

CLASSICS TO GO

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Amazing Stories

Volume 36

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The Timeless Ones

***It was a peaceful world, a green world,
where bright blossoms swayed beneath two
golden suns. Why did the visitors from Earth
sit in their rocket-ship—terrified?***

"There will be a great many changes, Ned," Cynthia Jackson said. She stared out the viewport at the little green world which the contact rocket *Star Mist* was swiftly approaching on warp-drive.

Her husband co-pilot nodded, remembering Clifton and Helen Sweeney, and the Sweeney youngsters. Remembering with a smile Tommy Sweeney's kite-flying antics, his freckles and mischievous eyes—a tow-headed kid of ten with an Irish sense of humor, sturdily planted in a field of alien corn five thousand light years from Earth.

Sowing and reaping and bringing in the sheaves, in the blue light of a great double sun, his dreams as vibrant with promise as the interstellar warp-drive which, a century ago, had brought the first prospect ship from Earth to the stars.

He'd be a man grown now, as sturdy as his dad. You could almost take that for granted. And his sister would be a willowy girl with clear blue eyes, and she'd come out of a white plastic cottage with the buoyancy of twenty summers in her carriage and smile.

They'd be farmers still. You couldn't change the Sweeneys in a million years, couldn't wean them away from the good earth.

It was funny, but he couldn't even visualize the Sweeneys without thinking of a little sleepy town, the kind of town he'd left himself as a kid to strike out across the great curve of the universe. Dry dust of Kansas and the Dakotas that would still be blowing after a thousand years!

"They've had time to build a town, Ned!" Cynthia said. "A really fine town with broad streets and modern, dust-proof buildings!"

Ned Jackson awoke from his reverie with a wry start. He nodded again, remembering the many other colonists and the equipment which had been shipped to the little green world across the years. Plastic materials to build houses and schools and roadways, educational materials to build eager young minds.

Every ten years a contact rocket went out from Earth by interstellar warp-drive to make a routine check. The trip was a long one—eight months—but the Central Colonization Bureau had to make sure that anarchy did not take the place of law on worlds where teeming jungles encouraged the free exercise of man's best qualities—and his worst.

From end to end of the Galaxy, on large planets and small, progress had to be measured in terms of the greatest good for the greatest number. There could be no other yardstick, for when man ceased to be a social animal his star-conquering genius shriveled to the vanishing point.

"The friends we made here were very special, Ned," Cynthia said. "I guess people who dare greatly have to be a bit keener than the stay-at-homes, a bit more eager and alive. But the Sweeneys had such a tremendous zest for living—"

"I know," Ned said.

"They were wonderful—generous and kind. It will be good to see them again. Good to—" Cynthia laughed. "I don't know why, but I was about to say: 'Good to be home.'"

Ned thought he knew why.

They'd made their first flight for the Bureau exactly ten years before. It had been a combined "official business" and honeymoon flight, and almost the whole of it had been spent on the little green world.

Did not the queen bee and her consort, flying high above the hive on a night of perfumed darkness, remember best what was bliss to recall, the shifting lights and shadows and honey-scented murmurings of their nuptial trance?

Would not the brightest, furthest star be "home" to the star-beguiled?

The rocket-ship was out of subspace now and traveling on its murmuring overdrive. It was well within sight of green valleys and purple-rimmed hills.

The planet had grown from a tiny dot to a shining silver sphere swimming in misty radiance; for a moment it had wavered against the brightly burning stars, caught in a web of darkness—

Then, swiftly, had exploded into a close, familiar world, as beautiful as a flower opening snowy petals to the dawn.

It was a simple matter to bring the rocket down. The valley seemed to sweep up toward them, and gravity jets took over in automatic sequence. There was a gentle hiss of air as the *Star Mist* settled to rest on hard-packed soil, a scant fifty yards from a blue and vermillion flower garden.

Through a dancing blue haze a dwelling loomed, white and serene in the rosy flush of evening.

Cynthia looked at her husband, her eyes wide with surmise.

"Just shows how close you can come when you follow dial readings!" Ned said. "The first lean-to shack stood just about here. I remember the slope of the soil—"

Cynthia's eyes grew warm and eager. "Ned, I'm glad—it's no fun searching for old friends with your heart in your throat! We'll step right up and surprise them!"

When they emerged from the ship the perfume of flowers mingled with the richer scent of freshly-turned earth, bringing back memories of their earlier visit.

There had been no flower garden then, but the soil had possessed the same April shower freshness.

"I must look like a fright!" Cynthia said. "You didn't give me time to powder my nose!"

They were within five yards of the dwelling when a door opened and a child of ten or twelve emerged. She was blue-eyed, golden-haired, and she stood for a moment blinking in the evening light, her hair whipped by the wind.

"Mary Sweeney!" Cynthia exclaimed, catching hold of Ned's arm. Then, in a stunned whisper: "Oh, but it can't be! She'd be a grown woman!"

The child straightened at the sound of the voice, looking about. She saw Ned and Cynthia, and blank amazement came into her eyes. Then she gave a little glad cry, and ran toward them, her arms reaching out in welcome.

"You've come back!" she exclaimed. "Mom and dad thought it would be a long time. But I knew you'd come soon! I knew! I was sure!"

Nowhere any sign that this was not the child they had known ten years before! Her voice, the peaches-and-cream color that flooded her cheeks, the way her hair clung in little ringlets to her temples, all struck memory chords from long ago.

And now she was beckoning them into the dwelling, having moved a little away from them. She was balancing herself in

elfin lightness on one toe, and smiling in warm gratefulness, the sun all blue and gold behind her.

She had always seemed an elfin and mischievous child.

"What can it mean, Ned?"

White-lipped, Ned shook his head. "I—I don't know! We'd better go inside!"

Helen Sweeney, her white-streaked auburn hair damp with steam vapor, sent a frying pan crashing to the floor as she turned from the stove with a startled cry.

"Ned! Cynthia! Why, land sakes, it seems only yesterday—"

Ned had a good look at her face. The eyes were the same, good-humored and kindly and wise; and if she had been forty a decade before she seemed now to be forcing herself back into an earlier instant of time—the very evening of that last well-remembered birthday party, with the candles all bright and gleaming, and the children refusing to admit that she could ever be middle-aged.

Old Clifton came in from his workshop out in back. He'd been whittling away at a rocket-ship model, and he still held it firmly in the crook of his arm, his eyes puckered in dust bowl grief. Like most men of the soil, Clifton had difficulty with his whittling when he turned his skill to rocketships.

The grief vanished when he saw Ned and Cynthia. Pure delight took hold of him, bringing a quick smile of welcome to his lips.

"Back so soon? Seems only yesterday you folks went away!"

"It was ten years ago!" Ned said, his throat strangely dry.

Clifton looked at him and shook his head. "Ten years, Ned? Surely you're joking!"

"It was a good many years, Clifton," Helen Sweeney said quickly. "You must forgive us, Ned, Cynthia. Time just doesn't seem to matter when you're busy building for the future. Time goes fast, like a great ship at sea, its sails ballooning out with a wind that keeps carrying it faster and faster into the sunrise."

"There are no ships here," Clifton said, chuckling. "Helen's fancy-wedded to Earth, but she's forgetting the last sailing ship rotted away a hundred years before she was born. It's a good thought though."

"Don't know what put a sailing ship in Helen's head, but I guess folks who were born on Earth have a right to hark back a bit. It'll be different with Tom and Mary."

"Where's Tommy?" Ned asked.

"Out shucking corn!" Clifton's voice was vibrant with sudden pride. "He's still the same reckless young lad. He'd risk his neck to bring in a full harvest. I keep warning him, but he goes right on worrying his mother."

"Fact is, he hasn't changed at all. No more than we have."

So they knew! Cynthia looked at Ned, an unspoken question in her eyes. How could they accept the tremendousness of not changing without realizing that any arrest of the aging process must alter their daily lives in a thousand intangible ways?

How could they build for the future—when their children would never grow up?

It was Ned who discovered the mind block.

Not only had the Sweeneys ceased to age physically—they lacked a normal time sense. If you reminded them of the passing years their minds cleared momentarily, and they could think back.

But that link with the past had no staying power. It was like punching pillows to get them to remember. They lived in the present, well content to accept the world about them on a day-to-day basis, warmed by the bright flame of their children growing up—

But their children weren't growing up—they had only the illusion of change, the illusion of planning for their future; and that illusion was terribly real to them—unless jolted by a question:

"How's Tommy?"

"Why, Tommy hasn't changed at all—"

A puzzled frown. A moment's honest facing of the truth, an old memory stirring into life. Then the mind block closing in, clamping down.

"Ned, Cynthia, you'll stay for dinner?"

It was late and growing cold, and the stars had appeared in the sky. In the rocket-ship Ned sat facing his wife.

"That house was never built by human hands!" he said, a cold prickling at the base of his scalp. He had suffered from the prickling off and on for a full hour. He could still taste the strong coffee he'd downed at a gulp before rising in haste at the end of an uneasy meal.

He was sorry now they'd returned to the ship without waiting to say "hello" to Tommy, fresh from his harvesting chores. Tommy was the brightest member of the family. Perhaps Tommy knew more than the others—or could remember better.

"Not built by human hands! But that's insane, Ned." Cynthia's face, shadowed from below by the cold light of the instrument board, was harsh with concern. "The materials came from Earth."

"They did," Ned acknowledged. "Grade A plastics—the best. And a good engineer can build almost anything with malleable plastics. But not a house without seams!"

"Without—seams?"

"Joints, connections, little rough places," Ned elaborated. "Inside and out that house was smooth, all of a piece. Like a burst of frozen energy. Like—oh, you know what I mean! Surely you must have noticed it!"

"There were other colonists," Cynthia said. "Some of them were engineers. They've had time to work out new constructive techniques."

"They've had time to disappear. Why did the Sweeneys act so funny when I asked them about the other colonists? Why did Clifton refuse to look at me? Why did I have to drag the answer out of him? 'Oh, we spread out. Enough land here for all of us—' Does that ring true to you?"

"They didn't want us to stay together!" Tommy Sweeney said.

Ned leapt up with a startled cry. Cynthia swayed, her eyes widening in stark disbelief.

Tommy Sweeney walked smiling into the compartment, his shoulders squared. He came through the pilot-room wall in a blaze of light, and stood between Ned and Helen, his lips quivering in boyish earnestness.

"Take any school," Tommy said. "Some of the pupils are bright. Some are just good students who work hard at their homework. Some are stupid and dull. If you let them stay together the bright ones, the really bright ones, get held back."

Tommy seemed suddenly to realize he was seeing Ned and Cynthia for the first time in ten years. His good friends, Ned and Cynthia. A Cynthia who was as beautiful as ever,

though deathly pale now, and a Ned who was just a little older and grayer.

A broad grin overspread his face. "I knew you'd come back!" he said.

"You—you came through a solid metal wall!" Ned said, feeling as though an earthquake had taken place inside of him.

"It's easy when you know how!" Tommy said.

"Who taught you how?" Cynthia asked, in a voice so emotional Ned forgot his own horror in concern for her sanity. "Who taught you, Tommy?"

"The Green People!" Tommy said.

"The Green—People?"

"They live in the forest," Tommy said. "They come out at night and dance around the house. They hold hands and dance and sing. Then they talk to us. To mom, dad and sis—but mostly to me. They taught me how to play, to really have fun."

"Did they teach you how to change the atoms of your body so that you could pass through a solid metal wall?" Ned asked, framing the question very carefully.

"Shucks, it was nothing like that!" Tommy said. "They just told me that if I forgot about walls I could go anywhere."

"And you believed them!"

Suddenly Cynthia was laughing. Her laughter rang out wild and uncontrollable in the pilot-room.

"He believed them, Ned! He believed them!"

Ned went up to her and took her by the shoulders and shook her.

Tommy looked shamefaced. He shuffled his feet, ill at ease in the presence of adult hysteria.

"I've got to go now!" he stammered. "Mom will be awful mad if I'm late for dinner again."

"You *are* late, Tommy!" Cynthia said. "The joke's on you. We just had dinner with your parents in a house Ned claims wasn't built by human hands."

She laughed wildly. "Your parents are sensible people, though. They didn't even try to walk through the kitchen wall."

"They could if they tried hard enough," Tommy said. "Someday they will."

Tommy looked almost apologetic. "I can't stay any longer. I saw your ship, and wanted to see if you really had come back. I thought it might be someone else. I'm sure glad it's you."

Tommy turned abruptly and walked straight out of the pilot-room, his small body lighting up the wall until he vanished.

Cynthia stared at her husband, her eyes dark with a questioning horror.

"The Green People," Ned said. "Think, Cynthia. Does the name mean anything to you?"

Cynthia shook her head, her lips shaping a soundless *No*.

Ned sat down slowly, rubbing his jaw. "I just thought you might know something about Druidism, and what the strange rites of that mysterious cult meant to the ancient inhabitants of Gaul and the British Isles. According to the Roman historian Pliny, the Druids built stone houses for their pupils and called themselves the Green People."

Starlight from the viewport illuminated Ned's pale face. He paused, then said: "The Druids were soothsayers and

sorcerers who disappeared from history at the time of the Roman conquest. It was widely believed they had the power of conferring eternal youth. They taught that time was an illusion, space the shadow of a dream."

His eyes were grim with speculation. "The Druids were teachers almost in the modern sense. Pliny records that they had a passion for teaching, and thought of their worshippers as pupils, as children with much to learn. Instruction in physical science formed the cornerstone of the Druidic cult."

Cynthia leaned forward, her face strained and intense as he went on.

"The Romans hated and feared them. There was a terrible, bloody battle and the Druids no longer danced in their groves of oak, in slow procession to a weird dirge-like chanting. They vanished from Earth and almost from the memory of man."

Ned took a deep breath.

"Man fears the unknown, and knowledge is a source of danger. Maybe the Druids were never really native to Earth. What if this were their home planet—"

"Ned, you can't really believe—"

"Listen!" Ned said.

The sound was clearly audible through the thin walls of the rocket-ship. It was a steady, dull droning—an eerie, terrifying sound.

Ned got up and walked to the viewport. He stared out—

He could see the Sweeney's dwelling clearly. It was bathed in an unearthly green light, and around it in a circle robed figures moved through shadows the color of blood. Around