

a MATTER OF TASTE



1952

I WAS NEAR THE SKY when the silver ship flew down to us. I drifted through the high trees on the great morning web and all my friends came with me. Our days were always the same and always good and we were happy. But we were also happy to see the silver carrier drop from space. For it meant a new but not unreasonable change in our tapestry, and we felt we could adjust to the pattern, even as we had adjusted to all the ravelings and unravelings of a million years.

We are an old and a wise race. We considered space travel at one time and gave it up, for it meant that the refinement we were seeking in our own lives would be torn like a web in a storm, and a one-hundred-thousand-year philosophy inter-

rupted just when it was bearing the ripest and most agreeable fruit. We decided to stay here on our rain and jungle world and live peacefully at ease.

But now—this silver craft from the heavens gave us a stir of quiet adventure. For here came travelers from some other planet who had chosen a course diametrically opposed to ours. The night, they say, has much to teach the day, and the sun, they continue, may light the moon. So I went happily, my friends went happily, in a glide, in a pleasant dream, down toward the jungle clearing where lay the silver carrier.

I must describe the afternoon: the great web cities glittered with cool rain, the trees freshly rinsed with falling waters, and now the sun bright. I had partaken of an especially succulent meal, the good wine of the humming jungle-bee, and a warm languor tempered and made my excitement all the more enjoyable.

But—a curious thing: while all of us, numbering perhaps a thousand, gathered about the craft in friendly demeanor and attitude, the ship did nothing, it remained firmly unto itself. Its portals did not open. Momentarily, I thought I glimpsed some creature at a small port above, but perhaps I was mistaken.

“For some reason,” I said to my friends, “the inhabitants of this beautiful craft are not venturing forth.”

We discussed this. We decided that perhaps—the reasoning of animals from other worlds being possibly of a divergent nature from our own—that perhaps they felt somewhat

outnumbered by our welcoming committee. This seemed doubtful, but nevertheless I transmitted this sentiment to the others about us, and in less than a second the jungle trembled, the great golden webs shivered, and I was left alone by the ship.

I then advanced, in a breath, to the port and said aloud: "We welcome you to our cities and lands!"

I was soon pleased to note that some machinery was working within the ship. After a minute the portway opened.

No one appeared.

I called out in a friendly voice.

Ignoring me, a conversation was in rapid progress inside the ship. I understood none of it, naturally, for it was in a foreign tongue. But the essence of it was bewilderment, some little anger, and a tremendous, and to me strange, fear.

I have a precise memory. I remember that conversation, which meant nothing, which still means nothing to me. The words stand in my mind now. I need only pluck them and give them to you:

"You go out, Freeman!"

"No, you!"

A bumble of indecision, a mixing of apprehension, followed. I was on the point of repeating my friendly invitation when a single creature picked its way carefully from the ship and stood looking up at me.

Curious. The creature shook in mortal fear.

I was much concerned, immediately. I could not under-

stand this senseless panic. Certainly I am a mild and honorable individual. I bore this visitor no malice; indeed, the machinery of malice last rustled long ago on our world. Yet here the creature was, pointing what I understood to be a metal weapon at me, and trembling. The thought of killing was in the creature's mind.

I immediately soothed him.

"I am your friend," I said and repeated it, as a thought, as an emotion. I put the warmth in my mind, a love, and a promise of a long and happy life, and this I sent to the visitor.

Well, where it had not responded to my spoken word, it responded, visibly, to my telepathy. It—relaxed.

"Good," I heard it say. That was the word. I recall it exactly. A meaningless word, but the creature's mind was warmer behind the symbol.

You will forgive me if here I describe my guest.

It was quite small. I would say only six feet tall, with a head on a short stalk, only four limbs, two of which it used exclusively, it seemed, for walking, while the other two were not used for walking at all, but simply *held* things, or gestured! It was with a flush of amusement I noted the lack of another set of limbs, so necessary to us, so useful. Yet this creature seemed perfectly at ease with its body, so I accepted it in the same sense that it accepted itself.

The pale-colored creature, almost hairless, had features of a most peculiar aesthetic, the mouth particularly, while the eyes were sunken and of a surprising art, like the noon

sea. All in all, it was a strange work, and as a curiosus, as a new adventure, quite exciting. It challenged my taste and my philosophy.

I made **the** adjustment instantaneously.

I thought such thoughts as these to my new friend:

"We are all your fathers and your children. We welcome you to our great tree cities, to our cathedral life, to our quiet customs, and to our thoughts. You will move in peace among us. You need not fear."

I heard it say aloud, "My God! Monstrous! A spider, seven feet tall!"

It was then seized with some sort of spell, some paroxysm. Fluid gushed from its mouth, it shuddered violently.

I felt compassion and pity and sadness. Something was making this poor creature ill. It fell down, its face, which was white, was now very white indeed. It was gasping and trembling.

I moved to give it aid. In doing so, I must have somehow alarmed those within **the** ship by my speed, for even as I plucked up **the** fallen creature to render it help, an inner door of **the** ship flung wide. Others like my friend leaped out, shouting, confused, frightened, waving silver weapons.

"He's got Freeman!"

"Don't shoot! Idiot, you'll hit Freeman!"

"Careful!"

"God!"

Those were **the** words. Meaningless even now, but remem-

bered. I felt the fear in them, however. It burned the air. It burned my brain.

I have a mind of quick thinking. Instantly, I rushed forward, deposited the creature where he would be in easy reach of the others, and retreated soundlessly from their climate, thinking back at them: "He is yours. He is my friend. You are all my friends. All is well. I would help you and him, if I may. He is ill. Take fine care of him."

They were amazed. They stood, and their thought was amazement and a species of shock. They vanished their friend within the ship and stood gazing out and up at me. I sent my friendship, like a warm sea wind, to them. I smiled upon them.

Then I returned to the city of jeweled web, to our good city among the high trees, under the sun, in the fresh sky. It was beginning to rain a new rain. As I reached the place of my children and my children's children, I heard some words from far below and saw the creatures stand in the portway of their ship, looking up at me. The words were these:

"Friendly, by God. Friendly spiders."

"How can that be?"

Feeling very well, I started this tapestry and this narration, using wild lime-plums and peaches and oranges strung upon golden web. It made a fine pattern.



A NIGHT PASSED. The cool rains fell and washed our cities and hung them with clear jewels. I said to my friends, let the craft lie

there alone, let the creatures therein accustom themselves to our world, they will venture out farther, at last, and we will be friends, and their fear will vanish as all fears must, with love and friendship present. There will be much for our two cultures to learn. They, new, and boldly venturing into space in metal seeds, and us, very old and comfortable and hanging in our cities at midnight, feeling the rain fall upon us benevolently. We will teach them the philosophy of wind and stars and how the green grows up and how the sky is when it is blue and warm at noon. Surely they will want to know this. And they, in turn, will refresh us with tales of their far planet, perhaps even of their wars and conflicts, to remind us of our own past and what we, with common sense, have put away, like evil toys, in the sea. Let them be, friends, patience. In a few days, all will be well.



IT WAS CERTAINLY OF INTEREST. The air of confusion and horror that lay over that ship for a week. Again and again, from our comfortable sites in the trees, in the sky, we saw the creatures gazing at us. I put my mind into their ship and heard their words, unable to guess their meaning, but getting an emotional content, anyway:

"Spiders! My God!"

"Big ones! Your turn to go out, Negley."

"No, not me!"

It was on the afternoon of the seventh day that one of the creatures came forth, alone, unarmed, and called up to me in

the sky. I called back and sent him friendship, warmly, and with good intent. In an instant, the great jeweled city was trembling behind me in the sun. I stood by the visitor.

I should have known better. He broke and ran.

I pulled up short, continually sending my best and kindest thoughts. He calmed and returned. I sensed that they had had some sort of volunteering or contest. And this creature had been picked.

"Do not tremble," I thought.

"No," he thought, in my own language.

It was my turn to be surprised, but delighted.

"I've learned your language," he said, aloud, slowly, his eyes turning wildly, his mouth shaking. "With machines. During the week. You *are* friendly, aren't you?"

"Of course." I squatted, so we were on an equal level, eye to eye. We were perhaps six feet apart. He kept edging away. I smiled. "What do you fear? Not me, surely?"

"Oh, no, no," he said, hastily.

I heard his heart thumping in the air, a drum, a warm murmur, quick and deep.

In his mind, without knowing that I could read it, he thought, using our language: "Well, if I'm killed, the ship will only be out one man. Better lose one, than all."

"Kill!" I cried, shocked by the thought, stunned and amused. "Why, nobody has died in violence on our world for one hundred thousand years. Please put the thought away. We shall be friends."

The creature swallowed. "We've been studying you with instruments. Telepathy machines. Various gauges," he said. "You have a civilization here?"

"As you see," I said.

"Your IQ," he said, "has astounded us. From what we see and hear, it is above two hundred."

The term was a trifle ambiguous, but, again, of a fine humor to me, and I gave him a thought of joy and pleasure. "Yes," I said.

"I am the captain's aide," said the creature, venturing what I learned to be his own smile. The difference being, note, he smiled horizontally, instead of on the vertical, as do we members of the city of the trees.

"Where is the captain?" I asked.

"Ill," he replied. "Ill since the day of arrival."

"I'd like to meet him," I said.

"I'm afraid that won't be possible."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said. I sent my mind into the ship, and there was the captain, stretched out upon a kind of bed, muttering. Very sick indeed. He cried out from time to time. He shut his eyes and warded off a kind of fevered vision. "Oh, God, God," he kept saying, in his own tongue.

"Your captain is afraid of something?" I asked politely.

"No, no, oh, no," said the aide, nervously. "Just sick. We've had to select a new captain who'll come out later." He edged off. "Well, I'll see you."

"Let me escort you about our city tomorrow," I said. "All are welcome."

As he stood there, all the time he stood there talking to me, this awful trembling moved in him. Trembling, trembling, trembling, trembling.

"You are sick, also?" I asked.

"No, no," he said, turned, and ran into the ship.

Inside the ship, I felt him to be very sick.

I returned to our city in the heavens, among the trees, sorely perplexed. "How odd," I said. "How nervous these visitors are."

At twilight, as I continued work upon this plum and orange tapestry, I heard the one word drift up to me:

"Spider!"

But then I forgot this, for it was time to go up to the top of the city and wait for the first new wind off the sea, to sit there, among my friends, at peace, enjoying the smell and the goodness of it all, through the night.



IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT, I said to the begetter of my fine children: "What is it? Why are they afraid? What is there to fear? Am I not a good creature of fine intelligence and friendly character?" And the answer was yes. "Then why the trembling, the sickness, the violent ailments?"

"Perhaps a suggestion of this is in their appearance to us," said my wife. "I find them odd."

"Admitted."

"And strange."

"Yes, of course."

"And a little frightening in appearance. Looking at them, I am somewhat uncomfortable. They are so different."

"Think it through, consider it intelligently, and such thoughts vanish," I said. "It's a matter of aesthetics. We're simply accustomed to us. We have eight legs, they only four, two of which are not used as legs at all. Odd, strange, momentarily unsettling, yes, but I adjusted immediately, with reason. Our aesthetic is resilient."

"Perhaps theirs is not. Perhaps they do not like *the* way *we* look."

I laughed at this. "What, be frightened of just outward appearances? Nonsense!"

"You're right, of course. It must be something else."

"I wish I knew," I said. "I wish I knew. I wish I could put them at ease."

"Forget it," said my wife. "A new wind has arisen. Listen. *Listen.*"



THE NEXT DAY I took *the* new captain on a tour of our city. We talked for hours. Our minds met. He was a doctor of *the* mind. He was an intelligent creature. Less intelligent than we, yes. But this is nothing to consider with prejudice. I found him a creature of wit, good humor, considerable knowledge, and few prejudices, actually. Yet, all through *the* afternoon, while touring our heaven-moored city, I felt *the* hidden trembling, trembling.

I was too polite to mention it again.

The new captain swallowed a number of tablets from time to time.

"What are those?" I asked.

"For my nerves," he said, quickly. "That's all."

I carried him everywhere, and as often as possible I let him down to rest upon a tree branch. When it came time to go on again, he quailed when first I touched him and his face was terrible to see, in its own way.

"We are friends, aren't we?" I asked, with concern.

"Yes, friends. What?" He seemed to hear me for the first time. "Of course. Friends. You're a splendid race. This is a lovely city."

We talked of art and beauty and time and rain and the city. He kept his eyes shut. He kept his eyes shut and then we got on beautifully. Then he became excited when we talked and he laughed and was happy and complimented me on my own wit and intelligence. Strangely, I recall now that I got on best with him when I looked at the sky and not at him. This is an odd thing to note. He with his eyes closed, talking of minds and history and old wars and problems, and myself replying quickly.

It was only when he opened his eyes that he became almost instantly remote. I felt sad at this. He seemed to feel sad too. For he closed his eyes quickly and talked on, and in a minute our old rapport was reestablished. His trembling vanished.

"Yes," he said, eyes shut, "we are very good friends indeed."

"I am happy to hear you say that," I said.

I took him back to the ship. We bade each other good night, but he was trembling again and he went inside the ship and could not eat his evening meal. This I knew, for my mind was there. And I returned to my family, excited by a day intelligently spent, but colored by a sadness I had never known.



MY TALE IS almost at an end. The ship stayed with us another week. I saw the captain each day. We had wonderful times, talking, he with his face averted or his eyes closed. Our two worlds would get on well, he said. I agreed. All would be done in a great spirit of friendship. I toured various members of the crew through the city, but some became so stunned, for one reason or another, that I returned them, with apologies, in shock, to the spacecraft. All of them looked thinner than when they had landed. All had nightmares at night. The nightmares drifted to me, in a hot mist, very late, in darkness.

I record now a conversation I heard, by my mind, among the various members of that ship, on the last night. It is entirely by rote, with my incredible memory, that I set down these words, which mean nothing but may, someday, mean something to my descendants. Perhaps I am somewhat at disease. I feel a bit unhappy tonight for some reason. For there are still thoughts of death and terror in that ship below. I do not know what tomorrow will bring, surely I do not believe

these creatures mean us harm. In spite of their thoughts, so tortured and in confusion. I put this conversation of theirs into tapestry, however, in the event that some unbelievable incident should occur. I shall hide the tapestry in a deep burial mound in the forest for posterity. The conversation went, then, like this:

"What'll we do, Captain?"

"About them? About them?"

"The spiders, the spiders. What'll we *do*?"

"I don't know. God, I've tried to figure it. They're friendly. They have *fine* minds. They are *good*. This is no evil plot of theirs. I'm positive that if we wanted to move in, use their minerals, sail their seas, fly in their sky, they would welcome us with love and charity."

"We *all* agree, Captain."

"But when I *think* of bringing my wife and children—"

A shuddering.

"It would never work."

"Never."

Trembling, trembling.

"I can't face going out again tomorrow. I can't stand another day of being with those things."

"When I was a boy, I remember, a barn, a spider—"

"Jesus!"

"But we're men, aren't we, strong men? Don't we have any guts? What are we, *cowards*?"

"This isn't reason. It's instinct, aesthetics, call it what you

will. Will *you* go out tomorrow and talk to *the* Big One, that big hairy one with *the* eight legs, so damned tall?"

"No!"

"*The* captain's still in shock. None of us can eat. How would our children be, our wives, if *we* are this weak?"

"But they're *good*. They're *kind*. They're generous, they're everything we'll *never* be. They love everyone and they love us. They offer us help. They bid us enter."

"And enter we must, for many good reasons, commercial and otherwise."

"They're our *friends*!"

"Oh, God, yes."

Trembling, trembling, trembling.

"But it'll never work. They're just not *human*."

I am here in this night sky with my tapestry almost finished. I look forward to tomorrow when *the* captain will come again and we will talk. I look forward to *the* coming of all these good creatures who are confused now and somewhat alarmed but who will learn in time to love and be loved, to live with us and be our good friends. Tomorrow, *the* captain and I, I hope, will speak of rain and *the* sky and flowers and how it is when two creatures understand each other. *The* tapestry is finished. I finish it with a final quotation, in their own tongue, from *the* voices of *the* men in *the* ship, *the* voices that drift up to me on *the* blue night wind. Voices that seemed calmer and that accept circumstances and are not afraid anymore. Here ends my tapestry: