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\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A MATTER OF PROTOCOL \*\*\*



# **A MATTER OF PROTOCOL**

**By JACK SHARKEY**

**Illustrated by SCHELLING**

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***First Contact was always dangerous—but  
usually only to the man involved!***

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From space, the planet Viridian resembled a great green moss-covered tennis ball. When the spaceship had arrowed even closer to the lush jungle that was the surface of the 7000-mile sphere, there was still no visible break in the green cloak of the planet. Even when they dipped almost below their margin of safety—spaceships were poorly built for extended flight within the atmosphere—it took nearly a complete circuit of the planet before a triangle of emptiness was spotted. It was in the midst of the tangled canopy of treetops, themselves interwoven inextricably with coarse-leaved ropy vines that sprawled and coiled about the upthrust branches like underfed anacondas.

Into the center of this triangle the ship was lowered on sputtering blue pillars of crackling energy, to come to rest on the soft loamy earth.

A bare instant after setdown, crewmen exploded from the airlock and dashed into the jungle shadows with high-pressure tanks of gushing spume. Their job was to coat, cool and throttle the hungry fires trickling in bright orange fingers through the heat-blackened grasses. Higher in the trees, a few vines smoldered fitfully where the fires had brushed them, then hissed into smoky wet ash as their own glutinous sap smothered the urgent embers. But the fire was going out.

"Under control, sir," reported a returning crewman.

Lieutenant Jerry Norcriss emerged into the green gloaming that cloaked the base of the ship with a net of harlequin diamonds. Jerry nodded abstractedly as other crewmen laid a lightweight form-fitting couch alongside the tailfins near the airlock. On this couch Jerry reclined. Remaining crew members turned their fire-fighting gear over to companions and stood guard in a rough semi-circle with loaded rifles, their backs to the figure on the couch, facing the jungle and whatever predatory dangers it might hold.

Ensign Bob Ryder, the technician who had the much softer job of simply controlling and coordinating any information relayed by Jerry, leaned out through the open circle in the hull.

"All set, sir," said the tech. Jerry nodded and settled a heavily wired helmet onto his head, while Bob made a hookup between the helmet and the power outlet that was concealed under a flap of metal on the tailfin.

Helmet secured, Jerry lay back upon the couch and closed his eyes. "Any time you're ready, Ensign."

Bob hurried back inside, found the panel he sought among the jumble of high-powered machinery there, and placed a spool of microtape on a spindle inside it.

He shut the panel and thumbed the button that started an impulse radiating from the tape into the jungle.

The impulse had been detected and taped by a roborocket which had circled the planet for months before their arrival. It was one of the two Viridian species whose types were as yet uncatalogued by the Space Corps, in its vast files of alien life. Jerry's job, as a Space Zoologist, was to complete those files, planet by planet throughout the spreading wave of slowly colonized universe.

Bob made sure the tape was functioning. Then he clicked the switch that would stimulate the Contact center in Jerry's brain and release his mind into that of the taped alien for an immutable forty minutes.

Outside the ship, recumbent in the warm green-gold shadows, Jerry's consciousness was dwarfed for an instant by a white lightning-flash of energy. And then his body went limp as his mind sprang with thought-speed into Contact....

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Jerry opened his eyes to a dizzying view of the dull brown jungle floor. He blinked a moment, then looked toward his feet. He saw two sets of thin knobby Vs, extending forward and partly around the tiny limb he stood upon, their chitinous surface shiny with the wetness of the jungle air.

Slowly working his jaws, he heard the extremely gentle "click" as they came together. The endoskeleton must exist all over his host's body.

After making certain it would not disturb his balance on the limb, he attempted bringing whatever on the alien passed for hands before his face.

Sometimes aliens had no hands, nor any comparable organisms. Then Jerry would have to soft-pedal the mental nagging of being "amputated," an unavoidable carryover from his subconscious "wrong-feeling" about armlessness.

But this time the effort moved up multi-jointed limbs, spindly as a cat's whiskers, terminating in a perpetually coiling soft prehensile tip. He tried feeling along his torso to determine its size and shape. But the wormlike tips were tactilely insensitive.

Hoping to deduce his shape from his shadow, he inched sideways along the limb on those inadequate-looking two-pronged feet toward a blob of yellow sunlight nearer the trunk.

The silhouette on the branch showed him a stubby cigar-shaped torso.

"I seem to be a semi-tentacled no-hop grasshopper," he mused to himself, vainly trying to turn his head on his neck. "Head, thorax and abdomen all one piece."

He tried flexing what would be, in a man, the region of the shoulderblades. He was rewarded by the appearance of long, narrow wings—two sets of them, like a dragonfly's—from beneath two flaps of chitin on his back.

He tried an experimental flapping. The pair of wings—white and stiff like starched tissue paper, not veinous as in Earth-insects—dissolved in a buzzing blur of motion. The limb fell away from under his tiny V-shaped feet. And then he was up above the blinding green blanket of jungle treetops, his shadow pacing his forward movement along the close-packed quilt of wide leaves below.

"I'd better be careful," thought Jerry. "There may be avian life here that considers my species the *pièce de resistance* of the pteroid set...."

Slowing his rapid wingbeat, he let himself drop down toward the nearest mattress-sized leaf. He folded his out-thrust feet in mid-air and dropped the last few inches to a cushiony rest.

---

A slight shimmer of dizziness gripped his mind.

Perhaps the "skull" of this creature was ill-equipped to ward off the hot rays of the tropic sunlight. Lest his brain be fried in its own casing, Jerry scuttled along the velvet top of the leaf, and ducked quickly beneath its nearest overlapping companion. The wave of vertigo passed quickly, there in the deep shadow. Under the canopy of leaves Jerry crawled back to a limb near the top of the tree.

A few feet from where he stood, something moved.

Jerry turned that way. Another creature of the same species was balancing lightly on a green limb of wire-thickness, its gaze fixed steadily toward the jungle flooring, as Jerry's own had been on entering the alien body.

Watching out for predators? Or for victims?

He could, he knew, pull his consciousness back enough to let the creature's own consciousness carry it through its daily cycle of eating, avoiding destruction, and the manifold businesses of being an ambient creature. But he decided to keep control. It would be easier to figure out his host's ecological status in the planet's natural life-balance by observing the other one for awhile.

Jerry always felt more comfortable when he was in full control. You never knew when an alien might stupidly stumble into a fatality that any intelligent mind could easily have avoided.

Idly, as he watched his fellow creature down near the inner part of the branch, he wondered how much more time he would be in Contact. Subjectively he'd seemed to be enhosted for about ten minutes. But one of the drawbacks of Contact was the subjugation of personal time-sense to that of the host. Depending on the species he enhosted, the forty-minute Contact period could be an eternity, or the blink of an eye....

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Nothing further seemed to be occurring. Jerry reluctantly withdrew some of his control from the insect-mind to see what would happen.

Immediately it inched forward until it was in the same position it had been in when Jerry made Contact: V-shaped feet forward and slightly around the narrow branch, eyes fixed upon the brownish jungle floor, body motionless with folded wings. For awhile, Jerry tried "listening" to its mind, but received no readable thoughts. Only a sense of imminence.... Of patience.... Of waiting....

It didn't take long for Jerry to grow bored with this near-mindless outlook. He reassumed full control. Guiding the fragile feet carefully along the branch, he made his way to his fellow watcher, and tried out the creature's communication system. His mind strove to activate something on the order of a larynx; the insect's nervous system received this impulse, changed in inter-species translation, as a broad request for getting a message to its fellow. Its body responded by lifting the multi-jointed "arms" forward. It clapped the hard inner surfaces of the "wrists" together so fast that they blurred into invisibility as the wings had done.

A thin, ratchetty sound came forth from that hardshell contact. The other insect looked up in annoyance, then returned its gaze to the ground again.

Aural conversation thus obviated, Jerry tried for physical attention-getting. He reached out a vermiform forelimb-tip and tugged urgently at the other insect's nearest hind leg. An angry

movement gave out the unmistakable pantomimic message: "For pete's sake, get off my back! I'm *busy!*" The other insect spread its thin double wings and went buzzing off a few trees away, then settled on a limb there and took up its earthward vigil once more.

"Well, they're not gregarious, that's for sure," said Jerry to himself. "I wish I knew what the hell we were waiting for!"

He decided he was sick of ground-watching, and turned his attention to his immediate vicinity. His gaze wandered along all the twists, juts and thrusts of branch and vine beneath the sun-blocking leaves.

And all at once he realized he was staring at another of his kind. So still had its dull green-brown body been that he'd taken it for a ripple of bark along a branch.

Carefully, he looked further on. Beyond the small still figure he soon located another like it, and then another. Within a short space of time, he had found three dozen of the insects sitting silently around him in a spherical area barely ten feet in diameter.

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Oddly disconcerted, he once more spread his stiff white wings and fluttered away through the treetops, careful to avoid coming out in direct sunlight this time.

He flew until a resurgence of giddiness told him he was over-straining the creature's stamina. He dropped onto a limb and looked about once more. Within a very short time, he had spotted dozens more of the grasshopper-things. All were the same, sitting in camouflaged silence, steadily eyeing the ground.

"Damn," thought Jerry. "They don't seem interested in eating, mating or fighting. All they want to do is sit—sit and *wait*. But what are they waiting for?"

There was, of course, the possibility that he'd caught them in an off-period. If the species were nocturnal, then he wouldn't get any action from them till after sunset. That, he realized gloomily, meant a re-Contact later on. One way or another, he would have to determine the functions, capabilities and menace—if any—of the species with regard to the influx of colonists, who would come to Viridian only if his report pronounced it safe.

Once again, he let the insect's mind take over. Again that over-powering feeling of imminence....

He was irritated. It couldn't just be looking forward to nightfall! There were too many things tied in with the imminence feeling: the necessity for quiet, for motionlessness, for careful watching.

The more he thought on it, the more he had the distinct intuition that it would sit and stare at the soft, mulch-covered jungle floor, be it bright daylight or blackest gloom, waiting, and waiting, and waiting....

Then, suddenly, the slight feel of imminence became almost unbearable apprehension.

The change in intensity was due to a soft, cautious shuffling sound from down in the green-gold twilight. Something was coming through the jungle. Something that moved on careful feet along the springy, moist brown surface below the trees.

Far below, a shadow detached itself slowly from the deeper shadows of the trees, and a form began to emerge into the wan filtered sunlight. It—

An all-encompassing lance of silent white lightning. Contact was over....

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Jerry sat up on the couch, angry. He pulled the helmet off his head as Bob Ryder leaned out the airlock once more. "How'd it go, sir?"

"Lousy. I'll have to re-establish. Didn't have time to Learn it sufficiently." A slight expression of disappointment on the tech's face made him add, "Don't tell me you have the other tape in place already?"

"Sorry," Bob said. "You usually do a complete Learning in one Contact."

"Oh—" Jerry shrugged and reached for the helmet again. "Never mind, I'll take on the second alien long as it's already set up. I may just have hit the first one in an off-period. The delay in re-Contact may be just what I need to catch it in action."

Settling the helmet snugly on his head once more, he leaned back onto the couch and waited. He heard the tech's feet clanking along the metal plates inside the ship, then the soft clang of an opening door in the power room, and—

Whiteness, writhing electric whiteness and cold silence. And he was in Contact.

---

Darkness, and musky warmth.

Then a slot of light appeared, a thin fuzzy line of yellow striped with spiky green. Jerry had time, in the brief flicker, to observe thick bearlike forelimbs holding up a squarish trapdoor fastened with cross-twigs for support. Then the powerful forepaws let the door drop back into place, and it

was dark again.

He hadn't liked those forepaws. Though thick as and pawed like a bear's, they were devoid of hair. They had skin thin as a caterpillar's, a mottled pink with sick-looking areas of deathly white.

Skin like that would be a push-over to actinic rays for any long exposure. Probably the thing lived underground here, almost permanently. His eyes had detected a rude assortment of thick wooden limbs curving in and out at regular intervals in the vertical wall of soil that was the end of this tunnel, just below the trapdoor. Tree roots. But formed, by some odd natural quirk, into a utile ladder.

But why had the thing peered out, then dropped the door to wait? Did *every* species on this planet hang around expectantly and nothing else? And what was the waiting for?

Then he felt the urge within the creature, the urge to scurry up that ladder into the light. But there was, simultaneously, a counter-urge in the thing, telling it to *please* wait a *little* longer....

Jerry recognized the urge by quick anthropomorphosis. It was the goofy urge. The crazy urge. Like one gets on the brinks of awesome heights, or on subway platforms as the train roars in: The impulsive urge to self-destruction, so swiftly frightening and so swiftly suppressed....

Yet, it had lifted and dropped that lid too briefly to have seen anything outside. Could it be *listening* for something? Carefully, he relinquished his control of the beast, fraction by fraction, to see what it would do.

It rose on tiptoe at once, and again lifted that earthen door.

It squinted at the profusion of green-yellow sunlight that stung its eyes. Then it rose on powerful hind limbs and clambered just high enough on that "ladder" to see over the grassy rim of the trapdoor-hole. Jerry then heard the soft shuffling sound that had re-alerted it, and saw the source.

Out on the matted brown jungle flooring, beneath the towering trees, another of the bear-things was moving forward from an open turf-door, emitting low, whimpering snorts as it inched along through the dappling yellow sunlight.

Obviously it was *following* that manic-destruction impulse that he just felt and managed to suppress. It must have been almost a hundred degrees out there. And the damned thing was *shivering*.

---

Here and there, Jerry noticed suddenly, other half-opened trapdoors were framing other bear-things' heads. The air was taut with electric tension, the tension of a slow trigger-squeeze that moves millimeter by millimeter toward the instant explosion....

The soft shuffling sounds of the animal's movement jogged Jerry's memory then, and he knew it for the sound he had heard when enhosted in the grasshopper-thing. Was a bear-thing what they'd been waiting in the trees so silently for? And what would be the culmination of that vigil?

Then the bear-thing he was in Contact with hitched itself up another root-rung. Jerry saw the thing toward which the quaking creature was headed, in a hunched crawl, its whimpers more anguished by the moment.

Pendant in the green gloaming, about four feet above the spongy brown jungle floor, hung a thick yellow-gray gourd at the tip of a long vine. Its sides glittered stickily with condensed moisture that mingled with the effluvium of the gourd itself. The odor was both noisome and compelling, powerful as a bushel of rotting roses. It sickened as it lured, teased the nostrils as it cloyed within the lungs.

To this dangling obscenity the bear-thing moved. Its eyes were no longer afraid, but glazed and dulled by the strength of that musky lure. Its movements were fluid and trancelike.

It arose on sturdy hind limbs and struck at the gourd with a gentle paw, sending it jouncing to one side on its long green vine. As it bobbed back, the creature struck it off in the opposite direction with a sharper blow.

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Jerry watched in fascination. The gourd swung faster; the mottled pink-white alien creature swayed and wove its forelimbs and thick body in a ritual dance matching the tempo of the arcing gourd.

Then Jerry noted that the vine was unlike earth-vines which parasitically employ treetops as their unwilling trellises. It is a limp extension of the tip of a tree branch itself. So were all the other vines in that green matting overhead.

---

A ripping sound yanked his gaze back to the dazed creature and the gourd again.

A ragged tear had riven the side of the gourd. Tiny coils of green were dribbling out in batches, like watchsprings spilled from a paper bag. They struck with a bounce and wriggle on the resilient brown mulch. And then, as they straightened themselves, Jerry knew them for what they were: Miniature versions of the grasshopper-things, shaped precisely like the adults, but only a third as large.

The bear-thing's movements had gone from graceful fluidity to frenzy now. A loud whistle of fright escaped it as the last of the twitching green things flopped from its vegetable cocoon, whirred white wings to dry them and flew off.

And the lumbering creature had reason for its fright.

The instant the last coil of wiggly green life was a vanishing blur in the green shadows, a cloud of darker green descended upon the pink form of the beast from the trees.

The grasshopper-things were waiting no longer. Thousands swarmed on the writhing form, until the bear-thing was a lumpy green parody of itself.

As quickly as the cloud had plunged and clustered, it fell away. The earth was teeming with the flip-flopping forms of dying insects, white wings going dark brown and curling like cellophane in open flame. The bear-thing itself was no longer recognizable, its flesh a myriad egg-like white lumps. It swayed in agony for a moment, then toppled.

Instantly the other creatures—his host with them—were racing forward to the site of the encounter. Jerry felt his host's long gummy tongue flick out and snare one—just one—of the dead adult insects. It was ingested whole by a deft backflip of tongue to gullet. As his host turned tail and scurried for the tunnel once more, Jerry swiftly took control again, and halted it to observe any further developments.

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Each of the other things, after a one-insect gulp, was just vanishing back underground. The turf-tops were dropping neatly into almost undetectable place hiding the tunnels. The sunlight nipped at his pale flesh, but Jerry held off from a return to the underground sanctuary, still watching that lump-covered corpse on the earth. Then....

The vine, its burden gone, began to drip a thick ichor from its ragged end upon the dead animal

beneath it.

And as the ichor touched upon a white lump, the lump would swell, wriggle, and change color. Jerry watched with awe as the color became a mottled pink, and the surface of the lumps cracked and shriveled away, and tiny forms plopped out onto the ground: miniature bear-things, tiny throats emitting eager mouse-squeaks of hunger.

They rushed upon the body in which they'd been so violently incubated and swiftly, systematically devoured it, blood, bone and sinew.

And when not even a memory of the dead beast was left upon the soil, the tiny pink-white things began to burrow downward into the ground. Soon there was nothing left in the area but a dried fragment of vine, a few loose mounds of soil and a vast silence.

"I'll be a monkey's uncle!" said Jerry ... forgetting in his excitement that this phrase was nearly a concise parody of the Space Zoologists' final oath of duty, and kiddingly used as such by the older members of the group.

The whole damned planet was symbiotic! After witnessing those alien life-death rites, it didn't take him long to figure out the screwball connections between the species. Insects, once born of vine-gourds and fully grown, then propagated their species by a strange means: laying bear-eggs in a bear-thing and dying. And dying, eaten by the surviving bears, they turned to seeds which—left in the tunnels by the bear-things as droppings—in turn took root and became trees.

And the trees, under the onslaught of another bear-thing on a dangling pod, would produce new insects, then drip its ichor to fertilize the eggs in the newly dead bear-thing....

Jerry found his mind tangling as he attempted a better pinpointing of the plant-animal-insect relationship. A dead adult insect, plus a trip through a bear-thing's alimentary canal, produced a tree. A tree-pod, with the swatting stimulus of a bear-thing's paws, gave birth to new insects. And insect eggs in animal flesh, stimulated by the tree-ichor, gestated swiftly into young animals....

That meant, simply, that insect plus bear equals tree, tree plus bear equals insect, and insect plus tree equals bear. With three systems, each relied on the non-inclusive member for the breeding-ground. Insect-plus-ichor produced small animals *in* the animal flesh. Dead-insect-plus-bear produced tree *in* the tree-flesh (if one considered dead tree leaves and bark and such as the makeup of the soil.) Bear-swats-plus-tree produced insects.... "Damn," said Jerry to himself, "but *not* in the insect-flesh. The thing won't round off...."

He tried again, thinking hard. In effect, the trees were parents to the insects, insects parents to the bears, and bears parents to the trees.... Though in another sense, bear-flesh gave birth to new bears, digested insects gave birth (through the tree-medium) to new insects, and trees (through the insect-medium) gave birth to new trees....

Jerry's head spun pleasantly as he tried vainly to solve the confusion. Men of science, he realized, would spend decades trying to figure out which species were responsible for which. It made the ancient chicken-or-egg question beneath consideration. And a lot of diehard evolutionists were going to be bedded down with severe migraines when his report went into circulation....

A dazzle of silent lightning, and Contact was over.

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"Ready with that first tape again," Bob Ryder said as Jerry removed the Contact helmet and brushed his snow-white hair back from his tanned, youthful face. "Or do you want a breather first?"

Jerry shook his head. "I won't need to re-Contact that other species, Ensign. I got its life-relationships from the second Contact."

"Really, sir?" said Bob. "That's pretty unusual, isn't it?"

"The whole damned planet's unusual," said Jerry, rising from his supine position and stretching luxuriously in the warm jungle air. "You'll see what I mean when you process the second tape."

Bob decided that Jerry—running pretty true to form for a Space Zoologist—wasn't in a particularly talkative mood, so he had to satisfy himself with waiting for the transcription of the Contact to get the details.

Later that day, an hour after takeoff, with Viridian already vanished behind them as the great ship plowed through hyper-space toward Earth and home, Bob finished reading the report. Then he went down the passageway to the ward room for coffee. Jerry was seated there already. Bob, quickly filling a mug from the polished percolator, slid into a seat across the table from his superior and asked the question that had been bugging him since seeing the report.

"Sir—on that second Contact. Has it occurred to you that you'd relinquished control to the host *before* you saw that other creature move out and start swatting the gourd-thing?"

"You mean was I taking a chance on being destroyed in the host if the creature I was Contacting gave in to the urge to do the swatting?"

"Yes, sir," said Bob. "I mean, I know you can take control any time, if things get dangerous. But wasn't that cutting it kind of thin?"

Jerry shook his head and sipped his coffee. "Wrong urge, Ensign. You'll note I recognized it as the



*goofy* urge, the impulse to die followed instantly by a violent surge of self-preservation. It wasn't the death-wish at all. Myself and the creatures who remained safely at the tunnel-mouths had a milder form of what was affecting the creature that *did* start swatting the gourd."

"Then what was the difference, sir? Why did that one particular creature get the full self-destruction urge and no other?"

Jerry wrinkled his face in thought. "I wish I didn't suspect the answer to that, Ensign. The only thing I hope it *isn't* is the thing I have the strongest inkling it *is*: Rotation. Something in their biology has set them up in a certain order for destruction. And that rite I saw performed was so un-animal, so formalized—"

Bob's eyes widened as he caught the inference. "You think they have an inbuilt protocol? That if one particular creature missed its cue, somehow, the designated subsequent creature would simply wait forever, never jumping its turn?"

"That's what I mean," nodded Jerry. "I hope I'm wrong."

"But the right creature made it," said Bob, blinking. "We can't have upset the ecology, can we?"

"Things develop fast on Viridian," mused Jerry. "If I figure the time-relationship between their egg-hatching rate and growth rate, those trees must mature in growth in about a month. And we managed to shrivel a half dozen vines with our rocket fires when we landed, and probably that many again when we blasted off..."

"We dropped CO<sub>2</sub> bombs after we cleared the trees," offered the tech, uneasily. "The fire was out in seconds."

"That wouldn't help an already-shriveled vine, though, now would it!" sighed Jerry. "And if my hunch about protocol is correct—"

"The life-cycle would interrupt?" gasped the tech.

"We'll see," said Jerry. "It'll take us a month to get back, and there'll be another six months before the first wave of engineers is sent to begin the homesteads and industry sites. We'll see, Ensign."

---

It took two months for the engineers to go out and return.

They hadn't landed. A few orbits about the planet had shown them nothing but a vast dead ball of dust and rotted vegetation, totally unfit for human habitation. They brought back photographs taken of the dead planet that no longer deserved the name it had rated in life.

But Jerry Norcriss, Space Zoologist, made it a special point to avoid looking at any of them.

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