

# The Lotus Eaters



Stanley G. Weinbaum

*Éditions de l'Âge d'Or*

## Stanley G. Weinbaum

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## The Lotus Eaters

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"Whew!" whistled "Ham" Hammond, staring through the right forward observation port. "What a place for a honeymoon!"

"Then you shouldn't have married a biologist," remarked Mrs. Hammond over his shoulder, but he could see her gray eyes dancing in the glass of the port. "Nor an explorer's daughter," she added. For Pat Hammond, until her marriage to Ham a scant four weeks ago, had been Patricia Burlingame, daughter of the great Englishman who had won so much of the twilight zone of Venus for Britain, exactly as Crowley had done for the United States.

"I didn't," observed Ham, "marry a biologist. I married a girl who happened to be interested in biology; that's all. It's one of her few drawbacks. "He cut the blast to the underjets, and the rocket settled down gently on a cushion of flame toward the black landscape below. Slowly, carefully, he dropped the unwieldy mechanism until there was the faintest perceptible jar; then he killed the blast suddenly, the floor beneath them tilted slightly, and a strange silence fell like a blanket after the cessation of the roaring blast.

"We're here," he announced.

"So we are," agreed Pat. "Where's here?"

"It's a point exactly seventy-five miles east of the Barrier opposite Venoble, in the British Cool Country. To the north is, I suppose, the continuation of the Mountains of Eternity, and to the south is Heaven knows what. And this last applies to the east."

"Which is a good technical description of nowhere." Pat laughed. "Let's turn off the lights and look at nowhere."

## Stanley G. Weinbaum

---

She did, and in the darkness the ports showed as faintly luminous circles.

"I suggest," she proceeded, "that the Joint Expedition ascend to the dome for a less restricted view. We're here to investigate; let's do a little investigating."

"This joint of the expedition agrees," chuckled Ham.

He grinned in the darkness at the flippancy with which Pat approached the serious business of exploration. Here they were, the Joint Expedition of the Royal Society and the Smithsonian Institute for the Investigation of Conditions on the Dark Side of Venus, to use the full official title.

Of course Ham himself, while technically the American half of the project, was in reality a member only because Pat wouldn't consider anything else; but she was the one to whom the bearded society and institute members addressed their questions, their terms, and their instructions.

And this was no more than fair, for Pat, after all, was the leading authority on Hotland flora and fauna, and, moreover, the first human child born on Venus, while Ham was only an engineer lured originally to the Venusian frontier by a dream of quick wealth in xixtchil trading in the Hotlands.

It was there he had met Patricia Burlingame, and there, after an adventurous journey to the foothills of the Mountains of Eternity, that he had won her. They had been married in Erotia, the American settlement, less than a month ago, and then had come the offer of the expedition to the dark side.

Ham had argued against it. He had wanted a good terrestrial honeymoon in New York or London, but there were difficulties.

## The Lotus Eaters

---

Primarily there was the astronomical one; Venus was past perigee, and it would be eight long months before its slow swing around the Sun brought it back to a point where a rocket could overtake the Earth. Eight months in primitive, frontier-built Erotia, or in equally primitive Venoble, if they chose the British settlement, with no amusement save hunting, no radio, no plays, even very few books. And if they must hunt, Pat argued, why not add the thrill and danger of the unknown?

No one knew what life, if any, lurked on the dark side of the planet; very few had even seen it, and those few from rockets speeding over vast mountain ranges or infinite frozen oceans. Here was a chance to explain the mystery, and explore it, expenses paid.

It took a multimillionaire to build and equip a private rocket, but the Royal Society and the Smithsonian Institute, spending government money, were above such considerations. There'd be danger, perhaps, and breathtaking thrills, but—they could be alone.

The last point had won Ham. So they had spent two busy weeks provisioning and equipping the rocket, had ridden high above the ice barrier that bounds the twilight zone, and dashed frantically through the storm line, where the cold Underwind from the sunless side meets the hot Upper Winds that sweep from the desert face of the planet.

For Venus, of course, has no rotation, and hence no alternate days and nights. One face is forever sunlit, and one forever dark, and only the planet's slow liberation gives the twilight zone a semblance of seasons. And this twilight zone, the only habitable part of the planet, merges through the Hotlands on one side to the blazing desert, and on the other side ends abruptly in the ice barrier where the Upper Winds yield their moisture to the chilling breaths of the Underwind.

So here they were, crowded into the tiny glass dome above the navigation panel, standing close together on the top rung of the ladder, and with just room in the dome for both their heads. Ham slipped his arm around the girl as they stared at the scene outside.

Away off to the west was the eternal dawn—or sunset, perhaps—where the light glistened on the ice barrier. Like vast columns, the Mountains of Eternity thrust themselves against the light, with their mighty peaks lost in the lower clouds twenty-five miles above. There, a little south, were the ramparts of the Lesser Eternities, bounding American Venus, and between the two ranges were the perpetual lightnings of the storm line.

But around them, illuminated dimly by the refraction of the sunlight, was a scene of dark and wild splendor. Everywhere was ice—hills of it, spires, plains, boulders, and cliffs of it, all glowing a pallid green in the trickle of light from beyond the barrier. A world without motion, frozen and sterile, save for the moaning of the Underwind outside, not hindered here as the barrier shielded it from the Cool Country.

"It's—glorious!" Pat murmured.

"Yes," he agreed, "but cold, lifeless, yet menacing. Pat, do you think there is life here?"

"I should judge so. If life can exist on such worlds as Titan and Iapetus, it should exist here. How cold is it?" She glanced at the thermometer outside the dome, its column and figures self-luminous. "Only thirty below zero, Fahrenheit. Life exists on Earth at that temperature."

"Exists, yes. But it couldn't have developed at a temperature below freezing. Life has to be lived in liquid water."

## The Lotus Eaters

---

She laughed softly. "You're talking to a biologist, Ham. No; life couldn't have evolved at thirty below zero, but suppose it originated back in the twilight zone and migrated here? Or suppose it was pushed here by the terrific competition of the warmer regions? You know what conditions are in the Hotlands, with the molds and doughpots and Jack Ketch trees, and the millions of little parasitic things, all eating each other."

He considered this. "What sort of life should you expect?"

She chuckled. "Do you want a prediction? Very well. I'd guess, first of all, some sort of vegetation as a base, for animal life can't keep eating itself without some added fuel. It's like the story of the man with the cat farm, who raised rats to feed the cats, and then when he skinned the cats, he fed the bodies to the rats, and then fed more rats to the cats. It sounds good, but it won't work."

"So there ought to be vegetation. Then what?"

"Then? Heaven knows. Presumably the dark side life, if it exists, came originally from the weaker strains of twilight-zone life, but what it might have become—well, I can't guess. Of course, there's the *triops noctivivans* that I discovered in the Mountains of Eternity—"

"You discovered!" He grinned. "You were out as cold as ice when I carried you away from the nest of devils. You never even saw one!"

"I examined the dead one brought into Venoble by the hunters," she returned imperturbably. "And don't forget that the society wanted to name it after me—the *triops Patriciae*". Involuntarily a shudder shook her at the memory of those satanic creatures that had all but destroyed the two of them. "But I chose the other name—*triops noctivivans*, the three-eyed dweller in the dark."

"Romantic name for a devilish beast!"

"Yes; but what I was getting at is this—that it's probable that *triopts*—or *trioptses*—Say, what is the plural of *triopts*?"

"*Trioptes*," he grunted. "Latin root."

"Well, it's probable that *trioptes*, then, are among the creatures to be found here on the night side, and that those fierce devils who attacked us in that shadowed canyon in the Mountains of Eternity are an outpost, creeping into the twilight zone through the dark and sunless passes in the mountains. They can't stand light; you saw that yourself."

"So what?"

Pat laughed at the Americanism. "So this: From their form and structure—six limbs, three eyes, and all—it's plain that the *trioptes* are related to ordinary native Hotlanders. Therefore I conclude that they're recent arrivals on the dark side; that they didn't evolve here, but were driven here quite lately, geologically speaking. Or geologically isn't quite the word, because *geos* means earth. *venusologically* speaking, I should say."

"You shouldn't say. You're substituting a Latin root for a Greek one. What you mean is *aphrodisiologically* speaking."

She chuckled again. "What I mean, and should have said right away to avoid argument, is *palæontologically* speaking, which is better English. Anyway, I mean that *trioptes* haven't existed on the dark side for more than twenty to fifty thousand Earth years, or maybe less, because what do we know about the speed of evolution on Venus? Perhaps it's faster than on the Earth; maybe a *triopts* could adapt itself to night life in five thousand."

## The Lotus Eaters

---

"I've seen college students adapt themselves to night life in one semester!" He grinned.

She ignored this. "And therefore," she proceeded, "I argue that there must have been life here before *triops* arrived, since it must have found something to eat when it got here or it couldn't have survived. And since my examination showed that it's partly a carnivorous feeder, there must have been not only life here, but animal life. And that's as far as pure reason can carry the argument."

"So you can't guess what sort of animal life. Intelligent, perhaps?"

"I don't know. It might be. But in spite of the way you Yankees worship intelligence, biologically it's unimportant. It hasn't even much survival value."

"What? How can you say that, Pat? What except human intelligence has given man the supremacy of the Earth—and of Venus, too, for that matter?"

"But has man the supremacy of the Earth? Look here, Ham, here's what I mean about intelligence. A gorilla has a far better brain than a turtle, hasn't it? And yet which is the more successful—the gorilla, which is rare and confined only to a small region in Africa, or the turtle, which is common everywhere from the arctic to the antarctic? And as for man—well, if you had microscopic eyes, and could see every living thing on the Earth, you'd decide that man was just a rare specimen, and that the planet was really a nematode world—that is, a worm world—because the nematodes far outnumber all the other forms of life put together."

"But that isn't supremacy, Pat."

"I didn't say it was. I merely said that intelligence hasn't much survival value. If it has, why are the insects that have no intelligence, but just instinct, giving the human race such a battle? Men have better brains than corn borers, boll weevils, fruit flies, Japanese beetles, gypsy moths, and all the other pests, and yet they match our intelligence with just one weapon—their enormous fecundity. Do you realize that every time a child is born, until it's balanced by a death, it can be fed in only one way? And that way is by taking the food away from the child's own weight of insects."

"All that sounds reasonable enough, but what's it got to do with intelligence on the dark side of Venus?"

"I don't know," replied Pat, and her voice took on a queer tinge of nervousness. "I just mean—Look at it this way, Ham. A lizard is more intelligent than a fish, but not enough to give it any advantage. Then why did the lizard and its descendants keep on developing intelligence? Why—unless all life tends to become intelligent in time? And if that's true, then there may be intelligence even here—strange, alien, incomprehensible intelligence."

She shivered in the dark against him. "Never mind," she said in suddenly altered tones. "It's probably just fancy. The world out there is so weird, so unearthly—I'm tired, Ham. It's been a long day."

He followed her down into the body of the rocket. As the lights flicked on the strange landscape beyond the ports was blotted out, and he saw only Pat, very lovely in the scanty costume of the Cool Country.

"To-morrow, then," he said. "We've food for three weeks."

To-morrow, of course, meant only time and not daylight. They rose to the same darkness that had always blanketed the sunless half

## The Lotus Eaters

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of Venus, with the same eternal sunset green on the horizon at the barrier. But Pat was in better humor, and went eagerly about the preparations for their first venture into the open. She brought out the parkas of inch-thick wool sheathed in rubber, and Ham, in his capacity as engineer, carefully inspected the hoods, each with its crown of powerful lamps.

These were primarily for vision, of course, but they had another purpose. It was known that the incredibly fierce *trioptes* could not face light, and thus, by using all four beams in the helmet, one could move, surrounded by a protective aura. But that did not prevent both of them from including in their equipment two blunt blue automatics and a pair of the terrifically destructive flame pistols. And Pat carried a bag at her belt, into which she proposed to drop specimens of any dark-side flora she encountered, and fauna, too, if it proved small and harmless enough.

They grinned at each other through their masks. "Makes you look fat," observed Ham maliciously, and enjoyed her sniff of annoyance.

She turned, threw open the door, and stamped into the open.

It was different from looking out through a port. Then the scene had some of the unreality and all of the immobility and silence of a picture, but now it was actually around them, and the cold breath and mournful voice of the Underwind proved definitely enough that the world was real. For a moment they stood in the circlet of light from the rocket ports, staring awe-struck at the horizon where the unbelievable peaks of the Greater Eternities towered black against the false sunset.

Nearer, for as far as vision reached through that sunless, moonless, starless region, was a desolate tumbled plain where peaks, minarets, spires, and ridges of ice and stone rose in

indescribable and fantastic shapes, carved by the wild artistry of the Underwind.

Ham slipped a padded arm around Pat, and was surprised to feel her shiver. "Cold?" he asked, glancing at the dial thermometer on his wrist. "It's only thirty-six below."

"I'm not cold," replied Pat. "It's the scenery; that's all." She moved away. "I wonder what keeps the place as warm as it is. Without sunlight you'd think—"

"Then you'd be wrong," cut in Ham. "Any engineer knows that gases diffuse. The Upper Winds are going by just five or six miles over our heads, and they naturally carry a lot of heat from the desert beyond the twilight zone. There's some diffusion of the warm air into the cold, and then, besides, as the warm winds cool, they tend to sink. And what's more, the contour of the country has a lot to do with it."

He paused. "Say," he went on reflectively, "I shouldn't be surprised if we found sections near the Eternities where there was a down draft, where the Upper Winds slid right along the slope and gave certain places a fairly bearable climate."

He followed Pat as she poked around the boulders near the edge of the circle of light from the rocket.

"Ha!" she exclaimed. "There it is, Ham! There's our specimen of darkside plant life."

She bent over a gray bulbous mass, "Lichenous or fungoid," she continued. "No leaves, of course; leaves are only useful in sunlight. No chlorophyl for the same reason. A very primitive, very simple plant, and yet—in some ways—not simple at all. Look, Ham—a highly developed circulatory system!"

## The Lotus Eaters

---

He leaned closer, and in the dim yellow light from the ports he saw the fine tracery of veins she indicated.

"That," she proceeded, "would indicate a sort of heart and—I wonder!" Abruptly she thrust her dial thermometer against the fleshy mass, held it there a moment, and then peered at it. "Yes! Look how the needle's moved, Ham. It's warm! A warm-blooded plant. And when you think of it, it's only natural, because that's the one sort of plant that could live in a region forever below freezing. Life must be lived in liquid water."

She tugged at the thing, and with a sullen plump it came free, and dark driblets of liquid welled out of the torn root.

"Ugh!" exclaimed Ham. "What a disgusting thing! 'And tore the bleeding mandragore,' eh? Only they were supposed to scream when you uprooted them."

He paused. A low, pulsing, wailing whimper came out of the quivering mass of pulp, and he turned a startled gaze on Pat. "Ugh!" he grunted again. "Disgusting!"

"Disgusting? Why, it's a beautiful organism! It's adapted perfectly to its environment."

"Well, I'm glad I'm an engineer," he growled, watching Pat as she opened the rocket's door and laid the thing on a square of rubber within. "Come on. Let's look around."

Pat closed the door and followed him away from the rocket. Instantly the night folded in around them like a black mist, and it was only by glancing back at the lighted ports that Pat could convince herself that they stood in a real world.

"Should we light our helmet lamps?" asked Ham. "We'd better, I suppose, or risk a fall."

Before either could move farther, a sound struck through the moaning of the Underwind, a wild, fierce, unearthly shrieking like laughter in hell, hoots and howls and mirthless chuckling noises.

"It's *triops!*" gasped Pat, forgetting plurals and grammar alike.

She was frightened; ordinarily she was as courageous as Ham, and rather more reckless and daring, but those uncanny shrieks brought back the moments of torment when they had been trapped in the canyon in the Mountains of Eternity. She was badly frightened and fumbled frantically and ineffectually at light switch and revolver.

Just as half a dozen stones hummed fast as bullets around them, and one crashed painfully on Ham's arm, he flicked on his lights. Four beams shot in a long cross on the glittering peaks, and the wild laughter rose in a crescendo of pain. He had a momentary glimpse of shadowy figures flinging themselves from pinnacle and ridge, flitting specterlike into the darkness, and then silence.

"O-o-oh!" murmured Pat. "I—was scared, Ham." She huddled against him, then continued more strongly: "But there's proof. *Triops noctivivans* actually is a night-side creature, and those in the mountains are outposts or fragments that've wandered into the sunless chasms."

Far off sounded the hooting laughter. "I wonder," mused Ham, "if that noise of their's is in the nature of a language."

"Very probably. After all, the Hotland natives are intelligent, and these creatures are a related species. Besides, they throw stones, and they know the use of those smothering pods they showered on

## The Lotus Eaters

---

us in the canyon—which, by the way, must be the fruit of some night-side plant. The *trioptes* are doubtless intelligent in a fierce, blood-thirsty, barbaric fashion, but the beasts are so unapproachable that I doubt if human beings ever learn much of their minds or language."

Ham agreed emphatically, the more so as a viciously cast rock suddenly chipped glittering particles from an icy spire a dozen paces away. He twisted his head, sending the beams of his helmet lamps angling over the plain, and a single shrill cachinnation drifted out of the dark.

"Thank Heaven the lights keep 'em fairly out of range," he muttered. "These are pleasant little subjects of his majesty<sup>1</sup>, aren't they? God save the king if he had many more like 'em!"

But Pat was again engaged in her search for specimens. She had switched on her lamps now, and scrambled agilely in and out among the fantastic monuments of that bizarre plain. Ham followed her, watching as she wrenched up bleeding and whimpering vegetation. She found a dozen varieties, and one little wriggling cigar-shaped creature that she gazed at in perplexity, quite unable to determine whether it was plant, animal, or neither. And at last her specimen bag was completely filled, and they turned back over the plain toward the rocket, whose ports gleamed afar like a row of staring eyes.

But a shock awaited them as they opened the door to enter. Both of them started back at the gust of warm, stuffy, putrid, and unbreathable air that gushed into their faces with an odor of carrion.

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<sup>1</sup> They were on British territory, being in the latitude of Venoble. The International Congress at Lisle had in 2020 apportioned the dark-side rights by giving to each nation owning Venusian possessions a wedge extending from the twilight zone to a point on the planet directly opposite the Sun in mid-autumn

"What——" gasped Ham, and then laughed. "Your mandragore!" He chuckled. "Look at it!"

The plant she had placed within was a mass of decayed corruption. In the warmth of the interior it had decomposed rapidly and completely and was now but a semi liquid heap on the rubber mat. She pulled it through the entrance and flung mat and all away.

They clambered into an interior still reeking, and Ham set a ventilator spinning. The air that came in was cold, of course, but pure with the breath of the Underwind, sterile and dustless from its sweep across five thousand miles of frozen oceans and mountains. He swung the door closed, set a heater going, and dropped his visor to grin at Pat.

"So that's your beautiful organism!" he chuckled.

"It was. It was a beautiful organism, Ham. You can't blame it because we exposed it to temperatures it was never supposed to encounter." She sighed and slung her specimen pouch to the table. "I'll have to prepare these at once, I suppose, since they don't keep."

Ham grunted and set about the preparation of a meal, working with the expert touch of a true Hotlander. He glanced at Pat as she bent over her specimens, injecting the bichloride solution.

"Do you suppose," he asked, "that the *triops* is the highest form of life on the dark side?"

"Beyond doubt," replied Pat. "If any higher form existed, it would long ago have exterminated those fierce devils."

But she was utterly wrong.

## The Lotus Eaters

---

Within the span of four days they had exhausted the possibilities of the tumbled plain around the rocket. Pat had accumulated a variegated group of specimens, and Ham had taken an endless series of observations on temperature, on magnetic variations, on the direction and velocity of the Underwind.

So they moved their base, and the rocket flared into flight southward, toward the region where, presumably, the vast and mysterious Mountains of Eternity towered across the ice barrier into the dusky world of the night side. They flew slowly, throttling the reaction motors to a bare fifty miles an hour, for they were flying through night, depending on the beam of the forward light to warn against looming peaks.

Twice they halted, and each time a day or two sufficed to indicate that the region was similar to that of their first base. The same veined and bulbous plants, the same eternal Underwind, the same laughter from blood-thirsty trioptic throats.

But on the third occasion, there was a difference. They came to rest on a wild and bleak plateau among the foothills of the Greater Eternities. Far away to the westward, half the horizon still glowed green with the false sunset, but the whole span south of the due-west point was black, hidden from view by the vast ramparts of the range that soared twenty-five miles above them into the black heavens. The mountains were invisible, of course, in that region of endless night, but the two in the rocket felt the colossal nearness of those incredible peaks.

And there was another way in which the mighty presence of the Mountains of Eternity affected them. The region was warm—not warm by the standards of the twilight zone, but much warmer than the plain below. Their thermometers showed zero on one side of the rocket, five above on the other. The vast peaks, ascending into the

## Stanley G. Weinbaum

---

level of the Upper Winds, set up eddies and stray currents that brought warm air down to temper the cold breath of the Underwind.

Ham stared gloomily over the plateau visible in the lights. "I don't like it," he grunted. "I never did like these mountains, not since you made a fool of yourself by trying to cross 'em back in the Cool Country."

"A fool!" echoed Pat. "Who named these mountains? Who crossed them? Who discovered them? My father, that's who!"

"And so you thought you inherited 'em," he retorted, "and that all you had to do was to whistle and they'd lie down and play dead, and Madman's Pass would turn into a park walk. With the result that you'd now be a heap of clean-picked bones in a canyon if I hadn't been around to carry you out of it."

"Oh, you're just a timid Yankee!" she snapped. "I'm going outside to have a look." She pulled on her parka and stepped to the door, and there paused. "Aren't you—aren't you coming, too?" she asked hesitantly.

He grinned. "Sure! I just wanted to hear you ask." He slipped into his own outdoor garb and followed.

There was a difference here. Outwardly the plateau presented the same bleak wilderness of ice and stone that they had found on the plain below. There were wind-eroded pinnacles of the utmost fantasy of form, and the wild landscape that glittered in the beams from their helmet lamps was the same bizarre terrain that they had first encountered.

But the cold was less bitter here; strangely, increasing altitude on this curious planet brought warmth instead of cold, as on the Earth, because it raised one closer to the region of the Upper

## The Lotus Eaters

---

Winds, and here in the Mountains of Eternity the Underwind howled less persistently, broken into gusts by the mighty peaks.

And the vegetation was less sparse. Everywhere were the veined and bulbous masses, and Ham had to tread carefully lest he repeat the unpleasant experience of stepping on one and hearing its moaning whimper of pain. Pat had no such scruples, insisting that the whimper was but a tropism; that the specimens she pulled up and dissected felt no more pain than an apple that was eaten; and that, anyway, it was a biologist's business to be a biologist.

Somewhere off among the peaks shrilled the mocking laughter of a *triops*, and in the shifting shadows at the extremities of their beams, Ham imagined more than once that he saw the forms of these demons of the dark. If there they were, however, the light kept them at a safe distance, for no stones hummed past.

Yet it was a queer sensation to walk thus in the center of a moving circle of light; he felt continually as if just beyond the boundary of visibility lurked Heaven only knew what weird and incredible creatures, though reason argued that such monsters couldn't have remained undetected.

Ahead of them their beams glistened on an icy rampart, a bank or cliff that stretched right and left across their course.

Pat gestured suddenly toward it. "Look there!" she exclaimed, holding her light steady. "Caves in the ice—burrows, rather. See?"

He saw—little black openings as large, perhaps, as a manhole cover, a whole row of them at the base of the ice rampart. Something black skittered laughing up the glassy slope and away—a *triops*. Were these the dens of the beasts? He squinted sharply.

"Something's there!" he muttered to Pat. "Look! Half the openings have something in front of them—or are those just rocks to block the entrance?"

Cautiously, revolvers in hand, they advanced. There was no more motion, but in the growing intensity of the beams, the objects were less and less rocklike, and at last they could make out the veinings and fleshy bulbousness of life.

At least the creatures were a new variety. Now Ham could distinguish a row of eyelike spots, and now a multiplicity of legs beneath them. The things were like inverted bushel baskets, about the size and contour, veined, flabby, and featureless save for a complete circle of eye spots. And now he could even see the semitransparent lids that closed, apparently, to shield the eyes from the pain of their lights.

They were barely a dozen feet from one of the creatures. Pat, after a moment of hesitation, moved directly before the motionless mystery.

"Well!" she said. "Here's a new one, Ham. Hello, old fella!"

An instant later both of them were frozen in utter consternation, completely overwhelmed by bewilderment, amazement, and confusion. Issuing, it seemed, from a membrane at the top of the creature, came a clicking, high-pitched voice.

"Hello, fella!" it said.

There was an appalled silence. Ham held his revolver, but had there been need, he couldn't have used it, nor even remembered it. He was paralyzed; stricken dumb.

## The Lotus Eaters

---

But Pat found her voice. "It— isn't real," she said faintly. "It's a tropism. The thing just echoed whatever sounds strike it. Doesn't it, Ham? Doesn't it?"

"I—I—of course!" He was staring at the lidded eyes. "It must be. Listen!" He leaned forward and yelled, "Hello!" directly at the creature. "It'll answer."

It did. "It isn't a tropism," it clicked in shrill but perfect English.

"That's no echo!" gasped Pat. She backed away. "I'm scared," she whimpered, pulling at Ham's arm. "Come away—quick!"

He thrust her behind him. "I'm just a timid Yankee," he grunted, "but I'm going to cross-question this living phonograph until I find out what—or who makes it tick."

"No! No, Ham! I'm scared!"

"It doesn't look dangerous," he observed.

"It isn't dangerous," remarked the thing on the ice.

Ham gulped, and Pat gave a horrified little moan.

"Who—who are you?" he faltered.

There was no answer. The lidded eyes stared steadily at him.

"What are you?" he tried again.

Again no reply.

"How do you know English?" he ventured.

## Stanley G. Weinbaum

---

The clicking voice sounded: "I isn't know English."

"Then—uh—then why do you speak English?"

"You speak English," explained the mystery, logically enough.

"I don't mean why. I mean how?"

But Pat had overcome a part of her terrified astonishment, and her quick mind perceived a clue. "Ham," she whispered tensely, "it uses the words we use. It gets the meaning from us!"

"I get the meaning from you," confirmed the thing ungrammatically.

Light dawned on Ham. "Lord!" he gasped. "Then it's up to us to give it a vocabulary."

"You speak, I speak," suggested the creature.

"Sure! See, Pat? We can say just anything." He paused. "Let's see—" "When in the course of human events it—"

"Shut up!" snapped Pat. "Yankee! You're on crown territory now. 'To be or not to be; that is the question just—"

Ham grinned and was silent. When she had exhausted her memory, he took up the task: "Once upon a time there were three bears—"

And so it went. Suddenly the situation struck him as fantastically ridiculous—there was Pat carefully relating the story of Little Red Riding Hood to a humorless monstrosity of the night-side of Venus! The girl cast him a perplexed glance as he roared into a gale of laughter.

## The Lotus Eaters

---

"Tell him the one about the traveling man and the farmer's daughter!" he said, choking. "See if you can get a smile from him!"

She joined his laughter. "But it's really a serious matter," she concluded. "Imagine it, Ham! Intelligent life on the dark side! Or are you intelligent?" she asked suddenly of the thing on the ice.

"I am intelligent," it assured her. "I'm intelligently intelligent."

"At least you're a marvelous linguist," said the girl.

"Did you ever hear of learning English in half an hour, Ham? Think of that!" Apparently her fear of the creature had vanished.

"Well; let's make use of it," suggested Ham. "What's your name, friend?" There was no reply.

"Of course," put in Pat. "He can't tell us his name until we give it to him in English, and we can't do that because—Oh, well, let's call him Oscar, then. That'll serve."

"Good enough. Oscar, what are you, anyway?"

"Human, I'm a man."

"Eh? I'll be damned if you are!"

"Those are the words you've given me. To me I am a man to you."

"Wait a moment. 'To me I am—' I see, Pat. He means that the only words we have for what he considers himself are words like man and human. Well, what are your people, then?"

"People."

"I mean your race. What race do you belong to?"

"Human."

"Owl" groaned Ham. "You try, Pat."

"Oscar," said the girl, "you say you're human. Are you a mammal?"

"To me man is a mammal to you."

"Oh, good heavens!" She tried again. "Oscar, how does your race reproduce?"

"I have not the words."

"Are you born?"

The queer face, or faceless body, of the creature changed slightly. Heavier lids dropped over the semi-transparent ones that shielded its many eyes; it was almost as if the thing frowned in concentration.

"We are not born," he clicked.

"Then—seeds, spores, parthenogenesis? Or fissure?"

"Spores," shrilled the mystery, "and fissure."

"But—"

She paused, nonplussed. In the momentary silence came the mocking hoot of a *triops* far to their left, and both turned involuntarily, stared, and recoiled aghast. At the very extremity of their beam one of the laughing demons had seized and was bearing

## The Lotus Eaters

---

away what was beyond doubt one of the creatures of the caves. And to add to the horror, all the rest squatted in utter indifference before their burrows.

"Oscar!" Pat screamed. "They got one of you!"

She broke off suddenly at the crack of Ham's revolver, but it was a futile shot.

"O-oh!" she gasped. "The devils! They got one!" There was no comment at all from the creature before them. "Oscar," she cried, "don't you care? They murdered one of you! Don't you understand?"

"Yes."

"But—doesn't it affect you at all?" The creatures had come, somehow, to hold a sort of human sympathy in Pat's mind. They could talk; they were more than beasts. "Don't you care at all?"

"No."

"But what are those devils to you? What do they do that you let them murder you?"

"They eat us," said Oscar placidly.

"Oh!" gasped Pat in horror. "But—but why don't—"

She broke off; the creature was backing slowly and methodically into its burrow.

"Wait!" she cried. "They can't come here! Our lights—"

The clicking voice drifted out: "It is cold. I go because of the cold."

There was silence.

It was colder. The gusty Underwind moaned more steadily now, and glancing along the ridge, Pat saw that every one of the cave creatures was slipping like Oscar into his burrow. She turned a helpless gaze on Ham.

"Did I—dream this?" she whispered.

"Then both of us dreamed it, Pat." He took her arm and drew her back toward the rocket, whose round ports glowed an invitation through the dusk.

But once in the warm interior, with her clumsy outer garments removed, Pat drew her dainty legs under her, lighted a cigarette, and fell to more rational consideration of the mystery.

"There's something we don't understand about this, Ham. Did you sense anything queer about Oscar's mind?"

"It's a devilishly quick one!"

"Yes; he's intelligent enough. Intelligence of the human level, or even"—she hesitated—"above the human. But it isn't a human mind. It's different, somehow—alien, strange. I can't quite express what I felt, but did you notice Oscar never asked a question? Not one!"

"Why—he didn't, did he? That's queer!"

"It's darn queer. Any human intelligence, meeting another thinking form of life, would ask plenty of questions. We did." She

## The Lotus Eaters

---

blew a thoughtful puff of smoke. "And that isn't all. That—that indifference of his when the *triops* attacked his fellow—was that human, or even earthly? I've seen a hunting spider snatch one fly from a swarm of them without disturbing the rest, but could that happen to intelligent creatures? It couldn't; not even to brains as undeveloped as those in a herd of deer, or a flock of sparrows. Kill one and you frighten all."

"That's true, Pat. They're damn queer ducks, these fellow citizens of Oscar's. Queer animals."

"Animals? Don't tell me you didn't notice, Ham!"

"Notice what?"

"Oscar's no animal. He's a plant—a warm-blooded, mobile vegetable! All the time we were talking to him he was rooting around below him with his—well, his root. And those things that looked like legs—they were pods. He didn't walk on them; he dragged himself on his root. And what's more he—"

"What's more?"

"What's more, Ham, those pods were the same sort as the ones that the *triops* threw at us in the canyon of the Mountains of Eternity, the ones that choked and smothered us so—"

"The ones that laid you out so cold, you mean."

"Anyway, I had wits enough to notice them!" she retorted, flushing. "But there's part of the mystery, Ham. Oscar's mind is a vegetable mind!" She paused, puffing her cigarette as he packed his pipe.

"Do you suppose," she asked suddenly, "that the presence of Oscar and his crew represents a menace to human occupancy of Venus? I know they're dark-side creatures, but what if mines are discovered here? What if there turns out to be a field for commercial exploitation? Humans can't live indefinitely away from sunlight, I know, but there might be a need for temporary colonies here, and what then?"

"Well, what then?" rejoined Ham.

"Yes; what then? Is there room on the same planet for two intelligent races? Won't there be a conflict of interests sooner or later?"

"What of it?" he grunted. "Those things are primitive, Pat. They live in caves, without culture, without weapons. They're no danger to man."

"But they're magnificently intelligent. How do you know that these we've seen aren't just a barbaric tribe and that somewhere on the vastness of the dark side there isn't a vegetable civilization? You know civilization isn't the personal prerogative of mankind, because look at the mighty decadent culture on Mars and the dead remnants on Titan. Man has simply happened to have the strangest brand of it, at least so far."

"That's true enough, Pat," he agreed. "But if Oscar's fellows aren't any more pugnacious than they were toward that murderous *triops*, then they aren't much of a menace."

She shuddered. "I can't understand that at all. I wonder if—" She paused, frowning.

"If what?"

## The Lotus Eaters

---

"I—don't know. I had an idea—a rather horrible idea." She looked up suddenly. "Ham, to-morrow I'm going to find out exactly how intelligent Oscar really is. Exactly how intelligent—if I can."

There were certain difficulties, however. When Ham and Pat approached the ice ridge, plodding across the fantastic terrain, they found themselves in utter perplexity as to which of the row of caves was the one before which they had stood in conversation with Oscar. In the glittering reflections from their lamps each opening appeared exactly like every other, and the creatures at their mouths stared at them with lidded eyes in which there was no readable expression.

"Well," said Pat in puzzlement, "we'll just have to try. You there, are you Oscar?"

The clicking voice sounded: "Yes."

"I don't believe it," objected Ham. "He was over more to the right. Hey! Are you Oscar?"

Another voice clicked: "Yes."

"You can't both be Oscar!"

Pat's choice responded: "We are all Oscar."

"Oh, never mind," cut in Pat, forestalling Ham's protests. "Apparently what one knows they all know, so it doesn't make any difference which we choose. Oscar, you said yesterday you were intelligent. Are you more intelligent than I am?"

"Yes. Much more intelligent."

"Hahl" snickered Ham. "Take that, Pat!"

She sniffed. "Well, that puts him miles above you, Yankee! Oscar, do you ever lie?"

Opaque lids dropped over translucent ones. "Lie," repeated the shrill voice. "Lie. No. There is no need."

"Well, do you—" She broke off suddenly at the sound of a dull pop. "What's that? Oh! Look, Ham, one of his pods burst!" She drew back,

A sharply pungent odor assailed them, reminiscent of that dangerous hour in the canyon, but not strong enough this time to set Ham choking or send the girl reeling into unconsciousness. Sharp, acrid, and yet not entirely unpleasant.

"What's that for, Oscar?"

"It is so we—" The voice cut short.

"Reproduce?" suggested Pat.

"Yes. Reproduce. The wind carries our spores to each other. We live where the wind is not steady."

"But yesterday you said fissure was your method."

"Yes. The spores lodge against our bodies and there is a—" Again the voice died.

"A fertilization?" suggested the girl.

## The Lotus Eaters

---

"No."

"Well, a—I know! An irritation!"

"Yes."

"That causes a tumorous growth?"

"Yes. When the growth is complete, we split."

"Ugh!" snorted Ham. "A tumor!"

"Shut up!" snapped the girl. "That's all a baby is—a normal tumor."

"A normal—Well, I'm glad I'm not a biologist! Or a woman!"

"So'm I," said Pat demurely. "Oscar, how much do you know?"

"Everything."

"Do you know where my people come from?"

"From beyond the light."

"Yes; but before that?"

"No."

"We come from another planet," said the girl impressively. At Oscar's silence she said:-"Do you know what a planet is?"

"Yes."

"But did you know before I said the word?"

"Yes. Long before."

"But how? Do you know what machinery is? Do you know what weapons are? Do you know how to make them?"

"Yes."

"Then—why don't you?"

"There is no need."

"No need!" she gasped. "With light—even with fire—you could keep the triopses—*trioptes*, I mean—away. You could keep them from eating you!"

"There is no need."

She turned helplessly to Ham.

"The thing's lying," he suggested.

"I—don't think so," she murmured. "It's something else—something we don't understand. Oscar, how do you know all those things?"

"Intelligence."

At the next cave another pod popped sullenly.

"But how? Tell me how you discover facts."

"From any fact," clicked the creature on the ice, "intelligence can build a picture of the—" There was silence.

"Universe?" she suggested.

## The Lotus Eaters

---

"Yes. The universe. I start with one fact and I reason from it. I build a picture of the universe. I start with another fact. I reason from it. I find that the universe I picture is the same as the first. I know that the picture is true."

Both listeners stared in awe at the creature. "Say!" gulped Ham. "If that's true we could find out anything from Oscar! Oscar, can you tell us secrets that we don't know?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"You must first have the words to give me. I cannot tell you that for which you have no words."

"It's true!" whispered Pat. "But, Oscar, I have the words time and space and energy and matter and law and cause. Tell me the ultimate law of the universe?"

"It is the law of—" Silence.

"Conservation of energy or matter? Gravitation?"

"No."

"Of—of God?"

"No."

"Of—life?"

"No. Life is of no importance."

"Of—what? I can't think of another word."

"There's a chance," said Ham tensely, "that there is no word!"

"Yes," clicked Oscar. "It is the law of chance. Those other words are different sides of the law of chance."

"Good Heaven!" breathed Pat. "Oscar, do you know what I mean by stars, suns, constellations, planets, nebulae, and atoms, protons, and electrons?"

"Yes."

"But—how? Have you ever seen the stars that are above these eternal clouds? Or the Sun there beyond the barrier?"

"No. Reason is enough, because there is only one possible way in which the universe could exist. Only what is possible is real; what is not real is also not possible."

"That—that seems to mean something," murmured Pat. "I don't see exactly what. But Oscar, why—why don't you use your knowledge to protect yourselves from your enemies?"

"There is no need. There is no need to do anything. In a hundred years we shall be—" Silence.

"Safe?"

"Yes—no."

"What?" A horrible thought struck her. "Do you mean—extinct?"

"Yes."

## The Lotus Eaters

---

"But—oh, Oscar! Don't you want to live? Don't your people want to survive?"

"Want," shrilled Oscar. "Want—want—want. That word means nothing."

"It means—it means desire, need."

"Desire means nothing. Need—need. No. My people do not need to survive."

"Oh," said Pat faintly. "Then why do you reproduce?"

As if in answer, a bursting pod sent its pungent dust over them. "Because we must," clicked Oscar. "When the spores strike us, we must."

"I—see," murmured Pat slowly. "Ham, I think I've got it. I think I understand. Let's get back to the ship."

Without farewell she turned away and he followed her thoughtfully. A strange listlessness oppressed him.

They had one slight mishap. A stone flung by some stray *trioptes* sheltered behind the ridge shattered the left lamp in Pat's helmet. It seemed hardly to disturb the girl; she glanced briefly aside and plodded on. But all the way back, in the gloom to their left now illumined only by his own lamp, hoots and shrieks and mocking laughter pursued them.

Within the rocket Pat swung her specimen bag wearily to the table and sat down without removing her heavy outer garment. Nor did Ham; despite the oppressive warmth of it, he, too, dropped listlessly to a seat on the bunk.

"I'm tired," said the girl, "but not too tired to realize what that mystery out there means."

"Then let's hear it."

"Ham," she said, "what's the big difference between plant and animal life?"

"Why—plants derive their sustenance directly from soil and air. Animals need plants or other animals as food."

"That isn't entirely true, Ham. Some plants are parasitic, and prey on other life. Think of the Hotlands, or think, even, of some terrestrial plants—the fungi, the pitcher plant, the *Dionaea* that trap flies."

"Well, animals move, then, and plants don't."

"That's not true, either. Look at microbes; they're plants, but they swim about in search of food."

"Then what is the difference?"

"Sometimes it's hard to say," she murmured, "but I think I see it now. It's this: Animals have desire and plants necessity. Do you understand?"

"Not a damn bit."

"Listen, Then. A plant—even a moving one—acts the way it does because it must, because it's made so. An animal acts because it wants to, or because it's made so that it wants to."

"What's the difference?"

## The Lotus Eaters

---

"There is a difference. An animal has will, a plant hasn't. Do you see now? Oscar has all the magnificent intelligence of a god, but he hasn't the will of a worm. He has reactions, but no desire. When the wind is warm he comes out and feeds; when it's cold he crawls back into the cave melted by his body heat, but that isn't will, it's just a reaction. He has no desires!"

Ham stared, roused out of his lassitude. "I'll be damned if it isn't true!" he cried. "That's why he—or they—never ask questions. It takes desire or will to ask a question! And that's why they have no civilization and never will have!"

"That and other reasons," said Pat. "Think of this: Oscar has no sex, and in spite of your Yankee pride, sex has been a big factor in building civilization. It's the basis of the family, and among Oscar's people there is no such thing as parent and child. He splits; each half of him is an adult, probably with all the knowledge and memory of the original.

"There's no need for love, no place for it, in fact, and therefore no call to fight for mate and family, and no reason to make life easier than it already is, and no cause to apply his intelligence to develop art or science or—or anything!" She paused. "And did you ever hear of the Malthusian law, Ham?"

"Not that I remember."

"Well, the law of Malthus says that population presses on the food supply. Increase the food and the population increases in proportion. Man evolved under that law; for a century or so it's been suspended, but our race grew to be human under it."

"Suspended! It sounds sort of like repealing the law of gravitation or amending the law of inverse squares."

"No, no," she said. "It was suspended by the development of machinery in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which shot the food supply so far ahead, that population hasn't caught up. But it will and the Malthusian law will rule again."

"And what's that got to do with Oscar?"

"This, Ham: He never evolved under that law. Other factors kept his numbers below the limit of the food supply, and so his species developed free of the need to struggle for food. He's so perfectly adapted to his environment that he needs nothing more. To him a civilization would be superfluous!"

"But—then what of the *triops*?"

"Yes, the *triops*. You see, Ham, just as I argued days ago, the *triops* is a newcomer, pushed over from the twilight zone. When those devils arrived, Oscar's people were already evolved, and they couldn't change to meet the new conditions, or couldn't change quickly enough. So—they're doomed.

"As Oscar says, they'll be extinct soon—and—and they don't even care." She shuddered. "All they do, all they can do, is sit before their caves and think. Probably they think godlike thoughts, but they can't summon even a mouse-like will. That's what a vegetable intelligence is; that's what it has to be!"

"I think—I think you're right," he muttered. "In a way it's horrible, isn't it?"

"Yes." Despite her heavy garments she shivered. "Yes; it's horrible. Those vast, magnificent minds and no way for them to work. It's like a powerful gasoline motor with its drive shaft broken, and no matter how well it runs it can't turn the wheels. Ham, do you know what I'm going to name them? The *Lotophagi*

## The Lotus Eaters

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*Veneris*—the Lotus Eaters! Content to sit and dream away existence while lesser minds—ours and the *trioptes'*—battle for their planet."

"It's a good name, Pat." As she rose he asked in surprise: "Your specimens? Aren't you going to prepare them?"

"Oh, to-morrow." She flung herself, parka and all, on her bunk.

"But they'll spoil! And your helmet light—I ought to fix it."

"To-morrow," she repeated wearily, and his own languor kept him from further argument.

When the nauseous odor of decay awakened him some hours later Pat was asleep, still garbed in the heavy suit. He flung bag and specimens from the door, and then slipped the parka from her body. She hardly stirred as he tucked her gently into her bunk.

Pat never missed the specimen bag at all, and, somehow, the next day, if one could call that endless night a day, found them trudging over the bleak plateau with the girl's helmet lamp still unrepaired. Again at their left, the wildly mocking laughter of the night dwellers followed them, drifting eerily down on the Underwind, and twice far-flung stones chipped glittering ice from neighboring spires. They plodded listlessly and silently, as if in a sort of fascination, but their minds seemed strangely clear.

Pat addressed the first Lotus Eater they saw. "We're back, Oscar," she said with a faint rebirth of her usual flippancy. "How'd you spend the night?"

"I thought," clicked the thing.

"What'd you think about?"

"I thought about—" The voice ceased.

A pod popped, and the curiously pleasant pungent odor was in their nostrils.

"About—us?"

"No."

"About—the world?"

"No."

"About—What's the use?" she ended wearily. "We could keep that up forever, and perhaps never hit on the right question."

"If there is a right question," added Ham. "How do you know there are words to fit it? How do you even know that it's the kind of thought our minds are capable of conceiving? There must be thoughts that are beyond our grasp."

Off to their left a pod burst with a dull pop. Ham saw the dust move like a shadow across their beams as the Underwind caught it, and he saw Pat draw a deep draft of the pungent air as it whirled around her. Queer how pleasant the smell was, especially since it was the same stuff which in higher concentration had nearly cost their lives. He felt vaguely worried as that thought struck him, but could assign no reason for worry.

## The Lotus Eaters

---

He realized suddenly that both of them were standing in complete silence before the Lotus Eater. They had come to ask questions, hadn't they?

"Oscar," he said, "what's the meaning of life?"

"No meaning. There is no meaning."

"Then why fight for it so?"

"We do not fight for it. Life is unimportant."

"And when you're gone, the world goes on just the same? Is that it?" "When we are gone it will make no difference to any except the *trioptes* who eat us."

"Who eat you," echoed Ham.

There was something about that thought that did penetrate the fog of indifference that blanketed his mind. He peered at Pat, who stood passively and silently beside him, and in the glow of her helmet lamp he could see her clear gray eyes behind her goggles, staring straight ahead in what was apparently abstraction or deep thought. And beyond the ridge sounded suddenly the yells and wild laughter of the dwellers in the dark.

"Pat," he said.

There was no answer.

"Pat!" he repeated, raising a listless hand to her arm. "We have to go back." To his right a pod popped. "We have to go back," he repeated.

A sudden shower of stones came glancing over the ridge. One struck his helmet, and his forward lamp burst with a dull explosion. Another struck his arm with a stinging pain, though it seemed surprisingly unimportant.

"We have to go back," he reiterated doggedly.

Pat spoke at last without moving. "What's the use?" she asked dully.

He frowned over that. What was the use? To go back to the twilight zone? A picture of Erotia rose in his mind, and then a vision of that honeymoon they had planned on the Earth, and then a whole series of terrestrial scenes—New York, a tree-girt campus, the sunny farm of his boyhood. But they all seemed very far away and unreal.

A violent blow that stung his shoulder recalled him, and he saw a stone bound from Pat's helmet. Only two of her lamps glowed now, the rear and the right, and he realized vaguely that on his own helmet shone only the rear and the left. Shadowy figures were skittering and gibbering along the crest of the ridge now left dark by the breaking of their lights, and stones were whizzing and spattering around them.

He made a supreme effort and seized her arm. "We've got to go back!" he muttered.

"Why? Why should we?"

"Because we'll be killed if we stay."

"Yes. I know that, but—"

## The Lotus Eaters

---

He ceased to listen and jerked savagely at Pat's arm. She spun around and staggered after him as he turned doggedly toward the rocket.

Shrill hoots sounded as their rear lamps swept the ridge, and as he dragged the girl with infinite slowness, the shrieks spread out to the right and left. He knew what that meant; the demons were circling them to get in front of them where their shattered forward lamps cast no protecting light.

Pat followed listlessly, making no effort of her own. It was simply the drag of his arm that impelled her, and it was becoming an intolerable effort to move even himself. And there directly before him, flitting shadows that howled and hooted, were the devils that sought their lives.

Ham twisted his head so that his right lamp swept the area. Shrieks sounded as they found shelter in the shadows of peaks and ridges, but Ham, walking with his head sidewise, tripped and tumbled.

Pat wouldn't rise when he tugged at her. "There's no need of it," she murmured, but made no resistance when he lifted her.

An idea stirred vaguely; he bundled her into his arms so that her right lamp shot its beam forward, and so he staggered at last to the circle of light about the rocket, opened the door, and dumped her on the floor within.

He had one final impression. He saw the laughing shadows that were the *trioptes* skipping and skittering across the darkness toward the ridge where Oscar and his people waited in placid acceptance of their destiny.

The rocket was roaring along at two hundred thousand feet, because numberless observations and photographs from space had shown that not even the vast peaks of the Mountains of Eternity project forty miles above the planet's surface. Below them the clouds glistened white before and black behind, for they were just entering the twilight zone. At that height one could even see the mighty curvature of the planet.

"Half cue ball, half eight ball," said Ham, staring down. "Hereafter we stick to the cue-ball half."

"It was the spores," proceeded Pat, ignoring him. "We knew they were narcotic before, but we couldn't be expected to guess that they'd carry a drug as subtle as that—to steal away your will and undermine your strength. Oscar's people are the Lotus Eaters and the Lotus, all in one. But I'm—somehow—I'm sorry for them. Those colossal, magnificent, useless minds of theirs!" What snapped you out of it?"

"Oh, it was a remark of Oscar's, something about his being only a square meal for a *triops*."

"Well?"

"Well, did you know we've used up all our food? That remark reminded me that I hadn't eaten for two days!"



