

THE LITTLE MEN FROM GRORK

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Science fiction is based on certain assumptions, or prejudices, which have never been adequately discussed. For example: every time a spaceship comes to Earth from another planet, it's a more advanced planet than ours. The extraterrestrials intimidate us with their fantastic firearms or their exemplary wisdom. But worse than the death ray is their air of moral superiority. Their civilization is invariably better organized and more virtuous than Earth's, and they never pass up an opportunity to remind us of it.

Well, I finally got tired of all that humiliation and made up a different kind of story. To begin with, the UFO that arrives on Earth to land on the Great Plains in the Middle West is remarkable because of a strange detail: the smokestack.

"I saw it with my own eyes, Sheriff. It came down sort of wobbly, bounced around a couple of times, tried to regain altitude and then fell like a rock."

"Leaving a strange glow behind it?"

"No, leaving a lot of smoke. From the smokestack."

"Smokestack? Impossible. Probably old Sam's still blew up again and took his cabin with it."

"No, it looked like a flying saucer. But with a smokestack on top."

The Sheriff calls the state authorities, who surround the contraption. Nobody dares get close until the federal troops arrive. One cop comments to another:

"Did you notice? The vegetation around it. . ."

"Decimated. Probably a magnetic field that surrounds the saucer and. . ."

"No. It looks like it was cut with an axe. If it didn't sound so silly I'd say they were cutting firewood."

Just then a segment of one of the panels of the saucer, which is made entirely of plywood, is kicked open and three little men with hatchets appear. They go out looking for more trees to cut down. They are examining one of the cop's legs when he decides to stop the nonsense, and he draws his pistol and aims at the little men.

"Don't move or I'll shoot."

The little men fall back, terrified, and ask:

"Shoot what?"

"Shoot with this revolver."

The cop fires into the ground to demonstrate. The little men, as soon as they get over their fright, go over and start examining the cop's pistol with evident awe. The other cops come out of their hiding places and surround the little men. But there's no danger. They just want to talk. To simplify the development of the story, they all speak English.

"You mean you don't have firearms?" asks one cop. "You must be in such an advanced stage of civilization that you don't need them. Nobody kills anybody anymore."

"Are you kidding?" answers one of the little men. "We use hatchets, clubs, slingshots, catapults, arrows, anything that kills. A weapon like this would bring incredible progress to our planet. We need a copy of this sucker!"

The federal troops and assorted scientists arrive to examine the extraterrestrials and their flying apparatus. The questions begin. From what planet are they? From Grork. How do you spell it? One of the little men scratches in the dirt: GRRK.

"Must be a letter missing," observes one of the scientists. "The O."

"The O?"

"Like this," the scientist says, making a circle in the dirt.

The little man examines the "O." The possibilities of the form are obvious. The wheel! Why hadn't they thought of that before? They'll return to Grork with three revolutionary ideas: the revolver, the wheel, and the vowel. They want to know exactly where they are. They've never heard of Earth. They had always thought that their planet was the center of the universe and that those little dots in the sky were just holes in the celestial blanket. Their mission was a scientific expedition to prove that Grork wasn't flat as many thought and that nobody would fall into the abyss if he went past the horizon. Their only intention had been to navigate to the horizon.

And how did they end up on Earth?

Well, something went wrong.

They had landed on earth because they had run out of wood for the boiler that drove the paddles that powered the boat. So it was a boat? Well, the idea had been to make a boat. Except that instead of floating it had flown. A failure. The little men invite the scientists to visit the craft. They go in through the same hole in the wood they came out of, after which they put a lid on the hole and renail it to the wall. Another good idea they'll take back from Earth is the door hinge.

The inside of the craft is all decorated with red velvet curtains. There are vases with palm trees, chandeliers, satin-covered divans. One of the little men explains that they had had a grand piano too, but that they'd had to burn it when the boiler ran short of fuel. Everything very modern.

"And what message to you bring for the people of Earth?" one of the scientists asks.

The little men look at one another. They hadn't come prepared. But earth had received them so well that they decide to reveal the most valuable secret of their civilization. The formula for transforming base metals into gold.

"You can do that?" asks one of the astonished scientists.

"Well, not yet," answers one of the little men, "but it's just a matter of time. Our scientists are working constantly on the formula, even working at night by candlelight."

"Candles? Don't you have electricity?"

"Elecwhat?"

"Electricity. Electric energy. How do you power things?"

"Steam. Everything has a boiler."

"But isn't that awfully inconvenient?"

"Sometimes. The portable shaver, for example. You need two guys to hold it. But aside from that. . ."

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