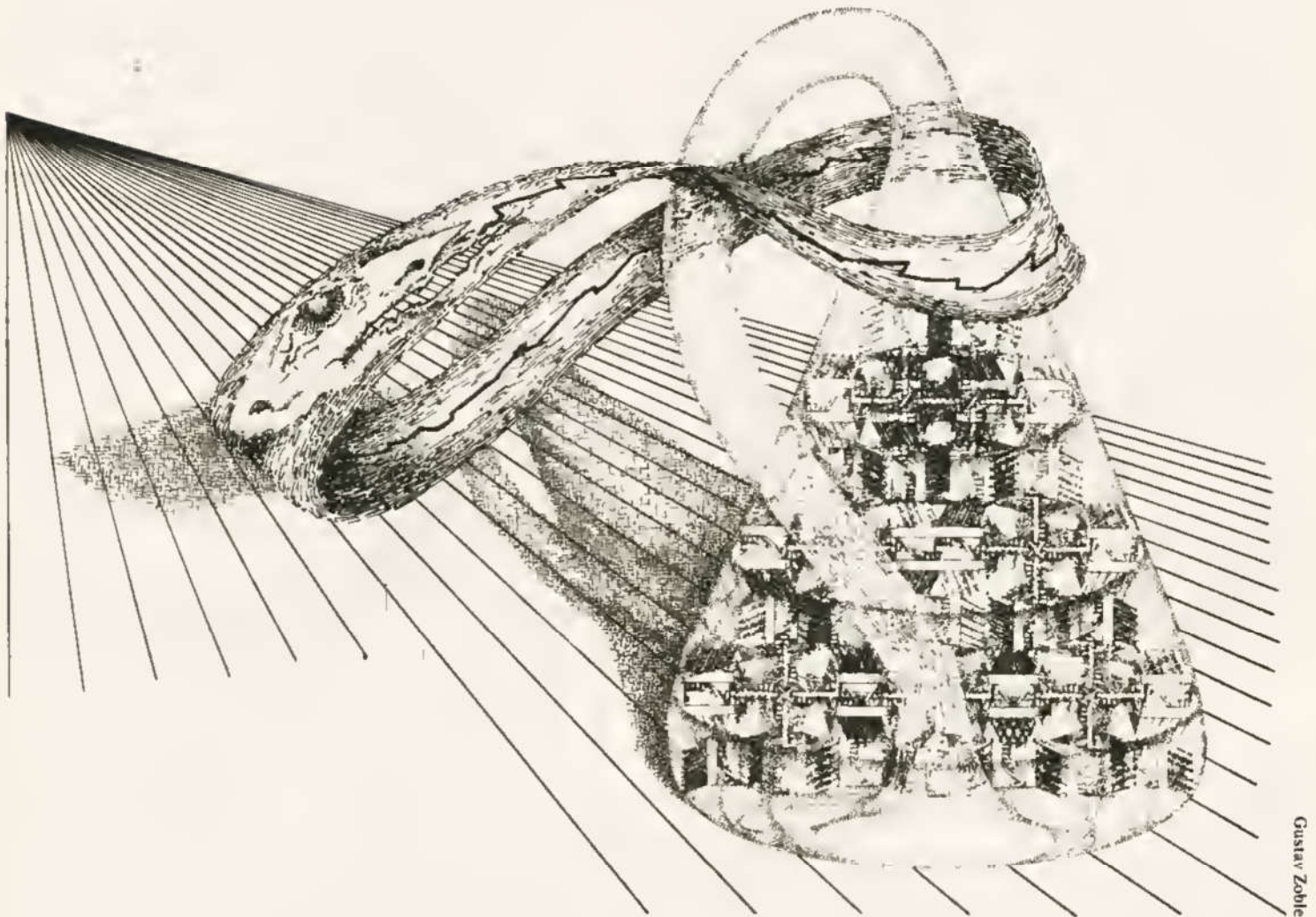


# NOBODY LOVES A MOEBIUS STRIP

Alice Laurance



Gustav Zoble

**Y**OU COULD BE INTERESTED, even fascinated by one, you could conceivably admire one, but nobody loves a Moebius Strip. Particularly not a living one. Even cut out of paper, there's something infuriatingly unreasonable about one, and in the flesh—I shuddered, looking at the creature on the table in front of me and repeated it: nobody loves a Moebius Strip.

The thing had all of the less appealing qualities of a skinned snake which had been flattened by a steam roller and had somehow contrived to swallow part of itself in the process. It

didn't look as if it had only one surface and edge, but I'd proved it by drawing a wavering line around it. The line was unsteady because the thing had tried to wriggle away. It had also made a faintly chortling sound and I made a useless note to the effect that it was probably ticklish. I was at a loss to know how to take its measurements, but if you flattened it out, ignored the unnerving half-twist somewhere in it and measured it doubled over itself, it would have been about a foot long and three inches wide.

It was mobile—or it had been before I'd pinned it to the  
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table with a strip of tape—moving like a clumsy conveyor belt. It was flesh-colored. I recognize that could be a controversial description in certain parts of the universe, but I use it in the most precise fashion: the thing was dappled and every conceivable flesh tone was represented on it someplace.

Worst of all, it had features. It had an eye—or perhaps two, I'm not sure. It went through, you see. I mean, it appeared on both sides. Yes, yes, I know, there's only one side. But if you stuck a pin through a paper Moebius Strip, you could turn the paper over and see the prick mark on either side despite the fact that there's only one surface. The eye(s) worked the same way and it stared at me. There was an ear (or a pair of ears, depending on your point of view) and a nose, but the nose didn't go through. It also didn't look much like a real nose. What it looked like was the way a child with little artistic talent would draw a nose: an angle with two dots underneath. But that was nothing compared to the mouth. It was all right when it was closed (it looked like an ordinary drawing of rather thin lips) but when it was opened, you could see right through it. Nobody could possibly love a Moebius Strip.

But it wasn't my job to love it. What I was supposed to do was evaluate it, to judge whether or not the thing had enough intelligence to qualify for diplomatic recognition.

I can see I'd better introduce myself. My name is Clarence Worthington, and I'm Chairman of the Psycho-Biological Department of Terran University. My specialty is the testing of newly encountered species with the object of deciding whether the creature should be placed in the Global Zoo or invited to exchange ambassadors.

We have a wide variety of tests we can administer, depending on the species being evaluated, and they're supposed to be comprehensive. They *are* comprehensive; I know, I devised most of them.

Put that way, it sounds simple enough, but you can take my word for it, it isn't. To minimize the risk, the cut-off point for diplomatic overtures is depressingly low and, in any borderline situation, the species is given the benefit of the doubt. Even so, you'll still hear stories about some of our more glaring errors, such as the time the Soppoites were placed in the Zoo. They gave us a very impressive, not to say forceful, demonstration of their intelligence and the situation was corrected. But I ask you—how could we know that the Soppoitic faith forbids testing?

But that's history and had nothing to do with the peculiar creature taped to the table in front of me.

Three lab technicians had already attempted to administer the basic tests, and all three were now undergoing extensive therapy as a result. The decision was up to me alone, and I had no idea how to make it. I studied the creature helplessly, listening to its whimpering sounds, and wondered why I'd ever accepted the Department Chairmanship.

Doggedly I worked through the standard tests, knowing in advance what the results would be. Most of the tests were totally useless (Spatial Relationships I didn't even try) and the rest inconclusive. The thing was intelligent, only it wasn't. It all depended on the test, which isn't supposed to happen; the tests are supposed to check each other. Sometimes the thing passed with flying colors; other tests it failed dismally, and there was absolutely no correlation between one result and another. It literally defied analysis.

The thing could reason, at least up to a point, but it couldn't (or wouldn't?) communicate, which is patently ridiculous. Analysis showed that the sounds it made were repeated at uneven intervals, and they were compatible with neo-english,

Alice Laurance

yet it refused to learn any new words. It did, however, react when its own sounds were repeated to it. The reactions were not unpredictable, but they made no sense—if it didn't smile and chortle, it tried to hurl itself at the speaker; sometimes it whimpered.

In desperation, I sent for the dossier on it. It had been brought back by the crew of the *Phoebe II*, which had gone out to investigate a derelict traveling aimlessly in the vicinity of Gamma Geminorum. Their assignment (which I understand is standard) was to check for life, offer any assistance possible and, failing that, to haul the craft in. The derelict had been boarded by several members of the *Phoebe II* crew, who immediately discovered signs of some sort of internal disaster. The power supply was so totally demolished they couldn't even determine what it might have been. They reported no signs of life and were about to abandon the ship when one of the men opened a door they'd missed initially and found himself confronted with an animated Moebius Strip that gave every sign of being in love with him. It leaped at him and attempted frantically to climb up around his leg. He managed to divert it to his arm and brought it out (the deed earned him a medal, a substantial bonus, and an unmerciful ribbing from the rest of the crew). A seaweed-like substance had been found on the ship which proved to be food, and the Moebius Strip was delivered to me in apparently glowing health. There was no clue as to its home planet and a check failed to turn up anyone who'd ever heard of such a species. Despite its unpleasant appearance, it had to be evaluated and, if judged intelligent, invited to send an ambassador to Earth.

I'd run every test I could think of and was no nearer a conclusion than I'd been at the start. I was staring at the thing when the idea hit me; it was mad, but I've always thought that when all sensible alternatives fail, a mad try is better than none, and there was nothing to be lost by trying this.

I placed a Klein's Bottle on the table next to the Moebius Strip and waited. The thing began to inch toward the bottle until the strip of tape stopped it and then it tore frantically at the tape until I released it. With a mighty heave, it hurled itself into the air and settled around the bottle, fitting itself tightly around the surface. It was giving a good imitation of hugging the bottle when it spoke a single word, a word which would be recognized by any intelligent being in the universe.

"Mama," it said plaintively.

The Moebius Strip has been placed in a nursery where it will remain until it grows up, presumably in the form of a Klein's Bottle. It will then be re-tested and, if it passes (as I'm sure it will), it will be offered diplomatic status.

But one question continues to haunt me. Can anybody love a Klein's Bottle?

—G—