

CHICKEN ITZA

*here was a world in which nothing ever went wrong—
and that bugged the hell out of the inspector from earth*

fiction By ROBERT F. YOUNG

IT HAVING BEEN established that the quickest way to civilize a savage is by providing him with a civilized environment and bestowing upon him the blessings of technology, the International Space Agency, when it came time to civilize the Siw of Sirius V, built a modern city for them in the big green plain where for centuries they had raised children, crops and chickens, and stocked it with all the technological goodies known to man. It also having been established that civilized environments require efficient supervision, constant care, and mechanical savoir-faire, ISA recruited a civilian cadre of experts to staff and maintain the city and to educate and train the Siw. Then, to teach the Siw technological self-reliance and to find out whether they were worth all the trouble, ISA put the city on an incommunicado status and left it to shift for itself for five years. When the trial period ended, they sent an inspector to look things over and report back. The inspector's name was G. A. Firby, and technology was his tutor, his mistress and his god. He might question his tutor and have misgivings about his mistress, but he never doubted his god.

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It was the first time Firby had seen the city, and his reaction upon being greeted by its mayor, who as head of cadre had been alerted to his coming, was one of cautious surprise. The elevated apron against which he had berthed his one-man spaceship was near enough to the outskirts to afford him an excellent view of the south side. However, it wasn't the pleasant and practical layout of the buildings, street and parking lots that occasioned his surprise, but their air of brand-newness. The buildings looked as though they had been built, yesterday, the Streets as though they had been laid that very morning and the parking lots as though they had been black-topped less than an hour ago. Moreover, the electric runabouts, both those cruising the streets and those parked in the lots, gave the impression they had just rolled off the assembly line.

"Sort of takes your breath away, doesn't it?" Mayor Henry Kobecker said. Despite the jaunty white feather he wore in his hat, he seemed nervous and ill at ease. His instructions were to conduct the tour without fanfare; he gave the impression that he didn't want to conduct it at all.

"It takes more than a view of a few housetops to take my breath away," Firby said.

"Quite so," the mayor agreed. "Quite so. Will, you come this way, Mr. Firby?"

Firby accompanied his host down a ramp to where the latter's runabout and Siw chauffeur were waiting. He had no qualms about leaving his ship unguarded. It was equipped with a special anti-burglar device that made mayhem of would-be intruders and sounded an alarm that was audible for a radius of ten miles.

The chauffeur's skin was the hue of varnished mahogany. After seating his two passengers in the rear of the runabout; he withdrew a handful of yellow pellets from a pocket in his mauve uniform and scattered them over the hood. Then he got behind the steering wheel and turned on the motor.

"What was that he threw on the hood?" Firby asked.

"Native corn," Mayor Kobecker replied "According to Siw, superstition, it brings good luck."

"Firby gave his host a long look, but made no comment.

The chauffeur rolled back the roof, "Which where, Mayhar?"

"I think we'll start with the Administration Building, Albert."

The mayor faced Firby. "Is that agreeable with you, sir?"

Firby did not answer. His eyes had focused of their own accord on a distant high-rise apartment building that had just caught the rays of the morning sun. He had eyes like a hawk, and if there'd been a single crack in the synthi-brick faceeee, a single sag in one of the balconies or a single pane missing from one of the windows, he would have seen it.

The tour began. Firby's eyes grew gradually larger. Broad avenues lined immaculate storefronts, and fettered with crystalline walkways, appeared. None of the walkways has closed for repairs, none of the storefronts needed refurbishing and not once did the wheels of the runabout encounter a chuckhole.

There were civilized Siw everywhere—riding in other runabouts, walking the walkways, coming out of the shopping centers laden with packages. But what made Firby sit up and take notice had nothing to do with their numbers, nor their apparent prosperity—nor even with the white feathers they wore in their hats. What struck him were their happy faces and carefree gaits.

The city dwellers he was familiar with had haunted faces and walked as though someone were chasing them.

"This," said Mayor Kobecker presently, "is the Administration Building!"

Firby saw that Albert had parked the runabout in the morning shadow of a large dignified edifice. He accompanied the mayor inside, where he was conducted through room after room lined with busy computers, every one of which looked as though it had been delivered fresh from the factory that very morning. All of the programmers were Siw and all of them seemed happy in their civilized habiliments and environment.

The mayor's office was in the center of the building. Four color-3-V screens inset in the walls functioned as windows. In the center of the room stood the mayor's desk. On it was a vase filled with white flowers. Firby, a nature lover at heart, went over and smelled them, only to discover that they were chicken feathers.

Straightening, he gave the mayor another long look. The mayor shifted his weight from his left foot to his right, fiddled with his tie but offered no explanation.

Next, while the mayor was outlining how City Hall administered to the city, Firby inspected the color-3V screens. At first he thought they were malfunctioning. This was because he was accustomed to color-3V sheens that depicted people with blue faces and green teeth. The people in these screens, albeit they had mahogany-hued faces and even though they were to far away for him to see their teeth, looked real.

For some reason, this annoyed him.

In swift succession, he inspected the Powerplant, the Sewage Disposal Plant, the Visiphone Building, the Department of Sanitation Shed and the Water Works. In not a single instance did he find a machine or a piece of equipment that needed repair.

Somehow he had the feeling that a vital ingredient was missing in each of the places he'd inspected, but it wasn't until Mayor Kobecker was wining and dining him in Siw City's moss elite eatery that he realized what it was. Momentarily, he was stunned. The, recovering himself, he said, "Why is it, Mayor, than I haven't seen a single mechanic, repairman or maintenance man since I've been here?"

"I'm—I'm afraid we have no need for them anymore," Mayor Kobecker mid.

"Preposterous! For your city to be in the condition it's in, they must be working twenty-four hours a day. Where are they?"

"Some of them have gone into other trades. A few of them have taken up raising chickens. A—"

"Raising chickens!"

"Yes sir. When our machines stopped breaking down and our appliances stopped malfunctioning and our streets and buildings no longer needed repairing, they had to do something, so—"

'All machines break down! All appliances malfunction!'" All streets and buildings need repairs!"

"Ours don't."

Firby looked at him. If he hadn't known better, he could have sworn that the mayor meant what he was saying.

He thought for a while. Whatever the reason behind it, there was questioning the technological perfection he had seen thus far. But for all he knew, it might be a carefully contrived mask hiding the

façade of a city-sized Penn Central railroad station. Streets, buildings, runabouts, color-3V sets, utilities—these were not reliable criteria. There was only one foolproof way of taking a city's pulse and getting an accurate reading: by inspecting its major industries. Siw City had only one.

"Take me to Synthinc," Firby said.

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After reseating his two passengers, Albert threw a second handful of corn over the runabout's hood before he got back behind the wheel. Firby ground his teeth. "Can't you stop him from doing that, Mayor?"

"I—I don't think it would be advisable, sir. We haven't had a traffic accident in years."

"Are you implying that *everybody* throws corn on their hood?"

"I'm—I'm afraid so."

For the first time, Firby realized that the feather in the mayor's hat was a chicken feather.

The runabout rolled smoothly past parks like Easter baskets, schools like birthday cakes and hospitals like blocks of spun sugar. From the front, Synthinc looked like a big brick of Neapolitan ice cream. Centered above the entrance were the letters S-Y-N-T-H-I-N-C, beneath them were two crossed chicken feathers molded in bronze.

Firby followed the mayor into the building,

A balding man advanced to meet them. The mayor introduced him as Fyodor Dubchek, the president and general manager. "I'll be delighted to show you around, Mr. Firby," Dubchek said.

"Just take me to the machines."

There were hundreds of them—thousands. All of them were set up for the various operations involved in turning a native plant called puwuwun into commercial synthifabric, and each was tended by a Siw.

Firby walked up and down the aisles, listening in vain for the rumble of a bad bearing or the telltale knocking of a worn shaft. Rounding a corner, he saw a Siw wearing striped mechanic's overalls and carrying what appeared to be a large oilcan passing from machine to machine and depositing a few drops of oil on each. But Firby's elation was short lived, for when the Siw came closer, he saw that what he'd thought was an oilcan was in fact a water sprinkler and that what he'd taken for oil was water.

For a moment, the enormity of the sacrilege was too much for him to cope with "Water," he babbled. "He's oiling the machines with water."

"Not *ordinary* water," said Dubchek, who with the mayor was standing just behind him "Rain water."

"*Rain* water!"

"Not ordinary rain water, Mr. Kirby," Mayor Kobecker said. "*Sacred* rain water. Sprinkling it on things is a Siw ritual designed to ward off trouble."

"On the same order as scattering corn, no doubt," Firby said scathingly.

The Mayor flinched slightly, but held his ground. "Yes, sir."

"And using chicken feathers for talismans."

The mayor rankled "There're Siw stratagems—all of them. And they can be used both ways. The point is, they work. At first, we were reluctant to permit such practices, but after we relented our breakdown rate was cut in half, our—"

"Listen," Firby interrupted. "I know as well as anyone that keeping a city in shape is a neverending problem. But you're going to tell me that you solved it by allowing the people you were supposed to civilize to revert to such superstitious foolishness as nattering of sprinkling rain water and wearing chicken feathers! There's another reason why your roofs don't cave in; why your streets don't develop chuckholes, why your machines don't break down. There *has* to be!"

"As a matter of fact." Mayor Kobecker admitted with an air of resignation, "there is."

"I knew science was lurking behind the scenes somewhere!"

"Well, not science exactly. Big we do have a sort of—ah—supervising engineer."

"You do? Then why haven't I been introduced to him? Take me to him at once!"

"I'd—I'd rather not. Mr. Firby. I don't think you'll like him."

"Nonsense! Of course I'll like him. I've never wanted to meet anybody so much in all my life."

The mayor sighed. "All right. Mr. Firby. Since you insist."

Dubchek gasped. "But Henry, you can't—"

"I have no alternative, Fyodor. Come, Mr. Firby. I'll conduct you to his headquarters."

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Reseated in the runabout and bound for the headquarters of the supervising engineer, Firby voiced his credo: "It may well be doubted," said he, "whether technological ingenuity can give birth to a dilemma that technological ingenuity may not, by proper application, resolve. I say this, Mayor, in face of the glaring fact our cities back on Earth leave much to be desired. Their tube trains run late, their walkways keep stalling, their visiphone service is a laugh, half the time they don't have electricity and their streets have as many chuckholes as the Moon has craters. But I have always maintained that eventually our technology will find a way to avert mechanical breakdown, and minimize deterioration, that a roseate day will dawn when the petty vexations that plague us from morning till night will be no more. Apparently, that day has already dawned for Siw City, Mayor, and I congratulate you. Maybe your supervising engineer can perform a similar miracle for us. Who is he, by the way? I knew ISA left some good men up here, but I had no idea any of them was *that* good."

The mayor didn't answer and Firby didn't press the question. He'd find out for himself who the supervising engineer was.

Presently, Albert brought the runabout to a halt in front of a one story cement block structure. A purple and green blanket functioned as a front door and there were no windows. Firby frowned but said nothing. The Mayor held the blanket aside and followed Firby. The interior consisted of a single barnlike room. In the center of the floor stood a large block of discolored concrete. Flickering radiance came from a source somewhere behind it but provided little in the way of actual illumination. Hanging from the rafters were miscellaneous articles of various shapes and sizes, none of which Firby could positively identify, but one of which he could have sworn was a bundle of chicken feathers.

It doesn't mean a thing, he told himself. I doesn't mean a thing. Aloud, he said, as calmly as he could, "Well, where is this supervising engineer of yours, Mayor?"

"Right over here."

Mayor Kobecker led the way around the discolored concrete block, and presently Kirby saw that the room contained a second curiosity—a pedestal. Upon it, flanked by two lighted tapers, stood a small doll. It had been carved out of mahoganylike wood, had agates for eyes, chicken down for hair; tiny pebbles for teeth, and was clad in striped mechanic's coveralls. Protruding from the center of its small forehead was the head of a nail.

"The coveralls were my idea," Mayor Kobecker said. "Rather appropriate, don't you think?"

"A fetish!" Firby exploded, "A god-damn fetish!"

"He doesn't ask for much in the way of sacrifices. A pullet or two now and then. Once in a while, a goat. Sometimes a sheep. He's really quite reasonable when you consider what the union scale is these days . . . Well, what else could we do, Mr. Firby? Our buildings were falling apart and our runabouts wouldn't run, our machines kept breaking down faster than we could fix them, our canned 3V programs had defective sound tacks, most of the sets themselves wouldn't work. We couldn't ask the personnel of the supply ships for help—we were forbidden even to talk to them while the trial period was in effect. We *had* to turn to the Siw. And, as things turned out, it was the wisest move we could have made. Civilized men have built things to fall to pieces for so long that they've now forgotten how to build them to stay together. The whole thing has gotten out of hand, as you know yourself. Ordinary measures of coping with the problem just aren't effective anymore."

"I don't believe it!" Kirby shouted. "I don't believe it!"

"Shhh!—you'll offend him, sir. Please be careful. You must remember that the homunculus is merely

his focal point. Actually, he's everywhere. There's no end to the things he can make go wrong for you if you make him mad."

"I don't believe it!" Kirby screamed. "I don't believe it!"

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He still didn't believe it when the drive malfunctioned during blast-off and his ship nearly nose-dived into a mountain. He still didn't believe it when the air-conditioner went out of whack during deorbiting and the interior temperature, climbed to a blistering 110 degrees Fahrenheit. He still didn't believe it when the automatic pilot lost its bearings and took him 10,000 miles off course. When he finally got back to Earth, demoralized, dehydrated and half dead, the port mechanics found water in the fuel, corn in the air conditioner and chicken feathers in the automatic pilot.

Then he believed it.