

FANTASY

STORY MAGAZINE

HYPERPELLO
by L. Sprague de Camp
STOLEN CENTURIES
by Otis Adelbert Kline
EXPERIMENT
by Roscoe Clark
**THE MAN WHO LOOKED
LIKE STEINMETZ**
by Robert Moore Williams

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A THRILLING
PUBLICATION

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VOL. 6, No. 2
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A Classic Novel

- ISLAND IN THE SKY**.....**MANLY WADE WELLMAN** 10
They were smashing more than atoms. They were smashing man's hope for a decent life — and Blackie broke jail to stop it!

Short Story Classics

- HYPERPILOSITY**.....**L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP** 67
Many a babe longs for a fur coat, but not as part of herself
THE MAN WHO LOOKED LIKE STEINMETZ.....**R. M. WILLIAMS** 88
He was only a little man — but he had a big, important idea!
STOLEN CENTURIES.....**OTIS ADELBERT KLINE** 101
He wanted to have a second chance — three hundred years later
EXPERIMENT.....**ROSCOE CLARK, F. R. C. S.** 112
The horror of the pathologist's experiment was its success!

Four New Stories

- GADGET BAGHDAD**.....**R. W. STOCKHEKER** 59
Nobody could ever figure out how the clown got into the act
DOOMSTRUCK.....**CLYDE B. SMITH** 75
The end of the world was coming, and he'd just begun to live!
THE MARTIANS CAME TO DINNER.....**CHARLES A. STEARNS** 97
Mrs. Worthington-Smythe issues invitations to a little party
LIBERATION.....**SAM SACKETT** 108
Survivors of the Mars I were beyond hope when the time came!

Features

- COSMIC ENCORES**.....**A DEPARTMENT** 6
SNIFF THAT ETHER AGAIN!.....**GREGG GNARLEN** 9
SONNET TO PEBBLES (A Poem).....**ALFRED I. TOOKE** 39
FROM OUTER SPACE—TO THE SCREEN.....**PAT JONES** 86

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The Martians Came to Dinner

By

CHARLES A. STEARNS

THERE is no denying that Mrs. Worthington-Smythe was a snob. But, being an interplanetary snob, she deserved, at least, credit for a unique approach. It was not easy to remain aloof on an uncharted world fifty-million miles from Earth, and yet Mrs. W.-S. managed it.

She lived apart from the closely-knit Terran colony, in a palatial, bubble-dome in wildest Central Mars, while her husband attended the offices of Colonial Administrator a hundred miles distant.

This is not to say that Mrs. Worthington-Smythe was left alone. Far from it. There were her two children, pale, worldly striplings both, who had seen everything that half a dozen worlds had to offer, and who were currently bored stiff with the Martian desert.

Then there were the interminable house guests. Sometimes a dozen or



They were an odd folk of bygone centuries

more. There were only three that eventful weekend, which was fortunate. (Or inadequate, depending entirely upon one's point of view.)

Ordinarily, these transient boarders were of the elite, interplanetary set. Mrs. Worthington-Smythe never mingled with locals. The Ahrimans, for instance, who were her only neighbors within fifty square kilometers, she had never met.

They were an odd folk, who lived in a quaint, old-fashioned house of bygone centuries, dating, no doubt, from the days of the early prospectors who had come and gone, leaving the miners to settle in their isolated communities, wrest the wealth from the ground, and take their leave, in turn.

Curiously, these early settlers had lived their own insular lives, earth-style, without seriously attempting to explore the land. Individual attempts had usually ended in tragedy.

A fact which led Miss Carstairs, the blonde and middle-aged daughter of a shipping magnate to declare five or six times each day of her visit, "But my dear, you must be very *brave* out here in the desert all alone, with ferocious savages all around you. And I hear they're (a delicious shudder) *cannibals*, too!"

Miss Carstairs appeared not to consider the rather pertinent fact that they were also surrounded by a fortress-like stockade.

"Heavens, no!" Mrs. Worthington-Smythe said, "Why, I've never even seen a native. *Heard* them, to be sure, but after all, there's the high wall around the place, and—"

"Heard them?"

"Oh, you'll hear them too, my dear. At night. They howl incessantly. At least I'm told it's the aboriginals."

MR. WRIGHT, an iron gray little man with more corporations than fingers and toes, leaned forward in his chair with sudden interest. "It's my first trip

to Mars, you know. I'd like to meet one of those chaps—over the sights of my .270, I mean."

The third guest, an ascetic looking young man, cleared his throat. When Mr. Ellington cleared his throat it usually meant trouble. Mr. Ellington was burdened with what is known as a social conscience, and he was unable to hide this rare, spiritual light under a bushel for very long at a time.

But he was frightfully clever, and his presence lent tone to any group, a fact which caused Mrs. Worthington-Smythe to overlook the knowledge, which she carefully concealed from the others, that he was merely "civil service."

"Harmless, really," said Mr. Ellington. "Though they really are homophagous, I'm told. It isn't surprising, considering the sparse life of the desert. One has to subsist some way. Perhaps our own race, under different circumstances, even at its present stage of development, might—"

"Mr. Ellington!" protested Miss Carstairs haughtily.

"It's possible. These are a humanoid race, though somewhat lower in the scale of evolution than our own. Why, there are even legends of such things among our own people. The old histories refer to it in several places, though it has been generally decided, nowadays, that human cannibalism was a myth. There was simply no reason for it on Earth, productive as we know the planet to be."

"I'd like to go after the blighters," said Mr. Wright, whose interest was singularly confined to banks and blood-letting.

"My husband could organize an official hunt, I suppose," Mrs. Worthington-Smythe said cautiously, "if I asked him to. Though the government frowns upon individual safaris these days."

"Do you really think he could?" said Mr. Wright.

"I'm sure of it. I'll call him Saturday and have him secure the necessary permits."

"It sounds exciting," Miss Carstairs said.

"None for me, thank you," said Mr. Ellington.

There was a slightly awkward pause, as after the first drops of cold rain at a lawn party. Mr. Ellington, perceiving it to be his fault, as usual, changed the subject.

"That interesting place across the dunes," he said suddenly. "Who lives there?"

He could have chosen a better subject.

"A local family," Mrs. Worthington-Smythe said. "You'd hardly wish to meet them."

"Oh, but I would," said Mr. Ellington. "Think of the facts they may be able to give us concerning native lore. If they've lived here very long they'll know quite a lot about the place."

"Well, I—really—"

"Couldn't you invite them over?"

Mrs. Worthington-Smythe had the sinking feeling that always preceded social disaster. They'd be completely impossible; just her luck. On the other hand, one's responsibility as a hostess. . .

"Of course," she said with unhappy inspiration. "We'll have a little party tomorrow night. I'll send a servant over to invite the Ahrimans. No—I'll ask them myself, in person. Tomorrow."

And with this decision the subject was gratefully abandoned. Drinks were ordered all around. The conversation gained an even keel once more and progressed satisfactorily until bedtime.

IT IS hard to say what possessed Mrs. Worthington-Smythe. The guests were all in bed, and the house was silent.

She stood alone upon the narrow balcony outside her room and reveled in the clear, thin Martian night air. She was, ordinarily, a phlegmatic woman who lived by prearranged schedule, in solid reality. But the night was warm and romantic, and the lights twinkled in the darkness. They came from the windows of the old house.

How venturesome, she thought, if I should go there now, alone! And straightway the decision was made.

She threw on a coat and made her way to the copter roof, where her private runabout waited. She stood for a moment, shivering in the breeze that was not as warm as before. From across the desert a sound was wafted on the wind. A faint, but unmistakable howl.

But there was mettle in the makeup of Mrs. Worthington-Smythe. The copter rose silently and glided across the sands, sparkling whitely below her in the light of double moons.

She landed in front of the gloomy place and walked boldly up to the front door. There was an ancient brass knocker. She had read about such devices in her history books. She raised the knocker and banged it twice, listening. She thought there was a stirring sound inside, but couldn't be sure.

She knocked again. There was a padding of feet. The door cracked open cautiously. A head protruded. A dark and foreign-looking head, but withal, classically handsome.

"How do you do?" Mrs. Worthington-Smythe said. "I'm your neighbor." And she introduced herself.

"Ah!" the head said, "from across the desert!" And the voice held an indefinable accent. The door opened wider. "Won't you come in?"

"Thank you, no," said Mrs. Worthington-Smythe, who felt understandably reluctant. "It's quite late, and I haven't much time. You must be Mr. Ahriman."

"I am," said Mr. Ahriman. He was a smallish man, darkly silhouetted against the dimly-lit hallway.

"I have come to ask you—that is, we are having a party tomorrow night, and I should be delighted if you and your family would come." Mrs. W.-S. had a vague idea that there were a good many of the Ahrimans.

"This is sudden," Mr. Ahriman said. "I—"

And it was at that precise moment

that the sound came. It rose from somewhere behind the house and hung, piercing, lugubrious, in the air, nerve-shattering, splitting the night into fearsome shards.

"Do not be afraid," said Mr. Ahriman.

"I am not," replied Mrs. Worthington-Smythe stoutly, "though the constant bedlam at night does get on one's nerves. You'll be glad to know that we have decided to deal with these creatures soon."

"How is that?"

"We are organizing a hunt. You may come along if you wish. There will be government guides, and I assure you it will be quite safe."

Mr. Ahriman was silent for a moment. He seemed shocked. "Do you think that it is—well, advisable? It seems almost like *murder*, doesn't it?"

"Oh, my dear sir!" said Mrs. Worthington-Smythe scornfully, "It's not as though they were human beings!" She remembered Mr. Ellington's words and repeated them gratefully.

"But supposing that, instead of savages," said Mr. Ahriman, "they are simply an older race, in decline. Beings who are forced to live as they do through circumstances. I have lived here in the desert a long time, and I urge you to reconsider."

"They howl," said Mrs. Worthington-Smythe stolidly, "and I am told that they have tails. There are certain other things about them, too. They are animals, and quite possibly dangerous. I shall instruct my husband to bring guides and rifles on Saturday."

Mr. Ahriman shrugged.

"Will you come tomorrow night?"

"We shall be delighted."

"Do not bother to be dreadfully formal," said Mrs. Worthington-Smythe, "It is a small house party."

Mr. Ahriman showed his teeth pleasantly. They were fine, white teeth. "I believe there need be no worry on that score," he said, "though we seldom visit anyone. The last family who lived here

left rather precipitately, leaving much clothing behind, among it several dinner jackets, I remember. As a matter of fact," he laughed apologetically, "it was they who built this house, and much of the furniture in it is theirs."

"It is a lovely place," said Mrs. Worthington-Smythe. "So quaint. . . ."

"I must be going," she said finally. "Dinner is at eight, Marstime."

"We shall be there," Mr. Ahriman said. "Good night."

FRIDAY was a century in passing. At least it seemed so to Mrs. Worthington-Smythe, who keenly felt the responsibility of the coming night. There was a pall upon the house which she could not explain. There was a thick, cloying ennui that affected every guest.

They chose to loll upon the couches of the sun room, and they spoke rarely, and in monotones. Mrs. Worthington-Smythe, however, knew the value of keeping busy. She spent the afternoon in a flurry of preparation and planning. And darkness came at last.

The clock in the hallway chimed seventhirty in a musical, brass voice, and the doorbell echoed it. It was quite dark outside now, and the evening had grown cold.

"Midge!" called Mrs. Worthington-Smythe. "Midge, answer the doorbell." But the butler was in another part of the house. She'd have to answer it herself.

She hurried, and yet her feet seemed strangely weighted down, so that walking was difficult. It was in her mind, she knew, a strange reluctance . . . she opened the door.

It was the Ahrimans, all right. There were quite a lot of them, waiting patiently there in the gloom.

Mr. Ahriman smiled pleasantly, white teeth flashing, and bowed. They were dressed in white ties and tails. Long, furry, prehensile tails.

They were dressed fit to kill, and it goes without saying that the party was one howl of a success. . . .