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BLESSED ARE THE MEEK

Every strength is a weakness, and every weakness is a strength. And when the Strong start smashing each other's strength ... the Weak may turn out to be, instead, the Wise.

BY G. C. EDMONDSON

Illustrated by Freas

The strangers landed just before dawn, incinerating a good li of bottom land in the process. Their machines were already busily digging up the topsoil. The Old One watched, squinting into the morning sun. He sighed, hitched up his saffron robes and started walking down toward the strangers.

Griffin turned, not trying to conceal his excitement. "You're the linguist, see what you can get out of him."

"I might," Kung Su ventured sourly, "if you'd go weed the air machine or something. This is going to be hard enough without a lot of kibitzers cramping my style and scaring Old Pruneface here half to death."

"I see your point," Griffin answered. He turned and started back toward the diggings. "Let me know if you make any progress with the local language." He stopped whistling and strove to control the jauntiness of his gait. *Must be the lower gravity and extra oxygen*, he thought. *I haven't bounced along like this for thirty years. Nice place to settle down if some promoter doesn't turn it into an old folks home.* He sighed and glanced over the diggings. The rammed earth walls were nearly obliterated by now. *Nothing lost*, he reflected. *It's all on tape and they're no different from a thousand others at any rate.*

Griffin opened a door in the transparent bubble from which Albañez was operating the diggers. "Anything?" he inquired.

"Nothing so far," Albañez reported. "What's the score on this job? I missed the briefing."

"How'd you make out on III, by the way?"

"Same old stuff, pottery shards and the usual junk. See it once and you've seen it all."

"Well," Griffin began, "it looks like the same thing here again. We've pretty well covered this system and you know how it is. Rammed earth walls here and there, pottery shards, flint, bronze and iron artifacts and that's it. They got to the iron age on every planet and then blooey."

"Artifacts all made for humanoid hands I suppose. I wonder if they were close enough to have crossbred with humans."

"I couldn't say," Griffin observed dryly. "From the looks of Old Pruneface I doubt if we'll ever find a human female with sufficiently detached attitude to find out."

"Who's Pruneface?"

"He came ambling down out of the hills this morning and walked into camp."

"You mean you've actually found a live humanoid?"

"There's got to be a first time for everything." Griffin opened the door and started climbing the hill toward Kung Su and Pruneface.

"Well, have you gotten beyond the 'me, Charlie' stage yet?" Griffin inquired at breakfast two days later.

Kung Su gave an inscrutable East Los Angeles smile. "As a matter of fact, I'm a little farther along. Joe is amazingly cooperative."

"Joe?"

"Spell it Chou if you want to be exotic. It's still pronounced Joe and that's his name. The language is monosyllabic and tonal. I happen to know a similar language."

"You mean this humanoid speaks Chinese?" Griffin was never sure whether Kung was ribbing him or not.

"Not Chinese. The vocabulary is different but the syntax and phonemes are nearly identical. I'll speak it perfectly in a week. It's just a question of memorizing two or three thousand new words. Incidentally, Joe wants to know why you're digging up his bottom land. He was all set to flood it today."

"Don't tell me he plants rice!" Griffin exclaimed.

"I don't imagine it's rice, but it needs flooding whatever it is."

"Ask him how many humanoids there are on this planet."

"I'm way ahead of you, Griffin. He says there are only a few thousand left. The rest were all destroyed in a war with the barbarians."

"Barbarians?"

"They're extinct."

"How many races were there?"

"I'll get to that if you'll stop interrupting," Kung rejoined testily. "Joe says there are only two kinds of people, his own dark, straight-haired kind and the barbarians. They have curly hair, white skin and round eyes. You'd pass for a barbarian, according to Joe, only you don't have a faceful of hair. He wants to know how things are going on the other planets."

"I suppose that's my cue to break into a cold sweat and feel a premonition of disaster." Griffin tried to smile and almost made it.

"Not necessarily, but it seems our iron-age man is fairly well informed in extraplanetary affairs."

"I guess I'd better start learning the language."

Thanks to the spade work Kung Su had done in preparing hypno-recordings, Griffin had a working knowledge of the Rational People's language eleven days later when he sat down to drink herb infused hot water with Joe and other Old Ones in the low-roofed wooden building around which clustered a village of two hundred humanoids. He fidgeted through interminable ritualistic cups of hot water. Eventually Joe hid his hands in the sleeves of his robe and turned with an air of polite inquiry. *Now we get down to business*, Griffin thought.

"Joe, you know by now why we're digging up your bottom land. We'll recompense you in one way or another. Meanwhile, could you give me a little local history?"

Joe smiled like a well nourished bodhisattva. "Approximately how far back would you like me to begin?"

"At the beginning."

"How long is a year on your planet?" Joe inquired.

"Your year is eight and a half days longer. Our day is three hundred heartbeats longer than yours."

Joe nodded his thanks. "More water?"

Griffin declined, suppressing a shudder.

"Five million years ago we were limited to one planet," Joe began. "The court astronomer had a vision of our planet in flames. I imagine you'd say our sun was about to nova. The empress was disturbed and ordered a convocation of seers. One fasted overlong and saw an answer. As the dying seer predicted the Son of Heaven came with fire-breathing dragons. The fairest of maidens and the strongest of our young men were taken to serve his warriors. We served them honestly and faithfully. A thousand years later their empire collapsed leaving us scattered across the universe. Three thousand years later a new race of barbarians conquered our planets. We surrendered naturally and soon were serving our new masters. Five hundred years passed and they destroyed themselves. This has been the pattern of our existence from that day to this."

"You mean you've been slaves for five million years?" Griffin was incredulous.

"Servitude has ever been a refuge for the scholar and the philosopher."

"But what point is there in such a life? Why do you continue living this way?"

"What is the point in any way of life? Continued existence. Personal immortality is neither desirable nor possible. We settled for perpetuation of the race."

"But what about self-determination? You know enough astronomy to understand novae. Surely you realize it could happen again. What would you do without a technology to build spaceships?"

"Many stars have gone nova during our history. Usually the barbarians came in time. When they didn't—"

"You mean you don't really care?"

"All barbarians ask that sooner or later," Joe smiled. "Sometimes toward the end they even accuse us of destroying them. We don't. Every technology bears the seeds of its own destruction. The stars are older than the machinery that explores them."

"You used technology to get from one system to another."

"We used it, but we were never part of it. When machines fail, their people die. We have no machines."

"What would you do if this sun were to nova?"

"We can serve you. We are not unintelligent."

"Willing to work your way around the galaxy, eh? But what if we refused to take you?"

"The race would go on. Kung Su tells me there is no life on planets of this system, but there are other systems."

"You're whistling in the dark," Griffin scoffed. "How do you know if any of the Rational People survive?"

"How far back does your history go?" Joe inquired.

"It's hard to say exactly," Griffin replied. "Our earliest written records date back some seven thousand years."

"You are all of one race?"

"No, you may have noticed Kung Su is slightly different from the rest of us."

"Yes, Griffin, I have noticed. When you return ask Kung Su for the legend of creation. More hot water?" Joe stirred and Griffin guessed the interview was over. He drank another ritual cup, made his farewells and walked thoughtfully back to camp.

"Kung," Griffin asked over coffee next afternoon, "how well up are you on Chinese mythology?"

"Oh, fair, I guess. It isn't my field but I remember some of the stories my grandfather used to tell me."

"What is your legend of creation?" Griffin persisted.

"It's pretty well garbled but I remember something about the Son of Heaven bringing the early settlers from a land of two moons on the back of his fire-breathing dragon. The dragon got sick and died so they couldn't ever get back to heaven again. There's a lot of stuff about devils, too."

"What about devils?"

"I don't remember too well, but they were supposed to do terrible things to you and even to your unborn children if they ever caught you. They must have been pretty stupid though; they couldn't turn corners. My grandfather's store had devil screens at all the doors so you had to turn a corner to get in. The first time I saw the lead baffles at the pile chamber doors on this ship it reminded me of home sweet home. By the way, some young men from the village were around today. They want to work passage to the next planet. What do you think?"

Griffin was silent for a long time.

"Well, what do you say? We can use some hand labor for the delicate digging. Want to put them on?"

"Might as well." Griffin answered. "There's a streetcar every millennium anyway."

"What do you mean by that?"

"You wouldn't understand. You sold your birthright to the barbarians."

THE END

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