

OCTOBER, 1954

IMAGINATION

STORIES OF SCIENCE AND FANTASY

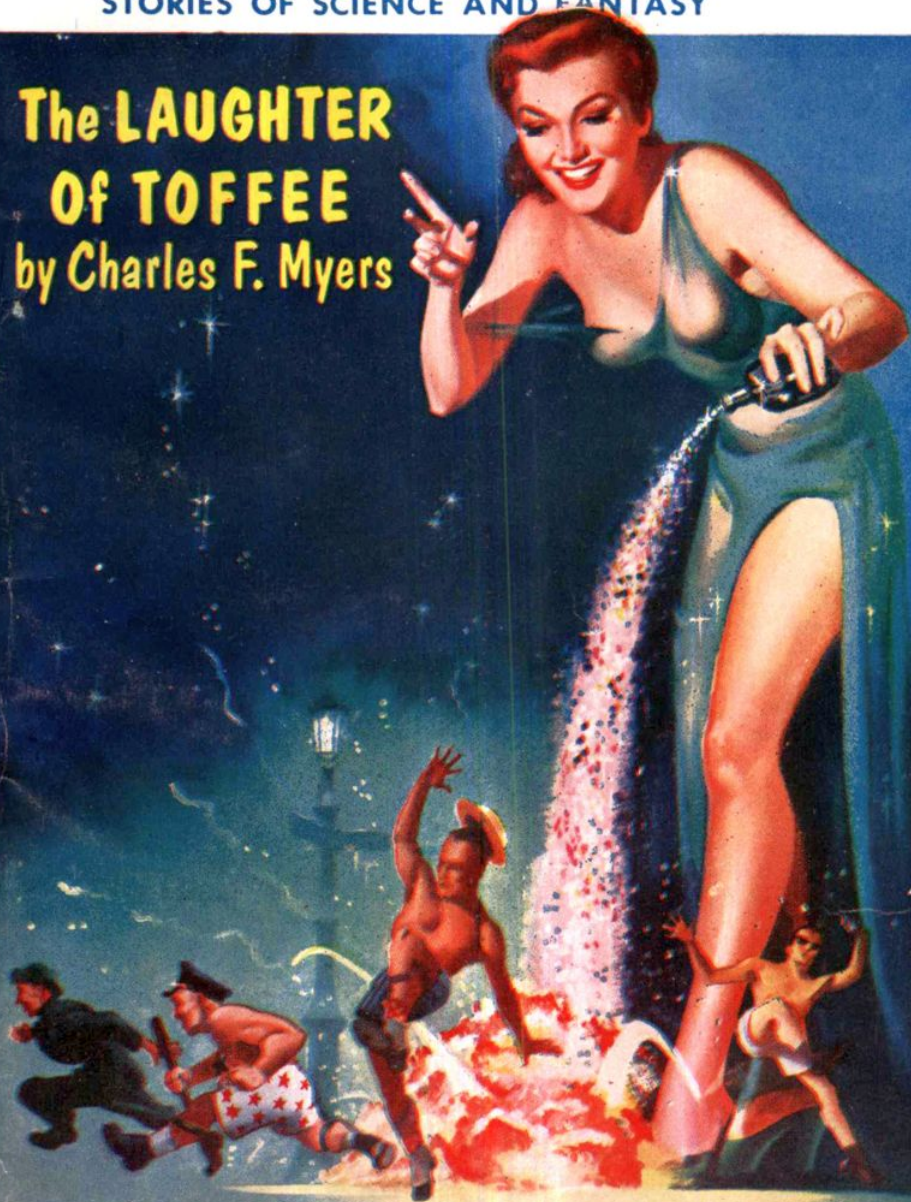
VOL. 5 NO. 10
ISSUE NO. 35

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STORIES OF SCIENCE AND FANTASY

OCTOBER, 1954
35¢

The **LAUGHTER**
OF TOFFEE
by Charles F. Myers



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Title: The Cautious Invaders

Date of first publication: 1954

Author: Arthur Gordon Ley (as Arthur Sellings) (1921-1968)

Date first posted: Nov. 25, 2022

Date last updated: Nov. 25, 2022

Faded Page eBook #20221148

This eBook was produced by: Delphine Lettau, Greg Weeks, Cindy Beyer & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

The Cautious Invaders

by

Arthur Sellings

**Before a planet was annexed,
scouts had to explore and analyze its
culture. Vraj and Gol were scouts—
and Earth was the planet . . .**

VRAJ lifted his gaze from the magazine and sighed. He passed the magazine to his companion.

“Look at that, Gol. If this is a specimen of the reasoning of the race we have to deal with, it’s going to be a pushover.”

Although he came from a system two hundred light years from Earth, and was speaking to a fellow-Antibian, he said just that. He called it a pushover. The two of them had been conversing in this intolerably clumsy tongue all the way here. It was part of the plan. There must be no mistakes, no slipping back in an unguarded moment into their native tongue. Their work must go as efficiently as the first scouting expedition’s had.

Vraj reflected that three years ago an Antibian ship had landed here and phased into invisibility. A raiding party had picked up two living specimens of the dominant race, together with a collection of carefully selected books. The expedition had remained just long enough to be sure that their thefts had gone unnoticed. Or, at least, unscrubbed to any super-normal intervention. The planet’s press reported a mysterious fire at a bookstore, and two names were added to the list of missing persons. The world had gone on, unaware that it had had visitors, while the visitors made off back to Antib with their booty.

“You see,” said Vraj, pointing to the crude drawing, “the man is hanging up a hammock, a kind of bed made of twine. He has attached one end to a tree. Only now is the stupid fool looking for a tree to tie the other end to. *And there isn’t one there.*” He smiled smugly. “It is obviously a case of the most primitive reasoning.”

Gol turned the magazine over as if looking for a clue to such unreasonable behavior. “Yes, it’s certainly primitive. But we must be careful not to judge too hastily. The picture might be a demonstration in visual terms of the dangers of faulty reasoning. Something in the nature of a lesson in logic.”

“At *that* level? That just proves what I was saying. If a race needs such an elementary lesson, even for its backward members, it must be shockingly inept.”

“Yet they have flying machines.”

“Of a kind.”

“Truly. I’m not denying they seem a primitive species. But I can’t help feeling that that picture is slightly out of key. It’s like one or two other things we’ve learned about them. They’re surprisingly advanced in some things . . . for a primitive culture that is. And surprisingly backward in others.”

“Their ways of waging war, for instance.” Vraj raised his hands. “It’s like being back at school, studying our own culture of the distant past. I know it’s illogical, but I can’t get over the feeling that because we’ve developed to such a high level, then every race should have by now. That a chaotic, sprawling race like this one should be existing *now*, is like an anachronism, an insult to the intelligence of the universe. I shall be glad when our report is done with, and the occupation squads move in in force.”

Gol raised a cautioning finger. “Let us not anticipate, Vraj. Remember Shervin Nine.”

VRAJ squirmed irritably. “You are always going on about Shervin Nine.” The memory of it rankled. Like Earth it had been one of the few planets ideally suited for taking over by Antib. It had been just as green, its skies as blue and friendly. Its inhabitants had been little peaceful furry animals. The report had gone back. The squads had moved in. *And been blasted out of existence.* The little peaceful furry animals had remained. The Antibians had never been able to explain that one. They gave Shervin a wide berth now.

“All right. So we don’t know everything,” he growled. “But we haven’t found a race yet to come near our record of achievement. Our creative achievement, that is,” he added hastily, remembering the Shervin debacle.

“True, true,” Gol observed cautiously. “But we of all people should know by now the strange shapes that life takes, the strange ways of thinking, developing. We may have gone through the Earth books with a toothcomb,

but we can never be sure what might be hiding under the surface. After all, that's the purpose of our mission now."

"All right," Vraj growled again. "Don't preach."

"That list of words, for instance," Gol continued suavely. "The ones we just don't have any equivalent for. Not even a circumlocution. The word *laugh*, for instance."

"Pah! A simple matter, a crude reflex action when certain parts of the human anatomy are slightly stimulated. I've read Vint's paper on it." He shuddered at the memory of it, the grossness of such a race.

"But it isn't only physical," Gol insisted. "There's also a link with *humor*, another word on the list. And that is a mental process, as far as we can determine. Some irrational way of apprehending and stating truth. It might have something to do with the illogicality of that drawing, for instance."

Vraj snorted. "How can truth be apprehended illogically? I think your fears are warping your own logical processes."

"Not fear, Vraj. Caution, that's all."

A warning light flashed on the control panel.

"Approaching atmosphere," said Vraj, turning to the instruments. He made the necessary adjustments with a practiced hand. As he reached over to a switch on the far side of the panel he felt the roughness and constriction of the Earth clothes he was wearing. "By the seven suns of Sufa, but I'll be glad to get out of these ridiculous clothes. And get this wig off, and this pigment out of my skin." He sent the ship into a graceful curve.

It came down, like a night-colored snowflake, on the dark side of the planet . . .

ONCE down, they phased the ship into invisibility and made for a nearby city.

Nobody gave them a second glance as they walked along a street. It was evening, but they would have passed the closest scrutiny even in daylight. They were equipped down to the last detail—papers, money, everything. Even their suits bore the labels of New York tailors.

"I'm only hesitant about our voices," said Gol as they strolled along. "There's bound to be some slight trace of accent."

Vraj shrugged. "It's not to be wondered at, is it? It's such a crude language. But have no fears. This is a big country. Many people come here

from other lands to live, and they speak the language with a stronger accent than any we could have.”

“True. It’s only a passing feeling. Where do we go?”

“We’ll just walk around, acclimating ourselves. If we see anything interesting from a technological aspect we’ll investigate. Look, for instance. There’s a cinema.” The word was a familiar one. They had read about cinemas. “Shall we?”

“Why not?” said Gol, feeling emboldened by the confidence of his companion.

It was their first test and they passed it perfectly. Their money was taken without question. Nobody looked at them curiously. Vraj even said, “Thank you,” to the girl behind the grille. She smiled and said “You’re welcome.” It was too easy.

They didn’t stay long inside. The pictures on the screen were crude and told them nothing new about the ways of this people. Gusts of that senseless laughter punctuated the proceedings at frequent intervals until the two aliens became bored with the stupidity of it. They rose from their seats after half an hour of it and went out again into the night air. Their stride had an air of complete confidence now. Vraj began thinking of what a pleasant world this would be to live in. Cleared, that is, of the rubble of its present occupants. The air smelt sweet and good. There were, it was true, overtones in it that made his nostrils wrinkle—crude exhaust gases from the primitive oil-burning engines of this race’s ground transport, acrid smoke from the fossil plants they used for fuel. But beyond these the air was as sweet as *lebani* wine. Once get rid of these uncouth creatures who polluted their own planet, and it could be made into a paradise. For a moment he felt a twinge of something like pity for them. After all, he thought, they’re not so different from us to look at. But he dismissed the thought from his mind without effort. They’d had their chance, and muffed it. The stupid always had to give place to the wise. It was a law of the universe.

Gol broke in upon his reverie, clutching at his sleeve.

“Look, Vraj, a factory.”

Vraj followed the direction of his gaze. He could see, through an open doorway, men bent over machines, intent upon their labors. He could make out other figures, supervisors evidently, moving among them scrutinizing their work.

“Let’s have a closer look,” said Vraj. “That should put to rest any fears you may have left. Remember the words of Cadour: ‘Know a culture by the processes of its manufacture.’”

They crossed over.

“What a noise!” exclaimed Gol.

“It’s one of the recent developments of this planet,” said Vraj smugly and contemptuously. “They pipe this cacophony into the ears of the operatives. It takes their minds off the monotony of their work.”

THEY stood surveying the scene through the doorway.

“Let’s go in,” suggested Vraj.

“But the guards. They’re sure to have guards.”

“We can try, anyway. If someone stops us we can say we made a mistake. Or even,” and he clapped Gol on the shoulder, “ask for a job.”

Vraj’s confident bravado dispelled Gol’s caution, and he followed Vraj in.

“There you are,” said Vraj serenely. “Security is as inefficient as everything else on this planet.”

A man in a brown coat, evidently one of the inspectors, looked at them, but turned away without querying their presence there.

Gol felt a twinge of returning fear.

“It’s too easy,” he whispered. “I don’t like it.”

“It’s all right,” said Vraj. “Let’s look at one of the workers.”

They looked over the shoulder of one who was operating a tong-like instrument in a glass case. As they watched him, he moved the tongs with great care. But somewhere in the process he seemed to make a mistake. His shoulders drooped, and the two onlookers heard him swear.

“I don’t wonder he was annoyed,” said Vraj as they moved on. “Did you see the sheer crudeness of those tongs and remote control mechanism. People shouldn’t handle radioactives with such clumsy implements.”

“Is that what he was doing?”

“Obviously,” said Vraj airily. “Now what’s this one up to?”

They didn’t spend much time with this one. His work was obviously even more rudimentary than the last one’s. He was checking numbers on a revolving drum, as periodically the drum stopped.

“A primitive type of computer,” said Vraj.

They passed on. They came to one operative who seemed extremely intent on his work. He was a big specimen of this race, tall and broad, and as

they approached him his bulk hid his machine. They saw only that his shoulders moved in some complicated manipulative process.

Then they saw the machine. Gol stared at it, incapable of believing his eyes at first. He felt the hairs on his neck bristling. He turned to Vraj with a look of sudden panic. “Mars!” he whispered hoarsely. “That’s the fourth planet of this system. *Mars Flight*, it says. This isn’t a factory. It’s a space flight control room!”

Vraj’s bravado had deserted him. He looked as fearful as Gol felt. “But—but there’s nothing in the books about it.”

“And look at that,” said Gol, pointing and gulping.

Vraj looked. The next machine was labelled *STARFLIGHT*. Lights flashed across the control board, lights whose pattern he couldn’t decipher. So these people had space travel! Interstellar travel even! The thought of Shervin Nine and its gentle furry animals returned to fill him with panic. He looked around wildly.

And one of the inspectors was approaching them, a stern look on his face.

“Quick, Gol.” Vraj went to take Gol’s arm to steer him out of the place. But Gol needed no prompting. They marched quickly out, fearing a hand on their shoulders, fearing they would have to unholster the weapons that were reserved for such an emergency.

But no hand moved to restrain them. They walked out of the control room and out of the town. As soon as they were in open country they broke into a run. They were panting when they reached their ship. They rephased it, climbed in and shot away.

Vraj was still trembling at the memory of it as, well clear of the system, he made out his report. He felt sick and ashamed. Gol kept looking at him with an air that plainly said “I told you so.” With difficulty he started his report:

To the Colonizing Office

Antib

Antib 5/73L497

Report on Planet 3: Definitely a bivalent, or even multivalent culture.

Stopped only to ascertain that they have space travel, and of a developed type. Advise absolute avoidance of such a cryptic civilization—

He chewed at the end of his stylus, wondering what to say next. Back on Antib they weren’t going to be pleased about the failure of this expedition.

His words must be chosen carefully . . .

ON EARTH a certain Joe Shmaltz was having no such difficulty in making *his* report. He took off his brown coat, crossed to his desk and wrote angrily:

Dear Al,

Look, you just got to send me some new models. Business has been lousy for two weeks now. Tonight was just about the limit. Two prosperous looking guys stroll in, take a look around, and don't play one pinball machine. Not one. Either you send me some real action getters inside three days, and I mean action, or I give my trade to Louie. Get me?

Yours disgustedly

Joe.

* * *

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

First published in the magazine “Imagination: Stories of Science and Fantasy”, Volume 5, Number 10, October 1954.

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *The Cautious Invaders* by Arthur Gordon Ley (as Arthur Sellings)]