

Divinity

Joseph Samachson

A decorative graphic consisting of several thick blue lines on a green background. The lines form a large 'X' shape on the left side and a curved, arch-like shape on the right side. The 'X' is formed by two intersecting diagonal lines. The arch is formed by a single curved line that starts from the left, goes up and over, and then comes back down to the right.

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The Project Gutenberg EBook of Divinity, by William Morrison

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DIVINITY

BY WILLIAM MORRISON

ILLUSTRATED BY FREAS

Bradley had one fear in his life. He had to escape regeneration. To do that, he was willing to take any chance, coward though he was—even if it meant that he had to become a god!

Bradley seemed to have escaped regeneration. Now he had only death to worry about.

Ten minutes before, he had been tumbling through the air head over heels, helpless and despairing. And before that—

He remembered how his heart had been in his mouth as he had crept down the corridor of the speeding ship. He could hear Malevski's voice coming faintly through one of the walls, and had been tempted to run back, fearful of being shot down on the spot if he were caught. He had fought back the temptation and kept on. No one had seen him as he crept into the lifeboat.

"This is your one chance," he told himself. "You have to take it. If they get you back to port, you're finished."

Luck had been with him. They were broadcasting the results of the Mars-Earth matches at the time, and most of the crew were grouped around the visors. He had picked the moment when news came of a sensational upset, and for a minute or two after the lifeboat blasted off, no one realized what had happened. When the truth did penetrate, they had a hard time swinging the ship around, and by then the lifeboat was out of radar range. He was free.

He had exulted wildly for a moment, until it struck him that freedom in space might be a doubtful gift. He would have to get to some civilized port, convince the port authorities that he had been shipwrecked and somehow separated from

the other crew members, and then lose himself quickly in the crowd of people that he hoped would fill the place. There would be risks, but he would take them. It would be better than running out of air and food in space.

It had been the best possible plan, and it had gone wrong, all wrong. He had been caught, before he knew it, in the gravity of a planet he had overlooked. The lifeboat had torn apart under the combined stresses of its forward momentum and its side rockets blasting full force, and he had been hurled free in his space suit, falling slowly at first, then faster, faster, faster—

The automatic parachutes had suddenly sprung into operation when he reached a critical speed, and he had slowed down and stopped tumbling. He fell more gently, feet first, and when he landed it was with a shock that jarred but did no real damage.

Slowly he picked himself up and fumbled at the air valve. Something in the intake tubes had jammed under the shock of landing, and the air was no longer circulating properly. Filled with the moisture of his own breath, it felt hot and clammy, and clouded the viewplates.

If he had kept all his wits about him he would have tried to remember, before he took a chance, whether the planet had an oxygen atmosphere, and whether the oxygen was of sufficient concentration to support human life. Not that he had any real choice, but it would have been good to know. As it was, he turned the air valve automatically, and listened nervously as the stale air hissed out and the fresh air hissed in.

He took a deep breath. It didn't kill him. Instead, it sent his blood racing around with new energy. Slowly the moisture evaporated from his viewplates. Slowly he began to see.

He perceived that he was not alone. A group of people stood in front of him, respectful, their own eyes full of fear and wonder. Some one uttered a hoarse cry and pointed at his helmet. The unclouding of the viewplates must have stricken them with awe.

The air was wonderful to breathe. He would have liked to remove his helmet and fill his lungs with it unhampered, expose his face to its soft caress, expand his chest with the constriction of the suit. But these people—

They must have seen him tumble down from the sky and land unhurt. They carried food and flowers, and now they were kneeling down to him as to a— Suddenly he realized. To them he was a god.

The thought of it made him weak. To Malevski and the ship's crew he was a criminal, a cheap chiseler and pickpocket, almost a murderer, escaping credit for *that* crime only by grace of his own good luck and his victim's thick skull. They had felt such contempt for him that they hadn't even bothered to guard him too carefully. They had thought him a complete coward, without the courage to risk an escape, without the intelligence to find the opportunities that might be offered to him.

They hadn't realized how terrified he was of the thing with which they threatened him. Regeneration, the giving up of his old identity? Not for him. They hadn't realized that he preferred the risks of a dangerous escape to the certainty of *that*.

And here he was a god.

He lifted his hand without thinking, to wipe away the perspiration that covered his forehead. But before the hand touched his helmet he realized what he was doing, and let the hand drop again.

To the people watching him the gesture must have seemed one of double significance. It was at once a sign of acceptance of their food and flowers, and their offer of good-will, and at the same time an order to withdraw. They bowed, and moved backwards away from him. Behind him they left their gifts.

They seemed human, human enough for the features on the men's faces to impress him as strong and resourceful, for him to recognize that the women were attractive. And if they were human, the food must be fit for human beings. Whether it was or wasn't, however, again he had no choice.

He waited until they were out of sight, and then, stiffly, he removed his helmet and ate. The food tasted good. And with his helmet off, with the wind on his face, and the woods around him whispering in his ears, it was a meal fit for the being they thought him to be.

He was a god. Possibly it was the space suit which made him one, especially the goggle-eyed helmet. He could take no chance of becoming an ordinary mortal,

and that would mean that he would have to wear the space suit continually. Or at least the helmet. That, he decided, was what he would do. That would leave his body reasonably free, and at the same time impress them with the fact that he was different from them.

By manipulating the air valve he would be able to make the viewplates cloud and uncloud at will, thus giving dramatic expression to his feelings. It would be a pleasant game to play until he had learned something of their language. It would be safer than trying to make things clear to them with speech and gestures that they could not understand anyway.

He wondered how long it would be before Malevski would find the shattered lifeboat drifting in space, and then trace its course and decide where he had landed. That would be the end of his divinity. Meanwhile, until then—

Until then he was a god. Unregenerated. Permanently unregenerated. Holding his helmet, he threw back his head and laughed loud and long, and wondered what his mother would have thought.

For awhile he was being left alone. They were afraid of him, of course, fearful of intruding with their merely mortal affairs upon the meditations of so divine a being. Later, however, curiosity and perhaps a desire to show him off to newcomers might draw them back. In the interval, it would be well to find out what sort of place this was in which he had landed.

He looked around him. There were trees, with sharp green branches, sharp green twigs, sharp red leaves. He shuddered as he thought of what would have happened to him if he had fallen on the point of a branch. The trees seemed rigid and unbending in the wind that caressed his face. There were no birds that he could see. Small black objects bounded from one branch to another as if engaged in complicated games of tag. He wondered if the games were as serious as the one he had been playing with Malevski, with himself as It.

There were no ground animals in sight. If any showed up later, they couldn't be too dangerous, not with the natives living here in such apparent peace and contentment. There probably wouldn't be anything that his pocket gun, which he had taken the precaution to remove from the lifeboat before that shattered, wouldn't be able to handle.

Near him was a strange spring, or little river, or whatever you might call it. It broke from the ground, ran along the hard rocky surface for a dozen feet, and then plunged underground again. There were other springs of a similar nature scattered here and there, and now he realized that their combined murmuring was the noise he had mistaken, on first removing his helmet, for the rustle of the wind in the woods.

He would have enough to drink. The natives would bring him food. What else could any reasonable man want?

It wasn't the kind of life he had dreamed of. No Martian whiskey, no drugs, no night spots, no bigtime gamblers slapping him on the back and calling him "pal," no brassy blondes giving him the eye. Still, it was better than the life he had actually lived, much better. It would do, it would have to do.

From what he had seen of the natives, he liked them—and feared them. For all their mistaken faith in him, they seemed to be no fools. How many times before had men from some supposedly superior civilization dropped in upon the people of a new world and made that first impression of divinity, only to have the original attitude of worship by the natives give way to disillusion and contempt? Who was that fellow they told about in the history books he had read as a kid? Cortez, way back on Earth, when that planet itself had offered unexplored territory. And later on it had happened on one of the moons of Jupiter, and on several planets outside the System. The explorers had been gods, until they had been found out. Then they had been savage murderers, plunderers, devils.

It would be too bad if he were found out. He was one against them all, he would never be able to fight off so many enemies. More than that, he was a stranger here, he needed friends. No, he mustn't be found out.

"Better put on your helmet, dope," he told himself savagely. "They'll be coming back soon, and if they find you without it—" He put on his helmet, still muttering to himself. It wouldn't make any difference if he were overheard. They didn't know Earth language and would take his words for oracular utterances. He could talk to himself all he wanted, and from the looks of things, there would be no one to understand him. He hoped he didn't grow crazy and eccentric, like those hermits who had been lost alone in space for too many years.

The helmet was the first nuisance. There would be others too. He couldn't even

talk in what had become his natural manner, with a whine in every word, a whine that came from being treated with contempt by police and fellow-criminals alike. A god had to speak with slow gravity, with dignity. A god had to walk like a god. A god had endless responsibilities here, it seemed.

He thought again of his mother. Ever since he could remember, it had been, "Georgie, wipe your nose!" and, "Georgie, keep your fingers out of the cake!" and Georgie do this and *don't* do that. A fine way to speak to a god. Even after he had grown up, his mother had continued to treat him like a baby. She had never got over examining his face and his ears and his fingernails to make sure that he had cleaned them properly. He couldn't so much as comb his hair to suit her; all through his abortive attempt at college, and later at a job, she had done it for him.

But she had been a lioness in his defense later on, when he had given way to that first irresistible impulse to dip his fingers in the till and get away with what he thought would be unnoticed petty cash. It had been her fault that the thing had happened, of course. She could have given him a decent amount of spending money, instead of doling it out to him from his own wages as if she were giving money for candy to a schoolboy. She could have treated him more like the man he was supposed to be.

Still, he couldn't complain. She had stuck to him all the way through, whatever the charges against him. When that lug of a traveling salesman had accused her Georgie of picking his pockets, and that female refugee from a TV studio had charged poor harmless Georgie with slugging her, it was his mother who had stood up in court and denounced them, and solemnly told judge and jury what a sweet, kind, helplessly innocent lamb her Georgie was. It wasn't her fault if no one had quite believed her.

Now he was on his own, without any possibility of help from her. And in what the ads called a "responsible position" that she had never so much as dreamed he could fill.

Unfortunately, now that he had reached so exalted a level, there seemed to be few possibilities of promotion. There appeared only the chance, on the one hand, that the natives would find him out and slaughter him, and on the other that Malevski would track him down and bring him back to Earth for the punishment he dreaded.



It was a good thing he had put on his helmet. Not far away, a group of the natives was approaching, laden with more food and flowers. It was larger than the previous group. Evidently, as he had anticipated, they were showing him off to newcomers.

He came to a stately halt and waited for them to approach. He could see the surprise on their faces as they noted his change of costume, and he watched nervously as they stopped to whisper among themselves. It would be too bad for him if they didn't like it.

But they didn't seem to mind. One of them, a very impressive old man with green hair flecked with red, stepped in front of the others and made a speech, a melodious speech full of liquid sounds that were neither quite vowels nor consonants. He didn't have the slightest idea of what the individual words meant. But the significance of the speech as a whole was clear enough. As it came to an end, they presented him with more food and flowers.

Bradley cleared his throat. And then, with as deep and impressive a voice as he could manage, he said, "Ladies and gentlemen, it gives me great pleasure to accept your nomination. I promise you that if elected I shall keep none of my promises."

It was his first speech to them, and he enjoyed making it so much that every time he saw them during the next few days—they settled down to coming twice a day, morning and night—he made it again, with variations, listing the wonderful things he would do for them if elected to the office.

After awhile, as he began to enjoy the ceremony for its own sake, he didn't mind at all putting the helmet on for two short periods every day. Having so little contact with them, he could learn their language only very slowly. He could distinguish the word for flowers from that for food, although he himself could pronounce neither. He knew the names of a few plants, a few parts of the body. And he learned a few names of people. The red-green haired old man was, as close as he could make the sounds, Yanyoo. He took the trouble to notice that the prettiest girl was Aoooya.

At first everything had been exceedingly peaceful. But about a week after his arrival—he couldn't be sure exactly how many days had passed, because he hadn't kept count—he learned of some of the dangers they faced.

It was while they were holding the morning ceremony that the thing came out of the forest. At first he thought that a tree had moved. It was green, with reddish blotches like clusters of needle leaves, and it seemed to ooze forward toward them from among the trees. Aoooya noticed it first, and pointed and screamed. It was the size of a tiger, thought Bradley, and might be even more dangerous. He had difficulty keeping his eyes on the rapidly moving creature through the goggles of his helmet. He was aware of gleaming eyes, of two rows of dull green teeth, and of muscles that rippled under the green fur.

Several of the men had little blowpipes, through which they released a shower of darts. But the darts bounced off the fur, and the thing came on. Bradley fumbled for his gun, and almost dropped it in his excitement. When he finally brought it up into aiming position, his hand was trembling, and his finger could hardly catch the trigger.

The thing leaped into the air at the old man, Yanyoo, just as the gun went off. The body vaporized first, leaving for a fraction of a second the fierce head and the powerful legs apparently supporting themselves in the air. Then part of the head went, and the rest fell to the ground. But sheer momentum carried the green smoky vapor on, so that it surrounded first the old man, then several of the girls, and after them, Bradley himself. They were all yelling, all but Bradley, who put away his gun and muttered to himself in relief, and then the wind began to dissipate the vapor, and on the ground there was left only part of a head and six torn legs.

They were bowing to him and raising their voices high in thanks. It was easy, thought Bradley. Really, it was a cinch to be a god. The beasts that were such great dangers to them were mere trifles to him. To him, with a gun loaded with a thousand thermal charges each of which was capable of blasting armor plate. The thing wouldn't even have come close if he himself hadn't been such a timid, cowardly fool. Put Malevski in his place, and the detective would have got the creature as it came out of the trees. He wasn't Malevski.

It was a good thing for him that they couldn't know that. Now his position was completely secure. Now he could relax and enjoy his divine life.

He didn't realize that a much greater danger was yet to come. He found that out after the evening ceremony.



The group that came to see him this time was bigger than ever. Evidently, to honor him they had dropped all other work. Yanyoo seemed to have constituted himself Bradley's priest. He made a tremendously long and rhapsodic-sounding speech, but at the end there was no donation of the usual food and flowers. Instead, Yanyoo backed away, all the others doing the same, and looking at Bradley as if expecting him to follow them.

He followed. In this manner, with his worshippers walking respectfully backwards, they arrived at what seemed to Bradley to be an ordinary small hut. Outside the hut was what he took for a curiously shaped log of wood. The inside of the hut was in shadow, but as his eyes became accustomed to the dimness, he saw something in one corner. It was a weird-looking head, also of wood.

It struck him then. The log of wood had been the old god, good enough to worship until he had come along and shown them what a god could really do. Now it had been contemptuously deposed and decapitated. The hut was a shrine. It was all his.

He *had* been promoted after all. The thought didn't please him in the least. Suppose *he* failed them too—and that was very possible, for he had no idea of what miracles they expected of him. Then he would be deposed and—he gagged at the thought, but he knew that he had to finish it—decapitated.

But for the moment there was no thought of deposing him. The gifts they offered were more lavish than ever. And in addition to the food and flowers, there was something new. A jug, filled with a warm, sweetish-smelling liquid. He could get the odor faintly through the intake valve of his helmet. Later on, when his worshippers were gone and he had his helmet off, he realized that it smelled up the entire hut.

It couldn't be harmful. Nothing that they had offered him so far was harmful. He took a sip—and sighed with content. This was one of the few things he had been lacking. There was alcohol, and there were flavors and essences that reminded him of the drinks he had encountered on a dozen planets. But this was first class stuff, not diluted or adulterated with the thousand and one synthetics that were put in to stretch a good thing as far as it could go.

Without realizing the danger, he downed the entire contents of the jug.



He felt good. He hadn't felt so good in years, not since his mother had made him

a special cake for his birthday when he was—let me see now, was it eight or nine? No matter, it had been many years ago, and the occasion had been notable for the fact that she had let him drink some of the older people's punch, made with a tiny bit of some alcoholic drink. He felt *very* good. He picked up his helmet and put it on his head, and stuck the stem of a green flower rakishly through the exit valve of the helmet, so that the flower seemed to dance every time he exhaled, and staggered out of his hut.

He was fortunate that it was dark. "I'm drunk," he told himself. "Never been so drunk in my life. Never felt so good. Mother never felt so good. Malevski never felt so good."

He passed a shadowy figure in the dark and said, "Hiya, friend and worshipper. Ever see a god drunk before?"

The figure bowed, and kept its head lowered until he had moved on.

"Drunk or sober, I'm shtill divine," he said proudly. And he began to sing, loudly and impressively, his voice orchestral in his own ears within the confines of the helmet. "Ould Lang Shyne, she ain't what she ushed to be, ain't what she ushed to be—" The words came easily, and as it seemed, naturally to his lips.

After awhile, however, he tired of them. After awhile he found that his legs had tired of them. He sat down with a thump under a spiky tree and said solemnly, "Never felt so good in my life. Never felt so happy—it's a lie. I don't feel good."

He didn't, not any more. He felt sick to his stomach. A touch of sober thought had corroded the happiness of his intoxication, and he was sick and afraid. Today their god was a hero, today they would forgive him everything. But did they actually *prefer* a drunken god? No. Drunkenness made a god human, all too human. A drunken god was a weak god, and his hold on his worshippers was their belief in his strength. As he valued his life, he must get drunk no more.

"Ain't gonna get drunk no more, no more," he sang sadly and solemnly to himself, and finally he fell asleep.



He awoke with a hangover and a memory. He was not one of those men who when sober forget all they have done when drunk. He remembered everything. And he knew that he must put drunkenness away from him.

That morning they brought him only food and flowers. But at the evening

ceremony they presented him once more with a jug of liquor as an additional reward for his destruction of the deadly beast. For the first time, Bradley took an active part in the ceremony. He held up the jug and said in grave tones, "In the name of Carrie Nation, I renounce thee and all thy works."

Then he poured out the liquor and smashed the jug on the ground.

After that, the smashing of the jug was part of the ceremony of worshipping him. It left him unhappy at first, but sober. After awhile, the unhappiness disappeared, but the soberness remained. From now on, he would act as a god should act.

The natives were not stupid, he saw that very clearly. The first jugs they had offered him had been beautiful objects, of excellent workmanship. But when they perceived that the only use he had for them was to break them, the quality deteriorated rapidly. Now the jugs they brought him were crude things indeed, made for the sole purpose of being smashed. He wondered how many other tribes had tricked their gods similarly.

No, they were not at all stupid. It struck him that with such advantages of civilization as he himself had enjoyed, they would have gone much further than he did. Two weeks or so after he had come down from the sky to be their god, he saw that they had learned from him. One of the young men appeared during the day wearing a wooden helmet. It was a helmet obviously patterned after his own, although it had no glass or plastic, and the openings in front of the eyes were left blank. The mythical Earth-hero, Prometheus, had brought fire down from the skies. He had brought the Helmet. He was Bradley, the Helmet-Bringer.

Even at that he had underestimated his worshippers. He had thought at first that the helmets were meant merely for ornament and decoration. He learned better one day when a swarm of creatures like flying lizards swept down out of a group of trees in a fierce attack. He had not known that such creatures existed here, and now that he saw them, he realized how fortunate it was that they were not more numerous. They had sharp teeth and sharper claws, and they tore at his head with a ferocity that struck fear into his heart. His gun was of less use than usual against them. He could catch one or two, but the others moved too swiftly for him to aim.

By this time, others of the natives wore wooden helmets, and he could see how the sharp claws ripped splinter after splinter from them. But the birds or lizards, or whatever they were, didn't go unscathed. From a sort of skin bellows, several of the natives blew a gray mist at them, and where the mist made contact with

the leather skin, the flying creatures seemed to be paralyzed in mid-flight, and they fell to the ground, where they were easily crushed to death. By the time they had given up the fight and fled, half a dozen of them were lying dead.

They were evidently useless for food because of the poison they contained. He was surprised to see, however, that the natives still had a use for them. They dragged the dead creatures into a field of growing crops, and left them there to rot into fertilizer.

But such incidents as this, he found, were to be rare. For the most part, the life here was peaceful, and he found himself liking it more and more. Now, without laughter, he wondered again what his mother would have thought of him.

She would have been proud. He realized now that she had done her best for him. And when every one else had given up hope for him, she had not. Perhaps she had protected him too much—but she had early learned the need for protection. He could look at her now in a new light. Her own father had died early in life, and then her husband soon after her son had been born. She had faced a tough fight, and had thought to spare him what she herself had gone through. Too bad she hadn't realized exactly what she was doing. She was bringing him up with the ability, as the old epigram had it, to resist everything but temptation.

The temptation to steal that petty cash, to put his hands into a drunk's pocket and lift the man's wallet, to lie to a pretty girl, to slug a helpless victim—he had resisted none of them. He had resisted nothing until that day he had poured the jugful of liquor on the ground and smashed the jug itself.

But could he blame his mother for all that? It had all been his own fault.

And it would be his own fault if he failed to resist the new temptation that now reared its pretty head—Aoooya. She had taken to coming to his hut-shrine for a private little ceremony of her own. You might almost have thought that she had fallen in love with him as an individual. He wondered whether she had been impressed by his helmet. Did she take that to be his actual head? No, of course not. They had made helmets for themselves, therefore they knew that the thing he wore was also a helmet. Perhaps they knew more about him than he thought.

But they continued to worship him, that was the main thing. And Aoooya brought him, every day, little presents, special flowers and food delicacies, that argued a personal affection.

This was a danger that he recognized from the beginning. Perhaps a god *might* fall in love with a mortal without losing his godliness. Perhaps. It had happened before. But, however the rest of the tribe might react to the idea, Bradley had noticed one young man who liked to stay near the girl, and he knew that this rival wouldn't take kindly to it at all. He might resent the god's behavior. And what happened when these people didn't like the way a god behaved? Why, they struck his head off.

The god might act first, of course. The young man wouldn't stand a chance against him if he used his gun. In fact, Bradley could blast the other man unobserved, make him disappear into vapor, without leaving any traces of how he died. That was murder, but if a god couldn't get away with murder, what sort of god was he? A pretty poor, cheap sort indeed. Yes, he could make his own rules.

And he could go on, maintaining his godhood by little murders of that sort, and other deadly miracles, until they hated him more than they loved him. That would follow inevitably. And then, when they all hated him, not even his gun would save him. Then—

"You're a liar," he told himself fiercely. "That isn't the thing you're afraid of. Your weakness is that you don't have a murderous nature. You could kill one or two of them and get away with it, and you'd be able to control yourself and kill no more. That time you hit the man over the head, you didn't intend to kill him either. You were more frightened, at first, anyway, by the thought that you might have killed him, than by the danger of being caught. You were overjoyed when he lived.

"You hate to kill, that's your trouble. You've had a sense of responsibility all along, but it never had a chance to develop. Now it's developed. You feel responsible for these people, for Aoooya and for the rest of them. That's why you can't take advantage of them. You've been posing as a rebel all your life, and you're just a respectable, law-abiding citizen at heart."

He winced at the thought. His own society had never accepted him at his own valuation. This one took him for a much greater being than he took himself, and there seemed to be nothing to do but to live up to what he was expected to be.

All the same, Aoooya continued to be a tempting morsel, and sooner or later, he

feared, he would not be able to resist her. And then the planet itself provided a diversion.

They had never seen such a thing and had no idea of what it presaged, but he knew. He had heard of it on Earth and on Venus, and he had seen it on other planets where the rock formations had not yet settled down. A little hollow appeared first in the ground, and then the hollow was pushed out and suddenly blown into the air. Steam whistled through the newly made vent, a shower of steam and hot dust and red hot fragments of rock. Slowly the vent grew, until the cloud from the terrifying geyser darkened the sky and spread panic through the tribe.

He knew what would happen next. They were running around in terror, but not for one moment was he himself in doubt. He donned his complete space suit, in order to impress them the more, then stalked into the middle of them, and said, "Pick up all your possessions and follow me."

They stared at him, and he showed them what he meant by picking up the belongings of one household in his gloved hands, and handing them to a waiting woman. Then, when they had grasped the idea and were gathering all they owned, he led them toward the safety of the trees. Five minutes after they had set off, the lava began to flow from the new-born volcano, scorching the ground for a hundred yards around, sparks smoking and smoldering in the treetops.

The head start he had given them was enough to help them escape the resultant forest fire. All that day they traveled, until finally they came to a forest which couldn't burn, and here they rested. And here they settled down to build their lives anew.

It must have been a comfort to know that a god had led them to safety and was helping them make the new start. Bradley helped them with his gun, which blasted dangerous beasts, and even more with his slightly superior knowledge. He showed them how to fashion tools from stone and how to use these to build better huts. He taught them how to make swords and other weapons, so that henceforth they wouldn't be forced to rely for defense on poison alone. He was the most industrious god since Vulcan. And in helping them he found that he had no time for Aoooya.

Came the day when the new village settled down to its changed routine of life. The morning ceremony before his new shrine had just been completed, but Bradley was not satisfied. Something was wrong. Yanyoo's demeanor, Aoooya's

—

With a shock, Bradley realized what it was. From old Yanyoo down the line, none of the natives seemed to have their original fear of him. There was respect, there was affection, certainly, but the respect and affection were those due an older brother rather than a god.

And he was not displeased. Being a god had been a wearying business. Being a friend might be a great deal more pleasant. Yes, the change was something to be happy about.

But he had little time to be happy. For that same morning, there came what he had so long dreaded. Out of a clear, shipless sky, Malevski appeared, strolling toward him as casually as if he had been there all along, and said, "Nice little ceremony you have here."

"Hello, Malevski. Don't give me the credit. They thought it up."

"Ingenious. Almost as ingenious as the way they've used the help you gave them. We had this tribe listed long ago as a very capable one, far behind the rest of its System in development, it's true, but only because it had started late up the evolutionary ladder. It had been doing very nicely on its own, and we didn't want to interfere unless we could give it some real help.

"I'll admit that I had a few qualms at first, when we traced you here and learned that you had landed among them. But we've been observing you for the past day and a half—our space ship landed beyond that burned out stretch of ground, not too close to that volcano—and I'll have to admit that, judging from your past record, I didn't think you had it in you."

"I suppose that's over with now," said Bradley.

"Yes, you're finished with being a god. We don't believe in kidding the natives, Bradley!"

Bradley nodded ruefully. "They don't seem to believe in it, either. I guess they found out I wasn't a god before I did. But it didn't seem to matter to them." He sighed, and turned toward the new village. "Do you mind, if I sort of—well, hold a farewell ceremony before we go? They won't understand, but they'll feel better than if I just go off...."

Malevski shook his head firmly. "No, no time for that. I'll have to get out a full report, and we're in a hurry to get off. Any word you'd like to have sent out to your mother, Bradley, before we blast?"

Bradley looked back again, and his shoulders came up more firmly. He'd taught his people here, and led them; but he'd learned a few things himself—he'd found he could take what was necessary. He'd found that the easiest way wasn't always the best, that getting drunk was no way out, and that real friendship and respect meant more than the words of big-shots. Maybe he'd learned enough to be able to take regeneration....

He managed to grin, a little lopsidedly, at Malevski. "Yeah. You might send her a message. Tell her I'm fine, and that I've learned to wipe my own nose. I think she'll be glad to hear that."

"She will," Malevski told him. "When she hears that you're Provisional Governor of this planet, she'll even believe it."

"Provisional Governor?" Bradley stood with his mouth open, staring. He shook his head. "But what about regeneration...?"

Malevski laughed. "You're appointed, on the basis of my first report about what you're doing here, Bradley," he answered. "As to regeneration ... well, you think about it, while we bring in the supplies we're supposed to leave for you, before we blast out of here."

He went off, chuckling, towards his ship, leaving Bradley to puzzle over it.

Then, just as Malevski disappeared, he understood. Damn it, they'd tricked him! They'd left him here where he had to be a god and assume the responsibilities of a god. And through that, he'd been regenerated—completely, thoroughly regenerated!

Suddenly, he was chuckling as hard as Malevski as he swung around and went back to face his former worshippers. And they were coming forward to meet him, their friendly smiles matching his own.

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