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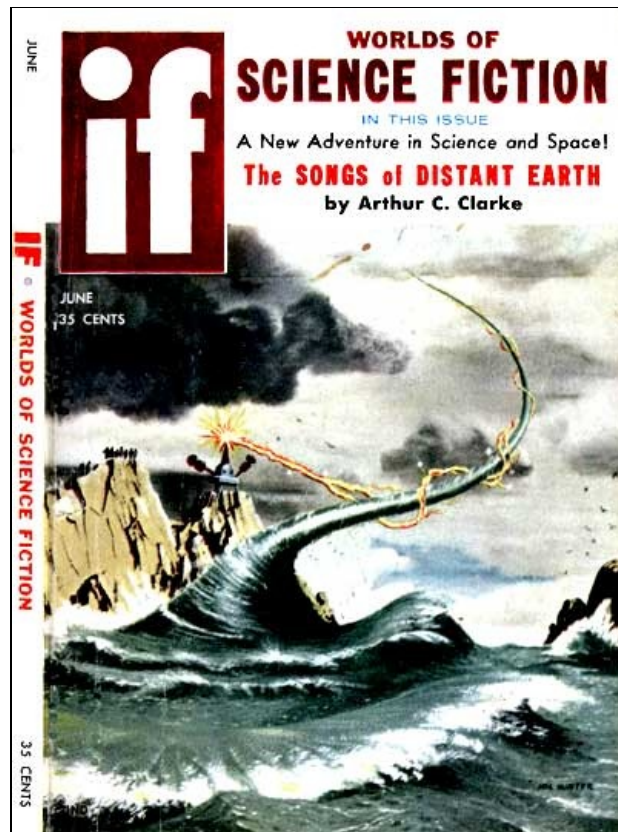
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DO UNTO OTHERS

Illustrated by Ed Emsh



Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.... And the natives of Capella IV, philosophers at heart, were not ones to ignore the Golden Rule....

My Aunt Mattie, Matthewa H. Tombs, is President of the Daughters of Terra. I am her nephew, the one who didn't turn out well. Christened Hapland Graves, after Earth President Hapland, a cousin by marriage, the fellows at school naturally called me Happy Graves.

"Haphazard Graves, it should be," Aunt Mattie commented acidly the first time she heard it. It was her not very subtle way of reminding me of the way I lived my life and did things, or didn't do them. She shuddered at anything disorderly, which of course included me, and it was her beholden duty to right anything which to her appeared wrong.

"There won't be any evil to march on after you get through, Aunt Mattie," I once said when I was a child. I like now to think that even at the age of six I must have mastered the straight face, but I'm afraid I was so awed by her that I was sincere.

"That will do, Hapland!" she said sternly. But I think she knew I meant it—then—and I think that was the day I became her favorite nephew. For some reason, never quite clear to me, she was my favorite aunt. I think she liked me most because I was the cross she had to bear. I liked her most, I'm sure, because it was such a comfortable ride.

A few billions spent around the house can make things quite comfortable.

She had need of her billions to carry out her hobbies, or, as she called it, her "life's work." Aunt Mattie always spoke in clichés because people could understand what you meant. One of these hobbies was her collection of flora of the universe. It was begun by her maternal grandfather, one of the wealthier Plots, and increased as the family fortunes were increased by her father, one of the more ruthless Tombs, but it was under Aunt Mattie's supervision that it came, so to speak, into full flower.

"Love," she would say, "means more to a flower than all the scientific knowledge in the world." Apparently she felt that the small army of gardeners, each a graduate specialist in duplicating the right planetary conditions, hardly mattered.

The collection covered some two hundred acres in our grounds at the west side of the house. Small, perhaps, as some of the more vulgar displays by others go, but very, very choice.

The other hobby, which she combines with the first, is equally expensive. She and her club members, the Daughters of Terra (D.T.s for short), often find it necessary to take junkets on the family space yacht out to some distant planet—to straighten out reprehensible conditions which have come to her attention. I usually went along to take care of—symbolically, at least—the bags and (their) baggage.

My psychiatrist would say that expressing it in this way shows I have never outgrown my juvenile attitudes. He says I am simply a case of arrested development, mental, caused through too much over-shadowing by the rest of the family. He says that, like the rest of them, I have inherited the family compulsion to make the universe over to my own liking so I can pass it on to posterity with a clear conscience, and my negative attitude toward this is simply a defense mechanism because I haven't had a chance to do it. He says I really hate my aunt's flora collection because I see it as a rival for her affection. I tell him if I have any resentments toward it at all it is for the long hours

spent in getting the latinized names of things drilled into me. I ask him why gardeners always insist on forcing long meaningless names upon non-gardeners who simply don't care. He ignores that, and says that subconsciously I hate my Aunt Mattie because I secretly recognize that she is a challenge too great for me to overcome. I ask him why, if I subconsciously hate Aunt Mattie, why I would care about how much affection she gives to her flora collection. He says, ahah! We are making progress.

He says he can't cure me—of what, I'm never clear—until I find the means to cut down and destroy my Aunt Mattie.

This is all patent nonsense because Aunt Mattie is the rock, the firm foundation in a universe of shifting values. Even her clichés are precious to me because they are unchanging. On her, I can depend.

He tells Aunt Mattie his diagnoses and conclusions, too. Unethical? Well now! Between a mere psychiatrist and my Aunt Mattie is there any doubt about who shall say what is ethical?

After one of their long conferences about me she calls me into her study, looks at me wordlessly, sadly, shakes her head, sighs—then squares her shoulders until the shelf of her broad, although maiden, bosom becomes huge enough to carry any burden, even the burden of my alleged hate. This she bears bravely, even gratefully. I might resent this needless pain the psychiatrist gives her, except that it really seems to make her happier in some obscure way.

Perhaps she has some kind of guilt complex, and I am her deserved punishment? Aunt Mattie with a guilt complex? Never! Aunt Mattie knows she is right, and goes ahead.

So all his nonsense is completely ridiculous. I love my Aunt Mattie. I adore my Aunt Mattie. I would never do anything to hurt my Aunt Mattie.

Or, well, I didn't mean to hurt her, anyway. All I did was wink. I only meant....

We were met at the space port of Capella IV by the planet administrator, himself, one John J. McCabe.

It was no particular coincidence that I knew him. My school was progressive. It admitted not only the scions of the established families but those of the ambitious families as well. Its graduates, naturally, went into the significant careers. Johnny McCabe was one of the ambitious ones. We hadn't been anything like bosom pals at school; but he'd been tolerant of me, and I'd admired him, and fitfully told myself I should be more like him. Perhaps this was the reason Aunt Mattie had insisted on this particular school, the hope that some of the ambition would rub off on me.

Capella IV wasn't much of a post, not even for the early stages in a young man's career, although, socially, it was perhaps the best beginning Johnny's family could have expected. It was a small planet, entirely covered by salt. Even inside the port bubble with its duplication of Earth atmosphere, the salt lay like a permanent snow scene. Actually it was little more than a way station along the space route out in that direction, and Johnny's problems were little more than the problems of a professional host at some obscure resort. But no doubt his dad spoke proudly of "My son, a planet administrator," and when I called on the family to tell them I'd visited their son, I wouldn't be one to snitch.

There was doubt in my mind that even Johnny's ambition could make the planet into anything more than it was already. It had nothing we wanted, or at least was worth the space freight it would cost to ship it. The natives had never given us any trouble, and, up until now, we hadn't given them any. So Earth's brand upon it was simply a small bubble enclosing a landing field, a hangar for checkup and repair of ships requiring an emergency landing, some barracks for the men and women of the port personnel, a small hotel to house stranded space passengers while repairs were made to their ship, or stray V.I.P.'s.

A small administration building flying Federated Earth flag, and a warehouse to contain supplies, which had to be shipped in, completed the installation. The planet furnished man nothing but water pumped from deep in the rock strata beneath the salt, and even that had to be treated to remove enough of the saline content to make it usable. At the time, I didn't know what the natives, outside our bubble, lived on. The decision to come had been a sudden one, and I hadn't had more than enough time to call the State Department to find out who the planet administrator might be.

I was first out of the yacht and down the landing steps to the salt covered ground. Aunt Mattie was still busy giving her ship captain his instructions, and possibly inspecting the crew's teeth to see if they'd brushed them this morning. The two members of her special committee of the D.T.'s who'd come along, a Miss Point and a Mrs. Waddle, naturally would be standing at her sides, and a half pace to the rear, to be of assistance should she need them in dealing with males.

There was a certain stiff formality in the way McCabe, flanked by his own two selected subordinates, approached the ship—until I turned around at the foot of the steps and he recognized me.

"Hap!" he yelled, then. "Happy Graves, you old son of a gun!" He broke into a run, dignity

forgotten, and when he got to me he grabbed both my shoulders in his powerful hands to shake me as if he were some sort of terrier—and I a rat. His joy seemed all out of proportion until I remembered he probably hadn't seen anybody from school for a long time; and until I further remembered that he would have been alerted by the State Department to Aunt Mattie's visit and would have been looking forward to it with dread and misgivings.

To realize he had a friend at court must really have overjoyed him.

"Johnny," I said. "Long time." It had been. Five-six years anyway. I held out my hand in the old school gesture. He let loose my shoulders and grabbed it in the traditional manner. We went through the ritual, which my psychiatrist would have called juvenile, and then he looked at me pointedly.

"You remember what it means," he said, a little anxiously I thought, and looked significantly at my hand. "That we will always stand by each other, through thick and thin." His eyes were pulled upward to the open door of the yacht.

"You can expect it to be both thick and thin," I said drily. "If you know my Aunt Mattie."

"She's your aunt?" he asked, his eyes widening. "Matthewa H. Tombs is *your* aunt. I never knew. To think, all those years at school, and I never knew. Why, Hap, Happy, old boy, this is wonderful. Man, have I been worried!"

"Don't stop on my account," I said, maybe a little dolefully. "Somebody reported to the Daughters of Terra that you let the natives run around out here stark naked, and if Aunt Mattie says she's going to put mother hubbards on them, then that's exactly what she's going to do. You can depend on that, old man."

"Mother Hub...." he gasped. He looked at me strangely. "It's a joke," he said. "Somebody's pulled a practical joke on the D.T.'s. Have you ever seen our natives? Pictures of them? Didn't anybody check up on what they're like before you came out here? It's a joke. A practical joke on the D.T.'s. It has to be."

"I wouldn't know," I said. "But if they're naked they won't be for long, I can tell you that. Aunt Mattie...."

His eyes left my face and darted up to the door of the ship which was no longer a black oval. The unexplained bewilderment of his expression was not diminished as Aunt Mattie came through the door, out on the loading platform, and started down the steps. He grew a little white around the mouth, licked his lips, and forgot all his joy at meeting an old school mate. His two subordinates who had remained standing just out of earshot, as if recognizing a crisis now, stepped briskly up to his sides.

Aunt Mattie's two committee women, as if to match phalanx with phalanx, came through the door and started down the steps behind her. I stepped to one side as the two forces met face to face on the crunching salt that covered the ground. It might look like a Christmas scene, but under Capella's rays it was blazing hot, and I found myself in sympathy with the men's open necked shirts and brief shorts. Still, they should have known better than to dress like that. Somebody in the State Department had goofed.

Aunt Mattie and her two committee women were dressed conservatively in something that might have resembled an English Colonel's wife's idea of the correct tweeds to wear on a cold, foggy night. If they were already sweltering beneath these coverings, as I was beginning to in my lighter suit, they were too ladylike to show it. Their acid glance at the men's attire showed what they thought of the informality of dress in which they'd been received. But they were too ladylike to comment. After that first pointed look at bare knees, they had no need of it.

"This is the official attire prescribed for us by the State Department," Johnny said, a little anxiously, I thought. It was hardly the formal speech of welcome he, as planet administrator, must have prepared.

"I have no doubt of it," Aunt Mattie said, and her tone told them what she thought of the State Department under the present administration. "You would hardly have met ladies in such—ah—otherwise." I could see that she was making a mental note to speak to the State Department about it.

"Make a note," she said and turned to Miss Point. "I will speak to the State Department. How can one expect natives to ... if our own representatives don't ... etc., etc."

"May I show you to your quarters, ma'am?" Johnny asked humbly. "No doubt you will wish to freshen up, or...."

Miss Point blushed furiously.

"We are already quite fresh, young man," Aunt Mattie said firmly.

I happened to know that Aunt Mattie didn't like to browbeat people, not at all. It would all have been so much more pleasant, gracious, if they'd been brought up to know right from wrong. But what parents and schools had failed to do, she must correct as her duty. I thought it about time I tried to smooth things over. I stepped up into their focus.

"Aunt Mattie," I said. "This is Johnny McCabe. We were at school together."

Her eyebrows shot upward.

"You were?" she asked, and looked piercingly at Johnny. "Then, I realize, young man, that your attire is not your fault. You must have been acting under orders, and against your personal knowledge of what would be correct. I understand." She turned again to Miss Point. "Underscore that note to the State Department," she said. "Mark it emergency." She turned back to Johnny. "Very well, Mr. McCabe, we would appreciate it, after all, if you would show us to our quarters so that we may—ah—freshen up a bit. It is rather a warm day, isn't it?"

She was quite gracious now, reassured because Johnny was an old school mate of mine, and would therefore know right from wrong. If I sometimes didn't seem to, she knew me well enough to know it had not been the fault of the school.

The three of us, Johnny on one side of Aunt Mattie and I on the other side, started toward the frame building on the other side of the bubble, which I assumed was the hotel. The four subordinates trailed along behind, silent, wary of one another.

Behind them the baggage truck, which had been piled high by the ship's crew, hissed into life and started moving along on its tractor treads. Johnny caught a glimpse of it, without actually turning around, and his eyes opened wide. He misinterpreted, of course. From the mountain of baggage it looked like our intention to stay a long time.

But then he wouldn't have been particularly reassured, either, had he realized that our own supplies were quite scant and these bags, boxes, and crates contained sewing machines and many, many bolts of gaily colored cloth.

I had hardly more than—ah—freshened up a bit myself in my hotel room, when I heard a discreet knock on my door. I opened it and saw Johnny McCabe.

"May I come in, Hap?" he asked. As if against his will, he glanced quickly down the hall toward the suite where aunt and her committee had been put.

"Sure, Johnny," I said, and opened the door wide. I pointed to an aluminum tube torture rack, government issue's idea of a chair. "You can have the chair," I said. "I'll sit on the edge of the bed."

"I'm sorry about the furnishings," he said apologetically as he sat down and I closed the door. "It's the best government will issue us in this hole."

"Aunt Mattie would be disappointed if it were better," I said as I sat on the edge of the bed, which was little softer than the chair. "She expects to rough it, and finds special virtue in doing her duty as uncomfortably as possible."

He looked sharply at me, but I had merely stated an accepted fact, not an opinion, and was therefore emotionless about it.

"I'm in trouble, Hap," he said desperately. He leaned forward with his clasped hands held between his knees.

"Well, old man," I answered. "You know me."

"Yes," he said. "But there isn't anybody else I can turn to."

"Then we understand each other," I agreed. He looked both resentful and puzzled.

"No, I never did understand you," he disagreed. "I suppose it's all those billions that act as shock insulation for you. You never had to plan, and scheme, and stand alert indefinitely like a terrier at a rat hole waiting for opportunity to stick out its nose so you could pounce on it. So I don't see how you can appreciate my problem now."

"I might try," I said humbly.

"This job," he said. "It's not much, and I know it. But it was a start. The department doesn't expect anything from me but patience. It's not so much ability, you know, just a matter of who can hang on the longest without getting into trouble. I've been hanging on, and keeping out of trouble."

"But you're in trouble now."

"I will be when your aunt fails to put mother hubbards on the natives."

"She won't fail," I said confidently.

"And when she storms into the State Department with fire in her eye and starts turning things upside down, it'll be my fault—somehow," he said miserably.

"So let her put some clothes on some natives," I said. "She'll go away happy and then, for all you care, they can take 'em off and burn 'em if they insist on going around naked. Just swing with the punch, man. Don't stand up and let 'em knock your block off. Surely you have some influence with the natives. I don't hear any war drums, any tom-toms. I don't see them trying to tear holes

in the sides of your bubble to let the air out. You must be at peace with them. You must have some kind of mutual cooperation. So just get a tribe or so to go along with the idea for a while."

He looked at me and shook his head sadly. Sort of the way Aunt Mattie shook her head after a conference with my psychiatrist. But Johnny didn't seem somehow happier. He had a pretty good chest, but it didn't look enormous enough to carry any burden.

"I've been pretty proud of myself," he said. "After five years of daily attempts, and after using everything I ever learned in school courses on extraterrestrial psychology, plus some things I've made up myself, I established a kind of communication with the natives—if you could call it communication. I'd go out in my spacesuit into their chlorinated atmosphere, I'd stand in front of one of them and talk a blue streak, think a blue streak. After about five years of it, one of them slowly closed his eye and then opened it again. I invited one of them to come inside the bubble. I told him about the difference in atmosphere, that it might be dangerous. I got one of them to come in. It made no difference to him."

"Well, fine, then," I said. "Just get some of them to come in again, let Aunt Mattie put some clothes on them, and everybody's happy."

He stood up suddenly.

"Take a walk with me, Hap," he said. It was more of a command than an invitation. "Over to the edge of the bubble. I want to show you some natives."

I was willing.

On the way around to the back of the building, over the crunching salt, I had a thought.

"If all he did was close an eye," I said. "How did you learn their language, so you could invite him inside, explain about the atmosphere?"

"I don't even know they have a language," he said. "Maybe he learned mine. I used to draw pictures in the salt, the way they taught us at school, and say words. Maybe it took him five years to put the thoughts together, maybe they don't have any concept of language at all, or need it. Maybe he was thinking about something else all those five years, and just got around to noticing me. I don't know, Hap."

We came around the edge of an outbuilding then to an unobstructed view of the bubble edge. Even through dark glasses he'd cautioned me to wear with a gesture, as he put on another pair for himself, the scene through the clear plastic was blinding white. Scattered here and there on the glistening salt were blobs of black.

"Why," I exclaimed. "Those are octopi. I suppose that's what the natives use for food? I've wondered."

"Those *are* the natives," he answered, drily.

By now we were up to the plastic barrier of our bubble and stood looking out at the scene.

"Well," I said after some long moments of staring. "It will be a challenge to the D.T.'s, won't it?"

He looked at me with disgust.

"What do they eat?" I asked. "Salt?"

"I don't know if they eat," he said. "Can't you get it through your thick skull, man, that these things are alien? Completely alien? How do I know?"

"Well you must know some things after five years of study. You must have observed them. They must get food somehow, they must sleep and wake, they must procreate. You must have observed something."

"I've observed the process of procreation," he answered cautiously.

"Well fine, then," I said. "That's what's going to concern Aunt Mattie the most."

"Here's something that may help you understand them," he said, and I felt a bit of the sardonic in his voice, a grimness. "When that one visited me inside here," he said. "I took him into my office, so I could photograph him better with all the equipment. I was explaining everything, not knowing how much he understood. I happened to pick up a cigarette and a lighter. Soon as I flipped the lighter on, he shot up a tentacle and took it out of my hand. I let him keep it, of course. Next day, when I went outside, everyone of them, as far as I could see in the distance, had a lighter, exactly like the one I'd given him. Furthermore, in a chlorinated atmosphere, without oxygen, those lighters burned normally. Does that help you to understand them better?" he asked with no attempt to hide the heavy irony.

I didn't have a chance to answer because we both heard a crunching in the salt behind us. We turned about and there was Aunt Mattie and her two committee women behind her also now in dark glasses. I waited until the ladies had come up to us, then I waved my arm grandly at the scene beyond the plastic.

"Behold the natives in all their nakedness, Aunt Mattie," I said. Then, to soften the blow it must have been, "I'm afraid somebody was pulling your leg when they reported it to the D.T.'s."

Miss Point gasped audibly.

Mrs. Waddle said, "Shocking!"

I couldn't tell whether it was the sight of the natives, or my remark which indicated I knew they had legs to pull.

For the first time in my life I saw uncertainty in Aunt Mattie's eyes as she looked, startled, at me, and then at Johnny. Then her chin squared, her back straightened still more, the shelf of her bosom firmed.

"It really won't be too much of a problem, girls," she said. "Actually simpler than some we've solved. Take a square of cloth, cut a hole in the center for that headlike pouch to come through where its eye is, put in a draw string to cinch it up tight, above those—ah—those protuberances, and let it flow out over those—ah—legs. Simple, and quite attractive, don't you think?"

The girls nodded happily, and Johnny just stood there gasping for breath.

It was simpler than any of us had thought.

Johnny looked at me desperately when Aunt Mattie told him to have one of the natives come in so she could fit a pattern on it, to see if any gussets would be needed for fullness—whatever gussets might be.

"One of them came inside before," I said in answer to Johnny's pleading look. "Ask him again. If he refuses, Mohammed will go to the mountain. I'm sure you have extra space suits. I'm sure the ladies won't mind going out to the natives if the natives won't come to them."

"I don't know," Johnny said miserably. "He may have had sufficient curiosity to come inside once, but not sufficient to bring him in again. You see, ladies," he turned to them desperately. "They don't seem to care about us, one way or the other."

The two committee women looked apprehensively at Aunt Mattie. Not to care about her, one way or the other? This was beyond comprehension. But Aunt Mattie was equal to it.

"Very well," she said crisply. "We shall not ask them to come to us. We shall go to them. It is our duty to carry enlightenment to the ignorant, wherever they may be, so that they can be taught to care. In the performance of our duty, we have no room for pride. We shall go to them, humbly, happily."

We did, too.

By the time we'd got into space suits and through the bubble lock out into the ordinary landscape of Capella IV, Capella, the sun, was sinking rapidly.

"We will just have time," Aunt Mattie said crisply, through the intercom of our suits, "To set the pattern and get some idea of the sizes needed. Then tomorrow we can begin our work."

Through his face plate I got a look at Johnny's wide, apprehensive eyes.

"Ladies," he said desperately. "I must warn you again. I've never tried to touch one of them. I don't know what will happen. I can't be held responsible."

"You have been most remiss, young man," Aunt Mattie said sternly. "But then," she added, as if remembering that he had gone to a proper school, "you're young. No doubt overburdened by nonsensical red tape in your administrative duties. And—if you had done this already, there'd be no reason for my being here. I am always willing to help wherever I'm needed."

All five of us marched silently, and bravely, on after that. A hundred yards brought us to the first native. It lay there, spread eagled in eight directions, on the salt. In the center of the tentacles there arose a column of black rubbery flesh, topped by a rounded dome in the center of which was one huge liquid black eye. There was not a twitch of a tentacle as we came to a halt beside it.

"Is this the one you talked to, Johnny?" I asked.

"How should I know?" he asked bitterly. "I never knew if I talked to the same one twice."

"They're much bigger than I thought," Miss Point said with a little dismay in her voice.

"Some of them are ten feet in diameter," Johnny said, I thought with a bit of vindictiveness in his tone.

"Never mind," Aunt Mattie said. "We'll simply sew three lengths of cloth together to get our square. I'm sure they won't mind a neatly done seam."

She had a length of cloth in one arm of her space suit, and a pair of scissors in the mechanical claw of the other hand. With her eye she seemed to measure the diameter of the dome and, manipulating the scissors with the claw like an expert space mechanic, she cut a sizable hole in the center of the cloth.

Entirely without fear or hesitation, she stepped into the triangle between two long black

tentacles that lay on the salt and walked up to the erect column at the center. Expertly, she flipped the cloth so that the hole settled over the creature's head, or whatever it was. Fore and aft, the cloth rippled out to cover the tentacles. The creature did not move.

With an amazing speed, she took some bundles of cloth from the arms of Mrs. Waddle, and with even more amazing dexterity of the space claw, which showed she was no amateur, she basted a length of cloth on either side of the first strip. Then with her scissors, careful not to gouge his hide, she cut off the corners so that the eight tentacles barely peeped out from underneath the cloth.

Somehow, it reminded me of a huge red flower with a black pistil laying there on the white salt.

"There, sir," my aunt said with satisfaction to the monster. "This will hide your nakedness, instill in you a sense of true modesty." She turned to Johnny. "They must not only know what," she instructed. "They must also know why." She turned back and faced the monster again. "It is not your fault," she said to it, "That you have been living in a state of sin. On Earth, where I come from, we have a code which must be followed. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. I'm sure that if I lived in a state of ignorant sin, I would humbly appreciate the kindness of someone letting me know. I'm sure that, in time, you will also come to appreciate it."

It was quite a noble speech, and her two companions bowed their space suit helmets in acknowledgement. Johnny's mouth and eyes were wide, and desperate. She stepped back then and we all stood there looking at the monster.

The dome of its head began to tilt until the eye was fastened upon us. It swept over the three ladies, hesitated on Johnny as if recognizing him, but came to rest upon me. It stared at me for a full minute. I stared back. In some strange way I felt as if my psychiatrist were staring at me, as he often did.

Then the great eye slowly closed, and opened again. As slowly, and somewhat to my amazement, I felt one of my eyes close and open. I winked at it.

"That's all for this evening," Aunt Mattie said crisply. "Let it have its clothes, get used to them. I have the pattern in my mind. Tomorrow we will get out our sewing machines, and really get busy, girls."

All the way back to the entrance of the bubble, I felt that huge eye upon me, following me.

Why me?

The girls did not need to get busy the next morning.

I was awakened by a shout, there was the sound of running feet in the hall, and a pounding on my door. Sleepy eyed, for I had dreamed of the monster's eye all night long, I opened the door as soon as I had found a robe to cover my own nakedness. It was Johnny, of course.

"Most amazing thing," he rushed in and collapsed into a sitting position on the side of my bed. "Absolutely amazing. You should see them."

"What?" I asked.

The rumpus must have disturbed the ladies, too, for there came another knock on my door, and when I opened it all three of them stood there fully dressed. Apparently they had arisen at the crack of dawn to get busy with their sewing. Miss Point and Mrs. Waddle averted their eyes modestly from the V neck of my robe and my bare legs. Aunt Mattie was used to my shameless ways.

"What is it?" Aunt Mattie asked crisply.

Johnny leaped to his feet again.

"Amazing," he said again. "I'll have to show you. You'll never believe it."

"Young man," Aunt Mattie said sharply. "No one has accused you of untruthfulness, and you are hardly a judge of what we are capable of believing."

He stood looking at her with his mouth open.

"Now ladies," I said, and started closing the door. "If you'll excuse me for two minutes I'll dress and we'll go see what Mr. McCabe wants to show us."

The door clicked on my last words, and I hastily doffed the robe and slid into pants and a shirt. Oddly enough, I knew what he was going to show us. I just knew. I slipped on some shoes without bothering about socks.

"All right," I said. "I'm ready."

They had started down the hall, and we quickly overtook them. Johnny went ahead, led us out of the hotel, around its side, and when we came around the corner of the outbuilding which obscured the view, there before us, through the bubble wall, we saw what I had expected.

As far as the eye could see, dotted here and there like poppies on snow, the natives lay in the early sun, each dressed in flaring cloth like that Aunt Mattie had designed the night before.

"You see?" Johnny cried out. "It's the same as with the lighter. One liked it, so they all have it!"

By now we were up against the plastic barrier. The two subordinates were gasping such words as "Fantastic, amazing, astounding, incredible, wondrous, weird".

Aunt Mattie took it all in, and her face lit into a beatific smile.

"You see, young man," she said to Johnny. "They needed only to be shown right from wrong. Let this be a lesson to you."

"But how did they do it?" Mrs. Waddle gasped.

"Give them some credit for diligence and ingenuity," Aunt Mattie almost snapped at her assistant. "I always say we underrate the intelligence and ingenuity of the lesser orders, and that it saps their strengths if we are overprotective. I admire self-reliance, and these have shown they have it. So we will not have to do the sewing after all. Come girls, we must pack and be on our way back to Earth. Our mission here is accomplished."

The two ladies obeyed their leader without question. The three of them, in their sturdy walking shoes and their tweed suits, crunched off across the salt back to their rooms to start packing.

Johnny and I walked along more slowly behind.

"The incredible Matthewa H. Tombs!" he breathed. "She's a legend, you know, Hap. But I never believed it before." Then, in a complete and sudden change of mood he snickered. Or, at least, it was the nearest thing to a small boy snicker I'd heard since prep school. The snicker turned into a roar of laughter, a grown man's laughter. "If they only knew!" he shouted, apparently feeling secure because they'd turned the corner and gone out of sight.

"Knew what?" I asked.

"Why," he said, and doubled up with laughter again. "They've covered up all the innocent parts and left the reprehensible part, which is right behind the eye, fully exposed."

"Johnny, my boy," I said with a chuckle. "Do you really believe there are innocent parts and reprehensible parts of any creature in the universe?"

He stood stock still and stared at me.

"It takes a nasty, salacious mind to make that kind of separation," I said.

"But your aun ... the Daughters of...."

"I know my aunt and the Daughters of Terra," I said. "I've lived with them for years. I know their kind of mind. Who would know it better?"

"But you...."

"The human race," I said, "is very young. It's only in the last few thousand years that it has discovered sex as a concept. So like little kids in kindergarten it goes around being embarrassed and snickering. But we'll grow up. Give us time."

"But you...." he said again. "But they.... That's the kind of organization that keeps us from growing up, Hap. Don't you see that? They've kept us mentally retarded for generations, centuries. How can we make progress when...."

"What's the hurry, Johnny? We've got millions of years, billions, eternity."

He looked at me again, sharply, shrewdly.

"I've underestimated you, Hap," he said. "I'm afraid I always did. I had no idea you...."

I shrugged and passed it off. I'd had no idea either, not until this morning, last night, yesterday evening when that eye had turned on me—and I'd winked back.

I didn't know how to tell him, or any reason why I should, that there couldn't be anything right or wrong, good or bad; that nothing could happen, nothing at all, excepting through the working of the law of nature. Could one say that water running down hill is good, and water being pumped up hill is bad? Both are operating within known physical laws. With millions of years to go, wasn't it likely we would go on discovering the laws governing how things worked? Until one by one we had to give up all notion of good and bad happenings? Understood them as only the operation of natural law? In all the universe, how could there be any such thing as unnatural happenings?

"Don't worry about it, Johnny," I said as we started walking again. "And don't worry about your career, either. Aunt Mattie likes you, and she's mighty pleased with the results of her work out here. Certain people in the State Department may consider her a bit of a meddlesome pest, but make no mistake about it, every politician in the universe trembles in his boots at the very mention of the D.T.'s. And she likes you, Johnny."

"Thanks, Hap," he said as we came to a stop before the doorway of the hotel. "I'll see you before your ship takes off. Oh—ah—you won't tell her she covered up the wrong—well what she would

think was the wrong part?"

"I could have told her that last night," I said.

He walked away with that startled, incredulous look he'd worn ever since our arrival.

On Earth Aunt Mattie had to rush off to a convention of D.T.'s, where I had no doubt her latest exploit in combating ignorance and sin would be the main topic of conversation and add to the triumph of her lionization. To give her credit, I think this lionization bothered her, embarrassed her a little, and she probably wondered at times if it were all sincere. But I also think she would have been lonely and disappointed without it. When one is doing all he can to make the universe we have inherited a better place for our posterity to inherit one likes it to be appreciated.

For two or three weeks after she came back home, she was immersed in administrative duties for the D.T., setting wheels in motion to carry out all the promises she'd made at the convention.

I spent the time in my own suite in the south wing of our house. Mostly, I just sat. No one bothered me except the servants necessary to eating, dressing, sleeping, and they were all but mute about it. My psychiatrist called once, but I sent word that I didn't need any today. I called none of my regular friends and did not answer their messages.

I did send to the Library of Science in Washington for the original science survey report on Capella IV. It told me little, but allowed me to surmise some things. Apparently the original scientists were singularly uncurious about the octopoids, perhaps because they didn't have five years to hang around and wait for one to blink an eye, as Johnny had. As always, they were overworked and understaffed, they did their quick survey and rushed on to some new planet job. If one hoped that someday somebody might go back and take another look at the octopoids I found no burning yearning for it in the dry reports.

As far as they went, their surmise was accurate. Some millions, many millions of years ago, the planet had lost the last of its ocean water. Apparently, as they failed to adapt to the increasing salinity of the little left, one by one the original life forms died out. Something in the octopoid metabolism (or mentality?) allowed them to survive, to become land instead of water animals. Something in their metabolism (or mentality?) allowed them to subsist on the air and sunlight. (Really now? Did they even need these?) That was as far as the reports went.

They did not draw the picture of highly developed mentalities who lay there for millions of years and thought about the nature of being. Such things as how mental manipulation of force fields can provide each of them with a cigarette lighter that burns without any fluid in it and any oxygen around its wick, or such things as mother hubbards which had caught their fancy, or perhaps gave them some kind of sensual kick caused by heat filtering through red cloth.

But mostly I just sat.

I went to see Aunt Mattie when she came back from the convention, of course. She had the west wing where her sitting room looked out upon her flora collection—and the gardeners who were supposed to keep busy. Our greeting was fond, but brief. She did look at me rather quizzically, rather shrewdly, but she made no comment. She did not return my visit.

This was not unusual. She never visited my suite. When I was twenty-one she took me into the south wing and said, "Choose your own suite, Hapland. You are a man now, and I understand about young men." If she had in mind what I thought she had it was a mighty big concession to reality, although, of course, she was five years late in coming around to it.

This older generation—so wise, so naive. She probably resolutely refrained from imagining far worse things than really went on.

About two weeks after she'd come back from the convention, a month since we returned from Capella IV, there was an interruption, an excited one. For once in his life the butler forgot to touch my door with feather fingertips and cough discreetly. Instead he knocked two sharp raps, and opened the door without invitation.

"Come quickly, Master Hapland," he chattered urgently. "There are creatures on our private landing field."

There were, too.

When I got there in my garden scooter, and pushed my way through the crowd of gardeners who were clustered on the path and around the gate to the landing field, I saw them. At least a dozen of the Capella IV octopoids were spread eagled, their tentacles out flat on the hot cement of the runway. Their eye stared unblinking into the sun. Over their spread of tentacles, like inverted hibiscus blossoms, they wore their mother hubbards.

Behind them, over at the far edge of the field, was an exact duplicate of our own space yacht. I wondered, rather hysterically perhaps, if each of them on Capella IV now had one. I suspected the yacht was simply there for show, that they hadn't needed it, not any more than they needed the mother hubbards.

There was the hiss of another scooter, and I turned around to see Aunt Mattie come to a stop. She stepped out and came over to me.

"Our social call on Capella IV is being returned," I said with a grin and twinkle at her.

She took in the sight with only one blink.

"Very well," she answered. "I shall receive them, of course." Somebody once said that the most snobbish thing about the whole tribe of Tombs was that they'd never learned the meaning of the word, or had to. But I did wonder what the servants would think when the creatures started slithering into our drawing room.

There was a gasp and a low rumble of protesting voices from the gardeners as Aunt Mattie opened the gate and walked through it. I followed, of course. We walked up to the nearest monster and came to stop at the edge of its skirt.

"I'm deeply honored," Aunt Mattie said with more cordiality than I'd seen her use on a Secretary of State. "What can I do to make your visit to Earth more comfortable?"

There was no reply, not even the flicker of a tentacle.

They were even more unusual than one might expect. Aunt Mattie resolutely went to each of the dozen and gave the same greeting. She felt her duty as a hostess required it, although I knew that a greeting to one was a greeting to all. Not one of them responded. It seemed rather ridiculous. They'd come all this way to see us, then didn't bother to acknowledge that we were there.

We spent more than an hour waiting for some kind of a response. None came. Aunt Mattie showed no sign of impatience, which I thought was rather praiseworthy, all things considered. But finally we left. She didn't show what she felt, perhaps felt only that one had to be patient with the lack of manners in the lower orders.

I was more interested in another kind of feeling, the one we left behind. What was it? I couldn't put my finger on it. Sadness? Regret? Distaste? Pity? Magnanimity? Give a basket of goodies to the poor at Christmas? Give them some clothes to cover their nakedness? Teach them a sense of shame?

No, I couldn't put my finger on it.

Hilarity?

I found myself regretting that back there on Capella IV, when Aunt Mattie put clothes on him, and the monster had looked at me, I winked.

I wondered why I should regret that.

I didn't have long to wonder.

Nothing happened during the rest of the day. We went back, together and separately, several times during the daylight hours and during the early hours of the night. For a wonder, nobody had leaked anything to the newspapers, and for what it was worth, we had the show to ourselves.

"Perhaps tomorrow," Aunt Mattie said around midnight, as we left the field for the last time. "Perhaps they must rest."

"I could use some of that," I said with a yawn.

"Yes, Hapland," she agreed. "We must conserve our strength. Heaven knows what may be required of us on the morrow."

Did she feel something, too? It was so strong, how could she help it? And yet, the monster had not looked into her eye.

I didn't expect to sleep well, but I fooled myself. I was quite sure I hadn't more than closed my eyes when I was roused by another excited rapping on my bedroom door and again the butler rushed in without ceremony.

"Look, Master Hapland," he shouted in a near falsetto.

He pulled so hard on my drapes they swept back from my windows like a stage curtain—and I looked.

To the very limit of our grounds in the distance, but not beyond, the trees, the shrubs, the drives and walkways, the lawns and ponds, all were covered with a two foot thick blanket of glistening salt.

"And the monsters are gone," the butler was saying. "And I must go to your aunt."

"So must I," I said, and grabbed up a robe.

As I ran, overtook him, passed him, from all over the house I could hear excited outcries, wonder,

amazement, anger, fear from the servants. I finished the length of my wing, sprinted through the main body of the house, and down the hallway of her wing to the door of her suite. I didn't need to knock, someone had left it open.

Her own personal maid, I saw, as I ran past the little alcove into the sitting room. The maid was standing beside Aunt Mattie, wringing her hands and crying. The drapes here, too, were swept full back, and through the windows I could see the collection, the highly prized, wondrous collection of flora, all covered in salt.

Aunt Mattie stood there, without support, looking at it. When I came up to her there were tears in her eyes and glistening streaks on her wrinkled cheeks.

"Why?" she asked. It was very quietly spoken.

By now the butler had made the trip, and came into the room. I turned to him.

"If we hurry," I said. "A good deal of the collection is enclosed under plastic domes. If we don't wet the salt, and if we hurry and have it scraped away from the buildings it won't poison the ground inside them. We can save most of the collection that way."

"No, Master Hapland," he said, and shook his head. "The salt is inside the buildings, just as much as here. A gardener shouted it at me as I passed."

Aunt Mattie's closed fist came up to her lips, and then dropped again. That was all.

"Why, Hapland?" she asked again. "Evil for good? Why?"

I motioned the maid and butler to leave—and take with them the cluster of servants around the door in the hall. I took Aunt Mattie over to her favorite chair, the one where she could sit and look out at her collection; no point in pretending the salt wasn't there. I sat down at her feet, the way I used to when I was ten years old. I looked out at the salt, too. It was everywhere. Every inch of our grounds was covered with it, to poison the earth so that nothing could grow in it. It would take years to restore the grounds, and many more years to restore the collection.

"Try to understand, Aunt Mattie," I said. "Not only what I say, but all the implications of it. They didn't return evil for good. Let's see it from what might have been their point of view. They live on a world of salt, an antiseptic world. We went there, and you intended good. You told them that our code was to do unto others as we would have them do unto us.

"They returned our visit, and what did they find? What kind of a pestilent horror did we live in? Bare ground, teeming with life, billions of life forms in every cubic foot of ground beneath our feet. Above the ground, too. Raw, growing life all around us, towering over us.

"If they were doomed to live in such a world, they would want it covered in salt, to kill all the life, make it antiseptic. They owed nothing to the rest of Earth, but they owed this kindness to you. They did unto others, as they would have others do unto them."

"I never realized—I was sure I couldn't be.... I've built my life around it," she said.

"I know," I said with a regretful sigh. "So many people have."

And yet, I still wonder if it might not have happened at all—if I hadn't winked. I wonder if that pesty psychiatrist has been right, all along?

END

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