



Masters of the Trading Game

A Science Fiction short story by Jim Cline
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The engine of the little aircraft he had rented had suddenly quit, and soon stalled, now heading rapidly toward the rough terrain below. He had a toolkit which quickly showed him that the engine had quit because its flight controller had been sent a signal by an airport ground control that the plane had landed and was to shut the engine down and let the passenger out. Unable to change the instruction to the autopilot, he activated his suit's buoyancy control, needed to live on this heavy gravity planet, set to a negative average weight, opened the door and jumped out. The plane sped downward past him; moments later it hit the ground, splattering pieces all over the mountainside. Reaching the ground, he adjusted his average weight for some traction, and bounded lightly across the terrain. Reaching the wreckage, he retrieved his luggage and lightly bounded away to a place that provided concealment; yet he was able to view the wreckage. Soon a helicopter arrived out of nowhere in this desolate place, and it squirted a stream of liquid fuel all over the wreckage, ignited it; hovered awhile to watch the inferno, then flew off.

So far, his day was not going well. Up until today, things had seemed to be quite reasonable. He had arrived as an ambassador to this planet, with a specialty in sociology, to determine how the beings here needed to be treated for a harmonious trade relationship with the Federation of Planets. It was not a judgmental activity; merely standard research to determine the data needed to establish the optimum trade relationship parameters.

They had no intention to interfere with any planet's doings; all they wanted was the working trade relationship so as to acquire needed goods in exchange for goods of which they had too much. The people here generally understood that. And yet, one of the natives had only yesterday acted odd and quietly told him to mind his own business or he would be in trouble, then the native faded away into the crowd.

Feeling a bit hungry, he carefully selected leaves from the thorny tree which hid him, taking select leaves from the outside where it would let more sunshine in for inner leaves to relish and grow faster. Putting the leaves into his pocket snack converter, soon it produced a refreshing sip of nutritious liquid and some tasty munchies for him. Now what? He had noticed the same corporation markings on the helicopter as had been on the rented aircraft, apparently associated with this particular territory he had just begun to gather data within. It appeared clear that some quite competent group had worked to destroy him, and probably of the control of this territory. To go into a nearby town would likely invite another destructive effort, maybe one he would not be able to avoid. His sociological research report would have to incorporate the social phenomenon which had produced his current predicament, so making it look like he was missing while he was continuing his data gathering project seemed most likely to determine pertinent data. An observer always had to be careful to not significantly alter the workings of the social system that was being documented, and it appeared that the social forces here had considered his presence very disruptive. Opening his suitcase and accessing the data store, he found a map with his location on it, and located the nearest large town. There were none nearby, however, so he chose to head back to the place from which he had rented the aircraft, and where his other belongings were presumably still located. But he would remain on the outskirts in hiding; see what he could discover from there as to what was going on now.

He traveled in the twilight hours, when the desert mountains were most active with animal life, hiding out

both in daylight and the deep of the night, motion too risky. He was in no hurry; data was data whenever he obtained it. Arriving on the outskirts of the city, he squirreled a secure hiding spot where he could see the area where his motel room was located, and his rented ground vehicle. It was still in the parking lot; he saw no one entering his motel room. The security cameras were not aimed at him nor his vehicle nor his room, just at their usual views of access passageways. He needed to report in, so as dusk fell he set his suit to high buoyancy and lightly bounced across the intervening space, coming in at an angle not observed by the cameras; touching the motel roof, he flipped over the eaves to be in front of his motel room door, and was soon inside. Odd, the couple of electric sparks he felt doing tiny stings on his skin. This door opening would be signaled to the office, surely; so he quickly gathered supplies and his communicator, leaving everything else as it was. He left the room, bounced to the roof, and off across several roofs to gain a probably unobserved return to his hideaway. His suit was the equivalent to a portable airship inflated by hydrogen; it had already been determined that this civilization had abandoned rigid airship transportation due to a spectacular accident long ago, and had used powered airfoils for airlift since then.

Back in his hideaway, he quickly set up the sub-space communicator and filed his report update. Then he switched the communicator to "observe local news" mode, suppressing its normal "interactive news" mode which would have given his continued existence away, making his job more difficult than it already had become. The folks receiving his report on his home planet would merely file it away; they had seen about anything possible, among the many planets which had been brought into the Federation. They had, however, cautioned him to be more careful about triggering activities by his presence that would further disrupt data acquisition and maybe even terminate him. Replacing him and his equipment would be costly and delay the acceptance of this planet into the Federation, so be more careful; end of message.

So he resigned himself to a long stay in this rather uncomfortable quarters, furtively watching. It was going to be a longer time until he would be back in the comfortable embrace of his wife; instead, he was here in this hole made among sharp rocks and thorny leaf-bushes. His buoyancy suit was made of sturdy cloth and when partially inflated, it provided a barrier between his body and the uncomfortable rocks surrounding him, so he at least could be somewhat comfortable when sleeping.

Opening his briefcase, he activated half of its fleet of micro-vehicles, programmed to scamper around the nearby city until hearing audio or observing activity, then transmit what ever they observed back to the suitcase along subspace channels. Periodically the raw data was sent in a packet through subspace to the home planet data center mindless recorders, just in case. A few of the micro-vehicles were hovering around his hideaway and if something suddenly obliterated him there, they would have described the incoming missile and so the home planet would have that data at least. Few ambassadors had ever been lost, and it was considered incompetence that led to their demise; and data as to causes was merely added to the vast database. He was on his own; no rescue would be sent. If he really messed up, he would merely be replaced, quickly forgotten. The Prime Directive was to not disrupt trade activities among planets.

So. What had he done to offend these people so much? This was the fourth territory which he had explored on this planet; this one seemed much the same as the other three, bland and understandable. That is, up until his aircraft crashed several days ago. Must be something different happening here. What was it? He examined the statistics. People were busy making things, buying and selling, growing food, marrying, having offspring and getting divorced, same old stuff. The next level deeper among the data showed something a bit odd. There were far more females here than males, as compared to ratios in the prior three territories. That was something for the micro-vehicles to ferret out a bit deeper. He compared the current findings to the planetary library history set. There were as many females as males born, on the average, everywhere. It was the same on the birth record in this town too, just as many males as females born each year. There were a large number of divorced females with children, as single moms were quite

well supported by the system. Soon another irregularity was found, that even among the relatively few males here, many of them were living together in group living situations, some with a female among them, others not. Eventually he discovered that there were only a few males who were active in procreation. Males of that group were marrying a female, procreating, divorcing them, supporting them while going on to another single woman; he periodically visited all his former wives, who did not seem to have any other relationship but with him. Odd, how did that happen? The community was thriving; monogamy was part of the law here as elsewhere, but divorced moms were of course allowed to have relationships. So it was not obviously polygamy, but effectively so, staying within the law.

Where had the extra females come from? Records seemed oddly scant, as if they suddenly appeared. There were several other kinds of groups living in the city besides the one that had the group of men who had the many former wives and who all formed a strong mutual support group.

He focused upon a young couple who had moved into town, the man having been lured here by a high paying nice job. He sent the micro-vehicles to be clustered around the areas where their new home had been, around the man on his job, and the couple's shopping. Things had at first looked fine. Then they registered to receive an offspring permit; immediately there were odd changes. The micro-vehicles discovered that the woman had been surrounded during shopping by the most handsome men among the sales staff, smiling and being helpful. Meanwhile, her husband was being assaulted by nearly invisible electric sparks shot by devices carried by the leaders of the area, and also were mounted in vehicles and at doorways, all quite hidden. The man, increasingly unfocused, gave up trying to figure out what had pricked him out of nowhere over and over again, and his body chemistry became altered, befuddling his thinking increasingly. When he came home, his wife wondered why he was being so dopey and no longer coping with life; he began to tell her that his boss on the job was not giving him a good job review. She liked the town there, the handsome salesmen and the smiling and very helpful women ever busy around when something was needed, who seemed ever ready to give her whatever she needed even before she needed it.

Finally her husband came home one day and said he had lost his job; he could not figure out what was going on, felt sleepy much of the time. There was a divorce clinic in town so she went there, found it was a quick and easy process, and soon she was a free woman, the law forcing her former husband to support her. Meanwhile, her former husband could find little work, and that was of low skill, and he was ever sleepy and now was being assaulted by pre-audible-sonics which were used in stores to direct staff, but now directed mysteriously to the now loner male. Eventually he could not endure it all, wifeless and alone, friendless, and he left town. Thus, another female was added to the territory's population, not balanced by a male's equal presence. Eventually the woman got involved in the town's group meetings and support systems, leading to occasional contact with the males who were former husbands of lots of the women. Soon she was to be added to the list of the women who were re-married, reproduced, divorced again, and living just fine with children, with occasional visits by her former reproducing mate. So that was the phenomenon.

Comparing with the other three territories he had observed, he found that they too had the same subgroup among them, quietly gathering other females from among the other kinds of groups nearby. Yet the virtual-polygamist-ruled group had not yet completely taken over the other three territories.

The library yielded lots of this kind of activity in history; it was a pattern where a small group of males somehow figured out how to deprive lots of other males of women, and thus had large groups of females by which to reproduce, and all their sons were now bonded by genetics, a genetic mark that caused them to unite against the world cleverly. Unmated, the genetics of the other males faded out of existence. The more subtle levels of living systems, sometimes called spiritual equivalents, were involved, the groups which were growing under the united membership requiring only male dependancy of their unique male

ancestry, a subtle psychic bonding and monitoring system that mystified non-member males and eventually caused their downfall, freeing their women to be acquired by the in-group. Such systems had happened several times around the world and throughout history, but eventually all the other groups had become amalgamated to a large extent into the larger society of which they were part. But the current virtual-polygamist-mutual-support-society in this territory was of a fairly new such group; wars were not being fought to dispose of neighbor males and free their women to be taken; but rather this time it was an insidious war against the individual males of the larger group, all done mysteriously to the non-in-group males. With the available females being taken in by the very supportive expanding group fathered by the founding fathers of the group, the other males of the original 50-50 gender ratio at birth, deprived of mating and progeny, faded away early in life. Laws enforcing monogamy were being skirted thereby; and anyway the law enforcers were among the reproductively privileged males, and no way were they going to disrupt a good thing for themselves.

So the micro-vehicles had found the raw data; and his suitcase data processor and communicator had sifted out the patterns. Yet it did not seem to be the cause of the attack on himself; was it that they were afraid he would observe the phenomenon and spread the word? Not likely; they knew his mission was to enhance trade between planets and did not care who it was with whom they traded. More data was needed.

He expanded his library searches to those of archives of the larger territory, even of the world, randomizing the searches so as to not leave too obvious a pattern for any who might wonder at the curiosity. Billions of news articles and writings of all kinds in the public system were evaluated, and a shadow process began to be sifted out, something that had been going on a long time, and rapidly getting more powerful, yet still not noticed by those squarely in the obvious path of ruin for the chosen target ones. It was one of the groups of the same leadership which had taken over this town, one woman at a time, by disposing of one man at a time via social crushing, mysterious estrangements. The shadow pattern took on probabilities way above random, that showed that the national and international spread of this group had expanded enormously under the cover of being just another group. They were very supportive of each other, whereas most of the rest of this world's men were intensely rivalrous to each other, each man an island, slowly drowning as the social water rose around him, ever shrinking his territory to nothing. The normal ratio of women they would have had as mates, were easily lured into the spreading group, much as within this current city he was observing. Yet it was a big nation, and a bigger world. In the past, this group had become too noticed by the men who had been deprived of mates, and in one case were declared unwanted and so they had moved elsewhere; yet their great mutual support system among the females had supplied abundance and good living, unhindered by taboos against the psychic side of spirituality common elsewhere; no part of life was taboo and therefore all were resources, thus maximum success was theirs. The only losers were all men who were not genetically related to the founding fathers of the seminal group a hundred years before. Yet now their wealth and quiet power had gotten an incompetent greedy government into power, which had led the country into financial ruin by expending resources fighting shadows in far lands and causing havoc there, generating growing world hostility.

Meanwhile, the spread word was that the whole world was overpopulated, so everybody stop having so many children; and this was being followed willingly or unwillingly by increasing numbers of people, many threatened by new diseases and strange toxins and disruptive pseudo-hormones. All except a couple of groups, that is; and the group who were acquiring women by the truckload like in this town, were reproducing as fast as possible. It was clear by drawing the projection curves, that this group would soon have overrun the whole country; and they were making efforts for formal leadership of the country, even though they had long had virtual control of the country through their vast network of normally peaceable mind-their-own-business people who only rarely responded to requirements to do an occasional dirty-work of the eldership, to trigger some event in un-obvious fashion.

OK, he now had the larger shadow social pattern, which clearly would coalesce most anywhere he tested; it was a deliberately guided subtle takeover of the nation. It would be them whom the Federation would trade with, so what? The Federation does not care who they traded with. So why had there been an attempt to terminate his research as ambassador here? It had been clearly an unemotional assault. They just pulled the plug on him, then went on to make sure nothing remained to show it.

So he provided his data set of the social evaluation via subspace communication to the home planet, then recommended that a perfunctory search be made for his crashed aircraft and his remains, making an official end to the investigation of his mysterious disappearance ... and by the way, happening to make a pit-stop here at his hideaway hole in the twilight so he could jump in and head back with them to home, along with his equipment. These people were too quietly ruthless to be trusted with knowledge of such advanced technology as he had here. His job was done here; soon he would be in the comforting embrace of his wife. Criteria for the trade negotiations were about to change on this planet, but now they knew what the new social system would be, and they would be ready to make profitable trade with it. No problem.

He was getting oddly sleepy now, and as he dozed off he vaguely remembered the man who had come to do an ordinary job in this town, but it had cost him his wife; he had lost all to the hidden alpha-male masters of the business game. He was getting ... so ... oddly ... sleepy

(Note: I originally posted this story on my "jedcstuff" blog at <http://www.kestsgeojedc.blogspot.com/> on 2007-12-07)

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