

Science Fiction

Collecting Team

By Robert Silverberg



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COVER DESIGN BY CHRIS HARDWICK

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From fifty thousand miles up, the situation looked promising. It was a middle-sized, brown-and-green, inviting-looking planet, with no sign of cities or any other such complications. Just a pleasant sort of place, the very sort we were looking for to redeem what had been a pretty futile expedition.

I turned to Clyde Holdreth, who was staring reflectively at the thermocouple.

‘Well? What do you think?’

‘Looks fine to me. Temperature's about seventy down there— nice and warm, and plenty of air. I think it's worth a try.’

Lee Davison came strolling out from the storage hold, smelling of animals, as usual. He was holding one of the blue monkeys we picked up on Alpheraz, and the little beast was crawling up his arm. 'Have we found something, gentlemen?'

'We've found a planet,' I said. 'How's the storage space in the hold?'

'Don't worry about that. We've got room for a whole zoo-full more, before we get filled up. It hasn't been a very fruitful trip.'

'No,' I agreed. 'it hasn't. Well? Shall we go down and see what's to be seen?'

'Might as well,' Holdreth said. 'We can't go back to Earth with just a couple of blue monkeys and some anteaters, you know.'

'I'm in favour of a landing too,' said Davison. 'You?'

I nodded. 'I'll set up the charts, and you get your animals comfortable for deceleration.'

Davison disappeared back into the storage hold, while Holdreth scribbled furiously in the logbook, writing down the coordinates of the planet below, its general description, and so forth. Aside from being a collecting team for the zoological department of the Bureau of Interstellar Affairs, we also double as a survey ship, and the planet down below was listed as *unexplored* on our charts.

I glanced out at the mottled brown-and-green ball spinning slowly in the viewport, and felt the warning twinge of gloom that came to me every time we made a landing on a new and strange world. Repressing it, I started to figure out a landing orbit. From behind me came the furious chatter of the blue monkeys as Davison strapped them into their acceleration cradles, and under that the deep, unmusical honking of the Rigelian anteaters noisily bleating their displeasure.

* * * *

The planet was inhabited, all right. We hadn't had the ship on the ground more than a minute before the local fauna began to congregate. We stood at the viewport and looked out in wonder.

'This is one of those things you dream about,' Davison said, stroking his little beard nervously. 'Look at them! There must be a thousand different species out there.'

'I've never seen anything like it,' said Holdreth.

I computed how much storage space we had left and how many of the thronging creatures outside we would be able to bring back with us. 'How are we going to decide what to take and what to leave behind?'

'Does it matter?' Holdreth said gaily. 'This is what you call an embarrassment of riches, I guess. We just grab the dozen most bizarre creatures and blast-off—and save the rest for another

trip. It's too bad we wasted all that time wandering around near Rigel.'

'We *did* get the anteaters,' Davison pointed out. They were his finds, and he was proud of them.

I smiled sourly. 'Yeah. We got the anteaters there.' The anteaters honked at that moment, loud and clear. 'You know, that's one set of beasts I think I could do without.'

'Bad attitude,' Holdreth said. 'Unprofessional.'

'Whoever said I was a zoologist, anyway? I'm just a spaceship pilot, remember. And if I don't like the way those anteaters talk—and smell—I see no reason why I—'

'Say, look at that one,' Davison said suddenly.

I glanced out the viewport and saw a new beast emerging from the thick-packed vegetation in the background. I've seen

some fairly strange creatures since I was assigned to the zoological department, but this one took the grand prize.

It was about the size of a giraffe, moving on long, wobbly legs and with a tiny head up at the end of a preposterous neck. Only it had six legs and a bunch of writhing snakelike tentacles as well, and its eyes, great violet globes, stood out nakedly on the ends of two thick stalks. It must have been twenty feet high. It moved with exaggerated grace through the swarm of beasts surrounding our ship, pushed its way smoothly towards the vessel, and peered gravely in at the viewport. One purple eye stared directly at me, the other at Davison. Oddly, it seemed to me as if it were trying to tell us something.

'Big one, isn't it?' Davison said finally.

'I'll bet you'd like to bring one back, too.'

'Maybe we can fit a young one aboard,' Davison said. 'If we can find a young one.' He turned to Holdreth. 'How's that air analysis coming? I'd like to get out there and start collecting. God, that's a crazy-looking beast!'

The animal outside had apparently finished its inspection of us, for it pulled its head away and gathering its legs under itself, squatted near the ship. A small doglike creature with stiff spines running along its back began to bark at the big creature, which took no notice. The other animals, which came in all shapes and sizes, continued to mill around the ship, evidently very curious about the newcomer to their world. I could see Davison's eyes thirsty with the desire to take the whole kit and caboodle back to Earth with him. I knew what was running through his mind. He was dreaming of the umpteen thousand species of extraterrestrial wildlife roaming around out there, and to each

one he was attaching a neat little tag: *Something-or-other davisoni*.

'The air's fine,' Holdreth announced abruptly, looking up from his test-tubes. 'Get your butterfly nets and let's see what we can catch.'

* * * *

There was something I didn't like about the place. It was just too good to be true, and I learned long ago that nothing ever is. There's always a catch someplace.

Only this seemed to be on the level. The planet was a bonanza for zoologists, and Davison and Holdreth were having the time of their lives, hipdeep in obliging specimens.

'I've never seen anything like it,' Davison said for at least the fiftieth time, as he scooped up a small purplish squirrel-like

creature and examined it curiously. The squirrel stared back, examining Davison just as curiously.

'Let's take some of these,' Davison said. 'I like them.'

'Carry 'em on in, then,' I said, shrugging. I didn't care which specimens they chose, so long as they filled up the storage hold quickly and let me blast off on schedule. I watched as Davison grabbed a pair of the squirrels and brought them into the ship.

Holdreth came over to me. He was carrying a sort of a dog with insect-faceted eyes and gleaming furless skin. 'How's this one, Gus?'

'Fine,' I said bleakly. 'Wonderful.'

He put the animal down—it didn't scamper away, just sat there smiling at us—and looked at me. He ran a hand through his fast-vanishing hair. 'Listen, Gus, you've been gloomy all day. What's eating you?'

'I don't like this place,' I said.

'Why? Just on general principles?'

'It's too *easy*, Clyde. Much too easy. These animals just flock around here waiting to be picked up.'

Holdreth chuckled. 'And you're used to a struggle, aren't you? You're just angry at us because we have it so simple here!'

'When I think of the trouble we went through just to get a pair of miserable vile-smelling anteaters, and- '

'Come off it, Gus. We'll load up in a hurry, if you like. But this place is a zoological gold mine!'

I shook my head. 'I don't like it, Clyde. Not at all.'

Holdreth laughed again and picked up his faceted-eyed dog. 'Say, know where I can find another of these, Gus?'

'Right over there,' I said, pointing. 'By that tree. With its tongue hanging out. It's just waiting to be carried away.'

Holdreth looked and smiled. 'What do you know about that!' He snared his specimen and carried both of them inside.

I walked away to survey the grounds. The planet was too flatly incredible for me to accept on face value, without at least a look-see, despite the blithe way my two companions were snapping up specimens.

For one thing, animals just don't exist this way—in big miscellaneous quantities, living all together happily. I hadn't noticed more than a few of each kind, and there must have been five hundred different species, each one stranger-looking than the next. Nature doesn't work that way.

For another, they all seemed to be on friendly terms with one another, though they acknowledged the unofficial leadership of the giraffe-like creature. Nature doesn't work *that* way, either. I hadn't seen one quarrel between the animals yet. That argued

that they were all herbivores, which didn't make sense ecologically.

I shrugged my shoulders and walked on.

* * * *

Half an hour later, I knew a little more about the geography of our bonanza. We were on either an immense island or a peninsula of some sort, because I could see a huge body of water bordering the land some ten miles off. Our vicinity was fairly flat, except for a good-sized hill from which I could see the terrain.

There was a thick, heavily-wooded jungle not too far from the ship. The forest spread out all the way towards the water in one direction, but ended abruptly in the other. We had brought the ship down right at the edge of the clearing. Apparently most of the animals we saw lived in the jungle.

On the other side of our clearing was a low, broad plain that seemed to trail away into a desert in the distance; I could see an uninviting stretch of barren sand that contrasted strangely with the fertile jungle to my left. There was a small lake to the side. It was, I saw, the sort of country likely to attract a varied fauna, since there seemed to be every sort of habitat within a small area.

And the fauna! Although I'm a zoologist only by osmosis, picking up both my interest and my knowledge second-hand from Holdreth and Davison, I couldn't help but be astonished by the wealth of strange animals. They came in all different shapes and sizes, colours and odours, and the only thing they all had in common was their friendliness. During the course of my afternoon's wanderings a hundred animals must have come marching boldly right up to me, given me the once-over, and

walked away. This included half a dozen kinds that I hadn't seen before, plus one of the eye-stalked, intelligent-looking giraffes and a furless dog. Again, I had the feeling that the giraffe seemed to be trying to communicate.

I didn't like it, I didn't like it at all.

I returned to our clearing, and saw Holdreth and Davison still buzzing madly around, trying to cram as many animals as they could into our hold.

'How's it going?' I asked.

'Holds all full,' Davison said. 'We're busy making our alternate selections now.' I saw him carrying out Holdreth's two furless dogs and picking up instead a pair of eight-legged penguinish things that uncomplainingly allowed themselves to be carried in. Holdreth was frowning unhappily.

'What do you want *those* for, Lee? Those dog-like ones seem much more interesting, don't you think?'

'No,' Davison said. 'I'd rather bring along these two. They're curious beasts, aren't they? Look at the muscular network that connects the—'

'Hold it, fellows,' I said. I peered at the animal in Davison's hands and glanced up. 'This *is* a curious beast,' I said. 'It's got eight legs.'

'You becoming a zoologist?' Holdreth asked, amused.

'No—but I am getting puzzled. Why should this one have eight legs, some of the others here six, and some of the others only four?'

They looked at me blankly, with the scorn of professionals.

'I mean, there ought to be some sort of logic to evolution here, shouldn't there? On Earth we've developed a four-legged

pattern of animal life; on Venus, they usually run to six legs. But have you ever seen an evolutionary hodgepodge like this place before?’

‘There are stranger setups,’ Holdreth said. ‘The symbiotes on Sirius Three, the burrowers of Mizar—but you're right, Gus. This *is* a peculiar evolutionary dispersal. I think we ought to stay and investigate it fully.’

Instantly I knew from the bright expression on Davison's face that I had blundered, had made things worse than ever. I decided to take a new tack.

‘I don't agree,’ I said. ‘I think we ought to leave with what we've got, and come back with a larger expedition later.’

Davison chuckled. ‘Come on, Gus, don't be silly! This is a chance of a lifetime for us—why should we call in the whole zoological department on it?’

I didn't want to tell them I was afraid of staying longer. I crossed my arms. 'Lee, I'm the pilot of this ship, and you'll have to listen to me. The schedule calls for a brief stopover here, and we have to leave. Don't tell me I'm being silly.'

'But you are, man! You're standing blindly in the path of scientific investigation, of—'

'Listen to me, Lee. Our food is calculated on a pretty narrow margin, to allow you fellows more room for storage. And this is strictly a collecting team. There's no provision for extended stays on any one planet. Unless you want to wind up eating your own specimens, I suggest you allow us to get out of here.'

They were silent for a moment. Then Holdreth said, 'I guess we can't argue with that, Lee. Let's listen to Gus and go back now. There's plenty of time to investigate this place later when we can take longer.'

'But—oh, all right,' Davison said reluctantly. He picked up the eight-legged penguins. 'Let me stash these things in the hold, and we can leave.' He looked strangely at me, as if I had done something criminal.

As he started into the ship, I called to him.

'What is it, Gus?'

'Look here, Lee. I don't *want* to pull you away from here. It's simply a matter of food,' I lied, masking my nebulous suspicions.

'I know how it is, Gus.' He turned and entered the ship.

I stood there thinking about nothing at all for a moment, then went inside myself to begin setting up the blastoff orbit.

I got as far as calculating the fuel expenditure when I noticed something. Feedwires were dangling crazily down from the

control cabinet. Somebody had wrecked our drive mechanism, but thoroughly.

For a long moment, I stared stiffly at the sabotaged drive. Then I turned and headed into the storage hold.

'Davison?'

'What is it, Gus?'

'Come out here a second, will you?'

I waited, and a few minutes later he appeared, frowning impatiently. 'What do you want, Gus? I'm busy and I—' His mouth dropped open. *'Look at the drive!'*

'You look at it,' I snapped. 'I'm sick. Go get Holdreth, on the double.'

While he was gone I tinkered with the shattered mechanism. Once I had the cabinet panel off and could see the inside, I felt a little better; the drive wasn't damaged beyond repair, though it

had been pretty well scrambled. Three or four days of hard work with a screw driver and solderbeam might get the ship back into functioning order.

But that didn't make me any less angry. I heard Holdreth and Davison entering behind me, and I whirled to face them.

'All right, you idiots. Which one of you did this?'

They opened their mouths in protesting squawks at the same instant. I listened to them for a while, then said, 'One at a time!'

'If you're implying that one of us deliberately sabotaged the ship,' Holdreth said, 'I want you to know-'

'I'm not implying anything. But the way it looks to me, you two decided you'd like to stay here a while longer to continue your investigations, and figured the easiest way of getting me to agree was to wreck the drive.' I glared hotly at them. 'Well, I've got news for you. I can fix this, and I can fix it in a couple of

days. So go on—get about your business! Get all the zoologizing you can in, while you still have time. I—'

Davison laid a hand gently on my arm. 'Gus,' he said quietly, '*we didn't do it. Neither of us.*'

Suddenly all the anger drained out of me and was replaced by raw fear. I could see that Davison meant it.

'If you didn't do it, and Holdreth didn't do it, and I didn't do it—then who did?'

Davison shrugged.

'Maybe it's one of us who doesn't know he's doing it,' I suggested. 'Maybe—' I stopped. 'Oh, that's nonsense. Hand me that tool kit, will you, Lee?'

They left to tend to the animals, and I set to work on the repair job, dismissing all further speculations and suspicions from my mind, concentrating solely on joining Lead A to Input A

and Transistor F to Potentiometer K, as indicated. It was slow, nerve-harrowing work, and by mealtime I had accomplished only the barest preliminaries. My fingers were starting to quiver from the strain of small-scale work, and I decided to give up the job for the day and get back to it tomorrow.

I slept uneasily, my nightmares punctuated by the moaning of the accursed anteaters and the occasional squeals, chuckles, bleats, and hisses of the various other creatures in the hold. It must have been four in the morning before I dropped off into a really sound sleep, and what was left of the night passed swiftly. The next thing I knew, hands were shaking me, and I was looking up into the pale, tense faces of Holdreth and Davison.

I pushed my sleep-stuck eyes open and blinked. 'Huh? What's going on?'

Holdreth leaned down and shook me savagely. 'Get up, Gus!'

I struggled to my feet slowly. 'Hell of a thing to do, wake a fellow up in the middle of the—'

I found myself being propelled from my cabin and led down the corridor to the control room. Blearily, I followed where Holdreth pointed, and then I woke up in a hurry.

The drive was battered again. Someone—or something—had completely undone my repair job of the night before.

* * * *

If there had been bickering among us, it stopped. This was past the category of a joke now; it couldn't be laughed off, and we found ourselves working together as a tight unit again, trying desperately to solve the puzzle before it was too late.

'Let's review the situation,' Holdreth said, pacing nervously up and down the control cabin. 'The drive has been sabotaged

twice. None of us knows who did it, and on a conscious level each of us is convinced *he* didn't do it.'

He paused. 'That leaves us with two possibilities. Either, as Gus suggested, one of us is doing it unaware of it even himself, or someone else is doing it while we're not looking. Neither possibility is a very cheerful one.'

'We can stay on guard, though,' I said. 'Here's what I propose: first, have one of us awake at all times—sleep in shifts, that is, with somebody guarding the drive until I get it fixed. Two—jettison all the animals aboard ship.'

'What?'

'He's right,' Davison said. 'We don't know what we may have brought aboard. They don't seem to be intelligent, but we can't be sure. That purple-eyed baby giraffe, for instance—suppose

he's been hypnotizing us into damaging the drive ourselves? How can we tell?'

'Oh, but—' Holdreth started to protest, then stopped and frowned soberly. 'I suppose we'll have to admit the possibility,' he said, obviously unhappy about the prospect of freeing our captives. 'We'll empty out the hold, and you see if you can get the drive fixed. Maybe later we'll recapture them all, if nothing further develops.'

We agreed to that, and Holdreth and Davison cleared the ship of its animal cargo while I set to work determinedly at the drive mechanism. By nightfall, I had managed to accomplish as much as I had the day before.

I sat up as watch the first shift, aboard the strangely quiet ship. I paced around the drive cabin, fighting the great

temptation to doze off, and managed to last through until the time Holdreth arrived to relieve me.

Only—when he showed up, he gasped and pointed at the drive. It had been ripped apart a third time.

* * * *

Now we had no excuse, no explanation. The expedition had turned into a nightmare.

I could only protest that I had remained awake my entire spell on duty, and that I had seen no one and no thing approach the drive panel. But that was hardly a satisfactory explanation, since it either cast guilt on me as the saboteur or implied that some unseen external power was repeatedly wrecking the drive. Neither hypothesis made sense, at least to me.

By now we had spent four days on the planet, and food was getting to be a major problem. My carefully budgeted flight

schedule called for us to be two days out on our return journey to Earth by now. But we still were no closer to departure than we had been four days ago.

The animals continued to wander around outside, nosing up against the ship, examining it, almost fondling it, with those damned pseudo-giraffes staring soulfully at us always. The beasts were as friendly as ever, little knowing how the tension was growing within the hull. The three of us walked around like zombies, eyes bright and lips clamped. We were scared—all of us.

Something was keeping us from fixing the drive.

Something didn't want us to leave this planet.

I looked at the bland face of the purple-eyed giraffe staring through the viewport, and it stared mildly back at me. Around it

was grouped the rest of the local fauna, the same incredible hodgepodge of improbable genera and species.

That night, the three of us stood guard in the control-room together. The drive was smashed anyway. The wires were soldered in so many places by now that the control panel was a mass of shining alloy, and I knew that a few more such sabotagings and it would be impossible to patch it together any more—if it wasn't so already.

The next night, I just didn't knock off. I continued soldering right on after dinner (and a pretty skimpy dinner it was, now that we were on close rations) and far on into the night.

By morning, it was as if I hadn't done a thing.

'I give up,' I announced, surveying the damage. 'I don't see any sense in ruining my nerves trying to fix a thing that won't stay fixed.'

Holdreth nodded. He looked terribly pale. 'We'll have to find some new approach.'

'Yeah. Some new approach.'

I yanked open the food closet and examined our stock. Even figuring in the synthetics we would have fed to the animals if we hadn't released them, we were low on food. We had overstayed even the safety margin. It would be a hungry trip back—if we ever did get back.

I clambered through the hatch and sprawled down on a big rock near the ship. One of the furless dogs came over and nuzzled in my shirt. Davison stepped to the hatch and called down to me.

'What are you doing out there, Gus?'

'Just getting a little fresh air. I'm sick of living aboard that ship.' I scratched the dog behind his pointed ears, and looked around.

The animals had lost most of their curiosity about us, and didn't congregate the way they used to. They were meandering all over the plain, nibbling at little deposits of a white doughy substance. It precipitated every night. 'Manna,' we called it. All the animals seemed to live on it.

I folded my arms and leaned back.

* * * *

We were getting to look awfully lean by the eighth day. I wasn't even trying to fix the ship any more; the hunger was starting to get me. But I saw Davison pattering around with my solderbeam.

'What are you doing?'

'I'm going to repair the drive,' he said. 'You don't want to, but we can't just sit around, you know.' His nose was deep in my repair guide, and he was fumbling with the release on the solderbeam.

I shrugged. 'Go ahead, if you want to.' I didn't care what he did. All I cared about was the gaping emptiness in my stomach, and about the dimly grasped fact that somehow we were stuck here for good.

'Gus?'

'Yeah?'

'I think it's time I told you something. I've been eating the manna for four days. It's good. It's nourishing stuff.'

'You've been eating—the manna? Something that grows on an alien world? You crazy?'

'What else can we do? Starve?'

I smiled feebly, admitting that he was right. From somewhere in the back of the ship came the sounds of Holdreth moving around. Holdreth had taken this thing worse than any of us. He had a family back on Earth, and he was beginning to realize that he wasn't ever going to see them again.

'Why don't you get Holdreth?' Davison suggested. 'Go out there and stuff yourselves with the manna. You've got to eat something.'

'Yeah. What can I lose?' Moving like a mechanical man, I headed towards Holdreth's cabin. We would go out and eat the manna and cease being hungry, one way or another.

'Clyde?' I called. 'Clyde?'

I entered his cabin. He was sitting at his desk, shaking convulsively, staring at the two streams of blood that trickled in red spurts from his slashed wrists.

'Clyde!'

He made no protest as I dragged him towards the infirmary cabin and got tourniquets around his arms, cutting off the bleeding. He just stared dully ahead, sobbing.

I slapped him and he came around. He shook his head dizzily, as if he didn't know where he was.

'|—|—'

'Easy, Clyde. Everything's all right.'

'It's *not* all right,' he said hollowly. 'I'm still alive. Why didn't you let me die? Why didn't you—'

Davison entered the cabin. 'What's been happening, Gus?'

'It's Clyde. The pressure's getting him. He tried to kill himself, but I think he's all right now. Get him something to eat, will you?'

* * * *

We had Holdreth straightened around by evening. Davison gathered as much of the manna as he could find, and we held a feast.

'I wish we had nerve enough to kill some of the local fauna,' Davison said. 'Then we'd have a feast—steaks and everything!'

'The bacteria,' Holdreth pointed out quietly. 'We don't dare.'

'I know. But it's a thought.'

'No more thoughts,' I said sharply. 'Tomorrow morning we start work on the drive panel again. Maybe with some food in our bellies we'll be able to keep awake and see what's happening here.'

Holdreth smiled. 'Good. I can't wait to get out of this ship and back to a normal existence. God, I just can't wait!'

'Let's get some sleep,' I said. 'Tomorrow we'll give it another try. We'll get back,' I said with a confidence I didn't feel.

The following morning I rose early and got my tool-kit. My head was clear, and I was trying to put the pieces together without much luck. I started towards the control cabin.

And stopped.

And looked out the viewport.

I went back and awoke Holdreth and Davison. 'Take a look out the port,' I said hoarsely.

They looked. They gaped.

'It looks just like my house,' Holdreth said. 'My house on Earth.' 'With all the comforts of home inside, I'll bet.' I walked forward uneasily and lowered myself through the hatch. 'Let's go look at it.'

We approached it, while the animals frolicked around us. The big giraffe came near and shook its head gravely. The house

stood in the middle of the clearing, small and neat and freshly painted.

I saw it now. During the night, invisible hands had put it there. Had assembled and built a cosy little Earth-type house and dropped it next to our ship for us to live in.

'Just like my house,' Holdreth repeated in wonderment.

'It should be,' I said. 'They grabbed the model from your mind, as soon as they found out we couldn't live on the ship indefinitely.'

Holdreth and Davison asked as one, 'What do you mean?'

'You mean you haven't figured this place out yet?' I licked my lips, getting myself used to the fact that I was going to spend the rest of my life here. 'You mean you don't realize what this house is intended to be?'

They shook their heads, baffled. I glanced around, from the house to the useless ship to the jungle to the plain to the little pond. It all made sense now.

'They want to keep us happy,' I said. 'They know we weren't thriving aboard the ship, so they—they built us something a little more like home.'

'*They?* The giraffes?'

'Forget the giraffes. They tried to warn us, but it's too late. They're intelligent beings, but they're prisoners just like us. I'm talking about the ones who run this place. The super-aliens who make us sabotage our own ship and not even know we're doing it, who stand someplace up there and gape at us. The ones who dredged together this motley assortment of beasts from all over the galaxy. Now we've been collected too. This whole damned

place is just a zoo—a zoo for aliens so far ahead of us we don't dare dream what they're like.'

I looked up at the shimmering blue-green sky, where invisible bars seemed to restrain us, and sank down dismally on the porch of our new home. I was resigned. There wasn't any sense in struggling against *them*.

I could see the neat little placard now:

* * * *

EARTHMEN. Native Habitat, Sol III.

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