



Membership Drive

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THIRTY million miles out, Keeter began monitoring the planet's radio and television networks. He kept the vigil for two sleepless days and nights, then turned off the receivers and began a systematic study of the notes he had taken on English idioms and irregular verbs.

Twelve hours later, convinced that there would be no language difficulty, he left the control room, went into his cabin and fell into bed. He remained there for sixteen hours.

When he awoke, he walked to a locker at the end of his cabin, opened the door and carefully selected clothing from a wardrobe that was astonishing both for its size and variety. For headdress, he selected a helmet that was not too different in design from the "space helmets" he had viewed on a number of television programs. It would disappoint no one, Keeter reflected happily, as he took a deep breath and blew an almost imperceptible film of dust from the helmet's iridescent finish.

Trousers and blouse were a little more of a problem, but finally he compromised on items of a distinct military cut; both were black and unembellished, providing, he hoped, an ascetic, spiritual tone to temper the military aura.

Boots were no problem at all. The black and silver pair he wore every day were, by happy coincidence, a synthesis of the cowboy and military footgear styling he had observed hour after weary hour on the pick-up panel in the control room.

He placed the helmet carefully on his head, took time to make sure that it did not hide too great a portion of his impressively high forehead, and then walked leisurely to the control room.

In the control room he checked the relative position of two green lights on the navigation panel, shut off the main drives, clicked the viewscreen up to maximum magnification and took over the manual controls. A little less than two hours later, at 11:30 A.M. Eastern Standard Time, he landed smoothly and quietly near the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, D.C.

Watching from a port in the airlock, Keeter was impressed with the restraint of the reception committee. Obviously, the entire city had been alerted several hours before his arrival. Now, only orderly files of military equipment could be seen on the city's streets, converging cautiously toward the gleaming white hull and its lone occupant.

He opened the airlock and stepped out on a small platform which held him a full hundred feet above the grass covered park. He watched as an armored vehicle approached within shouting distance, then stopped.

Telling himself that it was now or never, he raised both arms to the sky, a gesture which spoke eloquently, he hoped, of peace, friendship and trust.

Later that afternoon, behind locked doors and sitting somewhere near the middle of an enormous conference table, Keeter nonchalantly confessed to an excited gathering of public officials that he had landed on the planet by accident. It was not, he implied, a very happy accident.

"I didn't know where the hell I was," he explained carelessly, in excellent English that awesomely contained the suggestion of a midwestern twang. "Some kind of trouble with the ship's computer—if you know what a computer is." He suppressed a yawn with the back of his hand and continued. "Anyway, the thing will repair itself by morning and I'll get out of your hair. Too bad I had to land in a populated area and stir up so much fuss, but from the ship this place looked more like an abandoned rock quarry than a city. Now, if it's okay with you, I'll get back to the ship and—"

A senator, Filmore by name, at the opposite end of the table jumped to his feet. "You mean you had no intention of contacting us? My God, man, don't you realize what this means to us? For the first time, we have proof that we're not alone in the universe! You can't just—"

Keeter called for silence with an impatient wave of his hand. "Come, come, gentlemen. You're not the only other humanoid race in the galaxy. We don't have time to call on every undeveloped race we happen to run across. Besides, I never did like playing the role of 'the mysterious alien who appears unannounced from outer space.' Primitives always require so much explanation."

"Primitives!" exploded the senator. "Why, of all the impudent—"

The senator was quieted by a colleague who placed his hand over the offended man's mouth.

The presiding officer at the meeting, a General Beemish, arose and addressed the visitor. "We realize that from your point of view this planet has not exactly achieved the cultural or technological level of your, er, homeland—"

"You said a mouthful," agreed Keeter, who was now cleaning his nails with the pin attached to a United Nations emblem that somebody had stuck to his tunic earlier in the day.

"Look," said the general, gamely trying again. "We're not quite as unsophisticated as you seem to think. There are three billion persons on this planet—persons who are well fed, reasonably well educated,

persons who owe allegiance to only one government. We're making great strides technologically, too. Within a decade, we'll be established on the moon—our satellite. Why, even our school children are space-minded."

"Sure," said Keeter, who had turned in his chair and was now staring out the window. "Nice little place you got here. Say, is there a bathroom around this place. I gotta—"

Someone showed the visitor to a bathroom where to everyone's astonishment he proceeded to remove his clothes and leisurely shower. The meeting was adjourned for thirty minutes. When he had finished his shower, he dressed, walked back into the conference room, waved a cheery good-bye, and before anyone realized what was happening, he had unlocked the door from the inside and closed it behind him.

For a full thirty seconds, no one said anything. Then suddenly someone managed to gasp, "My God, what'll we do?"

"There's nothing we can do," said General Beemish. There were tears in his eyes.

Keeter walked all the way back to the ship. It took him an hour and forty minutes. Long enough, he hoped, for someone to have scooted ahead and notified the military personnel guarding the area to keep hands off.

No one attempted to stop him. He boarded the ship, made himself something to eat, walked to a stock room and pocketed a defective transistor from an unemptied disposal tube in a corner. Five minutes later he reappeared on the platform outside of the airlock. Fifteen minutes later he was delivered in a military staff car to the conference room he had left barely two hours before.

Everyone was transfixed by his reappearance. Beemish looked especially radiant as Keeter sat down at the table, pulled the transistor from his pocket, and stated his business quickly.

"Look, it's probably no use asking, but I need a repair part for that damned computer. Something's wrong with the automatic repair circuits, and I don't feel like staying up all night to find the trouble." He held the transistor toward them at arm's length. "Frankly, I don't think you'll have much luck reproducing it, but I thought I'd ask anyway—"

"May I see it?" asked Beemish, leaning forward and eagerly stretching out a hand.

Keeter seemed to hesitate for a minute, then shrugged his shoulders and dropped the transistor into the general's sweating palm.

Three persons got up from the table and crowded around Beemish, trying to get a look at the alien product.

"Well," said Keeter. "What do you think? If it's too far advanced for you, don't hesitate to say so. I'll just get back to the ship and start working."

"Not at all, not at all," said a small, white haired man who had finally wrested the transistor from Beemish. He squinted at the thing through a pocket magnifier. "We'll have it for you by morning, I'm quite sure."

"I'm not quite so sure," said Keeter, yawning, "but I need the sleep anyway. See you here at eight in the morning." He yawned again, got up from the table and walked out once more through the door.

When Keeter reappeared in the morning, Beemish ushered him into the conference room with a hearty clap on the back. When everyone was seated, he pulled a small jewel box from a pocket and handed it ceremoniously to Keeter.

"I already ate breakfast," said Keeter, setting the box on the table.

"No, no, no," groaned Beemish. "That's not food—open it up, man!"

Keeter lifted the box to eye level, squinted at it suspiciously for a moment, then sniffed it. "You're sure—"

"Yes, yes," shouted a dozen impatient voices, "open it, open it up!"

Keeter shrugged and opened the box. Twelve tiny, identical transistors lay gleaming on a bed of black velvet.

"Well?" said Beemish, eagerly.

"Hm-m," answered Keeter.

"What do you mean, hm-m," asked Beemish nervously.

"I mean it's a silly damn way to pack transistors."

"But—"

"But they look like they'll do the job," said Keeter, snapping the lid closed.

The sighs of relief were heard in the corridor.

Keeter pushed his chair back from the table and stood up. "I realize that I've put you all to a lot of trouble, and I'd like to offer some kind of payment for your services, but frankly, gentlemen, I don't know how I can—"

"Oh, you can, you can," interrupted Beemish excitedly. "What I mean to say is that if you really want to, you can."

"How?"

"Why, er, you could provide us with a small amount of information." Beemish looked definitely nervous.

"Be more specific, general." Keeter was beginning to look grim.

"Well, we were thinking—I mean, it would be nice if you'd agree to have a friendly chat with some of our people. For instance, an hour or so with our physicists, then maybe a half hour with a few sociologists, and perhaps the same amount of time with the senator's committee—"

Keeter closed his eyes and sighed. "Okay, okay, boys, but let's make it quick. Also, let's keep it to twenty minutes for each inquisition. Come on, when do we start? Now?"

The scientists were the first—and the easiest. He gave them just enough information to whet their appetites, just enough to plant the suggestion that it took a great deal of tolerance and patience on his part to hold an interview with such backward people.

"Gentlemen, I'd love to explain the principle of the neutrino drive, but frankly, I don't know where to begin. You—you just don't have the mathematics for it." He didn't bother to add that neither did he.

"Yes, of course, I'm sure I understand what you're getting at. My God, why shouldn't I? Even a child could understand those equations."

"You call *that* a representation of the mass-energy constant? No offense, old man, but I'm afraid you're going to have to start all over again. Invention doesn't take the place of research, you know."

The social scientists were next:

"As I explained a moment ago, we are heterosexual and live an organized community life, but not in any cultural context that could be explained by the term. You might say that our cultural continuum (although the term for us is quite meaningless) is a function of an intricately structured social organism, with institutional coordinates that are largely internalized. Do you follow me gentlemen?" They certainly did not.

But the senator's committee, as usual, got the information it wanted.

Senator Humper: Now, young man, you claim that your base is on one of three inhabited planets of Aldebaran. You also claim that in the known universe there are twelve hundred or more inhabited worlds, all welded together in a kind of super United Nations. Did you or did you not state as much?

Keeter: Uh-huh.

Humper: Well, now it appears that we're getting some place. Tell us, how does each planet manage to qualify for—er—membership in this organization?

Keeter: Why, they have to pass the test, of course.

Humper: Test? What test?

Keeter: The Brxll-Hawkre-Gaal test. We administer it to anybody who seems to be qualified.

Humper: Er—tell us, young man, just exactly what sort of test is this? An intelligence test?

Keeter: Yes, you might call it that, although it has a number of sections. Actually, Gaal has divided it into three parts.

Humper: I see. Well, what kind of parts?

Keeter: Well, let's see. First there's the fuel test.

Humper: Fuel test?

Keeter: Let me explain, all very simple really. Let's take the case of a planet that seems to be qualified for Federation membership in every respect but one. They don't have interstellar flight. Now—since membership imposes duties requiring commercial, diplomatic and scientific intercourse between member worlds, the applicant must be able, within a comparatively short time, to engineer its own transportation. Follow me?

Humper: Yes. Yes, go on.

Keeter: Well, since the biggest technological stumbling block for most planets in such a situation is the development of the necessary fuel, we'll help them along. In other words, we give them the fuel test; we supply a sample quantity of Z-67As—our standard thermonuclear power source. If the applicant, working with the sample, is able to reproduce the fuel in quantity, then that's it. They've passed that portion of the test, and at the same time have developed the means for interstellar flight. Follow me?

Humper: Yes, of course. Now how about the second part of the test?

Keeter: Oh, yes, that's the weapons section.

Humper: I'm sorry, I'm afraid I didn't hear you. I thought you said weapons.

Keeter: I did. You see, it's a matter of self defense. There are a number of primitive worlds that *have* developed interstellar flight, but have not achieved the cultural and social levels that would qualify them for membership. As a result, they become rather nasty about this exclusion, and devote themselves to warring against any Federation ship that comes within range. You'd call them pirates, I think. Anyway, the Federation Patrol keeps them pretty well in hand, but occasionally, the Blues—that's our nickname for them since all their ships are blue—do manage to

waylay a ship or raid a Federation planet. So naturally, every ship must carry suitable armament; the standard equipment is an R-37ax computer missile—even more complicated for an applicant to manufacture than the reactor fuel. Therefore we provide a sample missile along with our blessings. The rest is up to the applicant.

Humper: And the last part of the test?

Keeter: Oh, that's genetic. We require a specimen, a woman from the applicant's world. She's taken to a Federation laboratory, evaluated genetically, physiologically, psychologically. Our people are able to extrapolate the future racial—and to some degree cultural—development of the entire planet after about two weeks work. Needless to say, the entire process of testing is painless; the subject is made as comfortable as possible. And after the test period, the specimen is returned as quickly as possible to her home world.

Humper: Well, now, don't you think—after what you've seen of us—that we might possibly qualify, at least qualify to take the test? I'm sure you'll be surprised—

Keeter: Oh, no you don't! I've fulfilled whatever obligation I had by answering your questions. That was the agreement, remember? Information in exchange for the transistors. Now, gentlemen, if you'll excuse me—

Keeter allowed himself to be delivered back to the ship in a staff car. Beemish and several others were on hand to see him off. He shook hands all around—a custom which amused him immensely, since the same act meant something tremendously different in most other parts of the universe.

Back in the ship, he walked to his cabin, stripped off his clothes, showered, ate, dressed again. Going into the control room, he checked a number of detectors, found no evidence that any Blues were hunting for him, left the control room and walked back to a supply room.

Here, he selected a plastic vacuum solenoid from a rack, hefted it in one hand for a moment, then deliberately let it drop to the floor. He picked it up, squinted at it, then walked out to the airlock.

General Beemish was delighted. Everyone was delighted. "No trouble at all," said Beemish, who had already made a phone call that had galvanized two thousand scientists and technicians into action. "We'll have it for you in no time."

"I certainly hope so," said Keeter. Some of the flippancy had left him, and it was apparent that this new bid for assistance was causing him considerable embarrassment—for a short time, anyway.

"Yes sir," said Beemish, grinning. "Glad to be of help, in fact, we're flattered that you'd let us, primitive as we are, help at all. We primitives don't often have an opportunity to do this sort of thing, you know." Beemish believed in rubbing while the rubbing was good.

The solenoids, forty in all, were delivered the following morning. They were packaged in a small black box lined with velvet. This time Keeter made no comment about the packaging. Instead, he rose from his chair in the conference room, tucked the box under an arm, and addressed the group. "Gentlemen, I'd like you to know just how much I appreciate this favor. Evidently, I misjudged your level of technology, and for this I apologize. I don't know how I can repay you for this latest favor, but if you'd like, I'll be glad to formally submit your planet's application for Federation Membership as soon as I return to Aldebaran."

"When will that be?" asked Senator Humper unceremoniously.

"Oh, about ten of your years, at a guess."

"Ten years! My God, man. Can't you do something sooner?"

"Well—I suppose, I could administer the first two parts of the test myself. Why, yes, I suppose I could drop off your samples and your specimens at the Federation branch laboratory in Andromeda—."

"Wonderful!" shouted Beemish. "When do we begin?"

He was genuinely awed when three weeks later they began loading enormous quantities of Z-67As into his ship. He did not check the stuff, but had no doubts that it was, atom for atom, identical to the sample of fuel he had given them.

The R37Ax computer missiles arrived the same afternoon. There were four hundred of them. He selected one at random and had it taken into the ship's laboratory. Here, he ran a number of routine tests. The missile was not identical to the sample! They had made a number of improvements in the circuitry! Keeter reflected grimly that a race such as this would probably be able to deduce a launching and firing system for the thing, would probably have the planet ringed with launching stations within weeks. If the Blues *had* picked up a trace of him, he reflected, they would be atomized before they got within half a million miles of the planet.

The specimen for genetics, which he had almost forgotten about, arrived an hour before he was scheduled to depart. He was stunned again.

She was undoubtedly the most attractive woman Keeter had ever set eyes on.

"Oh, I'm so excited," said the young lady, in a voice slightly suggestive of the virgin on the way to the sacrifice.

"I'm excited, too," said Keeter honestly.

In the control room, Keeter set a course for Arcturus. He then tripped a lever which fed a month's supply of the earthmen's fuel into the ship's almost empty reaction chambers. Another lever fed 50 computer missiles into 50 completely empty launching racks.

He checked the detectors, but found no trace of the blue ships of the Federation Patrol. Keeter allowed himself the luxury of a sigh. It was a long way to Arcturus, a long, lonely way—even for a hardened pirate, he reflected sadly. Then he remembered that that was why he had asked for the girl.

THE END

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