

Now What?

Barbara J. Hamblen

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When Jorl and his wife, Tarla, talked about taking a family vacation, they pictured poolside drinks and late-night dancing, not explosions and enemy invasions. Yet, that is precisely what they encounter in Barbara J. Hamblen's debut novel, *Now What?*

When their spaceship crash-lands on Earth, the easygoing couple and the rest of the crew consider the planet as their new vacation destination. Their first order of business is to hide the ship and try to fit in with the locals. Tarla's psychic abilities and sexy smile make it easy for her to communicate with the natives. Sarn, Tarla's brother, quickly figures out how to best the Las Vegas slot machines, enabling the aliens to buy supplies, dine at the finest restaurants, and check into a luxury hotel. Their fun is soon disrupted by the realization that the "evil Sarnanians" have discovered Earth. Realizing the entire planet is in danger, the crew takes it upon themselves to destroy the enemy. With the help of an ancient ally whose little red "Forever" pills makes him as young as he wants, the aliens use their remaining technology to defend Earth.

The first several chapters are slow to gain momentum, as the characters plod through the expected difficulties of landing on a new planet, but the story really picks up when they learn enough about Earth to begin a series of meaningful interactions. Each violation of their noninterference policy brings new difficulties, especially when it comes to romance. Eloise (whose every sentence begins with an annoying, "Gee, Sarn honey") is a kind-hearted human elementary teacher whose sweet innocence captures Sarn's heart. Carol, on the other hand, is cooler, more practical, and more useful resident of Planet Earth. Khair, Jorl's brother, finds himself seeing stars when he thinks about her. Both couples want to marry, a complication that Captain Jorl will defend to the Federation—if they ever get home.

The techno-babble and gadgetry in this story aren't stellar, and neither is the way the characters are so delighted to finally be on vacation that they completely forget about their Federation duties for a few days. They're too busy gambling, eating Earth food, and flirting to let their Admiral know where they are, much less try to fix their ship. "Highly trained" and "experienced" officers should know better. Also, since this is a sci-fi story, the action could be much improved by more original technology with plausible scientific explanations. For example, the use of a remote-controlled eagle as a surveillance gadget is very Earthlike, not alien. Still, the Forever pill is a clever invention, and so is the foam that lets the crew crash-land without so much as a bruise.

Hamblen's cast of characters is out of this world. Unlike other debut authors, who create scores of needless characters, each of Hamblen's players has a distinctive personality and purpose: There's Big Alice, the madame whose whorehouse serves as a hiding place for the crew; and Old Bill, whose Jeep brings out the worst in Sarn.

Despite the weak cover art and careless punctuation, *Now What?* is a fun read for anyone looking to pass an afternoon with memorable characters, convincing action sequences, and the age-old struggle of good-versus-evil.

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