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Title: Reluctant Genius

Author: Henry Slesar

Release Date: February 9, 2009 [EBook #28030]

Language: English

Character set encoding: ISO-8859-1

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RELUCTANT GENIUS

By O. H. LESLIE

It is said that Life crawled up from the slime of the sea-bottoms and became Man because of inherent greatness bred into him before the dawn of time. But perhaps this urge was not as formless as we think.

BUOS was chastising Laloi as they sped through the ionosphere of the green planet. But like the airy creature she was, Laloi ignored the criticism and rippled zephyr-like through a clump of daffodils when they completed their descent.

"So pretty," she sighed. She flung her incorporeal substance around each flower, absorbing their unified beauty of scent, sight, and feel. Buos shrilled himself into a column of wind to express his displeasure at her attitude.

"Stupid, silly, shallow thing!" he said. "If the others only knew how you behaved—"

"And you'll be glad to tell them, of course," she said, extending her fingers of air into the roots of the wind-bent grass. She rolled across the hill ecstatically, and Buos followed in grumbling billows of energy.

"I don't carry tales," he replied, somewhat mortified. "But we're here as observers, and you insist upon making this world a plaything ..."

"I love it," she said happily. "It's so warm and green."

Buos whipped in front of her angrily. "This is an assignment," he snapped, his emotion crackling the air about him. "We have a purpose here."

"Purpose!" she groaned, settling over a patch of crowded clover. "How many centuries will this assignment last?"

"This world is young," said Buos. "It will take time."

"But how long?" she asked mournfully. "Our world will be shrivelled and dead before these people have the knowledge to rescue us. Why can't we spend our lives here ..."

"And leave the others behind?" said Buos stiffly. "Selfish being," he said sadly. "This world cannot support one-fourth our number."

"Oh, I know, I know," Laloi said. "I do not mean to say such things. I am twisted by my sorrow ..." As if to express her self-abnegation, she corkscrewed out of the clover and into a thin spiral of near-nothingness.

"Settle down, foolish one," said Buos, not unkindly. "I know your feelings. Do you think I am not tormented as well, by the slow pace of these Earth-things? Crude, barbaric beings, like children with the building blocks of science. They have such a long way to go ..."

"And so few *know*," said Laloi despairingly. "A handful of seeing minds, tens of millions of ignorant ones. Not even first principles—they're stupid, stupid!"

"But they will learn," Buos said stubbornly. "That is historical fact. Someday, they will know the true meanings of matter and light and energy. Slowly, yes, slowly. But in terms of their growth, it will seem like great speed to them ..."

"And in terms of our world," said Laloi, spinning sadly over the ground, "they may be far too late ..."

"No!" In his excitement, Buos forgot himself and entwined with the flowing form of the she-creature, and the result was a rending of the air that cracked like heat lightning over the field. "No," he repeated again. "They must not be too late. They must learn. They must build from the very ground, and then they must fly. And then their eyes must be lifted to the stars, and desire must extend them to all the universe ..."

"It seems so hopeless—"

"It cannot be! Our destiny is not extinction. They must come to us, in fleets of silver, and replant our soil, and send towers of green shooting into our sky, breathing out air."

"Yes, yes!" Laloi cried pitifully. "It will be that way, Buos. It will be that way! That man-creature, we will begin with him ..."

Buos floated earthward disconsolately. "He is a dreamer," he said cheerlessly. "His mind is good; he thinks of tomorrow; he is one of the knowing ones. But he cannot be moved, Laloi. His thoughts may fester and die in the prison of his brain ..."

"No, they will not! We have watched him. He understands much. He will help us!"

"I have seen his like before," said Buos hopelessly. "He thinks and he works, and his conclusions will die stillborn, for lack of a moving force ..."

"Then let us provide it, Buos. Let us move him!"

"With what?" said the other disdainfully. "Arms of nothing? Hands of vacuum? A breeze against his cheek? A rustle of leaves? A meaningless whistle in his ear?"

"Let us try. Let us try! This empty watchfulness is destroying us. Let us move him, Buos. Come!"

Faster than the sky-sweeping clouds they flew, over the gently swelling hills, over the yearning branches of the trees, over the calm blue waters of the lakes. Swifter than the flight of birds they came, searching for a thinking mind ...

They found him at last.

"He knows, he knows," said Laloi. "Only now to say 'this is so because' and 'this must happen when!' Only to think—to understand—"

They hovered over his head, in a pandemonium of helplessness. They whirled, and tumbled, and shrilly circled. And then to Laloi the inspiration came.

The apple, caught by a sudden gust of wind, twisted from the tenuous hold of the tree and fell to the ground.

The man, startled, picked it up.

He gazed at it, deep in thought.

THE END

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