

SISTER UNDER THE SKIN

Stick to mink, girls—or rabbit! Even if you can get a luxurious O'Grady's Mole fur coat for free ...

Illustrated by Ed Emsh

BY BERTRAM CHANDLER

KENNEDY waited until the work of discharge was well under way, then went ashore. He could have left the ship earlier; he could, had he so wished it, have been the first to leave, but the other officers, his juniors, were all married, and he was not; not any longer. Still, he reflected, he was lucky to have a home to go to. He was lucky to have a sister. It would be utterly grim to come in from Deep Space—especially after a voyage to a drab world like Beta Sextans III, known to spacemen as the Slag Heap—to spend one's leave in dreary hotel rooms. She was a good kid, Judith, he thought, even though she did marry that stuffed shirt of a Colonel.

The taxi was waiting for him at the foot of the gangway. Kennedy slung his bags into the passenger compartment, followed them. He sat back comfortably in his seat as the whirling vanes lifted him clear of the spaceport with its busy cranes and gantries and conveyor belts, the gleaming ships that looked like huge spinning tops scattered by some giant child.

"A good voyage, Mister?" asked the driver.

"No," said Kennedy. "Lousy. It's good to be back on Earth. I hope they send us somewhere better next trip."

"Where're you in from?" asked the driver. "It looked like metal you were discharging. Slabs and ingots . . ."

"Beta Sextans III," replied Kennedy. "The Slag Heap. Three months from Earth even with the Ehrenhaft Drive running flat out, and when you get there it's nothing but a big ball of rubble where it rains for three hundred and ninety days out of the four hundred that make its year. There's no surface vegetation except for a few things like Terran lichens. There're fungi in the caves and tunnels—that's where the natives live. They come out on fine days I'm told."

"What are they like?" asked the driver. "I've heard tales those extra-Terran women—I've often wished that I'd gone into Astronautics myself—"

"One trip to the Slag Heap would cure you of wishing," said Kennedy. "You've seen chimpanzees? Try to imagine albino chimpanzees that have a bath every six months. Oh, they're intelligent, up to a point. They work in the mines and the smelters, and get paid in gin and tobacco. The overseeing is done by Earthmen. The poor devils are out on a three-year contract."

"What do they do?"

"What can they do? They drink, they watch the films—ancient ones—and they drink. I've heard some of them have tried giving the native women—if

you can call them that—a good wash and employing them as housekeepers, so there's been labor trouble, with floggings and shootings—"

"Sounds like a jolly place," said the driver. "It wouldn't do me. Come to think of it—when I pick you officers up at the spaceport you usually have bags and boxes full of souvenirs you've brought home with you. All you have is one grip and one suitcase. Looks like there aren't even any curios worth picking up on that world of yours."

"It's no world of mine, thank God," said Kennedy. "Oddly enough, I did strike something worth bringing home, though—"

Gently, the taxi dropped down to the flat roof of the block in which Judith lived. Kennedy paid the driver, then carried his bags to the elevator. Seconds later he was walking along the passageway to his sister's suite. She opened the door as he approached it.

"Bill!" she cried, "it's good to see you back! Come in—your room's ready for you."

"It's good to see you again, Judith," he said, dropping his bags and hugging her. "It's good to have a home to come back to."

"It's good to have a big brother," she replied, leading him into the lounge.

"How's the Colonel?"

"I wish that you wouldn't keep referring to Jim as the Colonel," she objected.

"But he is so a Colonel," insisted Kennedy. "You could never take him for anything else. I shall be quite surprised if you don't snap to attention when he comes in tonight . . ."

"He'll not be coming in tonight," said Judith. "He's got a tour of garrison duty on the Moon. As a matter of fact I should have gone there with him—but I insisted on being home to welcome you in."

"You shouldn't have done that," said Kennedy.

"And why shouldn't I? You're my best big brother. Anyhow, I had to stay to see what you've brought me this time."

"Mercenary cat. I told you, before I left, what sort of a world Sextans III is. Well—it is just that, and worse. A slag heap in a cold drizzle, crawling with butterfly brained apes . . ."

"I'm going to sulk," she said. "Will you pour me another beer?"

"No."

"All right, all right—you've blackmailed me into it."

Kennedy got to his feet, opened his suitcase. He lifted out a civilian suit and then, carefully, a lustrous golden fur.

"But this is lovely!" cried Judith. She almost snatched it from him, held it

against her cheek. "It's beautiful!"

"And it matches your hair," said Kennedy. "But look at it carefully. Look at the cunning way in which the animal was skinned . . ."

"Why spoil things?" asked his sister. "Women love fur—but they don't like to be reminded of the—preliminaries."

"Even so," insisted the spaceman, "it's interesting. You've seen tiger skins and bear skins, of course, to say nothing of that birix pelt I brought home from Spica II—Are you still using it as a bedside rug, by the way?"

"Yes. Well, as a matter of fact Jim got rather huffy when I refused to come to the Moon with him and said that he was going to have some home comforts, and took it with him."

"Trust the Colonel. Well—you can use this until he comes back. After that—have it made up. But we're wandering away from the point. The average pelt, as I said, has to be cut to remove it from the animal. This—well, it may have been cut, but I don't think so. It's just as though every morsel of flesh, every splinter of bone, was vaporised and blown out—"

"Never mind the details. What was the animal, anyhow?"

"I can't remember the native name—and if I could couldn't pronounce it. We call it O'Grady's Mole—O'Grady was one of the officers of the survey ship that made the first landing; he stumbled on a sort of colony of the things in one of the caves. As a matter of fact, they're supposed to be protected—"

"Won't you get into trouble for having this skin?"

"I could, I suppose. But I didn't kill the mole myself, and there's no law to stop the natives from doing it—after all, it's their world. All that can happen is a new Standing Order to the effect that personnel will not, repeat not, buy furs, pelts or skins from the aborigines of Beta Cygni III—"

"How did you get it, then?"

"Well, as I've already told you, the Slag Heap is a grim world. You're far better off staying aboard the ship—but, sooner or later, you have to go ashore for a breather or start climbing up the wall paper. You go ashore, and what's there to do?"

"Knowing you," she said, "I can guess."

"How right you are. (My glass is empty, by the way . . .) Well, there's a sort of village where the overseers and the clerical staff live. They have a couple of pubs. They're far from jolly places—you'd think that the boys in charge of the mines and the works would be pleased to see a few new faces, but they're not. They're a sullen crowd.

"Anyhow, this night in question, there were four of us from the ship at one end of the bar—the Old Man, the Second Pilot, the Doctor and myself—and a bunch of the locals at the other. Each party was keeping to itself. Suddenly there was a commotion at the door. We looked round. One of the

natives was trying to force his way in, and two hairy faced, hairy chested overseers who looked just about as human as the natives were trying to keep him out.

"Well, it was none of our business. If we lived in Africa we'd take a dim view of baboons forcing their presence upon us while we were enjoying a quiet beer. We were ignoring the whole affair when the native, who seemed to know some English, started shouting out, `Spacemen! Must see spacemen! Must see Captain!'

"This direct appeal to the Old Man had results.

"He said, in his best Control Room voice, 'Let him in.'

"He's not coming in here, Mister,' said the barman.

"The Old Man just loves being called Mister."

" 'My man,' he said, 'I would remind you that I, as Master of an interstellar ship, rank with, but not below, the Governor of a Third Grade Colony—'

"He was right, of course—and the bartender knew sufficient interstellar law to recognise it. He said, however, that he would send a report in to the Commission, and the Old Man said that there were many things that he could mention in his report, including miscegenation—And this threat brought results.

"So they let the native in. He looked pitiful standing there under the glaring lights—a huge, shambling brute with filthy, matted white fur, almost human, but not quite; here, in this bar, an alien on his own world. In one big, gnarled hand he carried a limply hanging sack.

"I heard two of the overseers whispering together. 'Yes—That's him. Dangerous bastard—cause of all the trouble—' And, 'You can hardly blame him—Ken Slater shouldn't have taken both his women—' Then, 'Christ! Are you a monkey lover the same as these bloody spacemen?'

"The Old Man overheard this last. He said, 'We're not monkey lovers—but we believe in fair play.' To the native he said, 'What do you want?'

" 'Captain, sir,'—I wish that I could put the accent across properly; it was like a dog talking in broad Glaswegian—'do trade.'

" 'All right. What's in the bag?' "

'This, Captain sir.'

"And so he pulled out, one by one, five of the pelts. The locals were furious. Nobody offered them bargains like that. And they were bargains, too. Do you know how much I paid for this?"

"No," said Judith. "But I can tell you that this pelt, on Earth, would take all of Jim's monthly pay, and yours too."

"I paid," Kennedy told her, "just one bottle of gin. That's all that any of us paid, except for the Old Man. He paid two—but he got two furs — I suppose

you're going to have it made up into a coat?"

"Not yet, Bill. Not until Jim gets back from his tour of duty. I miss my bedside rug."

"As you please," he said. "It's your fur. And now, my dear sister, what about climbing into something glamorous and doing the rounds of the night spots with me?"

"As you please, Bill. But I know you, and know that you'd sooner spend your first night at home at home. I've got steak, and I'll do it the way you like, with lots of garlic. There's a bottle of Burgundy. There's a big hunk of that stinking English Stilton."

"You're an angel. Remind me to get you a pair of wings next trip." She refilled his glass. "It's a funny thing. I've often heard you and the Colonel grumbling about this apartment, complaining that it has no windows, no natural light—That, to a spaceman, is a point in its favour. We see enough of the sky and the stars. When we get home we like to forget about 'em."

THREE DAYS later Kennedy I was told that all the cargo had been discharged from his ship and that Lloyd's Surveyor would be making the routine inspection of the hull. A Survey was a job for the ship's own Chief Officer, and not for the spaceport relieving staff. Judith accompanied him up to the roof, where the taxi was waiting for him.

"Pity it's such a dull day," said Kennedy. "Weather Control must have slipped up. You won't be able to get in your sunbathing."

"I'll manage," she said. "There's plenty to do about the house. Don't work too hard, Bill. Give me a ring when you're ready to come home."

He enjoyed the flight from the city to the spaceport. He looked down with pride at his gleaming ship as the helicopter drifted in to a landing. He climbed the ramp to the main airlock with a certain eagerness, whistled softly and happily as the elevator whisked him up to the Officers' flat. In his cabin he changed into protective clothing, then sat down to wait for the Surveyor and the Astronautical Superintendent.

The survey did not take long. No plates and no structural members were in need of renewal. Kennedy would have been free, then, but for the fact that it had been impossible during the forenoon—cabin stores were being loaded—to test the main airlock doors.

So Kennedy lunched on board, his only companion at table being the elderly, grounded ex Chief Officer who undertook relieving duties aboard the ships in port. The old man was not a brilliant conversationalist. Kennedy found him rather boring. After lunch—the survey of the airlock doors would not be for another hour or so—Kennedy retired to his cabin, lit his pipe and pulled from his bookcase a well-thumbed volume of Kipling.

He was reading happily when there was a knock at his door.

"Come in!" he said, rather testily. He finished reading the verse before looking up to see who his caller was.

"...The Colonel's lady and Judy O'Grady, Sisters under their skins . . ."

"What did you do with your skin?" asked a voice.

Kennedy looked up, saw that it was the ship's Surgeon.

"What brings you back, Doc?" he asked. "Loading's not started yet."

"Never mind the loading. What did you do with your skin?"

"My skin? Oh, you mean those pelts we got at Port Debenham I took it home, of course. My sister has it now. What's the flap? Customs?"

"No, Bill, it's worse. Your sister hasn't had the skin made up into a coat, I hope. I tell you—once those skins get out into sunlight they're dangerous!"

"Why?" asked Kennedy.

"I'll tell you. It so happens that Marilyn—my wife—is allergic to fur, even to extra-Terran fur. As soon as I unpacked the thing she started to sneeze. She said that she appreciated such a lovely present, but that I, as a medical man, should have known that, as far as she was concerned, it was quite impossible.

"Well, I'm well in with the boys at the Department of Extra-Terran Biology, and I thought that they'd be glad of the pelt. The next morning I took it round to them. The following morning they rang me, saying that it was urgent that I come round to see them at once.

"I'll skip the biology of it all. I'll just tell you in words of one syllable what happened at the lab. They're a distrustful lot of beggars. They work on the assumption that the average spaceman is an incompetent bungler. They assumed that nobody aboard the ship had the savvy to sterilize the furs. After taking samples to be checked for micro-organisms, they proceeded with the sterilization. They used all sorts of radiation, including ultra violet. When they were using the ultra violet the skin came to life—it tried to eat one of the lab technicians . . ."

"Impossible," said Kennedy.

"It's not impossible! Here's the way that they doped it out. O'Grady's Mole is as near as, dammit, immortal. When its body is worn out, it comes to the surface and dies. Flesh and bone are either absorbed into the skin or blow away as dust. Sooner or later the empty skin will be found by one of the aborigines, and used as rough clothing of a sort. Sooner or later the aborigine will be wearing the skin, on the surface of the planet, on one of the rare fine days. What happens then is simple—there'll be one aborigine less and one O'Grady's Mole the more.

"Anyhow, the flap was on. We got all the skins back but yours. The Captain's wife was lucky—she laid both her furs out on the flat roof to air. When we got there she was in hysterics. Two odd looking things, like three-quarter deflated balloons covered with golden fur, were flopping round the roof. They had once been Pekingese dogs—"

"I gave the skin to my sister," said Kennedy. "She's using it as a bedside

rug for the time being. Luckily she lives in one of those inside, fully air-conditioned apartments. There's no danger."

"Even so," said the Doctor, "you'd better go to her straight away and get the skin back."

"I've got a Survey."

"Damn your Survey! Can't you see, Bill, that those natives hate the guts of all Earthmen? Selling the skins to us was a way to get revenge. There's no time to lose!"

"You're right," said Kennedy. "I'll ring Judith and tell her to lock the skin in a cupboard."

He went out to the wardroom to use the telephone. When he came back his face was pale.

He said, "She doesn't answer. But she's out shopping probably."

"We'd better hurry!"

They hurried.

There was nobody in the flat—nobody human, that is.

There was a thing that shambled to meet them, walking clumsily on all fours, skidding on the polished floor.

Kennedy looked over the golden furred back of the brute to the open bedroom door, saw the articles of clothing scattered on the bed, saw the overturned sun ray lamp still burning.

END

Scientific discoveries have been so closely linked to the ebb and flow of the events of history that it seems strange that histories have not been written with all the generals left out and the important inventors and scientists put in their places. —C. C. Furnas