

Blind Man's Lantern and Other Fantastic Tales



Allen Kim Lang

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by Allen Kim Lang

**Illustrated by
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Blind Man's Lantern

*Successful colonies among the stars require interstellar ships—
but they require, also, a very special kind of man.
A kind you might not think to look for....*



Walking home in the dark from an evening spent in mischief, a young man spied coming toward him down the road a person with a lamp. When the wayfarers drew abreast, the play-boy saw that the other traveler was the Blind Man from his village. "Blind Man," the youngster shouted across the road, "what a fool you be! Why, old No-Eyes, do you bear a lantern, you whose midnight is no darker than his noonday?" The Blind Man lifted his lamp. "It is not as a light for myself that I carry this, Boy," he said, "it is to warn off you fools with eyes."

—Hausa proverb



The Captain shook hands with the black-hatted Amishman while the woman stood aside, not concerning herself with men's business. "It's been a pleasure to have you and *Fraa* Stoltzfoos aboard, Aaron," the Captain said. "Ship's stores are yours, my friend; if there's anything you need, take it and welcome. You're a long way from the corner grocery."

"My Martha and I have all that's needful," Aaron Stoltzfoos said. "We have our plow, our seed, our land. Captain, please tell your men, who treated us strangers as honored guests, we thank them from our hearts. We'll not soon forget their kindness."

"I'll tell them," the Captain promised. Stoltzfoos hoisted himself to the wagon seat and reached a hand down to boost his wife up beside him. Martha Stoltzfoos sat, blushing a bit for having displayed an accidental inch of black stocking before the ship's officers. She smoothed down her black skirts and apron, patted the candle-snuffer *Kapp* into place over her prayer-covering, and tucked the wool cape around her arms and shoulders. The world outside, her husband said, was a cold one.

Now in the Stoltzfoos wagon was the final lot of homestead goods with which these two Amishers would battle the world of Murna. There was the plow and bags of seed, two crates of nervous chickens; a huge, round tabletop; an alcohol-burning laboratory incubator, bottles of agar-powder, and a pressure cooker that could can vegetables as readily as it could

autoclave culture-media. There was a microscope designed to work by lamplight, as the worldly vanity of electric light would ill suit an Old Order bacteriologist like Martha Stoltzfoos. Walled in by all this gear was another passenger due to debark on Murna, snuffling and grunting with impatience. "*Sei schtill*, Wutzchen," Stoltzfoos crooned. "You'll be in your home pen soon enough."

The Captain raised his hand. The Engineer punched a button to tongue the landing ramp out to Murnan earth. Cold air rammed in from the outside winter. The four horses stomped their hoofs on the floor-plates, their breath spikes of steam. Wutzchen squealed dismay as the chill hit his nose.

"We're *reddi far geh*, Captain," Stoltzfoos said. "My woman and I invite you and your men to feast at our table when you're back in these parts, five years hence. We'll stuff you fat as sausages with onion soup and Pannhaas, Knepp and Ebbelkuche, shoo-fly pie and *scharifer* cider, if the folk here grow apples fit for squeezing."

"You'll have to set up planks outdoors to feed the lot I'll be bringing, Aaron," the Captain said. "Come five-years' springtime, when I bring your Amish neighbors out, I'll not forget to have in my pockets a toot of candy for the little Stoltzes I'll expect to see underfoot." Martha, whose English was rusty, blushed none the less. Aaron grinned as he slapped the reins over the rumps of his team. "Giddap!" The cart rumbled across the deck and down the ramp, onto the soil of Murna. Yonnie, the Ayrshire bull, tossed his head and sat as the rope tightened on his noseband. He skidded stubbornly down the ramp till he felt cold earth against his rear. Accepting fate, Yonnie scrambled up and plodded after the wagon. As the Stoltzfooses and the last of their off-worldly goods topped a hillock, they both turned to wave at the ship's officers. Then, veiled by the dusty fall of snow, they disappeared.

"I don't envy them," the Engineer said, staring out into the wintery world.

"Hymie, were you born in a barn?" the Exec bellowed.

"Sorry, sir." The Engineer raised the landing ramp. Heaters hummed to thaw the hold's air. "I was thinking about how alone those two folks are now."

"Hardly alone," the Captain said. "There are four million Murnans, friendly people who consider a white skin no more than a personal idiosyncrasy."

Aaron's what his folks call a *Chentelmaan*, too. He'll get along."

"Chentelmaan-schmentelmaan," the Engineer said. "Why'd he come half across Creation to scratch out a living with a horse-drawn plow?"

"He came out here for dirt," the Captain said. "Soil is more than seed-bed to the Amish. It feeds the Old Order they're born to. Aaron and Martha Stoltzfoos would rather have built their barns beside the Susquehanna, but all the land there's taken. Aaron could have taken a job in Lancaster, too; he could have shaved off his beard, bought a Chevie and moved to the suburbs, and settled down to read an English-language Bible in a steepled church. Instead, he signed a homestead-contract for a hundred acres eighty light-years from home; and set out to plow the land like his grandpop did. He'll sweat hard for his piece of Murna, but the Amish always pay well for their land."

"And what do we, the government, I mean, get from the deal?" the Exec wanted to know. "This wagon of ours doesn't run on hay, like Aaron's does."

"Cultures skid backwards when they're transplanted," the Captain said. "Murnan culture was lifted from Kano, a modern city by the standards of the time; but, without tools and with a population too small to support technology, the West African apostates from Islam who landed here four hundred years ago slid back to the ways of their grandparents. We want them to get up to date again. We want Murna to become a market. That's Aaron's job. Our Amishman has got to start this planet back toward the machine age."

"Seems an odd job to give a fellow who won't drive a car or read by electric light," the Engineer observed.

"Not so odd," the Captain said. "The Amish pretty much invented American agriculture, you know. They've developed the finest low-energy farming there is. Clover-growing, crop-rotation, using animal manures, those are their inventions. Aaron, by his example, will teach the natives here Pennsylvania farming. Before you can say Tom Malthus, there'll be steel cities in this wilderness, filled with citizens eager to open charge accounts for low-gravs and stereo sets."

"You expect our bearded friend to reap quite a harvest, Captain," the Engineer said. "I just hope the natives here let him plant the seed."

"Did you get along with him, Hymie?"

"Sure," the Engineer said. "Aaron even made our smiths, those human sharks bound for Qureysh, act friendly. For all his strange ways, he's a nice guy."

"Nice guy, hell," the Captain said. "He's a genius. That seventeenth-century un-scientist has more feeling for folkways in his calloused left hand than you'd find in all the Colonial Survey. How do you suppose the Old Order maintains itself in Pennsylvania, a tiny Deutsch-speaking enclave surrounded by calico suburbs and ten-lane highways? They mind their business and leave the neighbors to theirs. The Amish have never been missionaries—they learned in 1600 that missionaries are resented, and either slaughtered or absorbed."

"Sometimes digestively," the Engineer remarked.

"Since the Thirty Years' War, back when 'Hamlet' was opening in London, these people have been breeding a man who can fit one special niche in society. The failures were killed in the early days, or later went gay and took the trappings of the majority. The successes stayed on the farm, respected and left alone. Aaron has flirted with our century; he and his wife learned some very un-Amish skills at the Homestead School. The skill that makes Aaron worth his fare out here, though, is an Amish skill, and the rarest one of all. He knows the Right Way to Live, and lives it; but he knows, too, that your Truth-of-the Universe is something different. And right, for you. He's quite a man, our Aaron Stoltzfoos. That's why we dropped him here."

"Better him than me," the Engineer said.

"Precisely," the Captain said. He turned to the Exec. "As soon as we've lifted, ask Colonel Harris to call on me in my cabin, Gene. Our Marines had better fresh-up their swordsmanship and cavalry tactics if they're to help our Inad Tuaregs establish that foundry on Qureysh."

"It sometimes seems you're more Ship's Anthropologist than Captain," the Engineer remarked.

"I'm an anthro-apologist, Hymie, like Mr. Kipling," the Captain said. "*There are nine and sixty ways of constructing tribal lays. And—every—single—one—of—them—is—right!*" Bells rang, and the ship surged. "Aaron and Martha, God keep you," the Captain said.



"Whoa!" Aaron shouted. He peered back toward the ship, floating up into grayness, the cavitation of her wake stirring the snow into patterns like fine-veined marble. "*Gott saygen eich*," he said, a prayer for his departing friends.

His wife shivered. "It's cold enough to freeze the horns off a mooley-cow," she said. She glanced about at the snow-drifted little trees and clutched her black cloak tighter. "I'm feared, Stoltz. There's naught about us now but snow and black heathen."

"It's fear that is the heathen," Aaron said. "*By the word of the Lord were the heavens made; and the host of them by the breath of His mouth.*" He kissed her. "I welcome you to our new homeland, wife," he said.

Behind them Wutzchen—"piglet"—grunted. Martha smiled back at the giant porker, perched amongst the cases and bags and household goods like the victim of some bawdy chiavari. "I've never heard a pig mutter so," she said.

"If he knew that his business here was to flatter the local lady-pigs with farrow, Wutzchen would hop out and run," Aaron said.

"*Dummel dich*, Stoltz," Martha said. "I've got to make your supper yet, and we don't have so much as a stove lit in our tent."

Stoltzfoos slapped the team back into motion. "What we need for our journey home are a few of the *altie lieder*," he said, reaching back in the wagon for his scarred guitar. He strummed and hummed, then began singing in his clear baritone: "*In da guut alt Suumer-zeit ...*

"... *In da guut alt Suumer-zeit*," Martha's voice joined him. As they jolted along the path through the pine trees, heading toward Datura-village, near which their homestead stood, they sang the other homey songs to the music of the old guitar. "*Drawk Mich Zrick zu Alt Virginie*," nostalgic for the black-garbed Plain-Folk left at home. Then Aaron's fingers danced a livelier tune on the strings: "*Ich fang 'n neie Fashun aw*," he crowed, and Martha joined in:

"A new fashion I'll begin," they sang,

"The hay I'll cut in the winter;

"When the sun-heat beats, I'll loaf in the shade.

"And feast on cherry-pie.

"I'll get us a white, smemarkase cow,

"And a yard full of guinea-hen geese;

"A red-beet tree as high as the moon,

"And a patent-leather fence.

"The chickens I'll keep in the kitchen," they sang; whereupon Martha broke down laughing.

"It's a new world, and for now a cold world; but it's God's world, with home just up ahead," Aaron shouted. He pulled the wagon up next to the arctic tent that was to be their temporary farmhouse, beside the wagon loads of provision he'd brought before. He jumped down and swung Martha to earth. "Light the stove, woman; make your little kitchen bright, while I make our beasts feel welcome."

The Amishwoman pushed aside the entrance flap of the tent. Enclosed was a circle some twelve feet wide. The floor was bare earth. Once warmed by the pump-up "naptha" lantern and the gasoline hotplate, it would become a bog. Martha went out to the wagon to get a hatchet and set out for the nearby spinny of pines to trim off some twigs. Old Order manner forbid decorative floor-coverings as improper worldly show; but a springy carpet of pine-twigs could be considered as no more than a wooden floor, keeping two Plain Folk from sinking to their knees in mud.

The pots were soon boiling atop the two-burner stove, steaming the tent's air with onion-tangy *tzvivvele Supp* and the savory pork-smell of *Schnitz un Knepp*, a cannibal odor that disturbed not a bit Wutzchen, snoring behind the cookstove. Chickens, penned beneath the bed, chuckled in their bedtime caucus. The cow stood cheek-by-jowl with Yonnie, warming him with platonic graciousness as they shared the hay Aaron had spread before them. Martha stirred her soup. "When the bishop married me to you," she told Aaron, "he said naught of my having to sleep with a pig."

"Ah, but I thought you knew that to be the purpose of Christian marriage, woman," Aaron said, standing close.

"It's Wutz I mean," she said. "Truly, I mind not a bit living as in one of those automobile-wagons, since it's with you, and only for a little while."

"I'll hire a crew of our neighbors to help with the barn tomorrow," Aaron

said. "That done, you'll have but one pig to sleep with."

After grace, they sat on cases of tobacco to eat their meal from a table of feed sacks covered with oilcloth. "The man in the ship's little kitchen let me make and freeze pies, Stoltz," Martha said. "He said we'd have a deepfreeze big as all outdoors, without electric, so use it. Eat till it's all, *Maan*; there's more back."

Yonnie bumped against Aaron's eating-elbow. "No man and his wife have eaten in such a zoo since Noah and his wife left the ark," Aaron said. He cut a slice of Schnitz-pie and palmed it against the bull's big snout to be snuffled up. "He likes your cooking," he said.

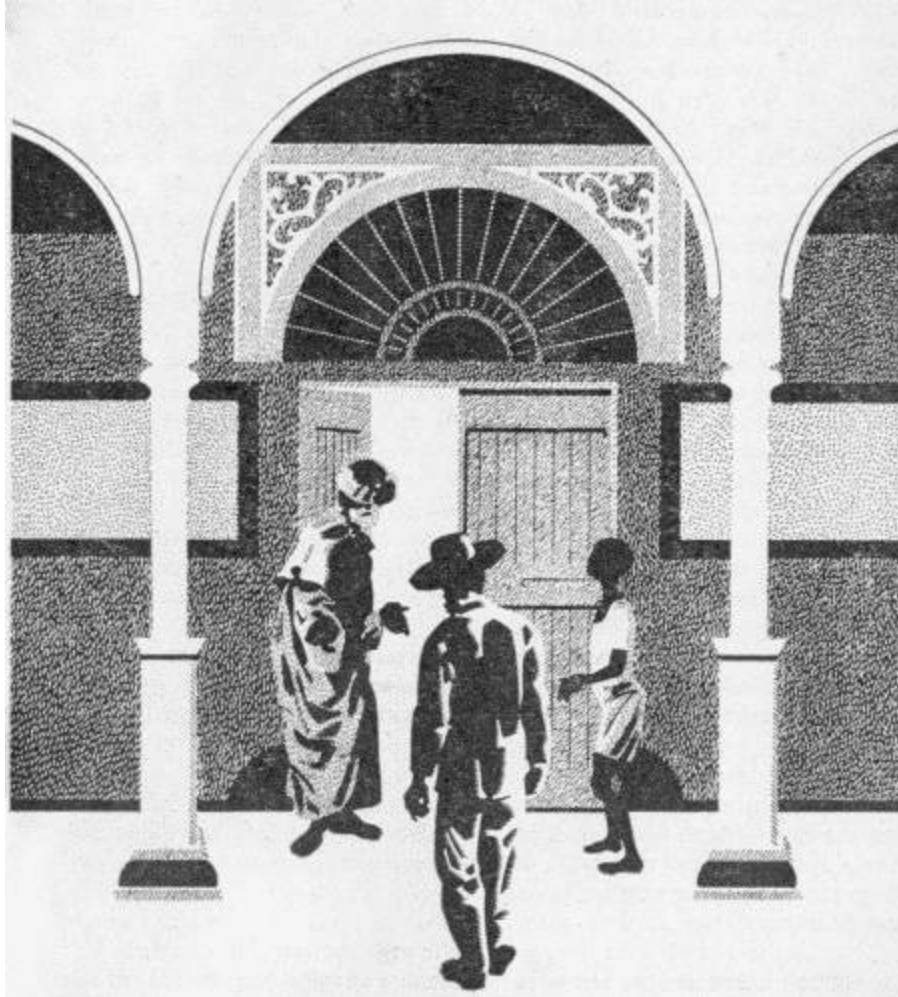
"So wash his face," Martha told him.

Outside the tent there was a clatter of horse-iron on frozen ground. "What the die-hinker is that?" Aaron demanded. He stood and picked up the naphtha lantern.

Outside, Aaron saw a tall black stranger, astride a horse as pale as the little Murnan moons that lighted him. "*Rankeshi dade!*" the visitor bellowed.

"May your life be a long one!" Aaron Stoltzfoos repeated in Hausa. Observing that his caller was brandishing a clenched fist, the Amishman observed the same ambiguous courtesy. "If you will enter, O Welcome Stranger, my house will be honored."

"Mother bless thee, Bearded One," the Murnan said. He dismounted, tossing his reins to one of the four retainers who remained on horseback. He entered the tent after Aaron; and stared about him at the animals, letting his dark eyes flick across Martha's unveiled face. At the Amishman's invitation, the visitor sat himself on a tobacco case, revealing as he crossed his legs elaborately embroidered trousers and boot tops worked with designs that would dazzle a Texan. Martha bustled about hiding the remains of their meal.



The Murnan's outer dress was a woolen *riga*, the neckless gown of his West-African forefathers, with a blanket draped about his shoulders, exactly as those ancestors had worn one in the season of the cold wind called harmattan. Aaron introduced himself as Haruna, the Hausa version of his name; and the guest made himself known as Sarki—Chief—of the village of Datura. His given name was Kazunzumi. Wutzchen snuffled in his sleep. The Sarki glanced at the huge pig and smiled. Aaron relaxed a bit. The Islamic interdict on swine had been shed by the Murnans when they'd become apostates, just as Colonial Survey had guessed.

Stoltzfoos' Hausa, learned at the Homestead School at Georgetown University, proved adequate to its first challenge in the field, though he discovered, with every experimenter in a new language, that his most useful phrase was *magana sanoo-sanoo*: "please speak slowly." Aaron let the Chief commence the desultory conversation that would precede talk of

consequence. Martha, ignored by the men, sat on the edge of the bed, reading the big German-language Bible. Aaron and Kazunzumi sang on in the heathen tongue about weather, beasts, and field-crops.

The Sarki leaned forward to examine Aaron's beard and shaven upper lip, once; and smiled. The Murnan does not wear such. He looked at Martha more casually now, seeing that the husband was not disgraced by his wife's naked face; and remarked on the whiteness of her skin in the same tones he'd mentioned Wutzchen's remarkable girth.

Aaron asked when the snows would cease, when the earth would thaw. The Sarki told him, and said that the land here was as rich as manure. Gradually the talk worked round to problems involving carpenters, nails, lumber, hinges—and money. Aaron was pleased to discover that the natives thought nothing of digging a cellar and raising a barn in midwinter, and that workers could be easily hired.

Suddenly Sarki Kazunzumi stood and slapped his palms together. The tent flap was shoved open. Bowed servants, who'd shivered outside for over an hour, placed their master's presents on the sack table, on the twig floor, even beside Martha on the bed. There were iron knives, a roast kid, a basket of peanuts, a sack of roasted coffee beans, a string of dried fruit, and a tiny earthenware flask of perfume. There was even a woolen riga for Aaron, black, suggesting that the Survey had said a bit to the natives about Amish custom; and there were bolts of bright-patterned cloth too worldly for aught but quilts and infant-dresses, brightening Martha's eyes.

Aaron stood to accept the guest gifts with elaborate thanks. Sarki Kazunzumi as elaborately bemeaned his offerings. "Musa the carpenter will appear on tomorrow's tomorrow," he said. "You will, the Mother willing, visit me in Datura tomorrow. We will together purchase lumber worthy of my friend-neighbor's barn-making. May the Mother give you strength to farm, Haruna! May the Mother grant you the light of understanding!"

"*Sannu, sannu!*" Stoltzfoos responded. He stood at the door of his tent, holding his lantern high to watch the Sarki and his servants ride off into the darkness.

"*Er iss en groesie Fisch, nee?*" Martha asked.

"The biggest fish in these parts," Aaron agreed. "Did you understand our talk?"

"The heathen speech is hard for me to learn, Stoltz," Martha admitted, speaking in the dialect they'd both been reared to. "While you had only the alien speech to study, I spent my time learning to grow the buglets and tell the various sorts apart. Besides, *unser guutie Deitschie Schproech, asz unser Erlayser schwetzt, iss guut genunk fa mier.*" (Our honest German tongue, that our Saviour spoke, is good enough for me).

Aaron laughed. "So *altfashuned* a *Maedel* I married," he said. "Woman, you must learn the Hausa, too. We must be friends to these *Schwotzers*, as we were friends with the English-speakers back in the United Schtayts." He pushed aside the bolt of Murnan cloth to sit beside his wife, and leafed through the pages of their *Familien-Bibel*, pages lovingly worn by his father's fingers, and his grandfather's. "Listen," he commanded:

"For the Lord thy God bringeth thee into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and depths that spring out of valleys and hills; a land of wheat, and barley, and vines, and fig trees, and pomegranates; a land of oil olive, and honey; a land wherein thou shalt eat bread without scarceness, thou shalt not lack any thing in it; a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills thou mayest dig brass. When thou hast eaten and art full, then thou shalt bless the Lord thy God for the good land which He hath given thee." Aaron closed the big book reverently. "Awmen," he said.

"Awmen," the woman echoed. "Aaron, with you beside me, I am not fretful."

"And with the Lord above us, I fear not in a strange land," Aaron said. He bent to scrape a handful of earth from beneath Martha's pine-twig carpet. "*Guuter Gruundt*," he said. "This will grow tall corn. Tobacco, too; the folk here relish our leaf. There will be deep grasses for the beasts when the snow melts. We will prosper here, wife."

The next morning was cold, but the snowfall had ceased for a spell. The Stoltzfooses had risen well before the dawn; Martha to feed herself, her husband, and the chickens; Aaron to ready the horse and wagon for a trip into Datura. He counted out the hoard of golden cowries he'd been loaned as grubstake, did some arithmetic, and allowed his wife to pour him a second cup of coffee for the road. "You may expect the Sarki's wives to visit while

I'm gone," he remarked.

"I'd be scared half to death!" Martha Stoltzfoos said. Her hands went to the back of her head, behind the lace prayer covering. "My hair's all strooby, this place is untidy as an auction yard; besides, how can I talk with those dark and heathen women? Them all decked out in golden bangles and silken clothes, most likely, like the bad lady of Babylon? Aaron Stoltz, I would admire a pretty to ride into town with you."

"Haggling for hired-help is man's *Bissiniss*." he said. "When Kazunzumi's women come, feed them pie and peaches from the can. You'll find a way to talk, or women are not sisters. I'll be back home in time for evening chores."

Bumping along the trail into Datura, Aaron Stoltzfoos studied the land. A world that could allow so much well-drained black soil to go unfarmed was fortunate indeed, he mused. He thought of his father's farm, which would be his elder brother's, squeezed between railroad tracks and a three-lane highway, pressed from the west by an Armstrong Cork plant, the very cornstalks humming in harmony with the electric lines strung across the fields. This land was what the old folks had sought in America so long ago: a wilderness ripe for the plow.

The wagon rumbled along the hoof-pocked frozen clay. Aaron analyzed the contours of the hills for watershed and signs of erosion. He studied the patterns of the barren winter fields, fall-plowed and showing here and there the stubble of a crop he didn't recognize. When the clouds scudded for a moment off the sun, he grinned up, and looked back blinded to the road. Good tilth and friendship were promised here, gifts to balance loneliness. Five years from spring, other Amish folk would come to homestead—what a barn-raising they'd have! For now, though, he and Martha, come from a society so close-knit that each had always known the yield-per-acre of their remotest cousin-german, were in a land as strange as the New York City Aaron, stopping in for a phone-call to the vet had once glimpsed on the screen of a gay-German neighbor's stereo-set.

Datura looked to Aaron like a city from the Bible, giving it a certain vicarious familiarity. The great wall was a block of sunbaked mud, fifty feet tall at the battlements, forty feet thick at its base; with bright, meaningless flags spotted