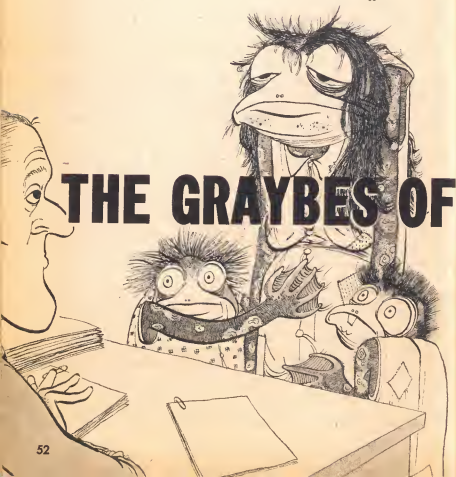


There are worse things than  
coming down with an epidemic  
— like not catching it, and  
filling in for those who do!



# THE GRAYBES OF

# RAATH

By NEAL BARRETT, JR.  
Illustrated by MARTIN

I'D forgotten how The Pit smells. I'd also forgotten my nose filters. The second I opened the door to HUM/OXY the stink hit me like a tidal wave. It was all coming back to me — I hadn't been away *that* long.

They were all there, every shape, size and color; clambering, sweating, shoving, clutching their records in their wet hands, getting sick from their shots. They probably thought it smelled, too. I gagged my way through to the main desk and past the gate. The receptionist jerked up, annoyed.

"Hey! You'll have to get to the end of the — oh! Yes?" She spotted my white and gray T-12 rating and added: "—sir?"

"I'm SteuberK," I said, trying to hold my breath, "filling in for some jerk with the plague. Where am I? I mean, where am I supposed to be?"

She consulted a list. "Oh. Mr. SteuberK. Room 909." She looked at me queerly.

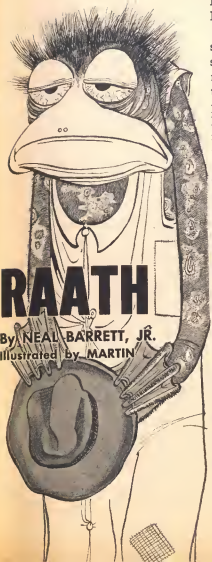
"No nose filters, Mr. SteuberK?"

"Do!" I choked, "Do dose vilders. You hab sub?"

"No," she said, "but I'm sure Miss Cress will. Why didn't you use the back lift, sir?"

"I haben't bid — I haven't been here for a long time, miss!" I snapped.

She glanced at the rating again, and blushed slightly. "Oh. No, of



course not, sir. In there and to your right, Mr. Steuber. Go right in."

IT wasn't much better in the inner hall. They were there, too, half a dozen at each door, waiting for their interviews. I found 909, went in, and leaned weakly against the door.

"Filters, miss, filters!"

The girl at the desk looked up, frowning. Then understanding dawned on her pretty face. She slit one of the little packages with her nails and handed it to me. I jammed them up my nostrils and took a deep breath. Better.

"I'm Steuber," I said, "filling in for — for —"

"Mr. Harris," she said. "I'm Leeta Cress."

She was a long-legged ash blonde with black eyes. The way the eyes tilted she was probably a Cythian Hybrid, Showgirl Class. What she was doing as a T-4 secretary is anybody's guess.

"Yes, Mr. Steuber?" One eyebrow tilted defiantly.

"Oh. Yes. Well — let's get on with it, shall we?"

"Yes," she said, "let's do that."

I went around to my own desk, which was at right angles to hers. I took out a cigarette, lit it and nodded to Miss Cress. She pressed a button and spoke into her intercom.

"Number K dash four-four-

eight-one-six. You may come in now, please."

I pulled the top folder from the stack on my desk, noted the number was correct, and opened it. There was one paper in the folder, the Preliminary History Form CC-4. It was absolutely blank. I frowned at Miss Cress.

"I know," she shrugged. "All the T-1 Clerks are out too, Mr. Steuber. We'll just have to start from scratch."

"Just what," I asked curiously, "is the matter with you people? Don't you take your shots down here?"

She nodded. "It's something MED/SEC didn't catch in the last ship. Kripstian Trot, I think."

I bit my cigarette. "Kripstian Trot, Miss Cress?" It sounded awful. "What does it do?"

Miss Cress reddened. "Mr. Steuber, I'd rather not —"

I waved her off. "Okay, okay. Forget it."

We were saved by the door. There was a hesitant knock, and Miss Cress released the lock from her desk panel. In they came.

I've seen 'em all. I've been with REF/RELIEF, IMM/EM and RELOC since the war ended fifteen years ago. I've pulled my way up the bureaucratic ladder from T-2 Lice Jockey to Counselor. I've worked in a hot suit in the COLEOP/METH tanks and I've even (as a T-3, of course)

hosed out the Sleepers. I thought I'd managed a long time ago to keep my feelings out of my work. I have 'em, all right. We all do, or we wouldn't be here. But we know we're here to help people, not feel sorry for them, and you learn pretty quick that pity is a very infectious disease.

I couldn't help it. It was impossible not to feel sorry for the sad-looking creatures that filed in through the door. There were four of them, two adults and two children. Officially, they were Refugees, Bipedal, Humanoid, Oxygen-breathers. Unofficially — they were a mess.

I'll try to explain it: If frogs were blue, and if blue frogs had orange hair covering their bodies, and if blue, orange-haired frogs came down with a bad case of poison ivy and mange — they'd be standing in my office, molting all over the floor.

I looked at Miss Cress and she swallowed hard.

"Names, please?" she asked.

THE tall male shuffled forward a step. He was dressed like the others, in a faded smock patched and washed to the limit of endurance. He was bent at the waist, and his shoulders sloped in a deep curve toward his hollow chest. He looked as if he were carrying a heavy, invisible load on his back. They all did.

"Name's Graybe, ma'am. I've Sut, this here's Sari, and the youngun's is Joak an' Luti."

I bit my lip and looked down at my desk. I recognized the accent the minute he opened his mouth. This was going to be a tough one. Getting a refugee, a misplaced person, back to his home world is bad enough. Most of them wouldn't be here if they still had worlds to go to. But that was nothing compared to Sut Graybe and his family. They were migratory workers — a pre-war phenomenon now extinct — unwanted, unsponsored, unanything. I might convince someone to put Sut on a quota list — at the bottom — in about twenty years.

"What's your home planet, Mr. Graybe?" I asked. I knew we might as well toss out the forms on this one. The Labor Corps was already overcrowded, and there aren't many decent jobs a live organism can do any more as well or as cheap as a robot. And those that are left require stronger stuff than the Graybes. The only hope we had was finding his own world — if it still existed — and trying to get him back among his own.

Sut Graybe hesitated a moment, glanced at his feet and said:

"Well, suh, I reckon we's born on Raath, suh, 'cept fer the kids.

Course thass a long time ago, warn't it, Sari?" His wife nodded solemnly. The two children gazed wide-eyed about the room, clinging to their mother's drab gray smock.

Miss Cress verified the spelling, and ran "Raath" through the tapes. In a moment we had fourteen possibilities, allowing for phonetic latitude and pronunciation. Nine we ruled out immediately. They could not support an oxygen-breather. One, "Rayyt," had no intelligent life, and another, "Wretsh," had belonged to the Enemy — and it was now a bright light around the beak of Cygnus. That left three.

Slides of the native life and geography of Ritk, Ratiki and Root brought definite noes from the Graybes. We were stuck on the ground.

"I don't suppose you know the coordinates of Raath, Mr. Graybe?"

The question brought nothing but bewilderment to the faces of Sut and Sari.

"Sector? System? Nearby stars?" Nothing. I turned to Miss Cress. "Maybe it's uncatalogued."

Miss Cress chewed thoughtfully on her knuckle a moment, then shook her head. "Have to be pretty old, Mr. Steuberk. Or real new."

"Yeah. Is there any other name for Raath, Sut? Do you

ever call it by anything else?"

Sut turned to his wife. "No suh, reckon not. Jest Raath — all we evah knowed."

Meanwhile, Miss Cress telefaxed photos of the Graybes to ANTHRO/REC and brought us up against another blank. Graybe's race, as well as his world, was uncatalogued. Not that that was unusual. We've mapped maybe one-quarter of the galaxy and half of that's still pretty wild and woolly. I looked at my watch. We were getting nowhere and there were plenty of others waiting.

SUT Graybe continued to be a goldmine of information. His home star was "kinda big an' yellor" — I could have guessed that. He reckoned the constellations, as seen from Raath, were "right purty." Swell.

"Mr. Steuberk?" I turned to Miss Cress. She was making motions with her hands around her shoulders. I raised an eyebrow. They were nice shoulders, but I didn't think she had anything like that in mind.

"His tag, Mr. Steuberk," she said firmly.

"Oh." I had forgotten the big paper ID card the refugees wear. I examined Sut's. I shuddered and looked at Miss Cress.

"Gomal," I said. She looked away.

"I didn't think anyone got off Gomal," I told Mr. Graybe.

He shook his head, remembering. "Warn't many, suh. Guess we's mighty lucky folks."

I guessed so too. I knew what had happened on Gomal.

"What were you doing there, Sut?"

"We's pickin' Skibi blossoms — warn't thet it, Sari? Them little purty pink 'uns?" Sari nodded sadly.

"And before Gomal?"

He answered readily. "Fredrickson Two. We's bringin' in the bananapple crop. Mighty hot, suh. Mighty hard work." Sari nodded sadly.

At least we were getting somewhere. Slowly. Sut Graybe was able to remember working on Trev, Eynthion, Psyche, Vix, Ornsburg, Gryphon and about two dozen more. The Graybes had seen more worlds than a Navy Chief!

About halfway through the second dozen something began to worry me. Even if you're riding the Star Fields a lot of time passes between worlds, and I knew those big lunky Long-Sleepers took their time with a frozen human cargo. If he'd spent only a day or two on each world, even, he —

"Mr. Graybe," I asked suddenly, "just what is your lifespan?"

He looked at me, puzzled.

"Let's put it another way. How long does the average — uh, do most people live on Raath?"

His face brightened with understanding. "Oh, yes, suh. Nine, ten hunnert years, ah reckon."

I sat up straight. "What?"

Miss Cress bit her knuckle and the eyebrows went up again.

"In *Standard* years, Mr. Graybe? You know what a *Standard* year is, don't you?"

"Yes suh, reckon ah do that. 'Bout four hunnert days, ain't it?"

"Uh, yes," I said slowly.

"That's correct."

"Exactly how old are you then, Mr. Graybe?" asked Leeta Cress.

He turned to his wife. "'Bout five hunnert, reckon." He grinned. "I'se oldern' Sari. 'Course she don't like to 'zactly give her age — you know how wimminfolks is, ah reckon, ma'am."

I took a deep breath. Well, it was certainly not impossible. There are a few long-lived races in the Union, though I'd never heard of any humanoid ones two or two-fifty. Still, it made sense — if you wanted to look at it like that. It was the *only* way he could have seen all those worlds in one lifetime by Long Sleeper.

"You're sure, Mr. Graybe? You're sure it's five hundred *Standard* years? You're not using some other calendar?"

"No suh, reckon ah five hunnert, all right." He chuckled. "Feel like it sometimes, anyways." I took another look at him. It was possible all right . . .

I scribbled a note on a piece of paper and handed it to Miss Cress. Then I wrote another one for the Graybes. Miss Cress frowned 'at me over her pretty nose.

I ignored her.

"Mr. Graybe," I said, "I want you and your family to go to this room." I handed him the paper. "Now. You'll be told what to do there. Then I'd like to ask you to do one more thing. I want you and Mrs. Graybe to go back to the Camp, and I want you to list every world you've ever worked on, starting back with, uh — Korby, yes, that was the last one we got to. Do you think you can do that, Mr. Graybe?"

He scratched his head and ran a long webbed hand over his face. "Ah shore try, suh. It been a heap a places, though."

I leaned toward him over my desk. "It would help a lot, Mr. Graybe, if you could just tell us the first world you worked on after Raath. Sure you can't remember that?"

"Naw," he said slowly, "it gonna take a little stewin'. Best ah works back slow like, way we's a-doin' heah."

"Okay. You do the best you

can. And come back at the same time tomorrow."

He nodded, and his shaggy brood dragged out after him. I turned to Leeta Cress. She was shaking her head slowly, like I was the boy who wrote the dirty word on the blackboard.

"That just isn't done. Mr. Steuberk," she said darkly.

"It isn't, eh? You sent the order up the tube, didn't you?"

"I did. But I don't like it. You can't go — shoving every other case to the head of the line. They'll get a physical anyway, you know."

"Sure," I said, "in about eight months. I want one now."

She let out a deep sigh. "All right, Mr. Steuberk, but it isn't the way Mr. Harris would have handled it."

I scowled. "Mr. Harris has the Galloping Rot, Miss Cress."

"The Kriptian Trot, Mr. Steuberk," she sniffed.

**WE** got through about half a dozen more cases without much trouble. We closed up shop and I asked Leeta Cress if she'd care to have dinner with me and — bang — we were in trouble again. So I had dinner by myself and a few drinks in the Red Tape Bar. I couldn't get the Graybes out of my mind. I made a note to have Research take a special look for Raath tomorrow,

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just in case it had gotten misplaced somewhere. I've worked in Research, too. We lost a whole System once behind a filing cabinet.

Meanwhile I had something else on my mind. Besides Miss Cress. I hopped a cab, rode across town and set down at the StarDome. It was late, and I didn't figure any of the big brains would be using it this time of night. I went in, sat down before the big panel and pressed GENERAL VIEW. The lights dimmed and the round ceiling lit up with a panorama of the Galaxy. Before I left the office I had copied down the planets Graybe had already given us, and now I took my notebook out and punched the names into the board. I pressed for CLOSE-UP and the galaxy dropped down on top of me.

Now I was looking at roughly one-quarter of the big lens, centering in the Union. Everything was bright, sparkling and well-defined until the edge, which dimmed on out to places we hadn't been, but could map, then on to a vague luminosity that was someone's general idea of Galactic Central.

The planets I had coded appeared as oversize red dots on the map. I connected them with a thin white line, in order of Graybe's migration, pulled a Tridi shield over my eyes, and

brought the picture up as far as I could and still keep everyone in view.

I now had a dimensional idea of Graybe's travels — and it told me absolutely nothing. If there was any pattern or direction, it was related to the picking season of the Zidze nuts or some damn thing, and that wasn't likely to show up on the StarDome.

Before I went to bed I called a guy I knew in MED/SEC and asked him what the symptoms were of the Kripstian Trot. He was asleep and it served me right for asking. He told me. *Well!*

I used the back lift this time, and I didn't forget my nose filters. There were two things waiting for me at the office: Miss Cress and a phone call. She handed me the number with a sugary smile, like Lucretia Borgia passing the cup.

The call was from Zack Miles in MED/SEC. The screen showed a tired, basset-faced character with a crooked smile.

He looked at me happily. "You been demoted, Steuber? Not surprised."

"No," I explained, "I'm filling in down here. Whole section's out with —" I caught Leeta Cress' eye — "with, ah, this new disease."

"Yeah." He grinned nastily. "I know. Been up in Bio all morn-

ing trying to catch it." Miss Cress mouth opened and she fled the room.

"Look," said Zack, "about those characters —"

"Well?"

He shrugged. "Too early to give you anything definite. They could be, mind you they *could* be, what they say. Just had time for a preliminary check. Can you get 'em back up here?"

I promised I would and asked: "Is Sut Graybe really five hundred years old?"

Zack scowled. "Let's put it this way. He has the body of a not-too-well preserved man of fifty. If his life expectancy is one thousand, like he claims, then that would work out about right."

"But you don't know for sure. Is that it?"

"I don't," said Zack patiently, "because I haven't finished the tests. But, yes — okay — probably is. And I figure his 'kids,' if you'll pardon the expression, are about eighty and a hundred. The woman won't talk but she's around four-fifty."

"Oh, yes," I said seriously, "if she's a *day*."

Zack ignored me. "Listen, Steu, where is this Raath, anyway?"

"It's a terrific place," I said, "you live to be a thousand and all the girls have got the Kripstian Trot."

He leered a second, daydream-

ing, and hung up. I turned. Miss Cress was standing in the door. I grinned sheepishly.

"You'll just have to put up with me, Miss Cress. Harris *still* has the —" Her hands clapped over her ears. I had a feeling we wouldn't have that dinner tonight, either.

The Graybes filed in about four — only six hours late. Sut's eyes were droopier and more bloodshot than usual, and Sari didn't look much better. Orange hair fluttered to the floor in great clumps.

"Well, Sut, how did you do?"

He shook his head doubtfully and handed me the list. "Sorry we's late, suh, but me 'n Sari done our bes', tryin' to rec'lec all them places. We's up all night, reckon."

"Oh, now, that wasn't necessary Sut, we —" I stopped. I had glanced down at the list. In a scrawly, crabbed hand, Sut had painfully set down, in reverse order, each planet he had visited, the approximate date, and in most cases the crops they picked.

But that wasn't what threw me. There were over two hundred and fifty names on the list. I clutched the paper tightly.

"Are you sure, Sut? You've been to *all* these places? You're not just making this up?"

He looked pained. "No suh, ah ain't. Reckon ah knows wheah ah been, all right, suh."

I raised a hand in peace. "Okay. Okay, I believe you, Sut." I glanced at the bottom of the list. Yuvor.

"Well now we're getting somewhere," I said. "Miss Cress, run Yuvor, Y-U-V-O-R, through the tapes. You're sure this is the first word you hit after Raath, eh?"

His eyes widened and he shook his head violently. Orange hair floated to every corner of the room.

"No, suh! You don't unnerstan, suh!"

I rubbed a hand wearily across my face. "What, Mr. Graybe, what don't I understand?"

"Well, suh, like ah said, we done our bes', but we fallin' sleep fore we's finished."

I didn't say a word for a minute. I stared at Sut, then at Miss Cress. Miss Cress was definitely better looking.

"All right," I said calmly as possible. "All right, Sut. You go back. Yes. You go back and finish the list. Then come back."

He grinned. The whole hairy crew shuffled out again. I laid my head in my hands. I looked at my watch. It was five.

"Miss Cress . . . ?"

She shook her head sweetly. "No, Mr. Steuberk."

I FOUGHT the temptation to run the new planets through the StarDome. I'd wait until Sut

— correction: *if* Sut, finished his list. I skipped dinner and had a drink in the Red Tape Bar. I had two drinks. I had three — oh, never mind.

I couldn't find the back lift in the morning. Miss Cress shook her pretty head sadly. "You look terrible, Mr. Steuberk."

I said, "Shut up, Miss Cress." She ignored me.

"They're waiting for you," she said.

I looked up. It sounded ominous. "Who? The little men?"

"No sir. The Graybes. With Dr. Zack?" She frowned. "Miles."

I lit a shaky cigarette. "Okay. Let's get it over with."

Zack filed in after the Graybes, leered at Leeta and leaned over my desk. "You look terrible, Steu."

"I know. I've been informed."

He beamed hopefully. "You lucky devil, you don't suppose you're coming down with —"

"Never mind, it's just a hang-over. Some doctor. Well, what did you find?"

He shrugged. "It's true. They are genuine long-lifers, all right. I borrowed a carbon-dater from Physics, tried it on a cell sample. They replace tissue about every seventy-five years."

I looked up. "Carbon-dater? I thought —"

He shook his head. "Course, the radioactivity involved is —"

"Never mind. I'll take your word for it. Anything else?"

He hesitated. "Maybe. Don't know. The kids have a funny kind of squiggly line in their brain-wave pattern. The adults don't."

"A funny squiggly line?" I said acidly. "Are you sure you're a doctor, Zack?"

Zack is not sensitive. He went on. I don't know what it is. All I know is the kids have it — parents don't. And I'd like to say you've advanced the science of Geriatrics tremendously — but I can't. We've been over them pretty thoroughly. They're old, all right. I just don't know why."

"Okay," I said, "stick around if you want to. If we ever find Raath, maybe you can ask the head man, the uh —"

"Raathskeller?"

I winced and turned to Sut. "Well, think you've got the whole thing now, Mr. Graybe?"

He shuffled forward, handed me the list. "Ah reckon so, suh. Purt' near busted mah haid, a-thinkin' so much."

He crackedled, nudging Sari in the ribs. I looked at the names. There were only about twenty additions. I hurried through, said the last name aloud.

"Crohznar. Is that it, Sut? The first place you worked after Raath?"

He nodded. "Yes suh, that it,

awright. Tol'ble purty, too. We's pickin' them big ol' Gushi buds an' —"

I stood up. "Fine. Miss Cress?"

"You want me to run Crohznar through the tape, Mr. Steuberk?"

"No. I want you to call us a cab for the StarDome. A big cab."

Miss Cress frowned. "Oh, we can't close up like that, Mr. Steuberk, we —"

"Miss Cress," I said darkly, "are you coming or aren't you? Dr. Miles thinks I may be coming down with something. Any minute, now. Do you know what he thinks I have, Miss Cress?"

She paled, bringing her hand to her face.

"All right, then. Let's get out of here."

WE made a great picture trail- ing up the steps to the StarDome. Zack, Leeta Cress, me and the molting Graybes. I sat them all down and had Zack feed me the names on the lists. Granted, I could have worked from Crohznar alone, but I wanted, if possible, to get a full directional picture of the trip from there to Gomal, where the Graybes were picked up. I pressed for CLOSE-UP again and a chorus of Oooooohs and Aaaaaaahs went up from the Graybes.

I pulled the Tridi shield over my eyes and brought up the mag-

nification. They were all there. Gomal back to Crohznar and all points in between. The picture was a little clearer now, but not much. The Graybes hadn't traveled in any orderly direction from Crohznar. They had gone where the work was, and the connecting white lines made a crazy pattern over half the Union. Still, there was a general, if ill-defined, drift from Sector II of the Union, where Crohznar was, "downward" toward Gomal.

I called Sut to the panel, explained the situation as well as I could and pulled a Tridi over his eyes.

"Mighty purty," said Sut.

"Terrific. Now look, Sut, I've shown you where Crohznar is. And you can see the route you took to Gomal. You took pretty average hops all the way, so it stands to reason Raath is probably about as far from Crohznar as your average jump. Does anything around there look familiar?"

"No, suh. Sho' don't," he said sorrowfully.

"Nothing?"

"No, suh. Jest a heap a purty lights, suh."

I slapped my head. "Okay, hold it, Sut." I dialed a view of the constellations as seen from Crohznar.

"Now, Sut? That's the way the stars look from the first planet

you worked on after Raath. Doesn't *anything* look familiar?"

He shook his head sadly. I pulled the Tridi off his eyes. I looked at Zack and Leeta Cress. They shrugged helplessly.

I lit a cigarette and leaned toward Sut. "Now think," I told him. "Can you remember how long it took to get from Raath to Crohznar? Did anyone on the LongSleeper ever mention how much *Standard* time, how much *real* time it would take? I know it was a long time ago, but try to remember."

Sut scratched his head and looked at me queerly.

"Now what's the matter?" I asked.

"Well, suh, it jest ah can't rightly tell how long they takes from Raath. Don' see how ah kin."

I frowned. "Why not?"

"Well, suh, we didn' take no LongSleeper from Raath to that place."

I let out a deep breath. "Okay, Sut," I said sarcastically, "how did you go? Plushline?"

Sut thought that was a riot. "No, suh," he laughed, "reckon not. Me 'n Sari, we swift-think it."

I could feel the hairs crawling up the back of my neck.

"*Swift-thunk?*"

"Yes, suh. Pickin's was right pore on Raath, an' we's both

purty young an' spry, 'bout two hunnert, reckon. So we swift-thunk 'bout some nice place what had work fer us an' we's jus' up and thar."

No one said a thing. Finally Zack broke the silence.

"Steu? Is he trying to say what I think he's trying to say?"

I nodded. "Uh-huh." My voice came out a little dry. "He thinks he and Sari *teleported* from Raath."

"**NONSENSE!**" scoffed Zack, a little nervously for an honest-to-goodness scoff, "if they had any psi, operating or latent, we would have caught it on the tests. If they ever had it, they sure as hell don't have it now."

"You talkin' 'bout swift-thinkin', suh?" Sut interrupted. "You right, suh, we ain't got it no more. Can't do it when you is old, suh. Reckon we done use all ours up a-gettin' there," he laughed.

I turned slowly to Zack. "Those — squiggly lines?"

He swallowed hard. "Yep."

"Sut," I said, "why didn't you say something about this before?"

"Didn' ask, suh. Didn't say nuthin' 'bout swift-thinkin'. Jes' wantin' to know whar Raath is."

"If he's telling the truth," I said, "and I wish I could believe he isn't — we might as well give up Raath. He doesn't know where it is, either."

"What do you mean?" asked Zack.

"If he swift-thu — teleported at random, he wouldn't have any idea what Raath looks like from a distance, only what the rest of the sky looks like from Raath. And if he didn't come from anywhere near Crohznar—"

"Oh, ah 'spect we know our home when we see it, suh," said Sut.

That was too much. "Then you're lying about the whole thing," I yelled at him. "You couldn't know!"

"You don' unnerstan' bout us, I reckon," he said. "We kinda feels whar home is, even 'haps we can't see it. Gotta know, see, so we kin git back. Can't do that no more; done used up all our swift-thinkin', but can't never fer-git. always got that, even if you can't do nuthin'. Don' know whar Raath is, suh, but if I'se evah to see it again, 'spect I'd surely know."

Zack, Leeta and I just looked at each other. No one said a word.

Then Sut said: "Reckon you could brighten this here thing up more than you has it? Lemme take another peek? I'd be powerful happy was I to find it 'gin."

I leaned over and boosted the magnification as far as it would go.

For maybe two minutes, Sut

moved the scanner all over the StarDome. Then, a wide grin stretched over his face.

"Sari, come look! There she is! Shore purty from here!"

I moved up. Sut grabbed my arm and pulled me to the scanner.

"There 'tis, suh. Right there. She look a lot different from heah, but that it, awright. See there? That bright, sorta fuzzy star 'neath that big-n."

I looked. This time the chill started at my feet and kept going.

"That — one, Sut?"

"Yes suh, that it all right."

I pointed it out to Zack and Leeta. I grinned stupidly.

"That one," I said.

"Mr. Steuberk?"

"Yes, Miss Cress?"

"Now."

"Now, what?"

"Now," she said, "I'm ready

for that drink, Mr. Steuberk."

I don't know what became of the Graybes of Raath. I'm not supposed to know. But I do know one thing — there are no Gushi buds to pick at Union Security Headquarters, so they must be up to something else over there. I imagine those boys have a few questions for Sut and Sari. And I'll give you ten to one they don't have an answer between them. Maybe we'll know when the Graybe kids reach maturity — in about a hundred years. I won't, of course, but Leeta and I'll have some grandchildren who might.

Every once in a while I burst out laughing just thinking about it. Do you suppose that sorry-looking, mangy-haired lout really did *swift-think* here from that fuzzy looking "star" —

— from Andromeda?

— NEAL BARRETT, JR.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

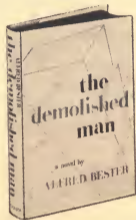
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