

MOON OF MYSTERY

By ALAN BROWNING, Jr.

CHAPTER 8
Convinced that we could be of no further aid to the princess Natal until she had completed her nap (how I envied her!) we withdrew to the main cabin of the flier. Our heads were buzzing with questions, but if there was a satisfactory answer running around loose anywhere, we hadn't been able to hem it up and capture it.

Bob said he had a theory that might work. In his estimation, the moon was once thickly populated with Na-tal's people, but as the small planet rapidly cooled, the people slowly perished until the end of a few hundred centuries found the dwindling population force to burrow beneath the surface for a place of habitation. He said they probably had to manufacture their own air; their food had to be worked out underground and all the other details necessary to support a people upon an unfriendly world and a world that had grown unsuited to human habitation.

Bob did fairly well up to there with his theories, but Pat had to go and spoil the day for him by asking the why and wherefore of the language? That stumped him. Then, to make matters worse, Pat wanted to know why a people, living so comfortably in their hidden city, would want to go and die for? Or if not dead, it amounted to the same thing unless some accommodating cusses like ourselves happened along. Pat said those folks should be real grateful to us for waking their princess.

While the Irishman was voicing

his thoughts, I gave birth to an idea myself, surprising as that may seem. I had read in ancient history or somewhere, that the ancient Egyptians had probably been more highly civilized than we; that being the case, perhaps they had migrated to the moon, and peopled our hidden city with their descendants. This theory seemed so good that I was fairly stuck up about it until Bob wanted to know what it proved, or pointed out, and how did it have any bearing upon the question?

I withered him with a look and told him it was a very plausible explanation of the fact that we could understand the moon people's language. I knew I had him there and I couldn't help but wink at Pat in the most approved fashion.

"You idiot," Bob answered quietly, "even if things had been as you said, and the Egyptians had reached the moon and settled here, that wouldn't solve the mystery of the language. Who ever heard of an ancient Egyptian speaking English?"

I crawled under a bench and pouted awhile, so thoroughly was I crushed and resolved to keep my thoughts to myself from then on. People never did seem to appreciate me.

Bob let in on his theories again. The way we had it figured, the moon people must have been faced with a terrible menace; must have known their time had come, and then, instead of waiting until death overtook them one by one, had done away with their entire race by putting them into a state of sus-

pending animation! He said that was evidently the condition the princess was in when we found her and it was possible the rest of the inhabitants were in the same fix.

But even if they were, he reasoned, he couldn't see how we were going to be of any aid to them. We had used the entire contents of the vial found in Na-tal's hands, upon herself, and without that wonderful concoction we couldn't vaccinate her cousins, uncles and aunts, and the rest of the tribe. But even if we had had a quantity of the serum sufficient to care for all, it would be impossible to cart them one by one to the space ship and air, and even if that were possible, the space ship wouldn't hold them all.

Next he began to work back to the cause of the sleeping portion. What dangers had confronted these people that they had found life unbearable and impossible and had decided to sleep it off? What dangers had overcome a people as intelligent and as highly civilized as they? And then I had another idea and out it came in spite of me. What dangers? Why "Old Faithful" and his brethren!

For a wonder Bob didn't set his pooh-poohing apparatus going and was inclined to agree with me. I felt so good that I wouldn't speak to any of them for an hour.

My mention of the hideous moon thing turned our throats into another channel. How in thunder, we questioned, did they live upon the airless, burning plains of the moon? The intense heat which would have dried up an exposed human in a jiffy, apparently held no terrors for them, neither did they suffer from lack of air. Bob said the moon days were at least two weeks long and the nights in proportion. As the days were unbearably hot, so were the nights terrifically cold. I was sure "Old Faithful" must have to put on plenty of red flannel underwear to be able to sleep comfortably.

Pat sprang into words. Why, said he, wasn't it possible for the moon to have a form of life all its own and ungoverned by the natural laws of earth? The earth has an atmosphere, and a wise providence utilized that atmosphere as a means of life for the earth's people; the earth had water, and water was made the chief lubricant of the earthly people. And so on. But the moon had had no air and no nothing much for untold centuries. So why wasn't it logical that the same providence, in deciding to bring forth a new life upon the moon, built their engines differently from the engines of humans as we know them? Why wasn't it possible that "Old Faithful" could navigate, say, on the sun's rays? Just because we had never heard of such a thing was no sign that it was impossible. Why shouldn't it be logical that "Old Faithful" and his cousins could eat sand and even rock and thrive on it? Cows eat grass on earth and it agrees with them. Yet let a human go out to graze and he'll more than likely wind up with the stomach-ache. Then why shouldn't this new race on the moon eat sand and enjoy it even though sand wouldn't agree with an earth being?

Pat, by the time he had voiced this lengthy idea, was so exhausted that I feared he was going to be a mental wreck, but within a few minutes he was himself again and looking vastly proud and stuck up because Bob had agreed there was a lot in what he had said. Bob had to agree because he couldn't prove Pat wrong and because we had actually seen "Old Faithful" prancing about the moon's surface in the flesh. "Old Faithful" had to live on something, so why not sand? There was certainly plenty lying about.

So interested were we in our theories that for the time we had forgotten all about our sleeping princess and no doubt would have gone on arguing and talking for a considerable length of time if we hadn't been interrupted by the sound of footsteps in the corridor. Turning as one man we dashed for the cabin and then stopped as if thunderstruck! For standing in the doorway of the cabin as calm as if she hadn't been practically dead for goodness knows how long, stood Na-tal!

She was a sight to behold. The long flowing gown, with its sprinkle of jewels, clung to the slender form so as to reveal the perfect figure which was her body. Her hair, which was cut much in the fashion of the earthly hob, was tousled about her neck and face, and was beautiful beyond the imagination, especially as it set off a face so strikingly calm and yet so possessed of an unearthly beauty that it fairly took my breath away.

Bob was the first to get his breath back, but all he could do was stammer and not very good stammering at that, and I think he would be standing there like a fool and stammering yet if the little princess hadn't spoken:

"You have come to our rescue," she said simply, and her voice sounded as the sweetest of music to our ears; "you have come to rescue my people. From space; from across the void have you made your way, and the voice of our prophet has not spoken in vain." She then walked to one of the windows through which could be seen the familiar face of the world hanging there in the inky sky, its continents and its polar snow caps plainly visible. "From that world you have come," continued Na-tal as calmly as if she knew more about us than we ourselves, "and I, Na-tal, princess of the moon, welcome you in the name of my father, the king."

The minute she said king I knew that her people were not so civilized after all, else they would have had all their kings chased out of office or else beheaded long ago. But I thought it wise to make no mention of the fact until we were better acquainted, at least.

By that time Bob had captured his voice. He replied to the princess and told her she was right; that we had come from the planet earth and if there was any rescuing to be done we would do it, although he was frank enough to add that we didn't have rescuing on the mind when we left home, but were just out on a pleasure jaunt to see the country and one thing and another.

By the time he had concluded this speech, the boy was as red as a beet and was blushing like a school-boy, but I figured he wasn't used to talking with princesses, especially a princess who was born before he was even thought of; before anyone on earth was thought of, for that matter, and was just naturally embarrassed. I learned better later.

It was Pat's and my time to add something then, but all we did was stand and stare at Natal in the most impolite manner imaginable, and she, seeing our distress, came to our rescue by stating that she was hungry. No wonder. The poor kid hadn't had anything to eat in no telling how long!

Pat, who probably had a simple reason for his behavior, ate and did not cook and immediately rushed to the kitchen and came back with a condensed food can that didn't look so very good and vitamins from showed no sign of the food, but the quantity didn't eat like her people. I, like a good outdone by we did us.

had the stomach-ache or headache, or something, and not as a matter of regular diet.

The simple meal over, Na-tal stated she was much refreshed and as every minute counted, would like to tell her story so that we might get busy with the rescue of her people. I couldn't swallow that statement about every minute counting when she and her cousins hadn't done anything worthwhile but sleep, for the past countless centuries, but I guess she knew what she was talking about.

If we expected to have all our mysteries solved then and there by the little lady, we were mistaken. She wanted to know if we could again visit the city and if we could take her back as easily as we had brought her to the ship? We told her that we could, barring none of "Old Faithful's" bunch were mean enough to try and horn in on our party. At the mention of "Old Faithful" I saw her cheeks go pale, for she seemed to know just who and what we meant. Then her color returned and she told us in a resigned sort of way that "Old Faithful" and his brethren were the chief cause of her people's trouble and she guessed we'd have to take a chance. She was a brave little thing.

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