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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE SWEEPER OF LORAY ***



THE SWEEPER OF LORAY

By FINN O'DONNEVAN

Illustrated by GOODMAN

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You wish a universal panacea? A simple boon to grant—first decide what part of you it is that you wish to have survive!

"Absolutely impossible," declared Professor Carver.

"But I saw it," said Fred, his companion and bodyguard. "Late last night, I saw it! They carried in this hunter—he had his head half ripped off—and they—"

"Wait," Professor Carver said, leaning forward expectantly.

They had left their spaceship before dawn, in order to witness the sunrise ceremonies in the village of Loray, upon the planet of the same name. Sunrise ceremonies, viewed from a proper distance, are often colorful and can provide a whole chapter for an anthropologist's book; but Loray, as usual, proved a disappointment.

Without fanfare, the sun rose, in answers to prayers made to it the preceding night. Slowly it hoisted its dull red expanse above the horizon, warming the topmost branches of the great rain-forest that surrounded the village. And the natives slept on....

Not *all* the natives. Already the Sweeper was out, cleaning the debris between huts with his twig broom. He slowly shuffled along, human-shaped but unutterably alien. The Sweeper's face was a stylized blank, as though nature had drawn there a preliminary sketch of intelligent life. His head was strangely knobbed and his skin was pigmented a dirty gray.

The Sweeper sang to himself as he swept, in a thick, guttural voice. In only one way was the Sweeper distinguishable from his fellow Lorayans: painted across his face was a broad black band. This was his mark of station, the lowest possible station in that primitive society.

"Now then," Professor Carver said, after the sun had arisen without incident, "a phenomenon such as you describe could not exist. And it most especially could not exist upon a debased, scrubby little planet like this."

"I saw what I saw," Fred maintained. "I don't know from impossible, Professor. I saw it. You want to pass it up, that's up to you."

He leaned against the gnarly bole of a stabicus tree, folded his arms across his meager chest and glowered at the thatch-roofed village. They had been on Loray for nearly two months and Fred detested the village more each day.

He was an underweight, unlovely young man and he wore his hair in a bristling crewcut which accentuated the narrowness of his brow. He had accompanied the professor for close to ten years, had journeyed with him to dozens of planets, and had seen many strange and wonderful things. Everything he saw, however, only increased his contempt for the Galaxy at large. He desired only to return, wealthy and famous, or wealthy and unknown, to his home in Bayonne, New Jersey.

"This thing could make us rich," Fred accused. "And *you* want to pass it up."

Professor Carver pursed his lips thoughtfully. Wealth was a pleasant thought, of course. But the professor didn't want to interrupt his important scientific work to engage in a wild goose chase. He was now completing his great book, the book that would fully amplify and document the thesis that he had put forth in his first paper, *Color Blindness Among the Thang Peoples*. He had expanded the thesis in his book, *Lack of Coordination in the Drang Race*. He had generalized it in his monumental *Intelligence Deficiencies Around the Galaxy*, in which he proved conclusively that intelligence among Non-Terrans decreases arithmetically as their planet's distance from Terra increases geometrically.

Now the thesis had come to full flower in Carver's most recent work, his unifying effort, which was to be titled *Underlying Causes of the Implicit Inferiority of Non-Terran Peoples*.

"If you're right—" Carver said.

"Look!" Fred cried. "They're bringing in another! See for yourself!"

Professor Carver hesitated. He was a portly, impressive, red-jowled man, given to slow and deliberate movement. He was dressed in a tropical explorer's uniform, although Loray was in a temperate zone. He carried a leather swagger stick, and strapped to his waist was a large revolver, a twin to the one Fred wore.

"If you're right," Carver said slowly, "it would indeed be, so to speak, a feather in the cap."

"Come on!" said Fred.

Four srag hunters were carrying a wounded companion to the medicine hut, and Carver and Fred fell in beside them. The hunters were visibly exhausted; they must have trekked for days to bring their friend to the village, for the srag hunts ranged deep into the rain-forest.

"Looks done for, huh?" Fred whispered.

Professor Carver nodded. Last month he had photographed a srag, from a vantage point very high in a very tall, stout tree. He knew it for a large, ill-tempered, quick-moving beast, with a dismaying array of claws, teeth and horns. It was also the only non-taboo meat-bearing animal on the planet. The natives had to kill srag or starve.

But the wounded man had not been quick enough with spear and shield, and the srag had opened him from throat to pelvis. The hunter had bled copiously, even though the wound had been hastily bound with dried grasses. Mercifully, he was unconscious.

"That chap hasn't a chance," Carver remarked. "It's a miracle he's stayed alive this long. Shock alone, to say nothing of the depth and extent of the wound—"

"You'll see," Fred said.

The village had suddenly come awake. Men and women, gray-skinned, knobby-headed, looked silently as the hunters marched toward the medicine hut. The Sweeper paused to watch. The village's only child stood before his parents' hut, and, thumb in mouth, stared at the procession. Deg, the medicine man, came out to meet the hunters, already wearing his ceremonial mask. The healing dancers assembled, quickly putting on their makeup.

"Think you can fix him, Doc?" Fred asked.

"One may hope," Deg replied piously.

They entered the dimly lighted medicine hut. The wounded Lorayan was laid tenderly upon a pallet of grasses and the dancers began to perform before him. Deg started a solemn chant.

"That'll never do it," Professor Carver pointed out to Fred, with the interested air of a man watching a steam shovel in operation. "Too late for faith healing. Listen to his breathing. Shallower, don't you think?"

"Absolutely," Fred said.

Deg finished his chant and bent over the wounded hunter. The Lorayan's breathing was labored. It slowed, hesitated...

"It is time!" cried the medicine man. He took a small wooden tube out of his pouch, uncorked it, and held it to the dying man's lips. The hunter drank. And then—



Carver blinked, and Fred grinned triumphantly. The hunter's breathing was becoming stronger. As they watched, the great gash became a line of scar tissue, then a thin pink mark, then an almost invisible white line.

The hunter sat up, scratched his head, grinned foolishly and asked for something to drink,

preferably intoxicating.

Deg declared a festival on the spot.

Carver and Fred moved to the edge of the rain-forest for a conference. The professor walked like a man in a dream. His pendulous lower lip was thrust out and occasionally he shook his head.

"How about it?" Fred asked.

"It shouldn't be possible," said Carver dazedly. "No substance in nature should react like that. And you saw it work last night also?"

"Damned well right," Fred said. "They brought in this hunter—he had his head pulled half off. He swallowed some of that stuff and healed right before my eyes."

"Man's age-old dream," Carver mused. "A universal panacea!"

"We could get any price for stuff like that," Fred said.

"Yes, we could—as well as performing a duty to science," Professor Carver reminded him sternly. "Yes, Fred, I think we should obtain some of that substance."

They turned and, with firm strides, marched back to the village.

Dances were in progress, given by various members of the beast cults. At the moment, the Sathgohani, a cult representing a medium-sized deerlike animal, were performing. They could be recognized by the three red dots on their foreheads. Waiting their turn were the men of the Dresfeyxi and the Taganyes, cults representing other forest animals. The beasts adopted by the cults were taboo and there was an absolute injunction against their slaughter. Carver had been unable to discover the rationale behind this rule. The Lorayans refused to speak of it.

Deg, the medicine man, had removed his ceremonial mask. He was seated in front of his hut, watching the dancing. He arose when the Earthmen approached him.

"Peace!" he said.

"Sure," said Fred. "Nice job you did this morning."

Deg smiled modestly. "The gods answered our prayers."

"The gods?" said Carver. "It looked as though the serum did most of the work."

"Serum? Oh, the sersee juice!" Deg made a ceremonial gesture as he mentioned the name. "Yes, the sersee juice is the mother of the Lorayan people."

"We'd like to buy some," Fred said bluntly, ignoring Professor Carver's disapproving frown. "What would you take for a gallon?"

"I am sorry," Deg said.

"How about some nice beads? Mirrors? Or maybe a couple of steel knives?"

"It cannot be done," the medicine man asserted. "The sersee juice is sacred. It must be used only for holy healing."

"Don't hand me that," Fred said, a flush mounting his sallow cheek. "You gooks think you can—"

"We quite understand," Carver broke in smoothly. "We know about sacred things. Sacred things are sacred. They are not to be touched by profane hands."

"Are you crazy?" Fred whispered in English.

"You are a wise man," Deg said gravely. "You understand why I must refuse you."

"Of course. But it happens, Deg, I am a medicine man in my own country."

"Ah? I did not know this!"

"It is so. As a matter of fact, in my particular line, I am the highest medicine man."

"Then you must be a very holy man," Deg said, bowing his head.

"Man, he's holy!" Fred put in emphatically. "Holiest man you'll ever see around here."

"Please, Fred," Carver said, blinking modestly. He said to the medicine man, "It's true, although I don't like to hear about it. Under the circumstances, however, you can see that it would not be wrong to give me some sersee juice. On the contrary, it is your priestly duty to give me some."

The medicine man pondered for a long time while contrary emotions passed just barely perceptibly over his almost blank face. At last he said, "It may be so. Unfortunately, I cannot do what you require."

"Why not?"

"Because there is so little sersee juice, so terribly little. There is hardly enough for the village."

Deg smiled sadly and walked away.

Life in the village continued its simple, invariant way. The Sweeper moved slowly along, cleaning with his twig broom. The hunters trekked out in search of sraggs. The women of the village prepared food and looked after the village's one child. The priests and dancers prayed nightly for the sun to rise in the morning. Everyone was satisfied, in a humble, submissive fashion.

Everyone except the Earthmen.

They had more talks with Deg and slowly learned the complete story of the sersee juice and the troubles surrounding it.

The sersee bush was a small and sickly affair. It did not flourish in a state of nature. Yet it resisted cultivation and positively defied transplantation. The best one could do was to weed thoroughly around it and hope it would blossom. But most sersee bushes struggled for a year or two, then gave up the ghost. A few blossomed, and a few out of the few lived long enough to produce their characteristic red berries.

From the berry of the sersee bush was squeezed the elixir that meant life to the people of Loray.

"And you must remember," Deg pointed out, "how sparsely the sersee grows and how widely scattered it is. We must search for months, sometimes, to find a single bush with berries. And those berries will save the life of only a single Lorayan, or perhaps two at the most."

"Sad, very sad," Carver said. "But surely some form of intensive fertilization—"

"Everything has been tried."

"I realize," Carver said earnestly, "how important the sersee juice is to you. But if you could give us a little—even a pint or two—we could take it to Earth, have it examined, synthesized, perhaps. Then you could have all you need."

"But we dare not give any. Have you noticed how few children we have?"

Carver nodded.

"There are very few births. Our life is a constant struggle against the obliteration of our race. Every man's life must be preserved until there is a child to replace him. And this can be done only by our constant and never-ending search for the sersee berries. And there are never enough," the medicine man sighed. "Never enough."

"Does the juice cure *everything*?" Fred asked.

"It does more than that. Those who have tasted sersee add fifty of our years to their lives."

Carver opened his eyes wide. Fifty years on Loray was roughly the equivalent of sixty-three on Earth.

The sersee was more than a healing agent, more than a regenerator. It was a longevity drug as well.

He paused to consider the prospect of adding another sixty years to his lifetime. Then he asked, "What happens if a man takes sersee again after the fifty years?"

"We do not know," Deg told him. "No man would take it a second time while there is not enough."

Carver and Fred exchanged glances.

"Now listen to me carefully, Deg," Professor Carver said. He spoke of the sacred duties of science. Science, he told the medicine man, was above race, above creed, above religion. The advancement of science was above life itself. What did it matter, after all, if a few more Lorayans died? They would die eventually anyhow. The important thing was for Terran science to have a sample of sersee.

"It may be as you say," Deg said. "But my choice is clear. As a priest of the Sunnheriat religion, I have a sacred trust to preserve the lives of my people. I cannot go against this trust."

He turned and walked off. The Earthmen frustratedly returned to their spaceship.

After coffee, Professor Carver opened a drawer and took out the manuscript of *Underlying Causes for the Implicit Inferiority of Non-Terran Races*. Lovingly he read over the last chapter, the chapter that dealt with the specialized inferiorities of the Lorayan people. Then he put the manuscript away.

"Almost finished, Fred," he told his assistant. "Another week's work, two weeks at the most!"

"Um," Fred replied, staring at the village through a porthole.

"This will do it," Carver said. "This book will prove, once and for all, the natural superiority of Terrans. We have proven it by force of arms, Fred, and we have proven it by our technology. Now it is proven by the impersonal processes of logic."

Fred nodded. He knew the professor was quoting from the book's introduction.

"Nothing must interfere with the great work," Carver said. "You agree with that, don't you?"

"Sure," Fred said absent-mindedly. "The book comes first. Put the gooks in their place."

"Well, I didn't exactly mean that. But you know what I mean. Under the circumstances, perhaps we should forget about sersee. Perhaps we should just finish the job we started."

Fred turned and faced his employer. "Professor, how much do you expect to make out of this book?"

"Hm? Well, the last did quite well, you will remember. This book should do even better. Ten, perhaps twenty thousand dollars!" He permitted himself a small smile. "I am fortunate, you see, in my subject matter. The general public of Earth seems to be rather interested in it, which is gratifying for a scientist."

"Say you even make fifty thousand. Chicken feed! Do you know what we could make on a test tube of sersee?"

"A hundred thousand?" Carver said vaguely.

"Are you kidding? Suppose a rich guy was dying and we had the only thing to cure him. He'd give everything he owned! Millions!"

"I believe you're right," Carver agreed. "And it *would* be a valuable scientific advancement.... But the medicine man unfortunately won't give us any."

"Buying isn't the only way." Fred unholstered his revolver and checked the chambers.

"I see, I see," Carver said, his red face turning slightly pale. "But have we the right?"

"What do *you* think?"

"Well, they *are* inferior. I believe I have proven that conclusively. You might indeed say that their lives don't weigh heavily in the scheme of things. Hm, yes—yes, Fred, we could save Terran lives with this!"

"We could save our own lives," Fred said. "Who wants to punk out ahead of time?"

Carver stood up and determinedly loosened his gun in its holster. "Remember," he told Fred, "we are doing this in the name of science, and for Earth."

"Absolutely, Professor," Fred said, moving toward the port, grinning.

They found Deg near the medicine hut. Carver said, without preamble, "We must have some sersee."

"But I explained to you," said the medicine man. "I told you why it was impossible."

"We gotta have it," Fred said. He pulled his revolver from its holster and looked ferociously at Deg.

"No."

"You think I'm kidding?" Fred asked. "You know what this weapon can do?"

"I have seen you use it."

"Maybe you think I won't use it on you."

"I do not care. You can have no sersee."

"I'll shoot," Fred warned, his voice rising angrily. "I swear to you, I'll shoot."

The villagers of Loray slowly gathered behind their medicine man. Gray-skinned, knobby-headed, they moved silently into position, the hunters carrying their spears, other villagers armed with knives and stones.

"You cannot have the sersee," Deg said.

Fred slowly leveled the revolver.

"Now, Fred," said Carver, "there's an awful lot of them. Do you really think—"

Fred's thin body tightened and his finger grew taut and white on the trigger. Carver closed his eyes.

There was a moment of dead silence. Then the revolver exploded. Carver warily opened his eyes.

The medicine man was still erect, although his knees were shaking. Fred was pulling back the hammer of the revolver. The villagers had made no sound. It was a moment before Carver could figure out what had happened. At last he saw the Sweeper.

The Sweeper lay on his face, his outstretched left hand still clutching his twig broom, his legs twitching feebly. Blood welled from the hole Fred had neatly drilled through his forehead.

Deg bent over the Sweeper, then straightened. "He is dead," the medicine man said.

"That's just the first," Fred warned, taking aim at a hunter.

"No!" cried Deg.

Fred looked at him with raised eyebrows.

"I will give it to you," Deg said. "I will give you all our sersee juice. Then you must go!"

He ran into the medicine hut and reappeared a moment later with three wooden tubes, which he thrust into Fred's hands.

"We're in business, Professor," Fred said. "Let's get moving!"

They walked past the silent villagers, toward their spaceship. Something bright flashed in the sunlight. Fred yipped and dropped his revolver. Professor Carver hastily scooped it up.

"One of those gooks cut me," Fred said. "Give me the revolver!"

A spear arced high and buried itself at their feet.

"Too many of them," said Carver. "Let's run for it!"

They sprinted to their ship with spears and knives singing around them, reached it safely and bolted the port.

"Too close," Carver said, panting for breath, leaning against the dogged port. "Have you got the serum?"

"I got it," said Fred, rubbing his arm. "Damn!"

"What's wrong?"

"My arm. It feels numb."

Carver examined the wound, pursed his lips thoughtfully, but made no comment.

"It's numb," Fred said. "I wonder if they poison those spears."

"It's quite possible," Professor Carver admitted.

"They did!" Fred shouted. "Look, the cut is changing color already!"

The edges of the wound had a blackened, septic look.

"Sulfa," Carver said. "Penicillin, too. I wouldn't worry much about it, Fred. Modern Terran drugs —"

"—might not even touch this stuff. Open one of those tubes!"

"But, Fred," Carver objected, "we have so little of it. Besides—"

"To hell with that," Fred said. He took one of the tubes and uncorked it with his teeth.

"Wait, Fred!"

"Wait, nothing!"

Fred drained the contents of the tube and flung it down. Carver said testily, "I was merely going to point out that the serum should be tested before an Earthman uses it. We don't know how it'll react on a human. It was for your own good."

"Sure it was," Fred said mockingly. "Just look at how the stuff is reacting."

The blackened wound had turned flesh-colored again and was sealing. Soon there was a line of white scar tissue. Then even that was gone, leaving firm pink flesh beneath.

"Pretty good, huh?" Fred gloated, with a slight touch of hysteria. "It works, Professor, it works! Drink one yourself, pal, live another sixty years. Do you suppose we can synthesize this stuff? Worth a million, worth ten million, worth a billion. And if we can't, there's always good old Loray. We can drop back every fifty years or so for a refill. The stuff even tastes good, Professor. Tastes like—what's wrong?"

Professor Carver was staring at Fred, his eyes wide with astonishment.

"What's the matter?" Fred asked, grinning. "Ain't my seams straight? What you staring at?"

Carver didn't answer. His mouth trembled. Slowly he backed away.

"What the hell is wrong!" Fred glared at Carver. Then he ran to the spaceship's head and looked in the mirror.

"What's happened to me?"

Carver tried to speak, but no words came. He watched as Fred's features slowly altered, smoothed, became blank, rudimentary, as though nature had drawn there a preliminary sketch of intelligent life. Strange knobs were coming out on Fred's head. His complexion was changing slowly from pink to gray.

"I told you to wait," Carver sighed.

"What's happening?" asked Fred in a frightened whimper.

"Well," Carver said, "it must all be residual in the sersee. The Lorayan birth-rate is practically nonexistent, you know. Even with the sersee's healing powers, the race should have died out long ago. Unless the serum had another purpose as well—the ability to change lower animal forms into the Lorayan form."

"That's a wild guess!"

"A working hypothesis based upon Deg's statement that sersee is the mother of the Lorayan people. I'm afraid that is the true meaning of the beast cults and the reason they are taboo. The

various beasts must be the origins of certain portions of the Lorayan people, perhaps all the Lorayan people. Even the topic is taboo; there clearly is a deep-seated sense of inferiority about their recent step up from bestiality."

Carver rubbed his forehead wearily. "The sersee juice has," he continued, "we may hazard, a role-sharing in terms of the life of the race. We may theorize—"

"To hell with theory," Fred said, and was horrified to find that his voice had grown thick and guttural, like a Lorayan voice. "Professor, do something!"

"There's nothing I can do."

"Maybe Terran science—"

"No, Fred," Carver said quietly.

"What?"

"Fred, please try to understand. I can't bring you back to Earth."

"What do you mean? You must be crazy!"

"Not at all. How can I bring you back with such a fantastic story? They would consider the whole thing a gigantic hoax."

"But—"

"Listen to me. No one would believe! They would consider, rather, that you were an unusually intelligent Lorayan. Your very presence, Fred, would undermine the whole thesis of my book!"

"You can't leave me," Fred said. "You just can't do that."

Professor Carver still had both revolvers. He stuck one in his belt and leveled the other.

"I am not going to endanger the work of a lifetime. Get out, Fred."

"No!"

"I mean it. Get out, Fred."

"I won't! You'll have to shoot me!"

"I will if I must," Carver assured him. "I'll shoot you and throw you out."

He took aim. Fred backed to the port, undogged it, opened it. The villagers were waiting quietly outside.

"What will they do to me?"

"I'm really sorry, Fred," Carver said.

"I won't go!" Fred shrieked, gripping the edges of the port with both hands.

Carver shoved him into the waiting hands of the crowd and threw the remaining tubes of sersee after him. Then, quickly, not wishing to see what was going to happen, he sealed the port.

Within an hour, he was leaving the planet's atmospheric limits.

When he returned to Earth, his book, *Underlying Causes of the Implicit Inferiority of Non-Terran Peoples*, was hailed as a milestone in comparative anthropology. But he ran into some difficulty almost at once.

A space captain named Jones returned to Earth and maintained that, on the planet Loray, he had discovered a native who was in every significant way the equal of a Terran. And he had tape recordings and motion pictures to prove it.

Carver's thesis seemed in doubt for some time, until Carver examined the evidence for himself. Then he pointed out, with merciless logic, that the so-called super-Lorayan, this paragon of Loray, this supposed equal of Terran humanity, occupied the lowest position in the Lorayan hierarchy, the position of Sweeper, clearly shown by the broad black stripe across his face.

The space captain admitted that this was true.

Why then, Carver thundered, was this Lorayan Superior not able, in spite of his so-called abilities, to reach any higher position in the debased society in which he dwelt?

The question silenced the space captain and his supporters, demolished the entire school, as a matter of fact. And the Carverian Doctrine of the Implicit Inferiority of Non-Terrans is now accepted by reasoning Terrans everywhere in the Galaxy.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE SWEEPER OF LORAY ***

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