

# ***FLEUVE RED***

**ROBERT F. YOUNG**

*Robert Young returns with a sequel to his "The Earth Books" (last issue) in which the author again follows his Muse to an unlikely world . . .*

**ILLUSTRATED by RICHARD OLSEN**

**W**ELL, here I am on Alpheratz VI.

"Be sure and take your umbrella," my Muse told me just before I left Earth. "On Alpheratz VI it rains three hundred and sixty-four days out of the year."

As usual, she was exaggerating. I would estimate Alpheratz VI's rainfall to be about that of Earth's. The temperature and the topography aren't much different either.

Immediately after my arrival, I chose a commodious country named Vespucha to live in and a colorful city named Serice to write in. Then I set about learning the Vespuchan language. In this, I was assisted by a beautiful native girl named Wenda, and it is she to whom I am indebted for my present prowess in the conjugation of Vespuchan verbs and the diagraming of Vespuchan sentences.

Not only did Wenda help me learn the language, she got me a room in a pleasant inn and kept me company between lessons. She is a tall, willowy girl with chestnut hair and luminous gray eyes. I owe her a great deal. Almost as much as I owe my Muse.

I hadn't been on Alpheratz VI very long before I became acquainted with the brome. This unique herbivore is endowed by nature with circular appendages instead of feet, and it rolls instead of running. It is covered with curious, fuzz-like hair that reflects light, and is all one color—generally blue or red or yellow, although green ones aren't unusual. Broad and low-slung, it has three eyes, two of which are round, phosphorescent, and located just above the fore-appendages, and the third of which is rectangular, exceedingly large, and located just beyond the long snout, forming the front part of the slightly slanted hump that comprises the creature's back.

The brome is used by the Vespuchans both as a beast of burden and as a means of transportation. Sometimes they ride on its back, but most of the time they ride on carriages attached to its rearend by means of a light wooden pole. The carriages are unique in their own right. They're constructed principally of wood, painted various colors, have an overall length of about ten feet and consist of a "tonneau" and a "forestructure". The former is cylindrical and rests on four articulated stilts with inflated rubber bases; the latter joins the former at a 45° angle, is slightly tapered and terminates in an oblong horizontal trunk for carrying baggage.

Inside the tonneau there's a device called a "shuttleplate" that's connected to the four articulated stilts via four different gear trains. The back-and-forth motion created in the shuttle-plate when the brome pulls the carriage is transmitted via the different gear trains to the stilts, causing them to rise, swing forward and lower in alternating sequence. Extra stress upon either of the two fore-stilts, as when the brome turns right or left, causes it to disengage from the shuttle-plate and function as a pivot till stress returns to normal.

Bromes are taught to respond to four simple commands—a trisyllabic one meaning *Go* and three monosyllabic ones meaning *Stop*, *Turn left* and *Turn right* respectively. Lines held in the carriage driver's hands and attached to the hubs of the brome's fore-appendages provide additional control.

After my introduction to this remarkable conveyance, I concluded naturally enough that Vespuchan ingenuity had outdone itself and that further innovations in the field of transportation couldn't fail to be anticlimactic. Consider my amazement then, when, returning from a stroll late one afternoon, I saw a Vespuchan riding on a rapidly moving carriage *that was unattached to a brome!*

THE BROMELESS CARRIAGE was made primarily of metal instead of wood and differed from brome-drawn ones in certain other respects. On the front of its baggage trunk were two tiny headlamps, and just above them were two pointed knobs—clearly controls of some kind. It sounded different too. Brome-drawn carriages emit a faint clacking noise caused by the vacillations of their shuttle-plates; this one emitted a continuous series of *puts*, which, as nearly as I could determine, came from an orifice in its rear region that was partly hidden by a curious queue of fine, wool-like wires.

I wasted no time in finding Wenda and describing the phenomenon to her. It was then that I learned that on the east bank of the Serice River, just south of the city, there is a factory devoted exclusively to the manufacture of locomobiles, as these bromeless carriages are called. They are nothing new, Wenda told me, but as yet they're relatively rare because before the introduction of revolutionary production techniques by the owner and builder of the Serice River Plant, producing them in sufficient quantities to create a market wasn't practicable. The locomobile I'd seen was merely one of the forerunners of thousands—more likely, millions—to come.

The very next morning Wenda, who is as much at home among the upper echelons of Serice society as she is among the lower, took me to visit the Serice River Plant and introduced me to its owner and builder, whose office is on the 26th floor of the towering Administrative & Engineering Building. He proved to be a quiet, unassuming man of medium height somewhere in his 50's who, when I inadvertently referred to him as an "inventor" immediately disclaimed the honor. His name is Enryh Ordf.

Word had already got around that I was a writer, and since the Vespuchan language doesn't differentiate between the terms "writer" and "journalist", Mr. Ordf naturally assumed that my reason for visiting him was to do a piece on him and his factory for one of the Vespuchan periodicals. I saw no point in disillusioning him. After Wenda left, he offered me a cigar, and both of us lit up. Then he stepped over to a big bay window behind his desk and beckoned to me to join him.

He pointed. "Those corrugated-steel structures way in the background are the Serice River Steel Mill. That big blue building in the middle distance is the Serice River Stamping Plant. The ferrous foundry's on one side of it, the non-ferrous on the other. Those long warehouses next to the river are for storing the parts and material that are shipped in from other Ordf factories, including the engines that make the locomobiles go. The long building in the foreground running kitty-corners to this one is the Serice River Assembly Plant. If you'll strain your eyes just a little you'll be able to see the new Ordfs that have just come off the assembly line being driven onto the rivercraft moored at the docks."

I squinted into the morning sunlight. Sure enough, a steady stream of shiny new Ordfs was emerging from the end of the building and flowing up a boarding ramp onto the deck of one of a quartet of river boats.

I was awed. Not so much by the magnitude of the Serice River Plant as by the magnitude of the Vespuchan who had built it. On the surface, he might seem as common as an old shoe, and on paper, he might seem no more than an engineer turned entrepreneur; but I knew I was standing beside a genius such as Alpheratz VI has never seen before and will probably never see again. I wished fervently that I *were* a journalist so that I *could* give the Vespuchan people a stirring story about him and his factory; but being a mere creative writer, all I could do was stand there and gape.

Mr. Ordf stepped over to the door. "Come along," he said. "I'm hard-pressed for time, but I can spare enough of it to show you how Ordfs are put together."

WE DESCENDED from his aerie through successive layers of offices teeming with administrators, executives, engineers, technicians, bookkeepers, secretaries, receptionists and just plain office girls, to the ground floor. Presently we stepped outside, and Mr. Ordf led the way to the Assembly Plant, from which weird medleys of clangs, crashes and screeches were emanating. Just inside the entrance, a series of steel stairs led upward to a lofty catwalk, and when Mr. Ordf began mounting them, I followed.

At first, after gaining the catwalk and looking down, I couldn't make heads or tails out of what was going on below. But I gradually sorted things out as I walked along the catwalk in Mr. Ord's wake: the moving platform immediately below and running the entire length of the building was a conveyor; the miscellany of objects hanging on hooks just above and within easy reach of the workers were tools; and the metal objects of various shapes and sizes piled behind the workers were the components, or parts, of Ord's-to-be.

I saw these remarkable vehicles grow from piles of nuts and bolts into semi-cylindrical tonneaus, into full-fledged tonneaus, and into one-stilted, two-stilted, three-stilted and four-stilted tonneaus. Presently, far below, I saw workers lifting the fore-structures into place and securing them with rivets.

"In designing Ord's," Mr. Ord shouted above the din, "we stuck pretty close to basic carriage-design. It's sound, and people've become pretty well accustomed to it. So an Ord doesn't look a great deal different from an ordinary brome-drawn carriage—on the outside. The inside, though—that's another matter. In Ord's, those forestructures you see being attached are more than just glorified baggage-compartments: they house the fuel tanks too. The top part of the trunk lifts up, just as in the brome-drawn carriage type; but on the bottom of the baggage compartment is a tube that runs down into the tank, making it easy to fill 'er up whenever it's necessary. Naturally the tube is kept capped at all other times to prevent spillage."

The two pointed knobs I'd noticed on the trunk of the bromeless carriage I'd seen in Serice were missing from the forestructures below. I asked Mr. Ord where they were and what they were for.

"They'll be installed later," he replied. "The one on the left lights the headlamps and the one on the right blows the horn, both of which'll also be installed later, as well as the tonneau storage-battery they draw on."

We had continued walking along the catwalk and were now directly above an oval vat brimming with brown fluid. The conveyor ended on one side of it, then began again on the other. Over it, a winch swung rhythmically back and forth, lifting each Ord-to-be by means of a sling passed beneath its undercarriage by two workers, dipping it into the brown fluid, then lifting it out and setting it down on the second section of the conveyor, where a second pair of workers removed the sling. The Ord was then borne between two opposing rows of powerful blowers that dried it to a crisp, lustrous brown.

I was favorably impressed by the efficiency of the operation, but one point puzzled me. "Is that the *only* vat?" I asked Mr. Ord.

He nodded. "The undercoat's incorporated in the lacquer."

I saw he hadn't got my point. "I mean," I elaborated, "don't you paint them other colors besides brown?"

"Of course not!"

"But Mr. Ord, suppose some of your customers should want red Ord's or blue Ord's or yellow Ord's?"

He laughed. "They can have any color they want—so long as it's brown!"

I let the matter drop.

FOR SOME TIME NOW I'd noticed certain individuals on the floor below who differed somewhat from the workers and who didn't seem to be engaged in any of the operations. They wore shiny black suits with leather elbow pads, black caps with long, pointed visors, and square-toed black shoes. All of them carried little black notebooks in which they periodically made entries with stubby yellow pencils. For the most part, they stood some distance back from the assembly line, sometimes between the piles of parts, but every once in a while one of them would run over to one of the workers, shouting at the top of his voice and waving his arms.

Finally my curiosity got the better of me, and I asked Mr. Ord who they were. "Why, they're my foremen, of course," he replied.

"But there's so many of them!" I gasped. "Surely your employees don't need *that* much supervision!"

"Supervision's only part of their job. What they're there for mostly is to find ways to speed up production so we can cut costs. My aim is to produce Ord's everybody can afford, and to do that I have

to keep upping the daily quota. The more unnecessary motions my foremen eliminate, the more machine-like and efficient the workers become. Eventually, of course, everything you see being done here today by unskilled labor will be done by regular machines."

"But Mr. Ordf," I objected, "I know little about such matters, but aren't regular machines—except perhaps prohibitively expensive ones—incapable of performing any but the simplest of tasks, and as time goes on, won't more and more improvements and additions cause locomobiles to become more and more complicated?"

"Not in my factory!" Enryh Ordf said.

"Perhaps not in yours, sir. But sooner or later, won't other entrepreneurs—if they haven't already—build other factories? And lacking your idealism, won't they deliberately add accessories to their vehicles and keep changing their lines in order to attract more customers and justify higher prices? And won't such practices eventually complicate locomobiles to such an extent that making them with machines will be economically unfeasible?"

"What *they* do is no concern of mine!"

"But you'll have to compete with them. And to do so successfully, you'll have to complicate your locomobiles too. So won't you wind up being even more dependent on unskilled labor than you are now, and if machines ever take over the jobs in other industries, won't the locomobile industry feel kind of foolish?"

"Bosh!" Enryh Ordf said. But I could see he was worried.

BELOW US, workers were raising the hinged upper sections of the tonneaus and lowering large multi-finned mechanisms into the interiors of the Ordfs by means of a chainfall. These were the engines that made the Ordfs go, Mr. Ordf informed me. As I watched, other mechanisms were set into place and installed. One of these, I learned, was the steering unit, which, in response to pressure exerted on either of two "knee-plates" incorporated in the tonneau's sides, causes one of the two fore-stilts to function as a pivot for the duration of the pressure.

The engine intrigued me most, and I asked Mr. Ordf how it worked. "Basically what it does," he explained, "is employ a series of alternating explosions to move four pistons back and forth in four elongated horizontal cylinders at a speed governed by the frequency of the explosions. Each piston is attached to one of the stilts by a connecting rod that's so designed that when it's engaged it lifts the stilt up as the piston moves forward and lowers it just before the piston moves back. All our engines are timed to produce what we call a 'double alternate stilt-movement'—right rear stilt, right front stilt, left rear stilt, left front stilt, and so forth. Any number of other 'gaits' are possible, but we've found that this one provides the smoothest ride with a minimum of wear and tear on the engine. As yet, we haven't devised a means of making an Ordf back up, or of braking it; but we're working on both problems."

"How do you cause the explosions?" I asked.

"Putting it as simply as possible, we vaporize a combustible fuel, combine it with air and force it into the cylinders, where it's ignited by a spark."

"And where do you get the fuel?"

"By distilling grain. Oh, we don't do it ourselves—the grain distilleries do. Wheat, corn, rye, oats. For some reason nobody's been able to figure out yet, locomobiles run best on fuel distilled from oats."

THE REST of the operations were anticlimactic and involved the installation of such uninspiring items as storage batteries, headlamps, horns, exhaust pipes, exhaust filters (the -queues of fine, wool-like wires that cover the exhaust vents), seats, and so forth. The last item to be set in place was the instrument panel, which is located at the juncture of the tonneau and the forestructure.

Finally Mr. Ordf and I came to a railed platform over-looking the end of the assembly line. Below us, the finished Ordfs were being inspected, fueled and started up to the accompaniment of innumerable *put-put-puts* that drowned out the clangs, crashes and screeches of the plant proper.

In trying to sort out the seeming confusion, I noticed two gray-suited men lurking in the shadows just to one side of the wide doorway through which the new Ordfs were being driven. Both of them had their

hats pulled down over their eyes, and one of them held a little notebook in which he was furtively making entries, while the other one held a camera with which he was surreptitiously snapping pictures.

Mr. Ordf caught sight of them almost the same time I did. His face went white. "Get those two!" he shouted to one of his foremen, pointing toward the two men. "They're spies!"

Not one, but six foremen responded, closing in on the two interlopers, carrying wrenches, crowbars, hammers, chains, and whatever else they could grab in a hurry. The interlopers shot out the door, running for their lives, the one with the camera dropping it in his haste to escape.

A narrow steel stairway zigzagged down from the platform to the floor. Mr. Ordf was already pounding down it, shouting instructions to the six foremen, who presently disappeared through the doorway. I followed at a more leisurely pace, trying to figure out what in the world was going on. By the time I reached the floor, Mr. Ordf had vanished, and when at last I made my way through the workers and the *put-put-putting* Ordfs he was already returning from the river bank, the six foremen trailing dejectedly behind him.

Presently he joined me in the doorway. He looked crushed. "They got away," he said hoarsely. "They had a boat hidden downstream.

"Who were they, sir?" I asked.

"The Odged brothers. They've been snooping around here for months, copying my techniques and stealing my ideas!"

"Oh. Do they make locomobiles too?"

He looked at me. "Hah!" he said.

I didn't press him for further information. I could see he was too upset. Anyway, the time he'd had to spare for my visit had already run out, and shortly after the unfortunate incident I accompanied him back to the Administrative & Engineering Building, where we shook hands and parted.

I WISH I could tell the reader how Enryh Ordf ultimately made out with the dastardly Odged brothers and whether he succeeded in realizing his dream of turning out Ordfs everybody could afford to buy; but writers as well as industrialists have to apportion their time, and soon after my visit to the Serice River Plant I said good by to Wenda and returned to Earth.

When I got home, my Muse was sitting on the living-room floor, putting a jigsaw puzzle together. "Hi," she said, as casually as though I'd just come from my study down the hall instead of from a planet light years away. "How are things on Alpheratz VI?"

"Fine."

I told her about the bromes, the brome-drawn carriages, the locomobiles and the Serice River Plant, being careful to make no mention of Wenda. (Muses are funny about certain things, and you have to be careful.) "Sounds something like a civilization I know of on Earth 4II," she said when I finished.

"Earth II?"

"A planet in a universe next to ours. It's really a rather dreadful place, and I wouldn't advise you to visit it."

"Do they have bromeless carriages there too?"

"No. They have carriageless bromes."

I looked at her. Her elfin face was guileless. Beyond it, through the living-room window, I caught a vista of afternoon hill and the distant footpaths and buildings of the city. "I think you're pulling my leg," I said.

"No I'm not—honest. The people of Earth it had living carriages but no bromes; so they built bromes for the carriages to pull and eventually found a way to make the bromes propel themselves. People are never satisfied with what they already have—don't you know that by this time?"

I looked at her again. "I think I'll go fix supper," I said.

My Muse exaggerates, but she never lies, so if she says there's such a civilization, there must be one. Apparently the only beings in all creation who like to walk are the beings of Earth I; and I sometimes wonder whether we really like to, or are just too lazy to look for a suitable substitute.

—ROBERT F. YOUNG

