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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK BIG STUPE ***



Big Stupe

By CHARLES V. DE VET

Illustrated by KOSSIN

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Bruckner was a man deeply imbued with a sense of his own worth. Now as he rested his broad beam on the joined arms of Sweets and Majesky, he winked to include them in a "this is necessary, but you and I see the humor of the thing" understanding. Like most thoroughly disliked men, he considered himself quite popular with "the boys."

The conceited ham's enjoying this, Sweets thought, as he staggered down the aisle under the big man's weight. At the ship's entrance, he glanced

Smart man, Bruckner—he knew how to handle natives ... but they knew even better how to deal with smart terrestrials!

out across the red-sand plain to where the natives waited.

They wore little clothing, Sweets noted, except the chief. He sat on his dais—carried on the shoulders of eight of his followers—dressed in long streamers of multi-colored ribbons. Other ribbons, rolled into a rope, formed a diadem on his head.

The only man more impressively dressed was Bruckner. He wore all the ceremonial trappings of a second century Gallic king, complete with jewel-studded gold crown.

As Sweets and Majesky grunted with their burden across the ten yards separating the ship from the thronelike chair that had been brought out earlier, their feet kicked up a cloud of red dust that coated their clothing and clogged their nostrils.

The dust had originally been red ferric sand. But the action of winds and storms had milled it together, grain against grain, through the ages, until it had become a fine red powder that hung in the hot still air after they had passed.

Most of Waterfield's Planet, they had discovered on their inspection flight the day before, had been a desert for more centuries than they could accurately estimate. Its oases, however, were large and plentiful and, as observed from the air, followed a clear-cut, regular pattern. The obvious conclusion was that they were fed by underground rivers.

The crewmen deposited their burden in the chair and stood waiting.

"Nice work, men," Bruckner muttered in an undertone. "Now keep up the act. Bow from the waist and retire discreetly to the background."

Majesky said something under his breath as they complied.

The greeting ceremony got off to a good start after that, Sweets had to admit. Whatever else might be said of Bruckner, he knew his job as a psychologist.

Bruckner rose to his feet, raised his right hand, palm forward, and intoned gravely, "Earthmen greet you." He spoke in the language of the natives.

The tribal chieftain raised his hand negligently in reply, but neither rose nor spoke.

With a great display of magnanimity, Bruckner sent over a bolt of bright red cloth.

The chieftain accepted the gift and sent back a large wooden box carried by two of his men. They lowered the box at Bruckner's feet and one of them opened a door in its side.

The large animal—or bird; the Earthmen couldn't be certain which—that stepped out stood about seven feet tall, with a body shaped like a bowling pin. It walked on webbed feet that angled outward, had short flippers, set low on a body covered with coarse hair that might have been feathers, and was armed with long, vicious claws. There was something so ludicrous about its appearance that Sweets had difficulty stifling the chuckle that rose in his throat.

The animal, however, took itself very seriously. When it saw its audience—the spaceship's crew—watching, it took two spraddling steps forward, pulled the bulk of its pot-bellied stomach up into its chest and paused dramatically.

It gave three very loud, hoarse burps, somewhere between the squawk of a duck and the braying of an ass. It was a hilariously funny caricature of a pompous orator.

Someone snickered. Immediately Sweets and the other crew members joined in the laughter. It was the kind of belly-laughing that could not be restrained.

While he roared, Sweets took time to observe Bruckner. At the first outbreak of laughter, the psychologist scowled and glanced nervously across at the natives. But when he saw that they, too, had joined in the laughter, he allowed himself to smile condescendingly.

The meeting ended with much apparent good will on both sides.

"Well, I guess we knew what we were doing, didn't we?" Bruckner said after they were back in the ship.

He made a point of emphasizing the we.

"At the time Waterfield's Planet was first discovered," he explained, "the official report was that the natives were friendly. However, when the survey team landed a year later, they ran into trouble. At the beginning, they were courteous and considerate in their dealings with the natives, but the tribesmen took that as a sign of weakness and gave the team very little cooperation. Then they tried being a bit tough and found themselves with a small war on their hands. They were lucky to get away with their lives. So you can see why I'm pleased with the way things went off today."

"If the natives are that touchy, we'll still have to be careful," Sweets said. "What are we supposed to be doing here, anyway?"

Bruckner looked carefully around the circle at each of his listeners. "There's no reason now why I shouldn't tell you," he said confidently. "The survey team found enough traces of rare elements here to suspect that there might be large deposits on the planet. That's what we're after."

"And you think there might be trouble?" Majesky asked. Bruckner had his full attention now, Sweets noted. There was always a kind of leashed vitality about Majesky that made him poor company during a space trip, but he was the type of man you'd want on your side in a rough-and-tumble.

"I certainly do not," Bruckner answered, frowning in annoyance. "It's my job to see that we don't have trouble. I went very carefully over the records of the two previous landings, even before we began this trip, and I believe I understand the psychological compulsions of these tribesmen quite well."

"You mean you know what makes 'em tick?" Majesky asked.

"Yes, I think I can safely say I do," Bruckner said modestly. "Their culture pattern is based on a long history of tribal conflict. And, for a tribe to prosper, they must have a strong as well as resourceful leader. Thus the splendid dress of their chieftain this morning, in contrast to the drabness of the ordinary tribal dress. He must be, very apparently, a man above the common tribesmen to hold their respect.

"And that," Bruckner added, "was the reason for our little act this morning. The best way to impress them with our power is to display the magnificence of our leader. The better we can keep them convinced of my greatness, the less risk there will be of trouble."



Big Stupe—someone gave their pet the name the first five minutes and it stuck—had the run of the ship. Individually and in groups, the crew took turns amusing themselves with him. And Big Stupe accepted everything they did very seriously and loved the attention. He was definitely a gregarious animal.

And his name fitted perfectly. His gullibility and invariable stupidity seemed to have no limits. He fell for the same practical jokes over and over again. He was clumsy and stumbled over furniture, loose objects and even his own feet.

He would eat anything. If what he swallowed proved indigestible, he would stand for a minute with an astounded expression on his hairy face and then whatever he had eaten would come rolling up. He eagerly gulped down the same rubber ball a dozen times in the space of ten minutes. Whenever spoken to, he replied promptly, in his incredible squawking bray. A "hello," by one of the crew, with an answering bray from Big Stupe, was always good for a laugh.

Big Stupe had a fear of loud noises and pulled a variation of the ostrich-head-in-hole routine, at every unexpected loud sound, of turning his back to whatever had frightened him and peering cautiously back under a flipper. If a tail feather was pulled, he'd

make a determined and prolonged effort to run straight through the ship's wall, flapping and treadmilling and skidding and pushing his beak against it.

Another of his tricks was the dispensing of pebbles—which he seemed to consider very valuable gifts—from his marsupial pouch to the crew members who took his fancy.

Sweets often wondered how an animal with so little common intelligence had survived the evolutionary process. He could spot no counterbalancing ability or survival characteristic. But somehow the species had escaped extinction.

On the second day, Bruckner sent Sweets and Teller, the head engineer, to the chief with a present and samples of rare ores. Sweets' duties, on the trip out, had included the learning of the native language.

The sun was hot and Sweets wore only his shoes, trousers and a T shirt. It seemed absurd that a sun that appeared no larger than an egg should be so hot. But he knew it generated all that heat because it was a blue sun and not one of the ordinary yellow-white type, as it appeared. The

deceptive appearance was caused by the heavy atmosphere that held out the ultraviolet and the heat and light came in on the yellow band. Last night, the darkness had had a dim violet haze.

The interview with Chief Faffin went quite smoothly. He received the Earthmen with great cordiality and Sweets was certain that he detected in the chieftain's manner more than mere courtesy. He seemed to have a genuine liking for them. He accepted gravely the gyroscope top which Bruckner had sent and agreed, without argument or reservations, to send his men in search of the ores that matched the samples Sweets showed him.

He would be happy to assist his friends, the *Lacigule*, the chief said. *Lacigule* was the natives' name for the Earthmen, used in both the singular and the plural.

The same afternoon, a dozen natives brought samples of ores to the ship. At Bruckner's orders, Sweets gave each native a comb from the ship's supply of trading goods.

During the evening, Teller and his men set up a portable mass spectograph separator at the mine site and, three days later, they had the hold of the ship two-thirds full.

During all this time, the crew members had been restricted to the vicinity of the spaceship and by the third day were showing signs of unrest. They sent Sweets to talk with Bruckner and the captain.

"We'll be leaving here in a few days," Sweets told them. "It's been a long trip out and it'll be another long trip back. The men feel they're entitled to some fun before they go."

"That seems like a reasonable request," the captain said. "What do you think, Mr. Bruckner?"

"It would be risky to let them mingle too freely with the natives," Bruckner advised. "We aren't familiar enough with the local customs. One wrong move might spoil all the good will I've been able to build up so far."

"Unless you let them have a little fun, you're going to be awfully unpopular," Sweets said. Without knowing it, he was something of a psychologist himself.

"Hmmm." Bruckner was thoughtful. "I'm for the men," he said finally. "One hundred per cent. Let's say we wait until tomorrow evening, though. We'll have the hold just about filled by that time. Then it won't matter too much if the natives change their minds about letting us take the ores. How does that sound to you?"

"Fair enough," Sweets agreed.

The next evening, a full-fledged party was held. Permission had been obtained from Chief Faffin for the crew to visit the village and the tribesmen were waiting for them when they arrived.

Sweets stayed close to Majesky. For the past couple days, the big crewman had been drinking—not heavily, but steadily. The irritation of being restricted to the ship and vicinity, added to the long trip out from Earth, had gradually built up in him an ugly resentment.

Now as the crew members sat in a circle watching the dancing of a half-dozen native men, Sweets noted that Majesky was drunk. He sat with his arms wrapped around his legs, his head resting on his knees, and glared at the dancers. Outside the circle, a pile of brush burned with much crackling of wood-pitch.

After the dance was over, the natives sat solemnly watching the Earthmen. It was soon apparent that they expected their visitors to furnish the next portion of the entertainment program.

Evidently Bruckner had come prepared for this. He rose impressively from his throne—on which he had been carried the quarter-mile from the ship—and said, "We'll have your song now, Billy."

Billy Watts, astrogator of the crew, pulled himself to his feet and, in a high boyish tenor, sang *I'll Take You Home Again, Kathleen*.

Sweets felt his throat quicken as a wave of homesickness went through him like a chill. At the song's end, it needed the yip, yip, yip of the tribesmen's applause to bring him out of his memories of Earth.

The tribesmen continued their applause until Watts rose again. Sweets wondered if they had any music of their own. The men had danced earlier without accompaniment and they had made no sound themselves.

Billy Watts sang two more songs and it was the tribesmen's turn again.

Suddenly a native woman ran out from behind one of the round, mud-packed village huts and into the circle of spectators. She paused on tiptoe, crouched and sprang upward, twisting and screaming as she rose. She landed with her legs in driving motion and went through a racing, energetic series of gyrations. She was almost completely unclothed.

For a stunned moment, the men sat motionless in pleased surprise. Then Sweets caught a movement from the corner of his eye and shifted his head to look at Majesky. For the first time in many days, Majesky appeared happy. He had straightened up and his eyes shone with a glow of approval. He raised his arms in a gesture of encouragement and yelled, "Swing it, baby!"

The dancer's stride broke and her head turned sharply in Majesky's direction. Then she ignored the interruption and went on with her dance.

But Majesky was not to be ignored. He climbed to his feet and stood with his head hunched between his shoulders, watching her. Then he lurched forward, caught the girl up in his arms and swung her around in a staggering circle.

It had happened too suddenly for any of the Earthmen to stop him, and now they were unable to decide just what they should do. Most of them turned to Bruckner.

To Sweets, it seemed that Bruckner had gone pale, but it was difficult to be certain in the uneven light cast by the fire. His mouth opened twice before he could speak. And when he did, Sweets almost laughed at the staginess and absurdity of what he said.

"Unhand that woman!" Bruckner commanded.

Bruckner's voice was loud and it penetrated through the haze of Majesky's drunken elation. He stopped his spinning and set the girl on her feet, but he kept his right arm around her waist and glared back at Bruckner.

"Go to hell," he said.

The natives apparently had been as surprised as the crew, for they had not moved. Now, however, one of them rose and lunged at Majesky.

Majesky's face twisted into an expectant grin and he tossed the girl aside and stood with wide-spread legs, waiting. As the native dived in with his head lowered, Majesky brought his right fist up in a powerful uppercut and smashed it into the tribesman's mouth.

The native continued his dive and landed face down. Natives and Earthmen were on their feet now and moving toward Majesky. Sweets reached him first.

The grin of pleasure was still on Majesky's face as he hit Sweets on the left cheek and spun him half-around. He butted his head into the chest of the next man to reach him, but they pulled him down then and held him helpless.

The natives had paused when they saw the Earthmen grab Majesky.

Now Bruckner made his voice heard above the noise. "Bring him over here!" he yelled.

Two men pinned Majesky's arms while a third held one kicking leg. They dragged him over to Bruckner.

"You damn, dumb fool!" Bruckner cursed fervently. He raised his voice. "All of you," he ordered, "back to the ship!"

The natives made no attempt to stop them.

Sweets glanced back over his shoulder at Chief Faffin as they went. He was standing and intoning sadly, "*Lacigule, lacigule, lacigule.*"

The following day, Bruckner called Sweets to his quarters.

"That was a rotten piece of business last night," Bruckner said. "But I'm proud of the way you acted. You did some mighty quick thinking there."

Sweets grunted. He knew the flattery was leading to something.

"I've been giving the matter some deep thought since," Bruckner continued, "and I don't think it's too late yet to patch things up. But I need a man with guts." He laughed. "How brave do you feel this morning?"

Sweets shrugged and regarded the other levelly.

"You can speak their language," Bruckner said. "And I don't believe they're sure enough of themselves to risk bloodshed. How would you like to bring another present to the chief? I'll see that you're—"

"I don't feel like being a hero this morning," Sweets interrupted. "Why don't you go yourself?"

Bruckner's eyebrows raised. "My job is vital to the success of this expedition to risk my life unnecessarily. I'd go myself except—"

"Except that it's too dangerous," Sweets finished for him.

Bruckner straightened and his lips grew narrower. "That will be enough of that. We'll find some way to get along without your help."

The party Bruckner organized to visit the native village pointedly did not include Sweets.

Each man carried a rifle and sidearms. Bruckner walked this time—at their head. But Sweets made a small bet with himself that Bruckner would stay close to the protection of his men. He was willing enough to send another man out alone, but when he had to go himself, he made sure that he was well protected.

Bruckner and his men had been gone almost an hour when Sweets heard the sound of Big Stupe's hoarse squawking from outside the ship. There seemed to be anger in the tones. Before Sweets reached the open portal of the ship, he heard more excited squawks. They were similar to Big Stupe's, but they weren't being made by him.

Outside, Sweets found Big Stupe facing three others of his breed, exchanging loud angry squawks. Soon they began to walk rapidly in their pseudo-dignified spraddles, each in a small circle.

Abruptly they were locked together and it was soon apparent that this was no game. Big Stupe pulled with both flippers at the head of one of his visitors, while another systematically raked his long claws down the sides of Big Stupe's neck. Before Sweets could reach him, the neck was streaming with blood.

Sweets remembered how Big Stupe had always been afraid of loud noises and he raised his voice in a shout. The other stupes turned their backs, but Big Stupe brought one flipper around and hit Sweets squarely between the eyes.

As Sweets stood stunned, he felt Big Stupe's body crash against his shoulders and this time, when he yelled, it was in alarm and fear.

Then he was free and his eyes swam back into focus. He saw Big Stupe standing with his back turned. The three visitors were shambling off awkwardly.

Sweets left Big Stupe and stumbled back to the ship.

Bruckner returned well pleased with his trip.

"I'd say we handled that exactly right," he said. "I don't know if the other expeditions contacted this particular tribe or not, but at least stories must have reached them of the potency of the Earthmen's weapons. When we showed them that we preferred peace, but were ready to fight if necessary, that was the end of the affair. And the presents we had for Faffin, and for the native that Majesky hit, didn't hurt any. The one thing to keep in mind is that we've got to make them respect us. And those lads have plenty of respect for *Lacigule* right now."

It seemed that Bruckner was right. There was no further difficulty with the tribesmen as the engineers completed their mining and separating operations and finished filling the hold of the ship.

Two days later, they were ready to leave.

"Can we take Big Stupe along with us when we go?" one of the crewmen asked Bruckner. Most of them were standing outside the ship, taking a last look around at Waterfields Planet. The ship had been made space-ready and all preparations for departure had been completed.

"I see no reason why not," Bruckner answered. "He certainly helps keep our morale up. I wonder," he went on in an expansive mood, "if you men realize why you get such a kick out of Big Stupe. You ought to read Hobbs' essay on the basis of humor sometime."

"Hobbs does a fine job of showing that we enjoy humor because it caters to our need for self-approval. When a monkey falls out of a tree, all the other monkeys laugh, because it makes them feel so clever and wise for not having fallen out of their tree. Whenever Big Stupe pulls one of his outlandish stunts, we are all reminded of how much smarter we are. It makes us feel good and so we like Big Stupe. We like anybody or anything that makes us feel superior."

A few of the natives who had been watching the preparations for departure from a distance walked closer.

Bruckner turned and waved cheerfully to them. "Farewell, friends. Perhaps we'll see you again in a few years." He paused. "I've been wondering," he said, pointing at Big Stupe, "what's your name for this bird here?"

"*Lacigule*," the native answered.

They left Big Stupe behind.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK BIG STUPE ***

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