

They were a long way from civilization, but there was something of home here for her...

STOP-OVER

By ROBERT F. YOUNG

IT WAS the kind of snow that falls all day and all night and all the next day. It had been falling now since morning, steadily falling, softly falling, -piling ever higher around the little station, sifting soundlessly down through the branches of the surrounding trees, filling the aisles and the meandering paths between the trees. Down the hill the raw wet wound which the departing ship had left on the snow-covered tarmac had long since healed, and the spaceport was once more an immaculate white clearing in a continental forest on a man-forsaken primitive planet.

"For heaven's sake, Deborah, haven't you ever seen it snow before?"

She turned from the wide window. Ralph was pacing the room again, the trade journal he had been trying to read lying in a disheveled heap on the table. "Not since I was a little girl," she said.

"Well, you've certainly made up for it today. You haven't budged from that window since we got here."

"I used to live on a primitive planet, remember? And sometimes it would snow like this and we'd be cooped up in the house for days, and there wouldn't be anything to do but sit by the window and watch the snow drift down—"

"And read old romantic novels and anemic pre-expansion poetry. You've told me all that before."

"You were in one of the novels," she said.

He stopped pacing and stood before her. "I'm behaving like an irritable old man," he said suddenly. "Forgive me, Debs. It's this damned delay. It's so upsetting, so humiliating."

"I know it is, darling."

"Imagine landing us here so they could go chasing half-way across the galaxy to pick up some barbaric tycoon! I may not be the most important citizen in the Empire, but I deserve some consideration."

"Why don't you mix yourself a drink and try to relax. I'm sure the second section will be along soon."

"You know how I feel about drinking."

"Of course I do; but there isn't the remotest possibility of your having to negotiate any business deals on this planet, so what difference can it make if your mind does become less acute?"

He shook his head. "It's a matter of principle. You know that, Debs."

SHE looked down at her hands. They were long slender hands and she held them interlaced on her lap. "You didn't drink in the novel either," she said. "I thought it was so noble of you."

"That sounds like sarcasm."

"I didn't mean it that way...do you remember the first time you saw me? I was sitting on top of the wagonload of hay my father had brought into the community silo. It was a summer morning, and you were standing in front of the big red office talking with the Grange Leader, and suddenly you glanced up and the sunlight struck your face in just the right way, and—"

"What's come over you, Deborah? You've never talked this way before."

"It's the occasion, I guess. The snow, the forest, this quiet little room. But you do remember, don't you?"

"Sure I remember. It wasn't *that* long ago."

"I had been reading an old novel. An ever so old novel. And I had a picture of the hero in my mind. It was such a resplendent beautiful picture that I knew he could not possibly be real, and yet there he was,

standing not fifty feet away, as real as I was, as real as the morning was, as real as reality can ever be. . .

."

"So that's why you nearly fell off the wagon." Ralph laughed. "I've always wondered what there was about me that you found so irresistible. Now I know." For a moment he looked very young, almost boyish. Then, swiftly, his habitual facial pattern returned: the relentless lines flowed back and set—the hard mouth lines, the deep forehead lines, the faint radial lines at the eye corners.

He looked at his watch. "It should be here by now," he said. "The captain said eight hours."

"Eight or ten hours," Deborah said in a lifeless voice.

"I think I'll call the tower."

"You just called half an hour ago."

"I know, but something may have come in." He went over to the communicator.

The operator's youthful face wriggled into focus on the screen. "Anything on the second section yet?" Ralph asked.

"Not yet, sir. It'll be here soon, though."

"I should think so! It's late now."

"Not technically, sir. It still has nearly, two hours grace-time."

"It'll probably use up every minute of them, too! They know they've got two passengers to pick up, I hope."

"The first section notified them. There's nothing to worry about, sir."

"What's the name of this atrocious planet, anyway?"

"Walden, sir."

"Walden! I suppose that was the name of the character who discovered it!"

"I don't think so, sir. It's one of those diehard words that have lost their meaning. It probably dates all the way back to the Early Expansion Era when the planet was inhabited. Before the Hui Migration."

"It's not important anyway," Ralph said. "Well, make sure you notify us the minute that section comes in."

"I will, sir."

The face faded and the screen reassumed its gray pallor. Ralph walked over to the table, picked up the trade journal, and riffled through it. After a moment he threw it down on the table again. He lit a cigarette with jerky fingers. "We could have been home by now," he said.

WHEN he received no reply he looked around. Deborah was curled up in her chair, her face close to the window, her breath making little vapor smudges on the glass. Outside the snow fell steadily, and beyond the diaphanous changeable curtain of the falling snow the dark blue mass of the forest showed.

"Damn it, Deborah, you act as if you don't care whether the ship comes or not!"

She turned from the window, slowly. There was an expression on her face he had never seen before. "Suppose it doesn't come, Ralph."

"It has to come!"

"But suppose it doesn't. Suppose we have to stay here for a few days, maybe even a week. All alone in this little station, with nothing to do but eat and sleep and talk; with nothing to worry us, with no one to bother us. Just the two of us, here, alone, way out in the middle of nowhere."

"You're being absurd, Deborah. You know perfectly well that I'm scheduled to appear before the Board tomorrow night. I have a report to make, or did you forget that this was an important business trip?"

"But just suppose you *can't* be there. No one could ever have a better excuse. The other directors would never hold it against you."

"I'm afraid you don't understand. I *have* to be there!"

"But—"

"And the ship *has* to come. It *has to!*"

"Well don't worry, darling," she said. "If it has to, I'm sure it will."

"I'm not worried!"

"Of course you're not. It's a sacrilege to worry about the vicissitudes of space travel. It implies a doubt of the galactic scheme of things."

"Now you're being cynical."

"Maybe I am. Maybe we've been here too long already—let's go out and watch for the ship."

"In the *snow*?"

"Why of course. The snow won't hurt us. That way we'll be sure not to miss it."

He looked at his watch. "It's overdue now," he said. "All right. We'll go out and watch it come in."

They donned their white snowsuits and pulled up the fleece-lined hoods. Ralph picked up their portmanteau. "Couldn't we come back for it?" Deborah asked.

"When that ship comes down I'm not coming back here for anything."

THEY had to squint their eyes against the snow. It stung their faces. It melted on their cheeks and ran coldly down to their lips. They turned their backs to the wind and ran to the lee of the station. The woods were at their elbow and the hill dropped away below them, down to the unsullied circle of the port. The tower was barely discernible in the bluish dusk. It was an ungainly mechanical tree standing on the circumference of the circle, distinguishable from the real trees by the warm yellow light that glowed in the window of its metallic tree house.

Deborah took a deep breath. "How beautiful!" she said.

Ralph was shivering. "We should have stayed inside. We'll freeze out here."

"No we won't. How could anybody freeze on a world as lovely as this!"

Their breaths made pale clouds in the air.

"Wouldn't it be nice if we could go outside our own apartment and find a world like this," Deborah said, "instead of corridors and arcades and make-believe parks and other apartments? It would be nice, even, if they'd put something on the tele-windows besides summer days and summer sunshine."

"I thought you liked to see the sun every day. Everybody else does."

"Not *every* day. Besides, it's hard to forget sometimes that's an alien sun, light-years away, shining on a weather-conditioned primitive planet, and that the only thing outside my window, really, is an ugly little box filled with silver tubes and copper wires."

"But what more practical arrangement could you have for a shielded city? You wouldn't want to be subjected to the combined radiations of the Hub suns, would you?"

"The least they could do is condition three more primitive planets; one for autumn, one for winter, and one for spring. Then we could have four telewindow programs, instead of one eternal, glaring summer program. . . ."

"You're being unfair, Deborah. You know perfectly well that summer weather is an integral part of the environmental psychology of our civilization. It has a definite euphoric effect upon the individual; it imbues him with zeal for his work; it brightens his existence."

"In my father's house there were real windows," Deborah said. "When it rained you could hear the raindrops spattering against the panes and if you wanted to you could step outside the door and feel the rain against your face, soft and cool and clean. But when it snowed it was best of all because then you could look out and see the ordinary world you knew slowly change into a resplendent white kingdom. You could see the trees, like these trees, and see the little snow ridges building up along their branches, and you could see the snow piling deeper and deeper around the trunks, and if you knew a certain tree real well, and you could remember the details of its trunk, the knotholes, the bark patterns, the scars, you could always tell just how deep the snow was. . . ."

Ralph was staring at her. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes had microcosmic stars in them. He had seen those eyes only once before in his life, he remembered in sudden astonishment. They were the eyes he had gazed into, too many years ago, when he had looked up and seen the lovely little peasant girl sitting on top of the wagonload of hay.

"Darling, there's an old poem my father taught me," Deborah said. "An ever so old poem. Would you

mind if said it now? Maybe there'll never be another moment quite like this one."

"All right. Debs."

"It's a beautiful poem. Listen:

*Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.*

* * *

*The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have Promises to keep.
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep."**

"The ship! There's the ship Ralph shouted. He started running down the hill, half dragging the heavy port-manteau. The snow fell thickly all around him.

The ship was a gray ghost. It settled down from the murky sky on incandescent bursts of fire. Steam rose up from outraged snow; the old wound reopened and the raw blackness of the tarmac showed in a ragged circle. The ship came down in the middle of the circle and squatted on metallic spider legs.

"Hurry up!" Ralph shouted from halfway down the hill. "You don't want to be *stranded* here, do you?"

She hurried after him, stumbling numb legs, the salt taste of her tears intermingling with the clean sweet taste of the snow. . . .

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