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OLD FRIENDS ARE THE BEST

By JACK SHARKEY

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Are you one of those people who save the best things for the last ... who eat all the chocolate sundae away from under the maraschino cherry? If so, you are very like the Peter W. Merrill Moonplant.

It had no awareness of time, and so did not know nor concern itself with the millennia that passed since it first drew up the dissolved silicates from the shifting grey remnants of soil and arranged them inside the walls of the thousand green pods that were its body cells, and settled down to wait. Somewhere within its fragile cortex, a tiny pulse of life beat. It was a feeble pulse, to be sure, and one that a man, unless he could observe it for a thousand years without blinking, would not be aware of. As the normal human heart beats seventy-two times a minute, so did this tiny swelling of tube contract once each hundred years; fifty tireless years of contraction, then fifty soothing years of relaxation, bringing the walls of the slender tube together, then letting them ease apart.

But it was sufficient for its life.

The pallid yellow sap was moved about inside the plant, once each hundred years, and the plasm of the silicon-protected cellular structure absorbed just the needed amount, bleeding off the waste products between the very molecules of the silicon buttresses, and patiently waiting the century out till the second helping came oozing around.

And so it lay dormant, through heat that could send a man into convulsions of agony in seconds, through cold that fractional degree lower than can be achieved in a scientific laboratory. It did not know where it was, nor what it was, nor how precarious—by cosmic standards—was its chance of survival, with sap enough stored in the stiff, coarse roots for only a few more million years.

It simply was, and knew that it was, and was satisfied.

Such a tiny organism can have only the most rudimentary of memories, but it remembered. Once—Once long before, there had been ... more.



Life had been the same, but somehow fuller. When it tried to recall exactly in what this fullness lay, the memory just was not there; only a vague recollection of comfort, motion, satiation.

When the men landed upon the moon in the twentieth century, they did not find it at first. Locating it would have been comparable to stumbling upon a solitary blade of grass, imbedded in ice at the South Pole. Men came to the moon, though, and began to settle there. The first homes they knew were mere metal shacks, filled with life-giving gases of their planetary atmosphere, and devoid of all comforts save those necessary for maintenance of life.

But men have a way of rising above the status quo, and so, within half a pulsebeat of the plant, the surface of the moon became dotted with these iglooic shacks, then pressurized tunnels radiated out in a unifying network, and soon the Domes began to grow; immense translucent light-weight structures of enormous strength bubbled up on the moon, and soon cities were being built beneath them, strange towering fairyland cities on this satellite where people and

architecture alike boasted six times the power possessed on Earth. The cities soared upward in glinting, stalagmitic pinnacles whose tapering ends seemed to threaten the fabric of the Domes themselves, but were in reality still far below the blue-white curving surface.

Machines lay buried now in the grey pumice that was the surface of the moon; machines that drained gases from the oxides and nitrates within the planetoid and filled the Domes for the people with the life-giving gases. And still the moon grew more Domes, and more.

And then, three motions of the tiny plant after the primal landing of men on the moon, three half-cycles later, a pulse-and-a-half—It was found.

The man who found it was an engineer, a man of high intelligence. For, building on the moon was a perilous undertaking. A man had to know stresses and strains, had to be able to read gauges that warned of vacuum pockets beneath the crust of the moon that—if broken into—could suck the life-giving gases from the metal caissons within which the men laid the foundations of new Domes. Had it been on Earth, and the workman unionized and possibly unlettered, it would have had the fate of a dandelion that stands in the path of a growing subway tube.

Unfortunately, the man—as mentioned—had intelligence.

Carefully, the fossil—so he presumed—was cut away from the rock in which it was rooted, and laid gently in a bed of soft cotton, and that bed in a plastic casing, and the casing in a metal box. The box was loaded aboard a spaceship and sent to a man back on Earth.

This man was an eminent botanist, and—eminent or not—he nearly jumped with joy when he'd opened the box, unsealed the container, plucked away the cotton, and saw the plant lying there. It was dead, insofar as he knew, and apparently useless except perhaps as a club, but the botanist was delighted to receive it. Through his head passed

notions of cutting it in two, then polishing the twin cut surfaces, and studying the cell structure, so that he might compare its construction with similar—if there were any—plants of Earth, and then write a learned thesis about it which would be read only by other eminent botanists, who would all then curse their luck for not having been friends with any engineers on the moon. The whole procedure—taking the cosmic view—was almost pointless, but it would make the botanist happy, at least.

However, after setting up his instruments, and placing the plant in a sort of padded vise to steady it against the invasion of its privacy, he chanced to see a bit of root, broken off by sheer unaccustomed weight on the planet, lying upon the lab table, and he placed that beneath the glass lens of his microscope and studied it instead.

"I'll be damned!" he said. "The plasm is *liquid!*"

A few dozen of the shattered cells had indeed let their contents spill out onto the slide of his 'scope.

"I wonder," he mused, "if it is viable?"

Wouldn't *that* make for an interesting paper, he went on, building his dreams upon dreams. A moonplant! Growing in my garden! He decided, as is the way with botanists, to name his—it was now "his"; having abandoned liberty when it abandoned the moon—to name his plant after himself.

And that's how it came to be called the "Peter W. Merrill Moonplant." He put it in his garden, arranged a small protective wire cylinder around it, and sprinkled it with water. Then he went into the house to start typing up his notes for that forthcoming paper.

As he lay there in the soft loam, feeling the cool trickling of the water passing over his stiff tendrils, the newly christened Pete felt a stirring within himself. The sunlight that now struck him was filtered by an atmosphere, and gentle in its action upon him. Pete prodded his memory, and suddenly decided that silicates, after all, are not the most comfortable of linings for one's tender green cells. He seemed to recall a state of lush, sybaritic softness, in pre-silicate times. Decidedly, the silicates must go, thought Pete.

And go they did, molecule by molecule, down into the earth through his roots, which were now acting as tiny spigots, getting rid of the scratchy stuff that had bolstered the cell walls against change for millennia past, leaving Pete softer, greener, livelier, and a constant delight to the heart of Peter W. Merrill the First, whenever he came out to tend his plant, between pages of his thesis.

Pete, after spewing the last hateful molecule away, reversed his tiny fibre engines, and began to draw in. He drew in all sorts of things, as the days passed. A lot of minerals, and just enough water to float them in. Mostly, Pete's growing hunger sought out iron. Pete didn't know why he wanted iron, any more than a smoker knows why he wants another cigarette, but Pete's interest in iron was as intense as any smoker's in tobacco.

Above the ground, he grew very few inches larger, merely broadening his dark, green spiral leaves a bit to catch the tiny amount of warmth he required for growth. But beneath the soil, as with any tuberous plant, his roots were spread in a rough circular spoke-like pattern that reached about ten miles in every direction.

Pete Senior, had he tried to dig his plant up, would have been very much surprised to find he could not do it. But he didn't try, so his life went on as usual, with no surprises, which is the way he preferred it,

so he was happy enough.

It wasn't until his paper had been duly published, and botanical cronies had shaken the dust from their whiskers and toddled around to see this enviable possession, that something of the root structure was discovered.

"Seems to spread underground," one remarked.

"Kind of a lunatic crab-grass," another jibed.

"Sure you're not pulling our leg, Merrill?" said a third. "Seems a bit stunted."

"Gravity," said Pete Senior. "Not used to it yet."

Then they all had coffee and cake, shook hands with Pete Senior, and went to their homes and laboratories.

By this time, of course, at the farthest reaches of Pete's root network, duplicate Petes were popping up above ground, quietly and unostentatiously (Pete stood barely five inches high), and much like their parent. They, too, began sending out spoke-like root networks. Some of them, stronger than others, sent roots for a radius of a hundred miles, others for a few leagues and no more.

Eventually, Pete Senior reached an age where his body cells died more rapidly than they were replaced, that is, he achieved old age, and he passed from his life, leaving a wife, three children, and an unpaid fertilizer bill.

Pete himself, by now was pulsing considerably faster. In fact, incredibly faster, after his once-a-century contraction of short years before. His pulse rate was now in the neighborhood of ten per second, which is a pretty good increase. It soon reached hundreds per second.

And his offspring weren't far behind him either.

Since the whole planet was now as interwoven with Pete-type networks as the inside of a baseball with string, this constant vibration—which slowly began to beat in a united concentration—began to make itself felt.

People started to complain about it.

So scientists with seismographs, and even dousers with willow twigs, began to seek out the source of this unnerving, almost supersonic, thrilling of the planet crust. Eventually, they located the tiny green plants with the spirally leaves at the center—the loudest point—of each network. Someone recognized the plant, and they confirmed this someone's suspicions by a check of the Public Library's back issues of *Botanist's Quarterly*. It was the moonplant, all right.

The Peter W. Merrill Moonplant. Yes sir. That's what it was.

The public, though, was not satisfied with the finding of a *name* for the disturbance, and insisted that it be brought to a *halt* somehow. Naturally, the International Society of Botanists, Biologists and Biochemists raised one hell of a fuss about this, but on a democratic planet they were summarily outvoted, and all spirally little green Peter W. Merrill Moonplants were—well, not *uprooted*; that would be impossible—But they were all cropped flush with the earth wherever found, and salt, acid, and all manner of nasty things poured into the stumps.

However, nothing happened at all to the vibrations.

People began to get fidgety, and started petitioning their representatives in government to *Do Something*. A lot of speeches were then made, all over Earth, about the noise and general disturbance of the moonplant roots, but none of them offered a solution to the increasing racket.

It was about this time that plumbines started hanging crooked. Oh, it wasn't detected at first. How could it be, at first? Because you judge things by plumbines, not vice-versa. However, in a month, when everything was about five degrees off the vertical, notice began to be taken.

When oranges began rolling off the ground in the California and Florida groves, and huddling in a mound here and there upon the countryside, the Spirit of Worry injected itself into the public consciousness. Niagara Falls' spectacular skew-wise splashing toward the Canadian side didn't set many hearts at ease, either.

And then someone remembered the moonplants, and saw that each new apparent gravity-tug was coming from the stump of one of the plants, and a leading scientist figured out the answer, after getting a snipped-off segment of moonplant root and testing the hell out of it.

"It seems," he announced to the world, or that portion of the world that was watching his appearance on TV; there being considerable competition with a new series of NBC Specials on another channel, "It seems that this Peter W. Merrill Moonplant is—er—magnetic, to a certain degree. Though not magnetism as we know it. It's more as though each plant, through the positioning of its roots, and the coiling of same, plus a heavy concentration of iron in its physical makeup, has managed to make itself—or, rather, the stump of itself, since all such plants were cut down, a short while back—to make itself the center of an artificial gravity field. This field seems to grow—Rather, these *many* fields seem to grow in strength by the hour, and they have

a tendency to topple things, the gravitational 'tug' being most disastrous near the centers of the fields. The rims, though the angle of gravity is sharper there, are safer for stability only because they are balanced by more 'tugs' from adjoining fields...."

Well, he went on this way for an hour or so, and soon his listeners—those who stayed tuned in—knew what the problem was: "Down" wasn't going to be "down" much longer. It was going to depend on which moonplant stump you happened to be near.



The prospect didn't seem too much fun, and people started selling their homes and such, and booking passage to the moon, where life was controlled, but carefree, and free of annoying vibrations and rolling oranges.

Lunar Real Estate enjoyed a fabulous boom for weeks after the telecast by the scientist, but it was soon "all filled up," and further immigrations would have to await the construction of more Domes to house the newcomers.

The laggards, understandably, raised a fuss about this callous attitude, and went moonward anyway until about two-thirds of the Earth's population was on the moon, the place becoming so hopelessly crowded that people had to half-rent rooms there, sleeping in alternating shifts with other half-renters, and spending their waking hours wandering the streets.

"Things," sighed one realtor to another, "can't get much worse."

And that's when the first meteor landed on Earth. In the general excitement, first about vibrations, then about gravitational fields, then about packing up and going to the moon, most newspapers had

pushed to the want-ad pages little articles by eminent astronomers, in which were noted the odd behaviors of certain large planetoids in the asteroid belt between Earth and Mars. These cosmic hunks of rock seemed to be "peeling off" the general formation of the ellipse followed by their fellows, and moving sunward^[1] singly or in small homogenous groupings.

Well, the first one landed and left a dent on Earth where the Congo used to be, the shock being felt as far north as Oslo, to add to their vibrational, gravitational and evacuational difficulties.

Scientists on the moon—being as singleminded as scientists anywhere—became ecstatic. At last the mystery of the ages was solved: Who put the pocks in the face of the moon? A Peter W. Merrill Moonplant, of course! They looked down in rapture as meteor after meteor—drawn across the countless miles of space by the pulsating gravity fields, plunged into the Earth, leaving pocks visible to the naked moon dweller's eye. And darned if each meteor didn't strike dead center of each plant network.



After about a month, Earth looked almost exactly like the moon had once looked, with the exception of one locale: Australia, and much of the Pacific Ocean surrounding it.

"It will indeed be a titanic meteor that hits there!" the moon scientists enthused. For their careful check of the records showed that only one plant had been found on the whole continent of Australia, toward the eastern coast; which meant that its network probably extended beneath the Pacific itself, with a gigantic field reaching its hungry magnetic fingers into space.

And then someone noticed that no more asteroids had peeled from the

formation. The void between the asteroid belt and Earth was barren of hurtling rock.

"Wonderful!" the scientists enthused. "It means that each field down there on Earth ceased its tug the moment its meteor struck it. That means that once the final meteor lands, the Peter W. Merrill Moonplant will be dead, and we can get some of the crowd off this place. Earth's a bit ragged-looking, but after all, it's Home."

"Funny," said one of the younger scientists, "that the moonplant went so far afield for meteors, and yet did not disturb the delicate gravitational balance between Earth and the moon, its own Satellite."

"Let us hope," said an older scientist, "that this enormous Australian network has not been saving itself for us." He laughed at this little pleasantry, but no one joined him, because someone had just peered through a telescope and noticed that Australia seemed to be getting larger.

"You know what?" said the young scientist, finally. "We're falling to the Earth, to form the largest pockmark of all!"

"What a spectacle!" cried another scientist. "Pity we won't be alive to witness it. I wonder why the Peter W. Merrill Moonplant saved us for last?"

"Possibly," said the young scientist, "because—as with a wedding—the groom asks all his relatives to come and see him married, and finally picks out the person who is to be the Best Man. The moonplant probably considers the moon an old buddy."

The older scientists, however, gave this statement the stoniest of non-replies, and refused even to speak to the hapless young man for the duration of their journey downward to squashy death against the home planet.

Romanticism and Science just don't mix.

THE END

[1] Ergo: Earthward

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