

Galaxy

SCIENCE FICTION

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GALAXY Science Fiction is published monthly by World Editions, Inc. Main offices: 105 West 40th St., New York 18, N. Y. 25¢ per copy. Subscriptions (12 copies) \$2.50 per year in the United States, Canada, Mexico, South and Central America and U. S. Possessions. Elsewhere \$3.25. Application for entry as second-class matter is pending at the Post Office, New York, N. Y. Copyright, 1950, by World Editions, Inc. President: George A. Gogniat. Vice-President: Marco Lombi. Secretary and Treasurer: Anne Swereda. All rights, including translation, reserved. All material submitted must be accompanied by self-addressed stamped envelopes. The publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited material. All stories printed in this magazine are fiction, and any similarity between characters and actual persons is coincidental.



February, 1951

Vol. 1, No. 5

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Next issue at your newsstand first week in February

Printed in the U. S. A.

Reg. U. S. Pat. Off.

The Protector

BY BETSY CURTIS

There's a fortune in a boxer who feels no pain. This one didn't, except in odd ways...

HOW come I live here on Gorlin permanent? Well, it's something like this.

There is nobody real surprised when some scientist writes an article in the Sunday supplement about the primitive tribes of Anestha dying out, probably. The Anesthon natives is freaks, anyway, and folks

Illustrated by DAVID STONE



just naturally figure they can't last long in stiff competition. If you are like them and your body don't feel any pain any time, you need a nursemaid around to keep you from doing dumb things, like walking in front of a truck or starving to death.

I am here on Gorlin a couple times and know about 'em. Some folks think it's comical to watch the space crews think up ways to give an Anesthon a workout. I see one Anesthon girl—a real looker she is, too—dance fourteen hours before she gives out, just for a bottle of perfume and one of them Venusian fur lounge robes. They sure enjoy their pleasures, even if they never feel no pain. You feeling any? More thiska?

Hey, Noor! Another round of thiska for the boys!

Well, they can feel your feelings, and any thoughts that are about them, too. I guess all they live for is pleasure and a pat on the back. One time a little runty Anesthon guy even builds a whole stone blockhouse for a first looie, when the looie thinks real hard that the little guy looks like a first-rate hod carrier. Time the house is built, the Anesthon's hands is all bloody and one ankle broke where a chunk of rock drops on him. He don't notice it, of course.

Pierre gets all worked up about them Anestha dying out. That's my boy Pierre, the heavyweight. I name him Pierre so's nobody thinks he is

tough till afterward. He comes from Gorlin. Of course I have to stable him on Venus long enough for a legal residence, or the Boxing Commission would have him investigated and maybe banned from the ring as a telepath. Tough training him, too. He can't see the sense of fighting, but, man, he can stay in the ring all night. He never does get real speedy on his feet, but he learns fast and packs a wicked left. I don't have to lie when I am thinking real hard he is champeen material.

Anyhow, Pierre gets all worked up over his race getting extinct. He has a sister who is glenched to some nice boy and his old man is some sort of a chief. He is all for beating it back by the next via-Venus ship to see what is getting at the old folks at home. I calm him down though, give him a couple of shots of thiska and say I better take him around to see that scientist-dopester and get the inside first. I have to go everywhere with him to see he doesn't break a leg and forget to tell me about it.

SO WE hope a TAT in Chi and make for Washington where this science fellow is with some Smithsonian Institute. He is nice enough about seeing us, but he can't figure how a Chinaman like Pierre has any call to be steamed up about the Anestha (you seen these Anestha with their slick black hair and goldy skin and smooth eyelids like

a Earth Chinaman) so I have to break down 'and tell him about Pierre being an Anesthon.

That scientist is pretty peeved with me bringing Pierre into the Earth system, but when I tell him Pierre wants to go back to help out the folks, he kind of clams up and says the article is just one of those Sunday paper things. There don't really seem to be anything wrong on Gorlin except that all the workers are getting more careless than usual, falling off walls they are building and getting hit by rocks during blasting, or walking in front of full cars in the mines.

Pierre gives the man a look. "Workers? Mines? Blasting?" he says. "What gives? There are no mines on Gorlin," he says, "just a few quarries and a lot of big farms. We never have to kill ourselves working. What gives?" he says.

"Oh," the man comes back, "there's a couple big targ mines in full swing. Some big Earth concern is shipping out the stuff five freighters a day to Mercury for mass insulation. All native workers. They don't get paid much—weej cigarettes, bubble bath, some thiska, electro-fur blankets, stuff like that—but I don't hear yapping. If I do, I report anything that looks like slavery." Of course he says it with a lot of grammar and it takes him a half hour, but that is the slant.

He wants to gab some then with Pierre. I see that the boy is getting

jittery and homesick, too, when the guy starts raving about swimming in the flaff pools and the feeling of katweela petals under your bare feet, so I says we have to catch a plane and get out of there.

Pierre still wants to head for Gorlin. He says his people must be unhappy about something or they are more careful. Life on Gorlin is too much fun to just go and die for no reason.

I try to pep him up on the way back to Chi, talking about his next fight with Kid Bop, but he says he can't see any reason in fighting, either, just now. I tell him I think he kind of likes fighting, but he says what he likes is the nice things I think about him when he wins, and he is too worried about his family to pay much attention to what I think just now.

WELL, we are both pretty flush from one of the best fight seasons I ever see and a rest won't hurt the boy, so I say okay, we are going by the first liner off the Flats.

"You don't have to go, Joe," he says. "Keep your dough and train a couple more kids. I may not be back," he says.

"Look, boy," I says, "you know what the food is like on them liners," I says, kind of kidding, "and if there's nobody around to cram it down you, you don't eat, and if you don't eat, you starve—and if you starve, you are in no condition to cheer up your sister and

your old man. Besides," I says, "I can afford a vacation and you're the only fighter I want to work with. You've got a real future," I says, "and I'm going to bring you back alive."

I guess that makes him feel kind of good, because he grins first time since he reads that paper and says, "All right, Joe, come on along."

WE BUY a few pretties and neckties in the station and ship out of Chi for the Flats on the next TAT. Pierre wants to get some perfume for his sister, but I tell him we can get better on Venus, where all the good stuff is made.

The trip from Venus Space Base to Gorlin is fast on account of overdrive, but even so I have no trouble passing Pierre off as a fighter who has the jitters and is headed for a vacation where he learns to take it easy the easy way. He is always burning his fingers or his mouth on a cigarette, and I have to keep an eye on him all the time. Nerves, I explain to the passengers.

When we land, Pierre is all for hunting up his folks, but I says no, if there is some trouble, it is smarter to case the joint. We check in at the swanky tourist hotel. She is new since I am on Gorlin a couple years ago and what class! She is built around one of the biggest flaff pools on the whole planet and our room is completely lined with padded velvety stuff, sort of a deep red color, and the bathroom

has a cloudrift shower that you nearly float away on.

But Pierre just doesn't relax. I keep trying to make him get in the shower, but it is no use. He says he is just too worried to take any pleasure in it. I don't think we ought to go scouting till night and that is thirty some hours yet, but when I see he is settling down to wear the fuzz right off the floor walking round and round, I give in, feed him a sandwich I bring from the ship, and we stroll off in the woods like we are looking for flowers.

There are no signs around the hotel saying which way to the mines, so we set off to circle the hotel and spaceport clearing to look for the rail-line that brings the targ to the port. I figure we have gone about two-thirds of the way around when I nearly fall over a guy sitting on the ground with his head in his hands. What I think is katweela flowers is just the red Anesthon kloa he has on. He looks up sort of dull and then he sees Pierre with me. He lets out a yip and sits back hard on the ground and moans. Pierre yanks the fellow up on his feet and hugs him and starts to jabber away so fast I can't tell what he is saying. Foreigners always talk faster than anybody else. The other guy puts in a word or two every once in a while and then he scrams off through the trees.

"That's Noor," Pierre informs me, "the guy my sister Jennel is

glenched to. He's gonna get us a couple of kloas so nobody'll notice us around the mine. He's feeling mighty low, but I can't figure out why. He says Jennel and the old man are okay, only he can't ever carry Jennel to his own house because he ain't man enough. I don't get it. He can make a good fighter, Joe."

BEFORE you can count three, Noor is back again with the kloas and Pierre strips and gets into his. I ain't too keen to show my shapelies, but Pierre starts grabbing my shirt and I have to put the kloa on or else. The boys head south at a good clip and I tag along trying to catch up and find out the score. When Pierre sees I am making like winded, he slows down and tells me we are going to the mine owner's fancy dump about two miles down the drag. Pierre says Noor tells him the mine owner doesn't like him and he has to leave us when we get in sight of the house.

After about a mile, Noor begins to drag along. Then he just sits down under another tree and says that is the end of the line for him. He points through the trees and says go on, maybe he is still there when we come back, maybe not. While Pierre is jawing with him, I look up the trail and see a Anesthon babe about a hundred feet away. You can tell it is a babe from one of them blue and green mollos draped around her over the kloa.

Noor sees her, too, and takes off like a bat back the way we come. Pierre jogs ahead and when I get up with him, there he is hugging and jabbering again.

"My sister Jennel," he says, and, "Jennel, this is Joe, my manager."

She is a cute trick with lots of yumph showing through the molla. She stands kind of slumped, though, and a few of the flowers in her shiny black hair are pretty mashed.

"'Smatter, Jennel?" I says. "You look kind of dragged out for a dame whose brother comes home practically a champeen. Katweela flowers go on strike?" I says, just trying to make talk.

She slumps a little more and says the boss don't like her and how it's too bad her brother has to come home and find her still alive and cluttering up the woods.

I tell Pierre she better take us to this boss that don't like a babe like her, but she just shakes her head and says go that way and we come to the house. Then she says the boss makes the natives use the employees' entrance on the other side of the house and she offers to take and show us the way. She kind of twitches when she says "natives."

She don't even says yes or no all the way to the gate till, just before we get there, I trip on a root and bang my knee on a rock on the way down. Well, I howl and cuss some and she comes up close and asks me what seems to be the matter. I

tell her the blamed rock hurts my knee and I think real hard about how her knee would feel if a rock hits it and she busts right out crying.

"Oh, you poor man, you poor man, you," she sobs. "That rock don't like you at all."

"It don't hate me, either," I says. "It's only a rock."

"But it makes a hurt to you. It don't love you and now you are not happy where there's any rocks because they don't love you," she says, and she helps me up and starts dragging me along, still crying like crazy.

I DON'T make nothing out of that, but pretty soon we come to a little gate in a thick row of bushes. Jennel lets go of me then and says she hopes Pierre is a strong man and a good worker and that the boss likes him. And then she gives a big sigh and says if the boss don't like him, we can find her over there where the men are cutting down a bunch of trees, because if one of the trees likes her, it will maybe fall on her pretty soon.

Pierre tells her to wait right there by the gate because he is coming back. He isn't looking for work so the boss won't care if he is strong or not. She just sighs again and sits down on the grass and whimpers.

Pierre tries once more to get her to tell him what is the matter, but all she says is that their father and some other fellow named Frith are

up at the big house. They are being talked to by the boss about not getting out enough targ on the shifts where they are foremen, and she says how sad it is about Pierre coming home.

It is just beginning to filter through my thick skull that the boss is connected with all this dying out of the Anestha, as the Sunday paper puts it, and I grab Pierre away from Jennel and hustle him through the gate.

"Look, Pierre," I says, "we'll go around and listen by them long windows and see what cooks. I'll bet that boss is up to something dirty in there. If he is the one who messed up Jennel," I says, "we better just mess him up some."

There is nobody in sight on the lawn and we just march up to the window easy as pie. There is this big booming voice giving somebody what for.

"You poor miserable idiots," yells this voice, "you can't keep the workers off the tracks and you get out less than twenty tons of targ since last night, and then you waste a whole charge of nitro by not telling the watchman he's not supposed to smoke in the enclosure. All those people are dead and it's your fault."

I hear a snuffle behind me and when I turn around, there is Jennel. She has sneaked up behind us to see what we are going to do.

"That's how he talks to me, too," she lets us know in a whisper, "only he says I am not fit to even

wash dishes, let alone ever have a house of my own . . . when I drop one of his plates a little while ago. He says I am looking in a mirror instead of where I am going and he hopes I see what an ugly pan I have, because I ought to know it and keep out of people's way so they won't have to look at me." Her tears splash right down on the grass.

"And that's not all," the yelling inside goes on. "Not only do you kill off all my workers, but at this rate I'm losing money paying you four packs of cigarettes a day. If I have to blast off and start from scratch in some other part of this blamed universe, you stupid, gutless . . . why, you aren't even men. You worms don't even run when you see a car coming at you. Too blamed dumb to come in out of the rain."

I stick my head around the corner and look in, and there is the back of a big guy in a Mercury-made suit and with a bald head that is red all the way round to the back of his neck. On the other side of the room I see a couple of the sorriest-looking Anestha God ever makes, shuffling their feet and looking like kicked dogs.

I turn to Pierre. "Go in there swinging," I says, like at a fight, and pull the window open.

"He won't like me," Pierre says, hanging back. "He says Anestha are dumb cowards. Maybe he knows. Maybe I won't dare hit him."

"You get in there and poke him, boy," I says and give him a push. "I like you and I see you fight and the Anestha got more guts than anybody!"

THE big guy hears us and turns around. "Get out of here, you mangy natives," he bellows. "You good for nothing, shivering, sniveling, cowardly boobs. I'm not ready for you yet." He is shaking a whippy-looking cane at me and Pierre, and I think he has turned purple.

"We're ready for you, though," I yell back. I climb into the room pulling Pierre in after me. "Pierre's no sniveling coward and you can quit talking to his brave, heroic, self-sacrificing father like that. Put 'em up and defend yourself, you howling ape," I yell, "because Pierre is going to give you the beating of your howling life!"

I see Pierre's old man and the other fellow spruce up some.

The big guy sits down in a chair real quick, and, sucking in a big breath, he starts going all fatherly at Pierre, telling him that he doesn't want to have to hit him back, because Pierre will not feel it when he kills him, which he doesn't want to have to do because Pierre is just a poor weak Anestha who don't know from nothing, and he doesn't want to injure any of his workers and he is just telling Pierre's old man a few things to protect the Anestha.

Pierre looks at me kind of doubtful.

"Go on, hit the fat bully," I says, real icy. "He has it coming. You owe it to your old man and Noor and Jennel here. Go ahead and show him what kind of champeens the Anestha can turn out. It's just for his own good," I says, "so hit him now. Then you can tell your dad what a great guy you are."

Pierre's left obediently swings into the lug's jaw with a crack like a rifle. He don't even watch the big guy sag down on the floor. He begins hugging his father and the other fellow and grinning and jabbering away like blue blazes.

The big guy is still breathing, but out cold, so I go to look for a televiz. I figure the authorities better hear my story before the big guy wakes up.

After I make my spiel, the port chief says to come in and bring Pierre and his father and Frith and Jennel and Noor, too, if we can find him, and make an official re-

corded report. He is sending a doctor out by 'copter.

We beat it for the port, leaving the fat boss sleeping on the floor.

We all stay in protective custody at the hotel, swimming in flaff and lounging around the thiska bar for a couple of weeks, until the commission headed by that scientist from the Smithsonian Institute comes out and takes the boss back to Earth. He has to see a judge about why he should not go into stir for a while for psychological coercion or something like that.

Before they leave, the commission hands me an official charge at a hundred thou a year to stay as Protector of Morale to the Anestha. That is better than the fight racket, but the protectorship is a laugh. I can't even go out for a walk without a couple dozen Anestha tagging along, to keep me from stubbing my toe on some unfriendly pebble, or socking my eye on some unloving devil of a doorknob.

—BETSY CURTIS