

*The tower lay in the midst of the forest, and though
the peasant girl's eyes were wide with fright
and mystery, she could see it had ...*

neither stairs nor door

FRAU Schnabel did not see the spaceship land, nor did she see it blast off. If she had witnessed either occurrence, the romantic tale which she was to tell later on—the true source of which has only recently come to light—would probably never have been related; for a person's perspective is arbitrarily governed by his thought-world, and while Frau Schnabel had no trouble interpreting what she did see, Newton's third law of dynamics in action would undoubtedly have posed a problem much too complex for her medieval mind to cope with.

Strictly speaking, the spaceship wasn't really a spaceship—it was, in the gobbledegook of the Metennabulite navy, a ship-to-planet-planet-to-ship contact-vehicle, and compared to its orbiting mother-ship, it was a very small fish in the pond indeed. But to Frau Schnabel, when she first set eyes on it, it looked as large as a house—or, to be more exact, a tower. The circumstances leading up to this memorable moment are worth examining.

"Mother" had wandered far from her native shore, consuming, in the process, much of her food supply, and her larder was badly in need of replenishing. Her captain, consequently, had put in to the system nearest her trajectory, and established her in orbit around the planet with the highest uranium-content reading—the third one out from the sun. Not long thereafter, her matter-detector registered a rich pitchblende deposit on one of the planet's larger continents, and a STPPTSCV was immediately sent down, with a crew of one, for the purpose of pinpointing the part of the deposit that contained the maximum amount of uranium oxide. Once the proper co-ordinates were relayed back, a transfer-beam would be directed upon the area and the uranium oxide would be extracted and transmitted simultaneously.

The "crew of one" was named Anaxel, and by Metennabulite standards, he was an ordinary enough individual. In common with most Metennabulite males, he was tall, noble of mien, had regular features and curly brown hair; and, in common with his fellow crew-members, he wore the regulation Metennabulite navy uniform, attire consisting of a white coat-blouse, pale-blue, jodhpur-like trousers, and gilt leather boots. He knew his job and he knew it well, and the STPPTSCV had no sooner settled on its metal haunches in the clearing of a small forest than he set about accomplishing his mission. First he donned his communicator-helmet—a tiara-like affair comprised of an intricate network of silvery wires—then he disengaged the lock and stepped into the stirrup of the boarding cable. The cable lowered him gently from the lofty lock to the ground, withdrew like a lazy golden serpent when he released it. Finally he set forth into the forest, his eyes flicking every now and then to his uranium detector, which was inset in a gold ring on the index finger of his right hand and which looked for all the world like a large and resplendent ruby.

HE ranged far and wide, but it was not till late in the afternoon, when he was on his way back to the ship, that the detector began emitting the series of flashes he was waiting for. After rotating the ring several times, he set off in the direction that evoked the most rapid reaction, his eyes focused on the detector. So great was his absorption in his task that, arriving in a small clearing, he failed to see the young woman who was kneeling in the middle of a bed of blue flowers till he was on the verge of tripping over her. She failed to see him too at first, so busily engaged was she in pulling up the flowers and nibbling away at their roots, and when she finally did become aware of him and looked up, startled, from

her quaint repast, his knee was only inches away from her nose.

She was round-faced and flaxen-haired, and she had the biggest blue eyes that Anaxel had ever seen. They proceeded to grow even bigger, and for an alarmed moment he was afraid that they were going to pop out of their sockets and fall into the bed of flowers. She seemed bereft of movement, and for a long while she went on kneeling at his feet somewhat in the manner of a supplicating statue, although the effect was somewhat marred by the coarse garment that covered her from neck to ankles. At last, however, she came back to life, and after standing up, she backed across the clearing in a series of curtsies that bordered on genuflections, and disappeared among the trees.

To say that Anaxel was puzzled by her actions would be gainsaying the truth. He simply wasn't interested enough to be puzzled. He was a technician, not an anthropologist, and while he knew enough about the world on which he stood to be aware that this particular section of it was in the middle of a dark-ages period, he hadn't the slightest desire to embellish his knowledge with details. When he returned to the mother-ship he would, in accordance with regulations, turn in a written report of everything he had seen and heard, but he could see little point in seeing or hearing any more than he actually had to. He had a one-track mind, and at the moment all that concerned him was the location of the main uranium-oxide deposit. Hence, far from being puzzled by the, young woman's actions, he forgot all about her two seconds after she disappeared into the forest.

But, while Frau Schnabel may have aroused no interest in Anaxel, Anaxel aroused plenty of interest in Frau Schnabel, and unknown to him, a pair of blue eyes devoured his every movement for the rest of the afternoon, and after dusk settled over the forest and he started back to the ship, deferring his prospecting activities till the morrow, that same pair of blue eyes were upon him every inch of the way. They were still upon him when he reached the ship, and if he could have seen them when he gave voice to the sonic password that activated the boarding cable, and if he could have seen them a moment later when the thick golden cable emerged from the lock and came undulating down to the ground, he would have bet his last murkel that in another second they would pop right out of her head. And it wouldn't have been a bad bet either, because when the cable drew him up into the lock, they almost did.

AFTER the lock closed, Frau Schnabel headed directly for the little wood-cutter's cabin which she shared with her middle-aged husband, Peter. Peter was already there, brooding darkly by the hearth, when she arrived, and the word-whipping which he proceeded to give her brought tears to her blue eyes. It was bad enough, he said, that after two years of marriage she had failed to beget him a son, without her gallivanting in the woods every afternoon when she should be home feeding the pigs and getting his supper. She had been dying to tell him about, her wondrous experience, but now she could not, and her mind sought desperately for someone else she could tell about it. Alas, there was no one. Her parents were dead, and she and Peter were the only people for miles around, save for an old woman who lived in a run-down cabin at the edge of the woods; but Frau Schnabel had it on the very best authority—her husband's—that the old woman was a witch, and she didn't dare go near her. So she went to bed after supper without having revealed her experience to anyone, and during the night, while she tossed and turned beside her snoring husband in the drafty loft above the pigpen, the events of the afternoon whirled dizzily in her head and got mixed up with her loneliness and the sweet roots she had lately developed a craving for and the old woman who lived at the edge of the woods, and by morning they had tentatively acquired the form which she was eventually to give them.

Peter had no sooner left the house than she was off into the woods, eager to see the marvelous tower—and its resplendent occupant—again. Just as she came within sight of it, the golden cable emerged and lowered Anaxel to the ground. She gave a little gasp and hopped birdlike behind a nearby tree and peered around the trunk. When he entered the forest, Anaxel passed so close to her that she could have reached out and touched him—if she had dared. She followed, keeping as close to him as she could, her heart hammering in cadence with her short quick steps.

All unawares of the blue eyes upon him, Anaxel headed straight for the spot where he had left off prospecting the previous evening. By mid-morning he had the main uranium-oxide deposit pinpointed to

his satisfaction, and he transmitted the co-ordinates to the mother-ship. He wasted no time in getting out of the danger-area. The mother-ship was above the dawn-belt and would be in a position to make the transfer any minute now, and soon the transfer-beam would flash down out of the blue and sink its invisible fingers into the forest. In a way, it was like picking a planet's pockets; but this much, at least, can be said for the Metennabulite navy—it never picked a planet's pockets unless it had to, and it never filched more uranium than it needed.

Suddenly a blur of movement within the danger area caught Anaxel's eyes. It was accompanied by a flash of yellow hair. Belatedly he remembered the young woman he had almost stumbled over the previous afternoon. Was it possible that she was still within the vicinity?

He could afford to take no chances. Human life—even alien human life—was highly esteemed in the Metennabulite civilization, and contact with a transfer-beam was invariably fatal. Hence, at the risk of his own life, he plunged into the forest, and when he came upon Frau Schnabel crouching behind a gooseberry bush, he whisked her into his arms and sped out of the danger area with her. He had no sooner reached safety when a dull rumble apprised him that the transfer-beam had done its work and that now his job was finished. Setting Frau Schnabel unceremoniously upon her feet, he headed back for the STPPTSCV.

FOR a long while Frau Schnabel did not move. Seeing her standing there, staring at the section of the undergrowth into which Anaxel had disappeared, you would have thought that a piece of the sky had fallen upon her head and stunned her, and in a sense, that is precisely what had happened. Years would come and years would go, but she would never be the same Frau Schnabel again.

Finally she essayed a tentative step in the direction Anaxel had taken. When she did not wake up in her wooden bed in the loft above the pigpen and was reasonably certain that she was not dreaming, she set off in his wake. Shortly before she reached the clearing in which the enchanted tower stood, she heard the sound of thunder receding in the distance. But she did not connect it with the emptiness that met her eyes when she finally broke free from the forest. There was no reason why she should have done so: magic towers, when they disappear, do so silently. They are there one minute, and gone the next.

Sobbing, she sank down on the ground, and her tears fell one by one upon the coarse material of her dress. She had known from the moment the King's son had spoken the magic words that for her there could be no hope, but somehow she had gone on hoping anyway, and when he had picked her up and started to carry her away, that hope had flared into sudden brightness like a candle-flame in a wind. But why had he changed his mind and returned instead to the enchanted tower and his golden-haired princess? Had she, Frau Schnabel, offended him in any way?

She did not think so, and the more she thought about the matter, the more inclined she was to believe that the King's son's action stemmed from his having decided at the very last second that his obligations to his princess and his country far outweighed his obligations to the poor peasant girl who had unaccountably swept him off his feet. After all, it was only natural that a King's son should have high principles. None of which explained the tower's disappearance; but Frau Schnabel had come to the conclusion quite some time ago that the old woman who lived at the edge of the woods had something to do with the tower, and, as everyone knew, witches were always making things disappear.

Understandably enough, Frau Schnabel was simply bursting by now to tell someone about her adventure. But whom could she tell? Certainly not her husband; a King's son was a fitting enough topic for a wife to talk about, but not when said King's son had picked up said wife in his arms with the apparent purpose of carrying her away to a far land, there to live happily with her ever after. And since her parents were dead, she couldn't very well tell them—and anyway, they probably wouldn't believe her even if they were around to listen. Whom, then? There was utterly no one, save Dame Gothel, the old woman who lived at the edge of the woods. Frau Schnabel sighed.

She would rather die than tell her.

NEVERTHELESS, as matters turned out, it was Dame Gothel whom she did tell, for Dame Gothel,

in addition to being a witch, was also a midwife, and Frau Schnable, unknown to herself, had been pregnant for some time. Her recent penchant for rampion, to say nothing of certain other signs, should have apprised her of the fact; but no one had ever taken the trouble to tell her about the birds and the bees, and up until the last moment, she remained completely innocent of her condition.

The account of her adventure that she gave Dame Gothel, however, is far from being a factual one, not only because of her inherent romanticism but because she gave most of it while she was half out of her head from labor pains. Nevertheless, we are beholden to her for one of the best eyewitness accounts of an alien landing on earth ever to come down to us through folklore, and although, in her loneliness, she ended up by identifying herself with the princess, whom she quite naturally assumed to have been in the tower, and changed quite a number of other details around to conform to her wish-fulfillment reverie, we cannot deny that her description of the STPPTSCV is but little short of photographic:

“... a tower, which lay in a forest; and had neither stairs nor door, but quite at the top was a little window.” As for the password which Anaxel used to activate the sonic mechanism of the boarding cable, that has come down to us verbatim. Neither Frau Schnabel nor the innumerable folk who co-operated in the historical handing-down process during successive generations would have dreamed of changing it. And quite probably it was the factor that affected Frau Schnabel's perspective the most, for the words that it comprised had phonetic counterparts in her own language—words that gave the incident a flavor which it would otherwise have lacked. They are well-known words today, and all of us, in our childhood, have run across them in one language or another. In English, they read quite simply,

*Rapunzel, Rapunzel,
Let down thy hair to me.*

THE END