

*Readers, are the trees in your neighborhood the upright pieces of deciduous arboreal vegetation which they seem to be? That hollow oak on the blasted heath, now, for example.*

## NOSELRUBB, THE TREE

*by Eric Frazee*

SWOOPING ACROSS THE FROZEN meadow, the wind veered suddenly and curled its strength around the base of the lone silvertip spruce, whipping away the insulating blanket of snow at the base of the trunk.

With a moan he looked down at his exposed feet. They were cold. He was cold. His name was Noselrubb and he was the tree.

He shook vigorously, throwing snow from his branches. He thought of his home, Slupbh, on the planet Phid. There it was warm. There he had been happy. There he had met Lechtmí at Phid U. She took one look at him, whipped out her portable computer, ran twenty-three factors through it in a twinkling, and announced that Noselrubb loved her.

"Now wait a minute!" said Noselrubb.

They were married the next day.

Mathematically speaking, Lechtmí was a beauty. Her many

angles were exquisitely joined. She was seven times as intelligent as any Phiddian male. At the U, Noselrubb and other young liberals secretly had admired the strange customs of other planets, where males were at least on an equal footing with females, and where curves, instead of angles, were a measure of feminine beauty.

After thirty lakks, however, Lechtmí's clever mathematical telepathy began to tell. Noselrubb began to think she was beautiful, and he almost forgot about strange customs in faroff places.

Then came the call from the Colonel.

"I see you majored in interplanetary scan, Noselrubb."

"Yes, sir."

The Colonel scowled. "You also wasted time with a lot of scrupp those civilian educators like to call 'rounding the man.'"

"Round—ah, yes!" said Noselrubb, spying the Colonel's aide in

the next office. No sharp angles on her. Round and well packed, she was. A few million lakks before, a Colonel Cetwaff had lost control of himself and his whole crew on a routine flight to Crumz.

The whole ship's company came back to Phid with foreign wives, round ones. What happened to Cetwaff for leading this little spree into miscegenation was too awful to record in formal history.

The results of Cetwaffian Error still existed.

Noselrubb continued to goggle at the aide.

"Noselrubb!"

"Yes, sir."

"You've studied about Crumz, of course. It's that tiny planet the inhabitants call Earth. We can't change the names of all the planets to match the idiotic whims of the inferior life on them, but we have expanded Project Squee to give closer attention to Crumz.

"Our observers take the forms of some object on the particular planet. They make careful notes which are picked up every lakk—Are you listening to me?"

"Oh, yes!" cried Noselrubb, tearing his gaze from the aide.

"Good! You just volunteered for duty on Crumz. Report to Captain Glut at once."

Noselrubb went home instead.

"Duty on Crumz, eh?" said Lechtni.

"You know everything before it happens."

Lechtni glanced at her computer and tried to appear modest.

"I thought maybe you—" Noselrubb said.

"No, I can't. That is, I don't wish to get you out of the assignment. You're so immature, Nosel. I've decided that the duty will do you good."

"I'd better pack."

"I've already done that."

"You and that damned computer," Noselrubb mumbled, and went to see Captain Glut.

"What's your preference?" the Captain asked.

Noselrubb considered. A car? A boat? A bridge? How about a ski lift? Not that; his feet had a tendency to get cold. "I want to be a 50-story building in New York."

"Fine!" said the Captain.

And that was how Noselrubb came to be a tree. A tree in the middle of nowhere, half frozen, with nothing to observe but unsanitary little birds and hairy little animals. The schedule of the ration ship was erratic, moreover.

The wind died. Once more it began to snow. Noselrubb shook his branches. He groaned.

When the ration ship came in, he was not even aware of it until he felt the bump on his knowledge branch. "Empty, as usual, no doubt," the smart sergeant said, as he removed the branch.

The exposed spot felt like an aching tooth. The replacement branch was even colder, for it had

been carried in cargo space at a hundred degrees below zero. Lousy lubphs! The least they could have done was warm the new branch, but Noselrubb was the last stop on the ship's regular run, and the whole crew was anxious to get back to Phid for dinner.

"Stand by for a direct call from Colonel Naktœ," the sergeant said.

Noselrubb shivered.

"Post 89?" the Colonel barked.

"Here, sir," said Noselrubb.

"Your reports on Crumzian wildlife are the most miserable efforts yet! What are you doing down there—sleeping?"

"No, sir."

"Two miles east of you, my bug and ant agent, Post 88, is face down in five feet of snow, but his reports make yours sound like a pile of scruppl!"

"But, sir, there's hardly anything—"

"Listen to this!" The Colonel read, *Lakk Three: Snowbird lit on branch. SB cruffed on branch. "Let's go back to last summer." Crumzian pet called dog xedded on trunk.*

There was an ominous silence.

"Another thing, Noselrubb. We spent a lot of time and money teaching you how to be a tree, how to stand, how to sway in the wind—the whole routine. And still I saw you myself, in clear daylight, shaking snow from your branches!"

"Colonel, have you ever tried holding all your arms out for days and days, with weight growing and growing on them, with your feet getting cold and colder, with —"

"Your feet got cold!" The Colonel almost choked. "Noselrubb, straighten up and do your job, or it's the Scrambler for you!" He clicked out.

The Scrambler was a mysterious female. It was reliably reported that she began merely by looking at transgressors—they were always males, of course—until they started to believe that they were strong, intelligent, superior creatures. Step by step she led them on until they thought they were masters of creation. What happened then no one really knew, but something in the terrible let-down reduced the Scrambler's victims to silly, giggling characters who were fit only to work for the health department after the ordeal.

You saw them on the plazas, simpering and scratching as they removed warts from the ninth toes of bureaucrats.

Not the Scrambler, Noselrubb thought. He had hoped that his silly reports would result in getting him transferred, maybe to Miami, where his friend Kapott was a surfboard.

Boy, the stories he had heard about Crumzian females crawling all over Kapott!

The Colonel hadn't gone for

the transfer idea. Noselrubb didn't want to be Scrambled. He guessed he had better fly right for a while.

And he tried. He improved his reports. He quit shaking his branches—in daytime. He worked hard. Did the Colonel give him a kind word? Heck, no.

One fairly warm day Noselrubb got his first look at Crumzians. There were two of them, underdeveloped creatures with only four limbs. Two of the limbs hung loosely. The other two sprang from their central control section and extended to the snow, and were used to propel the entire structure, primitive as it was.

Cackling and jabbering, the Crumzians walked up to Noselrubb and looked him over. Before he knew it they were hacking away at him with a crude instrument.

With the first blow, the words of his basic training instructor came back: "I think that I shall never see . . ." The instructor had quoted with fine dramatic power, but he had added at the end, "Don't be misled by such slush. They say it, but they have a nasty habit of using trees as a source of heat in their primitive shelters.

"It will likely never happen to you, but if you are approached by tree-hunting Crumzians, simply avoid contact with them, without arousing their suspicions, of course. Clear enough?"

On Phid that was good thinking. On Crumz it lacked something.

Maybe his size would discourage them, Noselrubb hoped.

Splunk! Chunk! They meant business.

In desperation Noselrubb shook his branches. Snow plumed down in a fine shower. The Crumzians looked up, amazed. "Just the vibration of the axe," one said.

Splat! Splunk!

Noselrubb began to sweat. It was a downpour. The Crumzians lurched out of his perspiration zone. They stared with awe at the lone tree standing in a great ring of slush. They left their tool and hurried away, looking back over their shoulders.

Knowing that the Colonel no doubt had monitored the whole performance, Noselrubb no longer gave a damn. That night he set out to visit the bug and ant agent. He uprooted himself and walked the two miles through the snow, and the tracks he left behind him were fantastic to behold.

Under five feet of snow he found Post 88, a rotten log. "Wake up, you Phiddian spy!"

The log didn't budge.

"Quit playing games. I know you." Noselrubb gave the log a whale of a kick with his roots.

With a grunt the agent rolled over. "What the gretch do you mean, breaking security?"

"I've got troubles."

The log rolled back in place. "You'd better get back to your post on the double."

"I couldn't make it. I'm bushed. Don't turn your back on me, please! I've got to talk to—"

"Shut up! My ants will get suspicious."

"Now wouldn't that be just too —" That was all Noselrubb had a chance to say. The invisible ship nosed against him. A ray hoisted him. He was materialized in his normal form inside. Captain Glut was in command. He said nothing as the ship retraced Noselrubb's steps, obliterating them with manufactured snow.

At the center of the meadow rays melted the ring of ice, and then new snow was deposited over the bare spot and a real tree replaced Noselrubb.

"Make course for Phid," Captain Glut ordered, and only then did he bother to look at Noselrubb.

"You were watching me all the time, weren't you?" Noselrubb said.

"Of course."

"I'm glad it's all over."

"Are you?" Captain Glut said grimly. He turned to Sergeant Kcut, a smirking, efficient hulk. "Advance time on the viewer to pick up those Crumzians when they come back to that tree.

In sharp, yellow light, the sergeant brought in the scene. Crumzians all over the meadow. They felled the tree with a noisy tool

that was a great improvement over the axe. They cut branches from it and examined them curiously, even smelling them.

"Stupid things," Captain Glut said, "but they do have a sort of animal curiosity. Naturally, we couldn't let them cut you up like that. They might have learned something."

"What happens to me now?" Noselrubb asked.

The sergeant snickered.

In the detention room on Slupbh, Noselrubb listened to an assortment of goof-offs who were complaining that they had been framed. The lousy army had to hang its mistakes on someone, they said. Noselrubb was about to agree, when two of the loudest grippers disappeared, making only a gentle *splut!* and leaving behind them thin wisps of blue smoke.

After that, silence prevailed.

One by one the transgressors saw their names appear on a screen. SCRAMBLER in each case. Then only fat Glushing Zerog and Noselrubb were left. Their names appeared, and: CASES UNDER REVIEW.

"We've got a chance!" Noselrubb cried.

"Phlurgg!" said Zerog. "A fat one, I'll bet."

They waited nervously. "What was your offense?" Noselrubb inquired.

"I was a sidewalk in Cleveland. I got tired of crummy Crumzians

walking all over me, so one night I rolled up and went to see a show. What did you—"

The screen lit up. CASES REVIEWED. SCRAMBLER.

Zerog rose. He was pale and shaking. Then he got hold of himself and grinned. "See you on the wart detail." He was projected through the wall.

When it came Noselrubb's time to go to the Scrambler, he tried to be casual like Zerog, but in spite of his best effort, he still held tightly to the bench he had been sitting on, and it was projected through the wall with him.

Slowly he drifted into a misty room with soothing green light. He heard soft music. He felt a sense of well being. The wall screen commanded: WALK FORWARD.

Noselrubb clutched the bench. "No!"

VERY WELL. THE SCRAMBLER WILL COME TO YOU.

Out of the misty green she came slowly, in filmy roundness, smiling, desirable. Noselrubb felt an overwhelming sensation of masterful strength, but he made one last effort to resist. He wrapped all his legs, as well as his arms, around the bench.

She drifted toward him, smiling, her arms extended. Noselrubb couldn't take it. He rose. He felt like he owned all of Phid and its ten galaxies. "Come here," he ordered.

Yellow light flooded the room suddenly. The Scrambler disappeared. The viewer screen pulsed with the words: SCRAMBLING OF NOSELRUBB CANCELLED.

Once more Noselrubb was a normal Phiddian male, scared and incompetent, but sneakily happy. He grabbed the bench. And then he was projected into the Colonel's office. The Colonel beamed at him warmly.

"Nice to see you again, Lieutenant Noselrubb."

"I—who?"

"You can put the bench down now." The Colonel shook his head. "A man of your intelligence assigned as a tree. Ridiculous! Be assured that I will have a little conference with Captain Glut. Indeed I will!" There was strain in the Colonel's smile, but still he smiled. "Well, I won't detain you longer. I know you're anxious to rush home to that—er—fine little wife of yours."

"You mean I'm clear?"

"Of course! Here's your commission with full weight in all Phiddian sub-civil affairs. If you wish to get your new uniform now . . ."

In the full dress uniform of a Phiddian lieutenant, with the fragrapholgs of sub-civil authority on his petryglumphs, Noselrubb went home to Lechtmí.

"You're handsome, Nosel!"

"I am?" Noselrubb got hold of himself. "Naturally."

Lechtni hugged him tightly.

"I came damn close to getting Scrambled, you know."

"Oh, you poor dear!"

Noselrubb shoved her out to arm's length. "As if you didn't know."

"I've got a wonderful meal cooked for you, Nosel." Lechtni retreated toward the kitchen.

Noselrubb let her go. He went to a mirror and admired his fragrapholgt. By dash, he was slightly handsome. All at once he thought of Zerog. Why, with the authority now vested in Noselrubb, he could have Zerog off the wart detail in no time, and there must be treatments that could restore him to his normal self.

He strode to the kitchen. "There was a fellow with me that I sort of liked. He was Scrambled, but—"

"Glushing Zerog, you mean? He wasn't Scrambled. He—" Lechtni covered her mouth.

"You and that blasted computer!"

"No, no, Nosel! I haven't touched it since you left. I swear! What we did was strictly intuitive, with no mathematics involved."

"We?"

"Mrs. Zerog and I. We knew that you and Glushing would foul—well, just weren't the types to buckle under to stupid military

methods, so we tried to protect you a little. We investigated the Colonel. What we turned up about him and that round little alien aide of his—phlurrg!"

"Hmmm," said Noselrubb.

"When we laid it on the line to him, you should have seen him shake."

"Then good old Zerog is all right?"

"Just like you. He and his wife will be over for dinner tomorrow night."

"Good!" Noselrubb embraced Lechtni. Just how extensive was miscegenation on Phid, anyway? Investigating the whole background might be a worthy project for him and Zerog. "You cut that Scrambling business mighty thin," he accused.

"The Colonel insisted. He had to save face. Besides, you and Zerog both drooled over his aide. You needed a little scare, Nosel."

Over Lechtni's shoulder Noselrubb stared thoughtfully at the computer. Perhaps he and Zerog had best forego any investigation of miscegenation. "Forget the Colonel's aide," he said sternly.

Lechtni sighed. "If you say so, Nosel." She shifted slightly in Noselrubb's embrace, so that he would not be poked by the small, new, improved portable computer she was wearing under her blouse.