



Tree, Spare that Woodman
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Transcriber's Note:

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STIFF with shock, Naomi Heckscher stood just inside the door to Cappy's one-room cabin, where she'd happened to be when her husband discovered the old man's body.

Her nearest neighbor—old Cappy—dead. After all his wire-pulling to get into the First Group, and his slaving to make a farm on this alien planet, dead in bed!

Naomi's mind circled frantically, contrasting her happy anticipations with this shocking actuality. She'd come to call on a friend, she reminded herself, a beloved friend—round, white-haired, rosy-cheeked; lonely because he'd recently become a widower. To her little boy, Cappy was a combination Grandpa and Santa Claus; to herself, a sort of newly met Old Beau.

Her mouth had been set for a sip of his home brew, her eyes had pictured the delight he'd take in and give to her little boy.

She'd walked over with son and husband, expecting nothing more shocking than an ostentatiously stolen kiss. She'd found a corpse. And to have let Cappy die alone, in this strange world ...

She and Ted could at least have been with him, if they'd known.

But they'd been laughing and singing in their own cabin only a mile away, celebrating Richard's fifth birthday. She'd been annoyed when Cappy failed to show up with the present he'd promised Richard. Annoyed—while the old man pulled a blanket over his head, turned his round face to the wall, and died.

Watching compassionately, Naomi was suddenly struck by the matter-of-fact way Ted examined the body. Ted wasn't surprised.

"Why did you tell Richard to stay outside, just now?" she demanded. "How did you know what we'd find here? And why didn't you tell me, so I could keep Richard at home?"

She saw Ted start, scalded by the splash of her self-directed anger, saw him try to convert his wince into a shrug.

"You insisted on coming," he reminded her gently. "I couldn't have kept you home without—without saying too much, worrying you—with the Earth-ship still a year away. Besides, I didn't know for sure, till we saw the tree-things around the cabin."

The tree-things. The trees-that-were-not. Gnarled blue trunks, half-hidden by yellow leaf-needles stretching twenty feet into the sky. Something like the hoary mountain hemlocks she and Ted had been forever photographing on their Sierra honeymoon, seven life-long years ago.

Three of those tree-things had swayed over Cappy's spring for a far longer time than Man had occupied this dreadful planet. Until just now ...

The three of them had topped the rise that hid Cappy's farm from their own. Richard was running ahead like a happily inquisitive puppy. Suddenly he'd stopped, pointing with a finger she distinctly recalled as needing thorough soapy scrubbing.

"Look, Mommie!" he'd said. "Cappy's trees have moved. They're around the cabin, now."

He'd been interested, not surprised. In the past year, Mazda had become Richard's home; only Earth could surprise him.

But, Ted, come to think of it, had seemed withdrawn, his face a careful blank. And she?

"Very pretty," she'd said, and stuffed the tag-end of fear back into the jammed, untidy mental pigeon-hole she used for all unpleasant thoughts. "Don't run too far ahead, dear."

But now she had to know what Ted knew.

"Tell me!" she said.

"These tree-things—"

"There've been *other* deaths! How many?"

"Sixteen. But I didn't want to tell you. Orders were to leave women and children home when we had that last Meeting, remember."

"What did they say at the Meeting? Out with it, Ted!"

"That—that the tree-things think!"

"But that's ridiculous!"

"Well, unfortunately, no. Look, I'm not trying to tell you that terrestrial trees think, too, nor even that they have a nervous system. They don't. But—well, on Earth, if you've ever touched a lighted match to the leaf of a sensitive plant like the mimosa, say—and I have—you've been struck by the speed with which *other* leaves close up and droop. I mean, sure, we know that the leaves droop because certain cells exude water and nearby leaves feel the heat of the match. But the others don't, yet they droop, too. Nobody knows how it works ... "

"But *that's* just defensive!"

"Sure. But *that's* just on Earth!"

"All right, dear. I won't argue any more. But I still don't understand. Go on about the Meeting."

"Well, they said these tree-things both create and respond to the patterned electrical impulses of the mind. It's something like the way a doctor creates fantasies by applying a mild electric current to the right places on a patient's brain. In the year we've been here, the trees—or some of them—have learned to read from and transmit to our minds. The range, they say, is around fifty feet. But you have to be receptive—"

"Receptive?"

"Fearful. That's the condition. So I didn't want to tell you because you *must not* let yourself become afraid, Naomi. We're clearing trees from the land, in certain areas. And it's their planet, after all. Fear is their weapon and fear can kill!"

"You still—all you men—should have let us women know! What do you think we are? Besides, I don't really believe you. How can fear kill?"

"Haven't you ever heard of a savage who gets in bad with his witch-doctor and is killed by magic? The savage is convinced, having seen or heard of other cases, that he *can* be killed. The witch-doctor sees to it he's told he *will* be killed. And sometimes the savage actually dies—"

"From poison, I've always thought."

"The poison of fear. The physical changes that accompany fear, magnified beyond belief by belief itself."

"But how in the world could all this have affected Cappy? He wasn't a savage. And he was elderly, Ted. A bad heart, maybe. A stroke. Anything."

"He passed his pre-flight physical only a year ago. And—well, he lived all alone. He was careful not to let you see it, but I know he worried about these three trees on his place. And I know he got back from the Meeting in a worried state of mind. Then, obviously, the trees moved—grouped themselves around his cabin within easy range. But don't be afraid of them, Naomi. So long as you're not, they can't hurt you. They're not bothering us now."

"No. But where's Richard?"

Naomi's eyes swept past Ted, encompassing the cabin. No Richard! He'd been left outside ...

Glass tinkled and crashed as she flung back the cabin door. "Richard! Richard!"

Her child was not in sight. Nor within earshot, it seemed.

"Richard Heckscher! Where are you?" Sanity returned with the conventional primness. And it brought her answer.

"Here I am, Mommie! Look-at!"

He was in a tree! He was fifteen feet off the ground, high in the branches of a tree-thing, swaying—

For an instant, dread flowed through Naomi as if in her bloodstream and something was cutting off her breath. Then, as the hands over mouth and throat withdrew, she saw they were Ted's. She let him drag her into the cabin and close the broken door.

"Better not scare Richard," he said quietly, shoving her gently into a chair. "He might fall."

Dumbly she caught her breath, waiting for the bawling out she'd earned.

But Ted said, "Richard keeps us safe. So long as we fear for him, and not ourselves—"

That was easy to do. Outside, she heard a piping call: "Look at me now, Mommie!"

"Showing off!" she gasped. In a flashing vision, Richard was half boy, half vulture, flapping to the ground with a broken wing.

"Here," said Ted, picking up a notebook that had been on the table. "Here's Cappy's present. A homemade picture book. Bait."

"Let *me* use it!" she said. "Richard may have seen I was scared just now."

Outside again, under the tree, she called, "Here's Cappy's present, Richard. He's gone away and left it for you."

Would he notice how her voice had gone up half an octave, become flat and shrill?

"I'm coming down," Richard said. "Let me down, tree."

He seemed to be struggling. The branches were cagelike. He was caught!

Naomi's struggle was with her voice. "How did you *ever* get up there?" she called.

"The tree let me up, Mommie," Richard explained solemnly, "but he won't let me down!" He whimpered a little.

He must *not* become frightened! "You tell that tree you've got to come right down this instant!" she ordered.

She leaned against the cabin for support. Ted came out and slipped his arm around her.

"Break off a few leaves, Richard," he suggested. "That'll show your tree who's boss!"

Standing close against her husband, Naomi tried to stop shaking. But she lacked firm support, for Ted shook, too.

His advice to Richard was sound, though. What had been a trap became, through grudging movement of the branches, a ladder. Richard climbed down, scolding at the tree like an angry squirrel.

NAOMI thought she'd succeeded in shutting her mind. But when her little boy slid down the final bit of trunk and came for his present, Naomi broke. Like a startled animal, she thrust the book into his hands, picked him up and ran. Her mind was a jelly, red and quaking.

She stopped momentarily after running fifty yards. "Burn the trees!" she screamed over her shoulder. "Burn the cabin! Burn it all!" She ran on, Ted's answering shouts beyond her comprehension.

Fatigue halted her. At the top of the rise between Cappy's farm and their own, pain and dizziness began flowing over her in waves. She set Richard down on the mauve soil and collapsed beside him.

When she sat up, Richard squatted just out of reach, watching curiously. She made an effort at casualness: "Let's see what Daddy's doing back there."

"He's doing just what you said to, Mommie!" Richard answered indignantly.

Her men were standing together, Naomi realized. She laughed. After a moment, Richard joined her. Then he looked for his book, found it a few paces away, and brought it to her.

"Read to me, Mommie."

"At home," she said.

Activity at Cappy's interested her now. Wisps of smoke were licking around the trees. A tongue of flame lapped at one while she watched. Branches writhed. The trees were too slow-moving to escape ...

But where was Ted? What had she exposed him to, with her hysterical orders? She held her breath till he moved within sight, standing quietly by a pile of salvaged tools. Behind him the cabin began to smoke.

Ted wasn't afraid, then. He understood what he faced. And Richard wasn't afraid, either, because he didn't understand.

But she? Surreptitiously Naomi pinched her hip till it felt black and blue. That was for being such a fool. She must *not* be afraid!

"Daddy seems to be staying there," she said. "Let's wait for him at home, Richard."

"Are you going to make Daddy burn *our* tree?"

She jumped as if stung. Then, consciously womanlike, she sought relief in talk.

"What do *you* think we should do, dear?"

"Oh, I *like* the tree, Mommie. It's cool under there. And the tree plays with me."

"How, Richard?"

"If I'm pilot, he's navigator. Or ship, maybe. But he's so dumb, Mommie! I always have to tell him everything. Doesn't know what a fairy is, or Goldilocks, or anything!"

He clutched his book affectionately, rubbing his face on it. "Hurry up, Mommie. It'll be bedtime before you ever read to me!"

She touched his head briefly. "You can look at the book while I fix your supper."

BUT to explain Cappy's pictures—crudely crayoned cartoons, really—she had to fill in the story they illustrated. She told it while Richard ate: how the intrepid Spaceman gallantly used his ray gun against the villainous Martians to aid the green-haired Princess. Richard spooned up the thrills with his mush, gazing fascinated at Cappy's colorful and fantastic pictures, propped before him on the table. Had Ted been home, the scene might almost have been blissful.

It might have been ... if their own tree hadn't reminded her of Cappy's. Still, she'd almost managed to stuff her fear back into that mental pigeon-hole before their own tree. It was unbelievable, but she'd been glancing out the window every few minutes, so she saw it start. Their own tree began to walk.

Down the hill it came—right there!—framed in the window behind Richard's head, moving slowly but inexorably on a root system that writhed along the surface. Like some ancient sculpture of Serpents Supporting the Tree of Life. Except that it brought death ...

"Are you sick, Mommie?"

No, not sick. Just something the matter with her throat, preventing a quick answer, leaving no way to keep Richard from turning to look out the window.

"I think our tree is coming to play with me, Mommie."

No, no! Not Richard!

"Remember how you used to say that about Cappy? When he was really coming to see your daddy?"

"But Daddy isn't home!"

"He'll get here, dear. Now eat your supper."

A lot to ask of an excited little boy. And the tree *was* his friend, it seemed. Cappy's tree had even followed the child's orders. Richard might intercede—

No! Expose him to such danger? How could she think of it?

"Had enough to eat, dear? Wash your hands and face at the pump, and you can stay out and play till Daddy gets home. I—I want—I may have to see your friend, the tree, by myself ... "

"But you haven't finished my story!"

"I will when Daddy gets home. And if I'm not here, you tell Daddy to do it."

"Where are you going, Mommie?"

"I might see Cappy, dear. Now go and wash, please!"

"Sure, Mommie. Don't cry."

Accept his kiss, even if it *is* from a mouth rimmed with supper. And don't rub it off till he's gone out, you damned fool. You frightened fool. You shaking, sweating, terror-stricken fool.

Who's he going to kiss when you're not here?

The tree has stopped. Our little tree is having its supper. How nice. Sucking sustenance direct from soil with aid of sun and air in true plant fashion—but exhausting our mineral resources.

(How wise of Ted to make you go to those lectures! You wouldn't want to die in ignorance, would you?)

The lecture—come on, let's go back to the lecture! Let's free our soil from every tree or we'll not hold the joint in fee. No, not joint. A vulgarism, teacher would say. Methinks the times are out of joint. Aroint thee, tree!

Now a pinch. Pinch yourself hard in the same old place so it'll hurt real bad. Then straighten your face and go stick your head out the window. Your son is talking—your son, your sun.

Can your son be eclipsed by a tree? A matter of special spatial relationships, and the space is shrinking, friend. The tree is only a few hundred feet from the house. It has finished its little supper and is now running around. Like Richard. *With* Richard! Congenial, what?

Smile, stupid. Your son speaks. Answer him.

"What, dear?"

"I see Daddy! He just came over the hill. He's running! Can I go meet him, Mommie?"

"No, dear. It's too far."

Too far. Far too far.

"Did you say something to me, Richard?"

"No. I was talking to the tree. I'm the Spaceman and he's the Martian. But he doesn't want to be the Martian!"

Richard plays. Let us play. Let us play.

You're close enough to get into the game, surely. A hundred and fifty feet, maybe. Effective range, fifty feet. Rate of motion? Projected time-interval? Depends on which system you observe it from. Richard has a system.

"He doesn't want to play, Mommie. He wants to see you!"

"You tell that tree your Mommie *never* sees strangers when Daddy isn't home!"

"I'll *make* him wait!"

Stoutly your pot-bellied little protector prevents his protective mother from going to pot.

"If he won't play, I'll use my ray gun on him!"

Obviously, the tree won't play. Watch your son lift empty hands, arm himself with a weapon yet to be invented, and open fire on the advancing foe.

"Aa-aa-aa!"

So *that's* how a ray gun sounds!

"You're dead, tree! You're dead! Now you *can't* play with me any more. You're dead!"

SEEING it happen, then, watching the tree accept the little boy's fantasy as fact, Naomi wondered why she'd never thought of that herself.

So the tree was a treacherous medicine-man, was it? A true-believing witch-doctor? And who could be more susceptible to the poisoning of fear than a witch-doctor who has made fear work—and believes it's being used against him?

It was all over. She and the tree bit the dust together. But the tree was dead, and Naomi merely fainting, and Ted would soon be home ...

—DAVE DRYFOOS

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