

The Bung-Hole Caper

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The aliens came to Earth the same spring that Cyrus Holmes found the old barrel. It was buried under a stack of old lumber in a dark corner of the barn, and it would have stayed buried if Cyrus hadn't been looking for his grandfather's tool chest. Grandpa had been a cooper all his life, and when he was gone, the tools had been stored away. They included a cooper's adze, which Cyrus thought might be just the thing for roughing out a new plow handle.

He found the adze. Once sharpened, it worked as well as he had hoped. He also found the barrel, and that was in rather worse shape. It had been drying for half a century, forgotten in the shadows, and its staves now fitted as badly as fence pickets. But a month or two in the pond would fix that, he told Allie, his wife. Then he could replace the hoops and have a decent vessel to harden his cider in.

All through that summer, Cyrus tended the barrel. He soaked the wood in pond water, watching the wood swell and tighten. He replaced the hoops with cobblings from his workbench. He stood the thing in the yard, filled it from the hose, and watched as the last leaks slowed and stopped. Finally, it was as tight as it would ever be, and the apples in his small orchard weren't quite ready.

In the meantime, there were the aliens. Cyrus knew all about them. He didn't have a tractor or a chain saw or an electric milker. He worked his fields with a yoke of oxen, cut his firewood with an axe, and milked his dozen cows by hand. Still, he was up-to-date enough. He had a car, for getting to church on a Sunday and so Allie could drive to her job in town. He had a radio or two. He even had a teevee set, and he never missed the six-thirty news.

He knew all about the aliens. He'd seen pictures of them, all smothered in pastel-patterned coal-scuttle helmets, like something out of a movie about the Great War. He'd heard they were refugees from some foreign disaster or war, and he knew they were asking for a place to settle in the ocean shallows, promising not to interfere with navigation or fishing--they farmed their food on land--and offering to trade. They had science beyond anything Earth knew, they had technology, and they had a price list. The space for a small colony, a little place to call their own, for instance, was worth the plans for a space drive. Help in settling in was worth a map to worlds that men could live on. Other things were worth money, credits that could be exchanged for travel tickets, for lesser goods, even for alien encyclopedias, suitably translated. Earth was drooling.

Cyrus thought it all interesting enough, but he was a farmer, a raw-boned, weathered outcropping of Maine's coastal hills. The aliens scarcely touched his life, and they never would, any more than the rest of modern life did. Too, he'd never seen an alien. Not many people had, for though they traveled plenty, they did it in closed black limousines, chauffeured by UN flunkies.

Cyrus--he hated being called "Cy" so much that anyone who dared be so familiar might get day-old eggs or half-soured milk--Cyrus put the aliens on a par with Florida hurricanes and California floods and Detroit strikes. They were all interesting. They all made the news. And he thought about them only when they crossed the flickering screen of his teevee set.

But the day came, it did. His apples ripened, and he gathered up the falls and picked the rest. He set a basket of the best down cellar for winter eating, helped Allie put up two dozen jars of applesauce, and filled the trailer with the bags and boxes that remained. Then he visited the cider mill.

The mill was Bob Witham's. An ancient rig of flapping belts and groaning gears, powered by a gasoline engine, it was nearly as decrepit as its toothless, flatulent owner. But it made good cider.

Cyrus binned his apples and watched the endless belt haul them up the chute to the grinder. As old Bob paddled the pulp into the burlapped flats for the press, Cyrus said, "Got a barrel now." He had to roar to be heard above the machinery.

Bob glanced up from his work. "Good for you."

"Ayuh. Old one. Found it out in the barn."

"Hope it's tight," Bob held up a hand to examine a gob of apple pulp sticking to a thumb. He licked it off. "Good apples this year, Cyrus."

"Should hope so. M'nured the bejeezus out of 'em. Soaked the barrel, too."

"Oughta do it. Stand back now." Bob threw a switch, and the grinder overhead groaned into silence. He flipped the last fold of burlap into place, laid a flat on top, and leaned into the pile of neatly wrapped squares of pulp. They rolled into the press on their dolly and jolted to a stop. He hauled on the lever that lowered the immense plate of the press into position. He flipped the lever that fed power to the belt that drove the press's screw. The screw turned. The plate mashed down. Juice spurted from the flats, collected in the gutters, and was pumped to the holding tank on the wall above their heads.

"Where's that cup?" asked Cyrus. Bob turned to point at the wall. There hung, just as it did every fall, a battered dipper. Once it had been enameled gray and blue. Now it was mostly rust, but Cyrus didn't mind. He took it off its nail and held it to catch the dripping cider. He drank deeply, and then he offered it to Bob. "It's good."

"Ayuh. Barrel'll do it more good'n them plastic jugs of yours, too."

"Hope so." The juice was sweet and tart, yet not too tart. Once hardened and settled, it would have a decent kick to it.

When the last drop of juice had left the press, Cyrus fetched his jugs from the car. They were the five-gallon inflatable things the hardware store sold to campers. Cyrus had found them good for cider, for maple sap at sugaring-off time, even for hauling water in dry spells. Now he puffed them open and held them under the hose from the holding tank. They filled slowly, since the hose was none too big, but he was in no great hurry. The cows would need milking when he got home, but they could wait for half an hour. Sixty gallons of cider was well worth a little patience.

He didn't unload the trailer till after supper. Between milking the cows in the pasture and the other chores, he had no time, and even then he didn't have enough. The barrel was in the barn, resting on its side, the bung-hole neatly plugged, its filling port on top and open. He ranged his jugs beside it. Then he selected one and took it into the house. "Fresh cider," he said to Allie. "Want a glass?" She did. They drank. They filled a pitcher for the fridge and put the rest in smaller jugs for the freezer. It would keep there, and they would have it for their grandchildren, for nieces and nephews, for themselves whenever they didn't care for hard cider. "I'll put the rest in the barrel tomorrow," he told his wife, "That's soon enough."

They refilled their glasses then, took them into their small living room, and turned on the news. And there were the aliens again, big as life. It seemed the French had sent them a case of wine. They liked it, asked for more, and paid, generously. "Our guests," said the teevee announcer, "have said they will pay for whatever they want. And we want their money, for only with it can we buy the wonders they have to sell."

The trick has been finding things they want. We are very different creatures, with different tastes and different needs, and they are far ahead of us in technology. Too many of the things we make, they can make better, and they have less desire for our handicrafts than we have for Indian pots and blankets. After all, we aren't related." The announcer smiled, showing well-kept teeth.

Cyrus grunted. Allie said, "Maybe they would like your cider."

Cyrus grunted again. "Doubt it. 'Tain't wine, is it?" She agreed. Cider was a country thing that rarely appealed even to most humans, living as they did in cities. Most folks preferred wine and beer. Why should the super-civilized aliens be any different?

First thing next morning, as soon as the milking was done, Cyrus headed for the barn. He wanted to get his cider into his barrel, get it working with a touch of baker's yeast, get it started toward his favorite brew. But when he entered the barn, the barrel was not as he had left it. The bung hole was no longer plugged, and the barrel itself had rolled a bit.

He scratched his head. Had someone come last night to steal some cider? No. All the jugs were there, just as full as he had left them. He swore.

When the barrel twitched, he swore again. When he saw a movement behind the unplugged bung-hole, he did it once more. Damn! His cider barrel, that he was counting on to give him better drink, was occupied. A rat? A mouse? It was late in the year for snakes, and birds would never enter such a place.

There was a sound, like a watery voice. The movement repeated, and a ropy thing, a tentacle, emerged from the bung-hole. With difficulty, he realized what he had. An alien. Of all things. What was it doing here? Where was its chauffeur? Where was its shell? He traded his puzzlement for a growing anger. What right did it have to take over his barrel, to deny him proper cider?

The tentacle wriggled. "Please, excuse," the voice burred, echoing within the barrel. "Shell, too-small. Abandoned, vehicle. Seek, other."

Cyrus hunkered down. He peered into the bung-hole, trying to make out a detail or two. It was too dark in there, but he glimpsed what might have been an eye, a damp hide, a lobsterish mouth. By all accounts, the things were harmless enough. He didn't fear, and his anger was fading, already giving way to fascination.

The tentacle writhed. It tapped the end of the barrel above the bung-hole. It tapped twice, once to either side. "Make," the voice burred again. "Holes. Eyes." It tapped below, along the barrel's curving flank. "Legs."

There was a pause while Cyrus thought it over. The creature didn't speak the language well, but it could get its wishes across well enough. Cyrus knew what it wanted, all right. But he knew, too, that boring all those holes would ruin the barrel. He'd be stuck with plastic cider for another year, and maybe longer. Finally, the voice spoke again. "Will, pay," it said.

That was another matter. "All right," said Cyrus. "Though I want to know why you chose my barrel." He stood and headed for his workbench. He found his electric drill and the hole saw. He added over his shoulder, "How big you want the holes?"

When the voice said, "This," he turned to watch the tentacle sketch a two-inch circle. Fine, he thought. The saw could handle that. He plugged in the extension cord and fetched his equipment back to the barrel. "Back off, now," he said. The tentacle withdrew, and he pulled the trigger. The saw bit and whined, once, twice, and the alien had eye holes. As he sat back on his heels, the eyes appeared. They

were on stalks, and they were extended a good six inches out the holes. "Thank," the alien said. "See, now." The voice still bubbled, but it echoed less. The new holes made a difference.

"Now," said Cyrus. The barrel wasn't really ruined yet. He could always fit a new top to it. But now.... "Where do you want those leg holes?"

Once more the tentacle emerged. It lengthened, more than he would have guessed possible, and it pointed. The saw whined again, six times, and the job was done. Or was it? Cyrus thought a moment and said, "You want more room around that arm of yours?" When the tentacle quickly sketched an oblong around the bung-hole, he obliged.

He rose, put his tools away, and returned. The head of his barrel now reminded him of nothing more than a Halloween pumpkin, all eyes and mouth, though no pumpkin ever had stalked eyes and a mouthful of wormy tentacles. No pumpkin had legs either, shiny and lobsterish, emerging from holes in its bottom. And no pumpkins walked, with a lurching, rocking gait, sideways across the barn floor. It struck him then, that the aliens resembled hermit crabs, wearing borrowed shells and moving into larger ones as they grew. He wondered if a real hermit crab might try a pumpkin.

He watched as the alien exercised its limbs. It crawled, it ran, it even capered as it grew used to its new shell, but it remained clumsy. A barrel just wasn't built to walk. Finally, it settled again, facing Cyrus, and bubbled, "Thank."

Cyrus almost grinned. He prided himself on rarely going into a flap, no matter what the crisis. And he had a crisis here, for sure. An alien, away from its people, free of its human guides and chauffeurs. It would have to go back, of course. It would probably want to, unless it preferred a holiday among the natives. In the meantime, well.... "Mind if I call you Hermit?"

There was no answer. He added, "It's time to talk, you know. Why my barrel?"

The tentacles withdrew. In a moment they returned to scatter a handful of plastic strips on the floor before the man. The alien money. One tentacle retained a strip and held it up. "Pay. New, shell. Food?"

"Soon," said Cyrus. "But first, why?" Damn, he thought. It's got me doing it too. Though it's not hard. We do talk that way here, a bit.

"Found, first." The alien's burble was somehow plaintive. "Hungry." Cyrus said nothing. After a moment, the alien went on. "Grow, we. Shells, change, always. Small, natural. Bigger, smarter, plastic. Change, must. Too-weak, not. Too-soft."

Cyrus stared intently, thinking beginning to see.... He was interrupted by a gasp. He turned, and there was Allie, a hand to her mouth, an apron around her waist. "I wanted the eggs," she said. "What's that?"

He told her. She scooted beside him, staring too. "They grow all their lives," he said. "Move into bigger shells as they grow. It says they get smarter too. I guess the brain must get bigger as they grow."

She nodded. Her gray hair bobbed. Her thin lips pursed. She smelled of the kitchen and soap. Her thigh was soft against his haunch, and he remembered.... The past, their past, was far from dead, but though he still loved her, she wasn't the girl he had married, the girl who had left him for college and then returned for a farmer's life. She said, murmuring, "I suppose it must have been learning how to build their own shells that let them get smart enough for civilization, then."

"Skin," the alien bubbled. "Wood. Metal. Plastic. Food?"

"What would you like?" asked Allie.

"Egg? Cheese? Potato, mash?"

"Right away." She rose to her feet, as graceful as ever, and headed toward the back of the barn and the door to the hen house. In a minute she was back, an egg in her hand. She laid it down before the barrel. A tentacle enfolded it and hauled it within. There was a crunch and a sound of sucking. "Thank."

"They aren't very big today, are they?" said Allie. She left again. While she was gone, Cyrus peered through the widened bung-hole. Despite the holes, it was still dark in there, and he had to lean close to make out the broken egg, cradled in a nest of tentacles beneath a writhing mass of mouthparts. He leaned too close, in fact, for when the alien was done, the discarded shell bounced off his brow. He rocked back on his haunches with a muttered curse. "No manners," he said. "None at all."

"Whatever do you mean?" asked Allie. She was back, standing behind him, her apron sagging with the weight of eight more eggs. "Maybe you shouldn't have been prying. I imagine it likes its privacy as much as we do."

"Then it should have stood at home."

"Enough of that, Cyrus!" She scooped beside the barrel and laid her eggs down on the floor. She held one out toward the bung-hole. "Would you like another?"

"Thank." A tentacle plucked the egg from her grasp. There was another crunching, sucking sound. She added, "It's a stranger, Cyrus. Away from home, and it probably doesn't know how it's going to get back. We should be nice to it."

"I suppose we should, Allie." They had always been as hospitable as they knew how, with friends and strangers alike. Every winter saw at least one stranded motorist warming himself before their stove and dining at their table, even passing the night in their guest-room bed. But never before had they hosted a stranger as strange as this one. "But I am curious."

"I know. I don't think anyone's seen them naked."

The alien had obviously been listening. "No," it burred, discarding the second eggshell. "Fear. Eat, be. Call? Phone?"

"You want us to call your friends? At the UN?"

"Yes. Please. Thank."

As they stood, another egg disappeared into the bung-hole. "I'll just leave them all," said Allie. "The poor thing's probably hungry."

"Enough, now. Take."

"All right." Allie gathered up the remaining eggs, and they turned to leave, thinking the alien would stay put. But as Cyrus was holding the door to the kitchen for his wife, they heard a scrabbling behind them. They looked, and there was the barrel, lurching along on six shiny legs, stalked eyes waving as they took in the yard, the car, the oxen behind their rail fence.

"We haven't had a dog for years," said Cyrus. "Wish we could keep it."

"Cyrus!"

The word got out, of course. By the time the limousine arrived, the yard was choked with neighbors,

townsfolk, and local reporters. There was even a wire-service helicopter in the pasture. Their alien was the center of attention, and it was loving it. It burbled happily away, posing for pictures, answering questions, and making comments. At one point, its gist seemed to be that its new shell reminded it acutely of a precious antique it had had to leave at home. "Hurry," it burbled sadly. "Danger. Fear. Leave, all. Now, new. Bigger!"

When the car pulled in, honking aside the crowd, the alien turned to watch, raising itself to the tips of its legs. It was silent as the driver, a young black man uniformed in powder blue, jumped out, saying, "What's been happening?" It remained silent as three of its fellows emerged from the back seat. They wore the coal-scuttle shells everyone knew from the teevee, and they were small, no larger than a bushel basket. When they saw the barrel, they sank on their legs, just as if they were bowing. They didn't speak, though it seemed natural to think they would have come armed with more than one choice phrase for their runaway.

The barrel lurched toward its smaller fellows. They flinched, retreating toward the car. "Up!" it burbled. "Home. Now!"

The others scurried. "Master!" they chorused. Their voices piped liquidly, and Cyrus thought their shells must have very different acoustics from his barrel. Their attitude puzzled him, too, until Allie jogged his elbow with her own and said, "It's so much bigger. That must be it."

"They think it's smarter!"

She nodded. She turned toward one of the reporters and told him what they had learned. "If size and intelligence go together, then the bigger ones must be the leaders."

The reporter, a fiftyish man with a bulbous nose and white hair, answered in a whiskey voice. "Then you must have the boss-bug of them all here. I've never seen a bigger one."

Cyrus said; "It's just the barrel." He noticed the patch on the reporter's sleeve. The symbol was the same as the one on the helicopter. "Though I suppose it gives it plenty of room to grow."

They turned their attention back to the aliens as the newcomers scrambled nimbly into the limousine. The barrel followed, just managing to squeeze through the door. It was a tight fit, and Cyrus was glad his barrel hadn't been any bigger. Or was he? He was sorry to see the alien go. He'd been counting on that barrel for his cider, and, besides, he rather liked the alien. It was such a peculiar little bugger.

The fuss died down soon enough. There was better local news, such as the flying saucers seen near the nuclear power plant in Wiscasset, and the aliens were drawing more attention with their request for a piece of the Florida Keys for their colony. The ocean was shallow enough there, they said; the islands would give them enough land for their needs, and the climate was much like that they had left. The locals, of course, wouldn't hear of it, but the rest of the world didn't think the spot a bad idea at all. At least, so said the teevee.

But the story didn't end there. The limousine was back before Thanksgiving, bearing a silk-suited diplomat and an alien whose wooden barrel was now smoothed and polished and covered with the pastel patterns that denoted rank or, perhaps, identity among its kind. It looked more like a dressed-up pumpkin than ever.

The diplomat introduced himself as Vince Barger, the Second Assistant Under-Secretary for Alien Relations. "A new department, you understand," he added with a smile that kept his teeth carefully covered. "We try to mediate between K-ssniskit's people and our own."

"Snickit?" asked Cyrus.

"K-ssniskit. Didn't she tell you her name before?"

Cyrus shook his head, wrinkling his nose at a strong whiff of Barger's cologne. "Can't say she did. Though she didn't seem to like what I called her much. Thought she was sorta like a hermit crab."

"So he called her Hermit," put in Allie.

All three watched the alien as she moved around the yard, stalked eyes peering into barn, pasture, and house, renewing her brief acquaintance with the place. She must have grown used to the weight of the barrel, for she no longer lurched. She must also, thought Cyrus, have grown a little.

Barger chuckled smoothly. "I can see why. But you probably irritated her. They're very sociable creatures, really."

He stopped talking when the alien scuttled closer. She stopped at Cyrus's feet and cocked her eyes up at his lanky figure. "Greet," she burred.

"Greet, yourself." Cyrus squatted to be nearer her level. "What're you after now?"

"Cyrus!" said Allie. She turned to the alien. "Don't you mind him, K-ssniskit," she said. "We are glad to see you, and if we can do anything to help, we will." She bent to lay a hand on the rim of the barrel just above the eyes. She looked as if she were petting it.

"Greet," the alien repeated. "Shells, like." A tentacle stretched to stroke the barrel's flank. "More. Make?"

"I suppose I could," said Cyrus. "Grandpa's coopering tools are still in the barn, and he taught me a little when I was a boy."

"Thin. Light. Polish, too. Sizes, many. Two, thousand," K-ssniskit burred.

Cyrus whistled. That was a lot of barrels. "Take time," he said. "What'll you pay?"

Barger held out a piece of paper. "Here's the order," he said. "Fifteen hundred dollars apiece, as long as you meet the specifications. We pay you, and they'll pay us."

Cyrus whistled again. He took the paper, unfolded it against its crisp resistance, and read. "Ayuh." He turned to look at Allie. She showed nothing but approval in her face. And they could surely use the money. "I suppose I might," he said. "But why me?"

"She insisted."

And that was that. Or almost that. Cyrus took the order, though at first he felt a little as he guessed a Navajo must feel, selling pots and blankets to jet-borne tourists. But he soon realized that it wasn't his heritage he was selling. He was more like a Hong Kong Chinaman making colonial trivets for Williamsburg shops.

Not that he minded, except for one thing. He was fast growing rich, he was honing long-forgotten skills, he was indulging a love for different woods and finishes, but he never seemed to have the time to make a barrel for himself. He still had to harden his cider in those damned plastic jugs.

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