

*Under his real name,— "William Morrison" is a general man of letters, writing everything from children's stories to adult quality fiction — which leaves us wondering how he finds time to turn out the large amount of distinguished science fiction which appears with the Morrison by-line. He's an old-timer in the field, dating back to 1941; but readers are apt to think of him as one of the newer writers because his work in the past four years has been so much more individual and off trail than his earlier conventional science fiction. The Morrison name is now a trademark for unusually detailed and logical exploration of an odd idea — as in this, the first of a number of Morrison novelets which F & SF is happy to bring you. Here's an adventure story of peril on a strange planet — and also a wry and very funny commentary on family life, as it is today or will be in the Galactic Future, among ourselves or among giants 1167 feet tall.*

## Playground by WILLIAM MORRISON

GEORGE WAS READING a book of old poetry, the kind that rhymed, when Jerry ran in and said, "Dad."

He frowned. "Haven't I told you before that I don't want to be interrupted when I'm reading?"

"I know, Dad, but I thought — well, this is kind of important. The gauge registers one-tenth gee."

"A planet or a sun?"

"A planet, but it looks kind of big. And our engines are missing, and it's pulling us down toward it, and Mom is kind of worried. She said —"

"Never mind what she said. I'll take a look."

He threw down the book of poetry, without even marking the page, and started to follow Jerry out of the room. By the time they reached the corridor, he was ahead of Jerry. Why the devil didn't the kid tell him in the first place that Sabina was worried? He'd have known then it was no trifle, he wouldn't have wasted time being annoyed and asking silly questions.

The rest of the family was in the pilot's cabin, Sabina at the controls, Lester peering over her shoulder, Carl trying to push Lester out of the way.

Sabina looked up as he came hurrying in. "I don't think there's much danger, George," she said. "But I thought you ought to know."

"Of course I ought to know. Not that I'm worried about the way you handle the ship. Still —"

He stared at the instrument panel. "Point one three gee," said Sabina. "It's pulling us down."

"What's wrong with the engines?"

"There's just no power. I think that either the fuel line is clogged or something has diluted the uranium."

"Nothing wrong according to the instruments. But they may be out of order."

Sabina looked flushed and unusually pretty, as she did sometimes when she spent too much time over the electronic stove. "I think we'll have to land, George. The auxiliary engine is all right — I tested it. It'll take us down for a landing."

"But what sort of planet is this?"

"Diameter 12,000 miles, density one point five seven," began Lester officiously. "Atmosheeric pressure —"

"All right, all right. I can read the instruments."

Lester looked hurt, and Sabina said reproachfully, "Oh, George, he's only trying to be helpful."

We've been cooped up too long together, he thought. No family should be forced to spend more than a month in any ship. And here we've been getting on each other's nerves for half a year. But Sabina is right, I'm too brusque with the kid. He's only eight, and I mustn't hurt his feelings. He said, "I'm sorry, Lester. Go on. What else does it say?"

"Atmosheeric pressure —"

"Atmospheric pressure, dear," corrected Sabina.

"Seventeen hundred twenty-two em em Hg at ground level —"

"Wow," said Jerry, who was eleven and knew that sea-level pressure on Earth was only 760 mm.

"That's a lot."

"Atmospheric — atmospheric composition: en two, 29 point seven, oh two, 31 point four, aitch ee, fourteen point one —"

"Too rich, but breathable," said George. "Thank God, we'll be able to adjust without too much trouble, and won't have to wear our space suits."

"Now don't make any promises you can't keep," warned Sabina. "You know we'll have to check on microorganisms first."

"I'm sorry I said anything," said George stiffly. "But I thought they knew that. We *always* check on microorganisms."

Carl, a bright-eyed youngster of three, had been standing there listening in wide-eyed silence. Now he said, "Mommy."

"Yes, Carl."

"I wanna go home."

"Of course we'll go home, Carl."

"I don't wanna go to any planick."

"We *gotta* go to the planet first," explained Jerry. "We can't help ourselves. Pop gotta fix the engines —"

"I wanna go home. I don't wanna go to any planick. I wanna go home, I don't wanna go to any planick, I wanna go home, I don't wanna —"

George closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Here we go again, he thought. Next time I say anything about taking these kids on a vacation in space I'll know it's time to have my head examined.

Sabina looked as harried as he felt. She said, "You take over the ship, George. I've got a nice heat-pop for Carl. Would you like a nice heat-pop, Carl? A delicious yummy heat-pop that keeps your tongue nice and warm and tastes like ice cream or anything else you want it to taste like?"

"I wanna go home," said Carl.

Sabina took him firmly by the hand and half led, half dragged him away. George sat down at the controls.

It was a fair-sized planet with low average density. That meant that the surface gravity would be low. The kids will like that, he thought. It won't be too big a change from the low artificial gravity of the space ship. The high atmospheric pressure and oxygen content may make them a little excitable at first, but in the long run, the effects will do them good. They'll have a chance to run around and get some of the nervousness out of their systems. And there'll be more space, provided there aren't too many dangerous animals. Less chance of the kids getting in my hair. When I think of the month we've still got to go before we get back to Earth, my heart sinks. I could brain the guy who suggested we take that vacation.

The planet was growing now, a vast bluish-gray ball that was slowly filling the entire viewing screen. The altimeter began to function at 500,000 feet, as he switched on the auxiliary engine and began to spiral down. No features discernible in the landscape, he thought, not through those clouds.

At 100,000 feet the radar began to give him useful details of the landscape. He passed over a vast ocean and began to fly over solid ground. After a minute of this, however, something seemed to go wrong with the altimeter. The needle of light began to waver. Eighty thousand feet — 70,000 — 80,000 — 69,000 — 78,000 — 69,000 — 76,000

Mountains, he thought, peculiar mountains that stick up as isolated individuals above the surface. They'll make landing difficult. I'll have to be careful how I lose altitude. I'd better take it slow and easy until we get past the thickest cloud layers and actually see what's going on.

Jerry and Lester were standing alongside him, knowing from experience that they'd better not interrupt. He could hear Sabina's footsteps as she came back. "Carl's asleep," she said. "That was the trouble with him, he was hungry and sleepy. He's all right when he's on a planet, and it gets light and dark outside, but when he's out in space he has no conception of day and night, and he just can't adjust. I think

—"

Without turning around to look at her, George held up his hand. "Please, Sabina, not now. There's something strange going on down there."

Sabina subsided. He peered at the view screen, but the visible light that came from below was still gray and diffuse. And the radar wasn't too clear, while the altimeter still wavered. Fifty-nine thousand — 48,000 — 58,000 — 48,000

Mountains all over the place. Mountains that stuck sharp and high into the air as individuals, with deep valleys between them and their neighbors. And not a sign of flat land suitable for landing.

Or was there? Forty-six thousand, 45,000, 45,000 — it was holding rather steady now. This might be the place. The needle suddenly shot down again to 31,000, and he turned the ship back. He had found one plain, he mightn't find another. He'd land where he could.

They were breaking through the clouds now, and a sudden gasp came from the kids. "Look, Dad!" exclaimed Jerry. "Tree-mountains!" The boy was right, he thought. That's what they were, huge trees as tall as mountains. That's why they rose into the sky as individuals, and there were no mountain ranges. They stretched away into the distance as far as he could see. A good thing, he told himself, we didn't try to land among them, or sure as shootin' we'd have had a bad smash.

Lucky too that he had turned back to find that one plain. It was a large clearing, with a dozen times as much space as he needed to make a landing. He could set the ship down right in the middle.

Sabina said wonderingly, "Is that *grass* down there?"

"It looks pretty tall, but I guess it is. Things seem to be done here on a big scale, Sabina."

"Gosh, Pop," said Jerry, "do you think the animals here are big too?"

"They probably are. However, I don't think we have to worry about that. Our atomic rifles should be able to scare them away."

"Will you let me shoot a rifle, Pop?" asked Lester eagerly.

"No," he said curtly. "And don't ask me again."

"Can I shoot it, Pop? I'm eleven, almost twelve —"

"Nobody is going to touch a rifle except your mother and me. Now, if you kids know what is good for you, you're going to drop the subject. I don't want anybody to distract my attention while I'm landing."

He made the landing without trouble, not far from the center of the clearing. Then he began to take samples of the air and soil. The kids waited impatiently, anxious to get out into the fresh air. Gravity was low, about a half gee. They'd have a wonderful time running and bouncing around — provided there was no danger.

But they'd have to wait, he thought. It took three hours to complete the tests, and although the ship carried a wide range of antibiotics, it was still silly to take chances. They'd just have to hold their horses until he'd made sure there were no viruses or other strange forms of life that their medicines couldn't handle.

Sabina filled part of the time by giving them a meal. Then they watched a home stereo film. After that they came over to him, not saying a word, but nagging him by their mere presence. He was annoyed enough even without their help, and when Carl awoke, irritable as usual, and began to bawl, he was ready to send them out there to face whatever the planet had to offer.

But he didn't. He waited the full three hours, and at the end of that time he said, "All right, you can go out — with Mother. Sabina, better take a rifle. And give them their pocket pistols. I'll get set to make repairs."

"But you can't touch the engine until it cools off, dear."

"I know, but I want to get things ready. Now, remember, Jerry and Lester, don't put your pistols down, not for a minute. Keep them aimed at the ground. Do *not* point them at each other. And stay close to your mother."

"I wanna pistol," wailed Carl.

"You can sweat bullets, my fine-feathered friend, but you still won't get a pistol. Not for another two years. Take him away, Sabina, before his buzzing gets on my nerves and I swat him as I would a Martian

mosquito."

Sabina hastily took Carl away, and George inhaled deeply. Ah, the blessed quiet, he thought. Too bad it can't last.

He got out his repair kit. Then he undid the anti-radiation chest and gave himself a shot. He'd better give them to Sabina and the kids too, he thought. Just in case they come monkeying around the engine while I'm fixing it and get a burst of rays accidental-like. Even Carl — especially Carl. He can scream all he wants to, but the way that kid pokes his nose into everything I'd better take no chances. And maybe the jab of the needle will convince him I mean business when I say I don't want to be bothered, and make him stay away from me for a while.

They had left the door of the ship open, and the heavy native air of the planet had rushed in. It was a little hard to breathe at first, but he knew he'd get used to it and suffer no after-effects. He had got used to worse air. But what the devil was it so quiet about outside? What were Sabina and the kids doing? It's nice to be left alone, it's wonderful to have Sabina take care of them all by her sweet self — and she is sweet, as I have to admit — but still this is a strange planet, and there may be danger out there. She's only a weak woman after all, and those kids — well, you know how kids are, always thrusting their snotty little noses into places where they have no business. Quiet as profound as this is positively ominous.

He took another rifle from the rack and stepped out.

The scene was peaceful enough, if strange. The grass, oddly jointed red-green stalks a half foot thick, rose 50 feet into the air, way above the ship, which had burned a path through it in making a landing. A slight wind swayed the tops of the stalks and made a thin sighing noise as it wandered among them. The grass was wet, as from recent rain. Probably the reason the fire hadn't spread.

Through the path burned in the grass he could see that a dozen miles away the mountainous trees rose into the air, grotesque figures by virtue of their shape as well as their size. They were more like enormous cacti, of the Martian type, than the trees he had known. If they moved in the wind at all, it was to such a slight extent that he couldn't detect it. They seemed to be frozen into place.

It wasn't the plants, however, but the animals that worried him. Off to one side he heard a distant noise, as if something were crashing through the stalks of grass. Then quiet. And then the noise came from in front of him. It grew louder, came nearer

A small reddish animal about two feet long leaped from the forest of grass. It moved so quickly that he had only a vague idea of the shape of the head and he couldn't be sure of the number of feet. Chasing after it came a mighty hunter — Carl, who pointed his finger and said, "Bang, bang!" And after Carl came Lester, who pointed a pistol and made a louder and more ominous bang.

A stalk of grass, ripped in two, bent and broke and then came crashing down, barely missing the eager Carl. "Lester!" shouted George. "Stop shooting! Stop it, do you hear me?"

After Lester came Jerry, and behind him Sabina. "What's going on here?" demanded George.

All three children began to explain at once, and George shut them up. "They were chasing that beast," said Sabina.

"Did it attack them?"

"Well, no. Jerry was in front, and Lester behind him, with Carl and me bringing up the rear. I was just a little ahead of Carl, who was sucking on another heat-pop. Suddenly I heard him cry and yell, 'Bad dog, bad dog!'"

"Bad dog," agreed Carl. "He took my pop."

"Yes, that brazen animal stole Carl's pop right out of his hand. When we came after it, it ran back in this direction."

"And it made no attempt to harm any of the children?"

"No attempt at all."

"Let's hope the other animals aren't any more vicious. I think, Sabina, that from now on the kids had better stick closer to the ship. At least until we know our fauna better."

"But they do so like to run around," said Sabina wistfully.

"It's too dangerous to run where we can't see. The grass cuts off our view in every direction except

where the ship's jets burned it down. We don't know what danger's going to swoop down on us next."

"I ain't afraid of no danger," said Lester. "You know what I'll do, Pop, if some animal jumps at me? I'll give 'im the old one-two. And then I'll point my pistol — a-a-a-a —"

"Don't you point that at me! Here, give it to me! We're in more danger from that than from the animals. Let's get back into the ship."

They had left the ship's door open, and sudden fear struck George. It would be an unpleasant surprise to find that some beast had sneaked in and was lying in wait for them. He began to hurry.

A great shadow blotted out the light above them. Then, as the shadow swooped down, there was a dull thud and the bow of the ship leaped into the air. The entire vessel trembled for a moment, then fell again and turned slightly on its side.

George and Sabina looked at each other. Jerry said, "What was that, Pop?"

"I don't know. Wait a minute, everybody. Don't move —"

There was a distant roar, as of a herd of cattle crashing through the great stalks of grass. Another shadow blotted out the light. George looked up and saw what seemed to a mountain towering over them.

"Down!" he shouted. "Everybody down!"

They threw themselves down, and even as they did so, George doubted the wisdom of the move. If that thing were the giant he thought it, a single footstep could obliterate the entire family. The shadow passed over them. They could hear the tearing and splintering of the grass, and then the noise diminished, and it was clear daylight once more.

He said, "We'd better get out of here."

A shadow again. This time it passed rapidly, and he could see its edges recede over the grass. It was circular in shape, as if the object which cast it were spherical. The object struck the ground, not the ship this time, and the shock sent an unpleasant tremor through all of them. Then the object rose into the air again.

"Back to the ship!" ordered George. "Everybody back — quick!" They ran into the ship and he shut the door. Outside there was another minor earthquake. And then silence.

He had never seen the kids so scared. They were speechless with fright. I can't blame them, he thought. I feel the same way.

It was Carl who recovered first. He said, "Bad dog took my pop. I wanna go home."

"Quiet, Carl," said Lester importantly.

"*You* be quiet," said Jerry.

We're getting back to normal, thought George. The dryness in his throat passed. He said, "It seems gone now. Hope it doesn't come back in a hurry."

"What do you think it was, George?" asked Sabina.

"Well, that thing that hit the ship first, and then the ground, seemed to bounce. And it had a curved edge. I'd say it was a ball of some kind."

"A ball, Pop?" exclaimed Jerry.

"You heard me. And that giant crashing through the grass must have been a kid playing with it."

"Some kid!" said Lester. "Gosh, Pop, he was as hooge as a house."

"*Huge*, dear," corrected Sabina.

"He was bigger'n a house. At least 1000 feet high," said Jerry.

"Maybe not that much. I'll admit I was in too much of a hurry to get a good look at him — if it is a him. It may have been a girl, or it may have been neither."

"Neither?" said Lester incredulously. "That's silly, Pop. A kid's gotta be *something*. If it ain't a boy it's a girl, and if it ain't a girl it's a boy. I remember that stereo Mom got us — it's all about sects —"

"*Sex*, dear."

"Let's not discuss that now," said George, feeling harried. "When I say I think this was a kid, I'm using the term loosely. I should say, perhaps, that it was the young of some intelligent species. I don't know how young, and I can't make any guess."

"But a thousand feet high, Pop!" said Jerry. "What'll he be when he grows up?"

"It wasn't a thousand feet — I'd say it was closer to 800, although as I've already told you, I didn't get enough time to make an accurate estimate. But even if the adult is no more than a thousand feet — well, I'm about average for a human being, six foot one, and those creatures are more than 106 times as big."

"To them," said Sabina, "we're like insects. Less than half an inch long."

"I'll bet they don't know we're alive," said Jerry.

"But the ship's big enough for them to see," said George. "And if they catch sight of that —"

Carl added the proper comment by wailing, "I wanna go home." "Me too," said Lester. "This place is fulla pearls."

"*Perils*, Lester," said Sabina automatically.

"We'll go home, all of us. But I've still a little work on those engines first. And they're not quite cool yet. So, in the meantime —"

There must have been an ominous note in his voice, for Jerry said uneasily, "Guess I'll look at a stereo, Pop."

"No you don't. You stay here. Everybody stay here."

"What for?"

"Anti-radiation injection. I'll just get the needles ready —"

"Aw, Pop," said Jerry. "I got one just last week."

"You'll take another one. I just gave one to myself."

"But it makes me break out all over —" began Lester.

"It does nothing of the kind. Now, stop all this nonsense. You're getting to be big kids, both of you, and you ought to be ashamed of yourselves making a fuss about a little injection. Even Carl wouldn't do a thing like that."

Carl promptly made a liar of him by beginning to yell, "I don't wanna needle! I wanna go home, I wanna go home —"

George had intended to save Carl for the last, letting the infant of the family profit by the good examples his older brothers set him. But Carl's bawling forced a change of plan. He seized the three-year-old and despite violent squirming jabbed the needle into the plump arm. Carl's voice rose in a shriek that might have been emitted by one of the damned, and Sabina hastily dragged him away. "You might have thought that hurt," muttered George in disgust. "All right, Lester, you're practically nine years old, you're next."

"I'm only eight — I'm just an infant, Pop! Jerry's older!"

"You're next, I said."

The needle bit again, and after that it was Jerry's turn. Jerry, as befitted his extreme age, exclaimed only, "Ouch!"

"What do you mean, 'ouch'? That didn't hurt at all."

"It didn't hurt you, but it hurt me."

"Don't be a sissy." George turned toward the engine. "Everything's cooled off now. I'm going to start making repairs. Anybody want to help?" As it turned out, Jerry wasn't anxious, but Lester was gracious enough to offer his services, and when Jerry heard that, he offered his too. And as usual, after five exhausting minutes, both boys decided that they were tired and went off, leaving him alone.

George grunted something about the kids these days growing up to be useless and wanting everything done for them, and went on with his work.

Outside, all was quiet. No crashing in the grass, no ominous shadows, no earthquakes.

Sabina came in and asked, "Need any help, dear?"

"Nothing, thank you. Just keep them out of my hair."

"I think I'll take them out again. The danger seems to have passed." "We can't be sure. Just don't let them wander too far away from the ship."

"Don't worry, dear." She bent down and kissed him casually on the cheek as he worked, and he grunted again, tolerantly.

He was vaguely aware of her speaking in a low voice, telling the kids they mustn't bother him as they

passed by. Even Carl, after the terrible experience of that injection, kept his mouth shut, and gave his father a wide berth on the way to the door.

The engine's main feed line had been clogged. Some non-fissionable, non-fusible material had got in and diluted the fuel, and getting the impurity out without waste meant handling with tongs and using the slow process of remote control purification. And now that he looked at it, he could see that there was a weak spot due to corrosion, and that would have to be fixed before they went any further. A good ten hours of additional work, he thought, even if he was lucky. And closer to twenty, if he wasn't.

He had become absorbed in the work, and it was with surprise that he looked up to see Sabina and the children come trooping back. "Have a good time?" he asked.

"Oh, it was wonderful," said Sabina. "The children haven't enjoyed themselves so much for ages."

"What did they do?"

"Well, they found a little pool, probably created by that rain that fell before we got here. And they went in swimming."

"Swimming?"

"Oh, don't worry, George, I disinfected the water first. If you could have seen what a time they had splashing around you'd have been only too happy to join them."

"I suppose you went in too."

"Just for a little," she admitted. "Next time, George, we'll drag you along."

"Maybe. See any animals?"

"There was one beast like the one that stole Carl's pop. But it ran away when it saw us, and there were no big ones."

"No giants throwing a ball around?"

"Not a soul, large or small. I couldn't have asked for a better playground."

"Fine. Now, if you don't mind, I'll get on with my work."

"But it's getting dark, George. The sun is setting outside."

"What of it? This job has to be done, and we don't go by this planet's time."

"But you'll have to use artificial light. And if you don't want to start our air-purifiers, and leave the door open, some giant may notice it and come looking for the ship."

"They'll think it's a firefly."

"How do you know they have fireflies here? So far we haven't seen a single insect."

"Then I'll keep the door closed."

"You're so stubborn," she sighed. "It's no use talking to you."

"You knew that when you married me."

"I thought you'd change. Oh, well, I'm going to make supper."

He went on working until it was time to eat. But after supper he suddenly felt tired. "Been up for a long time," he yawned. "Better get some sleep."

"I feel tired too."

So, for that matter, did the children — all except Carl. Carl had slept during the afternoon. Now he was wide awake and full of pep, and he insisted on letting everybody know that he wanted to go home. Sabina said, "I swear, I'm never going to take that child off Earth again. He's got the most irregular sleeping hours."

"Put him in a weightless rocker," suggested George, "and shake the energy out of him. Maybe that'll do the trick."

It did, and presently they all slept.

George was awakened by an earthquake. He could feel the ship heave up in the air and then spin around its axis. When it came to rest again, everything was upside down.

Carl was bawling, and the other kids were yelling, and Sabina was saying drowsily, with her eyes less than half open, "What happened? Did the alarm go off?"

"No, but it's time to get up anyway," said George. The ground had stopped quaking, and he stared into the visor that gave them a picture of the ship's surroundings. "I'll be damned. It's morning!"

"Already? I just closed my eyes!"

"Either this planet has an abnormally short period of rotation, or it's summer here, and we're closer to one of the poles than I thought. Anyway, we've been asleep only five hours, and it's morning."

"But what made the ground shake?"

"I don't know — wait a minute, maybe I do." They crowded around him, staring into the visor together. "There's some animal, pretty far away. Let's see if I can get some figures on this." He adjusted the range finder. "Five thousand feet away — the thing must be 500 feet high!"

"It's gigantic," said Lester, "and it's jumping around. That's what made the earthquake."

"And there's another figure — that must be the kid. Seven hundred eighty feet high — my guess of eight hundred was a good one. Maybe the smaller one is a pet."

"But what kind of creatures are they?" demanded Sabina. "I can't make them out."

"The one I called the kid is kind of human — I think. It has two legs."

"They got a funny shape, Pop," said Lester.

"They're broad, and they're heavier at the base than at the top. The body, in fact, seems to taper considerably. I suppose that if it were too heavy the legs wouldn't support it, even on a low-gravity planet like this."

"I see four arms, Pop!" exclaimed Jerry.

"I see a face, Pop!" cried Lester.

"If you can call it a face," said George. "Well, let's be generous and say it is. There are eyes —"

"Three of them, Pop!" announced Jerry.

"I can count. There seem to be half a dozen noses and several mouths. And I'm not sure that I can tell one from the other."

"But it's a child all the same," said Sabina. "Look, dear, he's holding something in his hand. It's a kind of stick. He's striking at the grass tops with it. And now he's throwing it!"

"And that animal is chasing it!" said Jerry. "Just like a dog — only it's hopping like a frog!"

"Gosh," said Lester. "I hope he don't throw it this way. That hopping thing would pulverize us."

"Pulverize, dear."

"I wanna go home," said Carl.

"That's an idea," agreed George. "Look, everybody, while Mom is getting breakfast ready, I'll have to be working on that engine. I found another corroded spot late yesterday, and it's going to take me longer than I thought at first. I want you kids to keep an eye on that little giant outside."

"Okay, Pop," said Jerry. And he added wistfully, "He's lucky. Wish I had a dog to play with out there!"

That was an old subject for discussion, and a sore one. But George had long ago decided that in a space ship a dog would be a nuisance, so now he simply ignored the remark and went about his work. He started to splatter a thin layer of metal over the corroded spots, trying at the same time not to hurry too much. He didn't dare do a bad job, or the patch would fall apart, and the engines would start missing again out in space. And next time there mightn't be a planet as convenient as this one to land on.

He interrupted work for five minutes to eat, and then fell to again. Later that morning, the giant kid and his pet disappeared, and Sabina took the children outside. They went swimming again, and George, on hearing their glowing reports about the fun they had had, was strongly tempted to follow their example. But the work comes first, he told himself sternly. The work always comes first. That giant kid and his pet dog-frog don't seem to be vicious, but they're dangerous simply by virtue of their size. The sooner we get out of here the better.

When he knocked off for lunch five hours later, he noted that all three children had a healthy, ruddy look about them. "The sun here gives you a beautiful tan," said Sabina. "This is really a wonderful vacation spot."

"Provided you don't get stepped on."

"Oh, I'm not afraid of that any more."

"The trouble is," he told her, "that you're getting used to the danger. You're beginning to think it's nothing. Just because you've had luck so far."

"It's hard to think of danger from that child, even though he is a giant," admitted Sabina. "The way he



plays with his pet is so human."

"His face isn't."

Jerry was staring at the visor. He yelled suddenly, "Hey — look, everybody! There's another one!"

They all ran over to see. In addition to the smaller giant, the one they had noticed before, there was a larger one, about one and a half times the first one's height. Eleven hundred and sixty-seven feet, by the range- and size-finder. The two giants were standing close together, and George felt a tremor come up through his feet and pass through his body.

"Is that another earthquake?" asked Lester anxiously.

"No, I think it's just the vibration from their conversation. They're so much bigger than we are that all their sounds are pitched much lower. Probably the vibrations aren't perceived as sound at all, but directly as sensations of a different kind."

"You know," said Sabina, "There's something about her — well, I can't be sure, of course, but I get the impression that's his mother."

"You can't prove anything by me," said George. "As Lester would say, I see no sign of sects."

"She seems to be bawling him out about something. She's pointing with one of her arms. What's she pointing to, George?"

"Wait a minute, and I'll focus the range finder. Say — that's strange!"

"What is it, Pop?" asked Lester.

"A wall. It wasn't there when we landed. A rough red wall in front of the mountain-trees. And it turns to blue over at the side."

"And further over," cried Sabina, "it's yellow."

"Let's figure this out. If it wasn't there yesterday, then *they're* the ones who have put it up. But why? The top of the wall seems to be pretty even —"

He stopped, with a strange puzzled look in his eyes. Sabina said, "Why, of course, I should have known at once. It's the family wash!"

"You mean the giants wash their clothes?" demanded Jerry. "Why should they do that?"

"You wouldn't understand, but I think they don't like dirt. Really, they're very human."

"They're dopey. Who's afraid of dirt?" demanded Jerry.

"But why did she point to the wash, Mom?" asked Lester.

"Yeah, and why is she bawling him out?" asked her other large son. "When you bawl us out, Mom — hey, what's she doing that for?"

George had focused on the two giants again. Now, as they watched, they saw a great arm swing and make contact with the smaller giant's face. The young one went down, the thud bouncing the ship an inch off the ground. And then the entire vessel shook with a series of violent vibrations.

"The nasty thing," said Sabina. "She slapped him in the face and knocked him down. And he's crying! That's what's shaking the ship!"

"Well, he'd better stop crying," said George crossly. "How can I do any work with all this shaking going on?"

"But why did she hit him, Ma?" persisted Jerry.

"She's just got a nasty streak in her," said Sabina, looking mad. "I'd like to give that woman a piece of my mind."

"Oh, don't get worked up about it," said George. "She must have had some good reason —" He focused on the wall again. "Look there — that green part. With a great patch of brown right in the middle. Dirt! He dirtied her wash!"

"That's still no reason to hit a child. Things like that happen all the time."

"Maybe she hasn't had the advantage of a book on child psychology," said George. "Cut it out, Sabina. Stop trying to run other people's business for them. Personally, I can understand how she feels. Sometimes when Carl starts his yapping I've wanted to wallop that kid so hard —"

"Don't you dare lay a finger on that poor child," said Sabina warningly, and Carl, scenting danger, edged closer to her.

"I'm not threatening him. I'm just telling you the way I feel — sometimes. And I'll bet you feel the

same way, too — sometimes."

"I do not. I'll admit that occasionally I'm annoyed with him, but I *never* hit him."

"Well, it seems to me I remember that about a week ago —"

"Hey, Pop," said Jerry. "She went away. He's picking himself up. He's patting his pet!"

"After all that sympathy your mother was wasting on him. Anyway, the ship isn't shaking any more. I'm getting to work again," said George. For a while there was a coolness between him and Sabina. But once he became absorbed in his work again, he forgot about it. And after he had been working for another few hours, he allowed Sabina to coax him into going swimming with them. He was slowing down, he admitted. He'd work all the faster and more efficiently for a slight change. And the water was so delicious, Sabina assured him, that she didn't want him to miss it. Carl had suddenly fallen asleep again, and Sabina was sure he wouldn't awaken for at least an hour. They left him in the ship, with the door open, as they trekked down to the pool in the forest of grass. To the giants it was probably merely a wet spot in the fields, left over from the last rain. But to human beings it was a fair-sized swimming hole, almost thirty feet long, and at least twenty wide. The only place that was over his head was in the center. They left two rifles at the edges of the pool, one at each side, so that no matter from which of the two directions danger approached they'd be able to get to a weapon. But once he had dived in, George forgot all about danger. This was a pleasure he hadn't had in a long time. He was a little out of practise, but with the low gravity of the planet, it didn't take much energy to leap and dive around, and the swimming was just as delicious as Sabina had said it would be.

He had just come out to dry off when the ominous sound of some body crashing through the grass smote his ears. Almost the next second, it seemed, shadows loomed above them.

It was the giant child and his pet. George grabbed his rifle and swung around bravely to face the danger and defend his family. The ground shook from the leaping of the pet, and the wind from the great creature's approach whistled about their ears. The thing was coming straight at them.

George raised the rifle, aimed — although that was hardly necessary in view of the size of his target — and fired. The animal roared (the sound must have been a high yelp compared to the usual subsonic vibrations the creatures emitted, thought George). It swerved aside, stopped to poke at its body with a huge foot, and squirmed unhappily.

George was about to order everybody back to the ship, when a human scream came to them. He swung around in the direction of the ship, and froze in terror.

The giant kid had found the ship. He had picked it up and was examining it, holding it fairly close to his eyes, about six hundred feet above the ground. High up there George thought he could make out the tiny figure of Carl, near the open door. At any moment, Carl might drop out and plummet through the air to the ground far below.

George raised his rifle again, but Sabina grabbed his arm. "Don't shoot," she panted. "The sting will only startle him, and he'll drop the ship. Wait."

But waiting wasn't easy. The giant kid seemed to be very much interested, and he took an endless time to make up his mind. He held the ship at different angles in the palm of one of his hands, and then he tried to peer into it. Once he held it up to the side of his head. To his ears, thought George, although these were either invisible or unrecognizable to the human beings far below.

He couldn't hear Carl any more. All the same, if I know that kid, thought George, he's still yelling. The giant can't hear him, though. To him, Carl's voice emits nothing but supersonic vibrations that his organs of hearing can't perceive.

After a time the giant seemed to make up his mind. He bent down and put the ship back in the grass. He didn't place it down as carefully as a mother would have done, but it had only a few feet to fall before coming to rest, and George was sure that Carl hadn't received any serious shock.

As the giant kid moved on, Sabina closed her eyes and swayed. George felt sure she was going to faint — he felt like fainting himself. But she didn't. She merely opened her eyes again and said, "Come on. I must find out what happened to him."

As they rushed toward the ship, the reassuring sound of Carl's bawling met them. Carl was yelling, "I wanna go home! I wanna go home!"

"I don't blame him," said George. "I want to go home myself." He fell into a seat, his legs suddenly weak. "When I think what that giant kid might have done —"

"He didn't," said Sabina. "He was curious, but not vicious. There are many human children who wouldn't have behaved so well, George. When they find something small and helpless, they torture it and tear it to pieces."

"Let's not make this sound any worse than it is," said George. "Carl is safe. Okay. Let's be thankful and do our best to see that we don't run into any more trouble. I've had all the swimming I need for a month. I'm going to finish up this repair job, with no more time out for fun."

"But I can't get over that giant child," said Sabina. "So sweet and gentle. What sort of woman would strike a child like that I can't imagine. I don't think she's much of a mother."

"It's none of your business, and there's nothing you can do about it. Now be quiet and take the kids out, and let me get on with my work."

"We won't bother you, Pop," said Lester. "We'll be mump."

"Mum, dear."

"I can't get anything done with a lot of conversation going on. Sabina, please —"

"Oh, all right, all right. But it seems to me that you're making most of the conversation yourself. Come, children, leave your father alone."

"Can't I help him, Ma?" asked Jerry. "I could hand him the tools —"

"Good idea. Let Jerry stay," said George.

"Why should he stay and not me?" demanded Lester. "Mom, I wanna stay too. I got a right to stay if he stays, Mom."

"He's older," said George.

"He gets everything because he's older! It ain't fair! If he stays —"

"Out!" said George. "Everybody!"

He could hear the quarrel still going on as they went into the next room. They forgot to close the door, and he slammed it after them.

It was a long afternoon. By the time the sun was touching the horizon, the children had been sent to sleep and he himself had finished his work. Repairs had been made, the ship was spaceworthy once more.

Now to get it into the air and then into space. But here there was a difficulty.

The ship had been tossed around several times after landing, and finally picked up and laid down again. Its stern pointed up into the air, its nose into the ground. It lay at an angle on its right side, like a stranded fish. Before taking off, it would have to be set right.

"I'll have to maneuver it around for a little while," George told Sabina. "It'll take me at least a half hour to get it into position."

"You can use your secondary jets. But, George, there's something you didn't think of. We're out here in the middle of a grass forest. And it's no longer wet, the way it was when we landed. The jets might set it on fire. In fact, they're *sure* to set it on fire."

"So what? When the ship is sealed, it's heat proof."

"Yes, but don't you see? The fire may spread and burn these poor giants out of house and home."

"Look, Sabina, why worry about them? I thought you didn't like that woman, anyway."

"I don't, but still it isn't the right thing to do. Nasty as she is, she doesn't deserve that. And the child would suffer too. And the father, if they have fathers."

"But, Sabina, even if it does inconvenience them, with us it's a matter of life and death. We've got to get out of here."

"I know, but —"

"Now don't start getting sentimental about a bunch of giants. We have to look out for ourselves. Even if a fire starts, they can put it out. They can just stamp it out. All they have to do is put their big feet down — wait a minute, that's a thought."

"About putting their feet down?"

"Yes. The fire will start right away, but we'll have to stick around for a half hour or so. Suppose they

come out here to put it out and step on us."

"They might do that, George. So it would be better if you didn't start a fire."

"But what am I going to do? Clear the forest away from around the ship? That would take days. And besides, that would attract their attention almost as much as a fire would. They'd come out to investigate what was making the grass disappear from the middle of their field."

Sabina said, "I don't know what to say. Why don't we wait till morning, George? We can both of us use a night's rest. And in the morning we'll be able to think more clearly, and decide what to do."

"I hate to stay here another night."

"But nothing happens during the night, George. The giants sleep. And if they do come close, the vibrations from their footsteps will awaken us."

"Well, I *am* tired — all right, Sabina, if you wish we'll get a night's rest and see what we can do in the morning."

The short night passed quietly. In the morning the photometric alarm was set to wake them with the increase in light from the rising sun, after what turned out to be only four hours of sleep. George got out of bed yawning and protesting. Sabina didn't hear a sound, however, and it took Carl's bawling to awaken her. Jerry had got into a fight with Lester, and Lester, on the losing end because of his more tender years, had decided to take out his feelings on his still younger brother. Hence Carl's lamentations.

The giants, if they were up, weren't about. Sabina prepared a hasty breakfast, and after they ate, George said, "I feel drugged. My eyes just keep closing. What was that stuff you were saying about being able to think more clearly in the morning?"

"I don't know. What did I say?"

"We have to get the ship in position to take off. Remember? And we don't want to use the jets for fear of starting a fire and attracting those giants."

Jerry said, "Ma, can we go swimming this morning?"

"No more swimming."

"Aw, gee, Ma, just once more."

"Stop nagging your mother," said George. "You're not leaving."

"I wonder," said Sabina. "That giant child —"

"What about him?"

"If he knew what we wanted, he'd help us."

"If he knew what we wanted — that's some idea! How could he possibly know? There's no method of communication we can use. It would take weeks even for one of our linguists to learn their vibration language."

"Yes, I know, but — there must be *some* way, George."

"If there is, you name it, and we'll do it."

Carl, who was sitting on Sabina's lap, crawled down to the floor and pounced suddenly on a small greenish object a couple of inches long. "Ship," he said. "I gotta ship."

"What is it, Carl?" asked Lester. "Let me see!"

"Mommy, he's trying to take it away from me!"

"I just want to look at it, Ma! I want to see what it is!"

"I'll look at it." Sabina examined the object curiously, then gave it back to Carl. "It must be a grass seed," she said. "It must have fallen on our clothes, and been carried by one of us into the ship."

"That's right, Mom," said Jerry. "Here's another one."

"It's a ship," insisted Carl. "I gotta ship."

"He thinks a grass seed is a ship. And I'll bet that giant kid," said George, "thought our ship was a funny kind of grass seed."

"I hope he don't pick us up again," said Jerry.

"Why not?" said Sabina. "George, maybe that's the answer! If we could get him to pick the ship up and hold it in the air, he'd keep turning it around, the way he did before, and sooner or later he'd point it up. And then you could jet off."

"But we'd have the same difficulty we already talked about. How do we get him to pick up the ship? We can't explain anything."

"We don't have to explain. Suppose you send a cloud of smoke through the jets. You could do that, couldn't you, George?"

"Yes, I could do that."

"Well, being curious, like any kid, he'd come over here to see what it was. And then he'd pick us up —"

"We might get hurt," said Jerry.

"We'd strap ourselves in position first. And Daddy would be at the controls, ready to start."

"It's a possibility," admitted George. "Let's try it. Start strapping them in, Sabina, and I'll get some stalks of grass."

A quarter of an hour later they were ready. And just about that time, the young giant and his pet made their appearance in the field, at a distance of ten thousand feet.

George had brought some of the huge grass stalks into the ship. Now he put them into the chemical combustion chamber, started them burning with insufficient air, and sent a cloud of smoke through the jets. To the young giant, he thought, it must look like the faintest trickle of smoke. The chances were that the youngster would overlook it entirely.

For a while nothing happened. Then the pet animal's face began to twitch.

"He's sniffing!" cried Jerry. "He smells the smoke!"

The animal bounced toward them, its master following. Now the young giant caught sight of the trickle of smoke, and he paused. George began shooting smoke through the jets as fast as he could.

The giant came cautiously closer and bent down, as if afraid that some insect would sting him. His face blotted the sky from the visor

He was picking the ship up. George whirled head over heels, but like the others he was strapped into position, and being upside down in the low gravity wasn't so bad. Carl, however, didn't like it. He yelled for his mother.

There came a bad ten seconds when the giant youngster shook the ship, probably listening to see if anything rattled inside. That didn't feel so good, and Carl began to bawl even louder. Then the ship righted, and for a moment its nose pointed ahead and up.

George pressed the button which set the engine to firing. The ship sputtered ahead, probably leaving the giant youngster with all his mouths open in surprise.

They were 400 feet over the grass tops now. A red wall loomed ahead, more than 1000 feet high, and there was no chance to clear it. They tore straight through, hardly feeling the shock, and then George pointed the nose of the ship up still more sharply, and soon they had skimmed the edge of the mountain trees and were rising higher and higher.

George breathed a sigh of relief, and began to unstrap himself. "Okay," he said. "We made it. We can go home now."

"That poor kid," said Sabina.

"What? I'm sure I didn't hurt him. If he had the middle of the ship in the palm of his hand, the jets probably sent the exhaust into the air, and didn't even get his hand hot. At worst we might have given him a slight scorching that he'll get over fast."

I don't mean that," said Sabina. "But that red wall — we went right through it. We ruined the garment, whatever it was."

"I suppose his mother can patch it up."

"That isn't what I mean either. Don't you see, George, they don't know what it is, and if he tries to explain, a nasty woman like her won't believe him. She's sure to blame him for whatever happened. She'll beat him."

"I'm sorry. I guess he can take it, though."

"But it hurts to see a woman of her kind mistreat a child so. And he's such a sweet child. Such a beautiful disposition, so thoughtful and kindhearted. I'd hate to think she might break his spirit."

What do you say to a wife who talks like that? George demanded of himself. He could think of

nothing suitable, and he just grunted.

Carl cried suddenly, "I don't wanna go home. I wanna go back to the playground. I wanna go swimmin'!"

"Shut up, Carl!" cried Sabina, turning on him savagely. "Shut up, or I'll give you a spanking you'll never forget! I'm sick and tired of your whining!"

Amazed at this sudden outburst from a parent from whom he had expected sympathy, Carl closed his mouth.

"He's really a doll."

"Carl?"

"No, that giant child, of course. And with a mother like that!" Situation normal, thought George. And he headed the ship for home.