

Native Son

T. D. Hamm



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NATIVE SON



By

T. D. Hamm

Tommy hated Earth, knowing his mother might go home to Mars without him. Worse, would a robot secretly take her place?...

TOMMY Benton, on his first visit to Earth, found the long-anticipated wonders of twenty-first-century New York thrilling the first week, boring and unhappy the second week, and at the end of the third he was definitely ready to go home.

The never-ending racket of traffic was torture to his abnormally acute ears. Increased atmospheric pressure did funny things to his chest and stomach. And quick and sure-footed on Mars, he struggled constantly against the heavy gravity that made all his movements clumsy and uncoordinated.

The endless canyons of towering buildings, with their connecting Skywalks, oppressed and smothered him. Remembering the endless vistas of *rabbara* fields beside a canal that was like an inland sea, homesickness flooded over him.

He hated the people who stared at him with either open or hidden amusement. His Aunt Bee, for instance, who looked him up and down with frank disapproval and said loudly, "For Heavens sake, Helen! Take him to a *good* tailor and get those bones covered up!"

Was it his fault he was six inches taller than Terran boys his age, and had long, thin arms and legs? Or that his chest was abnormally developed to compensate for an oxygen-thin atmosphere? I'd like to see *her*, he thought fiercely, out on the Flatlands; she'd be gasping like a canal-fish out of water.

Even his parents, happily riding the social merry-go-round of Terra, after eleven years in the Martian flatlands, didn't seem to understand how he felt.

"Don't you *like* Earth, Tommy?" queried his mother anxiously.

"Oh ... it's all right, I guess."

"... 'A nice place to visit' ..." said his father sardonically.

"... 'but I wouldn't live here if they gave me the place!' ..." said his mother, and they both burst out laughing for no reason that Tommy could see. Of course, they did that lots of times at home and Tommy laughed with them just for the warm, secure feeling of belonging. This time he didn't feel like laughing.

"When *are* we going home?" he repeated stubbornly.

His father pulled Tommy over in the crook of his arm and said gently, "Well, not right away, son. As a matter of fact, how would you like to stay here and go to school?"

Tommy pulled away and looked at him incredulously.

"I've *been* to school!"

"Well, yes," admitted his father. "But only to the colony schools. You don't want to grow up and be an ignorant Martian sandfoot all your life, do you?"

"Yes, I do! I *want* to be a Martian sandfoot. And I want to go home

where people don't *look* at me and say, 'So this is your little Martian!'"

Benton, Sr., put his arm around Tommy's stiffly resistant shoulders. "Look here, old man," he said persuasively. "I thought you wanted to be a space engineer. You can't do that without an education you know. And your Aunt Bee will take good care of you."

Tommy faced him stubbornly. "I don't want to be any old spaceman. I want to be a sandfoot like old Pete. And I want to go home."

Helen bit back a smile at the two earnest, stubborn faces so ridiculously alike, and hastened to avert the gathering storm.

"Now look, fellows. Tommy's career doesn't have to be decided in the next five minutes ... after all, he's only ten. He can make up his mind later on if he wants to be an engineer or a *rabbara* farmer. Right now, he's going to stay here and go to school ... *and* I'm staying with him."

Resolutely avoiding both crestfallen faces, Helen, having shepherded Tommy to bed, returned to the living room acutely conscious of Big Tom's bleak, hurt gaze at her back.

"Helen, you're going to make a sissy out of the boy," he said at last. "There isn't any reason why he can't stay here at home with Bee."

Helen turned to face him.

"Earth *isn't* home to Tommy. And your sister Bee told him he ought to be out playing football with the boys instead of hanging around the house."

"But she knows the doctor said he'd have to take it easy for a year till he was accustomed to the change in gravity and air-pressure," he answered incredulously.

"Exactly. She also asked me," Helen went on grimly, "if I thought he'd be less of a freak as he got older."

Tom Benton swore. "Bee always did have less sense than the average hen," he gritted. "My son a freak! Hell's-bells!"

Tommy, arriving at the hall door in time to hear the tail-end of the sentence, crept back to bed feeling numb and dazed. So even his father thought he was a freak.

THE last few days before parting was one of strain for all of them. If Tommy was unnaturally subdued, no one noticed it; his parents were not feeling any great impulse toward gaiety either.

They all went dutifully sight-seeing as before; they saw the Zoo, and went shopping on the Skywalks, and on the last day wound up at the great showrooms of "Androids, Inc."

Tommy had hated them on sight; they were at once too human and too inhuman for comfort. The hotel was full of them, and most private homes had at least one. Now they saw the great incubating vats, and the processing and finally the showroom where one of the finished products was on display as a maid, sweeping and dusting.

"There's one that's a dead-ringer for you, Helen. If you were a little better looking, that is." Tommy's dad pretended to compare them judicially. Helen laughed, but Tommy looked at him with a resentment. Comparing his mother to an Android....

"They say for a little extra you can get an exact resemblance. Maybe I'd better have one fixed up like you to take back with me," Big Tom added teasingly. Then as Helen's face clouded over, "Oh, hon, you know I was only kidding. Let's get out of here; this place gives me the collywobbles. Besides, I've got to pick up my watch."

But his mother's face was still unhappy and Tommy glowered sullenly at his father's back all the way to the watch-shop.

It was a small shop, with an inconspicuous sign down in one corner of the window that said only, "KRUMBEIN—watches," and was probably the most famous shop of its kind in the world. Every spaceman landing on Terra left his watch to be checked by the dusty, little old man who was the genius of the place. Tommy ranged wide-eyed about the clock and chronometer crammed interior. He stopped fascinated before the last case. In it was a watch ... but, *what* a watch! Besides the regulation Terran dial, it had a second smaller dial that registered the corresponding time on Mars. Tommy's whole heart went out to it in an ecstasy of longing. He thought wistfully that if you could know what time it was there, you could imagine what everyone was doing and it wouldn't seem so far away. Haltingly, he tried to explain.

"Look, Mom," he said breathlessly. "It's almost five o'clock at home. Douwie will be coming up to the barn to be fed. Gosh, do you suppose old Pete will remember about her?"

His mother smiled at him reassuringly. "Of course he will, silly. Don't forget he was the one who caught and tamed her for you."

Tommy gulped as he thought of Douwie. Scarcely as tall as himself; the big, rounded, mouselike ears, and the flat, cloven pads that could carry her so swiftly over the sandy Martian flatlands. One of the last dwindling herds of native Martian douwies, burden-carriers of a vanished race, she had been Tommy's particular pride and joy for the last three years.

Behind him, Tommy heard his mother murmur under her breath, "Tom ... the watch; *could* we?"

And his Dad regretfully, "It's a pretty expensive toy for a youngster,

Helen. And even a *rabbara* raiser's bank account has limits."

"Of course, dear; it was silly of me." Helen smiled a little ruefully. "And if Mr. Krumbein has your watch ready, we *must* go. Bee and some of her friends are coming over, and it's only a few hours 'till you ... leave."

Big Tom squeezed her elbow gently, understandingly, as she blinked back quick tears. Trailing after them, Tommy saw the little by-play and his heart ached. The guilt-complex building up in him grew and deepened.

He knew he had only to say, "Look, I don't mind staying. Aunt Bee and I will get along swell," and everything would be all right again. Then the terror of this new and complex world—as it would be without a familiar face—swept over him and kept him silent.

His overwrought feelings expressed themselves in a nervously rebelling stomach, culminating in a disgraceful moment over the nearest gutter. The rest of the afternoon he spent in bed recuperating.

In the living room Aunt Bee spoke her mind in her usual, high-pitched voice.

"It's disgraceful, Helen. A boy his age.... None of the *Bentons* ever had nerves."

His mother's reply was inaudible, but on the heels of his father's deeper tones, Aunt Bee's voice rose in rasping indignation.

"*Well!* I never! And from my own brother, too. From now on don't come to me for help with your spoiled brat. Good-bye!"

The door slammed indignantly, his mother chuckled, and there was a spontaneous burst of laughter. Tommy relaxed and lay back happily. Anyway, that was the last of Aunt Bee!

THE next hour or two passed in a flurry of ringing phones, people coming and going, and last-minute words and reminders. Then suddenly it was time to leave. Dad burst in for a last quick hug and a promise to send him pictures of Douwie and her foal, due next month; Mother dropped a hasty kiss on his hair and promised to hurry back from the Spaceport. Then Tommy was alone, with a large, painful lump where his heart ought to be.

The only activity was the almost noiseless buzzing as the hotel android ran the cleaner over the living room. Presently even that ceased, and Tommy lay relaxed and inert, sleepily watching the curtains blow in and out at the open window. Thirty stories above the street the noises were pleasantly muffled and remote, and his senses drifted aimlessly to and fro on the tides of half-sleep.

Drowsily his mind wandered from the hotel's android servants ... to the strictly utilitarian mechanical monstrosity at home, known affectionately as "Old John" ... to the android showroom where they had seen the one that Dad said looked like Mother....

He jolted suddenly, sickeningly awake. Suppose, his mind whispered treacherously, suppose that Dad *had* ordered one to take Mom's place ... not on Mars, but *here* while she returned to Mars with him. Suppose that instead of Mom he discovered one of those *Things* ... or even worse, suppose he went on from day to day not even knowing....

It was a bad five minutes; he was wet with perspiration when he lay back on his pillows, a shaky smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. He had a secret defense against the Terror. He giggled a little at the thought of what Aunt Bee would say if she knew.

And what had brought him back from the edge of hysteria was the

triumphant knowledge that with the abnormally acute hearing bred in the thin atmosphere of Mars, no robot ever created could hide from him the infinitesimal ticking of the electronic relays that gave it life. Secure at last, his overstrung nerves relaxed and he slid gratefully over the edge of sleep.

He woke abruptly, groping after some vaguely remembered sound. A soft clicking of heels down the hall.... Of course, his mother back from the Spaceport! Now she would be stopping at his door to see if he were asleep. He lay silently; through his eyelashes he could see her outlined in the soft light from the hall. She was coming in to see if he was tucked in. In a moment he would jump up and startle her with a hug, as she leaned over him. In a moment....

Screaming desperately, he was out of bed, backing heedlessly across the room. He was still screaming as the low sill of the open window caught him behind the knees and toppled him thirty stories to the street.

Alone in the silent room, Helen Benton stood dazed, staring blindly at the empty window.

Tommy's parting gift from his father slid from her hand and lay on the carpet, still ticking gently.

It was 9:23 on Mars.

The End

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