. H. McLeod has made Earth a laughingstock throughout the galaxy. His inability to comprehend the finer nuances of Galactic Socialism has made all Earthmen look foolish. It is too bad that a competent Russian zoologist was not chosen for the trip that McLeod made; a man properly trained in the understanding of the historical forces of dialectic materialism would have realized that any Galactic society must of necessity be a Communist State, and would have interpreted it as such. The petty bourgeois mind of McLeod has made it impossible for any Earthman to hold up his head in the free Socialist society of the galaxy. Until this matter is corrected....

News item Manchester *Guardian*:

Professor James H. McLeod, the American zoologist whose book has apparently aroused a great deal of hilarity in Galactic circles, admitted today that both Columbia University and the American Museum of Natural History have accepted his resignation. The recent statement by a University spokesman that Professor McLeod had "besmirched the honor of Earthmen everywhere" was considered at least partially responsible for the resignations. (See editorial.)

Editorial, Manchester *Guardian*:

... It is a truism that an accepted wit has only to say, 'Pass the butter,' and everyone will laugh. Professor McLeod, however, far from being an accepted wit, seems rather to be in the position of a medieval Court Fool, who was laughed *at* rather than *with*. As a consequence, all Earthmen have been branded as Fools....

Statement made by the American Senator from Alabama:

"He has made us all look like jackasses in the eyes of the Galactics, and at this precarious time in human history it is my considered opinion that such actions are treasonous to the human race and to Earth and should be treated and considered as such!"

Book review, *Literary Checklist*, Helvar III, Bornis Cluster:

"Interstellar Ark, an Earthman's View of the Galaxy," translated from the original tongue by Vonis Delf, Cr. 5.00. This inexpensive little book is one of the most entertainingly funny publications in current print. The author, one John McLeod, is a member of a type 3-7B race inhabiting a planet in the Outer Fringes.... As an example of the unwitting humor of the book, we have only to quote the following:

"I was shown to my quarters shortly before takeoff. Captain Benarly had assigned me a spacious cabin which was almost luxurious in its furnishings. The bed was one of the most comfortable I have ever slept in."

Or the following:

"I found the members of the crew to be friendly and co-operative, especially Nern Cronzel, the ship's physician."

It is our prediction that this little gem will be enjoyed for a long time to come and will be a real money-maker for its publishers.

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*They haven't hanged me yet*, McLeod thought. He sat in his apartment alone and realized that it would take very little to get him hanged.

How could one book have aroused such wrath? Even as he thought it, McLeod knew the answer to that question. It wasn't the book. No one who had read it two and a half years before had said anything against it.

No, it wasn't the book. It was the Galactic reaction to the book. Already feeling inferior because of the stand-offish attitude of the beings from the stars, the Homeric laughter of those same beings had been too much. It would have been bad enough if that laughter had been generated by one of the Galactics. To have had it generated by an Earthman made it that much worse. Against an Earthman, their rage was far from impotent.

Nobody understood *why* the book was funny, of course. The joke was over their heads, and that made human beings even angrier.

He remembered a quotation from a book he had read once. A member of some tribal-taboo culture—African or South Pacific, he forgot which—had been treated at a missionary hospital for something or other and had described his experience.

"The white witch doctor protects himself by wearing a little round mirror on his head which reflects back the evil spirits."

Could that savage have possibly understood what was humorous about that remark? No. Not even if you explained to him why the doctor used the mirror that way.

*Now what?* McLeod thought. He was out of a job and his bank account was running low. His credit rating had dropped to zero.

McLeod heard a key turn in the lock. The door swung open and Jackson entered with his squad of U.B.I. men.

"Hey!" said McLeod, jumping to his feet. "What do you think this is?"

"Shut up, McLeod," Jackson growled. "Get your coat. You're wanted at headquarters."

McLeod started to say something, then thought better of it. There was nothing he could say. Nobody would care if the U.B.I. manhandled him. Nobody would protest that his rights were being ignored. If McLeod got his teeth knocked in, Jackson would probably be voted a medal.

McLeod didn't say another word. He followed orders. He got his coat and was taken down to the big building on the East River which had begun its career as the United Nations Building.

He was bundled up to an office and shoved into a chair.

Somebody shoved a paper at him. "Sign this!"

"What is it?" McLeod asked, finding his voice.

"A receipt. For two thousand dollars. Sign it."

McLeod looked the paper over, then looked up at the burly man who had shoved it at him. "*Fifty thousand Galactic credits!* What is this for?"

"The royalty check for your unprintably qualified book has come in, Funny Man. The Government is taking ninety-eight per cent for income taxes. Sign!"

McLeod pushed the paper back across the desk. "No. I won't. You can confiscate my money. I can't stop that, I guess. But I won't give it legal sanction by signing anything. I don't even see the two thousand dollars this is supposed to be a receipt for."

Jackson, who was standing behind McLeod, grabbed his arm and twisted. "Sign!" His voice was a snarl in McLeod's ear.

Eventually, of course, he signed.

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"Nother beer, Mac?" asked the bartender with a friendly smile.

"Yeah, Leo; thanks." McLeod pushed his quarter across the bar with one hand and scratched negligently at his beard with the fingers of the other. Nobody questioned him in this neighborhood. The beard, which had taken two months to grow, disguised his face, and he had given his name as McCaffery, allowing his landlord and others who heard it to make the natural assumption that he was of Irish descent.

He was waiting. He had been forced to move from his apartment; nobody wanted that dirty so-and-so, Professor McLeod, around. Besides, his money was running short. He had never seen the two thousand. "You'll get that when the Galactic bank cashes your royalty check," he had been told. He was waiting.

Not hiding. No. That wasn't possible. The U.B.I. could find him easily when they wanted him. There was no place he could have hidden from them for very long. A man needs friends to stay

hidden from an efficient police organization for very long, and John Hamish McLeod had no friends. "Jack McCaffery" had, since he was a pleasant kind of fellow who made friends easily when he wanted them. But he had no illusions about his new friends. Let them once suspect, however faintly, that Good Old Jack McCaffery was really that Professor McLeod, and the game would be up.

The U.B.I. would find him again all right, whenever it wanted him. And McLeod hoped it would be soon because he was down to his last hundred bucks.

So he waited and thought about fifty thousand Galactic credits.

The mathematics was simple, but it conveyed an awful lot of information. To make fifty thousand credits from one thousandth of one percent royalties on a book selling at five credits the copy, one must needs sell a billion copies. Nothing to it.

$$5X \cdot 10^{-5} = 5 \cdot 10^4$$

Ergo:  $X = 10^9$

McLeod drew the equations on the bar with the tip of a wet forefinger, then rubbed them out quickly.

A billion copies in the first year. He should have seen it. He should have understood.

How many planets were there in the galaxy?

How many people on each planet?

Communication, even at ultralight velocities, would be necessarily slow. The galaxy was just too big to be compassed by the human mind—or even by the mind of a Galactic, McLeod suspected.

How do you publish a book for Galactic, for galaxy-wide, consumption? How long does it take to saturate the market on each planet? How long does it take to spread the book from planet to planet? How many people were there on each planet who would buy a good book? Or, at least, an entertaining one.

McLeod didn't know, but he suspected that the number was huge. McLeod was a zoologist, not an astronomer, but he read enough on astronomy to know that the estimated number of Earth-type planets alone—according to the latest theory—ran into the tens of millions or hundreds of millions. The—

A man sat down on the stool next to McLeod and said something loud enough and foul enough to break the zoologist's train of thought.

"Gimme a shot, Leo," he added in an angry voice.

"Sure, Pete," the bartender said. "What's the trouble?"

"*Tourists*," Pete said with a snarl. "Laffin' attus alla time like we was monkeys inna zoo! Bunch 'em come inta day." He downed his whiskey with a practiced flip of the wrist and slammed it on the bar. Leo refilled it immediately. "I shunt gripe, I guess. Gotta haffa credit offen 'em." He slapped down a five dollar bill as though it had somehow been contaminated.

The bar became oddly quiet. Everyone had heard Pete. Further, everyone had heard that another shipload of Galactics had landed and were, at the moment, enjoying the sights of New York. A few of them knew that Pete was the bell-captain in one of the big midtown hotels.

McLeod listened while Pete expounded on the shame he had had to undergo to earn half a credit—a lousy five bucks.

McLeod did some estimating. Tourists—the word had acquired an even more pejorative sense than it had before, and now applied only to Galactics—bought nothing, but they tipped for services, unless the services weren't wanted or needed. Pete had given them information that they hadn't had before—where to find a particular place. All in all, the group of fifteen Galactics had given out five or six credits in such tips. Say half a credit apiece. There were, perhaps, a hundred Galactics in this shipload. That meant fifty credits. Hm-m-m.

They didn't need anyone to carry their bags; they didn't need anyone to register them in hotels; they didn't need personal service of that kind. All they wanted to do was look. But they wouldn't pay for looking. They had no interest in Broadway plays or the acts in the night-clubs—at least, not enough to induce them to pay to see them. This particular group had wanted to see a hotel. They had wandered through it, looking at everything and laughing fit to kill at the carpets on the floor and the electric lighting and such. But when the management had hinted that payment for such services as letting them look should be forthcoming, they had handed half a credit to someone and walked out. Then they had gone to the corner of Fifty-first and Madison and looked for nothing.

Fifty credits for a shipload. Three shiploads a year. Hell, give 'em the benefit of the doubt and say *ten* shiploads a year. In a hundred years, they'd add another fifty thousand to Earth's resources.

McLeod grinned.

And waited.



They came for him, eventually, as McLeod had known they would.

But they came long before he had expected. He had given them six months at the least. They came for him at the end of the third month.

It was Jackson, of course. It would have to be Jackson. He walked into the cheap little room McLeod had rented, followed by his squad of men.

He tossed a peculiar envelope on the bed next to McLeod.

"Letter came for you, humorist. Open it."

McLeod sat on the edge of the bed and read the letter. The envelope had already been opened, which surprised him none.

It looked very much like an ordinary business letter—except that whatever they used for paper was whiter and tougher than the paper he used.

He was reminded of the time he had seen a reproduction of a Thirteenth Century manuscript alongside the original. The copy had been set up in a specially-designed type and printed on fine paper. The original had been handwritten on vellum.

McLeod had the feeling that if he used a microscope on this letter the lines and edges would be just as precise and clear as they appeared to the naked eye, instead of the fuzziness that ordinary print would show.

The way you tell a synthetic ruby from a natural ruby is to look for flaws. The synthetic doesn't have any.

This letter was a Galactic imitation of a Terran business letter.

It said:

Dear Mac,

I am happy to report that your book, "Interstellar Ark," is a smash hit. It looks as though it is on its way to becoming a best seller. As you already know by your royalty statement, over a billion copies were sold the first year. That indicates even better sales over the years to come as the reputation of the book spreads. Naturally, our advertising campaign will remain behind it all the way. Congratulations.

Speaking of royalty checks, there seems to be some sort of irregularity about yours. I am sorry, but according to regulations the check must be validated in the presence of your Galactic Resident before it can be cashed. Your signature across the back of it doesn't mean anything to our bankers.

Just go to your Galactic Resident, and he'll be happy to take care of the matter for you. That's what he's there for. The next check should come through very shortly.

All the best,

Clem.



*Better and better*, McLeod thought. He hadn't expected to be able to do anything until his next royalty check arrived. But now—

He looked up at Jackson. "All right. What's next?"

"Come with us. We're flying to Hawaii. Get your hat and coat."

McLeod obeyed silently. At the moment, there was nothing else he could do. As a matter of fact, there was nothing he wanted to do more.

It was no trouble at all for Professor McLeod to get an audience with the Galactic Resident, but when he was escorted in by Jackson and his squad, the whole group was halted inside the front door.

The Resident, a tall, lean being with a leathery, gray face that somehow managed to look crocodilian in spite of the fact that his head was definitely humanoid in shape, peered at them from beneath pronounced supraorbital ridges. "Is this man under arrest?" he asked in a gravelly baritone.

"Er ... no," said Jackson. "No. He is merely in protective custody."

"He has not been convicted of any crime?"

"No sir," Jackson said. His voice sounded as though he were unsure of himself.

"That is well," said the Resident. "A convicted criminal cannot, of course, use the credits of society until he has become rehabilitated." He paused. "But why protective custody?"

"There are those," said Jackson, choosing his words with care, "who feel that Professor McLeod has brought disgrace upon the human race ... er ... the Terrestrial race. There is reason to believe that his life may be in danger."

McLeod smiled wryly. What Jackson said was true, but it was carefully calculated to mislead.

"I see," said the Resident. "It would appear to me that it would be simpler to inform the people that he has done no such thing; that, indeed, his work has conferred immense benefits upon your race. But that is your own affair. At any rate, he is in no danger here."

He didn't need to say anything else. Jackson knew the hint was an order and that he wouldn't get any farther with his squad.

McLeod spoke up. "Subject to your permission, sir, I would like to have Mr. Jackson with me."

The Galactic Resident smiled. "Of course, professor. Come in, both of you." He turned and led the way through the inner door.

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Nobody bothered to search either of them, not even though they must know that Jackson was carrying a gun. McLeod was fairly certain that the gun would be useless to Jackson if he tried to assert his authority with it. If Clem had been able to render the U.B.I.'s eavesdropping apparatus inoperable, it was highly probable that the Galactic Resident would have some means of taking care of weapons.

"There are only a few formalities to go through," the Resident said pleasantly, indicating chairs with a gesture. The room he had led them to didn't look much different from that which would be expected in any tastefully furnished apartment in New York or Honolulu.

McLeod and Jackson sat down in a couple of comfortable easy-chairs while the Resident went around a large desk and sat down in a swivel chair behind it. He smiled a little and looked at McLeod. "Hm-m-m. Ah, yes. Very good." It was as though he had received information of some kind on an unknown subject through an unknown channel, McLeod thought. Evidently that was true, for his next words were: "You are not under the influence of drugs nor hypnotic compulsion, I see. Excellent, professor. Is it your desire that this check be converted to cash?" He made a small gesture. "You have only to express it, you see. It would be difficult to explain it to you, but rest assured that such an expression of will—while you are sitting in that chair—is impressed upon the structure of the check itself and is the equivalent of a signature. Except, of course, that it is unforgeable."

"May I ask a few questions first?" McLeod said.

"Certainly, professor. I am here to answer your questions."

"This money—is it free and clear, or are there Galactic taxes to pay?"

If the Galactic Resident had had eyebrows, it is likely that they would have lifted in surprise. "My dear professor! Aside from the fact that we run our ... er ... government in an entirely different manner, we would consider it quite immoral to take what a man earns without giving services of an exact kind. I will charge you five credits for this validation, since I am rendering a service. The bank will take a full tenth of a percent in this case because of the inconvenience of shipping cash over that long distance. The rest is yours to do with as you see fit."

*Fifty-five credits out of fifty thousand*, McLeod thought. *Not bad at all*. Aloud, he asked: "Could I, for instance, open a bank account or buy a ticket on a star-ship?"

"Why not? As I said, it is your money. You have earned it honestly; you may spend it honestly."

Jackson was staring at McLeod, but he said nothing.

"Tell me, sir," McLeod said, "how does the success of my book compare with the success of most books in the galaxy?"

"Quite favorably, I understand," said the Resident. "The usual income from a successful book is about five thousand credits a year. Some run even less than that. I'm not too familiar with the publishing business, you understand, but that is my impression. You are, by Galactic standards, a very wealthy man, professor. Fifty thousand a year is by no means a median income."

"Fifty thousand a *year*?"

"Yes. About that. I understand that in the publishing business one can depend on a life income that does not vary much from the initial period. If a book is successful in one area of the galaxy it will be equally successful in others."

"How long does it take to saturate the market?" McLeod asked with a touch of awe.

"Saturate the—? Oh. Oh, I see. Yes. Well, let's see. Most publishing houses can't handle the advertising and marketing on more than a thousand planets at once—the job becomes too unwieldy. That would indicate that you sold an average of a million copies per planet, which is unusual but not ... ah ... miraculous. That is why you can depend on future sales, you see; over a thousand planets the differences in planetary tastes averages out.

"Now if your publishers continue to expand the publication at the rate of a thousand planets a year, your book should easily last for another century. They can't really expand that rapidly, of course, since the sales on the planets they have already covered will continue with diminishing success over the next several years. Actually, your publishers will continue to put a billion books a year on the market and expand to new planets at a rate that will balance the loss of sales on the planets where it has already run its course. Yes, professor, you will have a good income for life."

"What about my heirs?"

"Heirs?" The Galactic Resident blinked. "I'm afraid I don't quite follow you."

"My relatives. Anyone who will inherit my property after my death."

The Resident still looked puzzled. "What about them?"

"How long can they go on collecting? When does the copyright run out?"

The Galactic Resident's puzzlement vanished. "Oh my dear professor! Surely you see that it is impossible to ... er ... inherit money one hasn't earned! The income stops with your death. Your children or your wife have done nothing to earn that money. Why should it continue to be paid out after the earner has died? If you wish to make provisions for such persons during your lifetime, that is your business, but the provisions must be made out of money you have already earned."

"Who does get the income, then?" McLeod asked.

The Galactic Resident looked thoughtful. "Well, the best I can explain to you without going into arduous detail is to say that our ... er ... government gets it. 'Government' is not really the proper word in this context, since we have no government as you think of it. Let us merely say that such monies pass into a common exchequer from which ... er ... public servants like myself are paid."

McLeod had a vision of a British Crown Officer trying to explain to a New Guinea tribesman what he meant when he said that taxes go to the Crown. The tribesman would probably wonder why the Chief of the English Tribe kept cowrie shells under his hat.

"I see. And if I am imprisoned for crime?" he asked.

"The payments are suspended until the ... er ... rehabilitation is complete. That is, until you are legally released."

"Is there anything else that can stop the payments?"

"Not unless the publishing company fails—which is highly unlikely. Of course, a man under hypnotic compulsion or drugs is not considered legally responsible, so he cannot transact any legal business while he is in that state, but the checks are merely held for him until that impediment is removed."

"I see." McLeod nodded.

He knew perfectly well that he no more understood the entire workings of the Galactic civilization than that New Guinea tribesman understood the civilization of Great Britain, but he also knew that he understood more of it than Jackson, for instance, did. McLeod had been able to foresee a little of what the Resident had said.

"Would you do me the service, sir," McLeod said, "of opening a bank account for me in some local bank?"

"Yes, of course. As Resident, I am empowered to transact business for you at your request. My fees are quite reasonable. All checks will have to go through me, of course, but ... hm-m-m ... I

think in this case a twentieth of a per cent would be appropriate. You will be handling fairly large amounts. If that is your wish, I shall so arrange it."

"Hey!" Jackson found his tongue. "The Earth Union Government has a claim on that! McLeod owes forty-nine thousand Galactic credits in income taxes!"

If the Galactic Resident was shocked at the intimation that the Galactic "government" would take earned money from a man, the announcement that Earth's government did so was no surprise to him at all. "If that is so, I am certain that Professor McLeod will behave as a law-abiding citizen. He can authorize a check for that amount, and it will be honored by his bank. We have no desire to interfere with local customs."

"I am certain that I can come to an equitable arrangement with the Earth authorities," said McLeod, rising from his chair. "Is there anything I have to sign or—"

"No, no. You have expressed your will. Thank you, Professor McLeod; it is a pleasure to do business with you."

"Thank you. The pleasure is mutual. Come on, Jackson, we don't need to bother the Resident any more just now."

"But—"

"Come on, I said! I want a few words with you!" McLeod insisted.

Jackson sensed that there would be no point in arguing any further with the Resident, but he followed McLeod out into the bright Hawaiian sunshine with a dull glow of anger burning in his cheeks. Accompanied by the squad, they climbed into the car and left.

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As soon as they were well away from the Residence, Jackson grabbed McLeod by the lapel of his jacket. "All right, humorist! What was the idea of that? Are you trying to make things hard for yourself?"

"No, but *you* are," McLeod said in a cold voice. "Get your hands off me. I may get you fired anyway, just because you're a louse, but if you keep acting like this, I'll see that they toss you into solitary and toss the key away."

"What are you talking about?" But he released his hold.

"Just think about it, Jackson. The Government can't get its hands on that money unless I permit it. As I said, we'll arrive at an equitable arrangement. And that will be a damn sight less than ninety-eight percent of my earnings, believe me."

"If you refuse to pay, we'll—" He stopped suddenly.

"—Throw me in jail?" McLeod shook his head. "You can't get money while I'm in jail."

"We'll wait," said Jackson firmly. "After a little while in a cell, you'll listen to reason and will sign those checks."

"You don't think very well, do you, Jackson? To 'sign' a check, I have to go to the Galactic Resident. As soon as you take me to him, I authorize a check to buy me a ticket for some nice planet where there are no income taxes."

Jackson opened his mouth and shut it again, frowning.

"Think about it, Jackson," McLeod continued. "Nobody can get that money from me without my consent. Now it so happens that I want to help Earth; I have a certain perverse fondness for the human race, even though it is inconceivably backward by Galactic standards. We have about as much chance of ever becoming of any importance on the Galactic scale as the Australian aborigine has of becoming important in world politics, but a few thousand years of evolution may bring out a few individuals who have the ability to do something. I'm not sure. But I'm damned if I'll let the boneheads run all over me while they take my money."

"I happen to be, at the moment—and through sheer luck—Earth's only natural resource as far as the galaxy is concerned. Sure you can put me in jail. You can kill me if you want. But that won't give you the money. I am the goose that lays the golden eggs. But I'm not such a goose that I'm going to let you boot me in the tail while you steal the gold."

"Earth has no other source of income. None. Tourists are few and far between and they spend almost nothing. As long as I am alive and in good health and out of prison, Earth will have a nice steady income of fifty thousand Galactic credits a year."

"Earth, I said. Not the Government, except indirectly. I intend to see that my money isn't confiscated." He had a few other plans, too, but he saw no necessity of mentioning them to Jackson.

"If I don't like the way the Government behaves, I'll simply shut off the source of supply. Understand, Jackson?"

"Um-m-m," said Jackson. He understood, he didn't like it, and he didn't know what to do about it.

"One of the first things we're going to do is start a little 'information' flowing," McLeod said. "I don't care to live on a planet where everybody hates my guts, so, as the Resident suggested, we're going to have to start a propaganda campaign to counteract the one that denounced me. For that, I'll want to talk to someone a little higher in the Government. You'd better take me to the head of the U.B.I. He'll know who I should speak to for that purpose."

Jackson still looked dazed, but it had evidently penetrated that McLeod had the upper hand. "Wha ... er ... what did you say, sir?" he asked, partially coming out of his daze.

McLeod sighed.

"Take me to your leader," he said patiently.

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