

ASTOUNDING

A dramatic illustration in a pulp magazine style. A man with dark hair, wearing a green short-sleeved shirt, is leaning over a woman. He holds a lit cigarette in his right hand, which is near the woman's face. The woman has blonde hair and is wearing a yellow dress. She looks up at him with a concerned or intense expression. The background is dark and indistinct, suggesting an interior setting.

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HERMIT OF MARS
by CLIFFORD D. SIMAK

The Morons

The Morons

by Harl Vincent

Harl Vincent (1893 - 1968) was the pen name of Harold Vincent Schoepflin, a mechanical engineer who began writing science fiction stories as a hobby in the late 1920s. He published his first story, "The Golden Girl of Munan", in the June 1928 issue of *Amazing Stories*, the world's first science fiction magazine, which had been founded two years earlier. Vincent went on to publish over seventy stories over the next fourteen years, before losing interest in his hobby in the early 1940s. The stories have since entered the public domain, but most of them have never appeared outside of the original science fiction magazines. We here at the Johnny Pez blog have decided to correct this oversight by posting Vincent's old stories here, in a blog-friendly multipart format. We now present our thirteenth such story, "The Morons" from the June 1939 issue of *Astounding Science-Fiction*. And now, without further ado, here is the first installment of:

The Morons

part 1

Grayson ran his fingers shakily through thinning, gray hair. Gray fingers of mist reached upward, curling slowly, sliding reluctantly over the blank port window. The scream of the savagely overdriven radite engine rocked the metal bubble jerkily downward. "No solid," he shouted.

"But there is somewhere," Matthews snapped savagely. "It's waiting down there for that other radite to give out."

Grayson picked up the communicator, keeping his eyes fixed out and down. "No solid," he repeated, "and no reading on the sonic altimeter. The gravitic says we're five miles below the surface--theoretically."

He pressed the communicator signal, waited a moment, and called: "Bearing temperature?"

"It's smoking. It would ha' blown up ten minutes ago if the engineers dat made it knew what dey was makin'," old Nelson answered hopeless. "It's runnin' eighty percent overload, and the--Hey, wait--"

"The repulsion's going," said Matthews flatly. "We'll find that damn solid now all right."

"Stop!" Grayson screamed suddenly. "Sol--"

The keening scream of the overloaded radite engine lurched up the scale and exploded into a ripping grind. Spattering bits of metal hailed against bulkheads and walls; the screaming hiss of a punctured air storage tank coincided with the sudden, sickening sensation of free fall. The bottom dropped out as the last gravity

repulsor died.

Matthews moved with the automatic reaction-speed of years of piloting. The lower steering rockets blasted a long howl of searing flame, for seconds the unwieldy ship jittered, swooped and balanced on the instability of roaring gas--then relapsed with a squashy thud on land suddenly clearly seen. Two hundred feet above hung the under side of a wavering blanket of mist.

"We join the procession," said Matthews bitterly. "We can't lift from here without those radite engines--and there won't be even a casing of that one." Already his quick strides had swung him down the narrow tube that led to the engine room.

He halted at the doorway. "Nels!" he grunted. ""You weren't touched?"

"No, sir. But it won't do any good. The Venus jinx got us like it got everybody else. The rockets couldn't land because they couldn't see, and we couldn't land because the gravity-repulsor blew up. And we can't take off like this. We're stuck, sir."

"We wouldn't be if we could just get a message out. We know, now." Matthews spoke bitterly as he stared out of a cracked bulletproof port window. "That damned blanket of mist just hangs there. It's safe enough--if you have a spare radite engine."

"But the ionosphere is so thick here," Grayson mourned, running shaking fingers through his thin hair. "We can't break through to Earth with even the shortest waves. I'm afraid we haven't done any good."

"Maybe long-wave radio would work?" suggested Nelson doubtfully.

"No--that long-wave type bounces back even in Earth's thin

ionosphere. We can't signal." Grayson was sadly positive.

"Maybe," said Matthews thoughtfully, "not all of those earlier rocketship expeditions were entirely wrecked. Maybe some of them--like our expedition--were merely marooned.

"The Italians under Polto were the last--and that was twenty years ago, almost. Is there any hope of fixing up those engines, Nelson?"

The engineer laughed softly and gestured. He clumped across the tight-packed engine room on his one sound leg, yanking queerly at the magnet-tipped wooden stump that replaced his lost leg. He stopped and pointed at a gaping hole in a thick metal and insulation tube. "The shaft of the main radite rotor went through the butt of the rocket tube. We built this trick boat with a couple big tubes, instead of lots of little ones, because it's lighter--like we built it with a couple radite engines instead of several. She won't float off Venus, though, and with one third of the rocket motor gone and both halves of the radite engines peppered through the walls here, we don't go. You can't build up gravity-repulsion without those motors, and we don't have enough machines to build new engines. We got lots of fuel, but no way we can burn it. No, sir. We don't go. What's it like outside?"

"We're near the edge of a swamp," Matthews grunted.

"We landed near the north pole," said Grayson, puzzled. "We should be in frozen land here, even on Venus. I particularly wanted to be away from possible dangerous life forms, and felt sure there wouldn't be any in cold regions of so hot a planet--"

"We missed it somehow, fellow," Matthews sighed. "Let's test the air and see if we get out."

* * *

Half an hour later Grayson appeared in the pilot room. He was equipped with helmet, plaited jacket, hip boots, and had two large-orifice Bronson guns in his belt. He stood staring out the port window at the dark-green vegetation that stood motionless, breathless, under the heavy, lowering ceiling of mist. The mist billowed slowly, lazily--like waves in a placid, inverted sea. The vegetation did not move. Despite the miles-thick mist-layers, the light was comfortably brilliant and queerly shadowless. Nothing whatever moved out there, no leaf, no twig--

"Matthews! There's something living out there!" he yelled suddenly. "Hurry--"

Nelson, from his vantage point at the one uncracked engine room port suddenly snorted. "It's a man--no, an--Hey, what is dat t'ing? It looks like a cross between an ape and a man."

Grayson stared at the thing that waddled out of the brush placidly. It was manlike, some six feet tall with hunched, hugely muscled shoulders and shambling walk. But the face had the broad, amiable grin of a moron, with dull, deep-set eyes under shaggy brows. He stopped and looked at the window where Grayson stared out. Suddenly Matthews was beside Grayson, looking out in silent fascination.

"He isn't human--but maybe--Do you suppose some of the expeditions weren't entirely wrecked, that he's some half-breed?" Matthews spoke softly.

"No." Grayson spoke softly, too, as though afraid the native could hear. "Impossible. The races of two planets--they could never cross. It's just parallel development. There was the saber-tooth tiger in North America, and in South America. Because it was isolated and had no large mammalian carnivores, it developed the saber-tooth

marsupial. It's just parallel evolution."

The Venusian raised a huge club in his hand and waved it in a gesture that somehow was quite friendly despite the savage bludgeon. "Let's go out." Grayson turned to the lock.

Thirty seconds later he stood in the open outer lock door and looked at the giant native. Under shaggy-haired brows the Venusian looked at the Earthman with the peaceable friendliness of a moron. He grunted queerly clacking, hissing syllables and looked at the Earthman.

Vainly Grayson tried to form the sounds. Tongue-clicks and clucks, and gurgles from a constricted throat were beyond the man trained to English speech. "We need an Arab or a Hottentot," he thought vaguely. They had those queer tongue-clicks and grunts in their languages--were used to them.

The Venusian opened his mouth, twisted it laboriously, and grunted: "Co... may... stah."

Grayson stared. That labored mouthing--the syllables so unlike his previous words--

The native writhed his lips and grinned wider. "Par... lah... tay... ah... tah... liyan... oh." The moronic giant nodded affably, and his loose lip fell in happy triumph.

"Si... Si!" gasped Grayson. "Polto... Polto... Conoscete Signor Polto?"

"Si." The giant native nodded. "Polto--" He dropped his huge bludgeon to point his finger at his head and made quick circling movements as he shrugged massive shoulders with a queer little gesture that was unmistakably, unquestionably, pure Latin. "Polto

dico. Too say batso."

"'You're nuts'?" Grayson looked at the native curiously. Suddenly he realized Matthews and Nelson had joined him. "He's speaking Italian!" Grayson snapped. "Polto landed here--or near here. He--"

"I speak Italian, too," Matthews interrupted. "Where is Polto?" he asked the native, proving his statement.

"He come. Queen Theresa come. They come slow."

"Who are you?"

"Trog," said the Venusian.

Matthews shook his head. "Not to us. We can't say that. We'll call you Throg. Understand?"

"What's he say?" asked Nelson uneasily. "How come he talks Italian?"

"Apparently every expedition that's tried to make Venus did as we did and headed for the pole. Polto did. He landed alive, apparently. He's taught them Italian, probably because he couldn't handle their clicks and clacks. This one's name is Trog. You stick your tongue on the roof of your mouth, snap it off with a clicking noise and say 'rog' at the same time."

Old Nelson looked at him. "Not me. I don't do those things."

* * *

Grayson was suddenly, vaguely suprised to realize that there were half a dozen--a dozen!--of the natives. They seemed to grow out of the ground soundlessly. All looked at the ship and the Earthmen with

friendly, stupid grins. Some carried massive bludgeons, some bows and arrows, some huge spears. Others--a very few--carried queerly bent sticks with jagged chips and bits of crystalline rock fastened on firmly.

Throg spoke suddenly. "Polto come slow, but Queen Theresa she comes slower. Polto round bend."

Abruptly a group of natives burst into sight, with a sweating, panting, ragged little gray bearded human among them. The gray-bearded little figure stopped abruptly. "A ship!" he yelled, and ran forward exultantly, dancing for joy. "A ship--and it is not smashed to ruin! It is safe! We go home--Theresa, my little Theresa and I go home!"

"You're Signor Polto?" asked Grayson.

The little man pulled himself upright with a sudden, curious dignity. "Si, signor--I am Polto, the first man of Earth to land alive on Venus. The only man to land alive on Venus, till you came."

Matthews looked at the natives. Some women had come; blocky, hunched females with the same blankly friendly, moronic eyes. They stared in the same childish, interested way as the men. "My little Theresa" and "Only man to land alive of Venus" came back to him. He wondered about this Queen Theresa.

Grayson was speaking, shaking his head. "I'm afraid, Polto, we've come to join you, rather than take you back to Earth. The ship isn't much damaged--but the engines are hopelessly ruined. The hull without power is as useless as a broken ship. What happened to you?"

Polto shrugged. "We had to lower on rockets--very slowly. That is fatal. Rocketships must never go slowly. We thought we would make

it, because we carried more energy in our fuel—we used stabilized atomic oxygen and boron, you know—than any before. But we used it all, and still the mist. We dropped perhaps five hundred feet, and because the ship was very lightly built, it crumpled gently. We were not all dead—I lived, and—"

A wild scream flared out of the dripping jungle growth. There was a directionless quality to it that was terrifying. It came from one direction and all directions; something was happening back in the moveless, dripping jungle under the lazily eddying blanket of fog. The natives suddenly danced to their feet, and stared toward the dense, swampy growth. An odor of rotting vegetation and silence filled the air.

Another throaty scream shot out of nowhere, then a chorus of shrieks and a vast animal roar of hate and pain. And, for a single infinitesimal instant, a queerly sweet humming noise. The vast roaring bellow of anger was cut off as though by a suddenly dropped soundproof wall.

The natives were suddenly grinning, moving in an eddying whorl toward the jungle growth. Every face was livened with a keen and evident anticipation. Even Polto seemed to feel a keen anticipation. "Xyll!" he grunted. "They found xyll. Good. They will like and remember you, for you brought good luck. There will be a feast."

The natives were eddying back, and a terrific crashing of underbrush and chanting accompanied their return. A score of them were tugging at each of three ropes, and presently they dragged the thing into the swampy clearing. The other natives were following it with keen interest, and Grayson and Matthews stared with equal fascination. It was an ugly, horn-skinned monster with four blocky legs and a huge knobbed tail. Rows of spikes like gigantic porcupine quills protruded from its neck and head, and huge dinner-

plate eyes covered the sides of a tiny head perched like a control cabin above an immense scoop-shaped mouth.

"There will be a feast," repeated Polto. "A very great feast. Xyll is good, very good."

Throg had drifted back and stood looking up at them. "You make roar again, please?" he suggested with a toothy, friendly grin.

"Roar?" said Matthews, bewildered.

Polto was suddenly laughing uproariously. Tears streamed down the seamed, weather-beaten cheeks and tangled in the unkempt beard. "Roar! Si, roar, my friends. Throg, he has the idea! You landed with the rockets for a moment--just a moment--but it was a mighty roar. So the xyll roars back and forth when they hunt their mates! You have the xyll-call in your ship!"

Matthews grunted. "We can't do it again. The tubes are clogged with swamp mud now, and we'd just blow up the ship. And I couldn't balance the ship down on those tubes again if our lives hung on it again. That was luck, not science."

Grayson was looking at Polto thoughtfully. Throg had said his characteristic gesture was that twirling finger at the forehead and a shrugging "You're nuts!" One thing morons were extremely clever at, as Throg had shown: mimicry. That shrug, even with the massive, humped shoulders of the hairy natives, had been pure Latin, a gesture so wholly, typically familiar it had been unquestionable perfection of mimicry. Equally, that twirling finger had been mimicry.

"Polto," Grayson asked suddenly, "Throg said your characteristic gesture was this, accompanied by 'You're nuts!' What did he mean?"

Polto grimaced, shrugged his shoulders with a little gesture that

seemed rather an imitation of Throg's than the original of Throg's mimicry. "You'll find out, if you can't leave. They are crazy--queer--in a most peculiar way. They have no sense, no brains, but they learn Italian quicker than I learn their language. And they learn to understand very quick. Too quick."

part 2

Matthews jumped down from the lock and strolled over toward a chalky cliff that thrust up an island of drier land in the swamp. The natives had dragged their xyll over there, and were beginning to hack through the heavy armor. Matthews watched them a moment, then sat down wearily and began figuring with pad and pencil. Several of the hairy natives came and stared over his shoulder. Matthews moved uneasily, then finally relaxed in resignation and continued.

"Polto," Grayson asked suddenly, "do they have any written language or understand writing? Do they know anything?"

The little Italian shrugged characteristically. "I don't know. I lose my mind trying to figure them out. Today they know everything; they fell a tree accurately so it falls across a stream and they cross. They move a boulder with a lever and ingenious fulcrum. They do things with mechanical things--stones and trees and sticks of wood--that even I would not think of. Tomorrow--they are dumb, witless. You have seen their crystal sticks?"

"Those slender sticks with crystals embedded as saw teeth?" Grayson questioned.

"Ho! Saw teeth, eh? You have not seen. But you will--and you will ask me if they know anything."

"What are the crystal sticks then?" asked Grayson, watching Polto narrowly. Twenty years among moronic natives, apparently with a native wife--

Matthews voice echoed sharply. "Hey, let go, Throg! You don't want-- Ouch!"

Grayson started toward him at a run, Nelson close behind. Throg had yanked pad and pencil from Matthews with a friendly, brood-toothed grin. "Throg look--not hurt--show picture."

Matthews yielded, nursing a wrist bruised by enormously strong fingers. Grayson joined him, Polto and Nelson close behind, and said: "He won't hurt it, he only wants to look, I guess. What's the matter with the ship?"

Matthews nursed his wrist and grunted. "Everything. We hoped to make it with the newly developed antigravity engines Dr. Grayson here helped develop. They were too new. They got us off Earth all right, and the rockets brought us over, but when we started lowering through Venus' mist, it meant hours of continuous run. Not more than ten miles an hour for one hundred and fifty miles--fifteen hours of steady pull. They didn't stand up. The port radite engine simply failed, and with the other one then under a 180-percent capacity load--

"And to complete the picture, the rotor shaft stabbed a hole in the butt of the port main rocket tube. I was trying to figure a patch. We might get out to space and signal help if we could do that."

Throg touched Matthews' hand, and the Earthman jerked away uneasily. The native merely wanted to return the notebook and pencil, which the pilot accepted.

Matthews looked at the page Throg had been working on and stared. "Hey. Hey, Grayson, look."

* * *

Grayson looked. On one page was the rough sketch Matthews had done. On the other was Throg's effort. The lines were jerky and wavered like a child's work; the powerful native didn't have the

delicate neuro-muscular coordination of a Terrestrial. But the drawing was recognizable—or almost.

"Why, it's a representation of a cross-section of a radite engine! Where—" Hastily Grayson turned through the other pages of the notebook to find the original Throg had copied. There was none.

"They do those things." Polto shrugged. "They're nuts."

Grayson looked at the sketch more closely. "Matthews," he whispered softly, "this is not quite a radite engine. That's in a new aspect to the rotor there... and... by all that's holy, that's a design I didn't think of, but should have—because it's better!"

Throg grunted suddenly and snatched the book. Crude lines built a square box about part of the engine, then he turned a page and sketched rapidly. Below the sketch he marked in scrawled, shaky symbols a mathematical expression of some kind. With a self-satisfied grunt he returned it to Grayson. Grayson stared bewilderedly at the sketch. Softly he heard Polto's "They're nuts," and heard him wander off toward the xyll. Nelson was wandering off, too.

Grayson felt his mind was wandering off. The new sketch was another version of the radite engine, with yet another difference. The mathematical symbols below didn't make sense at all, because he'd never seen any like them. He stared at them in puzzlement, because he knew perfectly well that morons didn't do mathematics.

Throg grabbed the pencil and pad, and sketched some more. When he returned it, Grayson stared again. There was another line of crude mathematical symbols, only this time the symbols made sense because they were familiar. But the equation wasn't. He thought a long time, changing, rearranging, reducing, before he understood. Then he looked at the radite engine sketch.

"Matt, they may be nuts, or I may be nuts, but that thing isn't. You see that coil? Look at this expression here. It's a wholly new development from the gravity line repulser theory, and it shows that this coil will act as a self-exciter. With that modification, we could run one radite engine at half speed and get all the effect we wanted, once we'd built up the field, and we'd build up a lot faster."

Matthews stared. "But we haven't got one engine--or part of one--and I can't pilot the ship with only one tube in action, either. That's worth another fortune to you if you can get back to Earth--but not a damn thing here."

Regretfully, Grayson recognized the truth of it. Throg's friendly, self-satisfied grin had gone to a doleful expression that curiously matched Grayson's feelings. The scientist looked at the brute man with a deeper puzzlement, a deeper wonderment as to the source of the queer and highly technical information. These natives were not human; perhaps their laws of inheritance were different, perhaps they could inherit buried technical knowledge, the knowledge that, ages before, perhaps, their ancestors had developed and forgotten somehow, in between. It might be that only when two halves of the necessary information came together in some scattered genes of inheritance did that inherited memory survive.

Somewhere there, in the more tropical parts of Venus perhaps, there might be mighty ruined cities, relics of a vast, forgotten civilization. Grayson stared southward, toward the slightly more brilliant southward and sunward horizon.

* * *

"Gray!"

Grayson started out of his reverie as Matthews snapped his name.

"Eh?"

"Listen! Do you hear what I hear?"

Grayson cocked his ears. There was a sound, a queer wailing and rising and falling of the flutelike notes that he could associate with nothing he had heard on Earth or Mars--nor anywhere in the Solar System. With a start, he saw that the natives were all prostrated. Nelson, stolid old Nelson even, seemed to be startled into immobility.

Throg, alone of all the morons, was on his feet. "Comes Queen," he intoned.

"You speak English?" Grayson asked, amazed.

Only gutterals answered him. There was no sense to it at all.

Polto came over from where he had been crouching. "Theresa," he croaked. "She come."

"What in--" Grayson commenced, then checked himself. It was no time to lose his temper. Nelson was standing near a huge chunk of the carcass of the xyll.

The wailing notes rose and fell weirdly. A procession was on its way. The natives, face down in the soggy marshland, did not move. Nelson walked over to where Grayson and Matthews were standing. The air of the place was filled with the sound which could not be associated with anything in any of their experiences or minds. It was a hypnotizing, unnatural, and mystifying rhythm.

The word "nuts" was once more on Grayson's lips, but he couldn't say it. To be honest with himself he had to admit in his mind that he did not like the sound of this wail.

Nearer and nearer came the unearthly music, if music it was. It the distance there were jungles and vistas such as the men had never seen.

Giant natives appeared, hairy of chest and with rippling muscles, but with the same vacant eyes the first had exhibited. The wail of the instruments they carried was like a dirge; it rose and fell in a cadence which could be compared with nothing before heard by any of the Earthmen. In the midst of the procession was a sedan chair, or what might be likened to one, had it been on Earth. Four natives had the thing in their hands, carrying its seemingly precious occupant.

Theresa! Queen of the planet Venus. Grayson wondered what she would be. Some half-breed daughter of Polto--They were about to see her.

The palanquin, or whatever it might be called, was set down with great ceremony by its bearers. A tall, sinuous brunette stepped out. Grayson distinctly heard Matthews gasp. She was beautiful, this self-styled queen of a race of morons. She was only a young girl, but unquestionably of purely Earth parents.

"Down!" the girl snapped. "Before Theresa all prostrate."

But Matthews did not go to his knees before her at that. He only gazed at her raptly--like a sick calf, Grayson thought.

"So--I said, 'Down,' " repeated the black-eyed queen.

Servitors of the native assemblage waved fans and tall rods with bubblelike appendages before her flushed face. Prostrating themselves, all of them, including Throg now.

part 3

Then, so suddenly it startled Grayson, the regal Theresa changed. A sudden wave of joy seemed to sweep her, the regal anger evaporated, the stiff carriage was gone and in an instant she was flying to him, clutching his arm passionately, speaking to him in breathless Italian so swift he could scarce catch her meaning.

"Oh, father was right--Polto told truth. You are from Earth, you are from the home-beyond-the-mist! Always, papa said that when men did not bow at my command, then those men were of Earth! You are of Earth, you will take Theresa back... you will, please--"

Polto came up suddenly, an apologetic little smile crinkling his unkempt beard. "So, my little one, so. They are from Earth, and now you will understand." He turned to the Terrestrians as the girl now clung to him, looking with wide, curious eyes at the lean, quiet little Grayson and the erect, commanding stance of Matthews, strange to her eyes used only to the shambling, stupid, but amiable morons.

"I taught her thus," Polto explained with a little shrug, "for several reasons. She must command the morons--and God alone knew when I must die. And she would not know quickly the men of Earth; she could not understand what is meant by intelligence in the eye, the face. I... I am not what I was, and offered poor comparison to her." He shrugged. "This was the only way to serve her thus in both ways. And--I knew men would never cease their attempts."

"I thought you said you alone reached the planet alive," Matthews questioned suddenly.

Polto's face was suddenly haggard and haunted. He gulped and held the girl tighter. "I... I was. The ship crumpled--the men screamed and

died. I... I fell on the three others in the control room and lived. My wife, my other Theresa, was in her berth, pillowed and protected in every way, for I was mad and she was mad, and she had accompanied us.

"I was the ship's doctor, and when we had landed and the ship split like a rotten fruit, I went to her. She--was dead, and I was alone, so I had to perform very quickly the operation that saved little Theresa. My arm was broken, but it was done. The natives came then, and they were friendly and witless, but one of the women took Theresa. Somehow, one of them set my arm, for I was unconscious for many days--nearly a season, here.

"I taught them then, and raised Theresa to know that she was the Queen from the Skies." The queerly pompous little gray-bearded Italian seemed more majestic and strangely representative of Man, then, as he held his daughter. She looked at the strange, erect and confident men of Earth. Grayson felt a new respect for this marooned scientist of two decades ago. "We lived," the little man shrugged. "I knew men would not cease to try."

A terrific roar from the fern jungle brought everyone to their feet, Earthman and native alike. Native spears were poised.

"It's the biggest xyll in the wilds!" screeched Polto. "He heard that other!"

There was a crashing of jungle fronds, soft and clinging and wet as they were, as they gave way to the plungings of the enormous beast. Theresa whimpered with a little purring whine. Grayson drew his Bronson gun, as did the other two Earthmen.

The monster which broke into the marshy clearing was maddened by insects of a sort that could evidently pierce its thick hide and scales.

Its snouted head weaved madly; its small eyes were bloodshot.

Nelson was the first to break on sight of the thing. His Bronson spat forth its message of death. White flame split the gloom of Venus and there was a kicking, screaming monster wallowing in the bog.

"Good work!" shouted Grayson.

"Pooh!" said the queen. "Theresa has a better weapon than that."

* * *

The scientist rubbed his fingers through what remained of his hair. Here were things to think about; things, not to worry about, but most puzzling to the mind. These primals: what could they know of science or mathematics? Yet they did--or they remembered fragments of knowledge from an ancient source. That was it--yes--words and figures came to them unbidden, unsearched-for--or maybe there was a search that Grayson couldn't figure out. As beings with life and movement, they didn't know what it was all about. Still the intelligence was there, somehow unavailably within themselves.

"Matt!" he called.

Matthews was absorbed in Theresa.

"You come with me!" Grayson insisted. "I want to talk with you seriously."

The spaceman came, and Theresa was borne away, pouting. A strange, but likable, almost wild, creature. What had she meant when she spoke of a better weapon? An old one of Polto's from Earth, Grayson concluded.

Matthews grinned sheepishly. "What's so serious?" he asked.

No one could long remain impatient with Matt. Grayson grinned back at him. "Everything, Matt," he said. "Have you thought much of what we've seen here? Have you realized what has happened to Polto and his daughter here? Any idea what it's all about?"

The younger man sobered. "I sure have--more than you think. I even did a lot of before we got here that I didn't tell you about."

"So you knew the fuel was low before we landed? How'll you get us away?" asked Grayson.

Matthews looked away. "Frankly I'm stumped. Sorry. But the Dragon is no use without the radite engine, and that could be brought only by a rescue ship--if we could radio for one. Even then, I doubt whether they would come either from Mars or Earth--you know what the space lords think of this planet. We're stuck... unless"--Matthews hesitated--"unless a miracle occurs. And I don't believe in miracles."

Well enough for the younger man to take it so calmly. Grayson did not want to be marooned here forever like Polto. But he shrugged resignedly, then brightened: "At least we can learn what power it is that brings such intelligence to Throg's poor mind. We'll have something to occupy us."

"Maybe he'll be able to help us," Matthews suggested jokingly.

Grayson wondered. Might be something in this, at that. He decided to do a great deal of investigating. He was suddenly hungry. The odor of xyll steaks broiling over the open fire was strong in his nostrils.

"Suppose we could eat a chunk off that beast?" he asked Matt.

"Why not? Polto and Theresa eat it and are healthy. Let's go."

Forgetting their problems for the time, they set forth to where the natives were massed about the glowing coals of the fire. Nelson and Polto already were gorging themselves.

"Move over," said Grayson.

Nelson and the Italian obligatingly made room, and he and Matt squatted near them. Nelson poked into the coals and drew out a large chunk of the meat of the xyll, handing it to Grayson on the stick he had speared it with. It was wrapped in wide, charred fronds and gave forth a most appetizing aroma.

"Have a bite," grinned Nelson.

Grayson bit; he ate ravenously of the sweetest meat he had ever in his life tasted. Who could dream, even wildly, that a monster like the xyll could produce so succulent a mouthful? The scientist relaxed with his satiation. Venus wasn't so bad after all.

He looked over at Polto, who was leaning back on his elbows, fully and sleepily stuffed with food. The terror of that long-gone landing had slipped from him again. And the daughter, poor kid--all these years of bringing up on this planet of morons.

Grayson's eyes wandered around the circle of reposing Venusians. They were laughing, happy, obviously bantering one another in their own guttural speech. Occasional loud burst of laughter would greet a sally from one of their number. Grayson reflected that morons are frequently possessed of an unusual amount of wit and good humor. He wished he was able to understand their jargon. Why, some of the most famous court jesters of ancient Earth history had been morons. Perhaps it was not so bad a state of mind to be in. At least they seemed to have no worries.

His eyes again lighted on Polto. He moved over to talk with him.

"You want to speak to me?" the Italian asked drowsily.

"What do you know about these ideas the natives get? How can they make these drawings and put down figures they do not know?"

The Italian shrugged helplessly. "In twenty years I have not thought it out."

"I have an idea they have memories, racial memories perhaps. Inherited scraps of knowledge from a higher civilization they've lost. Are there any more intelligent races on Venus? You must have explored it some," said Grayson.

Polto shook his head. "Not much. The natives will not go--and I cannot go alone. They say there are no cities; that it is everywhere the same."

Grayson was more than ever puzzled. Polto couldn't help him any, he could see that. Scraps of knowledge... from where?

* * *

His cogitations were interrupted by a wild scream which rang out through the swampy fern jungle.

"Theresa!" yelled Polto. "She is in danger." He leaped to his feet.

"Easy," counseled Matthews. "It's her voice, but I don't think she's in any real danger." But Polto was already on the run.

Alarmed, Grayson, Matthews, Nelson, and most of the natives streaked after him. There were other screams, now close at hand.

They crashed through the tall tree-like fronds, and then were in a large clearing in which was a sizable but primitively-constructed house which obviously was the "palace" of the queen. A xyll-like beast with carnivorous fangs of such tremendous size that Grayson could hardly believe his eyes had the girl Theresa cornered. The beast had trampled her courtiers under its massive feet and was bellowing in rage. A dozen heavy spears hung from it. The girl was silent now, desperately edging her way toward the door of her palace.

The Bronsons spat forth flame, but it splattered almost harmlessly against the scaly hide of this super-xyll, burning him deeply but with insufficient energy to reach a vital spot. Polto had an ancient Barratini that shot its stinging charges with no more effect than a popgun. But the stings of the Bronson charges were merely further maddening the monster with pain. It wheeled to face its new enemies.

Grayson's two guns had almost exhausted their loads when Theresa had gotten inside the hut and was out again with one of the native crystal-studded weapons, a futile thing against that hide. She raised it quickly, sighted along the rough crystals, and there was a screaming hiss. No flame, no singing dart or other missile, nothing that could be seen came from the bit of crystal at the front end of the queer arm. The mountainous xyll collapsed into a smouldering, twitching mass. The great beast was dead.

Theresa, beyond doubt, had a superior weapon. But what was it?

Polto had his daughter in his arms and was assuring himself of her safety. "You all right, bambina?" he asked anxiously. "Sure you're all right?"

"Yes," she laughed tremulously. "But I had a bad scare."

The Earthmen crowded to the flagged porchlike entrance. Matthews, of course, managed to be nearest to the girl. Grayson, seeing that she was unhurt, turned his attention to the weapon she had used. It appeared to be made in the crudest manner possible, from a piece of a tree limb, a large jagged bit of crystal, a metal endpiece that might once have been a portion of a tin can, and a few odd-colored bits of rock and crystal, roughly shaped.

Theresa saw him eyeing it and smiled past Matthews. "You see?" she exulted. "Did not Theresa tell you she had a better weapon?"

"You win," chuckled the scientist. "But what is it and where did you get it?"

"It's a--what do you say--heat ray. Throg made it."

"Throg!" Dazedly he reached for the crude thing as the girl gave it into his hands. "Throg! It isn't possible."

"Careful," warned Theresa. "This catch releases the ray." She indicated a small strip of crudely hammered metal attached to the rough unfinished stock.

Grayson turned the thing over in his hands, unbelieving. From the weight of it, he judged that the largest bit of crystal had in some way been hollowed, and that it contained the generating force of the heat ray. The tin object he had noticed at the forward end was just what he had judged to be; a cylinder rolled up from a piece of tin can. Evidently these, the only visible metal parts, had come from the wreckage of Polto's ship many years before.

"Want to try it?" Theresa asked him, seeing his great interest.

"Try it? On what?"

"That tree." The girl indicated an enormous, fronded trunk at the edge of the clearing. "Try it," she repeated, seeing his hesitation.

Matthews and Nelson watched with great interest as he raised the weapon to his shoulder and aimed at the base of the huge trunk.

He pressed the catch. There was only the screaming hiss, no recoil, no visible ray. But the great tree trunk was neatly and soundlessly cut down, the stump and the severed end of the already crashing trunk smouldering with little tongues of flame licking here and there. At the moment of impact there had been a blinding flash over there where the ray contacted--nothing more. The heat generated must be terrific.

And yet the stone power bowl of this weapon was not even warm.

"I'll be damned!" was all Grayson could say, returning the weapon to the girl. "Thanks."

He stared at Matthews, who was agape. "You heard her, Matt," he said. "A heat ray. You saw it. And Throg made it--from nothing. We're going to have a talk with him."

part 4

* * *

Grayson and Matthews collared Polto. "We want to talk with this Throg," the scientist told him. "Will you interpret for us? You know his language, don't you?"

"But I don't think I'll help much," Polto shrugged in the characteristic, hopeless gesture. "He doesn't speak any English--but he understands you."

"What?" Matthews exclaimed.

"It is so... you'll see," the Italian affirmed.

Grayson looked significantly at the young pilot of the Dragon.

Matthews nodded solemnly. "Let's get Throg."

They found the smiling, vacant-eyed Venusian at the base of the white cliff.

"Ugh," was all he said.

"You understand what I say?" Grayson asked him, in English.

Again the native nodded, smiling foolishly but engagingly. He uttered a string of harsh gutturals this time.

"What did he say?" the scientist asked Polto.

"He says as usual--that he understands. They always say--and do." The old Italian shrugged.

"Not so nuts as Polto thinks, maybe," Matthews said under his breath.

Then, turning to Throg, Grayson asked: "Can you tell us how you made the weapon used by the queen?"

This time Throg shook his head in the negative.

"But you made it!" protested the scientist.

Throg grinned amiably, and with a characteristic Poltonian shrug, said: "You're hopeless... you're nuts. You'll drive me crazy."

"You get that knowledge from somewhere," insisted Grayson.

Again Throg nodded amiably, with a funny little concentration of bush brows that were never meant for thought.

"Where do you get it?" Grayson was becoming patient and interested. The problem, the mystery of this queer creature's half-glimpsed wisdom was baffling--and intriguing.

Throg sputtered and mouthed difficult Italian, then, surprisingly, mouthed a clearly English word, "Dunno," and burst into guttural cluckings and clickings. One laboriously mouthed word intruded, something like "benzul."

Polto shook his head slowly and translated. "I've tried for twenty years, signori, and it is hopeless. It does not make sense. He is crazy with an astounding craziness, I tell you. He says he's cold, but he likes it, and he's going in the house--the big house--because the ashes fire is going out and the flame fire will, too, and he wants the 'benzul'--whatever that is."

Matthews swore gently. "That," said he, "is this thing." From his pocket he drew his notebook and pencil. Throg nodded amiably and grabbed them. He flopped onto the ground for this composition, and labored mightily. Long strings of weird mathematical symbols followed, traced in sloppy, jerky lines, staggering across one page onto another. Throg turned a page, and other straggling symbols followed.

Then he stopped, and the queer little frown of terribly labored thought wrinkled his placid, shaggy brows. A straggling line of poorly formed, but recognizable symbols followed, then another and another, till finally Throg grunted in annoyance, handed both notebook and pencil to Grayson, and grinned amiably. He walked off with a clacking grunt, leaving the party where they were.

Old Nelson shifted his wooden leg out of the hole it had sunk into. "He got disgusted, I guess."

Polto looked after him in resignation. "He simply said, 'I'm tired. Good night,' as usual. He worked unusually long that time."

Grayson looked after him, then at the book. There were fully a dozen lines of formulas in unknown characters, and perhaps three and a half in familiar form. But the formulas weren't familiar. "If these are translations, we can finish the translation. If they aren't--well, he may be willing to try in the 'morning.' I suppose there is no night here?"

"Once in about forty-five hours Venus revolves. It gets a twilight dullness, but the refractive atmosphere prevents real dark. They all sleep when the light gets reddish," Polto explained. "Nothing will make them give up their sleep."

Grayson and Matthews noticed for the first time that a duller, redder tinge had crept into the gray mist layer. "I suppose we may as well go

back to the ship and work on this for a while. do you and Theresa want to come?"

Polto smiled and shook his head. "Theresa wouldn't like the ship, and I will stay with my little one. She is used to Venus."

* * *

Grayson labored over the mathematical formulas stubbornly. The symbols were exceedingly hard to translate, even after Matthews, a competent draftsman, had turned them into more or less regularly formed characters. But gradually, he was pinning down a long series of formulas, laboriously translating. Some, he found, didn't translate, so he had to use original characters.

Old Nelson made coffee, and fried some eggs and potatoes, and they ate. "You know," he said in disgust as he saw Grayson's labors, "I'd be damned before I'd put in that much work on a crazy man's scratchings."

Grayson sighed. "I wouldn't. Not when he's this crazy. That equation there, is, I've at last determined, a variant of Hartman's seventh-power field. That, they're beginning to think, may have something to do with the stability of the atom. And this equation arbitrarily introduces a function--this one I've called $F(?)$ --which, from the action of the equation, is arbitrarily designated as the function which disrupts the equation."

"And," said Matthews softly, "the atom. That is a beautiful idea. Find the equation of the atom--arbitrarily define $F(?)$ such that it disrupts the equation--solve for $F(?)$ --and you have the atom disruptor. If you can do it."

"Throg is a moron. He couldn't possibly think of that!" Grayson

waited. "He can't concentrate, he hasn't the knowledge."

"What's the next equation?"

"Solution for $F(?)$," groaned Grayson. "It checks, but I can't see how it's solved."

"And what," asked Matthews, "would the rest be?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out. The first one looks like an explanation of what the atom breaks into."

Two hours later Grayson knew. The next one was a solution for a different $F(?)$, with other conditions defined. Somehow, impossibly, Throg had given him twelve different solutions for $F(?)$ such that $F(?)$ was a function capable of disrupting the atom. Each was, apparently, a sound solution. Each defined a different method. Each method defined different products. There was another half-completed solution for yet another type of disruptive fuction.

"Hartman," said Grayson in weary disgust, "would be interested. A moron on Venus not only knows his prize accomplishment—he got the Nobel prize this year—but knows at least thirteen different ways of breaking it down. Polto is quite right. They're crazy. I'm going to bed."

Matthews looked at the formulas. As a space pilot, he knew mathematics fairly well. He recognized, by a few simple checks, that each of the different solutions was classic, sound, and beautiful. But he couldn't derive the solutions, because the mathematical steps had been left out, and he didn't think that brand of mathematics existed. He went to bed.

There was a dull, angry gray mist curtain hanging over them when they awoke. A little exploration revealed all of the natives and Polto and Theresa as well, sleeping soundly. Grayson irritably went back to

his mathematics.

He had an advantage. Working both ends against the middle, the solution and the original against the unknown steps, using the power of all Earth's highest mathematics and three calculators installed in the pilot room of the ship, he broke it down. Then, because Throg and his source of information remained asleep, he and Matthews readjusted the calculator machines with some new drive systems that took advantage of perfectly magnificent and unheard-of mathematical methods he had found. Two more he developed himself from hints in the others.

He fed the incomplete solution into the machine, started it, and waited. It clattered and snapped and chuckled to itself for ten minutes, then thunked heavily as it printed a solution. Matthews darted forward, but Grayson stopped him.

"Wait," said the scientist. "That isn't the machine it used to be. It now has a brain as capable as our moronic friends; no longer handicapped like yours or mine," he explained bitterly.

The machine continued to chitter and clink. In half an hour it thudded heavily eleven times, then finally stopped. The final solution was $F(?)=0$. "That," explained Grayson, "means that that's all the solutions it can find. That makes a total of twenty-three different solutions that moron friend of ours could have written out if he'd taken the trouble. Incidentally, any one of the twenty-three would have made us billionaires on Earth."

"I wonder if we can't harness one of them?" remarked Matthews.

"No," said Grayson. "We haven't the needed material. Eighteen of these things are explosive, and the other five produce electric potentials so high we couldn't insulate them in this little ship."

"With good insulation--" began Matthews, perplexedly.

"You still need thirty feet of air gap to stop a fifty-million-volt potential," snapped Grayson. "But that's all right. Wait till that damned moron wakes up and we'll find out how."

part 5

They tackled Throg eventually, when Polto had finally induced the native to sit down near the ship for a while. Nelson finally turned the trick; he had some of his favorite rock candy stowed away somewhere aboard the Dragon, crystallized sugar as hard as stone. The moron sat down and sucked it with beaming joy on his broad, stupid face. He growled something.

Polto made a wry face. "It was a so-brilliant idea, your engineer's. But now he can't click his tongue, and nobody, not even I, can understand him. He will not stop. I still do not believe what you say. These people are wholly crazy. That insanity of ashes in the sky and being too cold and liking it when the temperature here never varies ten degrees."

"Hm-m-m," said Matthews suddenly, and sat down.

"Throg, what do you mean about the ashes and the flames and going into the big house?" Grayson asked patiently.

Throg grinned amiably. "Dunno. Crazy, I guess."

Polto shrugged his shoulders and turned away.

For a solid hour they questioned Throg, while his answers became gradually more intelligible as the lump of rock candy dissolved. Finally, Grayson had worked a complete circle back to the ashes and flame.

This time Throg grinned amiably and shook his head. "No." The guttural clacking of his native language sputtered out in a broken stream.

"He's changed his mind," sighed Polto resignedly, rather annoyed. "He says the ashes and flame aren't there at all. And it isn't cold, it's too hot; all the trees and grass are burning like ashes in a fire, and he likes it. They are," he announced determinedly, "crazy."

"No," said Matthews softly. "Not at all. Ask Throg if this is right." He thrust the series of formulas at the moronic giant.

Throg grinned, looked at it blankly for a moment, and shook his head. With a pencil he scrawled over it, crossing it out, and turned the page. He set down a dozen mathematical symbols of an entirely new type, then two more lines. Grayson groaned.

"Throg... Throg, draw the engine," snapped Matthews. "Candy, and we leave you alone... draw the machine."

Grayson stared at Matthews in amazement. Polto turned on him a gaze of whimsical questioning that made Matthews answer in self-defense. "No, I'm not crazy, Polto. I think... I think I get it. If I'm right, it's crazier than you ever thought."

Throg was scrawling lines and drawings on the sheet, holding the pencil like a dagger in his huge, brawny fist. Sudden crackling gutturals came forth, as he looked up in amiable understanding, and then bent over his work.

"Now," said Polto, "he says there aren't any big houses any more. They were long ago and not good."

"Inherited memory!" Grayson gasped, grasping Matthews' arm savagely. "Memories from a long-forgotten civilization!"

"Memories hell!" snapped Matthews.

Throg looked up again for a moment. Again the harsh syllables of his own language came forth, then once more he was laboring over the drawing.

"He said he'd show you how the crystal stick works now," Polto explained. "He 'has the knowingness now,' as he puts it."

Throg handed Grayson the notebook, looked toward Nelson eagerly, and mouthed, "Candy?" laboriously.

Grayson shook his head in bewilderment. "This isn't anything I can imagine. It must be that crystal-stick thing, but it doesn't look like it. It's simple enough—a few tubes of metal and glass—a couple of coils and a crystal oscillator of some sort--"

"Throg, what is that machine for?" asked Matthews sharply.

"He said, 'You go away,' I think," Polto reported.

"Give him the candy, Nels," said Matthews. "I think we go home!"

"What do you mean, Matt? What is this?" Grayson asked.

Matthews was hurriedly examining the drawing. A few very simple little parts, a curiously designed oscillator, and a series of coils, and some queerly designed controls. "Gray, look at that. That's a control lever obviously, isn't it?"

"Yes... Si--" Polto answered as well.

"All right. Now, pray tell, what kind of a hand would grip that controller, please?"

Grayson stared. The grip indicated--very clearly indicated--could obviously be held by no human hand! It was a quadruple control, with

obvious placement for eight independent digits!

"Throg," asked Matthews, "what color is the fire in the sky?"

* * *

He grunted a single syllable, then three more. Polto turned and looked sharply at old Nels, then gasped. "He says--like Nelson's shirt!"

Nelson looked down at his chest in surprise, rather stupidly lifted eyebrows startled at the idea. His shirt was a very bright blue, almost violet.

Matthews grinned. "Get it?" he asked at length.

"No! In the name of Heaven what is the answer?" demanded Grayson.

"That gadget he drew--I'm beginning to see what it is," Matthews explained. "He crossed out all the work he did last night, and wrote those new formulas. The last two he translated to our mathematical system. I can recognize two parts of them--one from last night's efforts, and one from your equations of the gravity repulser. That gadget turns the energy of atoms directly into gravity repulsion, or, if you change the setting just a little--a repulsion beam. Throg said 'You go away' because he meant that's what we'd do. He likes candy, but for two days we've been pestering blazes out of him. He'll be glad to see the last of us. That's our new drive system--three sheets of tin, and a homemade oscillator, or I'm a Dutchman."

"But how... how... how does he know?" stammered Grayson.

"Look. Last 'night' he talked about going in the big house because it was cold, but he liked cold, and about the ashes in the sky going out

and the flame going out. Then he wrote down those atomic equations we never would have guessed at.

"Now, my friends, watch." Matthews continued, and stood silently looking at Throg. Throg turned leisurely and crackled his queer language to Polto.

"He says now that he has two hands on one hand and four feet and two feet and one foot. I know he is crazy," said Polto hopelessly.

"And I," said Matthews, "thought the question 'How many fingers and toes has the one who told you about this machine you drew?' He's a moron--but, like many Terrestrial morons, he's a telepath. Many of his race are, seemingly. And telepathy is queer--it doesn't weaken over any distance, so far as is known. You know the earliest Terrestrial experiments... the later Mars-Earth experiments. All faulty, all utterly unreliable--but all equally good. Distance doesn't matter.

"Somewhere in space, there's a planet circling a double-sun system, one of which stars is red--like dying ashes, and one of which is yellow--like flames, and the people live in huge buildings. And... those people know a great deal about atomic power. Last night our moronic telepath was picking up the thoughts of some scientist unguessable billions of miles away. Perhaps even in another galaxy.

"That crystal weapon?" Matthews went on to explain. "They picked up the thoughts of the race that doesn't live in great buildings any more--all that was long ago to them--and lives under a sun as blue as Nels' shirt. And they know tremendously more, even, than the race of the twin suns. Throg crossed out their elementary equations. You'll find, I'll bet, that these are a thousand times further advanced. And this machine gets us home.... Polto, do they have any other gadgets like the crystal weapon?"

Polto was thinking deeply, with constant waves of surprise and comprehension chasing over his mobile face. He burst into Italian at a speed the two Americans could scarcely follow: "They have, they have, they have! I... I am the crazy one. I am crazier than I even thought they were! They have a thing made out of crystals and stones and scraps of metal from my ship and bits of bark. They put a crystal stick in one part of it, press the catch, and the ray is absorbed by the crystal without burning. But if they strap the contraption onto the carcass of a xyll, it floats so that a few men can tow it through the jungle!"

"Simple, eh?" said Matthews. "They are morons, with the poor neuro-muscular co-ordination of the moron, and the low concentrative powers. But they have at their command the knowledge of the greatest minds of the Universe. The simple things, they make. A bow and arrow are simple. They make them. But a transformer is simple too--just wrap wire around a chunk of iron--no matter how complex the electromagnetic theory is.

"The theory of their crystal-stick weapon is beyond us, but the mechanics of the actual gadget is well within their simple limits."

Grayson groaned. "We can do--but they can know. Matt... Matt, you take Polto and Theresa and Nels back to Earth--you can easily enough with that drive--and bring back an expedition with psychologists. I'll study here. But hurry. I want the psychologists to help--"

Polto roared in anger. "Take me back! You ship me from my Venus! I wait here twenty years, me, alone with my Theresa waiting, and now... now when something interesting is found, then you... you Americans who have just come, you try to drive me out! No! No, by ten thousand devils no! I stay. I will not go whatever! You shall go. I shall study. I shall learn, learn, learn again at last like a true scientist

should!"

Matthews grinned. "Nels, you don't want to stay?"

Old Nelson grinned back. "Not if I can help it. If that thing works--"

"It'll work. Probably the best engineers within this galaxy--and perhaps the next one, for all we know--designed it. And--"

Theresa came over toward them. Throg, sucking a block of candy, was leading her. "Gooobugh," said Throg. He turned back into the jungle, a half dozen other natives disappearing with him.

Theresa looked up at the Americans. "Throg said you wanted me," she said in a half-timid tone.

"You want to go to Earth?" asked Matthews.

Theresa looked up at him doubtfully. "Maybe you tell me about it first, eh?"

Grayson snorted softly. Theresa would go all right, and Matthews would do a job of telling her about Earth. He looked at Polto. Polto stuck out his straggly gray beard and solemnly nodded.

"She go," he said softly.

THE END

(borrowed from Johnny Pez blog <http://johnnypez9.blogspot.com/>)