

ROBERT F. YOUNG

*Robert Young's most recent stories here ("No Deposit*No Refill, February; "New Route to the Indies," August) dealt with the lighter sides of life but this time Young tackles a more somber theme, symbolized by Owen Spring as—*

THE DECAYED LEG BONE

Illustrated by DAN STEFFAN

THE "AWOL Amerind" awed the plenipotentiary from Earth, even though Marque knew perfectly well that the huge figure that had suddenly appeared on the main deck of the ESS *Landfall* wasn't Owen Spring in the flesh but a greatly magnified three-dimensional projection. Nevertheless, the image was so realistic that only by rising from his seat, walking around the rectangular negotiating table and thrusting his hand through the figure's "body"—a course of action Marque's diplomatic dignity strictly forbade—could the plenipotentiary have wholly convinced himself of the projection's insubstantiality.

The flesh-and-blood Owen Spring, presumably at least, was standing somewhere on Heaven World's major continent, thousands of miles "below," a homemade audio-visual projector-receiver positioned somewhere behind him. The dossier that the ES Navy had supplied Marque and that lay before him on the negotiating table gave the Amerind's height as a mere 5' 9½", indicating that in projecting his image on board the *Landfall* Spring had blown it up to at least twice his normal size, and strongly suggesting that he might not be quite as psychologically inept as the plenipotentiary had thought.

However, there was no alternative but to accept the projection as the real thing. Spring was wearing a beaver-skin (or its Heaven-World equivalent) weskit, deerskin-like leggings, and moccasins made of the same material. His black hair fell all the way to his shoulders and at first glance appeared unkempt; his narrow beardless face made the plenipotentiary think of the prow of a Great Lakes icebreaker.

Seated at Marque's left was Ms. Kleist, His Monroesque aide; to his right sat Captain Gerhard, the commander of the *Landfall*. Ranged along the same side of the negotiating table were additional dignitaries, but their passive role in this history obviates any need to enumerate them. Also present on the *Landfall's* main deck, raze rifles at port, were six white-uniformed Space Marines. The significance of Spring's insistence on a fixed orbital position had escaped the captain as completely as it had escaped the plenipotentiary, and the former had acted on the assumption that the Amerind would be dumb enough to come on board bodily.

"I take it," Marque said, addressing the Amerind and bringing to an end the stunned silence occasioned by the projection's sudden appearance, "that you're using equipment sufficiently sophisticated to enable you to see us as well as hear and talk to us."

Owen Spring nodded.

"Good." Marque introduced the others and himself. Then he said, "The official photo contained in the dossier before me is prima facie evidence of your identity. However, for the benefit of the tape Ms. Kleist is making of this meeting, would you be kind enough to state your name?"

"Owen Spring." Not only were the words perfectly modulated, they emanated, to all intents and purposes, from the projection's mouth.

"Thank you." Most of the plenipotentiary's awe had departed; the little that remained would soon follow. "We are gratified," he continued, "that you have so graciously and promptly responded to our radioed request to negotiate."

"I've been expecting you for months," Spring said. "What took you so long to get off the ground?"

Of all those present at the table, only Marque knew the real answer to that one, and he wasn't about to tip the PanNatGov's hand. "The usual red tape, he lied. Then, "May we assume from the fact that you didn't board us in the flesh that the STPTS you stole two years ago is no longer operable? Or was it because when you girdled Heaven World with a zeta-xi-field fence you not only shut the rest of humankind out but yourself in?"

"You can assume whatever you want, Owen Spring said. He glanced to his left, then to his right, taking in the pigmy-like Space Marines ranged on either side of him. He grinned. "Fine Honor Guard."

One of the main-deck's miniviewscreens, all of which were focused on Heaven World, was located just to the left of the visitor's huge head, and from where Marque sat the little blue planet had the aspect of an earring suspended from the Amerind's left ear. For some reason, this annoyed the plenipotentiary even more than the man's obvious irony.

Forgoing further preamble, Marque got down to business: "Lieutenant Spring, The All-Nations Government has authorized me to offer you virtually anything within reason if you will agree to deactivate your zeta-xi field fence at once and to cooperate with us in the development and colonization of those territories to which we already hold legal title but which, through some remarkable feat of mental legerdemain, you apparently regard as your own. Even you must admit that such a proposition is a magnanimous gesture indeed on the part of the PanNatGov in view of the fact that you stand charged in *absentia* by the ESN both with desertion and the theft of PanNatGov property. I might add that pending the outcome of this hearing yet a third charge may be leveled against you—that of treason."

Again, Owen Spring grinned. Then, in what appeared to be an aside but what was probably intended for an audience invisible to the negotiating committee, he said: ". And now another message for the people: sometime you may be called into a big building or aboard a big ship to attend a meeting: Be careful, for before you know it, the meeting will change its name to 'hearing', and then to 'trial', and you will discover all of a sudden that everybody there is pointing his finger at you."

A PAIR OF pink waves broke over the plenipotentiary's plump cheeks and washed against the bushy peninsulas of his sideburns. He decided on a less direct approach. "I think," he said to the assemblage as a whole, "that it will be of benefit to all concerned if we review briefly the events leading up to Lieutenant Spring's decision to remain on Heaven World and his subsequent decision to build a fence around it.

"You will recall that after its fortuitous discovery of the new New World the ESS *Hunter* proceeded to photomap the entire planet and to analyze both its atmosphere and surface features. This done, it then sent down the little ship-to-planet-to-ship vehicle it carried—the only vehicle it carried larger than a spacecraft—for a more intimate look at the three land masses. The craft's pilot and sole occupant was a EsNaval officer named Owen Spring."

AFTER PILOTING the STPTS on a number of crisscross courses over the planet's two minor continents, one of which consisted wholly of rocks and sand and the other of which brought Antarctica to mind, Spring had gone on to the major land mass. Silent up till then, he had suddenly begun augmenting the data being relayed back to the *Hunter* by the vehicle's sensors with emotion-charged descriptions of wooded hills and valleys, of great green plateaus; of myriad cataracts showing like dazzling sequins on the mauve bodices of cloud-bonneted mountains. Of vast tracts covered with what appeared to be wild berry bushes; of rivers, streams, lakes and brooks. "Just the way *Ganiodaivo* said," he was heard to murmur in an awed voice. And then, a moment later, "Heaven World". Not long afterward he sent back word that the paradisiacal planet he had just christened was inhabited. The captain of the *Hunter*, no friend of Spring's and contemptuous of his ancestry, asked sarcastically, "By Injuns?" No, Spring said. Not exactly. But they brought Indians to mind. Stone-Age Indians. He'd obtained only a glimpse of them through the treetops, a glimpse so fleeting it had failed to register on the *Hunter's* receptor screens, but he'd received the distinct impression of two opposing groups of humanoids trying to exterminate each

other. A little while later he passed over a meadow-like plain spangled with blue and yellow flowers where a second intertribal battle was in progress. "They're carving each other up like crazy," was the way he described it. The *Hunter's* screens bore him out. After that, he was Silent for a long time. Then he said, "I'm on low-altitude hover now. Above one of their villages." He went on to describe it in detail, despite the fact that the STPTS' sensors were relaying it photo-visually to the *Hunter*: Primitive dugouts with bark roofs; a larger dugout, centrally located, presumably a community center; an outlying acre of what appeared to be emaciated corn stalks; men and women wielding Stone-Age implements; skinny children running about; evidence everywhere of ignorance, inanition, disorganization, frequent raids. Then Spring was silent for an even longer time. Finally he had said, "Coming in low toward a range of hills. Fires burning on their slopes—cook-fires. It's dusk. 'Injuns' sitting round the fires. Lookouts posted on the hilltops. Looking the wrong way. Down instead of up . . . Naked in the night, all of them. Fair game for the first *Santa Maria* to drop anchor in their skies . . . It's time a prophet appeared in their land. Yes. Time. High time—"

At this point, the *Hunter's* receptor screens went blank and Owen Spring's voice was heard no more. Repeated attempts to reestablish contact had failed and subsequent blown-up orbital photos of the area had revealed no sign of vehicle or pilot. Despite its three billion-dollar price tag and despite the tens of thousands of dollars the ESN had spent transforming Spring from a fledgling scientific genius into a full-fledged one, both vehicle and pilot were adjudged dispensable, and after taking possession of Heaven World (the name Spring had given the planet was to become official) in accordance with Article 9, Paragraph E of the New Revised Space Law, the *Hunter* had returned to Earth.

Six months later, the advance contingent of the reactivated Planet Preparatory Corps had showed up. But they might as well have stayed home: during the interval between the *Hunter's* departure and their arrival, someone (guess who!) had encompassed the new New World, atmosphere and all, with an impenetrable zeta-xi-field fence.

CAPTAIN GERHARD said, "Lieutenant, when the PPTeam finally made contact with you via the STPTS' radio, you told them according to their report—and I quote—'Get the hell away from my Reservation!' Is that correct?"

Spring frowned. "Seems like I used stronger language than that."

"No matter. Will you tell us what prompted you to steal an entire planet?"

"I didn't steal it. I only fixed things so you couldn't."

"You're not the simpleton you let on to be, Lieutenant," Marque broke in. "You know perfectly well that we merely intend to take over from the indigenes in a purely supervisory capacity that will be of eventual benefit to them as well as to us. And you know equally as well that a consolidation of nations like the PanNatGov couldn't possibly be motivated by mere territorial acquisitiveness—that Earth's response to the discovery of Heaven World was and is a manifestation not of avidity but of Lebensraum."

Tiny splinters of light appeared briefly in the Amerind's dark-brown eyes. "No, I'm not a simpleton—and I'm not a fool either. Calling a bunch of trees a forest doesn't change the nature of the trees, and using a word like 'Lebensraum' doesn't change the nature of planetary rape!"

"May I ask him a question, Paul?" Ms. Kleist interjected.

Marque needed a moment's respite. "Of course, Gert—go ahead."

Ms. Kleist's blue gaze bathed the projection's larger-than-life face. "Lieutenant Spring, just before severing contact with the *Hunter*, you said, 'It's time a prophet appeared in their land'. Were you perhaps thinking of a Christ?"

Owen Spring smiled. "I was thinking of *Ganiodaivo*. The Injun Christ."

Ms. Kleist, Marque, Captain Gerhard and the others looked at him blankly.

Spring continued to smile. It was an unorthodox smile. There was sadness in it, and a strange softness; yet it did not in the least allay the ice-breaker aspect of his face. "You didn't know the Injuns had a Christ, did you? The Iroquois Injuns, that is."

"*Ganiodaivo*—'Handsome Lake'—" Spring went on when it became evident no comments were forthcoming, "never presumed to be a Christ, and strictly speaking, he wasn't one. He was a prophet. But even as a prophet, most of the Iroquois didn't take him seriously for centuries. Now they do. I know all about such things. My grandfather was a Code of Handsome Lake preacher.

"Handsome Lake was born some time before the American Revolution in a little Seneca village on the Genesee River. He didn't look like much, and he never amounted to much either till he reached his 60's. As a matter of fact, up till then he was a drunk. Then, after a long illness, he had a series of visions in which he saw three messengers (a fourth showed up later) sent to him by the Great Spirit. They gave him *Gaiwiive*—the good word—and told him to go forth and preach it to his people. Which he did, and it became known as the 'Code of Handsome Lake'. Some say he didn't get it that way at all—that he got it from the Quaker missionaries. Maybe so. The point is, even in its original form it's a good code even a noble one. His preaching it to his people gave them back their identity and saved them from complete whitemanization. He died in the early 1800's. His ministry lasted sixteen years."

THROUGHOUT Spring's biographical sketch part of Marque's mind had been sojourning in the Mare Imbrium region of Earth's moon where the "Auntie" missile stood waiting on her launching pad in the midst of the fleet of refurbished "sardine-ships" the PanNatGov had originally built to effect the colonization of Mars and had later abandoned when the planet's periodic dust storms had proved unconquerable. The Auntie missile was the result of the crash-program Spring had unwittingly and unknowingly initiated when he'd told the PPTeam to get the hell away from his Reservation. Her warhead comprised pure anti-zeta-xi matter that at the time of the Amerind's edict hadn't even existed on paper. It was a concrete testimonial to man's resourcefulness and all-around ingenuity when confronted with the seemingly insurmountable (in this case, impenetrable), and would when brought into contact with a zeta-xi field such as the one girdling Heaven World annihilate both the field and itself without permanently affecting the planet's atmosphere. Auntie, as both missile and warhead had come to be called, was the ace in the PanNatGov's sleeve, to be played only when the diplomatic deck ran out.

At length, noting the continued silence and realizing that the others at the table were waiting for him to resume command, the plenipotentiary said, "So you landed the STPTS and went AWOL because you thought you were a second Handsome Lake—is that it, Lieutenant?"

"Something like that," Spring said. "I thought of myself as a sort of second *Deganawida* too. *Deganawida*, way back in the sixteenth century, founded the League of Five Nations and established the 'Great Peace'. The 'Injuns' of Heaven World regard me as a god. I let them. As a god, they listen to what I have to say. But all I am really is a self-ordained Modern Code of Handsome Lake preacher."

"A missionary!" Marque almost gagged on the word. Then, "You must have had other thoughts during your moment of truth, Lieutenant."

"I did. I thought of Sullivan's raid on the Senecas in 1779. I thought of the Buffalo Treaty of 1838. I thought of the Kinzua Dam. I thought of the Trail of Tears the Cherokee left on their forced march west. I thought of the bulldozers chewing up the hills of twentieth-century California. I thought of the sardine-ships on the moon. Waiting. I thought of a lot of things. But most of all, I thought of the *Five Things*."

The plenipotentiary sighed. "Go on, Lieutenant."

"According to one of *Ganiodaivo's* visions, when the white man came to America he brought with him Five Things—Five Evils. A handful of coins, a pack of playing cards, a violin, a flask of rum and a decayed leg bone."

Oh boy! Marque thought. Aloud, he said, "I see. Well, I suppose there's no harm in reducing the whitemanization of the Amerinds to five simplistic symbols, although I might point out that the analogy you obviously have in mind contains an element of irony, since the 'white' man who will eventually be emigrating to Heaven World will be, among a host of other hues, partly red. But at least," Marque continued, "your motive for fencing in PanNatGov property is no longer obscure. Now, at least, we have a concrete base on which to negotiate. Suppose I were to guarantee in writing to set up a sort of Ellis Island space-station in Heaven World's skies that would make it impossible for any of these Five Things

you object to to get through—would you then agree to deactivate your fence?"

"It wouldn't work," Spring said.

"Let me interpose a question, Paul," Captain Gerhard interrupted. To Spring: "These Five Things the white man brought to America. Obviously the first four stand for corrupting influences. But what the devil does the fifth—the decayed leg bone —stand for?"

"It's come to have two meanings. At first it meant only a poison, or disease, that rots a man's bones.

"I didn't put up the fence because I'm a dreamer any more than I put it up to get even," Spring went on. "I'd deactivate it tomorrow if I thought that all the colonists would bring to Heaven World were the first four Things. I don't even consider the first three to *be* corrupting influences, and as for the fourth—booze—if the Heaven-World Injuns' drank so much as one drop of it, they'd vomit, because their biochemistry's different from humans'. But the fifth Thing—that's another matter. I can't—I won't allow the decayed leg bone to be brought here. Not yet."

"You said it had two meanings," Marque said. "We've yet to hear the second."

"The second is that it's a poison, or disease, too. Only it doesn't rot away a man's bones—it rots away his morals. In its final stage it causes him to do wrong self-righteously."

The plenipotentiary from Earth was renowned for being able to keep his cool under the most trying of circumstances. Nevertheless, he came close to losing it now. "Lieutenant Spring," he said, "I traveled all the way from Earth at God knows how much expense to the poor taxpayer to talk to you as one intelligent human being to another. I've tried earnestly to do so, but all I've got for my pains is an old wives' tale artfully camouflaged as an argument against colonization! Surely you don't expect me to take this decayed leg bone of yours seriously!"

Spring said, "One of the peculiar properties of the disease is the victim's inability to realize he has it . . . I'll need ten more years."

"*Ten more years for what?*"

"To finish teaching the Injuns' of Heaven World how to manufacture moral antibodies so they'll be immune to the decayed leg bone when the 'white man' brings it. Then I'll take down the fence. The way I see it, you'll have figured out a means to knock it down by then anyway."

"*But there's no such thing as a decayed leg bone!*" Marque shouted. Then he paused. For Spring, or rather his image, was becoming transparent. The Amerind, clearly, had said his say and was about to "depart".

The projection faded rapidly. "Wait!" Marque cried. "Before you break contact, listen to what I have to offer. First, amnesty for you; second, nationhood for Heaven World; third, PanNatGov's solemn pledge that if relocation becomes necessary the indigenes will be allocated the best lands available; fourth—"

Again the plenipotentiary paused. This time for good. For the "Awol Amerind" had gone. He'd left his "earring" behind, though. It hung in the blackness of space like a bright blue diamond, shards of sunlight ricocheting from the spherical zeta-xi display case that shut it out from the grubby grasp of man.

MARQUE SIGHED. Then he shrugged. He'd done his best. History would never be able to say the PanNatGov hadn't adhered to the fullest extent practicable to the laws of humanity.

He stood up and dismissed the negotiating committee. Captain Gerhard dismissed the Space Marines. The captain retired to his quarters, the plenipotentiary to the *Landfall's* lounge.

It was far too early to trans-radio the PanNatGovernor. Afternoon reigned on board the *Landfall*, but over PanNatDistrict (former Tanzania) day had just begun to break. So Marque waited till after evening mess. He and the PanNatGovernor were old friends. First-name friends. "Paul and Myles". Marque briefed his old friend on the minutes of the meeting with the Amerind. The Governor got a real charge out of the Five Things. Especially the decayed leg bone. "Did he really say that was why, Paul? Honest?"

"So help me, Myles."

"He must be some kind of a nut."

"No doubt about it."

"Well anyway, we tried, Paul. Thank God for that."

"Amen," Marque said.

"So now it's up to Auntie. I knew it would be all along. There'll have to be a vote, of course: I'll call an emergency session of the PanNatCouncil this afternoon. But there'll be no nays. Auntie will be on her way no later than tomorrow morning and the first wave of Space Marines will be right on her heels."

"Pow!" Marque said.

"Right. Pow! No other way *but* Pow! We simply couldn't have risked using her as a lever. Spring is a nut all right, but he's also a brilliant and resourceful scientist. No one *but* a brilliant and resourceful scientist could have harnessed enough natural energy in a Stone-Age technology, even with STPTS equipment to work with, to project a zeta-xi field around a whole planet. If you'd threatened him with Auntie he'd already have found a way to deflect her, and our whole crash-program would have gone for nothing!"

"I know," Marque said.

"It'd be different if we were using a nuclear missile," the PanNatGovernor went on. "But we aren't. Heaven World's atmosphere will be back to normal in less than six months' time. Oh, there'll be a few cases of sterilization of course, and a certain amount of mutation's inevitable. And there're bound to be *some* casualties. For his own good, let's hope Spring's one of them. That way, he won't have to suffer the humiliation of being tried and executed for treason . . . Got to run now, Paul. Million things to do. Take care, old buddy."

"You too, old buddy."

AFTER LEAVING the radio room, the plenipotentiary from Earth descended to the lounge where he had after-dinner brandy with Captain Gerhard and several of the off-duty officers. The *Landfall* had de-orbited and was well on its way Earthward. Approximately halfway there, it would pass Auntie. Not long afterward it would pass the ESN ship carrying the first wave of specially trained, specially equipped Space Marines.

The "Awol Amerind" was in for a big surprise—no doubt about it. He'd been away from home too long: he'd forgot how effective crash programs could sometimes be.

Even Marque himself hadn't believed anti-zeta-xi matter could be developed in less than twelve years' time.

After a desultory round of Zip-bridge, the plenipotentiary from Earth said good night, left the lounge and retired to his stateroom. Next to the head of his bunk was a little illuminated button that when depressed activated a hidden buzzer in Ms. Kleist's room. Out of force of habit Marque raised his hand, forefinger extended. Then his hand dropped to his side. The meeting with the Amerind had taken more out of him than he had thought: he did not quite feel up to calling Ms. Kleist tonight.

He undressed, got into bed and turned off the light. The temperature was 65°—ideal for sleeping. The soporific murmur of the inbuilt a-c unit filled the room; cool antiseptic air washed over him in lulling waves. Abruptly he experienced a sharp pain in his left leg. From the knee down to the ankle. He was puzzled rather than frightened. His last physical had showed him to be in excellent health: no cardiac irregularities, no vascular disorders; nothing. As he lay there, he became aware of a sickish-sweet odor; simultaneously the pain in his leg intensified. He turned the light back on, kicked back the sheet and looked, just to make sure. Naturally the leg was all right: healthily pink, unblemished in any way; veins and arteries doing their usual efficient job. He turned the light back off and lay back on the bunk, sinking pleasantly into its downy softness. But the sickish-sweet odor persisted, grew more and more offensive. Suddenly he realized what it was and where it was coming from. Nothing had showed on the outside of the leg because it was the bone, not the flesh, that was rotting. At this point, he awoke and realized he had been dreaming; but for the life of him he could not remember the dream. He fell back to sleep again instantly and slept the sleep of the just.

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