
Say "Hello" for Me

Frank W. Coggins



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Twenty years is a long time to live in anticipation. At least, Professor Pettibone thought so—until the twenty years were up.

Say "Hello" for Me

By FRANK W. COGGINS

THIS WAS to be *the day*, but of course Professor Pettibone had no way of knowing it. He arose, as he had been doing for the previous twenty years, donned the tattered remnants of his space suit, and went out into the open. He stood erect, bronzed, magnificent, faced distant Earth, and recited:

"Good morning, bright
sunshine,
We're glad you are here.
You make the world happy,
And bring us good cheer."

It was something he had heard as a child and, isolated here on Mars, he had remembered it and used it to keep from losing his power of speech.

The ritual finished, he walked to the edge of the nearest canal, and gathered a bushel or so of dried Martian moss. He returned and began polishing the shiny exterior of the wrecked space ship. It had to really glitter if it was to be an effective beacon in guiding the rescue ship.

Professor Pettibone knew—had known for years—that a ship would come. It was just a matter of time, and as the years slipped by, his faith diminished not a whit.

With his task half completed, he glanced up at the sun and quickened the polishing. It was a long walk to the place the berry bushes grew, and if he arrived too late, the sun would have dried out the night's crop of fragile berries and he would wait until the morrow for nourishment.

But on this day, he was fated to arrive at the bush area not at all, because an alien sound from above again drew the Professor's eyes from his work, and he knew that *the day* had arrived.

The ship was three times as large as any he had ever visualized, and its futuristic design told him, sharply, how far he had fallen behind in his dreaming. He smiled and said, quite calmly, "I daresay I am about to be rescued."

And he experienced a thrill as the great ship set down and two men emerged therefrom. A thrill tinged with a guilt-sense, because emotional experiences were rare in an isolated life and seemed somehow indecent.

The two men held weapons. They advanced upon Professor Pettibone, looked up into his face, reflected a certain wary hostility. That the hostility was tinged with instinctive respect, even awe, made it no less potent.

One of them asked, "Fella—man came in ship—sky boat—long time ago. Him dead? Where?" Appropriate gestures accompanied the words.

Professor Pettibone smiled down at the little men and bowed. "You are of course referring to me. I came in the ship. I am Professor Pettibone. It was nice of you to hunt me up."

The eyes of the two Terran spacemen met and locked in startled inquiry. One of them voiced the reaction of both when he said, "What the hell—"

"You no doubt are curious as to the fate of the other members of the expedition. They were killed, all save Fletcher, who lasted a week." Professor Pettibone waved a hand. "There—in the graveyard."

But their eyes remained on the only survivor of that ill-fated first expedition. It was hard to accept him as the man they sought, but, faced with undeniable similarity between what they expected and what they had found, the two spacemen had no alternative.

"I hope your food supply is ample—and varied," Professor Pettibone said.

This seemed to bring them out of their bemusement. "Of course, Professor. Would you care to come aboard?"

The other made a try at congenial levity. "You must be pretty hungry after twenty years."

"Really—has it been that long? I tried to keep track at first...."

"We can blast off anytime you say. You're probably pretty anxious to get back."

"Indeed, I am. The changes, in twenty years—must be breathtaking. I wonder if they'll remember

me?"

A short time later, the Professor said, "It's amazing. A ship of this size handled by only two men." Then he sat down to a repast laid out by one of the awed spacemen.

But, after nibbling a bit of this, a forkful of that, he found that satisfaction lay in the anticipation more so than in the eating.

"We'll look around and see what we can find in the way of clothing for you, Professor," one of the spacemen said. Then the man's bemusement returned. His eyes traveled over the magnificent physique before him. The perfect giant of a man; the great, Apollo-like head with the calm, clear eyes; the expression of complete contentment and serenity.

The space man said, "Professor—to what do you attribute the changes in your body. What is there about this planet—?"

"I really don't know." Professor Pettibone looked down his torso with an impersonal eye. "I think the greenish skin pigmentation is a result of mineral-heavy vapors that occur during certain seasons. The growth. As to my body—I really don't know."

But the two spacemen, though they didn't refer to it—were not concerned with the body so much as the aura of completeness, the radiation of contentment which came from somewhere within.

And it was passing strange that nothing more was said about the Professor returning to Earth. No great revelation, suddenly arrived at, that he would not go. Rather, they discussed various things, that three gentlemen, meeting casually, would discuss.

Then Professor Pettibone arose from his chair and said, "It was kind of you to drop off and see me."

And one of the spacemen replied, "A pleasure, sir. A real pleasure indeed."

Then the Professor left the ship and watched it lift up on a tail of red fire and go away. He raised an arm and waved. "Say 'hello' for me," he called. Then he turned away and, from force of habit, he began again to polish the hull, knowing that he would keep it shining, and be proud of it, for many years to come.

Almost beyond reach of the planet, one of the spacemen flipped a switch and put certain sensitive communication mechanisms to work. So sensitive, they could pick up etheric vibrations far away and make them audible.

But only faintly, came the pleasant voice of a contented man:

"Good morning, bright
sunshine,
We're glad you are here.
You make the world ..."

THE END

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