# The Adventurers

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It was a fair-to-middling afternoon at the Adventurers Club. Cleveland was not pre-blitz London, so it looked little enough like a club; instead of oak paneling, the walls were a bilious green plaster. The waiters were not ancient and subservient Britons, but mostly flippant youths in overstarched mess-jackets; they wore chronometer wristwatches and finger-rings. The Club did not radiate the solid certainty of the fixed and immovable, which is supposed to be such a comfort to the English. It had, as a matter of fact, been established in its present two floors of a business district office building for only three months, having been evicted from a Lake Boulevard loft-building destined to be torn down and replaced by a garage and parking lot. The Adventurers, however, had done their best in the brief quarter-year to make the place homey. Mounted heads covered the walls like a rash, and an obviously non-functional fireplace had been assembled of polished marble slabs and over it written the Adventurers’ motto: “A Hearth and Home for Those Who Have Strayed Far from the Beaten Path.” On two new brass andirons in the center of the big fireplace were two small, uncharred logs crossed at an angle of 45 degrees.

If the Club was out of character, however, so were most of its members. Over his roast beef, the Man Who Had Known Dr. Cook was presiding. He puffed, between sleepy chews: “I tell you, sir, the Doctor is one of the most maligned men in the history of exploration. I have been a naval officer myself and know what it is to lay aloft in a gale, but I hold no sort or kind of brief for Peary, the man who crucified the Doctor.” It was an impossible stretch of the imagination to picture the Man Who Had Known Dr. Cook laying aloft in a gale or, for that matter, doing anything but exactly what he was doing: sloppily chewing roast beef that would add to the many inches of his paunch and further lubricate his greasy face.

At a coffee-table, Captain Trevor-Beede was drinking, but not coffee. “Prunes,” he was thickly saying to a waiter, “prunes are what you need. Here in the States, here you don’t know how to cook prunes. Another b. and s.” The waiter went for the b. and s., and Captain Trevor-Beede continued to address a moth-eaten springbok head opposite him: “prunes should be soaked. That’s all there is to cooking prunes. Prunes should be soaked overnight, and then you should cook them. That’s all there is to cooking prunes.” Captain Trevor-Beede was in the diplomatic service.

At a quarter slot-machine in a corner, under a mournful and rather small walrus-head with chipped ivories, the Headshrinker was losing money with nervous haste. Click-whiz-whirr-bump, bump, bump. Click-whiz-whirr-bump, bump, bump. Click-whiz-whirr-bump, bump, bump. A minor payoff broke the rhythm, and he frowned as some quarters clunked into the scoop. He picked them up and began again. Click-whiz-whirr-bump, bump, bump. He had contributed one of the most unusual of the exhibits which filled a glass case against a wall: the doll-size, shrunken body of his eight-year-old son, born to him during his captivity, by his Jivaro wife. The son had died during the rigorous escape to the sea, and the Headshrinker had used his acquired tribal knowledge to do a really superior job of shrinking before he continued on his lighter way. Click-whiz-whirr-bump, bump, bump. “I was delirious, you know,” he would shyly explain, “but it’s really an ambitious bit of work. There weren’t the right kind of ants there, you know, and I was in a perfect funk for fear they’d botch the skin all up.” He was a one. Click-whiz-whirr-bump, bump, bump.

A waiter slouched up to a placid young man in a grey uniform. “Betcha nervous,” he said in a chummy way. “You want a drink?”

“Drink? Oh, no!” he said, very much surprised. He thought most people knew by then that the Shield was a lot stronger guarantee of Sobriety than the White Ribbon had ever been. But it was news to the waiter; he shrugged and walked away, and the young man continued to wait in a comfortable armchair that would have suggested a London club if its leather upholstery had not been Cocktail-Lounge Red.

The Man Who Had Known Dr. Cook was through with his roast beef, his baked potato, his chef’s salad, his two baskets of French bread, his innumerable pats of butter, his sweetened coffee and his pie à la mode. He wobbled over to the young man and said: “I think we’re ready for you now, youngster; the committee-room’s back there.” He followed him and on the way the Man collected Captain Trevor-Beede, who shambled after like a bear in tweeds, and the Headshrinker, who had finally lost all his quarters. The youth had met them at dinner the day before.

The committee-room had a long table and carved-oak chairs with the names of late adventurers engraved on brass plates sunk into their backs. The Man closed the door solemnly, wobbled to the head of the table and wedged himself into an armchair. The others sat down, but the young man didn’t know whether he was supposed to until the Headshrinker cracked a nervous smile and jerked out the chair next to him. “It’s quite all right, you know,” he told him; “we don’t stand on ceremony here.”

He sat down, and the Man started: “I tell you, sir, it’s good to see young blood about the old Hearth and Home again. And I venture to say, there is none of us who has strayed as far from the beaten path as you, youngster!”

The idea surprised him; he’d never thought of it that way. He tried to explain: “It’s very good of you, sir, but I wouldn’t put it like that at all. In fact, I suppose I’ve stuck closer to beaten paths than anybody else here; why, I wouldn’t be here at all if I hadn’t!”

“Paradox,” grunted Captain Trevor-Beede. “Let’s have the rest of it and get on with the business.”

“It’s no paradox, sir. Why, where would I be if I’d got any ideas of my own about the trajectory, instead of taking Plot Room’s word for it? I’d be nowhere, that’s where I’d be, sir!”

“You needn’t be modest with us, you know,” said the nervous little Headshrinker. “After all, Lieutenant, over the dinner-table we do like to keep ourselves within bounds—” Here he shot a quick look at the Man, who went red. “—but we’re out to assess your qualifications for membership.”

“Yes, Leff-tenant,” said Captain Trevor-Beede. “Now if you’d be so good as to give us some idea of the perils of your explorations—” He took out a pigskin notebook and pencil. That paralyzed the youth.

“Well, captain, they aren’t really explorations, I guess. I just follow the plot on the table, keep her turned, you know, and then I set her down in the cradle; I generally sleep and play some handball until she’s loaded up and ready to rip again. You should see that handball court they have up there at Luna Three! It’s three times the right size, but you can really cover ground up there. Boy, can you hit some fancy shots!”

He was aware that the membership-committee was dismayed by something or other he had said, and hastened to make amends: “Oh, you shouldn’t get the idea that handball’s all I do, of course.”

“Tennis?” asked the Headshrinker wryly.

“Now you’re joking, sir. But the handball’s necessary to keep in trim; sometimes you have to tune that table awfully fast!” He whistled and wiped his dry and healthy brow. “On the new involute approach it’s all partial differentials, all the way in from Luna gravity—sometimes four sets of four every minute for fifteen minutes; you really have to whip out your approximations. And man, they’d better be right! It isn’t like the old grazing-spiral days, I’ll tell you that, sir!”

The Man Who Had Known Dr. Cook said: “You do—mathematics—up there? In the ship?”

“I should say so!” the young man told him enthusiastically. “Why, mathematics is all you’ve got up there—you can’t see because the ports are closed; you can’t hear anything because of the jets; and there isn’t anything to hear. The instruments can’t be sensitive and last out a take-off at the same time. All you have is what you know about the weight and the motion of the ship, and the weight and the motion of the Earth and Moon and Sun, so you have to take it from there. What have you got except mathematics? But the Plot Room does all the really tough stuff before the takeoff. All a pilot has to do is keep one jump ahead of the pointers under the table and keep his control-pointers lined up with them. That’s what we call ‘tuning the table,’ maybe I should have said; and the way I told you, the first approximation’s good enough for that.”

“What if it isn’t?” asked the Man.

The space pilot shrugged his grey-clad shoulders. “That’s all,” he said. “You take a trip.” He thought of three classmates.

“If you were admitted,” asked the Captain, “you would, of course, take a Club Flag to the moon on one of your—runs?”

The young man looked troubled. “I’m afraid I couldn’t do that, sir,” he said. “You know, it takes an awful lot of money to get there and back. I’d never be able to justify it to the supercargo. I ferry heavy elements, after all—it’s the job.” He thought a moment. “But tell you what, Captain! I could take a microfilm of the flag—wouldn’t that be just as good?”

“Um,” said the captain, who had planted his flag on Everest.

“Well, you know…” said the Headshrinker, who had planted his flag on a ridgepole deeper in Jivaro country than any other white man had ever gone.

“Urg!” strangled the Man Who Had Known Dr. Cook. He had planted his flag at the North Pole, long before that hypothetical point was the Times Square of global air traffic.

The Captain asked bluntly, “What adventures have you had?”

“Adventures?” asked the young man. “Well, sir, the way I look at it, it’s like this. People don’t have adventures any more; if they do, they don’t live to tell about it. You see, we’re all so tied up and meshed together in a thing like the Moon-run—if one man makes a mistake, then he can make up for it himself. That’s what you call an Adventure—doing something wrong and having it come out all right anyway because you used your head. But up there—well, if I do something wrong, then it’s out of my hands right away. And I can’t expect Plot Room, by dumb luck, to compensate for just that mistake of mine, can I? No; sir—the way it looks to me, Adventure is just about washed up, if you’ll pardon me saying so.”

The Headshrinker said flatly. “Mr. Chairman, I move that the examination be closed and the candidate’s qualifications be voted on.” He turned apologetically to the young man. “You’ll have to leave now, you know—while we make up our minds.”

“Oh, sure,” said the space pilot. “And thank you, gentlemen, for a very interesting discussion.” He walked out and carefully closed the door behind him.

“If he joins,” said Captain Trevor-Beede immediately and explosively, “we’ll all have to resign at once. ‘Doing something wrong and having it come right anyway’!”

“Move to reject the candidate,” said the Headshrinker.

“Question.”

“Aye.”

“Aye.”

“Carried,” sighed the Man. They sat in silence while he rang for a waiter. He told the man: “Please inform Space Service Lieutenant Allen that the committee had regretfully been compelled to ask him to withdraw his application for membership.”

“Yes, sir,” said the waiter.

Outside, he said to the young man in grey, “No dice, Lieutenant, they turned you down.”

“Well, thanks,” said the lieutenant regretfully. He walked slowly from the club, looking his last on the mounted heads and the case of curios and the unlit fire.

The members were awfully old-fashioned, he thought, but it would have been such a handy place to have lunch on Earth, when he happened to find a breathing-spell from the dull routine of his occupation!