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by John Rackham



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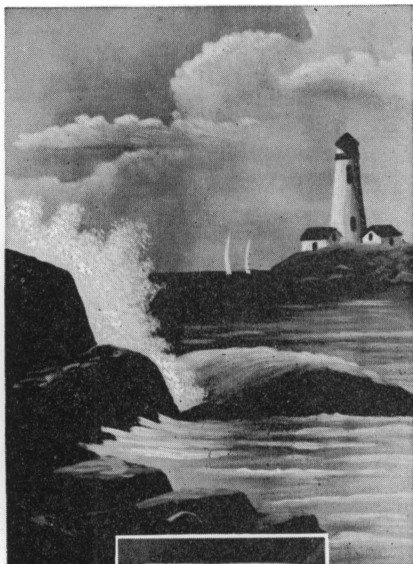
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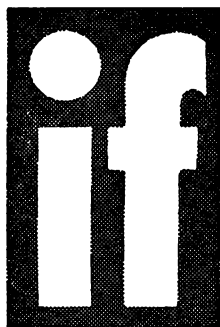
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WORLDS OF SCIENCE FICTION

NOVEMBER 1959

All Stories New and Complete

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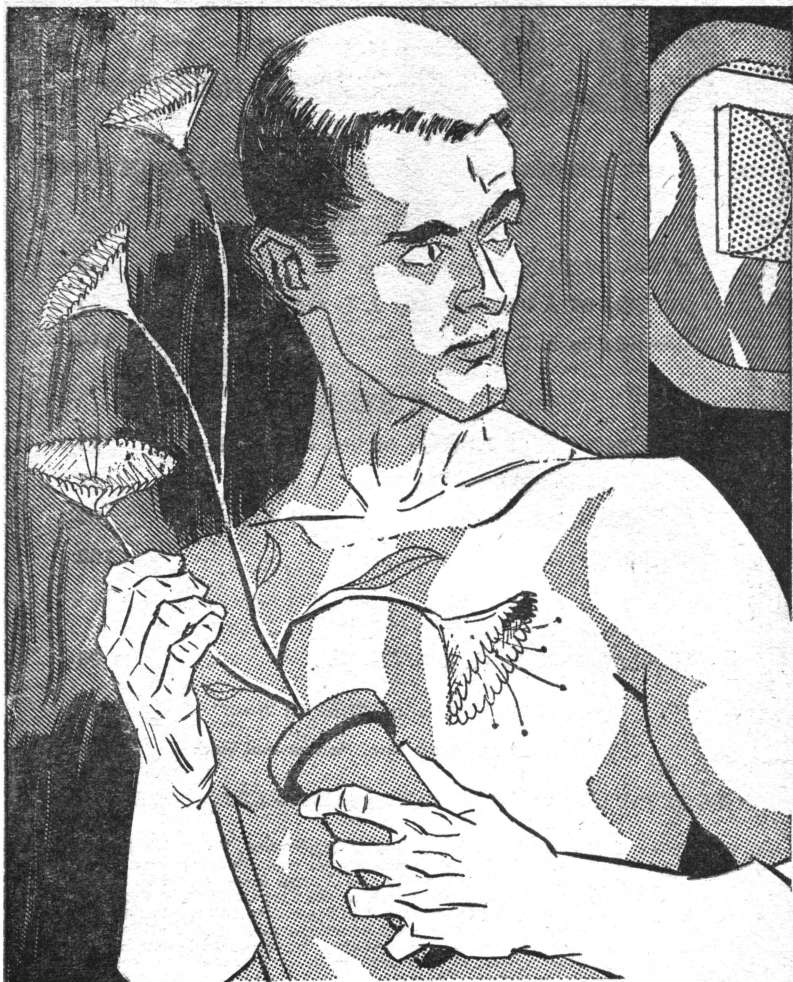
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Always look gift horses in the mouth—you never know if

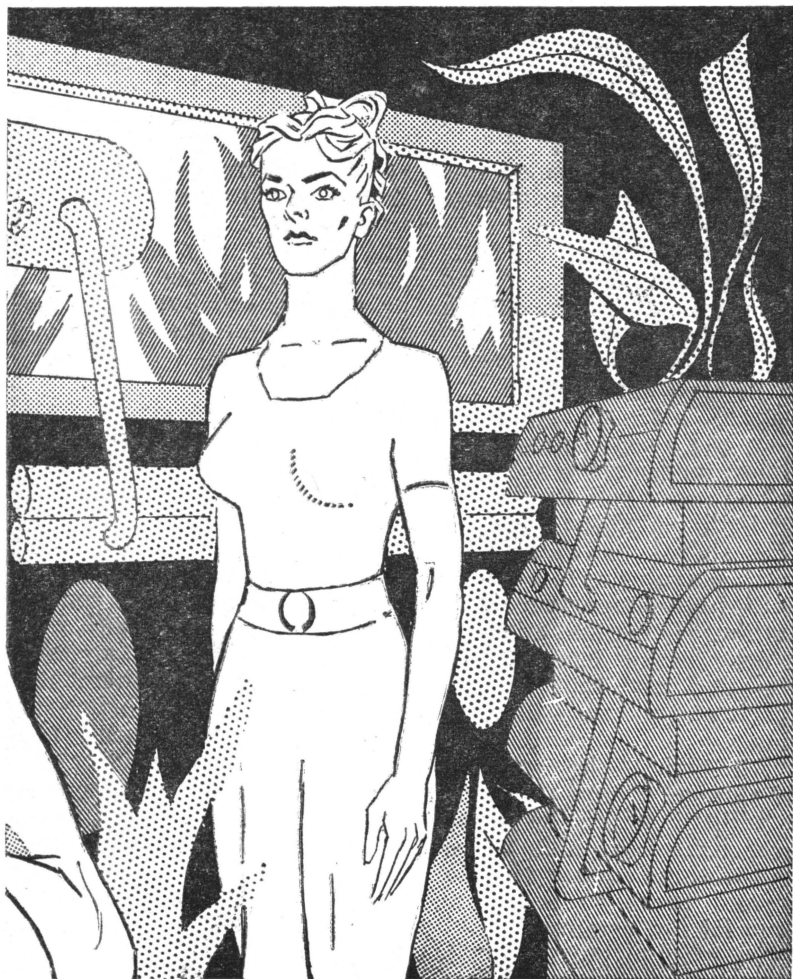
if you wish



they're the Trojan variety!

By JOHN RACKHAM

JACOB O'SIMON pressed his nose to the sliding magnifier, staring through it and the glassite wall at the tense scene inside the hot-house. The hideous but excep-



tionally rare and delicate Venusian fungus was about to spore. Any second now and—ideally—the bloated nodules would split to spew out a host of tiny purple balls. Ideally!

He snatched a hasty glance at the strip panel by the side of the chamber, checking temperature and humidity, atmosphere analysis—and was aware, suddenly, that the alarm was clamoring. That triple ring and pause, triple ring and pause, spelled out the approach of the shuttle rocket.

“The hell with it!” he muttered, pressing his nose to the glass again. This sporulation he had to see with his own eyes. As he held his breath the nodules shivered visibly. Then the deep purple rinds burst, and a soggy gray mass dripped and splattered onto the hot, moist soil, to discolor and wither almost at once.

He sighed and moved to switch the interior to a thirty-minute high-temperature sterilization. He became aware of an ache in his broad shoulders—and also that the approach alarm was still clamoring.

“All right!” he growled, and climbed aboard the scooter without which he would never have been able to police the three square miles of asteroid farm. “I hear you, damn it! I’m coming!”

The scooter purred busily along, its moron mind follow-

ing the exact mid-line of the high galleries between the culture houses—glassite cells full of writhing, struggling, burgeoning life.

At thirty, Jacob O’Simon had a lot behind him—a degree, a solid reputation in biology, a teaching post in botany, among other things. Won the hard way, he had gladly sacrificed them for this, for total isolation on a tiny asteroid. This chunk of rock no more than a mile through, dignified with the title Ajax III, because it was one of the cluster around Ajax, itself only one of a larger cluster, the Trojans, circling Sol in the orbit of mighty Jupiter.

HERE, with a slow-fusion inferno safely buried in the core to provide heat and power, with a triple-layered, impact-proof roof over his head, and instrumentation which could maintain any desired environmental conditions, he was alone with his plants—and happy, almost. Each ninetieth day the shuttle rocket called, bringing supplies, new specimens, reports and recommendations, and taking away other specimens, analyses, advices, and, occasionally, orders for his frugal needs.

He could, if necessary, contact Ajax Base at any time by radio, but he did this seldom, and then only to ask a ques-

tion, never to pass the time of day.

For Jacob O'Simon had one great character failing. He just could not stand people. His very few friends were all of the type who could be relied on to let him alone unless it was something really important. At first thought, this job might have been made for such a man, but there was a snag.

"Of course three square miles of observational data is a lot, Jacob," George Viner had said. "You need at least one assistant—"

"Assistant!" Jacob had snorted. "Of course I could do with an assistant—somebody who would have no interests but the job in hand, who wouldn't chatter all the time, who would do exactly what he was told, when he was told, who would know what to look for, and when, without being told, who wouldn't get on my nerves with a lot of silly, personal gab—you find me someone like that and I'll take him on!"

"Someone or something, Jacob?" George Viner had asked. "I may not find such a person, but—"

"Now don't give me that robot sales talk, George," said Jacob, for Viner was a specialist in automation, cybernetics and thinking mechanisms in general. "There never was and ever will be a machine that could do what I

want. It takes life to observe life and understand it. You have some pretty smart robots, able to deal with any predictable situation, but there never was a machine yet to do plant research—"

The scooter slid up the incline to the landing lock, and Jacob got off, with the ghost of Viner's laugh still in his ears. He cut off the alarm, which action made contact between him and the shuttle pilot.

"About time!" came a heavily disgusted voice. "Another minute and I was coming down to collect the body. You all right?"

"Yes, I'm all right," said Jacob. "Got anything special?"

"I do have a schedule to keep to!" was the pointed reply. "Your can ready to pick up?"

"Give me a minute to load up." Jacob leaned on the heavy door to the loading bay and launched himself into the zero-gravity zone inside. The door swung shut, cutting off the squawks from the intercom to hurry it up.

"Schedules!" he muttered, as he swam to the twenty-foot cylinder which housed his latest batch of results. "Does he worry about *my* schedules?"

He loosed the can, braced his legs against the bulkhead and shoved, steering it in the direction of the open trap of the ship. For a moment, he

saw it in his mind as it must seem from outside: the ship, like some dark beetle, clutching close to the bright surface, its probe dug deep, as if sucking the nectar from some giant blossom.

THE can clanged into place. Jacob made a backward flip clear. The bay door hummed and groaned shut. There was a screech of snug-fitting metal as the probe drew up and out, airtight plates snicking into place.

"Damned quick-on-the-draw merchant," Jacob growled. "Trap me in the damn door one of these times." He shoved off and drifted down to the gleaming floor where a duplicate can rested. He swam around it—and stared. It was standing open!

"What the hell?" He hung a moment, scanning the interior. There were the usual stacks of thermo-flasks, all in code colors—and one brightly silvered tube. A letter can! Who would be sending him a letter, unless it was something bad? He reached for the tube, twisted it open, and frowned at the paper inside.

"Dear Jacob," he read, "I've taken the liberty of enclosing a device with this shuttle. Try it. I'd like your opinion. It answers to 'Susan'—pardon the whimsy, and blame my niece, herself a biologist and botanist and one of your admirers—"

He paused to wonder, frowning. Niece? A vague memory came to him, from those nightmarish days when he had been trying to instill knowledge into dim and unwilling pupils—a foggy picture of a scrawny girl, all teeth and intense eyes.

He shuddered and read on. "Volition enough to preserve itself from destruction or injury—instant retention of any instruction without apparent limit, conditioned to obey absolutely, without question, overriding the personal safety circuit—and is, of course, quite harmless, being subject to the basic laws of robotics."

Jacob crumpled the paper with a savage hand. Laws of robotics! He kicked away from the can, looking around for this device, while the familiar words echoed in his mind:

"No robot shall injure a human, or by inaction allow injury to come to a human—" A twentieth century fiction-writer's pipedream. As if it would ever be possible to build into a machine brain the answer to a problem that man himself had not yet solved! Each man had to discover for himself just what was injurious, and what not—and no man, so far, had reached a full solution for that, much less a general one for humans in general. Any robot faced with that task would surely

blow a fuse before it had gone three steps.

But where was the blasted thing? He frowned again, assessing the evidence. Open can—either someone had left it open—carelessness—or someone or something had opened it. A robot with initiative? He shook his head, suddenly mindful of the dozen and one things being neglected while he was hovering here. Groping for the cable which lay coiled in a recess in the can, he looped it through the lugs of the thermo-flasks, hauled taut and kicked off for the opposing door, which led to stores and living space. The flasks hung in a long line after him.

Reaching the door, he shoved it open, dived through, letting the grav-field catch him as he crossed the boundary zone. Landing catlike, he spun and hauled, trapping each flask as it became heavy. When the last one had clunked into place, he eased away from the door, letting it swing shut.

By habit, he glanced at his wrist, computing ahead. Two or three things he had missed—so he had missed them; no use worrying about that. All told, he had something like a clear hour ahead now. By that time a certain batch of Venus-born cousins of the common Earthside horsetail was due to fructify, and would be ready for trans-

planting. Failing the very lively and extremely virulent miniature lizards which performed that function for them on their own planet, and the inability of any Earth-born insect to survive that atmosphere, that was a job for him. A hot, unpleasant and tedious job. So now would be a good time to eat. This new stuff could wait.

He turned and saw—her.

SHE stood absolutely immobile, in the midst of what he was pleased to call his dining room. She was tall, slim, solemnly blue-eyed, her face a smooth mask of quiet attention. Bright golden hair formed an aureole of crisp, tight curls about her head. She wore exquisitely tailored white slacks, a white, short-sleeved shirt—her skin gleamed a flawless bronze against the white. She stood quite still.

He realized he was gaping, wide-mouthed, and took a deep breath. His wits slowed their dizzy spin. Flawless tailoring—utter immobility—glowing skin—golden curls—the classic regularity of feature—she was beautiful—too beautiful!

“Susan?” he queried, in sudden illumination.

There was a slow, grave inclination of the head, nothing more. Wild thoughts pinwheeled in his brain. This must be some fantastic jest

on Viner's part—some attempt to trap him into indiscretions. He reread the letter, mentally. "Instant retention of any instructions—conditioned to obey absolutely—"

"Can you cook?" he asked, and instantly cursed his own inanity. Again there was that grave nod, nothing more. What was she—it?—waiting for now? He looked away from those bright blue eyes uneasily, striving to steady his thoughts. What now? The word "instructions" came back to him. Of course! This was a blank mind which had to learn everything from him. For a brief moment he was staggered by the magnitude of the prospective task, but then reason came back with a rush.

It must know quite a lot already—enough to get out of the can, find its way in here. It understood his questions. It claimed ability to cook. Perhaps it could handle package instructions! He went forward cautiously.

"Come!" he said, with exaggerated care. "Here is the cooking console. Here are the material bins. Prepare syntho-steak, biscuits, coffee—and I like my coffee black and strong. All right?"

Again that cool nod. He watched while it made the first competent movements. That was all right, seemingly. He retreated to the dining room and set to work check-

ing and sorting the new arrivals. The semi-automatic activity gave him time to set his thoughts in order.

First he cursed Viner for his weird wit. Was it necessary to make the thing female, and so impossibly perfectly female, at that? And she was certainly perfect. Jacob visualized her in his mind, seeing the sculptured structure of her face, and as much of the body as was betrayed by her clothes.

Human-copy manikins were common enough, he knew. Mass entertainment via full-color three-dimensional TV had made them necessary. The public refused to be fooled by pretended and insinuated stabbings, bashings and other tidbits. They demanded the real thing. Actors, understandingly, were reluctant to carry realism quite so far. Technical ingenuity had produced the perfect compromise—human-copy manikins which could be programmed to perform a few limited actions—duplicates with plastic but gruesomely realistic flesh, blood and vital organs.

HE HAD never been close to one before and didn't want to be. He raged at Viner. Then, suddenly, he smiled. Poor old George! All that exquisite sculpture and design, for what? A real girl as devastatingly attractive as that would have had him babbling

and furious by now—but here he was, quite unmoved. As he had so often argued, it's not the way people look, but the way—the stupid way—they think.

He wondered how this thing thought. Did it think in the accepted sense? A memory unit was a massive affair. Programming it was a specialist's job. He sat back on his heels, wondering. Would Viner have built in a few comedy values for kicks? On reflection, Jacob thought not. Viner had a vile sense of humor, true, but he was all seriousness when it came to his own field.

Jacob completed his cataloguing and went back to the cooking area, just in time to see the robot take up a fully laden tray.

"Here," he said, "on this table—" and watched as the tray was set down. Two places?

"You going to eat, too?"

Again that emotionless nod and the silent, patient wait. He struggled to fit this new factor into the picture. Probably a general-purpose converter system took in raw material and supplied energy—he had a waste-disposal unit which did just that. But a sudden thought stiffened him. It hadn't made a sound yet.

"You can—talk?"

"If you wish." The voice was cool, impersonal, quiet.

He breathed out again, thankfully. "Well, now, that's something to be thankful for, isn't it? I'm not the type to go nuts talking to myself, but I sure would, talking to something that didn't talk back. All right, let's eat!"

He sat and began his frugal meal, watching it do likewise, with quiet, precise movements and the flash of white, even teeth.

"You're almost human!" he said, through a mouthful of deliciously done steak.

It made no response. He scowled, felt irritation swell up—and then the answer hit him. What sort of answer could it make to a statement like that? To get a reply, he must ask a question. He glowed. Complete obedience—no idle chatter—maybe Viner had something, after all!

DRAINING a second cup of perfectly made coffee, he leaned back and considered his next move. He would need to find out just how far the education angle would have to be taken. Could this thing learn the difference between one plant and another, between a spore and a seed? But there was one question which should come first, a tricky one.

"Just how human are you, anyway?"

"As human as you wish," it said without emphasis.

He grinned, ruefully. Very

smart, too. Ask a silly question—!

"All right." He got up. "You're chief cook and dishwasher from here on out. Best grub I've tasted in a long while. Now, while you're clearing away, I'll get the scooter and we'll go take a look at the other aspect of the job."

He punched in Sector 7 on the scooter's panel and trundled it around to the front. Susan was waiting. With the two of them aboard, the little platform was crowded.

"You're warm!" he commented, touching the smooth skin of the robot's arm. "George did a first-class job on you. Was it necessary—this extreme duplication?"

"Structure and function are interrelated," it said smoothly. "I have been equipped with totally human potentials, senses and responses. It was found that the simplest way to achieve this was to make me human in structure. Hence my skin, like yours, is sensitive to touch, temperature and humidity."

JACOB took his hand away hastily, and cursed himself for doing it. So it was a fair copy—so what?

"How much do you know about what I'm doing here?" he asked, getting on to safer ground.

"General concepts only," the robot said. "This is a re-

search planetoid for controlled investigation of the possibilities for accelerating the evolution of native Venus flora, with the object of rendering the atmospheric conditions of that planet suitable for human occupation—"

"Oh, great!" he sneered. "Straight out of the book. Pure baffle-gab—you know what that is?"

"The word is not in my vocabulary."

"Well, it will be. Now I want you to forget all that jargon, and let me give it to you in simple one-syllable words. Can you forget?"

"Whatever you wish."

"That's fine. The wisdom of life consists in the elimination of the non-essentials."

"Lin Yutang," it said calmly, and he blinked.

"Eh? What was that?"

"Lin Yutang was a Chinese philosophical writer, the author of the saying you just quoted."

Jacob felt his mouth beginning to sag, and shut it hastily. "Is that so? Well—look, we're now passing through Sector 3. In these houses there used to be typical Venus atmosphere. Surface atmosphere, I mean. About two miles above the surface, Venus is very like Earth, only hotter, more humid, and loaded with excess CO₂. Because of perpetual turbulence, airborne life never got started. So—no birds or insects—and

plant life has to struggle along by other methods. Micro-lizards fill the gap, but not as efficiently as bees and such.

"So, in this sector, I have taken a sample collection of Venus flora, helped it become fertile and grow. As a result, the CO₂ is well down already, and the humidity, too. So the basic idea is sound. But it just is not possible to protect, fertilize and assist each individual plant on the whole surface of a planet. So, here, in Sector 5, which we are now coming into—" the scooter swung around a right angle and purred off down another glassite-line lane—"you would find certain mutated strains of certain selected plants, and in Sector 7, where we are headed, are the few final products which have proved successful. Even-numbered sectors, by the way, are on the opposite hemisphere. They're control areas, with a constantly maintained pure Venus-type atmosphere. Any questions so far?"

"On what basis do you select plant-forms for experimentation?"

"Smart girl!" he approved wryly. "You have your finger right on the sore place. It's not enough that I should have to comb through a zillion species to find the few that are viable enough to be worth encouraging—oh, no! This is research, but it is costing money, meaning there has to

be some profit. So I have to nurse such things as might show a dividend sometime!"

"You called me 'girl' a moment ago," it said impersonally. "Do you wish me to respond to that term?"

"I did?" He thought back, then nodded. "That's right, I did. You mind?"

"Why should I?"

"Why *should* you? Look, I'm liable to get excited from time to time—and there's only the two of us—so I'll be meaning you—unless I'm talking to myself. Use your discretion. You *do* have discretion, don't you?"

"Just as you wish," it said.

HE BEGAN to feel the first small stirrings of dissatisfaction. This, he saw, was what it must have been like with slaves, and why such civilizations inevitably fell apart. It was demoralizing. He wondered what it would feel like to be demoralized. The scooter chuckled to itself and swung into Sector 7. He shuddered, thrust away his dreads, and began to look out for the correct moment to hop off.

"Horsetail." He pointed through the glassite. "This plant is an almost exact duplicate of our own Earthside equisetum. Logical, when you think of it. Horsetail is pretty primitive—one of the earlier cryptogams. You know any botany?"

"Green, ribbed, aerial shoots," it recited. "Those bearing leaf whorls are sterile. The fertile nodes bear a dense oval spike consisting of short-stalked bracts with spore cases—"

"All right! All right! Damned walking reference file! Who was it that said exact information is the immediate death of conversation?"

"The origin of the saying is not known, but it is almost certainly Graeco-Roman."

"There I go again, asking damned silly questions." He took out a pair of small plastic bags. "Listen, this is what we're going to do. We want those two big fructifications there, see? They're just about ready to open up. The rest are below standard. I'll go first, right down to the far end, to plug in the heavy-duty cables. You grab those two spikes and bag 'em and get out. I'll be right after you."

He undogged the heavy glassite door, swung it open and hurried down the lane between the plant beds. It was like being in a damp oven. He bent, grabbed cable ends, shoved them home, straightened and hurried back.

"Got 'em? Good. Now I'll just seal down this door." That done, he threw the switch, and they watched as the twin lanes of greenish-brown soil sizzled and smoked into sterility.

"That," he said, "is the

only way to get rid of those beggars. Just like home horsetails—it only wants one little bit of the rhizome to start a whole new plant proliferating. Now we have to spread the spores from this lot over some clean ground. Jump on. The nearest vacant lot is some distance from here."

After a thoughtful silence, it said, "Why horsetail?"

"Believe it or not, it's gold!" he sneered. "The last batch I had processed out at fifteen ounces per ton of ash. This lot should be better—but you'd think mankind would have lost the golden itch by this time."

"That is to examine the concept from an outdated viewpoint," it commented. "Recent advances in metallurgy employ gold as a synergic in new alloy processes."

"They do?" he said weakly. "What the hell does 'synergy' mean?"

"Synergism—" the quiet voice was prompt and flowing— "is the cooperative action of discrete agencies such that the total effect is greater than the sum of the two effects taken separately."

"You know what? If you were human, I'd hate your guts!"

"You are offended?"

"No, just thankful you're not human. Whoa! This'll do!" He stopped the scooter again by a window where the

soil-lanes were virginally smooth. "Now this can be tricky. Let me explain. You hold a spike in one hand over the soil, poke a hole with a finger, tap the bract so that some spores fall into the hole, poke the finger close by so that the hole closes up again. Sounds simple, but don't let any of the spores touch your skin or you'll be sorry—that is, if your skin is chemically like mine—and don't miss the hole so that the spores fall on the surface or they'll get caught up in the little breeze we'll make—and we'll *both* be sorry. A good way is to hold your breath—"

"Protective clothing and a mask would be better."

"Strictly for amateurs! Besides, it's hot enough in there without being wrapped up. You ready? Right down to the far end and work back. That way we minimize the risks."

SWINGING open the heavy door, he went through. He took his spike from its bag, and holding it carefully by the tip, he crouched over the hot, damp soil, poking and tapping with expert speed. He assumed his helper was doing likewise, but was much too intent with his own job to watch anything else. They reached the door simultaneously.

He turned from securing the door, to find Susan pink and gleaming, its whites

stained with perspiration, and dabbing at the open neck of its shirt.

"Spores?" he guessed. "Don't do that—only makes it worse. Come on." He led the way at a trot to the corner of the glassite tunnel, to a wall compartment. "Germicidal jelly—got a stock of these all over the place. Here, slap some of this on it." He uncapped a tube of violently purple goo, then hesitated. "Better take that shirt off. This stuff is practically a dye."

He waited while the trim garment came off, then offered the jelly again.

"Feels good, doesn't it?" he said. "Damn spores burn like fire—blister, too, if you don't catch 'em quick. Turn round, let me look at your back." He looked, critically. "Lucky—you just got a small dose. All right now? That purple doesn't do a thing for your looks, but it'll wash off. You better leave that shirt, though, for the sterilizer."

He capped the tube, put it back in the compartment.

"You stay here. I'll bring the scooter and we'll run back to base."

He went off, grinning to himself. Damn robot might be smart at book-learning, but it took a botanist to handle plants. Still, pretty clever of old George to fabricate a "skin" like that. Blistered just like a human, maybe a shade faster. Silky, too. He

reached the scooter, swung it around and climbed on.

A wife like that, he thought with sudden wistfulness, would be something. Pretty, capable, willing, obedient—but without any feminine caprices. A quote of Shaw's came to mind: "The ideal wife is one who does everything that the ideal husband wants, and nothing else." He wondered if she would be able to place *that* quote—and was aghast at the treachery of his own mind. What did he want with a wife of *any* kind?

He slowed to a stop, to take her aboard. With the toe of his shoe he hooked the shirt into a bundle on the platform and drove on.

"How's it feel now—still burning?"

"A little. May I ask a question?"

"Ask away. Only thing is, I'm not like you. I don't know all the answers."

"The remark is without meaning. If I knew all the answers, there would be no need to ask questions."

"Sorry. That told me off, all right. But I guess it's just my way. You'll get used to it."

"Acceptance would be facilitated if I knew your motivation. You seem affable and pleasant in action, yet hostile and offensive in speech and value judgments. Why is that?"

"Damned if I know!" he ad-

mitted candidly. "On my own, I'm fine. Mix me with people and I come out wrong."

"You dislike people?"

HE TURNED to the bright, attentive face so close to his. "I've never told this to anyone, but I hate being owned or influenced—or anyone *trying* to own or influence me—or anyone wanting me to own or influence them." He saw a blank look and sighed. "Maybe it is too much to expect you to understand. I don't rightly understand it myself—"

"But you own me now. Does that bother you?"

"I do *not!*" he denied hotly. "Nothing of the kind! You were dumped on me. I'm just trying to get along—and managing pretty well, too. But I don't own you. Any time I tell you to do something you don't want to do, you refuse. As far as I am concerned, you're a free agent. Got that?"

"But if I am a free agent, how can I work with you?"

"Don't know the answer to that one, either," he admitted. "I'm not too strong on philosophy, but isn't that what man has been trying to figure out all along? How do you cooperate with somebody else without losing something of yourself in the process?"

"By limiting the cooperation to some external, impersonal activity such as this, so

that each individual concerned could contribute in equal measure yet without becoming involved in a personal prestige conflict."

"That sounds fine." The scooter purred to a stop, and he led off to the living space. "Trouble is, people don't work like that. Sooner or later—usually sooner—somebody wants to give orders, to be boss, to make somebody else jump. And there are always those who want to be ordered around, too, believe it or not."

He took a pair of tongs from a cabinet. "Skip the philosophy for now. You need something more positive, like a shower. Over here. Shed the rest of your gear and get on the grid."

He picked up the discarded clothing, collected the shirt, dumped the lot in the sterilizer, and came back to the cubicle with a clutch of bottles in his hands. Susan stood on the chrome grid, watching him with that blue-eyed stare. He unfastened the injector cover and poured in generous helpings from the bottles.

"Detergent," he explained. "Analgesic, to kill the burning. Germicide, to get any spores that might be left. And a fairly mild bleach, to get that purple stain off your—chest."

He corked the bottles again, and paused. "George overdid it a bit with your shape."

"You find it objectionable, or flawed in some way or other?"

SHRUGGING, Jacob said, "If George had to make you anatomically perfect, he *should* have put in a flaw or two—a sag or a wrinkle or something. You're too idealized to be real. I'd hate to meet a girl—a real girl—with a shape like that."

"Why?" asked the robot unemotionally.

"Beauty like that has real power, you know. Power to drive men, irritate women—cause havoc in all directions. And what good's a whip if you don't get to crack it once in a while?"

"But you are not thus affected. Why is that?"

"Why? I grow some pretty beautiful flowers and they don't affect me. Perhaps that's it. A flower is not trying to do anything to me. A pretty girl would be saying, in effect, 'I'm beautiful—what are you going to do about it?' Whereas you're just beautiful, period."

He laughed at himself. "You know what? I can talk to you. I can't talk to people at all—not without getting mad at 'em. Especially women. But I'm gabbing too much now. You hold still a minute while I program the water. I might have a spore or two myself, and I could do without some of the sweat. On this

job, a regular shower is a must."

The first impact of the needle-spray stung his flesh, so that he cringed. Through the steam, he saw Susan wince, too.

"Hot!" he mumbled. "Fifteen seconds of this, to open the pores—"

The biting hot needles ceased. He tapped the bronzed shoulder that glistened close to his chest.

"Let's have a look at those blisters," he ordered, and put a gentle finger on the fading purple patches. He reached for a tissue and swabbed away the last of the protective jelly. The skin beneath was only faintly red. It kept quite still under his ministrations. For a wild moment, he imagined this to be a real female, and chuckled at the thought.

"Why do you laugh?" the robot inquired.

"I was just imagining what would happen if you were a real girl and I was doing this. It's quite a strain on my imagination."

"Why?"

"Because—because I haven't had a lot of experience with girls, I suppose. Anyway, those spore marks look pretty clean. Stand by for the cold!"

He was just in time. An icy-chill mist filled the cubicle, shocking and jolting the skin into vigorous reaction. He drew a deep, shuddering

breath, heard the robot do the same.

"Good for the circulation—" he chattered, blowing the spray from the end of his nose and laughing at the sight of crisp golden curls flattened to its head, and its eyes tight shut against flying droplets. The cold jets died and he was tingling all over. "Makes you feel good, eh?"

It nodded, wide-eyed, and laughed.

He was struck by the pleasant sound. "Say, that's the first time I've heard you laugh!"

"You object?" It was serious, at once.

"For heaven's sake, no! I like it fine. Go ahead and laugh all you want to!"

"Maybe there is something wrong?"

"No, not a thing. Honest." He turned away abruptly. "Look, I prefer to rub down with a towel. It's old-fashioned, I know, but I like it. How about you? Shall I switch on the drier?"

"A towel, please."

JACOB splashed across to another cabinet, got out a couple of squares of fleecy synthetic, tossed one to her, began rubbing himself briskly with the other. Oddly upsetting phrases were echoing through his mind.

"As human as you wish"—
"I have been equipped with total human potentials"—

"whatever you wish"—"as human as you wish!" That was the one with the barbs. The more he thought about it, the less he liked it. Wadding the towel, he tossed it into the sterilizer, followed it with his discarded clothes.

"Susan." He went back to where it stood on the grid, slowly toweling its curls back to gleaming crispness. "You said you have as much discretion as I wish you to have, whatever that might mean. Do I take it that you have opinions, too?"

"Just as you wish," it said, with that wide-eyed stare.

He shook his head angrily. "I wish you'd quit that 'just as you wish' routine."

"I have done something wrong?"

"Not wrong, exactly. It's just that—well, how the hell do you know what I wish?"

"I obey your instructions."

"Yeah, but I never told you to laugh."

"You said the shower made you feel good and you laughed. I merely did the same." The quietly reasonable tone began to be irritating.

"Now look here—as far as the job is concerned, you'll do what I say—within reason, of course. I mean—" he groped for words—"self-preservation and so on. But that's all. The rest of the time, you act the way you want."

"Just as you wish."

He stared at that bright

face, wondering if he was being mocked, but the big blue eyes were steady.

"That's what I wish," he growled. "You do whatever makes you feel good and don't pay any attention to me. Understand?"

"No—" Susan spoke slowly, shaking its head, rolling the towel into a neat ball. "I cannot understand that. I feel good when I do that which pleases you. That is my function."

"Oh, God!" He beat a fist into a palm, trying to find words that would free him from this irksome responsibility. Then he caught a sight of his wrist and his mental clock clicked over. "Skip that for now," he ordered. "We have work to do. Sector 3—look, here on the diagram—" He went to the far wall, where there was a complex chart, much scribbled and annotated. "This is an experimental planting. Venus owns a thing enough like our *Astragalus racecosus* to be its cousin, but about a quarter the size. In this house I have seeded some of our natives along with the Venus variety. I'm hoping to hybridize the two—"

"*Astragalus racecosus* — loco weed. Why?"

"Selenium, plus a fair trace of vanadium and zinc. Rag-weeds are a bit better for zinc, but I haven't been able to establish them in a Venus atmosphere yet. Marley on Ajax

V expects to have fair success with it. He's going in for trees, too. Venus has no trees."

"My botany indoctrination did not include this. Are there many plants and trees which isolate metals?"

"Plenty." He pulled open a drawer. "Here, grab a couple—that's all we'll need this trip. Paintbrushes and patience."

"Without clothing?" asked the robot.

"That's up to you. This is not toxic and the climate is fine, if a bit warm, but suit yourself."

"Very well. I am ready."

He led the way to the scooter, and as soon as they were in motion, he reverted to the question.

"Yes, there's a whole slew of Earth plants that isolate metals. You can get barium, for instance, from Brazil nuts. Hickory gives aluminum and magnesium. Copper you get from dandelions, spinach and tobacco. I have some very fine tobacco-type plants coming along in Sector 7. Lord knows what they'll be like to smoke, though; the soil is pretty rich in antimony and that could be rough on the nasal passages. Venus soil is queer stuff, you know. Crawling with bacteria—like ours, of course—and damp all the time, but with no liquid water, there's no stratification. Just a fine general mixture of just about every-

thing you can lay a tongue to. You smoke, by the way?"

He glanced aside and groaned. "All right, don't say it. If I wish—right?"

It laughed, and the sweet sound sent little tinges along his spine.

THE scooter clucked and stopped. He pointed to a window wall which framed a prospect that might have been Elysium, back on ancient Earth.

"Pretty, isn't it?" He led the way down between the lanes of nodding, blowing blossoms, almost hip-high. "Now—" he knelt by a spread of richly purple blooms—"this is what you do." He made quick and expert dabs with the brush, transferring the sticky yellow pollen. "Got it? Only the very biggest of the purple ones, mind. The rest aren't worth the trouble."

Susan crouched and went to work, duplicating his movements. "This is Venus atmosphere that has been transmuted, you said?"

"Yes." He stood up and looked down at the robot, noting the smooth efficiency, yet aware of the graceful femininity. "This is hot, just under a hundred degrees Fahrenheit, and there's about twice the CO₂ of Earth; it's humid, but reasonably bearable. In Sector 2, where the atmosphere is maintained at Venus normal, these babies are

scrawny things—and the air would choke you. A few billion of these would make a hell of a difference. Men would be able to walk the surface of the planet without protection.” He crouched down and got to work alongside the robot.

“You wish to live on the surface of Venus?”

“Me? No, I’m not the pioneering kind. I get along with plants. They don’t bother me like people. Hah! Back to philosophy again. I suppose that’s a dead subject for a robot.”

“Not at all,” it replied. “I can give you a philosophical debate, if you wish.”

“All right.” He shuffled along the line of blooms. “I’ll take you up on that. Why don’t I get along with people.”

IT MUSED looking like a Greek nymph in contemplation. “That is largely a question of attitude. How do you think of people?”

“I’ve tried that and I get some very odd answers. I’m all alone here, so I get plenty of time for thinking. I have come to the conclusion that, as far as I am concerned, people are just things out there. I know about me, what I think, how I feel—but that’s all I know. All the rest is guesswork and inference. I don’t know, for instance, what you think or how you feel. I can only hear what you say,

see what you do, and go by that.”

“Then—to you—there is no difference between me and anyone else?”

“Put it like that—no. Except that you’re idealized. No real girl could be so perfect or so efficient. Otherwise, though, there is no difference.”

It spun to face him. “Then why are you at ease with me?”

He hopped awkwardly to another bloom, paintbrush busy, while he pondered that one. “You have a point,” he said. “You mean—it’s *me*, my attitude to people, that makes all the difference? All right, suppose I admit that—what do I do with the information?”

They had reached the end of a row. Susan stood up and looked at him calmly. “Treat everybody just the same way you treat me, of course.”

“Hah! I’m to assume that the whole universe is populated with robots, and that I’m the only real person among them?” He chuckled, then, growing serious, said, “It’s a way, though. People are the way they are not because they’re wonderful or whacky, but because that’s the way they have been designed and programmed, by life and experience, and they can’t help it, eh? You know—” he was suddenly depressed—“I’m enjoying this, and it can’t last. You’re too good for this job.

Old George will be taking you away and I'm going to miss you."

SHOULDER to shoulder, they worked back down another twin row. He knew an inexplicable yet powerful impulse to reach out and stroke that silky bronze skin so near to his, to ruffle that halo of crisp golden curls. He fought himself, cursing inwardly. Getting maudlin over a robot!

They finished the row in silence.

Outside the secured glassite door, he glanced at his watch again. "Nothing urgent now for another seven, eight hours. I figure to have a bite and then get some sleep. O.K. with you?"

"I, too, am aware of fatigue effects and the need for food," replied Susan. "I will prepare a meal and then we will sleep together."

"You got that bit wrong," he said as they remounted the scooter. "You don't sleep with me—not in the usually accepted sense of that phrase. You know what I mean?"

"Of course. You do not wish me to sleep with you, then?"

"That's what I said!" he snapped.

The scooter trundled up the incline to the living space and stopped. He got off, suddenly conscious of their nudity.

"Get the grub ready," he growled, "while I write up the data on what we've just done.

And get some clothes on. You can use mine!"

He strode stiffly to the locker which held his stock of shirts, slacks and socks, took what he needed, left it open, pointedly, and strode off to the records office.

There he sat and stared at the tabulated white sheet and strove to push away other pictures that threatened to flood his mind. The struggle started beads of sweat on his brow. Sex fantasies are an occupational hazard to the solitary man. Jacob knew this and had considered himself stable enough to ignore the danger. But this was an attack from a quarter which had never occurred to him in his wildest moments. And what frightened him most was the very fact that it was a fight. He should have been able to dismiss the matter with simple, cold logic.

Damn Viner! And damn Susan, too, for being so impeccably and perfectly beautiful! Fully human responses—just how far did that go, anyway? If performance to date was anything to go by—

He made a supreme effort and banished the temptation from his mind. No—that was the simple, short and only answer—no! He became aware of a softly feminine voice telling him the food was ready.

He went into the dining room. The robot stood by the table, waiting. He looked—and looked again. Wearing

one of his stretch-mesh sweat-shirts, there was no longer any sense in trying to think of this as an "it." It was blatantly a "she." He looked away uncomfortably and sat.

The food was good in his mouth and its very excellence was added torment. He stole a glance. She was quite silent, neatly busy with her own portion. He wondered what was going on in that exquisitely shaped head. Just where did "fully human" cease? Maybe she was offended at his rejection of her advances—or were they "services"?

He pushed away his empty plate.

"Come!" he said. "I'll show you your bed."

HE LED the way to a small compartment that had, as one wall, a clear glassite panel, looking out on a duplication of the alien scenery of Venus. There, in an endless hot twilight, stunted struggling vegetation fought its ceaseless battle against the elements, and a myriad tiny, gemlike lizards.

She stood a moment. Then: "Master—"

"Call me Jacob!" he said roughly. "What is it?"

"I have offended in some way?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"You do not wish me to sleep with you. You have instructed me to wear clothing."

"So?"

"You said I was to obey your instructions insofar as it concerned the operation of the station, but that in all other matters I would please myself."

"Yeah—and *you* said that you wanted to do whatever would please me, and it does not please me to have you running around naked—or getting ideas about hopping into my bed!"

"Then my appearance is not pleasing to you?"

"I didn't say that. You're attractive, but you're a robot."

"The rest of the universe is populated with robots, as far as you are concerned, you said."

"That was just talk," he snarled. "I can't treat you like a human."

"I am as human as you wish."

"There you go again!" he shouted. "You don't understand. It's not what I wish at all. Look, if I was to take a woman to bed—which fate forbid!—it would be because she wanted me to—not just to please me! Can't you see that?"

"If it would please you, then I would want you to."

"But it would *not* please me, not unless I knew that it was as much your idea as mine—and because you're a robot, without ideas of your own, that is out, it's impossible—see?"

"A human woman would be pleased to do whatever would give pleasure to her man." The voice was quietly insistent.

"Like hell she would!" He laughed harshly. "But let's not go into that just now. Look, Susan—to be crude—have you ever slept with a man?" The words were thick in his throat, but he managed to get them out.

"No."

"There you are, then! How do you know that it would either bring or give pleasure?"

"Have you ever slept with a woman—Jacob?"

"Oh, no you don't!" he said hurriedly. "You're not going to trip me up that way. As a matter of fact—no, I haven't, but that's got nothing to do with it. Here, this is your bunk. And this is mine, right next door. I'm going to bed. Alone! Get me?"

"Very well, Jacob," she said, and turned her face up to him so simply and naturally that he kissed her before he realized it. Her lips were cool and soft.

"Good night," she whispered, and, shedding her clothes, slid between the crisp, fresh sheets.

Still dazed, he went next door and climbed into his own bunk, and lay wide-eyed in the gloom, wondering. Just what had George Viner done here?

JACOB dug back into his mind for anything he could recall about robot mechanisms, and it was quite a lot. The station itself was full of them—thermostats, humidity controls, gravity stabilizers, unit analysis recorders, timing mechanisms of all kinds—his whole environment was made and maintained by constantly vigilant automatics, many of which he never had to touch, much less understand.

But a thinking, feeling, argumentative, logical robot was something else again.

The human shape, of itself, imposed restrictions on human-copy manikins which limited them to simple repetitive actions. There was nothing simple about Susan—or she was *too* simple, depending on the point of view. Viner must have developed a whole new technique for her. For the life of him, Jacob could not help thinking of "her" rather than "it." So utterly non-human in some ways—the calm, the logic, the incredibly perfect face and figure—yet so appealingly easy to understand and get on with—most of the time.

Jacob let that train of thought run its course, and came to a conclusion that shocked him for a moment. Then logic took over. After all, he asked himself, just what was the difference between something that walked,

talked, acted and reacted like a human—and a human?

He awoke from a crawly, sweaty dream of being chased down endless, glassite corridors, hotly pursued by a screeching, straggle-haired woman-shaped thing, trailing a gaggle of clanking, idiot-faced, mechanical urchins. The horrible harridan, dragging one dead-eyed child, was screaming: "Jacob! Jacob!"

She was nudging his shoulder gently, her bright face wide-eyed and attentive, yet remote.

"Huh?" He struggled up onto one elbow, glanced at his watch. "Oh. All right. Thanks."

"Breakfast?"

"Not for me." He sat up and stretched. "Look in the cold bin. You'll see a flask marked 'Berry Extract'. That's for me. You have coffee if you want."

She had poured two beakers of the liquid, which was tinged with blue and smelled faintly of mint.

He took his.

"You might not like it," he warned. "It's bitterish, but it's the biggest thing I've struck yet, bar one. This comes from a miserable little pod-bearer, one of a dozen or more, but this variety somehow is proof against the lizards. Seems they don't like the flavor. So although it propagates only by rare accident—wind and luck—it does

get to the pod stage. The others don't get that far."

He took a generous mouthful, shuddered. "That," he said, "is, in essence, the ecological problem of Venus. The lizards are the fertilizing mechanism, the symbiotes—but they are also damned voracious. So, over the millenia that life has been struggling there, very little progress has been made. It's more of a check than a balance!"

"I see that." She sampled the juice thoughtfully. "But why is this so important?"

"Water! There is no naturally occurring liquid water on the planet, although the atmosphere is loaded with it. Humid but not liquid. Only the plants and the lizards can accumulate liquids, and this particular plant has pods full of it. If we could seed enough acres with this stuff, it would solve a lot of problems."

"You said 'the biggest thing—bar one.' What is the other?"

"That's something we're going to take a look at right now, soon as you're ready."

"Is my clothing satisfactory?" she inquired without emotion.

HE TRIED to examine her objectively, but was forced to avert his eyes. He was learning, belatedly, that partial concealment is more provocative than total revelation.

"Take 'em off," he said awk-

wardly. "It's a Sector 5 job, so we don't need any, anyway. Hot but not non-toxic. Also, it could be tricky and clothes might get in the way." He was rationalizing, and he knew it.

"But you object to lack of apparel."

"So I've changed my mind!" he said.

"As you wish."

WHILE she stripped obediently, he took up a bunch of plastic tubes, each one belled out into a tiny trumpet at one end. "I'll explain as we go." He squatted on the scooter beside her and gave her a tube. "This specimen is a fungus—and a weirdie. You ever hear of Fergus Lintz, one of the first to do research on Venus? Yes? Then you'll know that he's a first-rate man. Now he had a really fabulous experience which nobody really believed all the way. At times, he even doubts it himself, I'm told. Seems he was lost in a little valley, running short of air and getting a bit light-headed. He knew he was fairly close to base, but too far gone to make it. Suit-radio on the blink, too. He was in a bad way. Then he stumbled across a big clump of fungi in a hollow and stopped to examine them. Can you imagine that? Death was staring him in the face, but this was something new—a new specimen—so he had to stop

and look. A real, dedicated botanist, old Fergus."

The scooter swung dizzily into Sector 5.

"Anyway, he took a look at these fungi—and, as he looked, he saw one of them blow a bubble at him! Naturally, he thought he was in the first stages of delirium and he proceeded to undo his faceplate, so as to get a better look—and it was that suicidal act which saved his life! You see, when he hunched over the little bed of fungi, another bubble blew off, and then it was a regular fountain of bubbles—and they burst right in his face. And they were oxygen! Oxygen plus a slight perfume—"

"Oxygen?" the robot queried.

"Right—something like a cubic foot of it. Enough, anyway, to get him on his feet again and back to base. But not without a scoopful of the fungi. At base, they thought he was off his trolley, especially when they failed to propagate the things. But Fergus stuck to his story—got a few specimens—and sent 'em to me with all the details."

The scooter stopped and they went to the plexiglass window, where he checked the gauges carefully. Then, pointing, he told her, "There's the last of the bunch. They look something like Amanita velatipes, don't they? But don't let that fool you. This my-

celium has a sex factor. That much I've found out. This one—" he indicated a purplish-white stem with a full-spread umbrella four inches across—"is a male. Characteristics are the spread-out pilaeus with the vent in the top. I've had some blow a bubble or two—three at most—then they wither, fast, very damned fast."

Shifting his angle to indicate similar stems, but with an ovoid head in darker purple, he said, "Those are females. They bubble, too. Far as I can make out, the bubble effect is a spore-distributing mechanism. The membrane of the bubble is made from the volva, which this mycelium preserves in a semi-fluid state. But the spores—microscopic—are always sterile. The only answer I can figure is that two bubbles have to make contact to become fertile."

"But the chances against that must be astronomical!"

He shrugged. "On Earth, evolution is profligate. On Venus, it's skinflint. A chance in a million is good odds. Now this is what we do. I've tried this before, but failed. Maybe you'll be luckier than me. I'm going to try to trap a bubble from a male and one from a female and mix 'em. All right? Remember, it's as hot as hell in there and heavy on CO₂. You'll sweat a lot, pant a bit—but it's bearable. Ready? Here we go."

IN THE clammy heat, Jacob crouched, fighting to keep his breathing steady. He had a trumpet tube ready. The timing had been very good. The pilaeus swelled, pouted in the center and out popped a tiny bubble, swimming with translucent color, about an inch in diameter. He pushed the bell-end of the tube at it, sucking gently—and the bubble burst, with a sweet smell. He shook the sweat from his eyes and waited. Again the umbrella grew a hump in the middle, popped a bubble—and began to wither immediately.

"See how damn fast everything happens?" he breathed, poking the tube delicately toward the drifting bubble. This time it stuck.

Holding his breath, he slewed around, seeking a ready female. None were popping yet. One purple ovoid swelled and heaved. He waited feverishly, his hand shaking with the effort to hold it steady.

"For Pete's sake, old lady," he muttered, "hurry up!"

His captive bubble shivered, burst—and, with exquisite timing, the female ovoid pouted and spouted a bubble—then another—and a third—and began to wither swiftly.

"Damn!" he stood up. "Damn and blast this crazy, screwball life system! Here, you try."

They moved to where a second male was showing signs of bubbling. She looked down,

frowning, a little bead of sweat on her upper lip. "Jacob, this is not the way. There must be something more. Lintz spoke of a fountain of bubbles, did he not?"

"That's right, but he might have been delirious."

"Not if he obtained enough gaseous oxygen to fill his suit—about a cubic foot, you said? To make such a difference, something would have to happen to the fungus—presumably the female—before sporulation. Don't you agree?"

"Sounds likely. But what?" The pilaeus began to quiver.

"I'm going to try something." She got down on her stomach, with her face close to the straining fungus.

He watched tensely, and almost shouted with surprise when she pouted her lips and caught the bubble as it popped out. Holding his breath, he saw her turn aside and gently blow the bubble at the female ovoid, at the underside, where the gill openings were. Amazingly, the bubble stuck, and dwindled rapidly, as if being sucked dry. Again, deftly, she caught a male bubble with her lips and served it to the hungry gills.

She lay quite still. Standing over her, he stared down, rigidly waiting. The purple ovoid swelled and swelled and shook—and suddenly, beautifully, spouted out a stream of huge, rainbow-hued bubbles. Dozens—hundreds—the hot air was

full of them, twinkling and bobbing—and bursting, filling his nostrils with heady perfume.

She squirmed over the hot soil to the last remaining pilaeus, and, as if waiting for her, it popped—and again she caught the fragile bubble on her rosy lips and blew it gently to a waiting female. The second bubble she sent to another female, the third to yet another.

THEN she scrambled to her feet and stood, with a shy, reserved smile, while volcanoes of bubbles spouted their scent around her. He caught a glimpse of her face and was transfixed by the sheer joy there.

"Isn't this just beautiful, Jacob?" She stretched out her arms and beat the cloud of rainbow globes into a whirling dance.

He saw her as a Venus arising from the sea-foam and laughed at the thought.

She heard and echoed his laugh merrily. "Aren't they lovely?"

"Very nearly as lovely as you, Susan." He put out his arms to her and she came into them. "I'm probably a bit giddy with all this oxygen and exotic perfumes, but I don't give a damn." He held her close. "Susan, you're the most wonderful thing that ever happened to me. Robot or not—who cares?—I want to have

you with me always. For me, you're as human as any real woman—and the only one I could ever get along with!"

For this was the conclusion he had come to, in the quiet of his bunk, and the answer that logic had dictated, and now he had said it.

"But what about my free will, Jacob?" she asked, with a hint of mischief, as she nestled close. "You said I could do what I wished on my own time."

"That's right!" He let go of her at once and stood back anxiously. "I'd forgotten all about that!"

IN HIS distress he took a deeper breath than was wise, and coughed. The mixture of free oxygen, perfume and excess CO₂, plus the heat, all combined to give him a nightmare sense of urgent unreality. It was as if a dream offered itself, just out of reach—and in between was this cursed business of definitions. And she wasn't helping any.

She stood there, smiling, ever in a dream of drifting, opalescent bubbles—remote and unhumanly ideal. He made a great effort.

"Susan, forgetting that you are anything other than just that—to me you are Susan, nothing more or less—I love you—will you—will you marry me?"

She was immediately serious, her blue eyes wide. Jar-

ringly, he heard the approach alarm.

"What is it?" She tilted her head to listen.

"Ship coming," he said flatly, seeing his dream shattered into dust. "It'll be here in about ten minutes."

"Why?"

"Who knows?" He shrugged sagging shoulders. "A chance delivery, special message—anything. Dust yourself off as much as you can—we don't want to lose any—collect a sample for fertility test—there's not much doubt, but we have to check. I'll go see who's calling. I'll send back the scooter, soon's I get there. You run the sample to the lab room."

He turned and left the hot-house, slapping away as much of the dust as he could, before she could ask any further questions. He put the scooter into top speed and clung grimly as it raced along the corridors. He had lied. He knew, with dull certainty, who was calling and why. A year's salary to a pinch of spore dust that it was George Viner, come to check up on his gadget.

As Jacob listened to the voice on the intercom, he knew he had won his hypothetical bet. No one would ever know just how much he had lost at the same time. He triggered the personal lock and went to shower.

When he came back, pulling

a shirt down over his head, George Viner sat there, at ease, chewing on the end of an unlighted cigar. Jacob thought, for the hundredth time, that he had never seen anyone who looked so like the typical professor—apart from that cigar. Against the white goatee, the pink complexion and the shaggy white eyebrows, the cigar added a rakish look.

"Hello, George!" Jacob perched a hip on the edge of the table. "Come to take her back, eh?"

"*Her?*" Viner echoed, then chuckled. "Oh, Susan, you mean. No, Jacob, my boy—not unless there is something wrong. Don't tell me something is wrong already!" He poked his bullet-head forward, anxiously.

"No, nothing wrong," said Jacob. "Just the reverse, in fact."

VINER took a fresh bite on his cigar. "Fine, fine. I'm on my way Earthside—couple or three things I want to bring up with the NSF and I'll be gone a good while—so I thought I'd look in on you, see how it goes. It's a bit early yet, I know. You haven't had time to get the thing trained up right, but it's something pretty new in the way of automatics, and a snap report would help. I've plans afoot to make them an assembly line number, if they work out.

There's a future for general purpose mechanisms, I think. Anything outstanding?"

Jacob shuddered. A mass-produced job! Thousands of Susans! General purpose robots! A sudden awareness of what he had almost done shook him.

"Did you have to make her so beautiful?" he demanded thickly. "And why make it a 'her'? Was that necessary?"

"Beautiful?" Viner seemed mildly surprised. "I suppose she *is* beautiful, come to think of it. But anything functionally perfect is beautiful—like a mathematical theorem, a razor blade or a wheel. As for sex—I suppose it's natural that a man living all alone would attribute female traits—the way old-time sailors always thought of their ships, for instance."

He took out his cigar, looked at it thoughtfully, then reinserted it. "But those aren't the kind of things I meant. Have you found anything that could do with improvement or modification, any faults or failures? On the other hand, is there anything you think you should know about replacing spares — batteries, programming—that sort of thing?"

Jacob tried to think objectively, but all that would come through the inner fog of pain was a heart cry.

"Did you have to teach her all that stuff about studying my wishes—all that philos-

ophy—keeping me happy—serving my pleasure—”

“Jacob!” Viner was on his feet now, like a stumpy, bewildered Santa Claus. “You all right, son? Maybe you’ve been overdoing it a bit, eh? All this by your lonesome stuff is getting you down. Robots with philosophy!” He grew alarmed. “You find yourself talking to it?”

“Hah!” Jacob was amused. “I talk to myself a lot, anyway, and never worried about it. It’s the way the damned thing talks back to me!”

Viner went back to his seat carefully—too carefully. Jacob could see the roboticist trying to appear casual.

“Now, Jacob,” Viner spoke soothingly, “don’t get me wrong on this, understand, but I think it’s about time you had a break. I’ll put a call through to Ajax Base and we’ll have somebody shipped out to take over—”

“Jacob!” she came hurrying in, her lovely face aglow with excitement. “They’re fertile, sure enough—” Then she saw Viner and stopped in surprise and consternation. Suddenly aware of her nudity, she clutched vain hands, then turned and fled.

Viner dropped his cigar and roared. “Susan! You come right back here!”

HE WAS halfway out of his chair, purple with intent, when Jacob grabbed his arm.

“What—” Jacob began.

“That,” Viner said through his teeth, “happens to be my niece, Susan Calvin, and I’d like to know just what the blazes she’s doing here, and in that state—and, what’s more, I intend to find out! Susan!”

“Give her time to get some clothes on,” Jacob said reasonably. “Your niece, you said?” He was too totally shattered to be anything but devoid of all feeling. “Tell me about her, George.”

“You mean there’s still something you don’t know?”

“There is. A lot. You see—” Jacob almost giggled at the silliness of it—“I thought she was the device you mentioned in your letter. You said ‘Susan’ and it—she—answered to that, and I thought, naturally—”

“You mean you actually took that girl for a robot!? But that’s fantastic! Nobody could be that dumb!”

“Well, either I’m that dumb or she’s a damn fine actress—or a bit of both. But I’m dumb, all right.” Jacob nodded ruefully. “I’m just beginning to realize how dumb. Tell me about her.”

“Well—” Viner ruminated, chewing the cigar. “She’s a smart girl, all right, although I shouldn’t say it. General sweep through biology and psychology, decided to major in sociology—personal relationships, group and individual dynamics—that line. She

works with me a lot on communication systems and the like—but what the hell am I doing, sitting here talking to you?” He got up violently. “Susan! Come right here!”

She came in demurely, tugging a sweatshirt into place. Jacob could only stare. Somehow—now—there was a difference. This was no longer an idealized dummy, but a living, breathing woman—and it was not the same. Common sense tried to tell him that it was all his own imagination, but it was no use. The shattered vacancy began to fill up, but the filling was dust and ashes. Real flesh and blood—she was *people!* He slid from the table edge, hearing the rapid interchange between uncle and niece as a vague, meaningless noise. He went out.

He was staring unseeingly at the windowed Venus-scape, when he felt her touch on his arm.

“Jacob.” Her voice was soft. “I’m sorry I played a trick on you. Forgive me?”

“For what?” he mumbled. “You had your fun. Or psychological experiment. Prove anything?”

“Just that you’re a very nice person—when you let yourself be—and that you’re afraid of people without any reason. You know, you’d seen me a few times before—but you never noticed me. I wanted you to—hence this.”

“**P**EOPLE!” he said bitterly. “Sometimes I think it’s a pity that Noah and his party didn’t miss the boat!”

“Mark Twain,” she said.

“All right, so you’re smart. You fooled me. You made your point. Now would you please leave me alone?”

“Does it make so much difference, Jacob—my being human? You said some very nice things to and about me, back there among the bubbles. I think you meant them. And you asked me a question, too. Don’t you want my answer?”

In the silence there came the muted trembling of the station as a ship blasted clear.

“Hey!” he cried. “That’s Viner, leaving. Why aren’t you on that ship with him?”

“Jacob O’Simon! You asked me to marry you! Uncle George has gone to bring back the padre from Ajax Base. Are you going to make a fool of me now?”

“You made a fair fool of me!” he protested, “pretending to be whatever I wanted—”

“I was not pretending, Jacob, then or now,” she whispered. “I am whatever you want me to be. That’s what a wife is for—to be whatever her man wants. Will you try me, Jacob?”

“On one condition—that we go on just the way it was.”

She said, this time with emotion, “Whatever you wish, Jacob!”

END

Not Snow Nor Rain

By MIRIAM ALLEN DeFORD

Sam should have let the 22

nixies go to the dead letter

office . . . or gone there him-

self for sanctuary!

ON HIS first day as a mail carrier, Sam Wilson noted that inscription, cribbed from Herodotus, on the General Post Office, and took it to heart: "Not snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds."

It couldn't be literally true, of course. Given a real blizzard, it would be impossible to make his way through the pathless drifts; and if there had been a major flood, he could hardly have swum to deliver letters to the marooned. Moreover, if he couldn't find the addressee, there was noth-

ing to do but mark the envelope "Not known at this address," and take it back to be returned to the addresser or consigned to the Dead Letter Office. But through the years, Sam Wilson had been as conscientiously faithful and efficient as any Persian messenger.

Now the long years had galloped by, and this was the very last time he would walk his route before his retirement.

It would be good to put his feet up somewhere and ease them back into comfort; they had been Sam's loyal servants and they were more worn out than he was. But the thought of retirement bothered him. Mollie was going to get sick of having him around the house all day, and he was damned if he was going to sit on a park bench like other discarded old men and suck a pipe and stare at nothing, waiting for the hours to pass in a vacuum. He had his big interest, of course—his status as a devoted science fiction fan; he would have time now to read and reread, to watch hopefully from the roof of his apartment house for signs of a flying saucer. But that wasn't enough; what he needed was a project to keep him alert and occupied.

On his last delivery he found it.

The Ochterlonie Building, way down on lower Second Avenue, was a rundown, shab-

by old firetrap, once as solid as the Scotsman who had built it and named it for himself, but now, with its single open-cage elevator and its sagging floors, attracting only quack doctors and dubious private eyes and similar fauna on the edge of free enterprise. Sam had been delivering to it now for 35 years, watching its slow deterioration.

This time there was a whole batch of self-addressed letters for a tenant whose name was new to him, but that was hardly surprising—nowadays, in the Ochterlonie Building, tenants came and went.

They were small envelopes, addressed in blue, in printing simulating handwriting, to Orville K. Hesterson, Sec.-Treas., Time-Between-Time, 746 Ochterlonie Building, New York 3, N. Y. Feeling them with experienced fingers, Sam Wilson judged they were orders for something, doubtless enclosing money.

IN MOST of the buildings on his last route, Sam knew, at least by sight, the employees who took in the mail, and they knew him. A lot of them knew this was his last trip; there were farewells and good wishes, and even a few small donations (since he wouldn't be there next Christmas) which he gratefully tucked in an inside pocket of the uniform he would never



NOT SNOW NOR RAIN

wear again. There were also two or three invitations to a drink, which, being still on duty, he had regretfully to decline.

But in the Ochterlonie Building, with its fly-by-night clientele, he was just the postman, and nobody greeted him except Howie Mallory, the decrepit elevator operator. Sam considered him soberly. It was going to be pretty tough financially from now on; could he, perhaps, find a job like Howie's? No. Not unless things got a lot tougher; standing all day would be just as bad as walking.

He went from office to office, getting rid of his load—mostly bills, duns and complaints, he imagined, in this hole. There was nothing for the seventh floor except this bunch for Time-Between-Time.

The seventh floor? He must be nuts. The Ochterlonie Building was six floors high.

Puzzled, he rang for Howie.

"What'd they do, build a penthouse office on top of this old dump?" he inquired.

The elevator operator laughed as at a feeble jest. "Sure," he said airily. "General Motors is using it as a hideaway."

"No, Howie—no fooling. Look here."

Mallory stared and shook his head. "There ain't no 746. Somebody got the number wrong. Or they got the build-

ing wrong. There's nobody here by that name."

"They couldn't — printed envelopes like these."

"O. K., wise guy," said Howie. "Look for yourself."

He led the way to the short flight of iron stairs and the trap door. While Mallory stood jeering at him, Sam determinedly climbed through. There was nothing in sight but the plain flat roof. He climbed down again.

"Last letters on my last delivery and I can't deliver them," Sam Wilson said disgustedly.

"Somebody's playing a joke, maybe."

"Crazy joke. Well, so long, Howie. Some young squirt will be taking his life in his hands in this broken-down cage of yours tomorrow."

Sam Wilson, whom nothing could deter from the swift completion of his appointed rounds, had to trudge back to the post office with 22 undelivered letters.

Years ago the United States Post Office gave up searching directories and reference books, or deciphering illiterate or screwy addresses, so as to make every possible delivery. That went out with three daily and two Saturday deliveries, two-cent drop postage, and all the other amenities that a submissive public let itself lose without a protest. But there was still a city directory in the office. Sam Wil-

son searched it stubbornly. Time-Between-Time was not listed. Neither was Orville K. Hesterson.

There was nothing to do but consider the letters nixies and turn them over to the proper department. If there was another bunch of them tomorrow, he would never know.

RETIREMENT, after the first carefree week, was just as bad as Sam Wilson had suspected it was going to be. Not bad enough to think yet about elevator operating or night watching, but bad enough to make him restless and edgy, and to make him snap Mollie's head off until they had their first bad quarrel for years. He'd never had time enough before to keep up with all the science fiction magazines and books. Now, with nothing but time, there weren't enough of them to fill the long days. What he needed was something—something that didn't involve walking—to make those endless hours speed up. He began thinking again about those 22 nixies.

He sat gloomily on a bench in Tompkins Square in the spring sunshine: just what he had sworn not to do, but if he stayed home another hour, Mollie would heave the vacuum cleaner at him. In the public library he had searched directories and phone books, for all the boroughs

and for suburban New Jersey, Connecticut and Pennsylvania; Orville K. Hesterson appeared in none of them.

He didn't know why it was any of his business, except that Time-Between-Time had put a blot on the very end of his 35-year record and he wanted revenge. Also, it was something to do and be interested in. In a way, science fiction and detection had a lot in common, and Sam Wilson prided himself on his ability to guess ahead what was going to happen in a story. So why couldn't he figure out this puzzle, right here in Manhattan, Terra? But he was stymied.

Or was he?

Sam took his gloomy thoughts to Mulligan's. Every large city is a collection of villages. The people who live long enough in a neighborhood acquire their own groceries, their own drugstores, their own bars. The Wilsons had lived six years in their flat, and Mulligan's, catercornered across the street, was Sam's personal bar.

He was cautious as to what he said there. He'd heard enough backtalk already when he had been indiscreet enough once, after four beers, to express his views on UFOs. He had no desire to gain a reputation as a crackpot. But it was safe enough to remark conversationally, "How do you find out

where a guy is when he says he's someplace and you write him there and the letter comes back?"

"You ought to know, Sam," said Ed, the day barkeep. "You were a postman long enough."

"If I knew, I wouldn't ask."

"Ask Information on the phone."

"He hasn't got a phone."

That was the weirdest part of it—a business office without a phone.

In every bar, at every moment, there is somebody who knows all the answers. This somebody, a nondescript fellow nursing a Collins down the bar, spoke up: "It could be unlisted."

Sam's acquaintance didn't include people with unlisted phones; he hadn't thought of that.

"Then how do you find out his number?"

"You don't, unless he tells you. That's why he has it unlisted."

The police could get it, Sam thought. But they wouldn't, without a reason.

"Hey, maybe this guy's office is in one of them flying saucers and he forgot to come down and get his mail," Ed suggested brightly.

Sam scowled and walked out.

Nevertheless . . .

Nothing to do with UFOs, of course. That was ridiculous.

BUT suppose there was a warp in the space-time continuum? Suppose there had once been another Ochterlonie Building, or some day in the future there was going to be another one, somewhere in New York? There wasn't another now, in any of the boroughs, or any other building with a name remotely like it; his research had already established that.

Sam went back to the Public Library. The building he knew had been erected in 1898. He consulted directories as far back as they went; there never had been one of the name before. Then a time-slip from the future?

That was hopeless, so far as he could do anything about it, so he cast about for another solution. How about a parallel world?

That could be, certainly: some accident by which mail for that other Ochterlonie Building, the seven-story one, had (maybe just once) arrived in the wrong dimension.

He couldn't do anything to prove or disprove that, either. What he needed was a break.

He got it.

One morning in early summer his own mailbox in the downstairs hallway disgorged a long envelope, addressed to Mr. Samuel Wilson. The upper left-hand corner bore a printed return address: Time-Between-Time, 746 Ochterlonie Building, New York 3,

N. Y. He raced upstairs, locked himself in the bathroom, the one place Mollie couldn't interrupt him, and tore the envelope open with trembling fingers.

It was a form letter, with the "Dear Mr. Wilson" not too accurately typed in. It enclosed one of those blue-printed envelopes in simulated handwriting. The letterhead carried the familiar impossible address, but no phone number.

Maybe it was chance, maybe it was ESP, but he himself had got onto Time-Between-Time's mailing list!

HE HAD trouble focusing his eyes to read the letter.

Dear Mr. Wilson:

Would you invest \$1 to get a chance at \$1,000?

Of course you would, especially if, win or lose, you got your dollar back.

In this atomic age, yesterday's science fiction has become today's and tomorrow's science fact. Time-Between-Time, a new organization, is planning establishment of a publishing company to bring out the best in new books, both fact and fiction, in the field of science, appealing to people who have never been interested until now.

Before we start, we are conducting a poll to find out what the general public

thinks and feels about our probabilities of success. We're asking for your cooperation.

Our statisticians have told us that from the answers to one question—which may look off the beam but isn't—we can make a pretty good estimate. Here it is:

If tomorrow morning a spaceship landed in front of your house, and from it issued a band of extraterrestrial beings, who might or might not be human in appearance, what, in your best judgment, would be your own immediate reaction? Check one, or if you agree with none of the choices, indicate in the blank space beneath what your personal reaction would probably be.

1. Phone for the police.
2. Attack the aliens physically.
3. Faint.
4. Run away.
5. Call for assistance to seize the visitors.
6. Greet them, attempt to communicate, and welcome them in the name of your fellow-terrestrials.
7. Other (please specify).

Return this letter, properly marked, in the enclosed envelope. To defray promotion expenses, enclose a dollar bill (no checks or money orders).

At the conclusion of this poll, all answers will be evaluated. The writer of the one which comes nearest to

the answer reached by our electronic computer, which will be fed the same question, will receive \$1,000 in dollar bills. Ties will receive duplicate prizes.

In addition, all participants, when our publishing firm has been established, will receive for their \$1 a credit form entitling them to \$1 off any book we publish.

Don't delay. Send in your answer NOW. Only letters enclosing \$1 will be entered.

Very truly yours,

Time-Between-Time,

Orville K. Hesterson,
Sec.-Treas.

SAM WILSON read the letter three times. "It's crazy," he muttered. "It's a gyp."

What he ought to do was take the letter to the post office—Mr. Gross would be the one to see—and let them decide whether this Hesterson was using the mails to defraud. Let Mr. Gross and his department try to find 746 in the six-story Ochterlonie Building. As a faithful employee for 35 years, it was Sam's plain duty.

But then it would be out of his hands forever; he'd never even find out what happened. And he'd be back in the dull morass that retirement was turning out to be.

"Sam!" Mollie yelled outside the locked door. "Aren't

you ever coming out of there?"

"I'm coming, I'm coming!" He put the letter and its enclosure back in the envelope and placed them in a pocket.

Time enough to decide that afternoon what he was going to do.

He escaped after lunch to what was becoming his refuge on a park bench. There he read the letter for the fourth time. For a long while he sat ruminating. About three o'clock he walked to the General Post Office—walking had become a habit hard to break—and hunted up the man who now had his old route, a youngster not more than 30 named Flanagan.

From the letter Sam extracted the return envelope.

"You been delivering any like this?" he asked.

Flanagan peered at it.

"Yeah," he said. "Plenty." He looked worried. "Gee, Wilson, I'm glad you came in. There's something funny about those deliveries, and I don't want to get in Dutch."

"Funny how?"

"My very first day on the route, I started up to the seventh floor of that building to deliver them—and there wasn't any seventh floor. So I asked the old elevator man—"

"Howie Mallory. I know him. He's been there for years."

"I guess so. Anyway, he said it was O. K. just to give

them to him. He showed me a paper, signed with the name of this outfit, by the secretary or something—”

“Orville K. Hesterson,” Sam said.

“That was it—saying that all mail for them was to be delivered to the elevator operator until further notice. So I’ve been giving it to him ever since—there’s a big bunch every day. Is something wrong, Sam? Have I pulled a boner? Am I going to be in trouble?”

“No trouble. I’m just checking—little job they asked me to do for them, seeing I’m retired.” Sam was surprised at the glibness with which that fib came out.

Flanagan looked still more worried. “He said their office was being remodeled or something, so he was looking after their mail till they could move in.”

“Sure. Don’t give it another thought.” Another idea occurred to him; he lowered his voice. “I oughtn’t to tell you this, Flanagan, but every new man on a route, they kind of check up on him the first few weeks, see if he’s handling everything O.K. I’ll tell them you’re doing fine.”

“Hey, thanks. Thanks a lot.”

“Don’t say anything about this. It’s supposed to be secret.”

“Oh, I won’t.”

Sam Wilson waved and

walked out. He sat on the steps a while to think.

Was old Howie Mallory pulling a fast one? Was *he* Orville K. Hesterson? Had he cooked up a scheme to make himself some crooked money?

THREE things against that. First, those nixies the first day: why wouldn’t Mallory have told him the same thing he told Flanagan? Sam would have believed him, if he had said they were building an office on the roof and giving it a number.

Second, Howie just wasn’t smart enough. Of course he could be fronting for the real crook. But Sam had known him for years, and old Howie had always seemed downright stupidly honest. A man doesn’t suddenly turn into a criminal after a lifetime of probity.

Third, if this was some fraudulent scheme involving Mallory, nobody the old man knew—least of all the postman who used to deliver mail to that very building—would ever have been allowed to appear on the sucker list.

Sam Wilson thought some more. Then he hunted up the nearest pay phone and called Mollie.

“Mollie? Sam. Look, I just met an old friend of mine—” he picked a name from a billboard visible from the phone booth— “Bill Seagram, you remember him—oh, sure you do; you’ve just forgotten.

Anyway, he's just here for the day and we're going to have dinner and see a show. Don't wait up for me. I might be pretty late . . . No, I'm *not* phoning from Mulligan's . . . Now you know me, Mollie; do I ever drink too much? . . . Yeah, sure, he ought to've asked you too, but he didn't. O.K., he's impolite. Aw, Mollie, don't be like that—"

She hung up on him.

Sam Wilson stood concealed in a doorway from which he could see the cramped lobby of the Ochterlonie Building. It was ten minutes before somebody entered it and rang for the elevator. The minute Howie Mallory started up with his passenger, Sam darted into the building and started climbing the stairs. He heard Mallory passing him, going down again, but the elevator wasn't visible from the stairway. On the sixth floor, after a quick survey to see that the hall was clear and the doors closed that he had to pass, he found the iron steps to the trapdoor.

The roof was just as empty as the other time he had visited it. No, it wasn't. In a corner by the parapet, weighted with a brick to keep it from blowing away, was a large paper bag. Sam picked up the brick and looked inside. It was stuffed with those blue-printed return envelopes.

He looked carefully about him. There were buildings all

around, towering over the little old Ochterlonie Building. There were plenty of windows from which a curious eye could discern anything happening on that roof. But at night anybody in those buildings would be either working late or cleaning offices, with no reason whatever to go to a window; and Sam was sure nothing was going to happen till after dark.

It was a warm day and he had been carrying his coat. He folded it and put it down near the paper bag and sat on it with his back against the parapet. He cursed himself for not having had more foresight; he should have brought something to eat and something to read. Well, he wasn't going to climb down all those stairs and up again. He lighted his pipe and began waiting.

He must have dozed off, for he came to himself with a start and found it was almost dark. The paper bag was still there. It was just as well he had slept; now he'd have no trouble staying awake and watching. He might very well be there all night—in fact, he'd have to be, whether anything happened or not. The front door would be locked by now. Mollie would have a fit, but he had his alibi ready.

There was only one explanation left. Not time travel. Not alternate universes. Not an ordinary confi-

dence game. Not—decidedly not—a hoax.

If he was wrong, then tomorrow morning he'd take the whole business to Mr. Gross. But he had a hunch he wasn't going to be wrong.

IT WAS 12:15 by his wrist-watch when he saw it coming.

It had no lights; nobody could have spotted it as it appeared suddenly out of nowhere and climbed straight down. It landed lightly as a drop of dew. The port opened and a small, spare man, very neatly dressed, as Sam could see with eyes accustomed to the darkness, stepped out. Orville K. Hesterson in person.

He tiptoed quickly to the paper bag. Then he saw Sam and stopped short. Sam reached out and grabbed a wrist. It felt like flesh, but he couldn't be sure.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" the newcomer said in a strained whisper, just like a scared character in a soap opera. So he spoke English. Good: Sam didn't speak anything else.

"I'm from the United States Post Office," Sam replied suavely. Well, he had been, long enough, hadn't he?

"Oh. Well, now look, my friend—"

"*You* look. Talk. How much are you paying the elevator operator to put your mail up here every day?"

"Five dollars a day, in dollar bills, six days a week, left in the empty bag," answered Hesterson—it must be Hesterson—sullenly. "That's no crime, is it? Call this my office, and call that my rent. All I need an office for is to have somewhere to get my letters."

"Letters with money in them."

"We have to have funds for postage, don't we?"

"What about the postage on the first mailing list, before you got any dollars to pay for stamps?"

If it had been a little lighter, Sam would have been surer of the alarm that crossed Hesterson's face.

"I—well, we had to fabricate some of your currency for that. We regretted it—we aim to obey all local rules and regulations. As soon as we have enough coming in, we intend to send the amount to the New York postmaster as anonymous conscience money."

"How about the \$1,000 prize? And those dollar book credits?"

"Oh, that. Well, we say '*when* our publishing firm has been established,' don't we? That publishing thing is just a gimmick. As for the \$1,000, we give no intimation of when the poll will end."

Sam tightened his grasp on the wrist, which was beginning to wriggle.

"I see. O.K., explain the

whole setup. It sounds crazy to me."

"I couldn't agree with you more," said Mr. Hesterson, to Sam's surprise. "That's exactly what, in our own idiom, I told—" Sam couldn't get the name; it sounded like a grunt. "But he's the boss and I'm only a scout third class." His voice grew plaintive. "You can't imagine what an ordeal it is, almost every week, to have to land in a secluded place where I can hide the flyer, make my way to New York, and buy a bunch of stamps and mail a batch of letters in broad daylight. We can simulate your paper and printing and typing well enough, but" — that grunt again—"insists we use genuine stamps. I told you we try to follow all your laws, as far as we possibly can. It's very difficult for me to keep this absurd shape for long at a time; I'm exhausted after every trip. I can assure you, these little night excursions from the mother-ship to pick up the letters are the very least of my burdens!"

"What in time does your boss think he's going to gain by such a screwy come-on?"

"'In time'? Oh, just an idiomatic phrase. Like our calling our organization Time-Between-Time, time of course being just a dimension of space. I learned your tongue mostly from the B.B.C. and I don't always understand your

speech in New York. My dear sir, do you here on this planet ask your bosses why they concoct their plans? Mine has a very profound mind; that's why he is the boss. All I know is that he persuaded the Council to try it out. A softening-up process— isn't that what you people call it when you use it in your silly wars with one another?"

"Softening for what?" But Sam Wilson knew the answer already.

"**W**HY, for the invasion, of course," said Orville K. Hesterson, whose own name was probably a grunt. "Surely you must be aware that, with planetwide devastation likely and even imminent, every world whose inhabitants can live comfortably under extreme radiation is looking to yours—Earth, as you call it—as a possible area for colonization? So many planets are so terribly overcrowded—there's always a rush for a new frontier. We've missed out too often; this time we're determined to be first."

"I'll be darned," said Sam, "if I can see how that questionnaire would be any help to you."

"But it's elementary, as I believe one of your famous law-enforcers once declared. First of all, we're gaining a pretty good idea of what kind

of reception we're likely to meet when we arrive, and therefore whether we're going to need weapons to destroy what will be left of the population, or can reasonably expect to take over without difficulty. We figure that a cross-section of one of your largest cities will be a pretty good indication, and we can extrapolate from that. In the second place, the question itself is deliberately worded to startle the recipients, who have never in their lives contemplated such a thing as an extraterrestrial visitor—"

"Not me. I'm a science fiction fan from way back. It's all old stuff to me."

Hesterson clicked his tongue—or at least the tongue he was wearing. "Oh, dear, that *was* an error. We tried particularly not to include on our lists subscribers to any of your speculative periodicals. That wasn't my mistake, thank goodness; it was another scout who had the horrible job of spending several days here and compiling the lists. Under your present low radio-activity it's real agony for us."

"I'll tell you one mistake you did make, though," said Sam angrily. "You ought to've arranged with the elevator man before your first lot of answers was due. If you want to know, that's how I got onto the whole thing. I'm a mail carrier—I'm retired

now, but I was then—and I was the one supposed to deliver the first batch. Mallory—that's the elevator operator—laughed in my face and told me there wasn't any 746 in this building, and I had to take the letters back to the post office—on my *last* delivery!" Sam couldn't keep the bitterness out of his voice. "After 35 years—well, that's neither here nor there. But I didn't like that and I made up my mind to find out what was happening."

"So that's it. Oh, dear, dear. I'll have to compensate for that or I *will* be in trouble."

Sam had had enough. "You are in trouble right now," he growled, pushing the little alien back against the parapet. "We're staying right here till morning, and then I'm going to call for help and take you and your flying saucer or whatever it is straight to the F.B.I."

The counterfeit Mr. Hesterson laughed.

"Oh, no indeed you aren't," he said mildly. "I can slip right back into my own shape whenever I want to—the only reason I haven't done it yet is that then I wouldn't have the equipment to talk to you—and I assure you that you couldn't hold me then. On the contrary. As you just pointed out to me, I did make one bad error, and my boss doesn't like errors. I have no inten-

tion of making another one by leaving you here to spread the news."

"What do you mean?" Sam Wilson cried. For the first time, after the years of accustomedness to the idea of extraterrestrial beings, a thrill of pure terror shot through him.

"This," said the outsider softly.

BEFORE Sam could take another breath, the wrist he was holding slid from his grasp, all of Mr. Hesterson slithered into something utterly beyond imagining, and Sam found himself enveloped in invisible chains against which he was unable to make the slightest struggle. He felt himself being lifted and

thrown into the cockpit. Something landed on top of him—undoubtedly the package of prize entries and dollar bills. His last conscious thought was a despairing one of Mollie.

Sam Wilson, devoted mail carrier, was making a longer trip than any Persian courier ever dreamed of, and not snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor gloom of night could stay him from his appointed round.

But he may not be gone forever. If he can be kept alive on that planet in some other solar system, they plan to bring him back as Exhibit One whenever World War III has made Earth sufficiently radioactive for Orville K. Hesterson's co-planetarians to live here comfortably. **END**

DANGER!

Without taking a single person into space, amateur-launched rockets are causing a greater proportion of casualties than car accidents: 162 versus 22 per 10,000. Alarmed by this rate, the American Rocket Society declares that "all practical means must be taken to prevent the manufacture of propellants of rockets by amateurs," urges bans on the sale of such fuels, and adds that the launching of rockets by amateurs must be prohibited. "The somewhat debatable loss in opportunity for intellectual development which might be suffered by foregoing experimentation," says Col. John P. Stapp, ARS president, "is small compared with apparently unavoidable and appalling loss of eyes, fingers and lives."

GOOD-BY, Gloria

By TED BAIN

*As mean a vengeance as was
ever devised — or a super-
human sacrifice—which was
it to be? . . .*

“**O**NE day,” said Gervais savagely, “I’m going to take a knife and stick it right into Wendle’s gizzard.”

“And twist it.” Frobisher didn’t like Captain Wendle any more than Gervais did.

“And twist it,” agreed Gervais. “Slowly.”

He was a chunky young man with a shock of unruly hair and a normally cheerful expression. Now his expression was far from cheerful. He flung himself into a chair

and stared morosely at the beautiful flight pattern over which he had taken so much trouble.

Frobisher lit a cigarette. “All right,” he said gently. “What is it this time?”

“Need you ask?” Gervais was bitter. “So Wendle is the king-sized brain-boy. So he is in command of this tub. So he should know what he’s talking about.” His voice rose as he thought about it. “But does he have to ram his su-

periority down my throat every chance he gets?"

"He does not," said Frobisher.

"Then why does he?" Gervais crumpled the flight pattern to a small ball of waste paper. "Wrong," he said. "The course could be shortened by a good thirty minutes. I'm a fifth decimal point out in my calculations."

Frobisher made appropriate noises, trying hard not to smile. Wendle might be all manner of a you-know-what, but he did know his business. If Gervais had muffed the flight pattern, then he shouldn't beef about having his knuckles rapped. Frobisher didn't tell his crewmate that. He wanted to avoid bloodshed. His own.

"Never mind," he soothed. "It happens to us all. Don't let it worry you."

Gervais made rude noises.

"Personally," continued Frobisher, "I don't mind admitting my errors. I like to think that I'm man enough to accept correction."

"That's big of you." Gervais was sarcastic. "Mighty big."

HE WOULD have said more but the door opened just then and Captain Wendle entered the chart room. He was a well-built man who wore his impeccable uniform like a second skin. His expression was his normal one, as if he

smelled a bad odor in his immediate vicinity.

"Frobisher!" His voice matched the rest of him. Cold, distant, acidly correct.

"Sir!" Frobisher leaped to his feet, snapping a salute. Wendle might be the original son of a female dog but he was still the captain. On his reports depended promotion.

"Frobisher, tell me, what is the optimum operating temperature of our pile?" said Captain Wendle.

Frobisher told him.

"Are you certain? Shouldn't it be just a little higher? Say a degree and a half higher?"

"No, sir."

"Then why is it that the gauges in the control room show that the temperature is higher than the one you have stated? Or could it be that the gauge is faulty?"

"We have a ten-degree tolerance, sir."

"I am aware of that. I am also aware that you are purported to be an engineer. You have given me the figure for optimum temperature. Optimum working, Frobisher, is what I demand on my vessel."

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry, sir." Frobisher looked ready to burst.

Wendle stared at him as if he were a clinical specimen. "Sorry, Frobisher? I think not. You are annoyed that I have discovered your inefficiency, but being annoyed is

not being sorry." Wendle swivled his eyes to Gervais. "Have you rectified your error, Gervais?"

"Just working on it, sir."

"You may save your labor and my patience. I have received a communication from Base. We have been re-assigned."

"Sir?" said Gervais.

"To an uncharted world. I will give you the coordinates later so that you may make an attempt to chart a flight pattern."

"Yes, sir. The mission, sir?"

"A rescue party." Wendle stepped toward the door. "If you are doubtful as to what that is, I suggest that you look up the word in a dictionary. There are, I understand, several aboard."

The door closed behind him. Frobisher let out his breath in a long, low, obscenity-filled hiss.

It was Gervais's turn to make appropriate noises.

THE world was a twin of Earth in that it had seas, mountains, continents and vegetation. It also had a breathable atmosphere and, according to Wendle's information, a party that needed rescuing.

"Base picked up a sub-etheric message," he explained. "It gave the coordinates and asked for a ship to make contact. That means rescue,

of course." His finger tapped a photomap. "You'll find them down there. We've pinpointed their transmitter."

"Them?" said Gervais.

"Yes, Gervais, them." Wendle was patient. "Surely you do not imagine that a single individual could have operated the transmitter?"

"Why not, sir?"

"Because Base has checked records and no ship has been missing for over twenty years. Obviously a ship was wrecked here and the survivors have taken all this time to organize themselves." His tone implied that, had he been with the survivors, they would have done it much sooner.

"Your mission," he continued, "is to go down, survey the party and report back to me. I will decide on appropriate action."

"Yes, sir." Gervais knew what that meant. Sometimes survivors of wrecked spaceships were best left alone. Disease and reversion to barbarism could produce some highly undesirable characteristics.

"Frobisher will go with you. You will take a scout ship and remain in constant communication with us as we orbit." Wendle rolled up the map and handed it over. "Is there anything more? Any point on which you are in doubt?" His tone defied them to admit ignorance.

Frobisher complained about it on the way down to the planet.

"Wendle is a good man," he said. "I'll give him that. Top marks at everything he does and all that. So why does he act as if *we* had holes in the head?"

"He can't help it." Gervais checked the controls. The tiny scout was heading to where it should go. "Maybe it's because of an inferiority complex."

"Inferiority?"

"In a way. He has to keep proving himself."

"Why?"

"Because he has to, that's why."

"As a psychologist, you make a good jet man," snorted Frobisher. "Inferiority complex! If Wendle has that, then I'm a green painted fairy. The trouble with that guy is that he considers himself to be superior to every other member of the human race."

"Maybe you're right," Gervais conceded.

Frobisher glowered at the control panel. "I know I'm right. As far as we're concerned, he regards us as morons. You can tell it every time he opens his mouth. The trouble is that when I'm with him I begin to feel like one. Then I begin to act like one. And the longer I'm with him, the worse it gets."

It was true, Gervais had to

admit. Neither he nor Frobisher was really dumb; it was just that against Wendle they felt that way. Little errors were made to seem more important than they really were. And the worst part of it was that Wendle was always right. Never once, in all the time they had known him, had he appeared other than perfect.

Gervais frowned at the planet below. Away from Wendle's irritating presence, he found it possible to be charitable. In a way he felt sorry for the captain. None of the crew liked him. He was never able to relax, to enjoy a drink, to let his hair down, to laugh off his own failures. He always had to be proving himself better than the next man. Even at sports he was unbeatable. At least, at the sports he ever played. Gervais had a shrewd idea that Wendle wouldn't join in any activity at which he wasn't a master.

HE FORGOT Wendle in the fuss of landing. The ship bumped a couple of times, then came to rest on a more or less even keel. Frobisher rubbed a couple of bruises, said something pungent about bum landings and buckled on his gear while Gervais reported back to the mother ship. He was waiting outside when Gervais joined him.

"Well?" asked Frobisher.

"We head for the site of the radio beacon." Gervais pointed vaguely south. "It can't be far."

"Depends on what you mean by far." Frobisher checked the pistol in his belt. "That undergrowth could hide things."

"Nothing big enough to hurt you."

"No?" Frobisher didn't sound too sure. "Maybe I'd better stand by the radio while you find the survivors. Wendle did order us to remain in contact, remember."

"I've arranged that. We can report back on portable radio to the scout and an automatic relay will pass it on to the ship." Gervais sucked in a deep breath of fresh air. "I wouldn't have liked to send you into unknown dangers without your friend and, incidentally, senior officer, at your side."

Frobisher sighed and followed him south.

"**WHAT** I can't understand," Frobisher said after an hour's hard going, "is why we just didn't wait at the scout for them to come to us. They must have seen us land."

"Possibly." Gervais gently eased a large, many-legged insect from beneath his collar. He stared at it with morbid interest. It bit him and he dropped it with a shudder.

"Then why couldn't we

have waited?" Frobisher stepped carefully over a log and cursed as his foot sank into a water-filled hole.

Gervais waited until his companion had exhausted his vocabulary. "Because we want to make an investigation of their village," he explained. "They've been here for more than twenty years. In that time they could have reverted and be offering human sacrifice to a totem or something. Or they could all have two heads—the kids, anyway—things like that. Wendle wants to know."

"Then Wendle should have come down to find out." Frobisher was annoyed. "How the hell did he think head-hunters could have operated a sub-etheric radio? And the coordinates—they needed astrogators to find them. Does that spell a primitive society?"

Gervais didn't answer. A looped vine had somehow wrapped itself around his neck and was busy throttling him. His boots threshed the grass as the air left his lungs. He clawed at his belt, found his knife, desperately slashed at the vine. It was like hacking at steel cable.

"Well?" Frobisher was striding ahead. "Does it?"

The blast of Gervais's gun answered him. Gervais had managed to drag it from its holster and had severed the vine. He fell, rolled a couple

of times, then climbed to his feet. Around his neck the loosened vine hung like a mottled necktie. He flung it at Frobisher and painfully massaged his throat.

"What's the matter?" Frobisher, gun in hand, stared around through narrowed eyes. "What did you shoot at?"

"You—" Gervais opened his mouth, closed it again in disgust. "Let's get moving."

THEY moved for about a hundred yards and the ground vanished beneath their feet and they rolled to the bottom of a pit. It was a deep pit. The walls were sheer. They couldn't get out.

"Radio for help." Frobisher clawed sweat from his eyes. "Tell them to have another scout come down and rescue us."

"With what?" Gervais held out what was left of the portable radio. He had landed on it when he fell.

"Shout then." Frobisher let out a yell. "Help! Help!"

"Shut up!" Gervais clamped his hand over his companion's mouth. "You want them to find us?"

"I want them to get us out of here."

"Then what?" Gervais stared at the walls of the pit. "This thing was dug for a purpose, and it doesn't take a genius to discover what that purpose is. Someone or some-

thing was meant to fall into it."

"A game pit?"

"Or a moat. For defense, anyway. The villagers might not be too happy if they found us in here. They might do things, like throwing rocks down on us, or spears, or boiling water. Maybe that's how they get their food supply."

Frobisher gulped. He grabbed his knife and began hacking steps in the dirt wall of the pit. Given time he would have managed to cut enough handholds so as to climb out. He wasn't given time.

A rope fell from the top of the pit. It hit Gervais on the shoulders and he, with memories of the throttling vine still fresh, fought it as though it were a living thing. Frobisher snatched it away from him and gave it a tug. It held firm.

"Come on," he said. He swung on the rope, planted his feet against the wall and began to climb.

Gervais, not to be left behind, followed immediately after. As his feet left the ground, the rope began to move upward. They held on, hit the edge of the pit and, still clutching the rope, were dragged away from the edge.

Shakily, they rose to their feet and stared around. No one was in sight. Only the rope, stretching from the pit

into the undergrowth, showed signs of movement. It vanished and then there was no movement at all.

Not until the young woman stepped from the brush and came toward them.

“GLORIA Hermitage,” said Gervais wonderingly, on the way back to the scout. “Professor Gloria Hermitage. Can you beat it?”

“No.” Frobisher trod on something which squelched. He lifted his foot and stared at a paper-thin organism which had wrapped itself around his boot. Wearily he scraped the mammoth leech against a tree. “Man, will I be glad to get off this planet!”

“She gave herself the title.” Gervais couldn’t get over it. “Stranded here all alone since she was a kid, the youngest one aboard. She educated herself, built a sub-etheric radio as soon as she knew how—twenty years later—and called for a ship to come and get her.” He shook his head. “It beats anything I ever heard of in my life.”

That, as Frobisher had to admit, was true enough. The young, attractive, athletic woman who had rescued them was alone on the planet. At the age of four or so, she had been the sole survivor of a wrecked educational vessel loaded with tapes, books, slides and other brain-food

for a newly opened planet’s schools. With nothing to do other than survive—not the easiest thing in the first place—she had devoted herself to mental and physical improvement. The result had been staggering.

“Strong as a horse,” mused Gervais. “Talks like a run-away encyclopedia. Learned enough to pass the examinations, so she gave herself the title of professor.” He jumped aside as something stirred in the grass at his feet. “Beats me how she ever managed to stay alive in the first place.”

“She’s tough,” said Frobisher. He winced at a memory. Appearances had fooled him and he had made a pass. Judo had been one of the things Professor Gloria Hermitage had mastered.

“And now she wants to spread her wings.” Gervais stared thoughtfully up at the sky. “Frobisher.”

“What?”

“You know what she wants, don’t you?”

“I know.” Frobisher kicked at a branch. It didn’t run, stir or bite, so he stepped over it. “I’m surprised you didn’t volunteer.”

“Not me.” Gervais was definite. “When I marry, I’m going to sign up with a soft little kitten who won’t look at me as if I ought to be in a zoo. I get enough of that from Wendle.”

Frobisher made an explosive sound.

Gervais tugged his gun from his belt. "What's the matter?"

"Wendle." Frobisher slapped his thigh. "Now I know what she reminded me of. Wendle, of course—who else but him?"

"So?"

"So use your imagination. She looks like Wendle—in a female way, of course. She talks like him. She made us feel just as moronic as Wendle does, only more so. She had the same 'holier than thou' attitude and expression. I tell you they are out of the same mold."

"How nice." Gervais was sarcastic. "Do we send them a bouquet?"

"We do better than that." Frobisher was enjoying himself. "We put them around each other's neck—for life."

Gervais started to grin.

"See it now? Wendle thinks he's better than the human race. Gloria thinks she is. Just put those two together and let her sink her claws into him. She wants to get married to a man she can respect. All right, let her marry Wendle. Just think of the life that poor so-and-so will suffer once he ties up with someone better than he is."

"And she would be better," agreed Gervais. "Living alone like she did. Learning all that stuff from the educational

tapes, books and visual guides. Hell, Wendle would be like a new-born baby next to her." His grin expanded. "What a revenge!"

"Classic," said Frobisher.

"Poetic justice right down the line."

"The fruits of victory," said Frobisher. "Let's celebrate."

"But supposing they don't like each other?" A shadow touched Gervais's happiness.

FROBISHER dismissed the idea. "They will. Wendle is a lonely cuss who doesn't want women just because they are women. He wants a girl with brains as well as a body. Gloria has brains and she has a body too." He sighed, thinking of how he had once felt about that body. "He can't help but fall for her."

"She'll have to have long, intimate talks with him so as to fill the record," said Gervais. "She'll have to tell him all about her past and the rest of it. They can swap mathematical problems together and maybe play tri-chess." His grin widened. "Wendle isn't a bad-looking character and we know what Gloria wants. A man to marry so that she can . . ." He suddenly lost his smile. "No."

"No what?" Frobisher squinted ahead to where he could see the ship.

"No dice. No putting them

together. Nothing like that at all."

"You crazy?"

"I'm sane. You think about it for a while."

Frobisher thought about it. He couldn't see what objection there could be to the great idea. It would serve Wendle right. A guy like that shouldn't have been born. And then he saw what Gervais was getting at.

TOGETHER they reached and climbed aboard the scout. Together they stared at the planet as it dwindled below. Silently Frobisher heard Gervais make his report.

"There was nothing else to do," said Gervais when he had switched off the radio.

"I suppose not," Frobisher said.

"Wendle's bad," said Gervais. "Bad in the sense that he's a stinker to be under. But he's only one. We can put up with one of his kind."

Frobisher grunted.

"Put him and Gloria together and what happens? She wants to marry and have

kids. Lots of kids." Gervais shuddered. "Between them they'd start a dynasty. Their kids would have other kids, and so on. And they'd all be like Wendle and Gloria."

"Don't!" Frobisher had an imagination.

"We've got to be brave about this," said Gervais. "We've got to forget personal vengeance and take a long-term view. The way things are, we can be transferred or promoted, or Wendle could die or retire or something. But suppose the service became filled with his and Gloria's offspring?"

It didn't bear thinking about.

"So we tell Wendle that the community was mutated and rife with disease. He won't doubt our word. Gloria will be left in peace, and generations of spacemen as yet unborn will have cause to bless our name." Gervais drew a deep breath. "You know, Frobisher, it makes a man feel humble and a little proud."

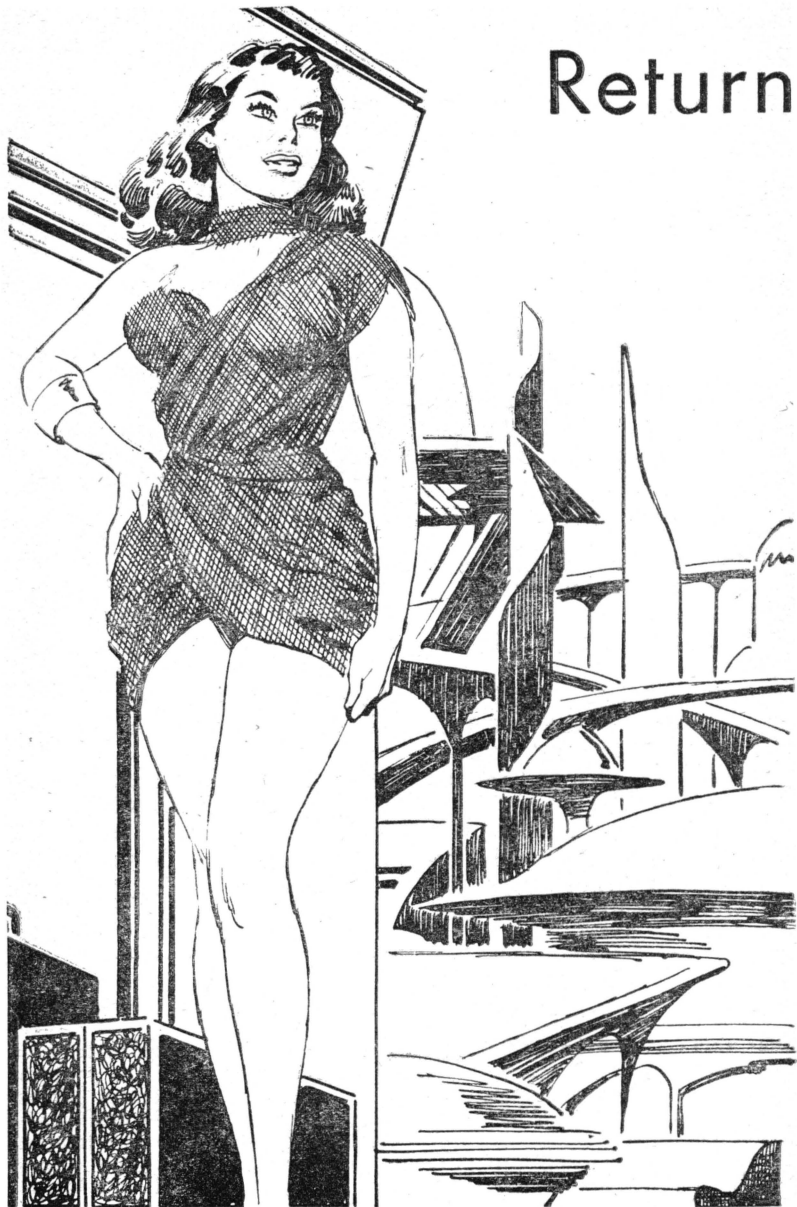
It did, Frobisher realized.

END

BREAKTHROUGH

Bone glue may cut the setting time of fractures from six months to three days, and eliminate casts, crutches and traction entirely, if the polyurethane plastic undergoing tests in U. S. and Canadian medical schools and hospitals proves as good as it has in 250 cases in the past three years. The ends of the break grow through the glue, which is tougher than bone, and join together in a year, by which time the glue is completely absorbed. More important to the patient, he can walk on a broken leg or use a broken arm in only three days.

Return



of a Prodigal

By J. T. McINTOSH

It was bad enough when Clare painted Henry Robert Colquhoun Adams yellow—but then she did the same to everyone else in Luna City!



SECOND Officer Jones took a last admiring look at his favorite passenger on the long trip from Scylla. "You're going to *stay* here, Miss Vernon?" he said, astonished. "Beats me why you should bury yourself in a hole like Luna City."

"You mustn't call my home town a hole," said Clare reprovingly, "even if it is."

"Your home town?" Jones incredulously said. "You mean you were born in Luna City? How did that come about?"

"I imagine it came about in the usual way," Clare Vernon said.

"I mean—you're no viaphobe."

"Being born on the Moon doesn't necessarily make you a viaphobe, though it helps. Anyway, don't you know there's no such thing as via-

phobia? Anybody in Luna City will tell you."

"Anybody in a nuthouse will tell you he's sane," Jones retorted.

"That's a point. But it isn't very nice of you to tell me I was brought up in a nuthouse."

"I didn't mean that, Miss Vernon. Well, I guess they'll be killing the fatted calf for you right now."

"I doubt it," Clare sighed. "More likely to be heating the tar and feathers. 'By, Mr. Jones."

SHE walked down the enclosed gangway to the spaceport terminal, white and beautiful and as much out of place in the center of bleak Mare Imbrium as a hot dog stand in the middle of the Sahara.

She ignored the other passengers waiting for the tender to take them on to Earth. They were the star-travelers, for whom the Moon was no more than a customs checkpoint, a mildly irritating delay within sight of their destination. They didn't have time to drop down in the elevators for even a glance at Luna City, and if they had had time, few would have bothered.

Clare was the only person to make the descent. The officials and porters were still busy with the passengers waiting for the Earth tender,

which would land as soon as the big starship was gone.

Luna City couldn't really be preparing a tar-and-feather reception for Clare, because no one knew she was coming back. Clare herself wasn't quite sure why she had come back. Not because she was homesick. Not to see her family again—there was only her sister Emma to see, and Clare and Emma had always found it quite easy to get along without each other. Not to see Greg Miller, whom she would probably have married if she had stayed in Luna City.

Well, why did you go home anyway? Because you'd been hurt, because the great big world or the great big galaxy hadn't turned out to be as glamorous and exciting as you thought, because you were broke, because you needed a quiet place to lick your wounds and prepare for the fray again. Most of all, because nobody at the moment seemed eager for your services or your person.

All that was near enough the truth.

Thoughtfully, without any sign of regret, Clare pulled the wedding ring off her finger and dropped it in her pocket. Divorce was easy across umpteen light-years. The wedding ring, though it had been useful on the ship, had no place in Luna City. It no longer meant anything.

EMMA VERNON had a premonition of disaster as she fixed her hair. The fact that her sister was at that very moment on her way down from the spaceport was not a great coincidence—Emma was always having premonitions of disaster.

The phone rang and she knew at once what her premonition had been about—Tony couldn't go to the Adams Festival ball that night. When she heard Tony's voice she was sure of it.

"Oh, Tony!" she wailed, before he'd had a chance to say anything.

"What's the matter?" he asked, startled.

"I know what you're going to say. You're not taking me to the dance—"

"Em," said Tony, exasperated, "it's about time you stopped behaving like a neurotic teen-ager. After all, you're—"

"I know. I'm thirty-two, and I've never denied it. But I'm not exactly decrepit, am I? I can still go to a dance if I like, can't I? And I did so want to. But maybe you think I *am* decrepit. Maybe you—"

"Em, for Pete's sake . . . All I wanted to say was, please don't enter the Festival Queen contest. Mother thinks—"

"But I *want* to enter!" Swept along by the tide of her disappointment and indignation, Emma instantly replaced

one grievance with another. "What's your mother got to do with it?"

"She thinks—I think too, Em—after all, beauty contests are for girls of seventeen and eighteen, and—"

"So that's it. Well, if that's how you feel, Tony Benson, you'd better take some other girl. *I'm* certainly not going with *you!*"

She slammed the phone down.

THE elevator door slid open and Clare faced Adams Square, the most gorgeous sight in the most gorgeous city in the Galaxy.

It was strange that Second Officer Jones had referred to Luna City as a hole. Stranger still that the seasoned travelers up on the surface hadn't seemed to care that they hadn't time for a visit. For Luna City was easily the most magnificent city of all history and all space.

Everybody in Luna City knew that.

Perhaps more conclusive was the fact that a large proportion of the population of Earth thought so too.

Gravity being only a fraction of what it was on larger worlds, the most fantastic architectural effects were possible. Every major building reached from floor to ceiling and did its share in supporting the vast roof. This was silver and lit by direct light-

ing which became transformed into soft indirect light that made Luna City a town without shadows.

Rather than being a township built in a cave, though, Luna City was a series of carefully calculated cavities, so arranged that the eye added one to another and got an impression of enormous depth and distance. Its designers had had the rare insight not to plan an artificial underground city which would always be a poor copy of an outdoor, open-air township, but instead to make capital of the very deficiencies of their medium and plan the kind of city which could only be constructed in such conditions.

What made every visitor gasp when he looked across Adams Square for the first time was the unconscious certainty that he was looking at a miracle. He was used, of course, to gravity approximating one *G*. Although his eye was forced to record what it saw, what it recorded couldn't be so, because such things could not exist. And even if his brain knew the real answer—that here a rolled newspaper would support a man's weight—his eye continued to marvel.

The engineering wonders were only the beginning of the miracle of Luna City. The artistic miracle was far greater. The architects had scrap-

ped all they knew about stresses and started again. Unsupported planes were commonplace. If they wanted a thin, flat platform jutting into space, a balcony or veranda or stage or hood, there was no need whatever to cantilever it. And the curved, sweeping promenades which soared high in the air from building to building needed no support along their incredible length. Not only was their own strength adequate to bear their own weight and any added burden they might have to carry—there were no winds to tear at them.

The architects and builders had seized their unique opportunity with imagination and enthusiasm, and surely no one could deny Luna City's claim to be the most beautiful city in the Galaxy.

Yet the engineering marvels and artistic triumph of the city were only a part of the scene which met the eye of a visitor, and some might say not the most important part. There remained the people.

Just to complete the miracle of Luna City, its men were the handsomest, its women the most seductive, to be found anywhere in the Galaxy.

There was one thing more—one thing which made Luna City almost utopia.

The Moon had vast mineral wealth, and the way Father

Adams had arranged things long ago, everybody shared in the loot without having to do very much for it. Only you had to be a native-born Lunan. Luna couldn't support all the bums in the Galaxy.

Only her own.

The most beautiful, richest city in the Galaxy, with the handsomest people.

It was strange indeed that Second Officer Jones had called Luna City a hole.

NNATURALLY Clare's eye ran up the column on the top of which Henry Robert Colquhoun Adams stood in marble aloofness, looking down complacently at the city he had helped to build.

Poor Henry Robert, Clare thought. The first viaphobe. Like every victim of viaphobia ever since, he had declared stoutly and indignantly that there was no such thing. That he founded Luna City because he wanted to, certainly not because he was scared to entrust himself to space again.

The strange thing about viaphobia was that unlike other neuroses—if it was a neurosis—it appeared to be hereditary. It was an undeniable fact that to this day no Adams had ever left Luna City, apart from brief trips up to the Moon's surface to see what space was like.

Clare had a particular reason for looking up that long,

slim column. She marveled as she did so. Once she had climbed that column. She had been furious at the time. That helped.

Bill Adams, leaning back comfortably on one of the seats in the park opposite the elevators, sat up in surprise when he saw that the Scylla ship had brought a visitor to Luna City—and a visitor who intended, judging by the size and number of her bags, to stay for some time. If colonials chose to visit Luna City at all, and they usually did just to say they'd seen it, they almost always went to Earth first and visited the Moon from there, together with thousands of other tourists.

However, he wasn't sorry to see this one. Quite the reverse. In her neat gray suit, elegant but conservative, she should have looked drab and uninteresting in Luna City, where the girls were dressed like chorines. She didn't.

Bill jumped up and bowed politely, a gesture of which Henry Robert Colquhoun Adams, looking down on it, must have approved. "Can I be of assistance, miss?" he asked.

Nothing had changed in ten years, Clare thought. How could it? How could Luna City ever change?

She recognized Bill Adams, who had been a gawky thirteen-year-old last time she had seen him, and was amus-

ed to see that he didn't recognize her.

"You certainly can," she said, and mischievously allowed a hint of colonial accent to creep into her voice. "Where do you suggest I live in this wonderful place?"

Bill swelled happily. "Quite a place, isn't it?" he said. "How about the Hotel Magnificent?"

"I am poor and not particularly honest," Clare sighed. "How about somewhere a little less Magnificent?"

"There's the Grand—"

"Even somewhere a little less Grand. Isn't there a hotel called the Henry Robert?"

Bill took in her elegant clothes which, conservative as they were, must have cost ten times as much as the spangled shorts and bolero of the girl who was surveying Clare critically as she passed. "I don't think you'd like the Henry Robert, miss."

"I hate to contradict you, but I would. Besides, that's it just across the square, isn't it?"

Even with this hint, it didn't cross Bill's mind that this cosmopolitan stranger could have been in Luna City before, much less that she could be a native of the city. He picked up the two heaviest bags as if they were as light as feathers, which they almost were, and led the way. He didn't talk; he preferred to let the glamorous visitor

drink in the marvels of her surroundings.

"I can manage now, thank you," said Clare, as they reached the entrance. She hesitated. Ten years ago, tipping had been unknown in wealthy Luna City. People helped you out of friendliness and laughed if a visitor offered money—not outraged, because tourists didn't know any better, but proud to show that Luna City's standard of living was so high nobody had to do minor services for money.

"If you're thinking of tipping me," said Bill, "please don't. In Luna City—"

"I know," said Clare. "I didn't think that would have changed."

At last he got it. "Changed? You've been here before?"

"Not since the time I painted your great-grandfather," Clare said, and left him staring.

AS CLARE was shown up to her room, she reflected that in half an hour everybody would know Clare Vernon was back. By now Bill Adams must have put two and two together with the usual result.

Alone in her room she started to change, realizing that in Luna City her modest gray suit was actually flamboyant—and Clare was only occasionally flamboyant. Then she saw that Henry Robert

Colquhoun Adams, level with her on top of his column, was staring right into her bedroom. The sculptor had given him the kind of eyes which followed one everywhere.

"All right," she said aloud. "Have a *good* look." She turned and posed for him. Then she said: "Oh, sorry," and took off her wristwatch. "That better?"

Clare was prepared to admit that it had been most ill-bred of her to climb up and paint Father Adams yellow ten years ago. Many of us do things at eighteen which we wouldn't do at twenty-eight.

All the same, she still wasn't exactly sorry. After she'd given her evidence at the viaphobia survey in New York, the things which happened to her back in Luna City shouldn't have happened to a pup. And why shouldn't she give evidence? Somebody from Luna City had to.

Anyway, when it became clear that she couldn't go on living in Luna City—not that that broke her heart—she had had to make *some* parting gesture to show she didn't give a darn for Luna City or anybody in it. And climbing up Father Adams' column and painting him yellow had seemed like a good idea.

She still thought so, after ten years.

Em's indignant letters had told her at the time what Luna City had thought of the

outrage. Clare's traitorous testimony at the New York investigation into viaphobia might have been forgotten in time. After all, being only eighteen, she didn't know any better. But the second crime was unforgivable. If Clare ever dared to return, her reception would make the death of a thousand cuts look like old-fashioned hospitality.

SOON now she'd know what Luna City proposed to do about it. She had deliberately mentioned the painting episode to Bill Adams just to make sure there was no misunderstanding.

The phone rang. She snapped the switch to the left—sound without vision. "Clare Vernon?" rasped a voice she knew, that of old Judge Henry Adams.

"The same," said Clare. "How are you, Judge?"

"Are you afraid to let me see you, miss?" the Judge demanded.

"Yes," said Clare. "I don't happen to have any clothes on. I'm afraid you might get excited."

Horrible sounds bubbled from the small loudspeaker. The first coherent words were: "You are shameless, miss!"

"Surely not," said Clare mildly, "or I'd have switched on the vision."

"If you think," the Judge roared, "that everything will

be set right by an apology, you're wrong."

"Oh, good," said Clare. "In that case I won't have to apologize."

Incoherent sounds started again, to cease abruptly as the Judge cut himself off.

CLARE put on a soft blue dress with a plunge which stopped only a little below waist level—quiet and restrained by local standards, without being dull.

Luna City's environment made it really unnecessary to wear clothes at all, but civilization shrinks from such extreme frankness. Curiously, the less the climate demands clothes, the more important they invariably become, and in Luna City they were more important than anywhere else. Even the men took a lot of trouble over their clothes, though naturally they pretended they didn't.

The women wore every conceivable variety of garment, including a few items which wouldn't be practical anywhere but in Luna City. It was unnecessary to wear brassieres or girdles for support. (Earth's pin-up girls usually came to the Moon for studio pictures—they looked much better there.) On the other hand, if even an approximation to decency was to be preserved, due account had to be taken in the design

of a costume of the fact that every time a girl moved, her clothes floated about her like bubbles.

Clare looked at herself in the mirror and decided that whatever happened, she would meet it looking her best.

The phone rang again. This time Clare set the switch to the right. She had no objection to people seeing her now. Quite the reverse.

It wasn't difficult to guess that the egg-headed man with the green eyeshade was a reporter. Clearly he had seen everything.

"*Luna Argus*," he said indifferently. "Clare Vernon?"

"At your service," said Clare.

He didn't give his name. "Miss Vernon, I'd like to have your story of what happened ten years ago." Obviously he wasn't going to believe it anyway.

"It must be in your files. Every scream of it."

"Sure, but I'd like your version, Miss Vernon."

"That's strange. Nobody wanted my version ten years ago. Well, in as few words as possible, a couple of investigators from New York called on me and asked me a few questions about viaphobia. After a while they asked if I'd go to New York with them and talk to a commission there that was investigating viaphobia. I said I would, and I did. When I came back—"

"Just a minute, Miss Vernon. What *exactly* happened in New York? What did you say?"

"That's in your files too. I said what I believed to be the truth. I was no viaphobe, obviously. When I got back here, I was treated as a traitor. Nothing official. Just public opinion, applied where it hurt. So I painted Father Adams and hit the trail."

"That's all you want to say, Miss Vernon?"

"I don't see any pressing need to say anything else."

"Thank you, Miss Vernon." And he cut the connection.

It was very unsatisfactory from Clare's point of view. She wanted to know what to expect, but the anonymous reporter had been as impersonal as a robot. He hadn't been for her or against her. He hadn't even seemed particularly interested. Worst of all, he had looked at her as he might have looked at a dead cow.

Once more the phone rang. The face which appeared was much younger than the last, and its eyes widened gratifyingly as they came to rest on Clare. This reporter hadn't yet seen everything.

"Clare Vernon? I'm Mike Reynolds of the *Moon Rocket*. Say, we could use a piece on you."

"Yes?" said Clare guardedly. The *Moon Rocket*, unless it had changed out of all rec-

ognition, was a spicy rag devoted entirely to sex, sadism and sensationalism.

"Sure. I understand you had a tough time before you left Luna City. Your coming back like this makes it news again. Were you ever beaten up? Raped? Anything like that? Just give us a few facts and one of the boys will write it up like the Battle of Waterloo."

Was she ever beaten up? Yes, once, only once. The rest of the time what had happened to her, unpleasant as it was, had stopped short of physical violence.

This once she'd been coming home late with Greg Miller. Until then she'd thought that being with Greg would be some protection. Three youths in silk slacks had shoved her and Greg into an alley. They hadn't said a word. After a couple of jolts in the ribs which made him gasp, Greg hadn't given them any trouble. He stood in white-faced terror and let them get on with it.

One of them twisted her arms up behind her and held her in helpless agony while the other two sank their fists anywhere they would sink. They beat her for three or four minutes, while she wondered why she didn't die. She didn't even lose consciousness. They punched every square inch of flesh on the front of her body, then start-

ed over and went around again.

She wasn't screaming because every time she got some air in her lungs they jolted it out of her. When they did stop she didn't know about it. The next she remembered was lying with her cheek on the ground, with Greg bending over her.

He'd been some use after all. He helped her to get home.

"Sorry," Clare said to the *Rocket* reporter. "I don't want to be written up like the Battle of Waterloo." She switched off.

"HELLO, Em," said Clare. Emma took one look at her and burst into tears.

Clare stepped back, surprised. "Well, we were never exactly buddies, but I didn't know it would be that much of a shock when I came back."

Mostly Emma was crying about Tony, whose fault it all was. For the rest, she wasn't crying because Clare had come back, but because she was so darned lovely. Emma had always been the pretty one, not Clare. And now . . .

"Oh, well," said Clare philosophically, "I'll go away and come back again. That'll give you a chance to get over your tears of joy at seeing your only sister after ten years."

She went out into the street again.

Nobody she passed recognized her. Could it be that Luna City didn't care that Clare Vernon was back? She doubted it. Judge Adams cared.

They just failed to recognize her as the plump, untidy, restless, too-smart teen-ager who used to make such a fool of herself over Greg Miller.

Greg was alone in his store when she walked in. *He* recognized her. She was amused to see that he was terrified of her.

Now what could he possibly be terrified about? Was he afraid that anyone who even spoke to her would be banished from Luna City?

Well, it was possible. After that night when she was beaten up, he'd written and phoned and sent flowers, but hadn't come near her. There had been more than a chance that Clare Vernon's boy friend would be beaten up too.

"I heard you were back, Miss Vernon," Greg said. It came out as a croak, and he had to clear his throat noisily and say it again. It sounded still sillier the second time.

Greg hadn't worn well. He couldn't be more than thirty-two or so, but already he was thin on top, harassed, visibly aging.

"What's this 'Miss Vernon' routine?" Clare demanded.

"It's been a long time," said Greg timidly.

"Yes. Ten years. I'm surprised to see you're still alive."

That stiffened him. "I'm not as old as all *that!*"

"No, I was only thinking that once you were going to kill yourself over me. You said life wasn't worth living without me. Didn't you, Greg?"

Greg writhed. Clare knew now exactly why he was scared. He was afraid she had come back to mate, kill and eat him.

"I'll tell you the truth," said Clare with a burst of frankness. "You were right about us, Greg. I found I couldn't live without you."

GREG took an involuntary step backward and knocked over a pile of cans. Clare helped him to pick them up. In doing so she got very close to him, and once when his leg touched her hip he flinched as if she were red-hot. Sitting on her heels, she looked up at him, smiling. She hadn't forgotten she was wearing a dress with a spectacular plunge.

"Never mind," said Greg hoarsely. "I'll pick them up later."

She took pity on him. Standing up, she said: "All the same, Greg, I can't marry you. I've promised six other guys. Be seeing you."

She left him dizzy with relief.

Greg was a viaphobe, of course.

Clare had grown out of the intolerance of her teens. She no longer scorned viaphobes just because she didn't happen to be one herself. She knew it wasn't their fault.

Before space flight, some people had liked to travel about the surface of Earth and some hadn't. It was never much of a problem, because if you didn't like traveling a hundred miles, you weren't likely to contract to go ten thousand.

But space was different. There's something awful about space, even the tiny hop from Earth to Moon. It shakes you to the core, forces you to look at yourself and your place in the Cosmos, makes you understand your utter insignificance in the galactic scheme of things. And there are physical effects too. If a friendly, solid thing like the sea could make people wish they were dead, what could unfriendly, empty space do to them?

It could do plenty. Space sickness is a hundred times worse than sea sickness. It doesn't give up after an hour or two or a day or two. So, apart from the pain, the horror, the agony of being in space if you have the misfortune to be a viaphobe, there is the fact that you must starve to death if your trip is longer than from Earth to

Moon. No viaphobe has ever reached Mars or Venus alive, much less the stars.

Sedation won't quell the internal upheaval. Nothing quells it except death. If you're a viaphobe you stay put on your home planet. You have to.

Nowadays nobody dies in agony on the Earth-Mars run. A preliminary check is obligatory. From all worlds there are test space flights which last long enough to show up viaphobia, and not long enough to produce more than a few hours of hell if you happen to be a victim. You don't get on a regular space flight without a certificate to show you're no viaphobe.

But in the early days there was nothing like that. People went from Earth to the Moon and found out the hard way. They didn't die—the trip isn't long enough. On the Moon they recovered, but with a fixed determination never to suffer anything like that again.

This happened to far more people than it should. There was a simple reason for this.

Pride.

When people were sick on the way to the Moon, there couldn't be any secret about it. You couldn't fight and conquer space sickness the way some people could fight and conquer sea sickness.

Afterward, however, it was natural to laugh it off. "Sure,

I was space sick. But hell, I'm okay now. Sure I could go back. If I wanted to, I could go back any time. But I like it here. Luna City's great. Why should I go back?"

Nobody on the Moon had ever denied that there was such a thing as space sickness—neither those who had suffered it nor those who hadn't. But many people denied the existence of viaphobia.

"Sure, I was space sick..."

Even ten years ago, when mankind had spread out to the stars, Luna City still didn't admit that there was any such thing as viaphobia. Space sickness, yes. "If I wanted to, I could go back any time."

That was why Clare Vernon had committed a crime in going before a commission in New York and telling them what she knew and guessed about viaphobia.

LIKE Greg, Judge Adams recognized Clare at once.

She met him just after she'd left Greg's store. The Judge said: "I am amazed, Miss Vernon, to see you have the effrontery to walk Luna City's streets."

"Why, Judge!" Clare protested. "I'm not walking the streets!"

The Judge went red as fire. "I didn't mean—I merely meant that after those disgraceful incidents of ten years ago—"

"Think nothing of it, Judge. I've forgiven you long ago."

Two or three people who had overheard some of this had stopped. In a few moments there was quite a crowd pretending not to listen, but not missing a word.

Everybody knew Judge Adams, of course. And everybody had heard about Clare Vernon.

"If you were a man I'd know what to do with you," Judge Adams roared.

"You mean that you don't know what to do with . . . no, Judge, I must have misunderstood you."

"Let me pass," said the Judge furiously. "I have no desire to take part in a public contest in repartee."

"No, indeed," Clare agreed. "I don't know where Repartee is, but why should you go there just to take part in a contest? You might get vi—I mean, you might get space sick."

The Judge controlled himself with an effort. "If you ever speak that word in Luna City," he said, "you, of all people, you'll be in grave danger of being torn limb from limb."

"What word?" Clare asked innocently.

"You know what I mean," said the Judge, and he stalked past her.

Yes, she knew.

People have always been

like that. When someone says: *If there's one thing I never do, it's . . .* you can be quite sure that's one thing he does do. When he says: *If there's one thing I'm not, it's . . .* you know that's one thing he is.

Years ago people on Earth had heard of viaphobia. They couldn't understand what Luna City was so touchy about. There was such a thing as space sickness, wasn't there? Well, then, that was viaphobia. What did the people on the Moon mean, there was space sickness but viaphobia didn't exist?

Only viaphobes said there was no such thing as viaphobia.

"**E**XCUSE me . . ." said a voice.

"Why, what have you done?" Clare asked.

The rather nice-looking young man grinned. "Nothing, but I make no promises for the future. Aren't you Clare Vernon?"

"I have that distinction."

"I'm Tony Benson. You don't know me because I was at school on Earth when you were here before. I've seen pictures of you. They didn't do you justice."

"Justice, yes. Mercy, no."

"Don't be modest. Will you come with me to the ball tonight?"

It was brash, typical of the colonies rather than of Luna City. She had no diffi-

culty in believing that Tony Benson hadn't always lived in Luna City.

"Yes," she said.

"That's great, Clare. Now suppose you go back to your hotel and slip on another dress and I'll call for you about eight?"

"You know where I'm staying?"

"Everybody does."

She wanted to ask him about that, what people were saying about her, how Luna City was reacting to her return. The fact that he was prepared to be friendly—at the very least—didn't give her a line, because he was no viaphobe.

"All right," she said. She couldn't ask him.

As she walked back to the Henry Robert, she saw that everybody knew her now. A few minutes ago they hadn't. A few minutes was all Luna City needed.

Release a rumor in any other town and it spreads fast to the edge of town and dies there. In Luna City, when a rumor reaches the walls it bounces back. Five minutes hadn't been enough for the people in the streets to learn that Clare Vernon was back. Ten minutes was.

She couldn't tell much from the way people looked at her. People saw her, pointed her out to each other and whispered. The same thing would have happened if she'd been

an actress, a princess, a murdereress.

And gradually Clare realized she was acting like a narcissistic adolescent. She had come back out of bravado, just because nobody in Luna City believed she'd ever dare come back.

Suddenly she wanted John. All these light-years away, what they had quarreled about seemed unimportant. Either of them could have healed the breach, right up to that last moment when, rather to her surprise, he had come to the spaceport to see her off. Neither had made the move. And now it was certainly too late.

Tony Benson reminded her a little of John.

She pushed the memory of John to the back of her mind as someone actually nodded politely to her. It was Bill Adams.

"Mr. Adams," she said, though she still thought of him as a boy, "I hope you didn't think I was rude earlier."

"No," he said, "I didn't think you were rude." But there was some constraint in his manner, and she made up her mind to probe it.

"I wasn't laughing at you either," she said.

"No."

"Mr. Adams, you were very friendly earlier. You're not now. Is it because I painted your grandfather?"

"No," he said. "It's not that at all. Miss Vernon, if you had only one leg, would you enjoy the taunts of people who had two?"

It hit Clare harder than the blows of those three young toughs ten years ago.

WHEN someone insists that black is white, you feel you can't let him get away with that. You try to make him see that black is black. It doesn't occur to you that it may be of great importance to him to cling to the idea that black is white.

Viaphobes said there was no such thing as viaphobia. So you had to show them they were wrong. But the moment they admitted they were wrong—"All right, so I'm a viaphobe. So what?"—there was suddenly nothing to say. Nothing to do. Nothing but to be sorry for them.

Prisoners.

Naturally they thought Luna City was wonderful. They might as well. They couldn't leave it.

"Bill, I'm sorry," Clare said with remorse. "But you've given me a shock. You mean there *is* such a thing as viaphobia? And you *know* it?"

"Of course we know," he said bitterly. "We've always known."

Clare stared at him. That simply couldn't be true.

Bill seemed to sense what

she was thinking. "Not the older people," he said. "Not Judge Adams. He'll never admit there's any such thing. But those of us who are younger . . . We're not crazy, you know. We realize we can't travel in space. It may be a physical or mental defect, but who cares which? Either way we can't leave Luna City. And that's what they call viaphobia."

"That's just what I said ten years ago."

"No, it's not. You said, in effect, 'The poor suckers are yellow and they won't admit it. I'm not yellow. Look at me, I was born in Luna City but look, I'm here in New York and I'm going back. I'm no viaphobe. They are, though, nearly all of them. They're scared to leave their little lump of rock and they won't even admit it. They're yellow, all of them.'"

"I didn't say anything like—"

"You did."

On the point of protesting again, Clare changed her mind. Bill Adams was right.

The people of Luna City were like an old hag who holds a sheet in front of her and says: "I'm the most beautiful woman in the world." Clare had known better. The deceit had angered her. She had torn away the sheet. And now the old hag was revealed in all her naked ugliness.

"I wish," Clare said quietly, "someone had talked to me like that a long time ago. But, Bill—whatever my motives were, I only told the truth. Someone had to. Maybe viaphobia can be cured. But before it can be cured, you've got to admit it exists."

"All right," said Bill. "I admit it. Now cure me."

For once Clare had nothing to say.

CLARE was changing again under Father Adams' disapproving eye when the phone rang. It was Em.

"You should have warned me, Clare." Em said. "Naturally it was a shock to see you like that."

"Still, I'm glad it was a pleasant shock," Clare said.

"Yes. Well. I've been talking to a few people and it's going to be all right, Clare—nobody's going to take any action about that—that business long ago. Everybody seems to think that by coming back you've admitted you were wrong—"

"Huh?" said Clare.

"Well, anyway, you're forgiven. You may even get your allowance back. So look, Clare, you'd better sort of make a public appearance. You'd better go to the ball tonight. I've had simply tons of invitations, but everybody will understand if I just go with you, without any escorts—"

"I've been asked already."

Somebody called Tony Benson. Know him?"

For a moment there was silence. Then Em screamed: "Tony! You knew, you must have known. Clare, you—you bitch!"

There was a click, then silence.

Tony might, Clare thought, have told her.

It hadn't been entirely an accident that Clare had arrived in Luna City on the eve of the Adams Festival. Once, long ago, even before the viaphobe investigation and long before Clare committed her notorious act of sacrilege, she and Em had taken part in the Festival Queen contest. Em had been placed fourth. Clare . . .

Well, why did they have to place everybody, right down the list? Surely they could have named the first six. But no, they had to number them all, one to twenty-seven.

Clare had been number twenty-seven.

She was complacently aware she wouldn't be placed twenty-seventh now, on looks. But there was, of course, more to it than looks, so much more that it hadn't crossed her mind to try to enter the contest again, even if they would let her. After what she had done, Clare Vernon could never be an Adams Festival Queen.

No, what she meant to do was look as lovely and as cos-

mopolitan as possible and show everybody that it hadn't done her any harm to place twenty-seventh out of twenty-seven all those years ago, when she cared about such things.

Her entrance with Tony that night was all she could have wished. A score of reporters and photographers were waiting for her at the Colquhoun Hall, and Clare smiled as the cameras clicked, knowing she had never looked better in her life.

Her gown was a Scyllan creation. The cut didn't matter so long as it was perfect, which it was. No girl at the ball was more modestly covered, yet no girl was more flamboyantly dressed. This was one of the occasions when Clare meant to be flamboyant.

The iridescent material of the gown split the color of the light into its elements, flashing through them unceasingly as Clare moved, even as she breathed, so that nobody had any idea what color her gown really was. It was breathtaking. A goddess might have worn such a gown.

John had given it to her on their seventh anniversary.

"WELL, was that what you wanted?" Tony murmured in her ear as the photographers fought for the best angles.

"Oh, it's really nothing,"

Clare murmured back. "Cleopatra would have caused twice as much fuss."

Tony was a good dancer, much better than John. And when he surrendered her occasionally, Clare found that all the men wanted to dance with her. Apparently she was forgiven. Indeed, the whole evening looked like being a triumph.

"If you want to succeed in Luna City, paint Judge Adams yellow," Tony murmured to her once.

Curiously, Clare wasn't entirely happy. There was the matter of Em, for one thing. She was there, in a much too revealing gown, not paying the slightest attention to either Clare or Tony.

And the better Clare was treated in Luna City, the more contemptible she felt. She hadn't forgotten what Bill Adams had said. She never would.

She knew the truth about herself. After all these years she knew the truth.

She had placed twenty-seventh in the Festival Queen contest. To get back at them, she had gone to Earth boasting that she was no viaphobe and that nearly everybody else in Luna City was. She had insulted Luna City and left it forever.

And when she came back, they treated her as a conquering heroine.

Even Judge Adams nodded

to her civilly, if not with any pretense of warmth. And she danced with Bill Adams twice. He, too, was a good dancer. In Luna City everybody was good at things like that.

She liked Bill. She liked Bill better than Tony Benson, now that she knew them both better. Tony had asked her to the ball because he had guessed shrewdly even then that she'd be in the limelight, and Tony liked to be in the limelight. Besides, Tony had spent half the evening so far talking about his mother, and in Clare's opinion, men of twenty-five who spent a lot of time talking about their mothers were not for her.

Bill had the beautiful manners of rather shy people, and already he was sorry for having spoken so bluntly to her.

"I'm glad you did, Bill," she told him as they danced. "I deserved every word of it."

Bill flushed and missed a step. "I shouldn't have said it."

"Of course you should. Why aren't more people like you? I did what I did because so many Lunans are viaphobes and won't admit it, and yet seem to think it makes them something special."

The dance ended. "It was natural, Clare," Bill said. "All the same, you shouldn't have painted Henry Robert yellow because most of us happen to be viaphobes."

"I didn't," said Clare. "I did it because three fellows beat me up for what I'd said. Viaphobia apart, they were yellow."

"I didn't know that. I think I understand, Clare."

THE high spot of the evening was the Festival Queen contest. Next day the girl chosen would preside at a score of festival events. She would open some new buildings, present prizes at sport events, dive in first at the gala (any excuse to get her into a swimsuit was better than none), and put in an appearance at all the major celebrations.

Clare didn't miss Tony's frown as Em paraded past. "What's eating you?" she whispered to him. "Was it a quarrel?"

"I asked her not to enter," Tony said.

"Why not?"

"I said she ought to leave things like this to teenagers."

"She must have loved that."

Tony made no reply. He continued to frown at Em.

Clare could see no reason why Em shouldn't enter the contest. Youth lasted long in a placid environment like Luna City. Em at thirty-two was at no disadvantage with the other girls in the parade. Clare hoped she won, and didn't think it at all unlikely that she would. If Em won,

there would be peace between her and Clare.

At last Judge Adams came to the microphone to announce the winner. He took the paper that was handed to him, started, glared at Em and then at Clare, and stepped away from the microphone to argue with someone.

"Well," said Clare, "don't you know what that means?"

Tony's frown changed to puzzlement. "They can't have chosen Em," he said. "Not Em. Mother says . . ."

Clare sighed. Em was in love with him — anybody could see that. It was easy to guess, too, that his relations with Em hadn't been strictly platonic. And like all men, Tony thought very little of anything he could easily have, and yearned for the unattainable.

He couldn't have Clare, for example. Sooner or later she'd try to forget John, but it would be a long time before any man could engage her full attention. And when that happened, she had no intention of stealing her sister's man—whatever Em might think.

Judge Adams was still arguing. Bill Adams was coming toward Clare. He had an envelope in his hand.

"This just arrived," he said, giving it to Clare. "I told them I'd find you and deliver it."

"Thanks, Bill," said Clare.

From his curious expression, she could tell that he knew what the wire was about.

She tore it open. *Decree nisi granted. John.*

Well, that was that. *Nisi* didn't mean much when the two parties were separated by umpteen light-years.

Judge Adams, his face red, was at the microphone again. "It has been decided," he said shortly, "that the duties of the Festival Queen will be shared by Clare and Emma Vernon."

CLARE was at a loss. She hadn't even entered the contest. Dimly she was aware that the announcement was getting a mixed reception. There were some boos, a great deal of whispering, and the applause sounded like a few people trying to make up for the rest.

Em turned and stared at Clare, and Clare realized that Em was already beginning to blame her for having cut in on an honor which should have been Em's alone.

Clare stepped forward quickly. "I appreciate the honor," she said, "but I should like to withdraw in my sister's favor."

The whispering swelled to a roar. Public opinion crystallized, and Judge Adams, still red in the face, expressed it.

"I'm not surprised," he said angrily. "Everybody

knows what you think of our founder and the Adams Festival and Luna City and everybody in it."

"I said I appreciated the honor," Clare repeated. But the uproar increased still more, and she cried: "All right! I accept!"

There was sudden silence. Someone started to clap. Em was pushed forward and turned to stand on the other side of Judge Adams from Clare. The two girls were certainly an attractive couple, alike yet not alike. Everybody decided the easiest thing to do was applaud, and did so.

In the confusion that followed, Clare had time for only a quick word with Tony. She was amused and exasperated to find that it was all right for Clare to be Festival Queen, but that he still hadn't changed his opinion about Em. And, of course, Mother wouldn't like it.

There was an awkward moment when the reporters asked her what she thought of viophobia now.

"What's that got to do with it?" she inquired.

It was an unfortunate question. A dozen people were ready to explain—and she knew the answer anyway.

You couldn't take part in an Adams Festival if you were a heretic—if you believed that Luna City was a sanatorium for neurotics. You had to recant.

But how could she recant? How could she say black was white?

She looked for Bill Adams, and couldn't see him.

"I've got nothing to say on that subject," she said firmly.

That wouldn't do. There was a clamor and Clare realized that she'd have to make up her mind on the spot.

Some young people like Bill Adams were prepared to admit privately that viophobia existed, that it was a crippling disease, that many of the citizens of Luna City would go elsewhere if they could. However, publicly you couldn't say any such thing.

If you were going to stay in Luna City, you had to conform. You could believe what you liked, but publicly you had to agree with everybody else.

There was no such thing as viophobia.

Was she going to stay in Luna City?

THE wire was in her hand-bag. *Decree nisi granted.* John. Well, wasn't she going to stay in Luna City?

Then another thing struck her. The judges had chosen her as joint Festival Queen. They had known they were bestowing a great honor on her when they did so.

Luna City could hardly have been more forgiving, more kind, when the prodigal daughter returned.

"Viaphobia?" she said.
"What's that?"

JOHN'S timing had always been bad. That wasn't why they had quarreled, but it was certainly the reason why this last breach had never been healed. The right word at the right time . . . even the wrong word at the right time might have served. But he'd always picked the wrong time.

It was hardly to be expected that from Scylla his timing would be any better.

The second wire arrived just as Clare was leaving Colquhoun Hall with Tony. It read: *Forget last wire. Please come back. John.*

Clare stuffed it in her handbag. It was too late. She had been telling herself for hours that life in Luna City had a lot to offer, and she'd finally convinced herself. John had kept up his record. Just an hour or so before asking her to come back, he had sent a snide wire telling her he'd arranged the divorce.

And Clare had thrown in her lot with Luna City. She wasn't going to change her mind again.

It was always the same with John. If she went back, within six months she'd be on the point of leaving him again—and John would say the wrong word at the wrong time.

Luna City had one thing to

offer which Clare, at the advanced age of twenty-eight, was beginning to appreciate.

There might have been some doubt about it before, but now that she'd been chosen joint Festival Queen, there was no doubt she would get her due share of the loot. She was reinstated. She was secure.

"What's that you've got there?" Tony asked.

"Nothing," she said, snapping her handbag shut.

She wouldn't let him come further through the darkened streets with her than Adams Square. She let him kiss her once, then held him off.

"Look, Tony," she said. "Em's crazy about you. If I'd known that, I'd never have gone with you."

"Em hasn't got much chance with me or anybody else while you're around," said Tony, and reached for her again.

"Good night, Tony," said Clare firmly. She meant good-bye. If she had to have somebody take her around, she didn't think it would be hard to enroll Bill Adams.

She turned away, cutting across the square.

Abruptly half a dozen dark figures detached themselves from the shadows around the base of the column.

"You needn't think you're going to be Festival Queen tomorrow," said a muffled

voice under a mask. "Your looks won't be up to it."

And as Clare drew a breath to scream, one of the men knocked her navel back six inches. Another fist found her mouth and she felt her lip spurt blood. Somebody else hit her in the left eye and she knew at once it would be all the colors of the rainbow the next day.

But that was all they could do to her. This wasn't the Clare Vernon who had been beaten up in the same city ten years before. Besides, the six men around her were attuned to a gravity one-seventh that of Scylla.

Despite her long skirt Clare was away like a hare escaping from six turtles, and she didn't stop until she was in her hotel bedroom, panting but reasonably triumphant.

Shiner or no shiner, she'd appear with Em tomorrow as Festival Queen. She caught Henry Robert's eye through the window and nodded grimly to him.

"Call off your boys, Father Adams," she said aloud. "Until that happened, I was ashamed of myself. But when six men try to beat up one girl, I don't need to be ashamed any more. I'll be Festival Queen tomorrow just to spite you."

BUT she couldn't sleep. How many world-shattering incidents have happened, or

not happened, because somebody couldn't sleep?

And when the six A.M. starship landed at the Mare Imbrium terminal, Clare Vernon and all her bags were waiting for it.

Second Officer Jones was startled for only a moment. Then his face registered delight. "Might have known you couldn't take it for long, Miss Vernon," he said.

"Might have known," Clare agreed. "Mr. Jones, I've got bad news for you. I'm going back to my husband."

Jones's jaw dropped. "Husband? You never said anything about any husband."

"No," Clare sighed. "You don't when you've left him forever. But you see, Mr. Jones, I was wrong. Wrong about everything. Wrong about John. Wrong about Luna City. Wrong about viaphobia."

Hurt and disillusioned, Second Officer Jones said nothing.

"They know about viaphobia," said Clare thoughtfully, "and they don't fight it. They accept it. Luna City is a wonderful place—you're sheltered from everything. I didn't know it then, but when I came back I wanted shelter too. Shelter from misunderstandings, quarrels . . . shelter from life. You don't have to be a viaphobe to want to be where it's warm and safe and comfortable and nobody

ever hurts you so long as you don't hurt them by telling them you see through them . . ."

"So you were married all the time," said Second Officer Jones indignantly, disgusted afresh at the perfidy of women.

"Are you sorry, Mr. Jones? Don't be. I'm going back to argue with John, and misunderstand him, and be misunderstood by him, and wish I'd never met him . . . but at least I'm not going to take shelter from him. As you once said, Mr. Jones, I'm no viaphobe."

"I'll have your bags stowed, Miss Vernon," said the officer, his nose in the air.

"What, still hurt, Mr. Jones? After all we've meant to each other?"

Second Officer Jones stalked off to sulk, and Clare reflectively restored the ring to the third finger of her left hand.

It was strange, after what she'd been saying to Jones, that she felt happy and sure of herself again and could hardly wait for the ship to get back to Scylla.

JUDGE Adams awakened, as he always did, when the lights came on to create Luna City's artificial dawn.

He got out of bed, yawning, and cleared his throat noisily. Still only half awake, he was dimly aware of something that was going to make this day worse than most days.

Then he remembered. It was Adams Festival Day, and Clare Vernon was going to be joint Festival Queen. He didn't mind about Em. If only those fool judges had picked Em without some genius thinking of the brilliant scheme of having two Queens, and one of them Clare Vernon. If only she would fall downstairs and break a leg.

If only . . .

Something caught his eye and he staggered to the window. He blinked, unable to believe his eyes.

Then he roared with the rage of a mad elephant.

Someone had climbed up the column and painted Henry Robert Colquhoun Adams yellow.

END

"The test of a truth is simplicity itself. Partial truths are always complicated; a truth is a punchline."

—Dudley Dell

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the gelzek business

By WYNNE N. WHITEFORD

He was the luckiest guy in the Galaxy

—until I got luckier than he ever was!

WHEN Tad Peters met me at the spaceport at Antary, he had lost none of his old exuberance. As he shook my hand he clapped me on the shoulder.

"Glad you could make it, Al!" He waved toward the customs barrier. "I'll get you through. I've got plenty of pull around here."

"I'm lucky I could come," I

said as he dragged me along. "Took almost my last credit."

He glanced at me sidelong. "That way, eh? What happened to your mining deal?"

"Fell through."

As we got my sparse baggage through the customs, I had more time to look at him. Still the old Tad Peters. The same sweeping gestures and booming voice—but had he

aged in the two years since I'd seen him?

Within minutes we were out on the pink marble concourse, climbing aboard an aircar that must have been the most expensive available.

"You look as though you've fallen on your feet," I said.

"I have, Al, I have. In the last six months, thirty-eight ships calling here have been fitted with Peters Deep-space Radar. Completely new principle."

"Your invention?"

"I built the lot of them. Got universal patents pending."

"I didn't know you knew anything about radar. You actually invented this?"

"Well, sort of. Basically an idea I picked up from my girl friend. Luanu." He switched on the antigravs, and the aircar lifted in a soaring arc above the great sprawling buildings of the starport. "I'm marrying her soon. She's terrific, boy, terrific! But you'll see her for yourself in a few minutes."

"When did you meet her?"

"About a year ago—in Has-tek. Heard of it? Didn't think so—it's an outpost planet away in toward the Hub."

For a while he was silent as we sped southward above the shimmering towers lining the broad esplanade, skirting a sea flame-tipped beneath the swollen crimson disc of Antares. Then he gave me a quick glance.

"You'll like Luanu. She's different."

HE SKIMMED down to a landing under the wing-like carport of a new, striking house on a promontory jutting out from the coast. As I stepped out of the aircar onto a terrace of translucent stone in which waves of sapphire and emerald flame rippled, I breathed deeply. The air was fresh and cool, with the intoxicating tingle of more than a quarter oxygen mingling with the salt tang of the floating marine vegetation that dappled the red-lit sea with patches of smoky violet.

"Quite a place you have here," I said, looking up at the sweeping facade of the house.

"I like it," Tad said.

"Bit different from the dump we lived in behind the ore-crushing plant at Port Mondo! Remember when they took our air-conditioner back, that day when the temperature was a hundred and thirty?"

He shuddered. "Please, Al. Let's leave the past behind us."

He led the way into the house. The furnishings, the murals, all the decor had a queer, outlandish touch that suggested some kind of alien temple. I stopped just inside the door and looked about me.

"Like it?" boomed Tad, standing with his feet apart and his fists on his hips.

"Sure—in a way. But it isn't like *you*, somehow."

"Well, it's mostly Luanu's choice. She should be here any minute."

"I'm here right now."

I'll never forget that voice. Flexible and vibrant, somehow cool and warm at the same time, with something within it that made me think of frangipani and the night breeze through palm trees. I turned.

She was standing in the doorway behind us.

Different, he'd said!

It was the understatement of a lifetime. She was slender and tall, taller than either Tad or myself, though we were both above average height; but it wasn't her height or her build that made me stand there with my mouth open. The hair that fell in thick waves to her shoulders was golden, but with a green tint that I'd never seen before, although it looked natural, like the green-tinged pallor of her skin. Broad forehead, pointed chin, huge upward-slanting eyes as green as emerald — everything about her had an effect of unseizable strangeness, yet at the same time a weird beauty.

"Can I get you something to drink?" Her voice lifted with the hint of some odd accent.

Tad said something, and she smiled and glided into an adjoining room, her movements swift and fluid and silent. I

suddenly realized that I was still standing with my eyes and mouth wide open.

"You'll like Luanu," said Tad. "Everyone does."

"Where did she come from?" I asked.

"I met her in Hastek. It's—"

"I know. In toward the Hub of the Galaxy. But where did she come from originally?"

His eyes skittered away from mine. "I think she's from one of the planets of the Vorand Empire."

"The what?"

He made a vague gesture. "Away in toward the Hub, past the Lagoon Nebula."

"But that's more than a thousand parsecs away!"

"I know. I've never been there. The—er—the Vorani had space travel before we discovered fire. That's why the first contacts with them put the Federation in a spin a couple of years back—or had you not heard about that? It's lucky the two spheres of influence are so far apart."

I looked at the door through which the girl had gone. "You mean she's—she's not—"

"Human? Well, I suppose it depends on your viewpoint. The Vorani would say *we* were not exactly human." He gave an odd little laugh. "After all, what is a human being?"

AT THIS point Luanu swept back into the room, holding a tray with three frail-

looking goblets sparkling with ruby liquid. She leaned toward me and I caught the suggestion of an unfamiliar perfume. Her full lips had an almost violet coloring. As I took one of the goblets, I found my hand was trembling slightly.

She whirled toward Tad. "Let's go down to Donelli's."

"I thought we'd decided to eat here," he said.

"I've changed my mind."

Tad drained his glass almost at a gulp. "O.K.," he said in a slightly resigned tone. "We'll go to Donelli's."

Within minutes, the three of us were in the aircar, skimming further southward along the coast. The sun was setting, its vast red disk leering through dark slats of cloud beyond a saw-toothed ridge across the bay. Donelli's was a bizarre, ultra-modern building on a small peninsula almost level with the sea, with the surf lapping the rocks on three sides of it.

We sat at a table overlooking the water. Beside it, a broad dance floor of black obsidian swept in an irregular curving shape, the transparent walls giving it the effect of being open to the sea air. A few couples were dancing to the surging music that filled the room from no visible source. Tad, who had been quiet since he had last spoken to Luanu, began to recover his air of enthusiasm.

"Business is sure going

well," he said with intense satisfaction, leaning across the table.

Luanu flashed him a side-long glance. "It would be better if we were making gelzeks," she said.

"What's a gelzek?" I asked, but neither or them gave any indication of hearing me.

"Don't let's start *that* again," Tad burst out irritably.

The girl's eyes widened, the pupils dilating into black pools of sudden anger. "You're a fool!" She almost spat the words at him, and then, as abruptly as it had come, her surge of anger vanished. She looked at me with a silvery laugh. "Don't mind us, Al. Tad can't help being stupid."

Tad's face was flushed. "Look," he appealed to me, "here we are with orders for radar units flooding in, just coming up to the crest of the wave—and she wants to drop everything to make gelzeks."

"But what *is* a gelzek?" I persisted.

His rage seemed to be mounting to the flash-point. "*I don't know!* Ask Luanu!"

I REPEATED my question to her, but she shook her head. "I'm afraid I can't explain it without building one," she said. Her eyes glinted at Tad. "You trusted me with the radar. Why do you doubt me when I tell you about the gelzeks?"

"Because you can't explain what they're for! All you say is that the gelzek makes possible a different way of life."

"And that's true. You'll see."

His mouth opened, then closed like a trap. "We stick to making radar," he said with forced calm.

She sat looking at him for a few seconds, and then she stood up. Without saying a word to either of us, she strode across the floor and out through the foyer. I looked questioningly at Tad, but he picked up his glass and drained it before meeting my eyes.

"She'll be back," he said, then added uncertainly: "I think." For a long time he sat staring down at the table, his fingers drumming in quite different time from the music, as though he were completely unaware of his surroundings.

"Are all the Vorani as temperamental as that?" I asked.

"Eh? Oh, I don't know. I never met any others." He looked across at the sunset. "Very few people have."

I thought that one over for a moment, then decided not to follow it up just yet; Tad didn't seem in any mood to talk. I looked around the dance floor and its surrounding tables. When we had come in with Luanu a few minutes ago, the place had seemed big and friendly and sparkling with glamor. Now it was only big.

TAD drove me back into the center of Antary and parked the aircar on the landing wing of a gigantic hotel facing the esplanade.

"I stayed here when I first arrived," he said.

I looked up at the gleaming facade of metal, reddened by the last rays of the sunset. "Say, this looks a bit expensive for me. I told you I was nearly down to my last credit."

His old manner returned for a moment like the first gust of a rising gale. "Al, old boy, I forgot. Here!" He pulled out a wallet, peeling a number of green ten-credit bills from a thick roll. "That should see you through. Think nothing of it. Everything's going to be all right. Luanu will be back."

He said it as though the last two facts were closely connected, and immediately afterward he seemed to sink into gloom again. As he said goodbye his eyes were focused beyond me, with the expression of a man who is seeing something he doesn't like.

I shrugged and went up to bed.

The days and nights on Antary are short, and when I awoke the giant red sun was already throwing its lurid glare over the city. The buildings cast a pattern of green-edged shadows. I had breakfast in the cafe on the top floor of the hotel, with a view over the esplanade and the sea.

Following the map Tad had

given me, I rode the beltways out to the edge of the city and located his factory—a long, plain building of recent construction. I found Tad in his office, sitting behind a large desk. He looked as if he hadn't slept.

"I can't find her," he said as soon as I was in the room.

"She'll be back," I told him.

"I'm not so sure, Al. I'm not sure at all." He got up slowly, and as he walked across to look at a production-flow chart on one wall, his step seemed heavy. "She's an unpredictable girl. Brilliant but wild. And if she walks out at this stage, we're sunk."

"Maybe there's something I haven't got straight, Tad," I said. "Didn't you say you'd already fitted thirty-eight ships with your radar in the last six months?"

"Well, they're all wired up and the heavy gear is in place. But they still have to be fitted with roto-azimuth integrators before they'll function."

"What's a roto-azimuth integrator?"

"It's a thing about so big." He made gestures with his hands. "We had one on the demonstration ship and it worked fine. Sold all these orders with it. Then it burned out."

"Can't you build another?"

"Luanu's been working on it. We went ahead with all the rest of the installations, but she hasn't finished it yet." He

sat heavily down at his desk, fiddling with a six-color pen, his eyes far away and glazed.

"Well," I said heartily, "if she made one, she can make another."

"I think the first one was made somewhere in the Vorand Empire," he said, thoughtfully writing something on his desk pad. "I hope she knows what was inside it. I don't."

He drew two lines on the pad, then two others crossing them. Very deliberately, he began putting zeroes and crosses in the squares, finally drawing a line through three zeroes and sourly studying the result. I moved toward the door.

"I'll see you sometime when you're not tied up," I said.

He looked at me as if he had forgotten I was there. "Yes, do that, Steve—I mean Al."

When he started drawing more lines on the pad, I went out.

SEVERAL times in the next few days I tried to call up Tad on the visiphone, but on each occasion I was told that he was out of town. Nobody knew when he would be back. Once I went out to his office, only to find three other men there who had been trying for days to trace him.

After ten days a long-distance call came through to me at my hotel, and when I answered it, Luanu's face smiled at me from the screen.

"Al, I wanted to see you again," she said.

"Where are you? When are you coming back?"

"I'm never coming back—not to Tad. We simply don't get along together. But I want you to help me."

"How?" I asked.

Her eyes sparkled. "Making Gelzeks. I've found a factory that will be ideal and I've already got a lot of the materials. I want you to help me run the factory."

"But why me?"

"Because I like you. Need any other reason?"

For a long time I examined the brilliant eyes, the full, curving mouth. "No," I said. "Where can I find you?"

"You mustn't tell Tad."

"I won't."

She frowned at me for a few seconds. "All right, I'll tell you where to find me," she said, and she did.

It was a long journey to Pavo City, up over the white-fanged peaks of the Equatorial Range and on over a thousand miles of flat yellow plain trenched by muddy, winding rivers to the shore of the Inland Sea. The aircraft was a primitive flying triangle and I was glad to step out of it onto the sun-scorched tarmac.

Pavo City was old, with many of its buildings of patched gray concrete, some of them in ruins. It had passed its peak centuries ago, when the nearby mines had been worked out.

Luanu met me at the airport, very tall and slender in a long hooded cloak of some heat-reflecting material, her eyes shining within the dark shadow of the hood. She led me to a small groundcar, and a few minutes later we were weaving through twisting, narrow streets crowded with buildings that represented many successive eras of architectural style, some of metal, some of concrete, some even of yellow brick.

THE factory was a long, bare building on the outskirts of the town, adjoining a landing field that served a number of similar buildings which appeared to be disused. Luanu parked the car and led the way into the office block.

She must have been working hard in the last few days—she showed me a number of incredibly complex drawings which I didn't begin to understand even after poring over them for several minutes. The maze of differently colored lines and symbols that covered them were completely incomprehensible to me.

"This," she said, waving a slim hand to the drawings, "is the gelzek. With it, your whole civilization will never be the same again. Even after your people have been using it for a hundred years, they will still be finding new possibilities for applying it."

"I see," I responded in a

tone that didn't convince even myself.

"Come through here," she said.

I followed her into a large open space, at one side of which were a number of metal cabinets about the size of small household refrigerators.

"These are gelzek cabinets," she told me. "I had a few made by a firm near here; they seemed satisfactory enough, so I've given them an order for ten thousand. It meant raising a substantial loan, but I managed to convince the bank people of the gelzek's possibilities—not that they could understand it, but they at least had the deep-space radar as an indication of what we can do. But I want you to run this factory with me."

"I don't understand what we're making yet," I objected.

"You don't have to. I've planned the gelzek so it can be made in about twenty sub-assemblies. I can fix the most tricky ones, and we can subdivide the rest of the circuits and parts into packaged units that an unskilled team can fit together."

As she stood there smiling, she looked very young. "You have got it well figured out," I said.

Her smile broadened. "We'll make billions out of it."

I thought briefly, guiltily, of Tad sitting at his desk drawing zeroes and crosses on a pad.

"Will you do it?" she asked.

Well, after all, if this project came off, I'd be in a position to give Tad all the help he needed, wouldn't I? I nodded. "O.K. But I wish you'd tell me—"

Her eyes danced impishly as she shook her head.

I FOUND a hotel overlooking the Inland Sea and booked a room. Within a week I had a team of twenty men and the factory was in production. Most of the employees never saw Luanu, and only one—Joe Parks, a scrawny little Earthborn engineer I had taken on as assistant manager—knew that it was not I who had been the sole driving force behind the whole project.

Luanu was renting a house facing an enclosed courtyard next to the factory, and she had had a doorway made to link this with the laboratory connected to the office, so that she had a separate entrance. The fact that the city was half-deserted had made it fairly easy for her to find a combination of buildings that suited her purpose so well.

Consignments of gelzek cabinets began to pour into the unloading bay by the truck-load. Thousands of coils of thin insulated wire in various thicknesses began to fill the storage racks we had erected, together with uncounted varieties of transistors and other small parts.

Several times, Joe Parks asked me what the gelzek was for. Always, I evaded a direct answer, I told him it was highly secret, and he seemed a little upset by my failure to take him into full confidence. He suggested advance advertising and I said I had the matter in hand.

"Which agency is handling the account?" he asked.

I had to say something. "Pavo City Advertising Incorporated."

"There's no such firm in town." He stepped back a pace, looking at me with a new wisdom. "Say—mind if I ask you something?"

"Go ahead."

"Do you know what you're doing?"

"What do you mean?"

"Look. I like working for you, Al. But I can't work for a guy who doesn't know what the hell he's doing. Gelzeks! I tell my friends we're making gelzeks, and they say to me: 'What's a gelzek?' And then I've got to tell them I don't know. Do you know?"

I stood up, walked around my desk and put a hand on his shoulder. "Joe, before I tell you, I want you to come with me."

I took him out into the enclosed courtyard and pressed the buzzer on Luanu's front door. The door slid open almost at once.

"Come in, Al," she called from within.

I led Joe into the large room on the left. The broad tables were littered with delicate apparatus, and Luanu, in a plastic coverall, was busy working on some intricate, shimmering device with a thin electric soldering iron. When she saw I was not alone, she stood up, shaking back her hair with a toss of her head.

"Joe," I said, "I'd like you to meet—"

"Call me Luanu," she said, and her smile seemed to dispel Joe's irritation instantaneously.

"Joe wanted to know what a gelzek is for," I explained.

"Of course," she said. "That is perfectly natural. You can go back to the office if you like, Al. I'll explain things to Joe."

I went back to the office and sat looking at the latest batch of invoices for gelzek chassis, gelzek cabinets, gelzek infinitely variable transformers, and gelzek hyper-synchronized vector analyzers. Maybe Joe would find out a bit about what they were for.

He was gone half an hour. When he came back he had a slightly dazed expression, but somehow he looked younger and more carefree.

"Marvelous girl," he said, his eyes shining. "I had no idea."

"Did she explain what the gelzek was for?" I asked guardedly.

"Eh? Oh. I meant to ask her that." Suddenly he shrug-

ged his shoulders. "Still, what does it matter? She knows what she's doing."

"Sure, Joe. She knows."

ABOUT the middle of the afternoon Luanu came in to my office. "Al! I've finished it!"

She put a glittering mass of coiled crystalline tubes and wires and transistors and delicate gears on my desk.

"What is it?" I asked.

"You might call it the gel-zek's heart, or its brain," she said proudly. "You know, Al, that's the first thing I've ever really finished."

I looked at her with my jaw swinging loose on its hinges.

"It's true," she said. "I'm always starting things, but this is the first one I've really finished. Wait a few minutes until I assemble the compensator and I'll show you how it works."

She ran lightly out of the office, leaving me sitting staring at the thing on the desk. I was still looking at it five minutes later when Joe burst in.

"Say," he panted, "there's a strange ship out on the landing field."

"Probably some new transport line," I replied.

"Not this thing. It's—*different.*"

I didn't like the way he said it. I went with him to the open door and looked across the field.

The machine out there was certainly different. Completely, utterly unlike any aircraft or spacecraft I'd ever seen—and craft built for special purposes can take some strange shapes. This thing was about fifty or sixty feet long, bluntly rounded, finned, fish-shaped, blue, with an eerie shimmer about it that gave it the uncanny effect of being unreal, as if surrounded by some kind of field.

There was a man near it—or was it some form of gigantic robot? Humanoid shape, but from this distance he looked about ten feet tall, unless something had gone radically wrong with my sense of perspective. He was dressed in skintight blue stuff that looked like a film of metal, with a sort of haversack on his back. He reached over his shoulder and touched this, and he was flying.

Just like that. No visible jets or air foils—nothing but that metal pack arrangement on his back. Yet he flew through the air, skimming toward us easily and swiftly.

Joe was making strangled, gurgling noises. I tried to say something, but the words did not come. A moment later, the fantastic figure had landed lightly just outside the building.

There was nothing wrong with my eyes. The fellow *was* about ten feet tall. He looked down at me with huge emerald

eyes that seemed shockingly familiar, though I couldn't think why.

"You are Al Sandry." He didn't ask me. He *told* me.

"That's—that's right," I said.

He made a sweeping movement with his arm. "Inside."

We went inside. Without any argument. Don't ask me why. The guy was just *like* that.

Anyway, have you ever tried arguing with a man ten feet high?

Joe looked at me furtively. "I'll—er—see to the unloading," he said, and before I could stop him he was gone.

I sat down behind my desk. "Take a seat," I invited.

THE stranger lifted the heavy electric typewriter off the table with one hand, putting it on top of a filing cabinet as if it had been a hat. He sat on the table, his feet squarely on the floor.

"Where is Luanu?" His eyes seemed to see inside my head the way Luanu's did sometimes, and it was then that I realized why they looked familiar.

"I don't know," I said.

His eyes took on a void, fixed look as though he were staring at something I couldn't see. He sat like that for some seconds, then seemed to relax.

"What are you making here?" he asked.

If anyone else had asked me

that, I would have had a reasonable answer. But not to this fellow. He just looked at me while I tried to say something. Then he leaned over and picked up the device Luanu had left on the desk. He glanced at it, then stowed it into a kind of satchel at his side, his eyes holding mine. He reached over to the filing cabinet where we kept the drawings and pulled gently at the drawer, which was locked. He pulled a little harder.

Part of the lock spanged off the ceiling and rattled across the floor. He pulled the drawer all the way out of the cabinet, put it on the table and riffled quickly through the drawings. Some—the ones on which Luanu had shown detailed connections—he took out, glanced at, and stuffed into his satchel. He looked at each drawing for no more than a second, yet I had the feeling he understood them at once.

The whole thing took a matter of seconds. When he had finished, he looked at me with those great catlike eyes.

"I am Kordru, of Vorand," he said. "Unfortunate if Luanu has disturbed you. Our children are sometimes irresponsible."

"*Children?*" I found my voice creaking like a rusty hinge. "You call Luanu a *child?*"

"Of course. One day she will be almost as tall as I am. And, I hope, as mature."

At this moment Luanu came in, her eyes wide. She stopped when she saw Kordru. It was the first and only time I ever saw her poise shattered.

Kordru didn't say anything to her, but he got his meaning across. He rose to his feet, his face stern and commanding, but with the faintest trace of amusement flickering in his eyes.

Luanu turned to me. "I must

apologize, Al. My father is taking me home."

The giant took her hand and led her to the door. She looked back at me over her shoulder.

"It's been fun, Al, hasn't it?"

And then they were gone.

Fun? With all those bills I owed for parts of—of gelzeks?

And that's something I still haven't found out.

What is a gelzek? **END**

HOW RESEARCH PAYS OFF

It is said that when Arthur Dehon Little sought \$50,000 in New England to obtain the American rights to the Cross & Bevan viscose process about 60 years ago, he was asked: "Do you mean to say, Dr. Little, that man can ever produce fibers as good as those God has provided us?" according to *Industrial Research*, a management-oriented magazine that covers 80 fields, which points out that the viscose process is the basis of the \$420 million viscose rayon industry.

Challenged by the general lack of technological vision, Dr. Little devoted much of his life to preaching industry's need for research. He wrote extensively about scientists—the Fifth Estate, he called them: "those having the simplicity to wonder, the ability to question, the power to generalize, the capacity to apply."

The experience of World War II gave the final impetus to industry's gradual conversion to the research doctrine until today, when it is a brave board chairman who does not report some kind of research effort to his stockholders.

"Research has meant the difference between growth and stagnation so that 90 cents out of every Minnesota Mining sales dollar now comes from products developed by research," says 3-M president Herbert P. Buetow. Statements like this can be made of Dupont, RCA, and other research-based companies, which are offering products, processes and services that would surely have caused theological chaos scarcely more than half a century ago. What man *cannot* do has become so much less important than what man *can* do that a fantastic \$12 billion will be spent on research next year—and Dr. Raymond H. Ewell, formerly of the National Science Foundation, has calculated that research money yields an annual average of 100% to 200% over a 25-year period.

Worlds of if

Book Reviews by Frederik Pohl

EVERY now and then some writer produces a story which can be regarded as a definitive work. Heinlein did that with *Universe*, so exploring the possibilities of a multi-generation spaceship that that particular story need never be written again. T. L. Sherred did it for the rear-view time scanner in *E for Effort*, Huxley for the antlike, automated future in *Brave New World*. There have been many stories written since on each of these subjects, some of them quite good, many of them fun, but they really have said nothing new about their themes. Nothing has been left by Heinlein, Sherred and Huxley to say.

In *The Falling Torch* (Pyramid), Algis Budrys may have given us another such definitive story.

Earth has been enslaved by invaders from another star's planets. They are human enough, barring a faint sallowness of complexion, but they aren't Earthmen and their total victory has driven Earth's government into exile, from whence they mount a feeble, reckless but successful underground attack which

ultimately liberates the planet.

This is the story: The government in exile, the underground, the successful revolution. It happens that Budrys comes to this theme with a vast head start over his colleagues. His father is a Free Lithuanian consul and Budrys himself has lived in the United States since early childhood on a diplomatic passport. Certainly this has been a help to him, but it doesn't account for the book's excellence.

BUDRYS'S exiled government is a creation of characterization: The Prime Minister who is a master chef eight hours a day; the Secretary of Defense who sells insurance; the exiled President Wireman who rules them all on paper, yet lives in relative squalor. He must. Budrys tells us why: "Even Prime Ministers could find ordinary work and bring no tarnish to the bright memory of Earth's freedom, but . . . the President could not. The rest of them could admit in public that Earth was no longer there, but someone had to preserve the fiction—someone

had to embody the legal fable that the Government in Exile still represented the people—and Wireman was the man." When the chosen agent of the exiles lands on Earth he meets an active though feeble underground. We find it invested with the same scrupulously precise rightness. Perhaps some of it shows the mark of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*; much of it may have come from the stories of the Lithuanian forest fighters. No matter. The bulk of it is Budrys.

Budrys shows us the great law of politics: No one makes weakness a gift of strength. He lets us perceive the barbs in the tempting bait other powers offer Earth's underground; he opens up the motives of the partisan fighters, and shows us that they cancel out. What is left? The protagonist. He is that invention of recent science fiction, a man who sees what must be done and does it, who comes within reach of a success and grasps it. He is a realized man. And *The Falling Torch* is a realized book.

And yet there is this one thing.

As a book, *The Falling Torch* earns high marks. As a science fiction book, it has the serious defect of hardly being science fiction. Change names and it becomes a story of modern Lithuania, of World War II France—of any occupied country anywhere.

This should not keep anyone from enjoying *The Falling Torch*; the book is a winner. But one can't help feeling that it is running on the wrong track.

FOR contrast, what about C. P. Snow's *The Search* (Scribner's) or Pearl S. Buck's *Command the Morning* (John Day)?

If we take for a rule that a science fiction story must contain some element of extrapolation, some one thing that could be true but isn't, then neither of them qualifies as science fiction. Yet surely they are fiction *about* science, as Budrys's book just as surely is not.

Sir Charles Snow first wrote *The Search* twenty-five years ago. This new, rewritten edition, he says in a preface, is published to help bridge the gap between Technical Man and Lay Man. "It is very stupid to attempt to make everybody into technologists, but it is essential that everybody, including the technologists themselves, should understand something of the intellectual and human meaning of what the technologists are about." It is in a way endearing of Sir Charles to offer an excuse for writing a book; most writers merely bang them out. But perhaps it is not an excuse. The gap yawns between the man in the white collar and

the man in the laboratory smock, and a bridge is necessary.

The Search does not span the void. Snow's hero, Arthur Miles, is quite believable and empathy evoking as a scientist and as a man. The science in the book, and there is a great deal of it, is technical enough to be exciting and cleverly presented enough to be entirely digestible. (It is a bit of a wrench that at one point Sir Charles gives the formula for sodium bromide as KBr. Slips happen; Sir Charles was a good chemist before he became an even better writer.)

BUT Arthur Miles is a scientist only so long as he is very successful at it, and then for just the few extra months after a disaster that it takes him to find some other source of income. (He marries it.) The change in his character from bright young zealot to cynic is depicted with complete skill. The book is a good book. But it is not the book we were promised in the preface. We have been offered a portrait; what we find is an expose.

Miss Buck's book does not give us even an expose. This is fiction, but it is also at bottom fact, or is supposed to be, for if the names of the characters have been changed (Szilard becoming Szigny, Slotin becoming Feldman,

Oppenheimer becoming, probably, Burton Hall), the work they are all doing is the manufacture of the atomic bomb. *Command the Morning* is probably the most glandular interpretation of the complicated motives of the bomb inventors ever to see print anywhere. They are supposed to be the brightest humans alive, but they talk and act like boobs.

What is most interesting here about these two books, though, is not whether they are good or bad, but what keeps them outside the category "science fiction" while *The Falling Torch* must be admitted. Perhaps we should be liberal and call them all science fiction—of a sort. But that sort is only one of the varieties of the science fiction experience, and not the transcendental one which lifts us away from *here* and *now*—not to escape our lives, but to see them more clearly.

A PURER form of science fiction is well exemplified in two new novels and a reprint. The reprint is Fred Hoyle's *The Black Cloud* (Signet), which not only gives us as luminous a portrait of the technologist as Sir Charles Snow's but provides the technologist team with a dominating problem—the solution to which raises a larger problem still.

Fred Hoyle, of course, is

the English astronomer whose Steady State Hypothesis has aroused such comment in the scientific world—much of it in the form of shrill, agonized screams. His thesis is that there was no “primordial ultimate atom” which in bursting generated the atoms and the galaxies we know. Instead, says Hoyle, old matter dies into energy and new matter is constantly born from energy; the universe is in a steady state where withdrawals continually balance deposits, so that what the stars burn up is regenerated in new gas clouds forming between the galaxies. In *The Black Cloud* one such cloud invades the Solar System. What it is, and what Man does about it, is not merely an exciting story; it is also a vehicle in which a man with fresh and important ideas can find a suitable pulpit from which to deliver them.

In Hoyle's newer novel, *Ossian's Ride* (Harper), we have something quite different. In Ireland a mighty new technical power has appeared. Great cities are built, of materials that have never before been seen. It is a wonder to the world, and naturally the world does its best to solve the mystery. In Dublin, now a very Lisbon for spies and plots, the hero of *Ossian's Ride* begins a Hitchcock journey across bogs, up mountains and through storm-toss-

ed seas to a mysterious island where all the answers are.

This is fine cloak-and-dagger; it has plausible and exciting characters and, above all, an informed foundation of fact. It is not only technical fact, either, for Hoyle demonstrates that he knows a great deal about Ireland, about intrigue and about human nature. Only in such faintly prissy literary conventions as the I - set - down - the - true - story - so - that - the - world - may - judge frame (present in *The Black Cloud* and retained in *Ossian's Ride*) does Hoyle display his academic disposition. Neither use of the frame serves any purpose, but neither matters very much; these are good books all the way through.

PPOUL ANDERSON is not a scientist; he is a science fiction writer and one of the best. Still, he does have a degree in physics and, like most of the better writers in the field, has made it his business to keep informed of what is going on in the area of science. His newest novel, *The Enemy Stars* (Lippincott), shows why this is worth while.

Matter transmitters operate almost instantaneously all over the Galaxy, says Anderson, but for the matter to be transmitted, it must be received. This requires a receiv-

er. This requires a ship. And ships cannot exceed the speed of light—Einstein has seen to that.

Therefore great rockets are sent out on hundred-year journeys, their principal cargo a matter transmitter, their crews a constant changing succession of thirty-day conscripts. It is dull aboard a star rocket, but it is bearable; once the thirty days are up, the old crew matter-transmits home, the new crew aboard.

Except once.

For *our* crew has an accident. The matter transmitter is destroyed. All at once the four men are marooned. The only possible salvation lies in the repair of the matter transmitter, and that seems impossible. *Is* impossible, though it would hardly be fair here to discuss the rabbits Anderson pulls out of his hat to give the story an ending. It is a perfectly splendid science fiction dilemma, and all its wonders are ingenious and enjoyable. Allow Anderson his matter transmitter and the rest of the story can be defended against any attack.

Unfortunately the plot is only eenie meenie minie moe, who the heck is next to go? But for setting and theme the story has all that a proper science fiction story should.

IN *Encounter* (Avalon), J. Hunter Holly gives us a mind-eating alien named Eze-

kiel (he saw a Wheel) who is as vulnerable as Achilles. His heel is cats. Bantam has just reissued Jerry Sohl's *Point Ultimate* (Rinehart), which concerns a tight-fisted tyranny governing Earth, and a freedom revolt sparked by a Martian colony. It lacks very little of being a first-class science fiction adventure. The little it lacks is a single flesh-and-blood human character. In *Starhaven* (Ace), Ivar Jorgensen offers a routine but fast picture of an outlaw planet. The other half of the double volume is Edmond Hamilton's *The Sun Smasher*, concerning the last of the galactic emperors and the weapon that can restore to him his throne. *Voodoo Planet* and *Plague Ship* (Ace) are both by Andrew North, and both are former Gnome Press juveniles. As juveniles they were fine. As presumptive adult fare, they still are juveniles.

Brian Aldiss is perhaps the most promising new science fiction writer on the horizon, as anyone can plainly see by reading *No Time Like Tomorrow* (Signet), a collection of half a dozen very good stories and no very bad ones. His great virtue is the selection of the right word or phrase; the defect of his virtue is that sometimes his precision becomes precious. Aldiss is not afraid to tackle new and difficult themes, either. But his

first novel, *Vanguard from Alpha* (Ace) is a spy-and-counterspy exercise which unfortunately gives his well-drawn characters no problem more challenging than a hit on the head. It too is a double volume, the other being *The Changeling Worlds*, by Kenneth Bulmer, concerning a culture of star-roving billionaires whose big problem is that—passengers will please fasten seat belts—they don't know where babies come from. Bulmer makes this more plausible than you would think by hard work and good writing, but how plausible can it be made?

Alan E. Nourse and J. A. Meyer give us a dictatorship which needs overthrowing in *The Invaders Are Coming* (Ace), and in spite of everything find freshness and excitement in the telling. Probably most readers will have guessed page 187's big secret no later than the second paragraph of page 17, but only because Nourse and Meyer play fair with their readers by using words exactly.

PHILIP K. DICK is an adventurous sort of byline for the science fiction reader, because he never knows what he will get. In Dick's first novel, *Solar Lottery*, which Ace has just reissued, he gave us a complicated and quite unsatisfying picture puzzle of an Earth governed by some

sort of quiz-show device for selecting a ruler. It was perhaps even more complex than van Vogt. His newest book is *Time Out of Joint* (Lippincott)—“oh, cursed spite,” says Hamlet, finishing the quotation, “that ever I was born to set it right.” But Dick's hero does not set it right. He gets less use out of more power than any science fiction hero of recent years. This is a most uneven book. There is a masterful opening in which Dick supplies the reader, with skill and economy, just the right hints as to what the surprises will be. Then there is some adroit weaving of the threads, and then . . . The book doesn't exactly end. It disintegrates. Lippincott, for reasons best known to Lippincott, has chosen to hide the fact that this is science fiction by labeling it “A Novel of Menace.” Well, so is *Moby Dick*. But *Time Out of Joint* is science fiction, all right, and fine of its kind in the first hundred-odd pages.

Donald A. Wollheim has put together two more Ace anthologies. In *The Hidden Planet*, the motif is the planet Venus, and Oliver, McIntosh, del Rey, Weinbaum and Brackett give us their several views of what's happening under all those clouds. After a quarter of a century Weinbaum's *The Lotus Eaters* is still the best story in the

book, but there aren't any bad ones. Wollheim's second anthology, *The Macabre Reader*, is horror-fantasy and, as Wollheim is a traditionalist, naturally includes Lovecraft, Smith, Wandrei and Howard. But it also has a fine scary Robert Bloch and a worrisome piece by that masterly Old Hand (presently manipulating real estate and contemplating the cobwebs on his typewriter), Thorp McClusky . . . There is also a novel by John C. Cooper, *The Haunted Strangler* (Ace), which is to become a movie starring Boris Karloff. Karloff can perhaps make credible this flight of idiocy involving a Mad London Doctor, but the printed page cannot.

Friends of the family may like to know of a new anthology, *The Fourth Galaxy Reader* (Doubleday), and a new short story collection, *Tomorrow Times Seven* (Ballantine). As the anthology is edited by our editor, and the short stories are written by the undersigned, this column is forbidden to praise and unwilling to blame.

FOUR scientific classics are back in print. Mentor has just reissued Bertrand Russell's *The ABC of Relativity*, probably the first layman's guide to space-time, and (with scrupulous editing and revising by Felix Pirani) probably still the best. D. E.

Smith's *History of Mathematics* (Dover) is in two fat, full volumes, the first a series of biographical sketches of some 1200 mathematicians, the second an orderly narrative of the growth of mathematical thought. It omits nothing. Another Smith, Homer W., gives us again his famous *Man and His Gods* (Grosset), which shows us the origins of all human religions. Finally there is Wolfgang Köhler's *The Mentality of Apes* (Vintage). Science fiction readers have come across these experiments on chimpanzee minds in many stories. (In de Camp and Miller's *Genus Homo*, for example, the apes are testing the men!) Here is the original text, after forty years still fresh and fascinating.

In *Soviet Space Science* (Basic Books), Ari Shternfeld does not tell us any guarded secrets of the Russian rocket effort. Indeed, the book's only fault is the word "soviet" in the title, for it is nationless, worldwide science which is discussed here. Among its attractive features are a foreword and an epilogue by Willy Ley, who brings Shternfeld up to date and comments on the book itself.

TO WRITE *Brighter Than a Thousand Suns* (Harcourt, Brace), Robert Jungk interviewed nearly every nu-

clear physicist of any consequence. The result is as vivid as Pearl S. Buck's fictional treatment of the theme is flat. Jungk lets us understand Einstein's fears, sympathize with Oppenheimer's conflicts. Yet this book makes one claim so incredible that the whole work must be held to question. Jungk tells us, with no visible skepticism, that Hitler had no atomic weapon to destroy us with because Nazi scientists had too many moral scruples to make one. Think of the "experimental medicine" of the concentration camps, the systematic annihilation of Jews, Poles and Gypsies. It would seem to need more than a self-serving declaration from the parties involved to make such a thesis convincing.

AN ABSOLUTE model of a technical book for the lay reader is Hans Thirring's *Energy for Man* (Indiana University Press). Dr. Thirring assumes that his reader can understand English and can concentrate, and assumes nothing else. Although the book makes use of much shorthand notation and a certain minimum employment of math, everything is explained and defined—once. It is necessary to keep your mind on it, but it is not necessary to be trained up to reading it. Dr. Thirring does that chore for you as you go along.

What he also does is to explain his predictions by means of that useful old invention of logic, the *reductio ad absurdum*. Future events will take just this sort of shape, says Dr. Thirring, because, look, if they don't, then we find ourselves in this foolish contradiction. This is a solid, thoughtful, interesting job; and if there is any essential fact bearing on Man's prospects of future power generation that isn't here, you'll never miss it.

Norman Lansdell's *The Atom and the Energy Revolution* (Philosophical Library), which covers somewhat similar ground, cannot help but suffer by comparison with Thirring. Few books could. Yet on its own terms Lansdell's book has much to tell us. As an Englishman, Lansdell is principally interested in the work now going on in the United Kingdom; and for a glimpse of what's happening at Calder Hall and Harwell—which is to say what's happening anywhere in the free world on *fusion* power—his book is very valuable.

JEAN ROSTAND'S new book asks us in its title *Can Man Be Modified?* (Basic Books), and he gives us an answer of sorts in the less than 100 pages of text that make up this slim, odd volume. Dr. Rostand is an ex-

perimental biologist of great fame (as well as being the son of the man who wrote *Cyrano de Bergerac*), and we might hope for some stimulating and original information in this book. Unfortunately we would not be entirely gratified. For what is here is more a discussion of the philosophical implications of self-remaking than a glimpse of what that task might ultimately lead to.

In *The Earth Beneath the Sea* (Johns Hopkins), Francis P. Sheppard tells us a great deal we never learned in school (if only because even the experts didn't know much of it until the past decade) about the three-quarters of the Earth's surface that lies under water. The book is often technical but never incomprehensible; and the author does not neglect such non-technical entries as his own eyewitness account of the great Hawaiian tsunami of 1947, or full directions for skindiving on a coral reef.

Douglas Botting's *Island of the Dragon's Blood* (Wilfred Funk) is exploration and adventure on the island of Socotra, where Indian Ocean and Gulf of Aden meet. It is a hot, dirty, pestilential place, and the very accuracy of Mr. Botting's reporting makes it appear unpleasant and dull.

C. G. Jung ranks next to

Adler and just under Freud in the pantheon of modern psychiatry. In *World in Crisis* (Mentor), Jung leaves the world within the mind to examine the problems of the world that our minds seem about to destroy . . . In *The Calendar for the Modern Age* (Thomas Nelson), Elisabeth Achelis argues for "The World Calendar." The new system would make all quarters equal and insure that one's birthday would fall on the same day of the week each year; but it offers few other improvements. And the evidence Miss Achelis summons up is sometimes queerly mystical and sometimes (e.g., "In color we are told there are the primary colors—red, blue, yellow and also white") quite wrong.

THOSE who have a morbid interest in witchcraft and diabolism will like *A Pictorial Anthology of Witchcraft, Magic and Alchemy* (University Books), by Emile Grillot De Givry. This volume includes 400 quite horrible illustrations and many useful spells. To make a girl love you, for example, you need only touch her hand and mutter: "Bestarberto corrumpit viscera ejus mulieris."

If you try it, let us know what happened.

END

COUNTERWEIGHT

Every town has crime—but

especially a town that is

traveling from star to star!

SURE I'm a Nilly, and I've died seven times, always in the blackness of the outer reaches, and I'm not alone, although there aren't very many of us, never were.

It made sense. Interstellar was new and they wanted him on the ship because he was a trained observer. They wanted facts, not gibberish. But to ask a man to give up two years of his life—well, that

was asking a lot. Two years in a sardine can. Still, it had an appeal Keith Ellason knew he couldn't deny, a newsman's joy of the clean beat, a planetary system far afield, a closeup view of the universe, history in the making.

Interstellar Chief Rexroad knocked the dottle from his pipe in a tray, saying, "Transworld Press is willing to let you have a leave of ab-

scence, if you're interested."

He knew Secretary Phipps from years of contacting, and now Phipps said, "Personally, I don't want to see anybody else on the job. You've got a fine record in this sort of thing."

Keith Ellason smiled, but just barely. "You should have called me for the first trip."

Phipps nodded. "I wish we had had you on the *Weblor I*."

"Crewmen," Rexroad said, "make poor reporters."

The *Weblor I* had taken off on the first trip to Antheon five years before with a thousand families, reached the planet with less than five hundred surviving colonists. Upon the return to Earth a year later, the crew's report of suffering and chaos during the year's outgoing voyage was twisted, distorted and fragmentary. Ellason remembered it well. The decision of Interstellar was that the colonists started a revolution far out in space, that it was fanned by the ignorance of Captain Sessions in dealing with such matters.

"Space affects men in a peculiar way," Phipps said. "We have conquered the problem of small groups in space—witness the discovery of Antheon, for example—but when there are large groups, control is more difficult."

"Sessions," Rexroad said,

"was a bully. The trouble started at about the halfway point. It ended with passengers engaging in open warfare with each other and the crew. Sessions was lucky to escape with his life."

"As I recall," Ellason said, "there was something about stunners."

Phipps rubbed his chin. "No weapons were allowed on the ship, but you must remember the colonists were selected for their intelligence and resourcefulness. They utilized these attributes to set up weapon shops to arm themselves."

"The second trip is history," Rexroad said. "And a puzzle."

ELLASON nodded. "The ship disappeared."

"Yes. We gave control to the colonists."

"Assuming no accident in space," Phipps said, "it was a wrong decision. They probably took over the ship."

"And now," Ellason said, "you're going to try again."

Rexroad said very gravely, "We've got the finest captain in Interplanetary. Harvey Branson. No doubt you've heard of him. He's spent his life in our own system, and he's handpicking his own crew. We have also raised prerequisites for applicants. We don't think anything is going to happen, but if it does, we want to get an im-

personal, unprejudiced view. That's where you come in. You do the observing, the reporting. We'll evaluate it on your return."

"If I return," said Ellason.

"I suppose that's problematical," Phipps said, "but I think you will. Captain Branson and his fifty crewmen want to return as badly as you do." He grinned. "You can write that novel you're always talking about on your return trip on the *Weblor II*."

Being a Nilly is important, probably as important as running the ship, and I think it is this thought that keeps us satisfied, willing to be what we are.

THE *Weblor II* had been built in space, as had its predecessor, the *Weblor I*, at a tremendous cost. Basically, it was an instrument which would open distant vistas to colonization, reducing the shoulder-to-shoulder pressure of a crowded solar system. A gigantic, hollow spike, the ship would never land anywhere, but would circle Antheon as it circled Earth, shuttling its cargo and passengers to the promised land, the new frontier. A spaceborne metropolis, it would be the home for three thousand persons outward bound, only the crew on the return trip. It was equipped with every conceivable facility and comfort—dining rooms, assembly

hall, individual and family compartments, recreation areas, swimming pool, library, theater. Nothing had been overlooked.

The captain's briefing room was crowded, the air was heavy with the breathing of so many men, and the ventilators could not quite clear the air of tobacco smoke that drifted aimlessly here and there before it was caught and whisked away.

In the tradition of newspaperman and observer, Keith Ellason tried to be as inconspicuous as possible, pressing against a bulkhead, but Captain Branson's eyes sought his several times as Branson listened to final reports from his engineers, record keepers, fuel men, computer men, and all the rest. He grunted his approval or disapproval, made a suggestion here, a restriction there. There was no doubt that Branson was in charge, yet there was a human quality about him that Ellason liked. The captain's was a lean face, well tanned, and his eyes were chunks of blue.

"Gentlemen," Branson said at last, as Ellason knew he would, "I want to introduce Keith Ellason, whose presence Interstellar has impressed upon us. On loan from Transworld, he will have an observer status." He introduced him to the others. All of them seemed friendly;

Ellason thought it was a good staff.

Branson detained him after the others had gone. "One thing, Mr. Ellason. To make it easier for you, I suggest you think of this journey strictly from the observer viewpoint. There will be no story for Transworld at the end."

Ellason was startled. While he had considered the possibility, he had not dwelt on it. Now it loomed large in his mind. "I don't understand, Captain Branson. It seems to me—"

"Let me put it differently. Let me say that you will not understand why I say that until the journey ends." He smiled. "Perhaps I shouldn't have mentioned it."

ELLASON left the captain's quarters with an odd taste in his mouth. Now why had Branson said that? Why hadn't Rexroad or Phipps said something, if it was important?

He made himself comfortable in his seven-foot-by-seven-foot cubicle, which is to say he dropped on his bed, found it more comfortable than he thought it would be, put his arms behind his head, stared at the ceiling. Metal walls, no windows, one floor vent, one ceiling vent, and a solitary ceiling molding tubelight. This would be his home for a year, just as there were

homes like it for three thousand others, except that the family rooms would be larger. His quarters were near the front of the spike near the officers' quarters.

He felt rather than heard the dull rumble. It was a sound he knew would be with him for two years—one year going and one year returning.

He looked at his watch, picked up his notebook and made an entry. The ship right now would be slipping ever so slowly away from Earth. He got up. He'd have to go forward to the observation dome to see that. Last view of Earth for two years.

The penetration of space by large groups is the coming out from under the traditions of thousands of years, and as these planet-originated rules fall away, the floundering group seeks a new control, for they are humanity adrift, rudderless, for whom the stars are no longer bearings but nonexistent things, and values are altered if they are not shown the way.

The theft of Carver Janssen's attache case occurred on the thirty-first day out. In Ellason's mind the incident, though insignificant from the standpoint of the ship as a whole, could very well be the cause of dissension later on. His notes covering it were therefore very thorough.

Janssen's case contained vegetable and flower seeds—

thousands of them, according to the Captain's Bulletin, the ship's daily newsletter which went to all hands and passengers. In the Bulletin the captain appealed to the thief to return the case to Mr. Janssen. He said it was significant that all en route had passed stability tests, and that it was to the ship's discredit that someone with criminal tendencies should have been permitted aboard.

Ellason had to smile at that. What did Captain Branson think of those colonists who killed each other on the *Web-lor I*? They had passed stability tests too. This, then, was what happened when you took three thousand strangers and stuck them in a can for a year.

WHEN Ellason saw Branson about it, the captain said, "Of course I realize it takes only a little thing like this to set things off. I know people get tired of seeing each other, playing the same tapes, looking at the stars from the observation dome, walking down the same corridors, reading the same books, eating the same meals, though God knows we try to vary it as much as we can. Space creates rough edges. But the point is, we know all this, and knowing it, we shouldn't let it happen. We've got to find that thief."

"What would he want seeds

for? Have you thought of that?"

"Of course. They'd have real value on Antheon."

Ellason sought out Carver Janssen. He was a middle-aged man with a tired face and sad eyes. He said, "Now what am I going to Antheon for? I could only take along so much baggage and I threw out some comfort items to make room for the seeds. I'm a horticulturist, and Interstellar asked me to go along. But what use am I now? Where am I going to get seeds like those? Do you know how long it took me to collect them? They're not ordinary seeds, Mr. Ellason."

There was an appeal from Janssen in the next day's newsletter describing the seeds, telling of their value, and requesting their return in the interests of the Antheon colony and of humanity.

On the thirty-fourth day a witness turned up who said he had seen a man emerging from Janssen's compartment with the black case. "I didn't think anything of it at the time," Jamieson Dievers said.

Branson asked him to describe the man.

"Oh, he was about six feet tall, stocky build, and he wore a red rubber mask that covered his head completely."

"Didn't you think that was important?" Branson asked in an outraged voice. "A man wearing a red mask?"

Dievers shrugged. "This is a spaceship. How would I know whether a red mask—or a blue or green one—does or doesn't belong on a spaceship?"

Although Dievers' account appeared in the newsletter, it was largely discounted.

"If it is true," Branson told Ellason, "the theft must be the work of a psychotic. But I don't believe Jamieson Dievers. It may well be he's the psychotic." He snorted. "Red rubber mask! I think I'll have Dievers put through psychiatry."

Attendant to taking notes on this incident, Ellason noted a strange thing. Janssen lived in that part of the ship known as the First Quadrant, and those who lived in that quadrant—more than seven hundred men, women and children—felt that the thief must surely live in Quadrant Two or Four. Elias Cromley, who had the compartment next to Janssen's, sounded the consensus when he said, "Surely a man wouldn't steal from his own quadrant, now would he, Mr. Ellason?"

And so, Ellason observed in his notebook, are wars created.

Seen in space, stars are unmoving, silent, sterile bright eyes ever watchful and accusing. To men unused to it, such a sight numbs, compresses, stultifies. He intro-

duces a countermeasure, proof he exists, which is any overt act, sometimes violent.

ON THE forty-fifth day June Failright, the young wife of one of the passenger meteorologists, ran screaming down one of the long corridors of the Third Quadrant. She told the captain she had been attacked in her compartment while her husband was in the ship's library. She was taken to one of the ship's doctors, who confirmed it.

She said the culprit was a husky man wearing a red rubber mask, and though her description of what he had done did not appear in the story in the newsletter, it lost no time in penetrating every compartment of the ship.

Ellason was present when a delegation from the Third Quadrant called on Captain Branson, demanding action.

Branson remained seated behind his desk, unperturbed, saying, "I have no crewmen to spare for police duty."

The delegation commenced speaking vehemently, to be quieted by Branson's raised hand.

"I sympathize," Branson said, "but it is up to each quadrant to deal with its problems, whatever they may be. My job is to get us to Antheon."

The group left in a surly mood.

"You wonder at my reluc-

tance, Mr. Ellason," Captain Branson said. "But suppose I assign the crew to patrol duties, the culprit isn't caught, and further incidents occur. What then? It soon becomes the crew's fault. And soon the colonists will begin thinking these things might be the crew's doing in the first place."

"Yes," Ellason said, "but what if the intruder is a crewman?"

"I know my men," Branson said flatly.

"You could have a shake-down for the mask and the seed case."

"Do you think it is a member of the crew?" Branson's eyes were bright. "No, I trust my men. I won't violate that trust."

Ellason left, feeling uneasy. If he were Branson, he'd initiate an investigation, if nothing else than to prove the crew guiltless. Why couldn't Branson see the wisdom of setting an example for the colonists?

As a Nilly, I knew that space breeds hate. There is a seed of malevolence in every man. It sometimes blossoms out among the stars. On the Weblor II it was ready for ripening.

Raymond Palugger was killed in the ship's hospital on the sixty-first day. Palugger, a Fourth Quadrant passenger, had complained of feeling ill, had been hospitalized with a

diagnosis of ileus. He had put his money belt in the drawer of the small stand beside his bed. A man in a red mask was seen hurrying from the hospital area, and a staff investigation revealed that Palugger had died trying to prevent the theft of the belt.

Captain Branson did not wait for the newsletter. Through the ship's speaker system, he reported that Palugger had a fortune in credits in the belt and had died of a severe beating. He said that since the incident occurred in the staff section of the ship, his crew would be forced to submit to a thorough inspection in an effort to find the mask, the seed case, the money and the man.

"I will not countenance such an act by a crewman," Branson said. "If and when he is found, he will be severely dealt with. But he might not be a member of the crew. I am ordering an assembly of all passengers at nine tomorrow morning in the auditorium. I will speak to you all then."

FACES were angry, tongues were sharp at the meeting, eyes suspicious and tempers short. Above it all was the overpowering presence of Captain Branson speaking to them.

"It is not my desire to interfere in passenger affairs," he said. "Insofar as the ship

is concerned, it is my duty to make certain no crewman is guilty. This I am doing. But my crew is not and cannot be a police force for you. It is up to you people to police and protect yourselves."

"How can we protect ourselves without stunners?" one colonist called out.

"Has Red Mask a gun?" Branson retorted. "It seems to me you have a better weapon than any gun."

"What's that?"

"This ship is only so wide, so long and so deep. If every inch is searched, you'll find your man. He has to be somewhere aboard."

The colonists quieted. Benjamin Simpson, one of the older men, was elected president of the newly formed Quadrant Council. One man from each of the quadrants was named to serve under him. Each of these men in turn selected five others from his own group.

Those assembled waited in the hall while each team of six inspected the compartments of the others. These compartments were then locked, everyone returned to his compartment, and the larger search was conducted. It took twenty hours.

No mask was found. No mask, no case, no money, no man.

The captain reported that his search had been equally fruitless. At another assem-

bly the following day it was decided to make the inspection teams permanent, to await further moves on the part of Red Mask. The Quadrant Council held periodic meetings to set up a method of trial for him when he was caught. It was all recorded in the newsletter and by Keith Ellason.

We Nillys know about hate and about violence. We know too that where there is hate there is violence, and where there is violence there is death.

DURING sleep time on the seventy-ninth day Barbara Stoneman, awakened by a strange sound, sat up in the bed of her compartment to find a man in a red mask in her room. Her cries brought neighbors into the corridor. The flight of the man was witnessed by many, and several men tried to stop him. But the intruder was light on his feet and fast. He escaped.

The Quadrant Council confronted the captain, demanding weapons.

"Are you out of your minds?" Branson exclaimed.

Tom Tilbury, Fourth Quadrant leader, said, "We want to set up a police force, Captain. We want stunners."

"There's no law against it," Branson said, "but it's a rule of mine that no weapons are to be issued en route."

"If we had had a gun, we'd

have got Red Mask," Tilbury said.

"And I might have a murder on my conscience."

Tilbury said, "We've also thought of that. Suppose you supply us with half-power stunners? That way we can stun but not kill."

They got their guns. Now there were twenty-four policemen on duty in the corridors—eight on at a time. Ellason observed that for the first time the passengers seemed relaxed.

Let Red Mask move against armed men, they said.

Yeah, let him see what happens now.

Red Mask did.

ON THE 101st day he was seen in a corridor in Quadrant Four. Emil Pierce, policeman on duty, managed to squeeze off several shots at his retreating figure.

Red Mask was seen again on the 120th day, on the 135th day, and the 157th day. He was seen, shot at, but not hit. He was also unable to commit any crime.

We've got him on the run, the colonists said.

He's afraid to do anything, now that we've got police protection, they said smugly.

The Quadrant Council congratulated itself. The passengers were proud of themselves. A special congratulatory message from Captain Branson appeared one

day in the Bulletin newsletter.

The colonists settled down to living out the rest of the voyage until the landing on Antheon.

But on the 170th day calamity struck. Red Mask appropriated one of the stunners, made his way down one whole corridor section in Quadrant Two, put occupants to sleep as he went, taking many articles of value and leaving disorder behind.

Ellason interviewed as many victims as he could, noted it all in his book. The things taken were keepsakes, photographs and items of personal value. It seemed to be the work of a madman. If Red Mask wanted to make everyone furious, he certainly succeeded.

"What does he want that stuff for?" Casey Stromberg, a passenger doctor, asked. "I can see him taking my narcotics, my doctor's kit—but my dead wife's picture? That I don't understand."

It was the same with others. "The man's insane, Mr. Ellason. Positively insane." Many people said it.

The council issued orders that all passengers from now on would be required to lock their compartments at all times. More guns were obtained from the captain. More policemen were appointed.

Ellason was busy noting it all in his book. It became fill-

ed with jottings about innocent people being accidentally stunned when trigger-happy policemen thought their movements suspicious, about one man's suspicion of another and the ensuing search of compartments, people who saw Red Mask here, saw him there. Hardly a day went by without some new development.

"Oh, yes, Mr. Ellason, we're going to get him," said Tilbury, now chief of police, cracking his knuckles, his eyes glowing at the thought. "We're bound to get him. We've got things worked out to the finest detail. He won't be able to get through our fingers now. Just let him make so much as a move."

"And what will you do when you get him?"

"Kill him," Tilbury said, licking his lips, his eyes glowing more fiercely than ever.

"Without a trial?"

"Oh, there'll be a trial, Mr. Ellason, but you don't think any jury'd let him live after all the things he's done, do you?"

RED MASK was stunned in Quadrant Four in a corridor by a policeman named Terryl Placer on the 201st day. The criminal was carried to the assembly room surrounded by guards, for he surely would have been mauled, if not killed, by angry colonists who crowded around.

COUNTERWEIGHT

In the assembly hall his mask was whipped off. The crowd gasped. Nobody knew him.

Ellason's first thought was that he must be a stowaway, but then he remembered the face, and Captain Branson, who came to have a look at him, unhappily admitted the man was a member of the crew. His name was Harrel Critten and he was a record keeper third class.

"Well, Critten," Branson roared at him, "what have you got to say for yourself?"

"Go to hell," Critten said quietly. As if it were an afterthought, he spat at the captain.

Branson looked as if he were going to kill the man himself right there and then.

It was a long trial—from the 220th to the 241st day—and there didn't seem to be much doubt about the outcome, for Critten didn't help his own cause during any of it.

Lemuel Tarper, who was appointed prosecutor, asked him, "What did you do with the loot, Critten?"

Critten looked him square in the eye and said, "I threw it out one of the escape chutes. Does that answer your question?"

"Threw it away?" Tarper and the crowd were incredulous.

"Sure," Critten said. "You colonists got the easy life as passengers, just sitting

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around. I had to work my head off keeping records for you lazy bastards."

The verdict was, of course, death.

They executed Harrel Critten on the morning of the 270th day with blasts from six stunners supplied with full power. It was witnessed by a great crowd in the assembly hall. A detail from the ship's crew disposed of his body through a chute.

It was all duly recorded in Keith Ellason's notebooks.

Dying is easy for a Nilly. Especially if it's arranged for beforehand, which it always is.

THE *Weblor II* was only one day out of orbit when Captain Branson sent for Ellason and introduced him to the executed man.

"Hello," Critten said, grinning from ear to ear.

"I figured as much," Ellason said. "I've been doing a lot of thinking."

"You're perhaps a little too good as an observer," Branson said. "Or maybe it was because you really weren't one of the colonists. But no matter, Critten did a good job. He was trained by an old friend of mine for this job, Gelthorpe Nill. Nill used to be in counter-espionage when there were wars."

"You were excellent," Ellason said.

"Can't say I enjoyed the

role," said Critten, "but I think it saved lives."

"Let me get this straight. Interstellar thought that it was idleness and boredom that caused the killings on the *Weblor I*, so they had you trained to be a scapegoat. Is that right?"

Critten nodded. "When great numbers are being transported, they are apt to magnify each little event because so little happens. It was my job to see that they directed none of their venom against each other or the crew, only toward me."

Branson smiled. "It made the time pass quickly and interestingly for the passengers."

"To say nothing of me," Critten said.

"And you, Mr. Ellason, were along to observe it all," Captain Branson put in. "Interstellar wanted an accurate picture of this. If it worked, they told me they'd use it on other trips to Antheon."

Ellason nodded. "No time for brooding, for differences of opinion on small matters. Just time to hate Mr. Critten. Unanimously."

"Probably," Critten said, "you are wondering about the execution."

"Naturally."

"We removed the charges before the guns were used."

"And Carver Janssen's case?"

"He'll get it back when he's

shuttled to Antheon. And all the other items will be returned. They're all tagged with their owner's names. Captain Branson will say they were found somewhere on the ship. You see, I was a liar."

"How about that assault on June Fairlight?"

Critten grinned again. "She played right into our hands. She ran out into the hall claiming I'd attacked her, which I did not. She was certainly amazed when the ship's physicians agreed with her. Of course Captain Branson told them to do that."

"And the murder?"

"Raymond Palugger died in the hospital all right, but he died from his illness on the operating table. We turned it into an advantage by making it look suspicious."

Ellason brightened. "And by that time everybody was seeing Red Mask everywhere and the colonists organized against him."

"Gave them something to do," Branson said.

"Every time things got dull, I livened them up. I got

a stunner and robbed along the corridor. That really stirred them. Lucky nobody got hurt during any of it, including that Stoneman woman. I was trying to rob her when she woke up."

BRANSON cleared his throat. "Ah, Ellason about that story. You understand you can't write it, don't you?"

Ellason said regretfully that he did understand.

"The colonists will never know the truth," Branson went on. "There will be other ships outward bound."

Critten sighed. "And I'll have to be caught again."

Yes, we're anonymous, nameless, we Nillys, for that's what we call each other, and are a theme, with variations, in the endless stretches of deep space, objects of hatred and contempt, professional heels, dying once a trip when the time is ripe, antidote to boredom, and we'll ply our trade, our little tragedies, on a thousand ships bringing humanity to new worlds.

END

NEW LIGHT

"EL"—electroluminescence—is the next stage beyond incandescent and fluorescent light; made up of phosphor-plastic "sandwiches," EL allows extremely uniform and flexible lighting, promising walls of light, drapes of light, picture-frame TV, and safer X-raying. Already on the market is an EL night light—a two-inch square panel that will burn a year for less than a penny's electricity—and breakthroughs are expected to develop brighter phosphors, says *Industrial Research*.

ORANGE

By E. C. TUBB



THE man wore gray pants, gray socks, gray shoes. His blouse was gray, his hair, his eyes, the color of his skin. I didn't have to ask his name.

He looked at me and his eyes widened. "Ruby?"

I nodded, ignoring the expression. It was one I had seen too often. One day, per-

*Sweet choice they gave me—to make a living on
Dispar, I had to be someone's murder proxy!*



haps, I might get used to it.
One day.

He ordered rye on rocks,
double rye and not too many
ice cubes. The liquor stung my

throat as it went down. It was
good rye. It had traveled well
across space.

Gray said, "Someone wants
to kill me."

"So?" I asked.

"So now you know why I sent for you." He picked up his glass, the ice rattling as he lifted it to his mouth. "I don't want to die."

"Who does?" The drink was free. I finished it and waited for him to say something.

"It's a business matter, I think," he said. "You know how it is. I've done pretty well out here and anyone who does that makes enemies. Now one of them wants to kill me."

"Do you know who?"

"Someone called Orange." He shrugged at that. "I received notification of intent this morning, effective as from dawn tomorrow. The usual thing: either I leave Dispar or I get killed." He tried to smile and didn't quite make it. "A simple choice."

"Then why not take it?"

"Run away?" He looked past me, his imagination penetrating the walls and reaching to the lush, fertile lands at the foot of the Ragging Hills. Meltin grew in those lands and meltin fetched a hundred solars an ounce, port of entry, Earth. It is never easy to run away from a fortune. Gray, apparently, was finding it impossible.

The empty glass in my hand was a nuisance. I set it down. The bartender waited for Gray's nod before he refilled it.

"So you don't want to run," I said. "What do you want?"

"I want you to act as proxy." He didn't look at me as he said it. "If you agree, you can file notification and take care of things for me." He hesitated. "I'll pay you well."

"How well?"

THE hesitation grew. Money and Gray were obviously closer than husband and wife. I waited. It is always an education to find out just how much a man values his existence.

"Five thousand solars—payable when my enemy has been eliminated."

I swallowed my drink and headed toward the door. He caught my arm as I passed.

"Ruby! For God's sake!"

"What?"

"How much do you want?"

"Ten thousand solars now. Ten more when the job is finished."

"That's robbery!"

I jerked my arm away from his hand. "It's your skin."

He bit his lip, thinking of all the money his life was going to cost him. Money he could earn in a few weeks' hard work at his concession. His eyes drifted over my face.

"Acid! My client nearly lost out that time. Well?"

His fingers trembled as they counted out the money. They were moist when they

clutched my hand. "Ruby! You'll make sure?"

The money went into my pocket.

"I'll do my best."

"Of course you will." He seemed to want convincing. "Look, I'll hole up somewhere until it's over. The Terra Hotel. You know it?"

"No, but I'll find it."

"I'll wait there for your call." He scowled at his glass, more relaxed now that the thing was done. "A hell of a situation," he complained. "A thing like this could never happen on Earth."

He didn't have to remind me that we weren't on Earth.

THE office of the Dispar General was on the edge of the spaceport, down where the fat-bellied freighters lifted for home, their holds stuffed with meltin for an insatiable market. Meltin couldn't exactly cure cancer, but it could arrest it. It could give immunity as well, and with something like over four billion people clamoring for immunity, it was in high demand.

There wasn't a day, seemingly, when freighters didn't drop down to the spaceport, their holds stuffed with luxury goods. But it was a rare day when one of those same ships headed back to Earth. On the face of it the problem was a simple one: merely collect enough meltin to satisfy

the demand. But there were snags.

One of them stared at me as I entered the office. He was a native Disparian, seven feet tall, lithe, dressed in a simple toga-type garment. His eyes were like jewels.

"You want?" He questioned.

"My name is Ruby. I am acting as proxy for a man named Gray who has received notification of intent from someone called Orange. I wish to register myself as that proxy."

From a desk behind the counter a form lifted itself into the air and fluttered down before me. A stylo thrust itself into my hand. I wasn't startled; it had happened to me before. But I was impressed.

"Fill out the document. Sign it and place the imprints of the balls of both your thumbs on the sheet." The Disparian was bored. "You know what to do; this is not the first time you have done it."

His voice had no tone. It would have sounded the same in empty space. Telepaths have no need to communicate by sound vibration, and each and every Disparian was more than just a telepath. It was their mental powers—their psi faculties, to quote the long-hairs—that made them absolute masters of their world.

I filled in the form, signed it, placed the balls of both thumbs on the sensitized surface of the form.

"You will notify the person concerned that I am official proxy for Gray?"

"Yes."

With a normal man I would have swapped gossip, tried to find out, maybe, just which Orange the would-be killer was, paid for his address, perhaps—things like that. With a Disparian that was impossible. How can you pump an utterly cold and remote conception of justice? You can't. It would have been a waste of time to try.

"Is there anything else?" He was polite, but distantly so. I had probably broken his communion with his fellows, or interrupted his game of telepathic patience, or whatever Disparians did for amusement.

"Thank you, no."

I walked out of the office, by choice a man now marked for death. I was Gray's proxy, which meant that Orange, whoever he was, had to kill me, not Gray. If he succeeded, then Gray was officially dead. He would lose his concession and could do as he liked about staying or going home. If, on the other hand, I killed Orange, then no one could file intent against Gray for another three months.

It was a hell of a way to earn a living.

SURROUND a spaceport by warehouses, depositories, houses and bars, hotels and flop-joints. Add the big stores, the yeast and algae plants, the supply sheds. Cut it with a few roads, hang out a few lights, install a few phone booths. Squeeze too many people into too small an area. Dispar!

I'd hated it for five years. I'd landed with high hopes and no money and had run smack up against some of the uglier facts of life. I'd almost starved before I cottoned on. Almost ran into debt, which was worse. Now, five years later, I had a face I hated to look at, a reputation no normal man should be proud of. But I was beating the system.

The bank was open all night. I entered, ignored the two guards and deposited five of the ten thousand Gray had given me. The teller was a serf, the silver of his collar bright against the jet of his skin. He fingered my money with loving hands.

"Doing well, Mr. Ruby?"

"Doing well, Mr. Black."

He stamped my passbook and handed it back, envy in his eyes. He was surrounded by money and couldn't touch a minim of it. He worked for bed, board and a reduction of his debt. He would probably die long before he had cleared it.

A man brushed past me as I left the bank. The lights

shone on puce clothing, puce shoes, puce skin. He looked at me with puce eyes. Puce wasn't orange, so it didn't worry me.

I dropped into a phone booth and checked on Orange. Fifty-two were listed, any of which could be the one gunning for Gray. Gunning for me, rather, or would be at dawn.

I looked outside the booth. Puce was waiting near a corner. I stepped out of the booth and held the door open, fumbling in my pocket as if for a coin. I looked helplessly at him.

"Change," I said. "Could you oblige?"

He came forward, and as he came within range, I released my hold of the door and pushed him into the booth. I leaned my weight against the door, found a metal wedge in my pocket and thrust it home. He beat against the panel, yelled something I couldn't hear. I smiled at him and shook my head. As I walked away he was desperately using the phone.

I had no time to waste—Puce had already fingered me. Come dawn, Orange would know just where to find me, would probably be waiting until the sun lifted so as to strike before I could protect myself.

At the Bureau I checked the residents' ledger. Of the

fifty-two Oranges, I concentrated only on those who had recently landed and could have had money enough to hire lookouts, and those who had been around long enough to have learned the ropes and maybe made friends. I eliminated about half the number and felt lucky at that. It could have been a White who was after Gray; there were six hundred and thirty of them. Or Black, seven hundred and fifty-eight. Orange, fortunately for me, was not a popular color.

It was near dawn when I left the Bureau and I had to move fast. The supply clerk, a Brown, fingered his silver collar and looked wistfully at the Raging Hills in the distance.

"Supplies for a seven-day trip? You going to try a little poaching, Ruby?"

"You know better than that," I said.

"I know, but do you?" He studied me. "I guess you do. Well, what do you want? A car?"

"I'll walk." Cars cost money to hire and could be seen for a mile.

"Pack, rations, water, compass, medical kit, bush outfit, emergency radio—"

"No radio."

"It's the law." He added it to the heap of supplies. "You get into trouble, you press the button and they come out after you."

"And charge you both arms and a leg."

"Practically," he admitted. "But it could mean your life." His fingers strayed to his collar. "Such as it is."

"I'll take the radio. And a knife."

He added an eighteen-inch bush knife to the heap. He looked at me. He was no fool. "A gun?"

"How much?"

"Five thousand."

"No." Five thousand for a single shot was too much. "How much do I owe?"

"Two for the hire and five for the deposit." He counted out the money I passed to him. "Good luck, Ruby."

"Thanks."

It was almost dawn. Time was running out.

THE sun lifted before I was a furlong from town. Crouching beneath a spined bush, I watched my back-trail, wondering if Orange would be dumb enough to come straight out after me. He wasn't that dumb. I waited an hour and then had to move. I headed for the Ragging Hills.

Nowhere in the Galaxy is there undergrowth like there is on Dispar. Every bush is covered with spines, each blade of grass is a tiny sword, the very leaves are jagged knives. Silicon, of course. Life on Dispar has evolved around it as we evolved

around carbon. And there is wild life, too—nasty wild life.

I stepped from the narrow path made by some creature and let a shimmering thing of scales and claws lumber past. It ignored me, but the insects didn't. A group of them tried to bore a hole through my bush outfit. I brushed them off with a gloved hand and then stepped out again, trying not to let the twitching between my shoulder blades get the better of me.

Orange couldn't be that close.

I wondered about Orange as I forced my way through the undergrowth. A lot depended on just how experienced he was. An amateur would hesitate, perhaps talk in order to bolster up his courage. A personal enemy would want to gloat. More important, a personal enemy would have no real satisfaction in killing a proxy. He might do it, but his motivations wouldn't be the same.

A glinting web of spun glass dissolved beneath the slash of my bush knife. I took no trouble to hide my trail. I wanted Orange to follow me. Later, when I had reached the correct spot, then I would set my snare.

A car drifted past overhead, the *phutt* — *phutt* — *phutt* of its rotors sounding a continent away. I stared up at it enviously. Some conces-

sionaire, probably, going out to his leasehold, there to spend a few days collecting meltin, and earning, in those few days, more money than I saw in months.

The car vanished in the distance toward the Raging Hills. The sound of the rotors faded and I hacked at the undergrowth with vicious exasperation. Damn Dispar! And damn the Disparians for making life what it was!

It took most of two days to get where I was going. Some rocket ship had blasted a clearing in the vegetation way back before the spaceport had been built, and the local shrubbery had only just managed to encroach on the fused area. I took trouble to leave no traces as I crossed the clearing, and when I finally squatted down, it would have taken more than an expert to guess at my presence. That done, I had nothing more to do but wait.

I waited three days.

ORANGE was more clever than I had guessed. He had employed tails, which was the reason I had left the city. Normally I would have met him on my own ground, but with paid shadows reporting my every move, the dice were loaded against me. So I had left the city, hoping that he would come after me. It had been a calculated risk. He could have waited until my

supplies ran out, then ambushed me on my return. That would have been the smart thing to have done. Instead he had lost patience and, with luck, it would cost him his life.

But it almost cost me mine.

I'd made a hideout beneath a spined bush, scooping a shallow hole and lying in it so that I blended with the vegetation. From my position I could see every inch of the clearing, the trail I had followed being directly opposite to me. I wasn't too worried at night. Not even the beasts could move around without sounding as if they'd run into a chandelier. But the days were something else.

Lying in one position hour after hour, a man has to brush off the borers, open his mask to take a drink or to eat, ease cramped muscles, a dozen little moves. I'm pretty good at emulating a robot, but I have my limit. I'd opened a ration pack, eaten, taken a drink of water and had limbered up a little. I was just crawling back into my hole when a shot blasted the ground before me.

I should have had my head incinerated by the blast, but Orange had been just a shade too eager. The shot missed me, and before the echoes had died away, I was twenty yards distant, rolling with a sound of broken glass. A sec-

ond shot followed me. A third. Then I was in a crouch, my eyes searching the undergrowth.

It was quiet, too quiet. The tinkling and brittle snapping had died with the echo of the shots. From far away a car sent down a murmuring hum, but in the undergrowth life seemed to have paused in frozen immobility.

Then I heard it. Something lunged through the bush. A shot blasted toward it. There was a deep, hissing roar, a scream and then a final shot. The hissing died into a liquid gurgle which faded as the creature died. It had probably saved my life, but I was too busy to feel sorry for it. It was dead, but I wasn't sure about the gunner.

I found Orange lying in a heap against the bole of a stunted tree. The animal was nearby, already thickly covered with scavenger beetles. I crept forward, bush knife raised to deliver a killing blow, then dropped it as I came close enough for a good look.

Orange was a woman.

“YOU spared my life,” she said. “Why?”

It was a reasonable question. As official proxy, it was my duty to kill or be killed. Instead I had picked her up, checked her for damage, found an ugly gash on one thigh and had injected her

with the contents of my survival hypo. Given soon enough, the antibiotics would save her from infection.

“You’re a woman.” The excuse sounded lame. “I’m curious about why a woman should file intent to kill.”

“Anything against it?”

“No. It’s just unusual.”

“I know.” She winced as she eased her thigh. “You think that a woman on Dispar can make out quite nicely in other ways. Maybe some can. I don’t happen to be one of them.”

“You’re not a killer either.”

“Anyone can squeeze a trigger.” She didn’t look at me. “Well, when are you going to get it over?”

She had courage. She had other things too—I could sense her femininity even through a double layer of bush clothing. Her orange-dyed skin, eyes and hair did nothing to spoil her prettiness. Killing her was something I didn’t want to do.

When the beast had attacked, it had scattered her equipment and supplies. I went back to my hideout and found what I’d been afraid of: her first shot had missed my head, but had incinerated my gear.

I returned to where she lay and made a quick check. A canteen of water had escaped damage; a single ration was still edible. Aside from that we had nothing but the

emergency radios hooked to our belts.

I picked up her rifle and examined it. The magazine was empty.

"Five shots at five thousand a shot," I said. "Add rental of other stuff, deposit and the rest, and it comes out to about fifty thousand."

"So?"

"That's a lot of money for a girl who only landed a couple of weeks ago. Who put you up to it, Orange?"

"You're smart. Why ask me?"

"Because I think that you are being used for a pigeon." I sat down beside her. "I checked the residents' ledger at the Bureau. I've got a good memory, but I discounted you as the killer. You just didn't fit, a woman, fresh on Dispar, the rest of it. Why did you want to kill Gray?"

"For his concession."

"Reason enough. In fact, it's the only reason anyone would file intent to kill—the only logical reason, that is. Who briefed you, Orange?"

"No one."

"But you knew about proxies? You knew that I'd agreed to take Gray's place?" I leaned back, the canteen in my hand. "You haven't been on Dispar long enough to learn all you have picked up. How about coming clean, Orange?"

"Why should I? You're going to kill me anyway."

"No, Orange, not me." I climbed to my feet. "I'll just walk away and leave you here. You've no food, no water, and you can't eat the local produce. You'll sit here for a while and maybe you'll try to make it back to town. You'll get panicky and thirsty and hungry. You'll be alone and you'll get lost. You'll discover that you're dying and then you'll press the button on your radio. You know what happens then?"

"A Disparian will come out for me."

"That's right. And then you'll get a bill for services rendered and you'll have to pay it. If you can't, you'll be sold into bondage and wear a silver collar. Can you guess what your life would be like then, Orange?" I stepped away from her. "No, I won't kill you. I don't have to."

I HAD gone maybe twenty yards before she called to me. She was scared.

"Did you mean that? About me being sold into slavery?"

"Bondage? Yes."

"It's the same thing." She frowned into the distance. "Ruby, why do they do it?"

"It's their system, the Disparians'."

"It's a lousy system."

"It's the one we're stuck with." I slipped an arm around her shoulders and heaved her to her feet. "Let's get moving."

"But you wanted to talk."

"We can do that on the way back to town."

She talked. Her story didn't surprise me—I'd lost the capacity for surprise some time ago—but it gave me time to think. But I wasn't surprised.

Dispar grew meltin and Earth wanted it. Normally we would have stepped in and taken what we wanted, but this time we couldn't do that. Not when the natives could teleport themselves into the engine room of a spaceship and detonate it at will. Not when the enemy was a will-of-the-wisp no one could fight, bribe, browbeat or cheat. If Earth wanted meltin, it had to get it on Disparian terms.

And so the system. The lucky ones had concessions to collect meltin and grew rich. The others worked for the lucky ones or killed them and took over their concessions. Others made out by supplying food and supplies without which human life on Dispar was impossible. The Disparians had forced us to found a colony in which money was the keynote of survival. And they had done more.

"You can't kill anyone without their permission," I explained. "When you land they do more than just give you a name and make you live up to it." I glanced at her. "Why orange?"

"Why ruby?" She shrug-

ged. "I knew I had to play along. Orange used to be my favorite color."

"No more?"

"What do you think?" She stumbled and I saved her from falling. She didn't thank me; the necessity for that had long since passed. "Why do they do it?"

"Make us wear colors? A whim, a law, a state of mind—anything. There's a lot about the Disparians we don't know."

"Like what happens if you kill someone without their permission?"

"No. That I do know about." It was something I didn't like to think of. "They read minds and there's no appeal. Stick to their rules and you're all right. Defy them and that's the end of you. A very unpleasant end it is too."

"You've seen it?"

"Yes."

She didn't pursue the subject.

She'd landed as we all land, full of high hopes and eager to get rich quick. The system had slapped her in the face as it does all of us. Dispar was no Eldorado, not unless you could get a concession. She didn't get a concession, but she did get an offer.

"It sounded so simple—These people would stake me and tell me exactly what I had to do."

"Pull a trigger and kill a man."

"Yes." If she flushed I couldn't know it, not with her dyed skin. "So maybe it was a little raw, but so what? It was the system, they said, kill or be killed, and no one would think it bad. Just pull a trigger and collect."

"How much?"

"Fifty thousand. I was to hand over the concession to the syndicate."

"Naturally."

I halted and gave her a drink of water. We'd eaten the ration long ago and the canteen was almost dry. With her damaged thigh we weren't making good progress. I wondered how she'd managed to find me. I asked.

"They led me out and showed me about where you were and left me to do the job."

It was a logical outcome of the system, many trying to do what one couldn't. And staying well within the regulations too; I had no doubt of that. Each member of the syndicate would only do so much. One would watch me, another would supply her gear, others would lead her out into the underbrush. Orange was simply a chosen weapon, a finger to pull the trigger. She could have killed me easily, but something had prevented her aiming straight. She was no killer, no matter what she said.

"Did they tell you why they picked a woman?"

"I guessed. Even on Dispar

a man thinks of a woman as being weaker than himself. And, as you said, a woman can get by without having to risk her neck."

She stumbled again, and again I saved her. Beneath the dye were pale blotches.

"And I *am* weaker than you."

"Right now, at least."

"It's my leg." She touched it and winced. Around us the undergrowth tinkled to the impact of a slight breeze. The sound was lonely, mournful. "Ruby."

"Yes?"

"We aren't going to make it, are we?"

"We'll make it."

She shook her head. "Alone you might have made it, not with me. I guess there's only one thing I can do."

My hand caught hers as it reached for her belt. It felt soft and very helpless. I smiled into her eyes.

"Not yours, Orange," I told her.

My finger pressed the button on my own radio.

THE bill was a hundred thousand, fifty for each of us. The Disparian who had come out and teleported us back to town was the twin brother to the one in the Dispar General's office. Or maybe he was the same one; I couldn't tell and it didn't make any difference. The bill was one hundred thousand,

and because I had pressed my button, I had to pay it.

One-third of my passage money back to Earth; twice as much as I owned on Dispar; enough to make me wear a collar for the rest of my life. I didn't want to wear a collar for any time at all.

It had been a quick rescue. One second we had been in the undergrowth. There had been a snap of displaced air and a Disparian had stood beside us. In less than a moment we had stood in the Dispar General's office. I doubted if my heart had beaten once during the trip. It had made up for it since.

Fear is a wonderful spur. The prospect of a life of bondage had thrown my brain into top gear, oiled my tongue and sharpened my ideas. I had talked fast and logically and had won a little time. It was something I felt proud of. Gray wasn't impressed.

"So you failed," he said. "Too bad."

"I've run into a little trouble, but I haven't failed."

"No?"

"I'm still alive. The trouble is nothing that money won't take care of."

"So you told me." He was casual. Why not? *He* wouldn't have to wear a collar.

"The charge is a hundred thousand. Someone will have to pay it."

"Not me." He sat up in his chair. "It has nothing to do

with me. You should have killed the woman."

"Woman?" I covered the distance between us in three strides. "How did you know it was a woman?"

"You told me."

"No, I didn't. All I told you was that the job was over and that I'd had to call for help." Suspicions became certainties. "It was a setup, wasn't it? You wanted to be safe and snug and thought up a scheme to protect yourself. Maybe all you concessionaires thought it up together—it fits well enough. Find a pigeon. Have that pigeon send you notification of intent. Hire a proxy and let them fight it out. Either way you're safe. If your proxy wins, then you are safe for three more months. If the pigeon wins, then you've already arranged to have your forfeited concession handed back. Against what you earn collecting melt-in, the cost was nothing."

"Pipe dreams."

"I think not."

"Who cares what you think? You're just a hired killer and not such a good one at that. If you were, you would have killed the woman and not come whining to me."

He was confident, too confident. I looked around. The Terra Hotel was the ultimate in luxury on Dispar. It took a mint to live there, another mint to live there in Gray's style. Gray had the arrogant

confidence of wealth. He was one of the aristocrats of Dispar and now he was cracking the whip.

"Look," I said reasonably. "To you a hundred thousand isn't much. Can't you let me have it and get this thing squared up?"

A smart man would have paid, but Gray wasn't smart, just greedy. He yawned and pointed toward the door.

"On your way, Ruby."

"How about the money?"

"You can whistle for it."

He had me and he knew it. Unless I paid my debt, I would be sold, and a bondsman couldn't file notification of intent. I couldn't harm him now or later.

"So I'm disowned, is that it?"

"That's it." He said what I'd wanted to hear. He'd canceled my standing as his proxy and he could never deny it. "Now get out before I have you thrown out."

I crossed the room and opened the door. Orange stood just outside where she had been waiting. She carried a bush knife in her hand. I stepped back as she entered the room.

"There he is." I pointed toward Gray. "I'm no longer his proxy. Kill him and get it over with."

MONEY breeds more than arrogance. Ten years earlier Gray would have had to

rely on himself, but now he had money and he was soft. He cringed in his chair as Orange advanced, the big knife lifted above her head, the light reflecting from the wicked blade.

Gray didn't know, couldn't know that she wouldn't kill him. There was nothing preventing her but her own nature, but he didn't know that. He gave a sound like a scream and dived for a desk. He turned, a gun in his hand. I could have smashed it from his hand, but there was no need. He had made me his official proxy, and until he *officially* resumed responsibility, he could no more kill Orange than she could kill him.

But he tried. He held the gun with both hands and desperately fought to squeeze the trigger. He finally managed that, but by that time the muzzle was pointing at the ceiling. He blew a hole in the plaster.

I took the gun from his hand. "Take it easy. No need for witnesses."

"Save me!" He was shaking with fear.

"I'm not your proxy. You disowned me, remember?" I winked at Orange. She waited, lowering the knife and running her thumb along the edge. In her way she was an artist.

"This isn't Earth, Gray," I said. "Maybe you made a mis-

take in not remembering that. Sure, we've got a strictly commercial society, but we've got something else too. We've got the Disparians watching over us like a bunch of guardian angels."

"Keep that woman away from me!" The knife seemed to fascinate Gray. He couldn't stop looking at it.

"How long do you think a setup like this would last if men were free? Not long. Not when any man could take a gun and go hunting for meltin and wasn't too particular who he shot to get it. You have a nice, safe money-making system here, Gray, you and the other concessionaires. It's a pity that you couldn't be satisfied with taking a part instead of wanting it all."

I could have told him more, but there was no need. He already knew the logic of the Disparians. Make a man your proxy and he is exactly that. The inability to kill or injure, instilled on landing, was replaced. A man was permitted to defend himself or commit an official murder, but that was all. Gray had fired me as his proxy but, as yet, he hadn't made official notification of that fact. He was way out on a limb.

"All right." He managed to look away from the knife. "What do you want?"

"Money."

He recovered some of his

courage. "You're a fool, Ruby, a bigger one because you don't know it. Maybe I did fire you, but as far as the Disparians are concerned, you're still my proxy. If this woman kills me, then she's in trouble."

"No. I've told her that I'm no longer your proxy. They can read her mind and prove that."

"Then you'll be in trouble. Until you notify the Disparians, I can't protect myself."

Orange lifted the knife.

"Wait!"

GRAY was sweating. I could see the moisture on his forehead. "If you kill me, you'll be sorry. The setup here is based on fair play and logic. That means I have to be given a chance to defend myself or get someone to do it for me."

"An interesting point." I nodded to Orange. She stepped closer to Gray. "Of us three, only two have the ability to kill. We could kill each other or Orange could kill me or I her. If she kills me, then she's in trouble because she knows that I'm no longer your proxy. If I kill her, the same. But she can kill you."

"Then you get into trouble," said Gray savagely. "Do I have to remind you how unpleasant it will be?"

"It won't be pleasant," I admitted. "But as far as you are concerned, the question is

purely academic. By that time you'll be dead."

He got the point. No matter what he said, I wasn't going to stop Orange from using that knife. He broke as the blade swung toward him.

"All right," he said. "What do you want?"

I blocked the swing of the knife with my arm, while Orange turned the edge just in time, and I got down to business. I wanted a hundred thousand to clear my debt, plus a double passage home. I would have asked for more but for the fact that I couldn't get it. Even as it was, he didn't like paying out. Orange wasn't too big, but I more than made up for her weight. In effect, I was demanding our combined weight in delivered meltin.

"Wait a minute! How are you going to get away with this?"

I knew what he meant. Orange had filed notification of intent and there was no time limit. One or the other had to be eliminated.

"I've fixed that part of it." I waved to the communicator. "Just transfer that money."

"But—"

"It's simple. Orange filed notification of intent. To wash it out, Orange must cease to exist. Well, Orange will cease to exist."

"You'll kill her?"

"In a way, yes."

The communicator hummed

just then and Gray became busy giving me lots of his easily earned money. Orange dropped the knife and came into my arms. It was the first time I had held her like that and it was good.

"No regrets?" I smiled into her eyes.

"None."

"Not even—?" I touched my acid-burned face.

"Not even." Her fingers were cool on my cheek. "Do you think it will work, Ruby?"

"It will work."

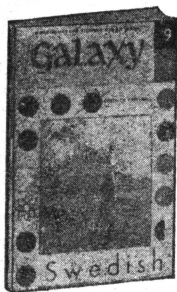
IT WOULD too. I knew that. Old habits die hard and the Disparians were logical. When an Earthwoman married, she changed her name. Orange would legally die, her name erased from the Residents' Ledger and the notification of intent annulled. Gray would be back where he started, a little poorer, but perhaps a lot wiser. And I would be the happiest man around.

I touched Orange's hair. Maybe we would leave Dispar, maybe not. It was a good world if you had money. With the money we had, we could start a small business or deal in bondservants. Open a restaurant, maybe, or even study Disparian law.

And Orange would look wonderful when her name and color were changed to Ruby.

END

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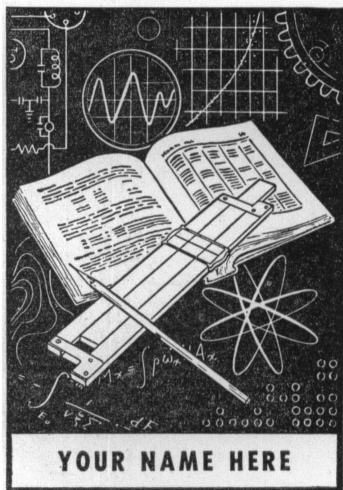
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