

PROMISED PLANET

THE EUROPEAN PROJECT was a noble undertaking. It was the result of the efforts of a group of noble men who were acquainted with the tragic histories of countries like Czechoslovakia, Lithuania, Rumania and Poland—countries whose juxtaposition to an aggressive totalitarian nation had robbed them of the right to evolve naturally. The European Project returned that right to them by giving them the stars. A distant planet was set aside for each downtrodden nation, and spaceships blasted off for New Czechoslovakia, New Lithuania, New Rumania and New Poland, bearing land-hungry, God-fearing peasants. And this time the immigrants found still waters and green pastures awaiting them instead of the methane-ridden coal mines which their countrymen had found centuries ago in another promised land.

There was only one mishap in the entire operation: the spaceship carrying the colonists for New Poland never reached its destination ...

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The snow was falling softly and through it Reston could see the yellow squares of light that were the windows of the community hall. He could hear the piano accordion picking up the strains of *O Moja Dziewczyzna Myje Nogi*. "My Girl Is Washing Her Feet," he thought, unconsciously reverting to his half-forgotten native tongue; washing them here on *Nowa Polska* the way she washed them long ago on Earth.

There was warmth in the thought, and Reston turned contentedly away from his study window and walked across the little room to the simple pleasures of his chair and his pipe. Soon, he knew, one of the children would come running across the snow and knock on his door, bearing the choicest viands of the wedding feast—*kielbasa*, perhaps, and *golabki* and *pierogi* and *kiszki*. And after that, much later in the evening, the groom himself would come round with the *wodka*, his bride at his side, and he and Reston would have a drink together in the warm room, the snow white and all-encompassing without, perhaps still falling, and, if not still falling, the stars bright and pulsing in the *Nowa Polska* sky.

It was a good life, hard sometimes, but unfailing in its finer moments. In his old age Reston had everything he wanted, and above all he had the simple things which are all any man wants in the final analysis; and if he occasionally needed to apply a slightly different connotation to a familiar word or two in order to alleviate a recurrent sadness, he harmed no one, and he did himself much good. At sixty, he was a contented if not a happy man.

But contentment had not come to him overnight. It was a product of the years, an indirect result of his acceptance of a way of life which circumstance and society had forced upon him . . .

Abruptly he got up from his chair and walked over to the window again. There was a quality about the moment that he did not want to lose: the reassuring yellow squares of the community-hall windows were part of it, the lilting cadence of the piano accordion, the softly falling snow—

It had been snowing, too, on that night forty years ago when Reston had landed the emigration ship—not snowing softly, but with cold fury, the flakes hard and sharp and coming in on a strong north wind, biting and stinging the faces of the little group of immigrants huddled in the lee of the slowly disintegrating ship, biting and stinging Reston's face, too, though he had hardly noticed. He had been too busy to notice—

Busy rounding up the rest of his passengers, then hurrying the women out of the danger area and setting the men to work unloading the supplies and equipment from the hold, using signs and gestures instead of words because he could not speak their language. As soon as the hold was empty, he directed the rearing of a temporary shelter behind the protective shoulder of a hill; then he climbed to the top of the hill and stood there in the bitter wind and the insanely swirling snow, watching his ship die, wondering what it was going to be like to spend the rest of his life in a foreign colony that consisted entirely of young, newly married couples.

For a moment his bitterness overwhelmed him. Why should *his* ship have been the one to develop reactor trouble in mid-run? Why should the appalling burden of finding a suitable planet for a group of people he had never seen before have fallen upon *his* shoulders? He felt like shaking his fist at God, but he didn't. It would have been a theatrical gesture, devoid of any true meaning. For it is impossible to execrate God without first having accepted Him, and in all his wild young life the only deity that Reston had ever worshiped was the Faster-Than-Light-Drive that made skipping stones of stars.

Presently he turned away and walked back down the hill. He found an empty corner in the makeshift shelter and he spread his blankets for the first lonely night.

In the morning there were improvised services for the single casualty of the forced landing. Then, on leaden feet, the immigrants began their new life.

Hard work kept Reston occupied that first winter. The original village had been transported from Earth, and it was assembled in a small mountain-encompassed valley. A river running through the valley solved the water problem for the time being, though chopping through its ice was a dreaded morning chore; and an adjacent forest afforded plenty of wood to burn till more suitable fuel could be obtained, though cutting it into cords and dragging the cords into the village on crude sleds was a task that none of the men looked forward to. There was a mild flu epidemic along toward spring, but thanks to the efficiency of the youthful doctor, who of course had been included as part of the basic structure of the new society, everybody pulled through nicely.

After the spring rains the first crops were planted. The soil of *Nowa Polska* turned out to be a rich dark loam, a gratifying circumstance to Reston, who had bled his ship of its last drop of energy in order to find the planet. It was already inhabited, of course—traces of the nomadic pilgrimages of the indigenes were apparent in several parts of the valley. At first Reston had some hope in that direction—until several of the natives walked into the village one morning, smiling hugely with their multiple mouths and pirouetting grotesquely on their multiple legs.

But at least they were friendly and, as it later developed, convenient to have around.

He helped with the planting that first spring. That was when he became aware that he was even less an integral part of the new culture than he had thought. Many times he found himself working alone while the immigrants worked in groups of twos and threes. He could not help thinking that he was being avoided. And several times he caught his fellow workers looking at him with unmistakable disapproval in their eyes. On such occasions he shrugged his shoulders. They could disapprove of him all they wanted to, but like him or not, they were stuck with him.

He loafed the summer away, fishing and hunting in the idyllic foothills of the mountains, sleeping in the open sometimes, under the stars. Often he lay half the summer night through, thinking—thinking of many things: of the sweet taste of Earth air after a run, of scintillating Earth cities spread out like gigantic pinball machines just waiting to be played, of bright lights and lithe legs, and chilled wine being poured into tall iridescent glasses; but most of all thinking of his neighbors' wives.

In the fall he helped with the harvest. The indigenes' penchant for farm work was still an unknown factor and consequently had not yet been exploited. Again he saw disapproval in the immigrants' eyes. He could not understand it. If he knew the peasant mind at all, these people should have approved of his willingness to work, not disapproved of it. But again he shrugged his shoulders. They could go to hell as far as he was concerned, the whole self-righteous, God-fearing lot of them.

It was a bountiful harvest. To the immigrants, accustomed as they were to the scrawny yields of Old Country soil, it was unbelievable. Reston heard them talking enthusiastically about the fine *kapusta*, the enormous *ziemniaki*, the golden *pszenica*. He could understand most of what they said by then, and he could even make himself understood, though the thick *cis* and *sz's* still bothered him.

But the language was the least of his troubles in the winter that followed.

After the way the immigrants had acted toward him in the fields, Reston had anticipated a winter of enforced isolation. But it was not so. There was scarcely an evening when he wasn't invited to the Andruliewicz's or the Pyzylciewicz's or the Sadowski's to share a flavorful meal and to join in the discussion of whatever subject happened to be of most concern to the community at the moment—the fodder for the newly domesticated livestock, the shortcomings of the village's only generator, the

proposed site for the church. Yet all the while he ate and talked with them he was conscious of an undercurrent of uneasiness, of an unnatural formality of speech. It was as though they could not relax in his presence, could not be themselves.

Gradually, as the winter progressed, he stayed home more and more often, brooding in his wifeless kitchen and retiring early to his wifeless bed, tossing restlessly in the lonely darkness while the wind gamboled round the house and sent the snow spraying against the eaves.

In a way, the babies had been the hardest thing of all to take. They began arriving late that second winter. By spring there was a whole crop of them.

There was one shining hope in Reston's mind, and that hope alone kept his loneliness from turning into bitterness—the hope that his SOS had been intercepted and that a rescue ship was already beamed on the co-ordinates he had scattered to the stars during the taut moments that had preceded planetfall. In a way it was a desperate hope, for if his SOS had *not* been intercepted it would be at least ninety years before the co-ordinates reached the nearest inhabited planet, and ninety years, even when you were twenty-one and believed that with half a chance you could live forever, was an unpleasant reality to contend with.

As the long somber days dragged on, Reston began to read. There was utterly nothing else for him to do. He had finally reached a point where he could no longer stand to visit the burgeoning young families and listen to the lusty squalling of youthful lungs; or endure another pitiful baptism, with the father stumbling through the ritual, embarrassed, humble, a little frightened, splashing water with clumsy hands on the new infant's wizened face.

All of the available books were in Polish, of course, and most of them, as is invariably the case with peasant literature, dealt with religious themes. A good eighty per cent of them were identical copies of the Polish Bible itself, and, finally annoyed by its omnipresence whenever he asked his neighbors for something to read, Reston borrowed a copy and browsed his way through it. He could read Polish easily by then, and he could speak it fluently, with far more clarity and with far more expression than the immigrants could themselves.

He found the Old Testament God naïve. Genesis amused him, and once, to alleviate a dull evening—and to prove to himself that he was still contemptuous of religious credos regardless of his situation—he rewrote it the way he thought the ancient Hebrews might have conceived of it had they possessed a more mature comprehension of the universe. At first he was rather proud of his new version, but after rereading it several times he came to the conclusion that except for the postulates that God had *not* created Earth first and had created a far greater multitude of stars than the ancient Hebrews had given Him credit for, it wasn't particularly original.

After reading the New Testament he felt more at peace than he had for a long time. But his peace was short-lived. Spring devastated it when it came. Meadow flowers were hauntingly beautiful that year and Reston had never seen bluer skies—not even on Earth. When the rains were over and gone he made daily treks into the foothills, taking the Bible with him sometimes, losing himself in intricate green cathedrals, coming sometimes into sudden sight of the high white breasts of the mountains and wondering why he didn't climb them, pass over them into another land and leave this lonely land behind, and all the while knowing, deep in his heart, the reason why he stayed.

It wasn't until early in summer, when he was returning from one of his treks, that he finally saw Helena alone.

There had been a flu epidemic that second winter, too, but it had not been quite as mild as the first one had been. There had been one death.

Helena Kuprewicz was the first *Nowa Polska* widow.

In spite of himself, Reston had thought about her constantly ever since the funeral, and he had wondered frequently about the mores of the new culture as they applied to the interval of time that had to elapse before a bereaved wife could look at another man without becoming a social outcast.

Helena was still wearing black when he came upon her in one of the meadows that flanked the village. But she was very fair, and black became the milk-whiteness of her oval face and matched the

lustrous darkness of her hair. Helena was a beautiful woman, and Reston would have looked at her twice under *any* circumstances.

She was gathering greens. She stood up when she saw him approaching. "*Jak sie masz, Pan Reston,*" she said shyly.

Her formality disconcerted him, though it shouldn't have. None of the immigrants had ever addressed him by his first name. He smiled at her. He tried to smile warmly, but he knew his smile *was* cold. It had been so long since he had smiled at a pretty girl. "*Jak sie made, Pani Kuprewicz.*"

They discussed the weather first, and then the crops, and after that there didn't seem to be anything left to discuss, and Reston accompanied her back to the village. He lingered by her doorstep, reluctant to leave. "Helena," he said suddenly, "I would like to see you again."

"Why, of course, *Pan Reston*. You are more than welcome to my house. . . . All spring I waited for you to come, but when you did not I knew that it was because you were not yet prepared, that you were not quite certain of the call."

He looked at her puzzledly. He had never asked a Polish girl for a date before, but he was reasonably sure that they didn't usually respond in quite so formal a manner, or in quite so respectful a tone of voice. "I mean," he explained, "that I would like to see you again because—" he floundered for words—"because I like you, because you are beautiful, because . . ." His voice trailed away when he saw the expression that had come over her face.

Then he stared uncomprehendingly as she turned away and ran into the house. The door slammed and he stood there for a long time, looking dumbly at the mute panels and the little curtained windows.

The enormity of the social crime he had apparently committed bewildered him. Surely no society—not even a society as pious and as God-fearing as the one he was involved in—would expect its widows to remain widows forever. But even granting that such were the case, the expression that had come over Helena's face was still inexplicable. Reston could have understood surprise, or even shock

But not horror.

He was something besides just an odd number in the peasants' eyes. He was a grotesque misfit, a monster. But why?

He walked home slowly, trying to think, trying, for the first time, to see himself as the immigrants saw him. He passed the church, heard the sporadic hammering of the carpenters as they applied the finishing touches to the interior. He wondered suddenly why they had built it next door to the only heathen in the village.

He hewed coffee in his kitchen and sat down by the window. He could see the foothills, green and lazily rising, with the mountains chaste and white beyond them.

He dropped his eyes from the mountains and stared down at his hands. They were long, slender hands, sensitive from long association with the control consoles of half a hundred complex ships—the hands of a pilot, different, certainly, from the hands of a peasant, just as he was different, but, basically, intrinsically the same.

How *did* they see him?

The answer was easy: they saw him as a pilot. But why should their seeing him as a pilot so affect their attitude toward him that they could never relax in his presence, could never evince toward him the warmth and camaraderie, or even the resentment, which they evinced toward each other? A pilot, after all, was nothing but a human being. It was no credit to Reston that he had delivered them from persecution, no credit to him that *Nowa Polska* had become a reality.

Suddenly he remembered the *Book of Exodus*. He got up, disbelievingly, and located the copy of the Bible he had borrowed during the winter. With mounting honor, he began to read.

He had crouched wearily on the little ledge. Above him the insurmountable cornice had obfuscated the sky.

He had looked down into the valley and he had seen the remote winking of tiny lights that symbolized his destiny. But they symbolized something more than just his destiny: they symbolized warmth and a security of sorts; they symbolized all there was of humanity on *Nowa Polska*. Crouching there on the

ledge, in the mountain cold, he had come to the inevitable realization that no man can live alone, and that his own need for the immigrants was as great as their need for him.

He had begun the descent then, slowly, because of his weariness and because his hands were bloodied and bruised from the frenzy of the climb. It was morning when he reached the meadows, and the sun was shining brightly on the cross above the church.

Abruptly Reston left the window and returned to his chair. There was pain even in remembered conflict.

But the room was warm and pleasant, and his chair deep and comfortable, and gradually the pain left him. Very soon now, he knew, one of the children would come mooing across the snow bearing viands from the feast, and a knock would sound at his door, and there would come another one of the moments for which he lived, which, added together through the years, had made his surrender to his destiny more bearable.

His surrender had not immediately followed his return to the village. It had come about subtly with the passage of the years. It had been the natural result of certain incidents and crises, of unanticipated moments. He tried to remember the moment when he had first stepped briefly into the niche which circumstance and society preordained for him. Surely it must have been during the fourth winter when the little Andruliewicz girl had died.

It had been a dull wintry day, the sky somber, the frozen earth unsoftened as yet with snow. Reston had followed the little procession up the hill that had been set aside for the cemetery and he had stood with the gray-faced immigrants at the edge of the little grave. The casket was a crude wooden one, and the father stood over it awkwardly with the Bible in his hands, stumbling through the service, trying to say the words clearly and instead uttering them brokenly in his clumsy peasant's voice. Finally Reston could stand it no longer and he walked over the frozen ground to where the stricken man was standing and took the Bible into his own hands. Then he stood up straight against the bleak cold sky, tall and strong, and his voice was as clear as a cold wind, yet as strangely soft as a midsummer's day, and filled with the promise of springs yet to come, and the sure calm knowledge that all winters must pass.

"I am the Resurrection and the Life, saith the Lord: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die . . .

The knock finally sounded, and Reston got up from his chair and walked over to the door. Funny the way a simple, God-fearing people would regard a spaceman, he thought. Especially the particular spaceman who had delivered them from persecution and brought them to the Promised Land; who had nonchalantly manipulated a ship three acres long by one acre wide with nothing but his fingers; who had, in the course of Exodus, performed exploits that made Moses' cleaving of the waters of the Red Sea seem like a picayune miracle by comparison; and who had, after the Promised Land had been attained, made many wanderings into the Wilderness to commune with God, sometimes carrying the sacred Book itself.

But that attitude by itself would not have been enough to engender the social pressure that had shaped his way of life without the catalyst that the single casualty of planetfall had provided. Reston could still appreciate the irony in the fact that that single casualty should have involved the most essential pillar in the structure of the new society—the Polish priest himself.

He opened the door and peered out into the snow. Little Plots Pyzyldewicz was standing on the doorstep, a huge dish in his arms. "Good evening, Father. I've brought you some *kielbasa* and some *golabki* and some *pierogi* and some *kiszki* and—"

Father Reston opened the door wide. Being a priest had its drawbacks, of course—maintaining peace in a monogamous society that refused to stay evenly balanced in the ways of sex, for one, and making certain that his sometimes too greedy flock did not overexploit the simple indigenes, for another. But it had its compensations, too. For, while Reston could never have children of his own, he had many, many children in a different sense of the word, and what harm could there be in an old man's pretending to a virility which circumstance and society had denied him?

“Come in, my son,” he said.