

Susceptibility

By John D. MacDonald

The colonists on this world needed help urgently. It was as if they had deliberately decided to set their civilization back to some harsh era out of the past!

An A\NN/A Preservation Edition.

[Notes](#)

SEAN MALLOY stood unnoticed at the edge of the clearing and frowned as he watched the girl work. Exposure to the rays of the yellow-white sun, half again the size of Sol, had turned her to copper bronze, against which the mane of yellow hair was quite startling. He found that he was taking pleasure in watching the smooth play of muscles in her naked back as she swung the instrument against the tree. Each stroke bit out a chunk of the soft yellowish wood, veined with green. Exertion had put a sheen of perspiration on her shoulders.

The proper paleolinguist word eluded him. Suddenly he remembered. Of course—it was an ax.

The sound of it, biting into the wood, resounded across the clearing, a sharp, metronomic sound. He heard the crackle of fibers and saw her step back from the tree. Sean Malloy glanced up then, and saw the great mass of branches and leaves sway toward him. He gave a gasp of alarm, and forgetting all the dignity of a Praecursor from the Colonial Adjustments Bureau, he ran at right angles to the line of fall. After fifty feet of surprising fleetness, he struck a hummock of grass and fell just at the moment the tree thundered to the ground, so close behind him that the end of a branch rapped him smartly across the shoulders. He crawled out from under the leaves and stood up. The tall woman was hurrying toward him, buttoning on a shirt of coarse fabric, quick concern in her eyes.

“You’re not hurt?”

“It so happens that I’m not,” he said acidly.

He saw her glance take in his uniform, the CAB seal, the tiny gold question mark of the Praecursor blazoned upon it. She no longer looked concerned.

Illustrated by James Vincent

“People who wait for trees to fall on them generally get hurt,” she said indifferently.

“I am Sean Malloy, Praecursor. They told me, in the village, that I should talk to you. You *are* Deen Thomason?”

She nodded. She looked regretfully at the tree. “I suppose I can just as well finish it tomorrow. Come along, Malloy.”

She shouldered the ax and headed across the clearing to the mouth of a narrow trail. Her stride was long. Once again Malloy found himself taking a rather surprising pleasure in watching her. He made a mental note to apply, on his return to the Bureau, for deep psychological analysis. Praecursors who became emotionally involved with colonial women suffered a loss of efficiency. It would be wise to have this susceptibility tracked down and eliminated. In the meantime, to take his attention away from the swing of her walk, he asked hastily, “What were you planning to do with the tree, Thomason?”

“Cut off the branches today, saw it tomorrow, then split it and carry the pieces back to my place.”

“But why?” he asked, baffled.

SHE stopped so suddenly that he almost ran into her. She turned around and he saw a mixture of amusement and irony in her gray eyes.

“Our winter season is coming, Malloy,” she said. “I burn the wood in order to keep warm.”

She was almost as tall as he. He said, as though reasoning with a child, “Wouldn’t it be much simpler to ask for a heat unit? There’s a field station here, an unlimited power source. All you have to do is…”

“Of course, Malloy. It just so happens that I’d rather do it this way.”

“But…”

She had turned again and was striding along the trail. He had to trot to catch up with her. They emerged into a second clearing. A crude wooden house sat at the base of a hill, and he was forced to admit that the setting, with the small busy stream foaming through the rocky channel, was superb. Primitive, though.

He followed her to the door of the house. It was open.

“Where is your mate?” he asked, realizing too late that his choice of words had been a bit hasty. It was undiplomatic to point out the backwardness of this unfortunate social order without shrewd preparation.

She looked more amused than angered. “Sit down, Malloy. I have not yet mated, if that’s what you Bureau people prefer to call it.”

“You built this house yourself?”

“No. I selected the spot. All the others helped me. It was built in two days. The Bureau would have been horrified. Everyone working with their hands. Dancing and food that didn’t come from the field station and a strong brew made from fruits. Very barbaric.”

He sat at a bench beside a wooden table. She lifted a trap door, went down steps and returned with a corked earthenware jug. She poured a cup of water and handed it to him. The day was warm, the water cool and sweet.

“Thank you,” he said. She sat opposite him.

He smiled officially. “Well, shall we get to it, Thomason? It took me a long time to find you. And I didn’t expect anyone like you to be… head of the planet.”

“Let us be accurate, Malloy. This year it happened to be my turn to represent the village at general meeting, and also the turn of my village to supply the chairman for the meeting.”

MALLOY gave her a pained look. “My dear young woman, my duty involves contacting the person in charge here. Are you or are you not in charge?”

“If you could say anyone is in charge, I suppose I am.”

“Then you keep the records, I gather. Issue orders. Take care of administration.”

“There are no records to keep, Malloy. I issued one order, I think. I set the day of the next meeting. And the villages administer themselves.”

Malloy stood up, walked to the stone fireplace, turned abruptly. "Please, Thomason. A Praecursor named Zedder was sent here to Able XII seven Earth years ago, five and a half of your years. His job was to find out why the field station was almost unutilized, why there were no entertainment imports, why you were canceled off the tour schedules for lack of business. Zedder came here and put his ship on homing automatic with his resignation fastened to the flight panel. That was so unusual that Able XII was put on emergency priority. Our press of business is so great that this is the first time you have had Bureau contact since then.

"I came here expecting to find most of the population gone. At first I thought I was right. No one seems to live at the Centers the Bureau built for you people. Then I found you of Able XII living out here in these crude villages and shacks. It has taken me two full weeks to locate you, Thomason. I'm a busy man. A very busy man. The field station is in perfect working order. I've tested it. I projected a perfectly satisfactory little flier, synthesized foods at random from the list that checked perfectly, even used the tele-tubes from Center to Center. My job is to find out what's wrong here, Thomason."

"Does something have to be wrong?" she demanded.

"Don't try my patience, Thomason."

Her gray eyes narrowed a bit. "I can think of very few things I'm more indifferent to, Malloy, than your patience or lack of patience. This is my home. You have all the normal privileges of a guest. An autocratic attitude is not one of those privileges."

He sat down wearily. "I'm sorry. It's just that I'm upset. Where's Zedder?"

"I'm sure I haven't the faintest idea."

"Isn't there any central record of population? Any index?"

"We don't find that necessary, Malloy."

"I can't spare the time to hunt in every village for him. I've got four more emergency priority cases to cover in other parts of the Galaxy."

"Then why don't you just get back into whatever you came here in and go take care of them?"

HE LIFTED his chin. "When the Colonial Bureau sets up proper resident facilities on a planet and stocks the planet with colonists, and when said colonists fail to use the facilities provided, it is the duty of the Colonial Adjustments Bureau to send a Praecursor to make investigation and recommendation as to what sort of adjustment team should be sent to rectify said non-utilization of standard facilities."

She looked amused. "I assume you're quoting from some sort of absurd manual, Malloy. Does it actually use the word 'stock'? As with fish in a pond?"

"There is a case on record where one colonial planet suffered such an emotional degeneration that the colonists acquired a superstitious fear of Center facilities and moved off into the woods."

"And they were adjusted?" Deen Thomason asked mildly.

"Re-educated," Malloy amended.

"That sounds dreadful. Just report, Praecursor, that the inhabitants of Able XII prefer a so-called primitive life, and that the facilities of the Centers and the field station are used when emergencies arise."

"That will make no sense to the Bureau," he said hotly. "You people live out here in absolute squalor.

All the Center homes are empty. Insects have gotten in. Of course they can do no damage, but they have spun webs on the projector dials. It's untidy, a criminal waste. You could move to a Center. Everything you could possibly desire would be no farther from your hand than the nearest dial. It is incomprehensible to me, Thomason, that you should prefer to walk back into the earliest history of your race. Every possible comfort was made available when this colonial planet was set up for..."

She raised her hand. "Please, Malloy. Stand up a moment."

He stood up, puzzled. She walked around the table, smiled enigmatically at him and suddenly, clenching her fist, she struck him hard in the diaphragm. He had just enough warning so that he was able to tense his muscles against the blow. Even so, it almost took his breath.

"To strike a Praecursor is..."

"Oh, stop being so stuffy! Why are you a Praecursor? Why are you reasonably lean and hard and fit? Why aren't you sitting plump and happy within arm's reach of a dial on your home planet?"

He stared at her. "Why, I... there have to be Praecursors!"

"That point is debatable. But I'm asking why you are one."

"I like problems and new places, I suppose," he said hesitantly. "And I have to keep fit because sometimes I run into... strenuous situations. But no one forced me to be a Praecursor."

"Exactly," she said.

"I hope you realize that you are not making sense, Thomason."

"Indeed? I thought I was making a great deal of sense. Anyway, you can report that we are not completely lost. One of the Centers is occupied, you know."

"Is it? Good! Which one?"

"Number Six. I'd like to visit it with you. I have a reason, Malloy."

He pressed the stud on his time ring and the correct sun time of the Able XII twenty-hour day came into his mind. He knew that she was standing near enough to him so that she caught it, too, though less strongly. She chuckled, and it was a surprisingly warm sound.

"Why are you laughing?" he asked.

"That toy. See the sun pattern on the floor? From that I could have told you the time within a half hour."

"Not much of a degree of accuracy."

"AGAIN you've missed the point, Malloy. It's accurate enough."

"I can't argue with unreason. Come on. That flier I projected is beyond the clearing where I found you. I'll leave it with you when I go."

"Thank you. I'd have no use for it. And we should eat before we go."

"We'll eat at the Center."

"Thank you, no. I'll get us something here. First, though, I must bathe."

He looked around the room. "No cleansing unit here."

"There's a perfectly good one in the stream, Malloy." She went to the shelves near the fireplace, selected a tunic of softer fabric than her work clothes, and a heavy towel. "You can make yourself useful, Malloy. Build a small fire in the fireplace. But first come here a moment. That's my garden. See those spiky green things? Pull up about a dozen of them and wash them in the stream."

Before he could decide whether or not to refuse the request, she had gone, walking toward the stream with that long stride of hers, supple and somehow wild. He selected small sticks and tried with infuriating lack of success to start them burning by using a short hot focus of his pocket heat unit. Angry at failing in so simple a task, he walked out and yanked up a dozen of the growths she had indicated. Black moist soil clung to the bulbular white ends that came out of the ground.

He took them to the stream, below the wider part that formed a pool. Remembering the extreme variations in attitudes of modesty on the colonial planets, he did not wish to look directly at her. Precursors were trained to adapt themselves readily to many odd folkways. But in spite of his intentions he found himself gawking at her as she stood by the pool, tall and tanned and lithe. She smiled down the slope at him as she toweled her shining hair and he made a comparison oddly damaging to the soft pallid women of home.

She belted the short aqua tunic around her slim waist and he followed her back to the house. As he watched her she put some dried moss under the sticks in the fireplace, scratched an object which he recognized as being one of the crude firemaking devices of earliest times. It was called, he remembered, a "match." The small fire blazed. She brought ovoid white objects from the cellar, cracked them into an earthenware dish, chopped the bulbous white growths with a crude knife and stirred them into the mixture. The dish was then suspended over the flame while she sawed off heavy slabs of coarse bread, spread them with a yellow substance.

MALLOY watched closely. This primitive substitute for the extremely simple procedure of operating the synthesizer would form an interesting portion of his report. The odor that filled the room, however, made his salivary glands surprisingly active. The mixture firmed and she took the dish from over the fire, divided the contents into two parts, placed one part between two heavy slabs of bread and put it on another dish, set it in front of him.

Malloy took a cautious bite and then a much larger one. The taste was harsher and more concentrated, the texture far coarser than any food he had ever tasted before.

Before he knew it, his share was gone. She washed the dishes in the stream and replaced them on the shelf.

"That was very interesting," he said.

"But nothing you'd care for day in and day out?"

"N-no," he said.

She smiled. "I'm ready, Malloy. Shall we go?"

They walked to the small flier. Malloy watched her closely. She had no awe of it, accepted it as something routine and unimpressive. He ducked under the low door, sat down beside her, lifted the flier off the ground, swung around the crest of a clump of trees.

"Let me see," he said, "six would be..."

“Turn it a bit to your right, Malloy. That’s enough.”

Air whined by as he upped the speed. Cabin heat increased and the cooling unit came on. The ground streamed by far below, flattened by the height.

He said, in a fatherly tone, “This would be a long trip afoot, the way you people seem to travel.”

“Several days, Malloy. Through country where pine woods cover the hills, where silvery fish leap high in the lakes, where the trees hold wild honey. At dusk you come to a village. You are always made welcome. Cheese and bread and wine and dancing in the dusk, and the fireflies are like little lanterns.”

“Oh,” he said distantly.

“But your way is, of course, much quicker,” she added.

“I see the Center,” he said.

HE BROUGHT the flier around in a long swooping curve and dropped it lightly onto cleared land outside the gates. Even as he got out he saw people walking in the wide pastel streets of the Center. It was like a scene from home. They wore clothes of all shades, hues, fancies, whims. A completely anachronistic shack stood outside the gate, though. A tall young man with a full blond beard sat with his back against the door frame. He grinned and stood up as Malloy and Deen approached. He wore the crude garments of the villagers.

“Thomason, isn’t it?” he asked.

“That’s right. This is just an inspection trip.”

“Go right ahead,” he said.

He turned to a metallic plate set beside the rude door, depressed a switch. Malloy, slightly baffled, followed Deen through the gate. As he passed through he felt the momentary tingle of a space-twist fence temporarily reversed.

Then he straightened his shoulders. He walked beside Thomason. “You see how pleasant life can be in a Center?” he asked proudly.

A well-larded woman sat in the sun playing with two romping fuzzy creatures she had created out of the mental projector. Beyond her a man slept propped against a wall, half-empty bottles surrounding him.

“Very pleasant,” Thomason said.

“They all have everything they want. Who would want to live out in the brush when everything is right here, within arm’s reach? Exotic foods, toys, amusement.”

“Who indeed?” Thomason stressed with gentle irony. Malloy beamed at the colonists. They had the familiar triple chins of the home planet, the same shortness of breath, the same bland look that comes of satiety in all things. But he was puzzled by the way they stared at the two of them. Dulled eyes, with the glow of resentment almost submerged.

At the end of the street he stopped. “But the rest of the Center is empty!” he said.

“Yes. There’s just this one street. We can’t go any farther. The fence will stop us.”

She turned and started back. He caught her in two quick strides, grasped her arm and pulled her around roughly. “Why have you people installed a twist fence around this street?”

“Because there’s no need to put it around a bigger area.”

“Why put it around any area?” he shouted into her face.

“You are rude,” she said coldly. “And more stupid than I thought. We’ll walk back slowly. Look at their faces, Malloy. Look long and well. You see, this is the penal colony for this planet.”

The breath whoofed out of him. “Penal? But... Wait. Anybody who lives here can have every last thing they want.”

“Exactly,” she said.

Subdued, he walked beside her and he looked at their faces.

IT WAS dusk in the heart of the village. He heard the thin eager voices of children at play. Smoke from the cook fires lost itself in the grayness overhead where the first strange star patterns were beginning to appear. Deen sat with her back against a tree. Sean Malloy lay stretched out on the grass on his back, the concavity of the nape of his neck fitting comfortably over the warm convexity of her thigh.

An insect lit on the back of his hand and he slapped it. He squirmed a bit. He wasn’t yet accustomed to the scratchiness of homespun clothes. He squinted up at the skies and thought of his ship speeding toward Bureau headquarters, the resignation affixed to the automatic controls. This was the third night back at her home.

“A crazy thing to do,” he muttered.

She took her cool fingertips from his forehead abruptly. “Sorry you did it, Sean?” she asked a bit frigidly.

He captured her hand, kissed the palm. “Not the way it sounded. My ship will get back there. They’ll give Able XII a double priority. A new Praecursor will be here in probably less than four years. He may send an adjustment team.”

The children were being called in from play. A few hundred feet down the unpaved main street came the first tentative sounds of music.

“I wouldn’t worry about that, Sean,” she said softly.

He sat up, faced her. “Why in Sol not?”

She smiled at him. “Because when he comes, he’ll go looking for the person in charge, won’t he?”

“Naturally.”

“It was decided a long time ago that what little centralized administration we need should be handled by those of us least likely to be hungry for that sort of power.”

“I don’t get the connection.”

“Village representatives to the general meeting are always unmarried girls, and are always those considered to be the most pleasing to the eye. And we are beginning to find that anyone who has become a Praecursor seems peculiarly... susceptible to this sort of existence.”

HE WAS silent for a long time, and then he laughed. “Poor Zedder,” he said.

“And poor Malloy,” she added teasingly.

Suddenly he became suspicious. “Did you have orders to—to—”

“Seduce the Praecursor? How strangely short your memory is, my Sean! I seem to remember that the shoe was on the other foot.” She stood up quickly and held out her hand. “Come. They will expect us to dance. I shall teach you. It will make you hungry for the wedding feast.”

“How barbaric!” muttered the ex-Praecursor as he urgently up-tilted her mouth.

“How primitive you’re becoming!” she taunted, and writhed out of his arms.

He caught her finally, but only because she let him. He needed some woodchopping and farming, maybe some hunting and hiking, too, before he could outrun her legitimately. A couple of months and she would see who was the stronger.

The End.

Notes and proofing history

AK #15

Scanned with preliminary proofing by A/NN\A

October 24th, 2007—v1.0

from the original in *Galaxy* January, 1951

John D. MacDonald began writing pulp fiction in 1945. He is best known for his detective fiction featuring Travis McGee. *Susceptibility* was reprinted in *Galaxy Reader of Science Fiction* in 1952 and in a collection of MacDonald's science fiction stories, *Other Worlds, Other Times* in 1978.
