

WRITTEN IN THE STARS

THE ABRUPT DEPARTURE of the Staaid had left everyone bewildered, including the President of the United States himself. One minute they had been standing on the White House lawn with Professor Gromley, chatting affably through their portable translator and watching the stars come out; the next minute, for no apparent reason, they had folded their gossamer tents like a band of affronted Arabs and had filed stiffly through the glistening doorway of their transmitter. That their decision was final became obvious when they pulled the transmitter into the warp after them, leaving nothing on the White House lawn to show that an extraterrestrial expedition had ever camped there, except a medley of strange footprints in the snow, a forlorn tent peg and a crestfallen expression on Professor Gromley's countenance.

The President of the United States, quite understandably, was disappointed as well as bewildered. After all, if the Staaid had stayed and dispensed all of the wondrous technological items they claimed to have, his would have been a distinction not to be sneezed at for generations to come. The next election would have been in the bag, and 1973, the very first year of his tenure, would have commanded a place in future schoolbooks as large and as imposing as that occupied by such diehard dates as 1492, 1620 and 1945.

But the Staaid hadn't stayed, and all the President had to look forward to now was his impending cross-examination of Professor Gromley. He sat grimly behind his austere, flat-topped desk, waiting impatiently for the anthropologist to be shown into his office. Never had a President been in more dire need of a patsy, and never had one been more readily available.

Professor Gromley's black-rimmed spectacles gave him an owl-like look as he stepped diffidently into the Presidential presence. "You sent for me, Mr. President?"

"I most certainly did," said the President, honing each word carefully. "Can you think of a more pertinent person for whom I could have sent under the circumstances?"

"No, sir, I'm afraid I can't."

"Well, then, without further digression, I suggest that you tell me what you said out there on the lawn to offend our guests and send them hieing back to wherever they came from."

"That would be Delta Sagittarii 23, sir," Professor Gromley said. "But they didn't leave because of anything I said."

"Now that is a remarkable statement!" said the Chief Executive acidly. "We made you our representative because of your esteemed anthropological background, threw the Staaid in your lap, so to speak, hoping that, because of the mark you'd made for yourself in your field, you'd be the one human least likely to tread on their cultural corns. In other words, for the twelve hours of their stay on Earth, you were the *only* person who spoke to them directly. And yet you stand there and tell me that they didn't leave because of anything *you* said. Why, then, did they leave?"

With his black-rimmed spectacles glinting in the radiance of the Presidential desk lamp, Professor Gromley looked more than ever like an owl—and an acutely embarrassed one. "Mr. President," he said hesitantly, "are you familiar with the constellation Orion?"

"Certainly I'm familiar with Orion. I believe, however, that we are now discussing Delta Sagittarii 23."

"Yes, sir," Professor Gromley said miserably. "But you see, sir, from the perspective of Delta Sagittarii 23, Orion isn't Orion at all. That is, the arrangement of the stars that comprise the constellation is very different when seen from their planet."

"All of which," the Chief Executive said dryly, "is extremely interesting astronomical data. I presume it has some tenuous connection with the present topic of conversation—viz., in case you've forgotten, the reason underlying the Staaid's departure."

"What I'm trying to bring out, sir," Professor Gromley continued somewhat desperately, "is the unfortunate fact that the Staaid, never having been on Earth before, could not possibly have anticipated the star pattern that climbed into our eastern sky tonight while we were talking out there on the lawn. If

they had anticipated it, they wouldn't have touched this planet with a ten-trillion-foot pole."

"I'm listening."

Professor Gromley stood up a little straighter before the Presidential desk and a certain classroom didacticism crept into his next words:

"Before demonstrating exactly why the Staaids did leave, Mr. President, I'd like to fill you in on certain pertinent facts which I learned about them during the time I spent in their company.

"First, while they are certainly sophisticated in regard to technological matters, they are not in the least sophisticated in regard to other matters.

"Second, their present morality bears a strong resemblance to our own morality, and was strongly influenced by elements closely paralleling the Judaeo-Christian elements that molded our own Western attitude toward sex. In other words, they are simultaneously fascinated and repelled by any reference to the act of reproduction.

"Third, their language is symbolic, dating way back to their primitive ancestors, and so simplified that even a nonspecialist like myself was able to obtain a fair understanding of its basic structure during the twelve hours I spent in conversation with them.

"Fourth, the particular group that visited our planet were missionaries ... "

"And now, Mr. President, if you will have the kindness to have a blackboard brought in, I will demonstrate why our erstwhile benefactors departed."

It was on the tip of the President's tongue to remind Professor Gromley that this was not a classroom and that he, the President of the United States, was not to be regarded as a somewhat retarded pupil. But an aura of dignity had lately settled on Professor Gromley's stooped shoulders—an owlish dignity, to be sure, but a dignity nonetheless. The President sighed.

After the blackboard had been brought in, Professor Gromley assumed a classroom stance before it and picked up a piece of chalk.

"The only characteristic of the Staaid language that applies to the present problem," he said, "is the manner in which they form their verbs. This is accomplished by combining two nouns. In representing their symbols, I'm going to use stars—for a reason that will become apparent to you presently. Actually the Staaids employ many subtle variations, but the resultant pattern of the symbol, in this context, is the same."

He raised the piece of chalk, touched it to the blackboard. "This—

is the Staaid symbol for 'sapling,' and this—

is the Staaid symbol for 'tree.' Now by combining the two, thusly—

we obtain the verb 'grow? Do I make myself clear, Mr. President?'

"I'm still listening," the President said.

"One more example. This—

is the symbol for 'bird,' and this—

is the symbol for 'air.' Combining the two, we get

for the verb 'fly.'"

Professor Gromley cleared his throat "We are now ready for the particular symbol combination that brought about the Staaids' departure," he said. "This—

is the symbol for 'man,' and this—

is the symbol for 'woman.' Putting them together, we get—

Now do you understand why they left, Mr. President?*

It was obvious from the ensuing silence and from the blank expression on the Presidential countenance that as yet no bell had sounded in the Presidential brain.

Professor Gromley wiped his forehead. "Let's resort to an analogy," he said. "Suppose *we* transmitted *ourselves* to Delta Sagittarii 23, established contact with the local natives, and promised them the moon and the stars as a prelude to proselytizing them. Then suppose, on the very evening of the day of our arrival, we looked up into their sky and saw a gigantic four-letter word rising in the east. What would *we* do?"

"Good Lord!" The President's face had turned the color of his crimson blotting pad. "But can't we explain—make an official apology? Something?"

Professor Gromley shook his head. "Even assuming we could contact them, the only way we could bring them back would be by removing the source of the affront to their mores. . . . We can wash four-letter words off lavatory walls, Mr. President, but we can't wash them out of the sky."