

the
first
sweet
sleep
of
night

by Robert F. Young

The strange, bewildering fragrance from the Flower Islands was as mysterious as life itself. And with it came desire—and death.

So lyrical in mood and so rich in poetic imagery is this astounding fictional excursion into the still largely unexplored realm of comparative ethnology that the profundity of its underlying premise may at first escape you. But we urge that you ponder that premise long and earnestly, for in a kind of glorified nutshell Robert Young has encapsulated the entire tragedy of human life on this planet, and shown us exactly what guilt feelings in juxtaposition with a cultural complex can do to human nature throughout Time and Space.

WHEN SHE WAS seventeen Millicent Clarke had picked up the thin volume of her young life entitled, "Men," closed it firmly, and placed it on the mental shelf labeled "Books I'll Never Read Again."

At the time it had seemed a logical classification, but several years later when she was majoring in anthropology she found that she had to take the book down again now and then for purposes of reference. As a feeling of frustration usually accompanied the act, it was not surprising that she came eventually to specialize in matrilineal societies. The more markedly matrilineal they were, the better she liked them.

The present society was positively fascinating. Not only was it markedly matrilineal, but it subsisted on an Elysian land mass the equal of which Millicent had never seen in any of her previous planetary field work.

Topographically, the land mass was a paradox. In one sense it was an imposing continent, and in another it was nothing more than an emaciated island. It was more than a thousand miles in length, and it rose out of the Sapphire Sea on a line with the Fomalhaut 4 equator; but for all its length, its width never exceeded five miles.

The north coast was scalloped with white beaches. Hills began modestly as, sand dunes, acquired trees and grass farther inland, rose ever and ever higher and finally dropped, in abrupt cliffs, to the line of jagged rocks that comprised the south coast. The wind crashed the sea against the rocks from morning to night. It had never slackened nor changed direction during the two Terran months since the subsidiary camp had been established, and Millicent had begun to doubt if it ever would.

However, Millicent liked the windless days of the leeward side. The temperature was consistently comfortable, so there wasn't really any need for a wind, though occasionally a fragment of moving air did surmount the barrier of the cliffs and come tiptoeing over the grassy hills to the encampment. One came up behind her now and caressed her short brown hair.

But she hardly noticed. She was too engrossed with her journal ...

I am beginning to think (she wrote) that we have stumbled upon a pure matrilineal society, although Dr. Vestor does not agree with me, and Dr. Hanley made the comment, in his usual sarcastic manner, that I have arrived at a typically subjective conclusion, referring no doubt to my absorption with my chosen specialty.

Nevertheless, postulating a pure susu throws at least some light upon our present impasse. If the present susu is undiluted, as I think, it is unprecedented in our experience and our inability to comprehend it stems largely from our tendency to use previous diluted susus for criteria—

"Iced tea, Dr. Clarke?"

Startled, Millicent looked up. "Oh—Oh, thank you, Dr. Hanley. I was just catching up on my notes." She accepted the tall frosted glass and set it on the arm of the tent chair.

"Gloria; made it," Dr. Hanley said. "She and Vestor and I are going to play a few games of Martian canasta in the mess tent. Care to join us?"

"Oh, no," Millicent said. "I really have to finish this entry."

He looked at her quizzically, his gray eyes laughing and yet not laughing at all. It was an unanalytical mannerism that had made her dislike him all through college and all during their field work together. He must have sensed her annoyance.

"Okay, I only asked," he said. "By the way, you know it's Saturday afternoon, don't you?"

He turned and walked away.

Primarily such a postulation gives us our first clear insight into the predominant paradox of the present culture—the outstanding dearth of males. While it fails to resolve the problem of what physical cause lies behind this dearth, it eliminates the paradoxical element of the result, for what could be more logical than that the females of a pure susu should overwhelmingly outnumber the males of a pure susu?

Such a postulation does not, unfortunately, explain the cyclic age groups of both females and males, but it does provide us with a sound foundation upon which to erect the structure of our culture study ...

Saturday afternoon—

It was so silly to compute non-Terran time by the Terran calendar, Millicent thought. Particularly when you were on a planet whose orbital velocity was so insignificant that its year equalled almost twenty of Terra's. She laid her notebook on her lap and picked up the glass of iced tea.

Saturday afternoon—

At her feet the hill on which the subsidiary camp stood dropped gently down to the shore of the blue cove. The native village sprawled lazily on the white sand, and native fishing boats speckled the placid water like basking water spiders. Beyond the cove, the Sapphire Sea spread out in sparkling wastes to the low-lying Flower Islands.

She sipped the iced tea slowly, letting its flavor linger in her mouth. Her mind skipped back a dozen years to the patio of her father's summer home, and she saw her father sitting by the rose trellis with his eternal volume of Shelley, and she saw herself, a little girl sitting in a sequestered corner with her books

...

The memory should have been pleasant, but it was rather horrible instead. Millicent set the glass on the ground and stood up. She decided to let her notes go till evening; somehow she didn't feel like writing any more.

Laughter and the tinkle of ice cubes came from the nearby mess tent. For a moment she considered joining the three players, then she thought of Gloria Mitchell. Gloria Mitchell was the group's secretary; she was blonde and chic and read confession comics. She was just about the last person in the world you would have expected staid anthropologists like Dr. Vestor and Dr. Hanley to choose for a secretary.

Suddenly Millicent hated the camp. She felt as though she couldn't endure it for another second.

After returning her journal to her tent, she started walking back into the hills.

She climbed her favorite hill and sat down beneath her favorite tree and gazed out over the Sapphire Sea to the Flower Islands. The pounding of the waves against the jagged feet of the cliffs came softly to her ears.

She forced her wandering thoughts into anthropological channels, concentrating on the native village on the shore of the cove. There were hundreds of similar villages, all of them matriarchies, scattered along the northern littoral, but one was enough for her purposes.

She thought of the incredibly beautiful people she had seen, and wondered for the thousandth time why they avoided sex. Especially the men. As far as Millicent had been able to ascertain they actually shunned the nubile women, fishing alone by day, and staying close to the susus of their own families by night. It was as though sex did not exist.

And yet, obviously enough, it did exist.

The sound of the waves against the cliffs was soporific. Millicent stifled a small yawn. With an effort, she concentrated on the village again.

The apparent absence of sex was only a minor problem, but it was directly related to the major problem of the age groups. The fact that none of the natives was under twenty Terran years of age was puzzling enough. But it was only a mild incongruity compared to the additional fact that none of the men was over twenty years of age, and that the women ranged from twenty to forty to sixty years of age, with no intermediate age groups.

That certainly indicated a twenty year sexual cycle. Or a one year sexual cycle, computing it in Fomalhaut 4 time. Which was the way it should be computed, Millicent reminded herself sleepily. But no matter how you computed it, two irreconcilable questions remained—what had caused the cycle in the first place, and what happened to the men when they passed the cyclic age of one, or twenty?

She yawned again. The hilltop was so tranquil, the pounding of the waves so remote, so unreal; soft, and growing ever softer ...

She must have dozed off for, suddenly, Dr. Hanky was standing there, tall and willowy against a sky that had faded from deep blue to wan gray. She sat up abruptly, rubbing her eyes.

"Why," she said, "I must have dropped off!"

"We looked all over for you back at camp. Gloria got a bad attack of stomach cramps and when Vestor radioed main base the M.D. said to bring her in in the launch. He thought it might be appendicitis."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Millicent said. "I should have been there."

"Vestor wanted you to go along. He didn't want to leave the two of us here alone, and yet he couldn't take me along because that would have left you completely alone. But he's coming right back."

Millicent stood up. There was a strange stillness in the air. "I'm afraid I don't quite follow your line of reasoning, Dr. Hanley."

The mirthless laughter was in his eyes again, mocking her. "It's very simple, Dr. Clarke," he said. "Vestor was merely concerned over your reputation. There is a quality about foursomes that renders them inviolate to the workings of malicious minds. When, however, the foursome is reduced to a twosome, the quality disappears.

"Our esteemed co-workers are probably bored to death with the lugubrious nordic culture they are dissecting and will be delighted to hear that a male and a female anthropologist have been left all alone on a tropical island with nothing but the light of stars to chaperon them. It will give them something to talk about besides traits and ancestral backgrounds, and climatic cycles as they affect mass pattern deviations."

Millicent felt the abrupt hotness of her face. "I assure you, Dr. Hanley," she said between tight lips, "that there'll be no substantiation for whatever contemptible little lies they invent concerning us!"

"I'm sure there won't be." The laughter was gone from his eyes. "We'd better be getting back to camp, don't you think? I'm sure you must have some new data to enter into your journal."

"I certainly have!"

She followed him down the hill. The stillness seemed to increase with each passing moment. There

was something wrong about it, a subtle wrongness that Millicent couldn't put her finger on till they reached the hill where the camp stood. And then, abruptly, she realized what it was.

The pounding of the waves against the cliffs had ceased.

Suddenly she felt the first warm breath of moving air and knew that the wind had changed.

It was coming from the north...

They ate in silence, facing each other across the narrow table in the mess tent. The only sounds were the sporadic whirring of the generator below the crest of the hill, and the rushing sound of the wind.

Dr. Hanley finished his coffee and stood up. "I don't want to keep you away from your notes," he said. "Don't split any infinitives now." He walked out into the wind, his shoulders held straight.

She sat there furious for some time. Then she started back to her tent. The wind was a sweet river of air flowing in over the sea. It rushed round her warm and cool, tugging at her bobbed hair, trying vainly to send it swirling about her face and neck. She paused before the mess tent, breathing deeply. There was another scent blended with the salt-scent of the sea—the musky perfume of the Flower Islands. Millicent had breathed it only once before, but she had never forgotten it.

It seemed to pervade her entire body, and for a moment she felt vertiginous. The wind flattened her slacks against her thighs, flapped her jacket wildly. Below, on the shore of the cove, she could see the lights of the village, and she heard the new sound of surf on sand.

She walked slowly toward her tent. Dr. Hanley's tent was in darkness and he was nowhere to be seen. She guessed that he was probably visiting the village again, for in his own way he was as concerned with the culture problem as she was.

She switched on her tent light and tied the flaps. Undaunted, the wind slipped beneath the canvas walls and filled the interior with its heady scent. She got her journal out of the locker, sat down at the table, and riffled through the pages. An entry caught her eye:

In typical matrilineal societies, once the male is forced into marriage he is under the dual obligation of both his bride's susu and his mother's susu. He must provide for both households but he is not permitted to live in either, that of his mother having cast him out because he deserted it for another, and that of his bride having cast him out because the bride's mother is so fiercely possessive that she cannot endure giving him even enough floor space upon which to sleep. There are incidents, in societies of this sort, of males committing suicide because of their rejection by their communities ...

Was it possible, Millicent wondered, for the males of a *pure* susu to be driven to commit *mass* suicide? She shook her head. No, it wasn't likely. Not without some other influencing factor—some circumstance of environment, of climate or topography.

The rushing sound of the wind was mesmerizing. She sat there listening to it, the entry blurring before her eyes. Presently she heard the distant murmur of voices, of voices raised in lilting song. She untied the flap and peered out. The hills were awash with pale starlight. The native village seemed to be spreading; flickering lights were everywhere, expanding in a widening semi-circle into the hills.

The flap slipped from her fingers and whipped wildly beside her. The fragrance of the Flower Islands was all around her. She swayed. Everything was unreal, and yet real in a way that transcended reality, that made ordinary reality a mockery, a progression of cold, loveless days.

I mustn't let myself go, she whispered to the wind. I mustn't!

The desperate fingers of her mind seized upon her notes and she ran back to the table, riffled her journal to the last entry, and began to write. She wrote without thinking, and the lines emerged from her subconscious, materializing on the page.

*I arise from dreams of Thee
In the first sweet sleep of night,
When the winds are breathing low
And the stars are shining bright*

She stared at the words in horror, fighting back the hated memory that had gained a foothold in her mind. Abruptly she got up and ran out into the night.

All around her in the hills women were carrying flaming torches. Their faces were exotic in the reddish radiance, their lips moved in soft beckoning song. The wind sent their dark hair drifting about their naked shoulders, made swirling mist out of their garments. Some of them wandered through the camp, but though they looked right at her they did not see her.

Presently Millicent saw the men. They walked as though dreaming, tall and lithe, their bodies flowing in the unreasonable night. At first she could not believe their faces, for their faces were beautiful.

And then she saw Dr. Hanley, and his face was beautiful, too. Beautiful—and frightening.

She shrank back into the shadow of the tent and watched him pass. He walked the way the natives walked, as though he did not know he walked at all. The first soft mist of spring had touched the grayness of his eyes. He passed her very close, but he did not see her, and then he descended the southern slope of the hill. The wind fluttered the collar of his khaki jacket and ruffled his light brown hair.

The wind. The scented north wind—

Suddenly Millicent understood the behavior pattern of the culture. In one lucid second the whole array of paradoxes dissolved, into a crystal clear sequence of cause and effect ...

During the last lap of the southward flight, the launch had passed over the Flower Islands and everyone had been fascinated by the polychromatic patterns that floated like riotous nosegays on the face of the Sapphire Sea. No one had given a thought to the musky fragrance that drifted subtly through the open vents.

The phrase "Flower Islands" leaped to everyone's lips at once, and later the place-name was entered on Dr. Hanley's Fomalhaut 4 map. In addition to the unanimous voicing of the place name, several other incidents occurred in quick succession.

Dr. Vestor put his arm around Gloria Mitchell's shoulders, and leaned over and kissed her on the mouth. Instead of resisting, Gloria Mitchell responded passionately.

Dr. Hanley said: "I didn't laugh, Milli. I wasn't one of the ones who laughed."

Millicent answered: "I know. But all the others laughed and that's what destroyed it."

"But I didn't laugh, Milli. I tried to tell you so many times, but you'd never listen. You'd always withdraw into yourself and I'd find myself talking to a shell of a woman. That's why I stopped trying—"

"The others laughed and that was the end of it. Can't you understand that? Can't you see why it had to be the end?"

"No, I'll never understand ..."

His voice trailed away and the softness that had come into his eyes disappeared. Abruptly Millicent blushed and wondered why she hadn't blushed before. She noticed then that Dr. Vestor's arm was no longer around Gloria Mitchell's shoulders, that he was sitting stiffly in the pilot's seat, his neck the color of a tropical sunset. The Flower Islands were far behind, and the automatic controls were guiding the launch toward the elongated land mass that showed in the distance.

They had landed a short time later and had gone about establishing the subsidiary camp as though nothing unusual had occurred. The incident had never been mentioned, as though by tacit agreement, and Millicent had carefully kept it from trespassing upon her thoughts. Until now—

The Flower Islands were uninhabited. For the first time she realized why they were uninhabited.

No race of people could possibly adapt itself to such a milieu.

But a race of people could adapt itself to the land mass to the south—if the prevailing wind was from the south. If it were a normal race, its sexual cycle would be influenced, though not necessarily determined, by the number of times the wind shifted to the north.

An extremely matriarchal race, however, would react somewhat differently—as in the present instance. When the wind was from the south, sex was avoided by the men because marriage was synonymous with social death. But when the wind shifted to the north, the aphrodisiacal fragrance which it carried southward from the Flower Islands was enough to overcome their fear of social death and send

them off in pursuit of the nubile women who, already affected, had wandered into the hills, crooning tribal love songs to lure prospective suitors.

From the evidence of the age groups, it was clear that the wind changed direction for a brief period once every Fomalhaut 4 year. But the limited longevity of the men indicated that another factor was involved. That factor had to be topography.

Fear of social death, Millicent realized, was not enough in itself to cause a man to kill himself. But abetted by the right symbolical interpretation of his milieu, it could be more than enough. All primitive races were in some measure influenced by the topography of their native habitat.

In some cases they were inordinately influenced. From the perspective of an observer the present land mass was merely unusual. But from the perspective of the natives who lived and died on it, in whose eyes it constituted the entire universe, it equalled life and death and was symbolically interpreted according to those terms.

The beaches and the coves of the north coast represented life, since all sustenance for life came from the sea and from the sands bordering the sea. The hills, possibly because of their superficial resemblance to virginal breasts, were the fertility symbol, the place where all life was reproduced. And the cliffs—

The cliffs symbolized death.

The topographical interpretation of existence, therefore, was life, reproduction, and death, death for the men immediately following the reproductive act because of the association of the hills with the cliffs, and the parallel association of the idea of marriage with the idea of social death.

Taken separately, neither association would have been strong, enough to evoke the suicide response. But taken together, they made the death-wish inevitable ...

The last of the natives had passed. Dr. Hanley was a barely discernible figure moving up the starlit slope of the next hill.

"Dr. Hanley," Millicent shouted. "Dr. Hanley!"

He did not pause. He surmounted the star-kissed crest of the hill and started down the opposite slope. Torches danced like boated fireflies in the distance.

She started to, run after him. Then she paused.

She looked down at her baggy jacket, at her uncompromising mannish slacks. She reached up and touched her short hair. She remembered the gossamer garments of the native women and the way their long hair had drifted in the wind. She remembered their beautiful faces.

She touched her own face, her cheeks, her mouth. She pressed her fingers against her lips, trying to soften, their hard line, but the hardness would not go away.

She couldn't change the expression of her face or the shortness of her hair. Nothing but, time could do that. But there was something that she could do. She walked on numb feet to her tent and she opened her foot locker with numb hands. The dress was at the bottom where she had placed it—how long ago?

Before that it had been at the bottom of a bureau drawer in a dormitory, and before that it had been at the bottom of another bureau drawer in another dormitory, and before that it had been at the bottom of a bureau drawer in her room where she had placed it on her seventeenth birthday.

When she uncovered it the first thing she saw was the crumpled corsage of plastic violets, and that was when she began to cry.

IT WAS her seventeenth birthday and she was descending the staircase to the improvised ballroom. The polished floor was already aswirl with youthful dancers and the little orchestra in the corner was bravely playing "Roses from the South."

It was her seventeenth birthday and she had been reading "Lines to an Indian Air" in her room, glancing shyly, now and then, at her oval face in the mirror, listening to the pounding of her heart; touching the gossamer shoulder straps of her new white dress to reassure herself that they were real, that she was real, that the lovely night in June was real, and that she was really seventeen.

It was her seventeenth birthday and it was her first dress, and it was the first time that she had ever dared to leave the enchanted universe of her books and come out and inform the world that she too,

beneath her shapeless sweaters and her schoolgirl skirts, had been a woman all the time, and a beautiful woman too.

Bruce was standing at the base of the stairs when she came down, his eyes absorbing her springtime loveliness—her soft child's face, the whiteness of her shoulders, the burgeoning swell of her breasts. The plastic violets above her heart had bloomed a springtime blue.

He stepped forward, without a word, and took her in his arms, and together they floated away on the surf of the music. In the sweet sea of sound her shyness had left her, and she had almost become a woman.

And then she had felt the abrupt coldness of her breasts, heard the first intimations of the laughter. She had looked down then, and seen the broken strap, and her nakedness, and felt the first searing blush of her shame. She had run across the gleaming floor, through the dancers and the mounting laughter, to the stairs, and wildly up the stairs to the cool virginal sanctuary of her room—

MILLICENT was still crying when she slipped out of her clothes. She was crying when she mended the strap, crying when she slipped into the dress and felt its soft coolness against her flesh. She was crying when she left the tent and ran into the hills.

The returning launch passed like a great dark bird above her, but she did not see it. Her shoes were ugly mannish things and she kicked them off and felt the soft moist grass beneath her bare feet. She ran on, feeling the dress against her body and the wind upon her, inhaling the fragrance that the wind carried, running swiftly beneath the sharp bright stars. And something deep within her broke and her tears stopped and the cool wind dried her eyes.

Behind her someone was shouting her name, but she paid no attention. Her eyes were absorbed with star-washed valleys and pale slopes, eager for a glimpse of the familiar willowy figure of the man she loved.

She overtook him finally. He was breasting a high hill and she was in the valley just below. "Bruce," she cried. "Bruce!"

He heard her this time, and turned. When he saw her standing in the starlight he ran stumbling down the hill. She collapsed in his arms. "I ran away," she said. "I ran away and I never stopped running. I'm so sorry, darling."

There was the sound of pounding footsteps. Dr. Vestor was wearing an oxygen mask and he was tremendously excited. He raised the mask briefly when he came up to them.

"No time for questions now," he gasped. "Just put these on and follow me. We're going back to Main Base!"

They donned the masks he handed them. Then, hand in hand, they followed him back over the dwindling hills to the launch.

Anthropologists, as a rule, do not interfere with the pattern of a culture. But there are exceptions to every rule, and I think all of us were relieved to see the demolition crew board the launch this morning and head southward for the Flower Islands.

I have just returned from sick bay and am happy to record that Miss Mitchell's appendectomy was a success. On his last visit to her, Dr. Vestor optimistically left her a copy of Pyczykietvich's excellent Atypical Pantheistic Patterns of Certain Camelopardalis Cultures and she had the volume propped before her when I came in, reading it with every indication of absorption. When she closed it, however, I detected the telltale yellow edge of a confession comic protruding from the pages and I am beginning to suspect that her affection for Dr. Vestor, genuine though it may be, will never quite extend itself to include Dr. Vestor's metier.

He proposed to her, she told me, while they were passing over the Flower Islands on their way back to Main Base, and it was that particular incident, I think, although the proposal itself was unquestionably a true manifestation of his suppressed desire, that activated the concatenation of ratiocination that led ultimately to his analysis of the culture, and, of course, to his immediate

return to the southern land mass for Dr. Hanley and myself.

The wedding, incidentally, will be a double one, and is scheduled to take place as soon as the demolition crew returns. Bruce calls it the "Flower Island Wedding" and says that I am his "Flower Island Bride." He's always saying quaint things like that.

Shortly, we shall be leaving Fomalhaut 4 for Terra. I shall be relieved in a way. I realize that such an emotion is atypical of me, but the nordic culture here has begun to pall on me. It too has turned out to be matrilineal.

For some reason, I am rather sick of matrilineal cultures ...