

# **SKIT-TREE PLANET**

**By MURRAY LEINSTER**

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The communicator-phone set up a clamor when the sky was just beginning to gray in what, on this as yet unnamed planet, they called the east because the local sun rose there. The call-wave had turned on the set. Bob Wentworth kicked off his blankets and stumbled from his bunk in the atmosphere-flier, and went sleepily forward to answer. He pushed the answer-stud.

"Hello, what's the trouble?" he said wearily. "Talk louder, there's some static. Oh—No, there's no trouble. Why should there be? The devil I'm late reporting! Haynes and I obeyed orders and tried to find the end of a confounded skit-tree plantation. We chased our tails all day long, but we made so much westing that we gained a couple of hours light. So it isn't sunrise yet, where we are."

Wentworth yawned as he listened.

"Oh, we set down the flier on a sort of dam and went to sleep," he answered. "No, nothing happened. We're used to feeling creepy. We thrive on it. Haynes says he's going to do a sculpture group of a skit-tree planter which will be just an eye peeking around a tree-trunk. No! Hang it, no!

"We photographed a couple of hundred thousand square miles of skit-trees growing in neat rows, and we photographed dams, and canals, and a whole irrigation system, but not a sign of a living creature. No cities, no houses, no ruins, no nothing. I've

got a theory, McRae, about what happened to the skit-tree planters."

He yawned again.

"Yeah. I think they built up a magnificent civilization and then found a snark. Snark! SNARK. Yes. And the snark was a boojum." He paused. "So they silently faded away."

He grinned at the profanity that came out of the communicator-speaker. Then—back at the irreverently nicknamed *Galloping Cow* which was the base ship of the Extra-Solarian Research Institute expedition to this star-cluster—McRae cut off.

Wentworth stretched, and looked out of the atmosphere-flier's windows. He absently noticed that the static on the communication-set kept up, which was rather odd on a FM receiver. But before the fact could have any meaning, he saw something in motion in the pale gray light of dawn. He squinted. Then he caught his breath.

He stood frozen until the moving object vanished. It moved, somehow, as if it carried something. But it was bigger than the *Galloping Cow*! Only after it vanished did he breathe again, and then he licked his lips and blinked.

Haynes' voice came sleepily from the bunk-space of the flier.

"What's from the *Galloping Cow*? Planning to push off for Earth?"

Wentworth took a deep breath and stared where the moving thing had gone out of sight.

"No," he said then, very quietly. "McRae was worried because we hadn't reported. It's two hours after sunrise back where the ship is." He swallowed. "Want to get up now?"

"I could do with coffee," said Haynes, "pending a start for home."

Wentworth heard him drop his feet to the floor. Bob Wentworth pinched himself and winced, and swallowed again, and then twisted the opener of a beverage can labeled *Coffee*, and it began to make bubbling noises. He put it aside to heat and brew itself, and pulled out two breakfast-rations. He put them in the readier. Finally he stared again out the flier's window.

The light outside grew stronger. To the north—if where the sun rose was east—a low but steep range of mountains began just beyond the spot where the flier had landed for the night. It had settled down on a patently artificial embankment of earth, some fifty feet high, that ran out toward the skit-tree sea from one of the lower mountain spurs. The moving thing had gone into those mountains, as if it carried something. But it was bigger.

Haynes came forward, yawning.

"I feel as if this were going to be a good day," he said, and yawned again. "I wish I had some clay to mess with. I might even do a portrait bust of you, Wentworth, lacking a prettier model."

"Keep an eye out the window," said Wentworth. "Meanwhile you might set the table."

He went back to his bunk and dressed quickly. His expression was blank and incredulous. Once more he pinched himself. Yes, he was awake. He went back to where steaming coffee and the breakfast-platters waited on the board normally used for navigation.

The communication-set still emitted static, curiously steady, scratchy noise that should not have come in on a frequency-modulation set at all. It should not have come in especially on a planet which had plainly once been inhabited, but whose every inhabitant and every artifact had vanished utterly.

Habitation was so evident, and seemed to have been so recent, that most of the members of the expedition felt a creepy sensation as if eyes were watching them all the time. But that was absurd, of course.

Haynes ate his chilled fruit. The readier had thawed the frozen fruit, and not only thawed but cooked the rest of breakfast. Wentworth drank a preliminary cup of coffee.

"I've just had an unsettling experience, Haynes," he said carefully. "Do I look unusually cracked, to you?"

"Not for you," said Haynes. "Not even for any man who not only isn't married but isn't even engaged. I attribute my splendid mental health to the fact that I'm going to get married as soon as we get back to Earth. Have I mentioned it before?"

Wentworth ignored the question.

"Something's turned up—with a reason back of it," he said in a queer tone. "Check me on this. We found the first skit-trees on

Cetis Alpha Three. They grew in neat rows that stretched out for miles and miles. They had patently been planted by somebody who knew what he was doing, and why.

"We also found dams, and canals, and a complete irrigation system. We found places where ground had been terraced and graded, and where various trees and plants grew in what looked like a cockeyed form of decorative planting.

"Those clearings could have been sites for cities, only there were no houses or ruins, or any sign that anything had ever been built there. We hunted that planet with a fine-toothed comb, and we'd every reason to believe it had recently been inhabited by a highly civilized race. But we never found so much as a chipped rock or a brick or any shaped piece of metal or stone to prove it.

"We found out a civilization had existed, and it had vanished, and when it vanished it took away everything it had worked with, except that it didn't tear up its plantings or put back the dirt it had moved. Right?"

"Put dispassionately, you sound like you're crazy," said Haynes cheerfully. "But you're recounting facts. Okay so far."

"McRae tore his hair because he couldn't take back anything but photographs," Wentworth went on. "Oh, you did a very fine sculpture of a skit-tree fruit, but we froze some real ones for samples, anyhow. We went on to another solar system. And on a planet there, we found skit-trees planted in neat rows reaching for miles and miles, and dams, and canals, and cleared

places—and nothing else. McRae frothed at the mouth with frustration. Some non-human race had space-travel. Eh?"

Haynes took a cup of coffee.

"The inference," he agreed, "was made unanimously by all the personnel of the *Gallopig Cow*."

Nervously Wentworth glanced out the flier window.

"We kept on going. On nine planets in seven solar systems, we found skit-tree plantations with rows up to six and seven hundred miles long—following great-circle courses, by the way—and dams and irrigation systems. Whoever planted those skit-trees had space-travel on an interstellar scale, because the two farthest of the planets were two hundred light-years apart. But we've never found a single artifact of the race that planted the skit-trees."

"True," said Haynes. "Too true! If we'd loaded up the ship with souvenirs of the first non-human civilized race ever to be discovered, we'd have headed for home and I'd be a married man now."

"Listen!" Wentworth said painfully. "Could it be that we never found any artifacts because there weren't any? Could it be that a creature—a monstrous creature—could have developed instincts that led it to make dams and canals like beavers do, and plantings like some kind of ants do, only with the sort of geometric precision that is characteristic of a spider's web? Could we have misread mere specialized instinct as intelligence?"

Haynes blinked.

"No," he said. "There's seven solar systems, two hundred light-years apart, and a specific species, obviously originating on only one planet, spread out over two hundred light-years. Not unless your animal could do space-travel and carry skit-tree seeds with him. What gave you that idea?"

"I saw something," said Wentworth. He took another deep breath. "I'm not going to tell you what it was like, I don't really believe it myself. And I am scared green! But I wanted to clear that away before I mentioned—this. Listen!"

He waved his hand at the communicator-set. Static came out of its speaker in a clacking, monotonous, but continuous turned-down din.

Haynes listened.

"What the devil? We shouldn't get that kind of stuff on a frequency-modulation set!"

"We shouldn't. Something's making it. Maybe what I saw was—domesticated. In any case I'm going to go out and look for tracks at the place where I saw it moving."

"You? Not me? What's the matter with both of us?"

Wentworth shook his head.

"I'll take a flame-pistol, though running-shoes would be more appropriate. You can hover overhead, if you like. But don't try to be heroic, Haynes."

Haynes whistled.



"How about air reconnaissance first?" he demanded. "We can look for tracks with a telescope. If we see a jabberwock or something on that order, we can skip for the blue. If we don't find anything from the air, all right. But a preliminary scout from aloft would be wiser."

"That might be sensible," Wentworth admitted. "But the cussed thing scared me so that I've got to face it sooner or later. All right. Clear away this stuff and I'll take the ship up."

While Haynes slid the cups and platters into the refuse-disposal unit, he seated himself in the pilot's seat, turned off the watch-dog circuit that would have waked them if anything living had come within a hundred yards of the flier during the nighttime. Then he gave the jets a warming-up flow of fuel. Thirty seconds later, the flier lifted smoothly and leveled off to hover at four hundred feet. Wentworth took bearings on their landing-place. There were no other landmarks that would serve as guides for keeping the flier stationary.

The skit-trees began where the ground grew fairly level, and they went on beyond the horizon. They were clumps of thin and brittle stalks which rose straight up for eighty feet and then branched out and bore copious quantities of a fruit for which no human being could imagine any possible use.

Each clump of trees was a geometrically perfect circle sixty feet in diameter. There were always just ninety-two feet between clumps. They reached out in rows far beyond the limit of vision. Only the day before, the flier had covered fifteen hundred miles of westing without coming to the end of this particular planting.

With the flier hovering, Wentworth used a high-power telescope to search below. He hunted for long, long minutes, examining minutely every square foot of half a dozen between-clump aisles without result. There was no sign of the passage of any creature, much less of the apparition he would much rather not believe in.

"I think I'm going to have to go down and hunt on foot," he said reluctantly. "Maybe there wasn't anything. Maybe I'm crazy."

Haynes spoke in mild tones.

"Speaking of craziness, is or isn't that city yonder a delusion?" he asked.

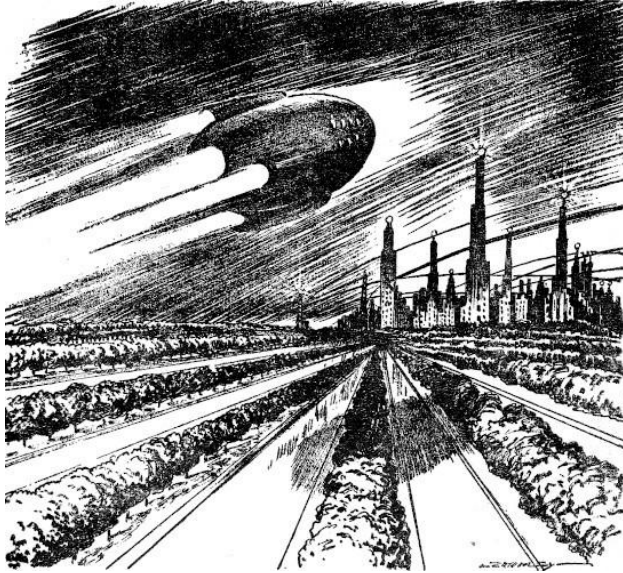
He pointed, and Wentworth jerked about. Many, many miles away, something reared upward beyond the horizon. It was indubitably a city, and they had searched nine planets over without finding a single scrap of chipped stone to prove the reality of the skit-tree planters.

Wentworth could see separate pinnacles and what looked like skyways connecting them far above-ground. He snapped his camera to his binoculars and focussed them, and of course, the camera with them. He saw architectural details of bewildering complexity. He snapped the shutter of his camera.

"That gets top priority," said Wentworth. "There's no doubt about this!"

The thing he had seen before sunrise was so completely incredible that it was easier to question his vision than to believe in it. He flung over the jet-controls so that the drive-jets

took the fuel from the supporting ones. The flier went roaring toward the far-away city.



Wentworth sent the scout flier zooming in the direction of the mysterious city.

"Take over," he told Haynes. "I'm going to call McRae back. He'll break down and cry with joy."

He pushed the call-button. Seconds later a voice came out of the communicator, muffled and made indistinct by the roar of the jets. Wentworth reported. He turned a tiny television scanner on the huge, lacy construction rising from a site still beyond the horizon. McRae's shout of satisfaction was louder than the jets. He bellowed and cut off instantly.

"The *Galloping Cow* is shoving off," said Wentworth. "McRae's giving this position and telling all mapping-parties to make for it. And he'll climb out of atmosphere to get here fast. He wants to see that city."

The flier wobbled, as Haynes' hands on the controls wobbled.

"What city?" he asked in an odd voice.

Wentworth stared unbelievably. There was nothing in sight but the lunatic rows of skit-trees, stretching out with absolutely mechanical exactitude to the limit of vision on the right, on the left, ahead, and behind to the very base of the mountains. There simply wasn't any city. Wentworth gaped.

"Pull that film out of the camera. Take a look at it. Were we seeing things?"

Haynes pulled out the already-developed film. The city showed plainly. It had gone on television to the *Galloping Cow*, too. It had not been an illusion. Wentworth pushed the call-button again as the flier went on toward a vanished destination. After a moment he swore.

"McRae lost no time. He's out of air already, and our set won't reach him. Where'd that city go?"

He set the supersonic collision-alarm in action. The radar. They revealed nothing. The city no longer existed.

They searched incredulously for twenty minutes, at four hundred miles an hour. The radar picked up nothing. The collision-alarm picked up no echoes.

"It was here!" growled Wentworth. "We'll go back and start over."

He sent the flier hurtling back toward the hills and the embankment where it had rested during the night. The communicator rasped a sudden furious burst of static. Wentworth, for no reason whatever, jerked his eyes behind. The city was there again.

Haynes photographed it feverishly as the flier banked and whirled back toward it. For a full minute it was in plain view, and the static was loud. Then the static cut off. Simultaneously, the city vanished once more.

Again a crazy circling. But the utterly monotonous landscape below showed no sign of a city-site, and it was impossible to be sure that the flier actually quartered the ground below, or whether it circled over the same spot again and again, or what.

"If McRae turns up in the *Galloping Cow*," said Haynes, "and doesn't find a blamed thing, maybe he'll think we've all gone crazy and had better go home. And then—"

"Then you'll get married!" Wentworth finished savagely. "Skip it! I've got an idea! Back to the mountains once more."

The flier whirled yet again and sped back toward its night's resting-place. Ten miles from it, and five thousand feet up, the static became still again.

Wentworth kicked a smoke-bomb release and whirled the flier about so sharply that his head snapped forward from the sudden centrifugal force.

There was the city.

The flier roared straight for it. Static rattled out of the communicator. One minute. Two. He kicked the smoke-bomb release again. Already the first bomb had hit ground and made a second smoke-signal. Ten miles on, he dropped a third.

The smoke-signals would burn for an hour, and give him a perfect line on the vanishing city. This time it did not vanish. It grew larger and larger, and details appeared, and more details.

It was a unit—a design of infinite complexity, perfectly integrated. Story upon story, with far-flung skyways connecting its turrets, it was a vision of completely alien beauty. It rose ten thousand feet from the skit-trees about its base. Its base was two miles square.

"They build high," said Wentworth grimly, "so they won't use any extra ground they could plant their confounded skit-trees on. I'm going to land short of it, Haynes."

The vertical jets took over smoothly as he cut the drive. The flier slowed, and two blasts forward stopped it dead, and then it descended smoothly. Wentworth had checked not more than a hundred yards from the outermost tower. It appeared to be made of completely seamless metal, incised with intricate decorative designs. Which was incredible.

But the most impossible thing of all was that there was no movement anywhere. No stirring. No shifting. Not even furtive twinklings as of eyes peering from the strangely-shaped window openings. And when the flier landed gently between two circular clumps of skit-trees and Wentworth cut off the

jets and turned off even the communicator—then there was silence.

The silence was absolute. Two miles high, near them towered a city which could house millions of people. And it was utterly without noise and utterly without motion in any part.

"And the prince went into the castle," said Wentworth savagely. "He kissed the Sleeping Beauty on the lips, and she opened her eyes with a glad little cry, and they were married and lived happily ever after. Coming, Haynes?"

"Sure thing," said Haynes. "But I don't kiss anybody. I'm engaged!"

Wentworth got out of the flier. Never yet had they found a single dangerous animal on any of the nine planets on which skit-trees grew, with the possible exception of whatever it was he had seen that morning. Whoever planted skit-trees had wiped out dangerous fauna. That had been one of the few seeming certainties. But all the same, Wentworth put a flame-pistol in his belt before he ventured into the city.

He stopped short. There was a flickering. The city was blotted out. A blank metal wall stood before him. It reared all around the flier and the men in it. Between them and the city. Shining, seamless, gleaming metal, circular and a hundred feet high. It neatly enclosed a space two hundred yards across, and hence some clumps of skit-trees with the men. "Now, where the devil did that come from?" asked Wentworth.

Abruptly everything went black. There was darkness. Absolute, opaque.

For perhaps two seconds it was unbroken. Then Haynes, still in the flier, pushed the button that turned on the emergency landing-lights. Twin beams of some hundreds of thousands candlepower lashed out, and recoiled from polished metal, and spread around and were reflected and re-reflected. There was a metal roof atop the circular metal wall. Men and flier and clumps of skit-trees were sealed up in a monstrous metal cylinder. Wentworth cried furiously:

"It isn't so! It simply can't be so!"

He marched angrily to the nearest of the metal walls. Twin shadows of his figure were cast on before him by the landing-light beams. Weird reflections of the shadows and the lights—distorted crazily by the polished surface—appeared on every hand.

He reached the metal wall. He pulled out his flame-pistol and tapped at it. The wall was solid. He backed off five paces and sent a flame-pistol beam at it. The flame splashed from the metal in a coruscating shower. But nothing happened. Absolutely nothing. When he turned off the pistol the metal was unmarred. It was not even red-hot.

"The sleeping beauty woke up, Wentworth," Haynes said. "What's the matter?"

He saw Wentworth gazing with stupefaction at a place where the metal cylinder touched ground. There was the beginning of a circular clump of skit-trees. And he saw a stalk at a slight angle. It came out of the metal wall. The skit-trees were in the wall. They came out of it. He saw another that went into it.



He went back to the flier and climbed in. He turned the communicator up to maximum power. The racket that came out of it was deafening. He punched the call-button. Again and again and again. Nothing happened. He turned the set off. The dead stillness which followed was daunting.

"Well?" said Haynes.

"It's impossible," said Wentworth, "but I can explain everything. That wall isn't real."

"Then we ram through it?"

"We'd kill ourselves!" Wentworth told him, exasperated. "It's solid!"

"Not real, but solid?" asked Haynes. "A bit unusual, that. When I get back to Earth and am a happily married man, I'll try to have a more plausible story than that to tell my wife if I ever come home late, not that I ever will."

Wentworth looked at him. And Haynes grinned. But there was sweat on his face. Wentworth grunted.

"I'm scared too, but I don't make bad jokes to cover up," he said sourly. "This can be licked. It's got to be!"

"What is it?"

"How do I know?" demanded Wentworth. "It makes sense, though. A city that vanishes and re-appears, apparently without anybody in it. That doesn't happen. This can—this tank we're in. There wasn't any machinery around to put up a wall like this.

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