

*Beautiful Karen, who had fled the shackles of Earth, once had written: "We shall never leave Earth as long as we compute escape velocity in miles per hour . . ."*

## PRISONERS OF EARTH

BY ROBERT F. YOUNG

*Guildenstern: Prison, my lord?*

*Hamlet: Denmark's a prison.*

*Rosencrantz: Then is the world one.*

*Hamlet: A goodly one, in which there are many confines, wards, and dungeons, Denmark being one o' the worst.*

*Rosencrantz: We think not so, my lord.*

*Hamlet: Why, then, t'is none to you; for there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so. To me it is a prison.*

(HAMLET : Act II, Scene 2)

IT T WAS a country of blue lakes—the *Misseros d'n Gaedo* region of Altair 12. There were little lakes and big lakes and middle-sized lakes scattered like sapphire dewdrops over a tableland verdant with forest. Some of the lakes had small green islands in them and it was on one of these islands that Larry saw the second native village.

He brought the little flier down, circling several times before he deposited it gently on the water. Then he retracted the swallow-wings and started taxiing toward the shore. He had a feeling that this, surely, was the right place.

It had the right look—the odd, pathetic aspect all the other places had had in one way or another.

The pink, spherical houses, perched absurdly on gangling stilts, came right down to the water's edge, and the village street debouched on the beach. If you could call the meandering aisle between the houses a street. In any event it sufficed for one, and it was filled now with the people of the village.

They came down to the lake to greet him. The quaint people, the grown-up little boy and girl people who, in the premeditated phraseology of the Altair travelogue, "played at being adults in their simple paradise of fish and fruits and little isosceles triangles of vegetable gardens."

Larry eased the flier between two cluttered fishing rafts, running its prow into the soft beach sand. He locked the controls and climbed out. The village chief walked down to the water's edge to receive him.

"Welcome to my country," the chief said in standard *Galactia*. He bowed ceremoniously. In the eyes of his people he was far from young, but in Larry's eyes he was a little boy with a fat man's body. He had a large cherubic face—a small pink mouth, chubby beardless cheeks, and enormous blue eyes. His hair was light brown, and there was a startling cowlick protruding over his forehead like the visor of a baseball cap. He was clad, as were all his subjects, in a gaudy thigh-length skirt, and he wore a fresh lei of *iliao* flowers around his neck.

Larry imitated the bow, feeling ludicrous. "Thank you," he said. He surveyed the crowded street, looking over the chief's shoulder. But all he saw were baby faces and rotund bodies, and no familiar face with delicate features and haunted blue eyes, no graceful shoulders. But that didn't necessarily prove that this was the wrong village. Karen didn't care for crowds, not even crowds that gathered to welcome her own husband. If he knew her at all she had probably fled into the forest the moment she had seen the approaching flier and now was sitting by some quiet stream, composing introvert verse. . . .

The chief had begun his well-rehearsed welcome speech. "—for the duration of your visit," he was saying, "let my country be your country. Let my subjects be your subjects, and I, the chief, shall be your

subject also—"

The traditional snowjob, Larry thought. To how many hungry-eyed tourists had he already delivered it? Tourists with blue lakes in their eyes and with little office cubicles crammed into the backs of their minds. If I were a tourist I'll bet it would sound terrific to me, too, he thought. I'll bet when he came to the part about the rent it wouldn't even disillusion me, that even then I'd be too blind to see the credit signs in his baby-blue eyes.

But tourists didn't mind being duped. They came to the *Misseros d'n Gaedo* region to fish and to hunt, to relax in an uncomplicated milieu; they didn't come to look for their wives. They'd had sense enough to marry emotionally stable women. Stolid women, unimaginative women—

"There is, of course," the chief said, "a small fee which we are required to ask for our hospitality. Probably you are familiar with the ruling of the Altair council in this respect. Having to ask payment for services which, in happier circumstances, I would gladly render free, is a source of extreme humiliation to me, but I have no choice."

Larry already had his credit book in his hand. "I don't know exactly how long I'll be here," he said. "Perhaps a week—"

The chief's blue eyes were guileless. "Our weekly rate is fifty credits," he said. "Payable in advance."

The robber! Larry thought, tearing out five crisp tens. The first village had only asked thirty-five, and that had been exorbitant enough. He hadn't had to pay then, though. One glance around had told him Karen wasn't there. Somehow, after years of weary searching and finding, you knew instinctively where to look; you sensed just the kind of *mise en scene* that would appeal to her. You could tell by the expressions on the people's faces, by the architecture of the houses, by the contour of the land. One glance had been enough and he had reentered the flier and lifted swiftly above the disappointed natives, and presently he had found this village. And this village *looked* right, this village *could* be the one—

And if it was, fifty credits was certainly cheap enough, he rationalized. Finding Karen was worth more than fifty credits any day. He handed the five tens to the chief and returned to the flier for his kit. By the time he returned to the beach the chief had already selected a "companion" for him and was walking back up the village street. The crowd, its duty done, was listlessly dispersing.

Larry's "companion" was a buxom doll of a girl with a rosebud mouth, big blue eyes, and frizzly straw-colored hair. She took his kit and led the way up the street. There was a shed-like structure that resembled a primitive warehouse standing on the beach. But Larry knew it wasn't a warehouse, and when they passed it he identified the muffled sound that emanated from its interior as the smooth hum of a modern generator. He identified the vine-like cables that overhung the street for what they really were too—electric wires.

Multi-colored honeysuckle wound riotously around the stilts of the houses, but looking closely he saw the glint, here and there, of a copper pipe, and he knew that primitive though the houses might be in outward respects they at least had running water and other modern conveniences.

They also contained some form of television receivers. The animal shapes of the antennae on their rooftops might convince the ordinary tourist that all he was seeing was a kind of cultural religious symbol, but Larry wasn't an ordinary tourist. He wondered cynically what ancient vintage of film entertainment the Interstellar Mass Media Board had allotted Altair 12. Then he saw a group of native children playing in the nearby forest and he realized the nature of the game they were engaged in. The hoary "bang-bang" of the pre-space "oaters" resounded incongruously among the idyllic trees as baby faced cowboys loped ecstatically about on imaginary steeds. Hop-along Cassidy rides again, Larry thought, and marveled at his own apostasy.

The trouble with him was that he had seen too many converted cultures. Searching for Karen on so many out-of-the-way planets had made him hypercritical, in spite of himself, of the repetitious puppet dances of inferior civilizations. And when the dance was deliberately concealed behind simple, non-technological exteriors in order to lure vacationists from Earth and the other technologically advanced planets, there was something snide about it, something obscene. . . .

His "companion" had halted before one of the houses and was regarding him with mundane baby-blue eyes. He concluded that it was the one the chief had assigned him. It was no different from the

other houses except that it really was what it purported to be: there were no water pipes hidden in its honeysuckle and the metallic animal design on its rooftop was just that.

"You is mayhap tired?" the girl asked in pidgin *Galactia*.

Larry was more than tired. He was exhausted. It had been more than twenty standard hours since he had left the Altair 12 consulate. But he shook his head. He took his kit from the girl, climbed high enough on the climbing pole so that he could shove it through the door, then returned to the street. He pulled his credit book from his pocket and riffled its crisp pages.

"Am looking for Earth lady, beautiful Earth lady," he said. "You have mayhap seen?"

The blue eyes were mesmerized by the green blur of the pages. "Beautiful Earth lady? How is lady look?"

"Lady very very beautiful." He had trouble keeping his voice steady. "Have hair like sun, eyes like sky. Like to walk in woods. Very much like to walk in woods—"

He paused. The big blue eyes had risen from the credit book. They were filled with wonderment first, and then disbelief. Finally the disbelief faded and amusement took its place. A grimy hand covered the rosebud mouth, stifling a giggle.

Larry felt like slapping her. He controlled himself with an effort and riffled the credit book again. "You have seen lady?"

"Have seen many times. Crazy lady. Walk in woods, look at flowers, birds. Make funny marks in wrong color credit book."

Larry sighed. It was the right place all right. There hadn't really been any doubt in his mind since the moment he had first glimpsed the village. "Where lady now?"

"Not know. Think mayhap live at Mission. Not see many days now."

"Where Mission?"

"Mission on big hill, center of island." Keeping one blue eye on the credit book, she pointed up the street to where the houses petered out into the forest. "Walk through woods, come to creek. Follow creek back."

Larry nodded. Then, reluctantly, he tore a five from the book and laid it on the outstretched hand that suddenly appeared before him. "Here," he said, "go buy yourself some electrical appliances."

He turned abruptly and started up the path that led through the woods to the Mission beyond.

IT WAS Karen's type of forest—charming little trees, sudden clearings filled with unexpected flowers, birds like winged blurs of color . . . Larry walked along slowly, bending his head sometimes to avoid the low branches of the trees. It was almost impossible not to picture her strolling dreamily through the enchanted aisles, curling up in some sequestered bower to jot down wisps of verse in the little notebook she always carried

And such verse! Larry shook his head. He had never understood it and he never would. Not that he hadn't tried. But how could you understand outrageous outpourings like—

*—the cold touch of doubt upon you in the evening  
and the falling to Earth of stars,  
each burning infinitesimally in the little night,  
abruptly microcosmic,  
its hauteur gone,  
a pitiful cinder beneath the scuffed shoes of man . . .*

or—

*we have converted the souls of mountains into shining ships,  
and yet we cannot leave Earth;  
we shall never leave Earth  
as long as we compute escape velocity in miles per hours . . .*

Nonsense, Larry thought. Utter nonsense. Like all the rest of her poetry. And yet, illogically, an obscure publishing house had brought out a collection of her most aberrant verse under the title of *The Prisoners of Earth*. Nor had they stopped with one collection. A year later another had appeared. *Equations*.

Larry bent back an offending low branch until it snapped. Equations! The book had turned out to be even more esoteric than *The Prisoners of Earth* had been. At least *The Prisoners* had resembled poetry, even though not a single one of its lines had rhymed. Equations didn't resemble anything at all. "Mass Man" for instance—

Homo Sapiens / Technological Culture equals Mass Man

and then there was the one on "Earth"—

Earth x 1,000,000 equals Earth

and the one on "Escape Velocity"—

Technological Progress / Emotional Maturity = Escape Velocity

The trees thinned out and he found himself on the green shoulder of a sparkling brook. He paused, staring down into the dancing water, the equations fading from his mind. There were always brooks in the milieus Karen chose when she ran away—brooks and trees and meadows, lakes and gentle hills. Suddenly he had the feeling that he was reenacting an old, old scene out of an old, old play. The name of the play was *Karen* and its basic plot was girl-leaves-boy, boy-looks-for-and-finds-girl.

They had performed the play in so many places, against so many backgrounds . . . The first place had been the Tetkov reservation of Alpha Centauri 4, and the background had consisted of lazy rivers winding among tumbled hills and green trceries of trees in serpentine valleys. Karen had joined the Tetkov nomads in that performance, and Larry had found her, after weary, heart-breaking months, creditless and starving in a little Tetkov town.

He had taken her back to Earth, and after several months he began to think that one experience in "going native" had permanently cured her of her *Weltschmerz*. She was docile, and she smiled at the right times and laughed when she was supposed to, and she no longer made unintelligible remarks when galactic civilization was the topic of conversation. He even began to believe that she was going to be worth the five thousand credits he had paid her father for her after all.

And then she had run away and the play had begun all over again.

The background for that performance had been Heaven, the third moon of Sirius 9. Heaven was the twenty-third psalm minus the valley of the shadow of death. It was a place of green pastures and still waters. It was blue sky and gentle terrain and soft winds breathing out of the south from morning till night, and a big safe night that was only a shade less bright than day.

When he finally found her Karen was living on the reservation which the Earth Supreme Council had set aside for the natives. She was a shepherdess. She was wearing a shining white robe and hand-made native sandals, and she was holding a primitive shepherd's staff. She was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen, and when he saw her he wanted to cry.

And then he had seen the disillusionment in her eyes, the pain; and for the first time he had noticed the bleak steel ribs of the new Interstellar Trade Building rising in the distance—

The dancing water threw flecks of sunlight into his eyes and Larry turned away. He began walking along the green shoulder of the bank, the ground rising slowly beneath his feet. The grass was knee-deep and infiltrated with flowers; birds blurred from little tree to little tree.

He had made up his mind on Heaven that there weren't going to be any more performances, but

there had been many many more. He thought of them grimly, and thought too of the interludes between when Karen had rationalized her brief periods of conventional behavior by writing her paradoxical poetry. And for the hundredth time he wondered why he bothered, why he didn't let her go, let her become whatever it was that she wanted to become, let her, in her own words—

*—Break free from all the gaudy glittering things  
that constitute the circumstance of man,  
and become the essence of not-wanting . . .*

The forest, typical of all Karen forests, ended abruptly, and a Karen-type hill raised its lovely green brow into the blue sky. On top of the hill the white buildings of the Mission gleamed in the afternoon sunlight. Larry climbed the hill slowly, wading in the tall grass. When he reached the outlying buildings and saw the new-turned grave in the little burial lot he knew, without knowing why or how he knew, that the basic plot of the play *Karen* had finally varied, and that the curtain this time, had fallen irrevocably.

THE MISSION Mother came out of the chapel while Larry was standing by the grave. She walked over and stood beside him. She was old and thin, with faded eyes set deep beneath sharp dark brows. She wore the traditional golden cape about her shoulders, and the sacred U-235 Emblem, symbol of the Galactic Church, glittered on her forehead.

"She was your wife?" she asked.

"Yes," Larry said. There was a vast emptiness building up beyond the *Misseros d'n Gaedo* horizon, threatening to move in over the forests and the blue lakes.

"She mentioned you several times. She seemed to be expecting you."

"How did she die?"

"She could have stayed here, but she wouldn't." The Mission Mother sniffed. "She could have worked for her food and her lodging. But she was too lazy. All she wanted to do was wander in the forest, to dream—"

"Never mind all that," Larry said. "How did she die?"

"She died of starvation. She lived in the village when she first came. Then, when her credits were gone, she lived in the forest. Naturally the natives refused to feed her when she could no longer pay." The Mission Mother looked at Larry closely. "You certainly can't blame them for that, can you?"

"No, of course not," Larry said. The emptiness had begun to move in. He felt the first cold breath of it.

"She didn't even blame them herself. Just before she died I heard her say, 'Father forgive them—' I don't know why she asked her father to forgive them though."

Larry shook his head. He looked down at the grave again. There were fresh forest flowers covering it. "The flowers are beautiful," he said. He looked at the Mission Mother. "Did you put them there?"

Two raddled spots of red appeared on the Mission Mother's thin cheeks. The U-235 atom glittered harshly. "Yes . . . It isn't customary but—" She dropped her eyes, stared at the grave. "I don't know why she wouldn't stay at the Mission," she said. "She could have worked for her food. She wouldn't have had to work hard. I don't know why she wouldn't. I don't know why she was so fascinated by the forest—"

"Karen wasn't like us," Larry said. He looked over the Mission Mother's head at the metallic sphere of the chapel, at the big atom-emblem poised above it like the hard bright heart of a star. He wondered if Karen minded being buried in what she would have called a heathen churchyard. She had never believed in the Galactic Church. She had belonged to some silly religious sect that dated from before the dark ages of Earth, a dying sect that worshipped an impossible God who advocated throwing away credits.

He decided that the religious aspect of the churchyard wasn't important. What was important was the green hill on which it stood, the matchless blue sky above it, and the forest and the lakes rolling away into the soft distances. Certainly, if Karen belonged anywhere at all, she belonged here . . .

The emptiness was very close now, and suddenly he knew that he couldn't face it. Not yet. He lowered his gaze to the Mission Mother. "Thank you for trying to help her," he said, and he was shocked

to see that there were tears in her faded eyes. He turned away quickly and began walking down the hill.

He walked down the hill and into the forest, the emptiness just behind him. He walked through the forest rapidly, following the dancing brook till he glimpsed the pink spherical houses through the foliage. He stopped at the house that the chief had assigned him and retrieved his kit, and then he continued on down the village street, the emptiness close at his heels.

When he was halfway down the street the chief came running up behind him calling, "Wait! Wait!" Larry paused, and that was when the emptiness caught up to him.

The chief was breathing hard. His baby face was red and his cowlick protruded belligerently. He looked like a kid playing baseball confronting an umpire who had just called a "ball" a "strike." "You did not tell me beautiful Earth lady is your wife," he panted. "She owes for one day's rent, and you must pay." Then he lapsed into one of the memorized sentences of his welcome speech: "Having to ask payment for services which in happier circumstances I would gladly render free—"

The emptiness was all around Larry now. The numbing truth that he could never again find Karen, no matter where he looked, no matter how long he looked, overcame him; and he realized that searching for her had subtly become his *raison d'être*, that without her to search for, to hope for, his life had no purpose, no meaning whatsoever. The shock of his loss sent his values tumbling, and shining like a sword through the chaos of what once had been an impregnable structure came the clear cold thought—*They let her die. They pattered about, playing with the outdated gadgets we sold them, counting the credits we taught them to value, and they would not even throw her a crust of bread—*

"—is a source of extreme humiliation to me," the chief concluded, "but I have no choice."

Larry's head was throbbing. He pulled his credit book out slowly. He handed it to the chief. Then he swung hard. The chief sank to his knees, spitting baby teeth and blood. Larry turned and resumed walking down the street. He walked slowly. He wanted the rest of the villagers to run after him, to leap upon him. He wanted to swing wildly and crash his fists into counterfeit children's faces and see blood. But there was only silence behind him, and he walked on down the street, past the smugly humming generator, to the beach. He lifted the little flier straight up. He hovered a moment at ten thousand feet, looking down at the lakes. The *Misseros d'n Gaedo*, he thought. *The Tears of God . . .*

Finally he pointed the prow of the flier toward the part of the horizon where the blue lakes ended and the tentacles of Earth began.