

IN VALUE DECEIVED
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What is valuable? That will depend on the nature of the planetary civilization of which one is a part. In this story we see through the eyes of a strange but highly intelligent life-form a picture of how two utterly dissimilar civilizations are forced by their own needs to establish completely different sets of values for various commodities, techniques, and inventions. One man's meat is another man's sawdust; in the world of the Galaxy you never can be sure what will be valueless and what will turn out to be worth more than fine jewels.. .

Rylat was quite disappointed at the barrenness of the planet. At that, it was the only one circling the small white star in Sector Twelve that had offered any hope at all.

"Things are as bleak as at home on Olittra," he thought to Akyro. "Nothing growing but a few creepers and moss. No wonder, with the dim light."

He shifted his four eyestalks so as to examine the shallow hills shown on the telescreen. From above the surface, no life had been discernible. They had made the landing only on the strength of Akyro's detection of radiation. That might have meant habitation, which seldom appeared without some form of agriculture.

"It could have been artificial," Akyro had thought in mild hope, raising his tapering, dull-blue body to the flat tips of his eight walking legs.

Seeing the surface at close range, however, he now lost his enthusiasm.

"You look it over," he thought to Rylat. "I'm hungry."

He opened a locker and removed a chunk of synthetic food and a plastic tube of liquid. He manipulated the grayish chunk between two of his tiny eating legs, using the other pair to squirt a drink into his mouth at intervals.

"How can you enjoy that awful stuff?" demanded Rylat in some annoyance. "And how will you like it if we go outside and you get sick in your vacuum suit?"

"One must replenish his energy," replied Akyro contentedly.

Rylat thought a red flame.

"You are nearly as broad as long already," he added.

Before he could invent further caustic ideas, Akyro dropped his food to the plastic deck and waddled hastily to the bank of detector instruments. They were his specialty, upon which he always had at least "one eye trained.

"Something?" inquired Rylat.

"Approaching radiation," Akyro answered. "A ship, perhaps."

He worked over his dials, then gave Rylat coordinates for his telescreen. His guess proved correct; it was a spaceship. Not one from Olittra, certainly, to judge by the elongated lines. It cruised close above the surface.

"Only one," announced Akyro. "Shall we signal it down?"

"No harm," Rylat agreed.

He crept over to the piloting bench and pushed certain' levers: A series of flares shot up into the thinner part of the planet's shallow atmosphere, there to explode into a standard greeting in Galactic Code.

The other ship leaped straight away from the surface, at considerable acceleration. Then, as the flares were recognized for a peaceful message, it headed more slowly

toward the grounded ship. Rylat gestured approvingly.

"If they can maneuver like that, they must be quite advanced. Perhaps they know the location of uninhabited planets where we can obtain plant life for our sterile lands."

Akyro, intent upon translating the answering flares from the other vessel, made no comment. He analyzed the pattern of radiation to check his visual perception—not all beings in the known Galaxy saw the same images from the same stimuli.

"Send them our home identification," he told Rylat. "They say they come from a star in Sector . . . Fourteen, I think. Yes, here it is in the list-Sol, Class G, nine major planets, one dominant race inhabiting three planets, members Sector Fourteen Confederation, rating 'civi-lized.'

"What are they doing over here in Twelve?"

"Let us not be impolite," reproved Akyro. "They may be wondering the same about us."

Rylat thought a bad taste at him, but halfheartedly, for he recognized the justice of the reproof.

"Well, I shall invite them down to meet us," he thought back. "See about unpacking a shelter assembly, in case they come out wearing something clumsy."

Some time later, they watched the port of the other ship open, after a landing that met with Rylat's approval. Since they had set up the shelter on the dimly lit, sandy soil a few lengths from their ship, and did not know how well the visitors could see, he lit a portable light-tube to show the location.

Two of the strangers presently bounded across the irregular ground. They had four large limbs apiece, two of which were sufficient for locomotion. Rylat considered their vacuum suits and personal equipment well made but unnecessarily prettified. He saw no working parts, which suggested added weight to conceal them.

"Notice how easily they run," he observed to Akyro. "They must come from a fairly large, solid planet."

When the Solarians arrived, Rylat invited them by gestures to enter the temporary shelter. Akyro had a heat converter operating, producing as a waste product an atmosphere breathable by the Olittrans. The latter opened the head ends of their suits.

The larger Solarian resorted to the Galactic Gesture Code to express appreciation of the shelter. His vacuum suit was topped by a globular fixture, partly transparent, behind which Rylat could see what must be the creature's face.

There were various rudimentary features, but no small limbs about the mouth. Rylat could not imagine how the Solarian fed himself. The single pair of eyes were further limited by being set immovably in the head.

Yet, Rylat reflected, these beings had obviously overcome such handicaps. Their equipment was, if anything, superior to his own. He decided they must be quite intelligent.

"What does he want to know?" inquired Akyro, as his companion replied to the Solarian's next gestures.

"He was surprised that we set up the shelter in so short a time, and wanted to know what the heat converter is."

"Maybe it is new to them," suggested Akyro.

"I doubt it, for they seemed to lose interest when I explained the principle and how one can produce any element at all as waste."

"Have they identified themselves?"

Rylat went through a series of formal gestures with one of his forelegs. The Solarian answered in kind.

"The one with the reddish fur on top is called 'Clothmaker,' or perhaps 'Weaver' would be closer. The other is named 'Strong-foreleg' as nearly as I can translate."

He proceeded to exchange general information with the Solarian. The smaller one, meanwhile, inspected the shelter curiously. He showed interest in the system for supporting the dome with the pressure of the enclosed atmosphere, and made rough gestures to Akyro to indicate admiration for the simple but effective entrance chamber. He did not pay any further attention to the heat converter, apparently taking it for granted after the first explanation.

From the conversation between Rylat and the Weaver, it developed that the Solarians were also a form of oxygen-breathing life, but that they required much denser air than their hosts. Rylat reported that they acted rather like traders. When he told the Weaver that he and Akyro were merely on an exploring expedition, the Solarian amended his business offer to a suggestion that they exchange souvenirs.

"Perhaps they could tell us of some planet such as we seek," Akyro thought to Rylat.

"I judge it unwise for us to seem overcurious. They might demand some fantastic reward if we reveal the necessity of our finding new plant stocks."

"But that would hardly be ethical," protested Akyro.

Rylat thought a stupid, newly hatched cub, and told Akyro that he was always too trusting with alien beings. "Time enough," he suggested, "to worry about ethics when we are acquainted. Besides," he added, "the Weaver has invited us to see their ship. We should learn what they are like."

They left the shelter one by one. The Solarians, being considerably larger, squeezed gingerly through the exit. Then they led the way to their own ship, moderating their pace politely to accommodate the Olittrons.

The Solarian ship fulfilled the promise of the equipment of its crew. Good workmanship was the rule in the section into which they were guided. Rylat was surprised at the luxury that permitted a division of the living and piloting quarters.

"But then," he reflected, "they are traders and doubtless can afford to waste materials on such refinements."

"What does he think?" inquired Akyro as the Weaver made a series of code gestures to Rylat.

"He invites us to inspect samples of their cargo. I fear he still believes us willing to trade something."

Out of politeness, they permitted the red-topped Solarian to lead them to another compartment. Here he displayed various wares. The Olittrons noted that the Solarian objects ran mostly to gadgets and precision instruments, while things *they* had obtained by trading were in many cases minerals. The Weaver displayed with strange pride some large chunks of white carbon crystals and small quantities of some of the heavier elements. Those which radiated were kept in shielded containers.

Rylat did not blame him for that. He himself had once incurred a severe rash on

his thick hide when he had left too much uranium—a waste product from a heat converter—lying around outside his shelter. The Solarians, without their vacuum suits, looked unpleasantly thin-skinned. He could actually see outlines of a circulatory system right through the Weaver's hide.

"There is little here to attract us," he thought to Akyro.

"True," the other agreed. "Their workmanship is very fine, but our own instruments are adequate. As for the minerals, we could make up any quantity of those in a short time."

"I shall not tell them exactly that," decided Rylat. "Why not?"

"Oh ... it would hardly be polite."

He indicated to the Weaver that it was time for them to return to their own ship, at least temporarily, to check its mechanisms. and to replenish the tanks of their vacuum suits.

As they passed forward through the living quarters, Rylat glanced with one eye at a flat-topped piece of furniture upon which the other Solarian was setting out food and drink. This included, he noted half unconsciously, a portion of an obviously synthetic substance, but also a number of what looked like vegetables. In fact, one platter held a heap of untreated white stalks with green leaves.

The idea came to Rylat that these must be raw and fresh plants, grown recently; and he turned another eye upon them.

Grown recently!

The realization smote him with almost physical force. His eyestalks retracted halfway before he could control himself, and his walking legs involuntarily bowed in the vestige of a crouch.

Akyro noticed this evidence of excitement, a holdover from primitive times when the best physical defense of their remote ancestors had been to flatten themselves to the ground and rely upon their thick, armorlike hides.

"What is the trouble?" he asked.

"Look at the food!"

Akyro looked, and *his* eyestalks twitched.

"A fresh plant! Quickly—ask them where they got it!"

Rylat controlled himself with an effort. The red-thatched Weaver had turned his head at the Olittrans hesitation, and was training both eyes curiously upon them.

"Pay no attention to it," Rylat ordered his companion. "And come along! He notices our actions."

"For your love of posterity!" Akyro insisted. "Ask him, where he got it! *Ask him!*"

"Later," Rylat thought to him, moving toward the exit port between that compartment and the piloting chamber forward.

Akyro bounced irritably on his walking legs and stared back at the foodstuffs with three of his eyes.

"Do not be a fool!" he urged. "Do you realize what it may mean to us? Since the blight struck Olittra, and with the population what it is? We were not sent to pick up pretty crystals, you know!"

"You need not be sarcastic," retorted Rylat. "I know our mission as well as you, but I have also heard about these races proficient in trading. I know what I am doing."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course! Now stop acting mentally deficient and follow!"

Akyro thought a bottomless swamp of sticky ooze—but quietly, to himself—and followed the others to the exit.

The little Solarian politely donned a vacuum suit to see them safely through the outer valve. Rylat gestured that they would return before long, and led the way across the sand.

Back in their own vessel, after a routine check and a brief rest period, Akyro put a record of the Galactic Gesture Code on the visiplayer for a thorough review. Consequently, he was able to catch some inkling of the conversation when next they called at the Solarian ship.

He was still sufficiently uncertain of the motions to make any communications himself, but he understood the Weaver's greeting and opening remarks.

The Solarians, it developed, had stopped at this star only in search of barter. They were as disappointed with it, in their way, as were the Olittrons.

"We, also, were passing and stopped out of curiosity," Rylat signaled. "But we are merely explorers."

"Traders such as we," waved the Weaver, "often must be their own explorers."

"That is interesting," Rylat told him. "Perhaps you would describe for me how a trading expedition operates." Akyro was annoyed. '

"Why make yourself a simpleton?" he asked Rylat.

His companion briefly thought a set of eyestalks tied in a knot, and continued his gesture talk. The Solarian explained that it was not always necessary to obtain something more valuable than what one gave for it.

"Sometimes," he indicated, "the mere act of transporting an object to a different planetary system increases its value enormously. It may be rare or peculiarly useful there."

"It seems to me close to cheating," thought Akyro, but his thought was ignored.

"Well, of course, I would not understand these matters," Rylat informed the Solarian.

The Weaver gaped at him a moment with small blue eyes, then turned to Strong-foreleg. The two Solarians exchanged a series of oral vibrations which apparently served for communication with them. After a little discussion, the Weaver turned his red-furred head again to Rylat.

"Perhaps, for luck or amusement or what you will, we might make some token exchange. It would provide us with souvenirs of this meeting."

Rylat expressed willingness. There followed rather floundering attempts on both sides to suggest something desirable to the opposite parties.

The Solarians regretfully declined any of the Olittran instruments that Rylat thought he could spare, apologizing that their own were satisfactory. Nor did Rylat profess any interest in the Solarians' knick-knacks, picked up on half a dozen worlds lately visited.

"But we have some very good maps of Sector Eleven," he offered in his turn.

The Weaver thanked him, but the Solarians did not plan to travel in that direction. In the end, he suggested that they visit his cargo compartments again.

"Ask him about the plants!" Akyro urged.

"How can I?" Rylat thought back. "What have we to offer for such information? They will surely want something!"

"Well, if you refuse to ask him, I shall stay here and watch to see if his friend brings out any more of them."

"As you please," answered Rylat, and followed the Weaver from the compartment.

They walked along a metal-decked corridor to the same storeroom of samples that Rylat had seen earlier. He found nothing new that interested him, and was careful to make this fact diplomatically clear to the Solarian.

During the process, he felt Akyro calling him, and so he indicated as soon as possible a desire to rejoin the others.

"They grow them themselves!" his friend greeted him as he entered the living quarters with the Weaver.

"Explain that!" demanded Rylat, noting that the Solarians were also seizing the opportunity to communicate privately.

"The *plants!*" Akyro thought to him. "They have tanks on the ship where they grow them in water with chemicals and artificial radiation. I have seen them!"

"How?"

"I stood here looking bored until Strong-foreleg showed me through some of the compartments."

"Did you let him see what interested you?" Rylat paused to think a hollow bubble of clear plastic. "Of course you did, or they would not be vibrating their mouths at each other. Really, Akyro!"

The Weaver turned to Rylat and inquired if he might not be interested in seeing the hydroponic tanks. Rylat agreed without outward enthusiasm. He hoped that the Solarian would not know how to interpret the slight shrinking of his eyestalks.

They all walked into the compartment mentioned, and Rylat's walking legs nearly buckled.

All about the bulkheads of the compartment, and in rows down the center, were large, transparent tanks with plants in various stages of growth. Most were some shade of green in the parts that Rylat guessed normally grew above the ground.

He allowed himself, for a brief moment, to picture Olittra's blighted agricultural areas repopulated with such plant life. The food problem he would solve if he could only get some seeds or cuttings! He was so tired of synthetic foods

"They are very pretty," he signaled. "They remind me of the gorgeous foliage of my home planet."

"Rylat!" came Akyro's horrified thought. "How can you deliver such an untruth? It is not ethical!"

"It is not an untruth. *Any* vegetable matter at present makes me remember Olittra. Besides, how could he know our vegetation was mostly purple?"

He had to request that the Weaver repeat his last gestures.

"I said, we would be very glad to let you have a few. They are quite nourishing."

"Oh, we seldom eat such," replied Rylat. "Still, they would be pleasant decoration in our bare and functional ship."

The Solarians exchanged stares that made him wonder if perhaps they, too, had a form of telepathy. Then the Weaver reached into the nearest tank of dark-green

specimens.

"Perhaps—" Rylat began; and then, as the Weaver looked up, "But never mind. It is not necessary—"

Akyro's walking legs folded completely. He crouched on the deck, heedless of the Solarians' astonished glances, and thought a violent volcanic eruption. Rylat caught the whole image distinctly. It included himself at the zenith of the upsetting burst of flames.

"I was about to suggest," he signaled the waiting Weaver imperturbably, "that perhaps you could spare us a complete tank, since you have so many. Growing new plants would be an amusing hobby to us in the loneliness of space."

The Weaver signified that he would be only too pleased. He insisted upon including a supply of chemicals and a special light-tube. He and Rylat examined the latter, and the Olittran assured him that he could arrange to feed the proper power into it. The Olittrons carried enough water to supply the tank.

Both Solarians donned vacuum suits to assist with the transportation of the tank, which they thoughtfully enclosed in an insulated cylinder. Rylat was qualified to bear only a token share of the burden across the and outside. Akyro trailed the group unsteadily, eyestalks still a bit retracted.

The Solarians helped get the cylinder inside the Olittran vessel but declined to be shown around.

"Probably feel a bit clumsy because of their size and those bulky suits," Rylat thought to Akyro.

To the Solarians, he expressed appreciation and asked if they would not hit him on some gift he could make in return.

"It is nothing!" waved the Weaver. "Do you intend to leave soon?"

"Rylat!" pleaded Akyro. "Tell him yes, and quickly! If they take time to reflect, they will surely realize the value of what they are giving us!"

"Patience! I, too, deeply desire to mount a starbeam."

He signaled to the Solarian that they did intend to leave almost immediately. The Weaver expressed regret.

"But tell me what we can do," insisted Rylat, fearful lest cause arise to make him surrender his booty.

"We had considered inspecting the planet's surface and its mineral content," the Weaver informed him.

"An interesting hobby," replied Rylat doubtfully.

By the looks they exchanged, the two Solarians were as puzzled at *that* as he was at their project. Who cared what minerals could be dug up? One could convert them any time.

"Our object," the Weaver tried again, "was to make ourselves comfortable on the surface and take a holiday from the confines of the ship."

"Ah!" answered Rylat, comprehending at last. "Why, if you wish to use our shelter, you are more than welcome."

The Weaver accepted with thanks, but wondered about the Olittrons' departure.

"It will not matter," Rylat assured him. "We can pick up the shelter the next time we pass this way."

"Rylat! *Give* it to him! Let us leave this place with some dispatch," pleaded

Akyro.

"In fact," continued Rylat, "I recall that we have another, so you might as well keep the one outside. I will get you a set of instructions for the entrance valve and the heat converter. You will be able to understand the diagrams, at least."

He did so, and after many exchanges of courtesies, the Solarians departed.

Akyro wasted no time in securing the tank of plants in the hold. As soon as the Solarians were safely in their own ship, Rylat took off.

He spiraled away from the planet and set a tentative course for the limit between Sectors Twelve and Eleven.

"About my remark on returning to pick up that shelter," he teased Akyro, "you did not believe I would really risk facing them again? After cheating them like that?"

Akyro did not reply. Rylat turned an eye toward him and saw that he was watching his dials intently.

"What is it?" he asked, vaguely uneasy.

"Moving radiation of the same pattern. It must be the Solarians, leaving the planet."

"How fast?" demanded Rylat, wondering if he dared step up the acceleration even more.

"About as fast as we, perhaps a bit more."

Rylat's eyestalks cringed. He hastily estimated the emergency power available to him.

"Enough to catch us?" he inquired anxiously.

"Oh, no," Akyro told him calmly. "They are heading in the opposite direction."

"What?"

"No doubt of it. As fast as they can, apparently."

Rylat rose from the piloting bench and joined the other at the bank of instruments.

"I do not understand it," he thought to Akyro. "They claimed they intended to stay. And we certainly left nothing to make them hurry home."

"Perhaps the mechanism of the entrance valve?"

"No ... they had better on their ship. And they showed no special interest in the heat converter. I doubt they would want to play at transmuting elements."

"Who would want a heat converter for that? They, too, must have better ways."

"Exactly. So what could be on their consciences?"

They pondered until Rylat returned to the piloting bench and curiously focused the image of the Solarian vessel on the telescreen.

"Let us admire their folly," Akyro suggested, "but not to the extent of lingering."

"No ... and yet, I wonder why—"

He watched the other ship move out of focus.

"Look at them go!" he thought to Akyro. "Anyone would suspect that *they*—not we—had practically committed theft!"