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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK NOT FIT FOR CHILDREN ***



NOT FIT FOR CHILDREN

By EVELYN E. SMITH

Illustrated by DICK FRANCIS

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***Trading with the natives was like taking candy
from a kid—but which were the natives?***

Ppon lowered himself hastily to the orlop and ran toward me. "Hurry up, Qan!" he projected on a sub-level, trying to escape my mother's consciousness. "They're coming! All the others are up already."

"Who's coming?" my mother wanted to know, but her full interest was absorbed by her work, and she gave us only the side of her mind. "You youngsters really must learn to think clearly."

"Yes'm." Ppon projected suitable youthful embarrassment, but on a lower level he was giggling. Later I must give him another warning; we young ones could not yet separate the thought channels efficiently, so it was more expedient not to try.

"The *zkuchi* are coming," I lied glibly, knowing that the old ones accept inanity as merely a sign of immaturity, "on hundreds of golden wings that beat faster than light."

Grandfather removed a part of his mind from his beloved work. "The *zkuchi* are purely mythological creatures," he thought crossly. "You're old enough to know better than that.... Qana," he appealed to my mother, "why do you let him believe in such nonsense?"

"The *zkuchi* are part of our cultural heritage, Father," she projected gently. "We must not let the young ones forget our heritage. Particularly if we are to be here for some time."

"It seems to me you're unnecessarily pessimistic," he complained. "You know I've never failed you yet. We shall get back, I promise you. It's just that the transmutation takes time."

"But it's taken such a long time already," she thought sadly. "Sometimes I begin to have doubts." Then she apparently remembered that serious matters should not be discussed before us young ones. As if we didn't know what was going on. "Run along and play, children," she advised, "but don't forget to check the atmosphere first."

Grandfather started to excogitate something about how it would be better if Ppon went and helped his father while I stayed and did my lessons—you never seem to escape from lessons anywhere in the Universe—but we got away before he could finish.

Topside, the others were jumping up and down in their excitement. Ztul, the half-wit, was so upset he actually *spoke*: "Hurry, Qan, the tourists are coming!"

"Ztul, you must never, *never* make words aloud!" I thought fiercely. "The old ones might hear and find out about the game."

"It's a harmless game," Ppon contributed. "And useful, too. Your grandfather needs the stuff."

"Yes," I agreed, "but perhaps the old ones wouldn't see it that way. They might even stop the game. Adults have funny ideas, and there's no use asking for trouble."

There was a chorus of assenting thought from the others. All of us had our family troubles.

We got to work. Quickly we arranged the interiors of the shelters which we had cleverly built out of materials borrowed from below when the old ones' perceptions were directed elsewhere. The essential structure of the materials had not been changed and could easily be replaced when the time came, but there was no use having to give involved explanations. The old ones never seemed to understand anything.

At first we had just built the shelters as play huts, but when the first tourists had misunderstood, we had improved upon the original misconception. Now we had a regular street full of rude dwellings. Lucky for us the old ones never came topside.

As the little spaceship landed, Ppon and I and four of the others were ready at its door to form a welcoming committee. The rest dispersed to play villagers. The others took turns alternating the two roles, but I, of course, was always leader. After all, I'd made up the game.

Two members of the crew dropped lightly out of the ship and slid a ramp into place. Then the passengers—there was a sizable group this time, I noted with satisfaction—came, followed by Sam, the guide, a grizzled old human. He grinned at us. We were old friends, for he'd been leading these tours for ten of their Earth years.

The passengers stopped at the foot of the ramp and Sam ran forward to face them. By now we were used to the appearance of the human beings—small, binocular, with smooth, pasty skins—although they had really frightened us when we first laid eyes on them.

"Now, you see, folks," Sam bellowed through his megaphone, "the scientists don't know

everything. They said life could not exist out here in the Asteroid Belt—and, behold, life! They said these little planets were too small, had too little gravity to hold an atmosphere. But you just breathe in that air, as pure and fresh and clean as the atmosphere of our own Earth! Speaking of gravity, you'll notice that we're walking, not floating. Matter of fact, you'll notice it's even a little hard to walk; you seem a bit heavier than at home. And they said there would be hardly any gravity. No, folks, those scientists know a lot of things, I won't deny that, but they sure don't know everything."

"Amazing!" a small, bespectacled male passenger said. "I can hardly believe my own senses!"

"Watch out for him," Ppon projected to me. "I think he's a scientist of some kind."

"Don't teach your ancestor to levitate," I conceptualized back.

Of course what struck the passengers first was neither the atmosphere nor the gravity; it was us. They never failed to be surprised, although the travel folders should have shown them what to expect. One of the folders had a picture of me, amusingly crude and two-dimensional, it's true, but not entirely unflattering. I'm not really purple, just a sort of tender fuchsia, but what could you expect from the rudimentary color processes they used? Sam had let me have the original and I always wished I could show it to Mother, but I couldn't without having to explain where it had come from.

"They're so cute!" a thin female screamed. "Almost like big squirrels, really, except for all those arms." Her teeth protruded more than those of the small rodent she was thinking about, or than mine, for that matter.

"Be careful, ma'am," the guide warned her. "They speak English."

"They do? How clever of them. Why, they must be quite intelligent, then."

"They are of a pretty high order of intelligence," the guide agreed, "although their methods of reasoning have always baffled scientists. Somehow they seem to *sense* scientists, think of them as their enemies, and just clam up entirely."

"I think they're just simply too cute," she said, gazing at me fondly.

"Ah, *srrk* yourself, madam," I excogitated, confident that humans were non-telepathic.

She looked a little disturbed, though; I'd better watch myself. After all, as leader I had to set a good example.

"This here is Qan," the guide introduced me. "Headman or chief or something of the tribe. He is always on hand to greet us."

"Welcome, travelers from a distant star," I intoned, wrapping my mother's second-best cloak more impressively about me, "to the humble land of the *Gchi*. Come in peace, go in peace."

"Why, he speaks excellent English," the scientist exclaimed.

"They pick up things very fast," Sam explained.

"Natives can be very, very shrewd," a stout female commented, clutching her handbag tightly.



"And now," Sam said, "we will visit the rude dwellings of this simple, primitive, but hospitable people."

"*People!*" Ppon projected. "You better mind your language, Buster! People, indeed!"

"Our friend Qan will lead the way." Sam waved toward me.

I smiled back at him, but didn't move.

"Whatsa matter?" he hissed. "Don't you trust me? Your old pal Sam?"

"No," I whispered back. "Last time I let you pay me at the end of the tour, the take was \$3.75 short."

He tried another tack. "But look, Qan, it's a hell of a job getting all those coins together. Why can't you take paper money instead?"

"What good would paper money do me up here?"

"What I can't figure out is what good the metal does you up here, either."

I beamed. "We eat it."

Muttering to himself, he walked over to the ship and called one of the crewmen. They dragged a bag out of the ship's hold. Puffing, they laid it at my feet. I tossed it to Ztul.

"Count it," I ordered out loud, "and if there's any missing, no one leaves this planet alive." I snarled ferociously.

Everybody laughed. It was part of the act.

"You will notice," Sam announced as we led the way down the street, "that the *Gchi* are all about the same size. No young ones among them. We don't know whether this is because they reproduce differently from us, or because they have concealed their offspring."

"The children must be dear little creatures," the toothy female gushed. "If even the adults are cute when they're seven or eight feet tall, the little ones must be simply precious.... Tell me, Chief, do you have any children?"

"Don't understand," I grunted. "Concept unfamiliar. Not know what children is."

"Funny," remarked the scientist, "he was speaking perfectly good English before."

"Watch yourself, kid," Ppon ideated warningly to me.

"Children are ..." she began and stopped. "They're—well, how do you reproduce?"

Ppon, the *oosh*-head, took it upon himself to answer. "If you'll just step into my hut, madam, I'll be delighted to show you."

"If you ask me," the scientist stated, "these are frauds."

"Whaddya mean frauds?" Sam demanded indignantly.

"Human beings dressed up as extraterrestrials. They speak too good an English. Their concepts are too much like ours. Their sense of humor is equally vul—too similar."

"You and your big mouth!" I projected to Ppon.

"Look who's thinking!" he excogitated back. I could see I'd have to give him a mind-lashing later.

It was up to me to save the situation. "If you would like to examine me more closely, sir," I addressed the scientist, "you will see that I am not a human being."

He approached me dubiously.

"Closer," I said, looking him in the eye, as I bared my teeth and growled. "I have five eyes, sir, and you will notice that I am looking at you with each one of them. I have seven arms, sir—" here I reached out to grab him—"and you will notice that they are all living tissue."

"No, you couldn't be a human being," he agreed, backing away as soon as I released my grip, "but the whole thing is ... odd. Very odd."

"If anthropologists on Earth can't explain all the customs of the primitives there," Sam tried to placate him, "how can we explain the behavior of extraterrestrials? Let's go into some of the houses. The chief has kindly given us his permission to look around."

"Our houses are your houses," I stated, bowing graciously.

As always, the tourists grew extremely enthusiastic about the furniture in our simple dwellings. "What lovely—er—things you have," squirrel-tooth commented. "What are they used for?"

"Well, the *pryu* is for the *mrach*, of course," I explained glibly, "and the *wroov* is much used for *cvrking* the *budz*, although the *ywrl* is preferred by the less discriminating.

"Oh," she said. "How I should love to have one of the—'wroov' I think it was you said, for my very own. I wonder whether...."

By a curious coincidence, Hsoj arrived at this point, carrying a tray full of things and stuff.

"Artifacts!" he shouted. "Nice artifacts! Who wants to buy artifacts?"

All the tourists did. They were pretty good artifacts, if I do say so myself. I'd made them out of the junk I rescued from our dustbins before the disintegration unit got to work. Honestly, I can't understand how the old ones can complain about our being wasteful and then go and throw away all sorts of perfectly useful things.

"You must pay the natives in metal," the guide explained. "They accept only coins."

"Why?" the stout female wanted to know. "Do they really eat metal?"

"I doubt it. One of them ate a couple of pounds of Earth candy a tourist gave him last time and he seemed to enjoy it without ill effects."

"Without ill effects!" Ppon excogitated. "You should have seen Ztul afterward, boy!"

"Look, Mac." A short fat human offered Hsoj a small silver coin and then five larger brown ones. "Which would you rather have?"

"Them." Hsoj pointed unhesitatingly to the brown coins.

A smile rippled covertly through the tourists.

"They're a simple and child-like people, but really so good-natured," Sam footnoted.

All of us gave simple good-natured smiles as Hsoj accepted the gift of the brown coins.

"Keep up the good work," I projected. "We can use all the copper we can get."

"You like metal, dear?" a female asked Hsoj. She unfastened a belt from around her waist. "Would you take this in exchange for some of your pretty things?"

"Say 'yes,'" I conceptualized. "That's steel. Old and worthless to her, but not to us."

"I know, I know," Hsoj ideated impatiently. "What makes you think you're the only one who knows anything?"

Never had we got such a big haul before, because everybody seemed to have all sorts of metal stuff on him that he valued less than coins.

Now came the sad part of the spiel. "Remember, folks, these simple, honest individuals you see before you are but the scanty remnants of a once-proud race who spanned the skies. For their ancestors must have been godlike indeed to have erected such edifices as that commanding structure over there." Sam pointed to the portable atmosphere machine which was set up several *yebil* away to give our playground proper air. "Once glorious, now fallen into ruin and decay."

"You're going to catch *muh* from the old ones," Ppon ideated, "when they find out you haven't been keeping the machine clean."

"Don't be a silly *oosh*," I thought back with a mental grin. "I'm using the atmosphere machine to create atmosphere."

"You're getting to be as stupid as a human," he thought in disgust.

"May we go inside?" the scientific passenger asked Sam.

"No, indeed," I said hastily. "It is our temple, sacred to the gods. No unbeliever may set foot in it."

"What are the basic tenets of your religion?" the scientist wanted to know.

"We do not talk about it," I said with dignity. "It is tabu. Bad form."

"And now," announced the guide, glancing at his watch, "we have just time for the war dance before we leave for Vesta."

"Against whom are they planning a war?" asked a small passenger, turning pale.

"It's a vestigial ritual," Sam explained quickly, "dating back to the days when there were other—er—when there was somebody to fight. Just an invocation to the gods ... general stuff like that ... nothing to be afraid of. Isn't it so, Qan?"

"Quite so," I replied, folding all my arms across my mother's cloak. "Come in peace, go in peace. Our motto."

We started the dance. It wouldn't have got us a passing mark in first grade, where we'd learned it *rffi* ago, but our version of the dance of the *zkuchi* was plenty good enough for the tourists.

"If I ever visit Earth, *Janna* forbid," I thought to Ppon as we executed an intricate caracole, "I'm going to wear earplugs all the time."

The dance finished.

"Now everybody get together!" Sam shouted, clapping his hands to round up his charges. "We are about to leave little *Gchik*."

"He should only know what *gchik* means," Ppon sniggered mentally.

"Little *Gchik* is barren, dying, its past glories all but forgotten," Sam almost sobbed, "but still its simple, warm-hearted inhabitants carry on bravely...."

"Couldn't we *do* something for them?" suggested the stout female.

Everybody murmured assent. This contingency arose all too often—a result of our being just too lovable.

"No one can help us," I said in a deep voice, pulling the cloak over my face. The *idzik* feathers trimming it tickled like crazy. "We must dree our own weird alone. Besides, the air of *Gchik* has a deleterious effect upon human beings if they're exposed to it for longer than four hours."

There was a mad scramble to reach the ship.

"Stand by the atmosphere machine, Hsoj," I instructed, "to poison a little air in case anybody wants to take a sample."

The scientist actually did, in a little bottle he seemed to have brought along for the purpose; but he got off the "asteroid" as rapidly as the rest of them, after that.

We watched the spaceship dwindle to a silver mote in the distance.

"Whew," Ppon thought, sinking to the surface. "That war dance sure takes a lot out of a fellow."

Then he conceptualized indignantly as he—as well as the rest of us—floated off the top level. "Somebody's cut the gravity!"

"Must be Grandfather," I mentalized. "I suppose he thinks we've been out long enough, so he's warning us, just as if we were a bunch of infants. I guess we'd better go inside, though. Let's not forget to turn off the atmosphere, fellows. It uses too much energy and the old ones won't let us play topside any more."

"You know everything, don't you, Qan?" Ppon sneered.

I ignored him. "Pretty good haul," I excogitated as I hefted the bags of metal. "Here, Ztul, catch!"

"You always make me carry everything!" he complained.

Grandfather caught us as we lowered ourselves from the airlock. I figured he must have been getting suspicious or otherwise he'd never have left his beloved engines.

"What's this you youngsters have?" he wanted to know, pouncing on our bags. "Metal, eh? I suppose you were going to make another fake meteorite out of it for me, were you?"

"I thought you wanted metal, Grandfather," I sulked. He could have been more appreciative.

"Certainly I want metal. You know I need it to get the drive working again. But what I want to know is where you got it from. I'd think you stole it, but how could even little *muhli* like you steal out here in space?"

"They have always brought you metal from time to time, Father," Mother projected, coming out as she overthought us. "So clever of them, I always thought."

"Yes, but I've been thinking that their encountering so many meteorites was a singularly curious coincidence. And they were curious meteorites, too. I suppose the young ones made them themselves."

"But out of what, Father? You know we don't have any spare metal on the ship. That's why you haven't been able to get the repairs finished before. Where else could they get the metal but from meteorites?"

"I don't know where they get their metal from, but certainly not from meteorites. These pieces here are artifacts. Look, the metal has been more or less refined and roughly formed into shapes with crude designs upon them. Tell me the truth, Qan, where did you get these?"

"Some people gave them to us," I replied sullenly.

"People?" asked my mother. "What are people?"

"Natives of this solar system. They call themselves people."

"Nonsense!" my grandfather interjected. "It's just another one of your fantasies. You know what the astronomers say—none of the planets of this little system is capable of supporting life."

"They come from the third planet," I persisted, trying to keep from disgracing myself by *flwng* in front of the other young ones. "There is life there. All of us have seen them. Besides, there is the metal."

My companions chorused agreement.

"You see, Father," my mother smiled, stroking my head with three hands, "the wise ones are not always right."

My grandfather nodded his head slowly. "It is not impossible, I suppose. I hope it is true that these—people *gave* you and your friends the metal, Qan."

"Oh, yes, Grandfather," I thought anxiously. "Of their own free will."

"Well—" he continued, not altogether convinced—"this lot should be enough to repair the engines. Perhaps, when we take off, we should have a look at the youngsters' third planet on the way home."

"But this trip has taken such a long time already, Father," my mother protested. "Almost a *rff*; the young ones have missed nearly two semesters of school. And Qan has been getting some very peculiar ideas—from those *people*, I suppose."

"But if there is some sort of intelligent life," Grandfather thought, "it's our duty to visit it. Next time we need to stop the ship for repairs, it might be more convenient to put in at this third planet instead of just hanging out there in space. And the young ones say the natives seem to be friendly."

"I'd like to see Sam's face when he comes back and finds his 'asteroid' gone," I conceptualized.

"Yes," Ppon agreed, with the edge of his mind, but his main channel was turned in another direction. "That is the end of this game now, you know. In the next game *I* shall be leader."

"Oh, yes?" I thought back. "I'm the leader and I'm staying leader, because I am the biggest and cleverest."

"Children!" my mother protested, distressed. "I'm afraid you've picked up some really unpleasant concepts from those dreadful natives."

"Come, come, Qana," Grandfather ideated, "we mustn't be intolerant."

"Perhaps not," she replied with heat, "and I know the natives probably don't know any better, but I am not going to have my young one or anyone else's contaminated. Visit the third planet if you wish, but not this time. You'll have to make a special trip for it. I'm not going to let you stop off there while the young ones are aboard. It's obviously no fit place for children."

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK NOT FIT FOR CHILDREN ***

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