

*Handsome, athletic, debonair,  
a man of powerful charm as well as solid worth,  
I'd give anything  
to conquer my one real fault —  
my darned modesty!*

# The Flying Tuskers Of K'niik-K'naak

BY JACK SHARKEY

**I** HAVE trod many tangled jungles, explored the floors of innumerable oceans and braved death in so many forms that a man less magnificent than myself would have died of fright. But if there is one event that stands out in my perfect memory that can still raise a goosebump or two on my broad tanned shoulders, the event is when I went hunting for the flying tuskers of K'niik-K'naak. There we were,

myself and my faithful old purple Andromedan guide, Mimp, out in the vast blue-white desert of Polaris III, looking for the flying tuskers.

K'niik-K'naak, the region we trod, was much feared by the Polaris III natives. They were a superstitious bunch anyway, who panicked at the very thought of being trampled or gored, and never ventured into the region of the tuskers. I, a man of clear head and no nonsense, laughed at their primitive fancies. I set out nonetheless into the desert, with only the barest rudiments necessary for survival. We could get none of the local boys for bearers, so Mimp had to carry everything. Naturally I had to have both hands free to use my Moxley .55, the best ray-rifle you can buy anywhere in the colonized universe.

Aside from the ray-rifle, I carried nothing save a fourteen-inch carbon-steel bolo knife slung to my belt, my ever-present calabash pipe, crammed full of steaming Yekkweed—expensive to have imported from the Martian canals, but I buy it by the carton — and my trusty f9-ultiflex binoculars on a short platinum chain.

Mimp struggled along behind me as we set off into the desert. Even his mighty plumbed muscles quivered under the load of our gear, which included an inflatable pseudolog

hut (with fireplace, an optional extra), a double-oven radium-powered cookout stove and a seven-pound crate of signal flares, just in case we got lost.

**T**HREE days we ranged the shifting blue-white sands of K'niik-K'naak, watching everywhere for signs of the herd we'd heard occurred in that region. Nothing.

"Keep sharp lookout," I snapped at Mimp, over my shoulder. Mimp was like a brother, but you have to keep these aliens in their place.

"Yes, Bwana," said Mimp. (He called me Bwana, always.) "Soon we come to waterhole."

I didn't ask him how he knew. Andromedans have a knack for geography. In many ways, they're almost as good as an Earthman. "Good," was all I answered. It was short, to the point, and showed who was boss.

Onward we trekked, a sunburnt duo casting long bronze shadows across the burning sands of K'niik K'naak. A thin plume of Yekkwood fumes marked our passage. It was nearly sunset when we spotted the pink glitter of that sickening slop that is the Polaris III excuse for water. I stood watching the sunset, while Mimp unloaded all the gear and began to set up camp. As the last rays faded in the sky, I turned and entered the pseudolog hut Mimp had inflated.

Hard on his lungs, of course, but I hadn't wanted to burden him with the extra weight of a hand-pump. I'm a stern man, but I'm fair.

He had my slippers laid out beside the armchair by the fire and a cool mint julep awaiting me on the small teakwood taboret. He was busying himself in the kitchenette, whipping up a quick soufflé with one hand and tossing a small salad with the other.

"Hurry it up there," I growled jovially. "Time is money, time is money!" A bit of friendly joshing is good for the relationship; shows Mimp I'm tolerant of him sharing the same quarters, without actually making me act like an equal, if you know what I mean.

"I hurry, Sahib," said Mimp. "Coming up." (He always called me Sahib.) He rushed across the room and began setting the table, with my pearl-handled silverware.

"No, not there," I yawned, picking up my julep and settling back into the armchair. "I think I'd like the table nearer the piano, so you can play Chopin Nocturnes while I dine." I added, as a kindly afterthought, "You can reheat your share of the soufflé later, after I've gone to bed." Personally, I hate cold soufflé.

"Yes, Effendi," said Mimp. (He always called me Effendi.) Rapidly, he moved the table over to the Steinway, set

out the finished soufflé and salad and then hurried to the piano and began laboriously plunking out glorious melody. I took a sip of my julep, then spat it out on the carpet.

"Mimp!" I roared, incensed. "Did you make this drink with Polaris III water?"

Craven and cowering, he fell at my feet, whining for mercy. But I was adamant. You let an alien take an inch, and the next thing, he's swiped a parsec. "The knout," I said, keeping my voice emotionless and holding out my hand.

"Please, Kimosabe," whimpered Mimp, "I dared not use the water in the canteens. You know that Polaris III water is poisonous to us Andromedans, while you Earthmen can tolerate it."

"I can *not*!" I raged.

"I was speaking medically," he mewed piteously.

"And I, esthetically," I snarled. "The knout, now, and be quick about it."

He scurried on all fours to the bureau where I kept my odds and ends, and came crawling back with the brutal leather whip. I weighed the infraction, decided that three stripes should be lessened enough and I laid them onto his bare back with a steady hand. "Now," I said, wearied by the effort, "play something gay and lilting."

Hastily, he dragged himself to the Steinway and complied.

Dinner was really delicious.

NEXT morning, before sun-up, we lay in wait for the herd behind a rock beside the waterhole. The sky was growing pale saffron near the horizon, then light yellow, and finally glaring brass as the sun arose. (By "sun," I mean the star Polaris, of course. Our sun is a star, you know. Or did you? I knew, naturally.) Then, afar off, I espied the bulky blobs in the sky that were the flying tuskers of K'niik-K'naak. No man had ever hunted one before. I felt pretty proud, let me tell you.

Onward they came through the air, their large skin-type gray wings flapping stolidly up and down, about three strokes to the mile. Enormous creatures they were, with fiery little eyes, and long trailing trunks that had a wicked little hook at the tip. But the thing that really caught one's eye was their tusks. Ten of them. Eight originating in the mouth, and one in either fore-knee. Each tusk was seven feet in length, long, white, straight-tapered and flawless. But not ivory, not on these babies. Pure pearl. That lovely lustrous calcareous concretion! Each tusk would bring fifty thousand interplanetary credits on the open market. And there were ten per elephantine beast, and at least sixty of them in the herd.

"Look at that, will you!" I cried to Mimp. "Look, feast your ugly eyes on that gleaming fortune swooping down upon us, Mimp!"

"I look, I feast," he murmured servilely, huddled behind me behind the rock behind the tree. Aliens tend to be cowardly when their lives are in danger.

Carefully, I raised the rifle and took a bead on the youngest beast in that descending herd. It's slightly illegal to shoot the fledglings, but after all, I wasn't going to bring him *back* with me, so no one would know. It's just that I find that when I shoot the eldest in a herd of wildlife, the others miss their protector and flee. But if I shoot one of the babies, the elder ones stay around to protect it, and I get to kill lots more. Nasty, perhaps, but that's the hunting game for you.

Anyhow, I took this bead on the beasts. I was just in the act of depressing the firing stud when an unwonted lightness in the weapon caught my attention. Irritated, I cracked open the firing chamber. "*Mimp!*" I growled, in one of my rare real wraths. "You didn't *load* the ray-rifle! Even a Moxley .55 is no damned good without cart-ridges!"

"A thousand pardons, boss," muttered Mimp, inclining his loathsome lavender face in a subservient bow. "I go get."

He wriggled away across the sand and into the hut, fortunately not disturbing the herd, which was now kneeling on the slope above the waterhole and inhaling that putrid pink liquid through their trunks. I drooled a bit, seeing the rainbow glint of sunlight on those magnificent tusks. Seconds passed, then minutes. The herd was practically slaked, and still no crawling Mimp reappeared from the hut.

Soon they'd fly off, and cost me a fortune.

I was already pretty much in hock after paying the fare to Polaris III from Earth. (I'd been able to save a little by listing Mimp as baggage, and storing him in the hold for the flight.) Angry, irked, and pretty well enraged, I moved swiftly toward the hut on hands and knees, scuttling in the doorway as fast as I could, lest the herd see me and flee, or attack.

**I**N the parlor, I stood erect, and glanced about. There was no one in sight, but the back door was open. "*Mimp!*" I bellowed, stamping across the carpet. "Where are you, you off-color blemish!?" No reply. "This means six stripes with the knout!" I warned him.

Then I heard a faint sound, not unlike that of a fourteen-inch bolo knife being brought down hard upon the inflating-

valve of a pseudolog hut. I felt at my belt. My bolo was missing. "*Mimp!*" I hollered, much too late.

Then the whole damned room, piano, fireplace, carpet, armchair and all, snapped in upon me, and I was wound up with those rubberized walls tighter than the center of a golfball. I think I must have swooned, then.

Much, much later, by dint of tooth, fingernail and sheer grit, I had gnawed, clawed and wrenched my way free of the collapsed hut. A stunning sight met my eyes. All about the waterhole, the flying tuskers were still kneeling. Every one of them was dead and already beginning to rot. But the infuriating thing was that not one of them had so much as an inch of tusk any more.

Every beast had been detusked, the priceless pearl shafts lopped off flush with the thick gray hides. *Mimp!* And with *my* bolo knife, already!

At least he'd left me a canteen. I tasted it. *Pfffaugh!* Pink Polaris III slop! The dirty little—! But I saved it anyhow. I had a long lonely walk back to town ahead of me.

And there it was that I learned even worse news.

Mimp had alreday sold the tusks and was on his way back to Andromeda, with a fortune in his breechclout. I swore revenge, then and there, but was

unable to carry it out, since I was short the rocketfare back to Earth and the authorities. (It seems that Polaris III is a neutral planet. Even the mighty word "Earthman" carries no weight there.) So I had to hock the piano, my precious Moxley .55 and what could be salvaged of the soufflé, and even then I was only able to book passage as near Earth as Sirius II.

Luckily, they had a consulate there. I was able to secure a ride home, after some weeks' wait. By then, however, it was too late to avenge myself.

Mimp, with his stolen fortune, had paid off his planet's debt to Earth. Andromeda IV (his home planet) declared its independence, and the Earth authorities throw up their hands and shrug whenever I

hint at extraditing him. Seems he's the new emperor there, or something. They can't afford to antagonize him. Damn!

However, I suppose you're wondering just why I get goosebumps when I recall the flying tuskers of K'niik-K'naak. Well, it wasn't so much the danger from the beasts, nor the hideous heat of that desert, nor my long, painful sojourn beneath the Steinway in the shrunken hut that was so bad.

It was those tuskers. Know how they died? Mimp had poisoned the waterhole. Unsporting, and all that, but the thing that nags my brain is: Why didn't I think of that?

Me! Bested by a lousy purple alien!

What's the universe coming to?

END

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## THUS SPAKE NIETZCHE

Nietzsche believed in an extinction which was not eternal. The entire world, according to him, was a mechanical dashing about of material atoms forming endless combinations. In course of time, he held, any given combination was bound to repeat itself; consequently each of us, after aeons of extinction, would find himself repeating his past life. The theory was glib nonsense. Nietzsche was completely ignorant of science and did not know that the Second Law of Thermodynamics expressly forbids any such repetition of a past state of the material world.

—J. W. Dunne

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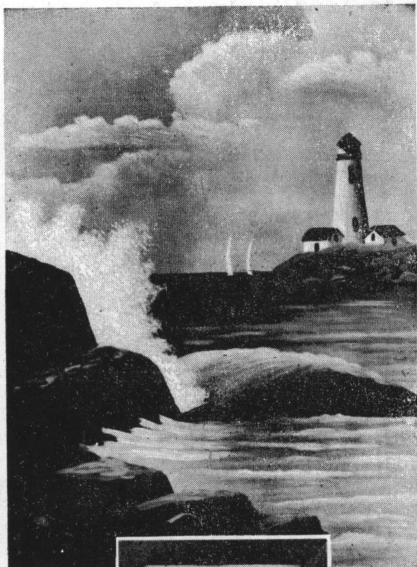
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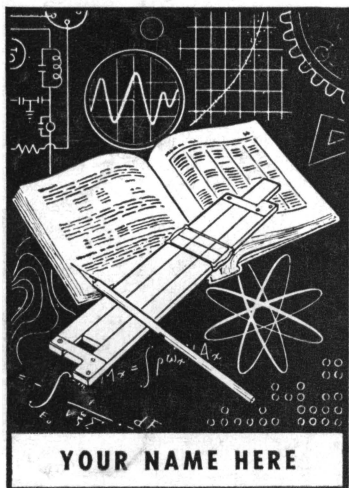
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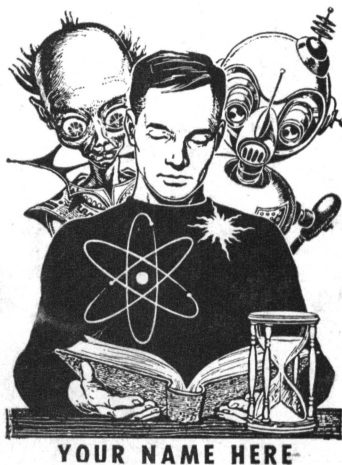


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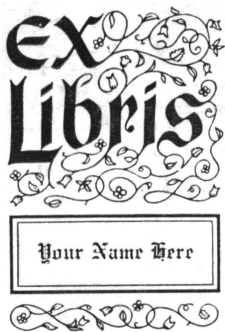
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