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ABSOLUTE POWER

By J. T. McINTOSH

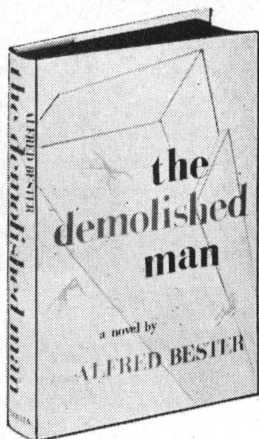


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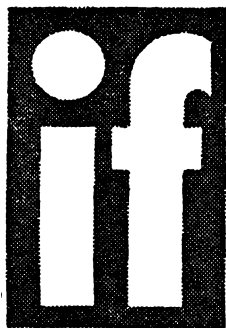
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Next issue (March) on sale January 10th

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Having an impossible planet and an even more impossible girl to bring to heel—those were the odds Barr liked to take.

ABSOLUTE POWER

By J. T. McINTOSH

Illustrated by Dick Francis

I

SUITABLY, Edgar Dainton had his office right at the top of the immense Planet Development Company Building. He was signing letters when Paul Fackley came in.

"Well?" said Dainton, looking up.

"They've turned it down, E. D.," said Fackley. "We're pulling out of Bullance. They said the usual things—PDC has a responsibility to the shareholders—Bullance is a white elephant—under the present government regula-

tions it's impossible to make Bullance pay—better get out before we lose any more."

Dainton nodded. He was a very kindly, mild-mannered, reasonable man to be the director of a vast economic empire such as that controlled by the Planet Development Company. He had found that on the whole it paid to be kindly, mild-mannered and reasonable.

"What was said about my personal submission?" he asked.

"Well, you can go ahead with it," Fackley said. "But there was a strong recommen-

dation not to throw your money away. And you know how I feel, E. D.—it wouldn't be a worthwhile gamble. If you lose, you lose not only your money but prestige as well."

"I know," said Dainton.

In an economic empire there is no life membership for dictators. Dainton was the director of the PDC program, but what he said only went when it paid off. And Bullance wasn't paying off. Dainton wanted to keep trying; everybody else wanted to cut their losses.

Now Dainton had offered to finance from his own pocket one last try. And what Fackley said was undeniably true—if the last try failed, Dainton would lose face as well as money. He would have been expensively wrong. PDC directors weren't supposed to be expensively wrong, even when they footed the bill themselves.

It was a gamble for big stakes. If it came off, everybody would remember (or would be gently reminded if they didn't) that Dainton had opposed PDC's withdrawal from Bullance and had taken over the account personally because the board had turned down all his recommendations. He would probably sell back the rights for a colossal sum, his prestige rocketing sky-high as well as his bank account. But if it didn't come

off, it would always be remembered that he'd been badly wrong once, and could be badly wrong again.

"When I told them you wanted ninety-five per cent of the profits," said Fackley, "they didn't even haggle. They just said, 'What profits?' You're not going ahead with it, are you, E. D.?"

Dainton glanced at his watch. "Barr's due in a few minutes. I'll make a final decision when I meet him."

Fackley hesitated. He was a very able and intensely loyal assistant. "If you're doing this on Miss Dainton's account . . . I mean, I know you intend to send her with him . . . I mean . . ."

"What *do* you mean, Paul?" Dainton asked gently.

"Just that I think the board would understand if you have private reasons. If you mean the project to be a flop, for reasons of your own . . ."

"Now why would I want that?"

"Well, if you do, let me drop a hint to the members of the board. Then at least they won't start to question your judgment."

Dainton smiled slightly. "Thanks, Paul. You're smart *and* you're loyal. I wish between us we'd been able to make Roxie marry you."

Fackley flushed slightly. "That's over."

"I know," Dainton sighed. "Pity."

FAR below in the gargantuan PDC building, Lyn Barr was looking about him with the naive curiosity of the hick he was. In the vast hall of the PDC Building a thousand tiny planets revolved rapidly round a hundred tiny suns. The display must have cost a million to install and several thousand a year to run.

"Yes?" said a supercilious blonde.

"I want to see somebody called Dainton."

The blonde smiled a supercilious smile. "I'm sorry, sir. Perhaps you'd care to see Mr. Decker. He—"

"Decker didn't ask to see me."

Her plucked brows rose incredulously. "You mean you have an appointment with Mr. Dainton? Mr. Edgar Dainton?"

"He said for me to come at four," said Lyn patiently. "I guess he only wants to bluster and bawl me out because I just took five thousand off him, but—"

"Mr. Dainton could give a bellhop five thousand and never notice it," the blonde said with a wintry smile.

"Maybe. You ever know a millionaire who didn't scream blue murder if somebody gyped him out of a dime?"

Still incredulous, the blonde snapped a switch. A few sec-

onds later, incoherently apologetic, she was taking him up personally in an elevator.

An express elevator was something new in Lyn's experience. The floor tried to come up and hit him, but he stiffened his knees just in time and kept it where it was. When the elevator stopped at the top of the immensely tall building, he glanced down at the blonde's neat ankles.

"Thought your panties might have fallen down," he explained. "But then, *your* pants would never fall down, would they?"

About to become icily supercilious again, the blonde remembered that this man was about to see Edgar Dainton. She tried to laugh as if at a scintillating witticism.

In the large, bright room at the top of the building, Dainton and Lyn Barr eyed each other.

"I got the five thousand all right, Mr. Dainton," Lyn said pleasantly. "Thanks for asking."

"How did you find out about that?" Dainton said.

"I always read the small print. When I came from Mars on one of your ships, naturally I had to look at the conditions. And I found this clause: 179 (a) Compensation (transfer in space): Should it be necessary to transfer passengers to another ship in space, except as under 178 (a) and (c), compensation of

five thousand dollars will be paid to said passengers on demand."

"You knew, of course," said Dainton, "that that clause dated from the time when transfers were hazardous and people had to be assured that there wouldn't be any? And that for the last hundred years or so there have always been transfers from tender to ship and back to tender?"

Lyn smiled. "But this clause is still there in black and white among the conditions."

"Was," Dainton said. "It's out now."

The two men looked at each other. And though Dainton was thirty years older than Barr, small and plump instead of tall and thin, and neatly dressed instead of shambling and untidy, they saw they had a good deal in common.

They were both patient men. They liked to see what was to be seen before committing themselves further. It would obviously be rare for either of them to lose his temper. They would be kind to old ladies in the street. Women would like them, believing erroneously they needed mothering. Neither of them would have any difficulty in getting children to accept them as equals.

"So you didn't bring me here to swear at me?" Lyn asked.

"I brought you here to give you a hundred thousand."

Lyn showed no sign of shock. "I'll take it."

"Barr, would you say you were a gambler?"

Lyn considered the matter with the grave curiosity of a man who is often mildly surprised, rarely startled. "No, I guess not," he said at last.

"But it wouldn't surprise you to know that many people think you are?"

"No, it wouldn't."

"I've had you closely investigated, Barr. I'm going to offer you a job, a very important job. I think you're enough of a gambler to take it on these terms: If you fail, living expenses and fifty a week. If you succeed, the same living expenses, the same fifty, and a bonus of a hundred thousand."

"What makes you think I could handle a job like that?"

"The conviction that you can do other things besides reading small print. But there's something I have to tell you before you say any more. Not about the job itself—that's straightforward enough. Impossible, probably, but quite straightforward. What I want to tell you about is something that goes with the job."

LYN waited, but Dainton seemed to be waiting for a comment. So Lyn asked: "What goes with the job?"

"My daughter Roxie," said Dainton.

"I guess you don't mean I'm supposed to marry her."

"You guess right. Not that I'd mind. I'd rather she married you than the fool she no doubt will marry when she finds somebody useless enough. But she won't marry you. When I say she goes with the job, I mean that I propose to send you to Bullance as Premier, and Roxie with you."

"Premier?" said Lyn, almost astonished. "And you think I'm a gambler?"

Dainton smiled. "I never denied that I was. This is one of my biggest gambles, Barr. Along with that, I want to turn Roxie into a normal, healthy girl of twenty-two with no more than the usual emotional problems. If you can do that, Bullance can go to hell."

Lyn's memory stirred. Even on Mars he had heard of the Young Daintons. "Wasn't there—didn't she have a brother?"

"Willie. He was always violent with his girl friends. Finally he killed one and shot himself rather than face trial. Somebody might save Roxie, though, if he was patient and good at reading small print. She isn't all bad."

"Let's get this straight. Is my job premiership of Bullance or psychiatrist to Roxie? And if it's the latter, am I supposed to cure her or marry her or both?"

"Your job is to be Premier of Bullance and work out a solution there. So far nobody has got within light-years of solving it. In your spare time, do what you can about Roxie—if anybody can do anything about Roxie. Marry her if you like, and if you can."

Dainton sighed. Lyn didn't have to be told what he was thinking. Dainton was thinking about two children he had never seemed to have time for, two children who had always had absolutely everything except the love of a father and a mother—or, for that matter, anyone.

"You still haven't answered my question," said Lyn. "Which is my job?"

Dainton pulled himself together. "A good man can do three or four things at once, and I think you might be a good man. Save Bullance and you get a hundred grand at least—probably a lot more. Save Roxie, and . . . no, I won't ask for too much. Do anything for Roxie and you'll find me more grateful than about Bullance. If there's any conflict between the two things, Bullance can go to hell if you can do anything for Roxie. And, Barr, if Roxie tells me one thing and you say another, I don't think I'm going to believe Roxie."

Lyn always liked time to think things over. But he knew already that he was going to take the job Dainton

offered, for about six different reasons.

"Why," he asked, "are you so sure your daughter will go with me?"

"She wants to be a premier on a primitive world," said Dainton bleakly. "And I've told her she has no chance unless she does this first. She has no chance anyway."

"Why not?"

"The reason she wants to rule a world is to prove that Ghengis Khan, Hitler and the Russian revolutionaries were humanitarian, sentimental philanthropists."

"Yet you say she isn't all bad?"

"I think she isn't," said Dainton quietly. "But maybe I'm biased, being her father."

III

ON THE company ship out to Bullance, Lyn saw very little of Roxie Dainton. It wasn't until the ship was nearly due to land that all the young officers on board had become heartily sick of Roxie. The stewardesses, of course, had been sick of her from the start.

Lyn knew that he must in due course clash violently with Roxie, and was quite satisfied to postpone hostilities until they were on Bullance and the *Meredith* had left. He had divided his time between winning money from anyone on board ship who would play

any gambling game with him and reading about Bullance.

Bullance was a pleasant enough world, apart from being slightly too hot. Its air and water were non-poisonous, the highest life-form—about twenty per cent less intelligent than humans—was friendly and completely harmless, and no other animal on the planet was larger than a cat.

Like most friendly, harmless worlds, Bullance had very little to offer Terran civilization. In fact, only one commodity was worth exporting.

It seemed to be almost a natural law that if a world was vicious, poisonous, unstable and in other respects highly dangerous, it was invariably rich in things Earthmen wanted. And if it was as harmless as Bullance, it produced practically nothing of any value.

Simple economics thus ensured that all the important settlements were on extremely tough worlds. Bullance was too far from any thickly populated world to have any value as a vacation resort; consequently any colony there had to depend on what it could produce for necessities, and on what it could export for luxuries.

The one commodity which Bullance did export was very valuable, and if it could have been exported in quantity, Bullance could have become

wealthy. This was so far from being the case that PDC had already ceased to subsidize the small settlement that existed there, and it owed its present precarious existence to Edgar Dainton's personal backing.

Called *manna* without any particular originality or imagination, Bullance's one valuable commodity was partly natural and partly manufactured by the highest life-form, a humanoid species with gray skin known officially as Bullanese and unofficially as Maniacs (because they brought in manna). The Maniacs performed a long and complicated process with the sap of certain trees, a mash of leaves, different kinds of soil and a common form of gelatin.

The result was manna, the Maniac's staple diet. It would have been a great delicacy back on Earth but for the fact that hardly anybody could afford to eat it. Occasionally some very rich man on Earth would invite a very few guests to dinner and serve manna. He rarely did it again if he wanted to remain a very rich man.

Most of the manna that was brought in from Bullance was used in the production of expensive plastics which could not be given the same qualities by any other process. Some was used in fabulous ceramics. It also produced the finest possible film base, used with the thinnest emulsions

when great enlargement was required.

There was no difficulty in selling manna for great sums. The difficulty was in getting it.

The only way to produce it was the way the Maniacs produced it on Bullance. And unfortunately manna didn't keep much longer than the time taken to transport it to Earth. So the supply of manna depended (a) on the Bullanese bringing it in, and (b) on their bringing it in at the right time and in the right quantities.

Lyn had before him the exasperating story of manna supplies brought to the PDC base on Bullance. In January, 2175, stock was 170 tons—more than a shipload. But the next ship to call arrived in May, by which time only 10 tons were still consignable. Shortly after the ship had left, the Bullanese supplied a further 110 tons. By November, when the next ship was due, only five tons were fresh enough to stand the journey.

It wasn't that the ships called at the wrong time of year. Their schedules had been changed repeatedly. It wasn't that the Bullanese were not prepared to supply manna. It was simply that there seemed to be no way of getting them to bring in supplies at the right time, or know when the next big supply was coming.

Everything seemed to have been tried. Once a ship had been kept waiting indefinitely on Bullance, ready to blast off whenever she was fully loaded. When she did blast off, a year and four months later, she was only half full, because by the time the last small quantities of manna had been brought in, the first bales had gone bad and had to be unloaded. Half a shipload was an exceedingly valuable cargo—but the cost of keeping a ship and her crew idle for sixteen months was ruinous. Besides, the crew was near mutiny by the time the ship finally left Bullance, and when she got back to Earth the various unions inserted clauses in their contracts forbidding a stay of more than a month on Bullance.

No wonder, Lyn thought, the PDC board had decided to cut their losses in Bullance. What he didn't understand was what Dainton hoped he, Lyn Barr, was going to accomplish.

Still, Lyn was quite prepared to try to find a solution. He was always prepared to try.

IV

"HI," SAID Roxie. She hadn't knocked. "Am I interrupting anything?"

"Could I be anything but delighted?" said Lyn, pushing his book aside.

"Can't you do better than

that?" She threw herself moodily on the locker, which was the only item of furniture in the tiny cabin other than the folded bed on which Lyn was sitting.

She wore a vivid scarlet skirt with hundreds of pleats and a blazing yellow blouse stretched tightly across breasts which could stand it. She was neither tall nor short, neither blonde nor brunette, but if she hadn't been Roxie Dainton she could have been a showgirl. If she was twisted and frustrated, it certainly wasn't because she was ugly.

"Look," she said, "I don't get it. Why is my father sending you to Bullance?"

"Because he thought I might see a way of making manna imports pay."

"Oh, that's censored," she said impatiently. "He's paying you to do a nursemaid job on me, isn't he? He doesn't give a tinker's damn about Bullance."

Lyn shook his head. "Bullance could and ought to be a gold mine. Why it isn't is because no matter what the market value of manna is, a shipload of ten tons every six months won't pay all the expenses. Forty tons would. And if we could guarantee a shipload every month—"

"Don't be a bloody fool. Think I don't know anything about Bullance? Kick the Maniacs around and there

won't be any more trouble with them."

"Unfortunately," said Lyn carefully, "there's a government inspector permanently on the station to prevent just that. The Bullanese have legal rights, same as anybody else."

"Do it when he isn't looking, then."

"I'm afraid that won't work. The Bullanese would simply move away from the PDC station and there wouldn't be any manna at all."

"Let's cut the pretense," she said angrily. "What's your real job?"

Lyn leaned back comfortably on the bed. "I'm supposed to make Bullance pay. That means getting more manna exports, somehow. Naturally, this ship will take back any manna which happens to be waiting when we land. I can neither take credit if there's a lot nor be blamed if there isn't. But in two months' time another ship is coming, a special ship, and it's my job to arrange that there'll be a cargo of manna waiting for it. That's my job. That's what I'm here for."

"For God's sake, stop talking about manna, I'm sick of hearing about the censored stuff. You're supposed to turn me into a solid citizen, aren't you?"

Lyn was quite prepared to follow that line. "What par-

ticular objection do you have to solid citizens?"

She twitched her skirt impatiently. "They're boring."

"It seems to me," said Lyn, "that you spend most of your time being bored anyway, whether you're surrounded by solid citizens or not."

She sighed. "It's true, damn it. You think I believe I'm the most important thing in the Galaxy, don't you?"

"I haven't had much opportunity to make up my mind what you think."

"You think I'm stinking with pride, don't you?"

"No," said Lyn. "I think that nobody has a lower opinion of Roxie Dainton than you have."

SHE blinked and gasped. "Well, that was a poke in the gut," she said. "You think you're smart, don't you?"

"Not as smart as I'd like to be," said Lyn.

"You must be smart. The old man doesn't pick fools. How are you going to set to work on me?"

"Miss Dainton," said Lyn firmly, "whether you believe me or not is your affair, but my immediate concern is the supply of manna and I have no qualifications as a doctor, psychiatrist or priest. If I were supposed to be a big brother to you, would I have kept out of your way the whole voyage?"

"You might have," Roxie said thoughtfully, "if you were smart. By this time I'm fed up with everybody on this ship, and everybody is fed up with me—except you."

"How could people get fed up with a girl like you?"

"Don't act dumb."

"I'm not acting."

She threw up a leg restlessly and the shoe sailed off her foot across the cabin. Her skirt slid up and she didn't bother to pull it down again. "Why should I tell you?"

"No reason, only that if you don't like to talk about yourself, there must really be something unusual about you."

"I guess you're right," she said moodily. "I guess nothing interests me much any more except seeing people squirm. It's always possible to make them squirm, you know. You think now that I'll never make you writhe, but you're wrong. You'll squirm just like everybody else."

"Women too?"

"Women are easiest. They are always in competition and I win because I don't want what the other girl wants; I only want to win. You know Mary Shearing, the night stewardess? She's crazy over Porter. Porter's married, but that doesn't matter. On the *Meredith* Porter is all hers, and that's something his wife can never share. Well, I made her say I couldn't take

Porter away from her, and then I took Porter away from her. I didn't sleep with him because he was easier to handle with his tongue hanging out. I made him fight with Mary and tell her she made him sick and he was going to get away from her if he had to transfer to another ship or another company. I made her tell him she wouldn't have anything to do with him if he was the last man alive. Then I kicked Porter out and never spoke to him again."

"Very pretty," Lyn said. "Maybe I haven't heard about these things because I'm supposed to be a big wheel and might get somebody fired. I gather Mary and Porter are not the only two who hate you?"

"I got Benning crazy for me too. I had him where he thought he was really getting someplace, and then kicked him out as well. I found out that Brenda Cowley took his job because her second child is a spastic and needs expensive care. It's easy to make her writhe . . . You see, there is always a way."

"And that makes you feel good?"

"No," said Roxie bleakly, "it makes me feel the same way you would feel if you did it."

THERE was a long silence, quite a companionable silence, for though Lyn could

see why people hated Roxie, he didn't hate her. You could not hate anybody you pitied.

At last she said: "It was the old man's fault. He gave me everything except what I needed. I know now that nobody should ever get all he asks for. But it's too late."

"You said it. I didn't."

"And it's true. At eighteen, if I'd met the right man . . . But now I'm twenty-two. That's four years of doing anything to make people squirm. It's too late now."

"Well, if you want me to agree, I will."

She stood up. "No, I don't want you to agree. I'm God damned if I know what I want."

"Watch your language. There's a lady present."

She stared down at him. "Are you telling me how to behave, nursemaid?"

"No. Only how not to talk."

Suddenly she laughed, a hard, jeering laugh. "If swearing shocks you, I guess you don't have any idea what I'm like. Want to know why I want to be premier of a world like Bullance?"

"I can guess."

Her eyes became slits and she almost snarled. "To be in control of a world—in sole command, the boss, the one person with absolute power—that's the one thing I haven't tried. To have the power of life and death, to make people crawl, to think up the

craziest things and make people do them, to be able to beat natives to death . . . I'd do anything for that power."

Lyn said nothing.

She looked at him, the cruelty already beginning to die out of her face. But for a moment he had seen the hell behind her eyes. He began for the first time to believe that it really was too late, that she was rotten all the way through.

Perhaps she guessed this, for as her eyes met his she suddenly spun on her heel and went out of the cabin, leaving her shoe behind.

V

BULLANCE was a hot, moist world, a yellow-green hell. Not trusting the local insects, both Lyn and Roxie were wearing protective coveralls as they emerged from the ship.

"Jesus!" said Roxie as the heat hit them, and for once Lyn felt blasphemy was justified.

Within a couple of minutes they found that there were five tons of fresh manna waiting, and two hundred tons spoiled. Joe Gunther, the PDC base commander, jumped around in his vexation. "If the ship had been four months earlier," he said to Lyn, almost in tears, "practically all the loss on the Bullance books would have been paid up!"

Lyn wondered if it was really impossible to keep a ship waiting on Bullance, ready to blast off whenever she was fully loaded. However, he didn't weaken his position as PDC troubleshooter by making what might be a silly suggestion.

Gunther's jumping about irritated Roxie. "Why don't you just lash out instead of holding it in?" she demanded.

Gunther started to say something he might have regretted.

"This," said Lyn, "is Miss Roxanne Dainton."

Gunther checked himself immediately. "Delighted to make your acquaintance, Miss Dainton," he gasped. "Glad you found yourself able to visit Bullance. We'll show you as much as we can before the *Meredith* blasts off."

"She's not going back with the ship," said Lyn. "She's staying here."

Gunther goggled. Before he could say anything, Roxie saw something silvery moving in the jungle and exclaimed: "Look! Is that one of the Maniacs?"

Gunther recovered himself. "We don't use that word, Miss Dainton," he said, playfully chiding. "The Bullanese have enough sense to realize that the term is derogatory and—"

"I'll call them what I bloody well like."

Lyn thought the opportu-

nity as good as any to show how things stood. "No, Miss Dainton. If you look at the terms of my contract, you'll find that I can send you right back on the ship if you don't behave yourself."

For a moment it looked as if Roxie would explode. Then her fury blew itself out in irritation. "What the hell does it matter what you call the lousy bugs?" She calmed herself down. "Okay, I'll call them Bullanese, Boss."

Gunther's eyes widened again. Neither the way Roxie talked nor the way this man Barr treated her was what he would have expected.

They were standing outside the PDC base, a large white building at one side of a huge clearing which was used as a landing field both for spaceships and the landplanes the base staff used.

IT WAS obvious at a glance that Bullance was an alien world. The predominant color was a startling yellow-green, with tomato reds a close second. Nearly all the bushes and trees had the same basic shape, a strange one to people from Earth. Strong, hard trunks which drew up no moisture held the main bodies of the plants well clear of the ground. Temporary roots at the end of springy arms dug themselves down into rich soil, ready to fly up out of danger when touched, leaving

only expendable tips to their fate. Most of the herbivorous animals of Bullance were very small, and plants had developed in this way for self-defense.

"That's Zin," said Gunther, as the Bullanese emerged from the bush. "And I can guess what he wants." He sighed.

"First time I ever saw a bug with clothes on," said Roxie.

Bullanese were not insects, yet it was not unnatural that Roxie should choose to call them bugs. There was a certain insectlike exaggeration of even their humanoid characteristics. They had big heads, tiny chests, bulbous pelvises and long, spindly limbs, and their skin, though soft and very like human skin, was a slaty gray color which gave it the appearance of being a shell. Nevertheless, they could be quite attractive in an alien kind of way, for instead of the awkwardness which would have meant ugliness, their movements had a smoothness and grace which had beauty in it. It was merely not a human beauty.

They were attractive as the long-limbed pixies drawn by human artists were attractive. Their clothing helped. Zin wore a V-shaped breechcloth which made his pelvis look less bulbous and a loose jacket like a bolero, both in a brilliant orange material

like satin, but finer and brighter.

Zin ignored Lyn altogether, looked curiously and doubtfully at Roxie, nodded his head and began to speak in a high singsong voice to Gunther.

One of the first things he must do, Lyn decided, was learn the language. Gunther might or might not resent him, though, if he did, he had given no indication of the fact so far, but it wouldn't do to be able to communicate with the Bullanese only through Gunther.

Roxie fidgeted impatiently in the throbbing heat as the conversation went on and on. Presently she shrugged, unzipped her coveralls and stripped them off. Her shorts were very short.

When the discussion was finished, Zin shot another curious glance at Roxie. This time he was flabbergasted. In the first place, he hadn't seen her take off her coveralls and the transformation appeared to strike him as magical. In the second place, the lines of her body, previously concealed, now could hardly have been more obvious, and Zin clearly had never seen any lines like them.

As he went away he kept glancing back over his shoulder at Roxie. He seemed reluctant to go at all.

"You've made a hit, Miss Dainton," said Lyn.

She turned on him irritably. "Are you doing that to annoy me?"

"Doing what?" asked Lyn.

"Calling me Miss Dainton."

"No. I'll call you anything you like." But Lyn spoke absently. He wanted to hear what Joe Gunther had to say. Gunther wasn't looking happy.

"The Bullanese want a ton of manna back," said Gunther. "That means only four tons for the *Meredith*."

"Don't tell me you're going to give them it!" Roxie exclaimed.

"Have to. They only bring it in on condition that they can have it back if they need it. I told him they could have all the spoiled manna too. It's no good to us."

"What good is it to them?" Lyn asked.

"They make cloth with it. Like what he was wearing."

Manna was very useful stuff, apparently. The material Zin had worn would command a high price on Earth, perhaps enough to make it worth while shipping it. Another thing for Lyn Barr to look into.

"Shall we go into the base?" Gunther said.

"Bloody high time," Roxie grumbled.

VI

WHEN Lyn decided to go out for a walk after lunch, he found to his sur-

prise that Roxie wanted to go with him. Perhaps "wanted" was too strong a word to describe her sullen admission that she wouldn't mind coming along.

"It would be an unexpected pleasure," he said. "But I'm only going to have a look around."

"I know." She swore suddenly. "I've a good mind to go back on the *Meredith*."

"Why?" Lyn asked. If Roxie went, half his job went too, but he wouldn't be sorry. The problem of manna supplies interested him and he would be quite happy to concentrate entirely on that.

"There are twenty-nine human beings on Bullance," said Roxie bitterly, "and you and I are the only two under forty."

Lyn smiled slightly. "You could have found that out before you came."

"The *Meredith* isn't blasting off until tomorrow. Why is the crew still cooped up in it? Why don't they come out and stretch their legs?"

"We've been immunized against Bullanese bacteria and they haven't. It wouldn't be worth the trouble and the expense. If there was anything to do or see on Bullance, it would be different."

The subtle approach seemed to be working. Roxie's frown became blacker. But then abruptly she seemed to sense what Lyn was thinking. "Why

don't you want me to stay here?"

"If you believe that," said Lyn, "you can't believe any more that my job is to be a nursemaid to you."

"Maybe I don't. Why do you want to get rid of me? Am I ugly? Do you hate women?"

"You're not ugly and if you were anybody but Roxie Dainton I'd be glad for you to stay."

"What does *that* mean?"

Lyn looked at her thoughtfully. She now wore green-and-white striped shorts and halter. She was spectacular, all right.

"All the men on the station you could possibly be interested in are married and have their wives with them," he said patiently. "And, as you have already pointed out, they are all over forty. Nevertheless, within a week you'll have the base in an uproar."

She liked that. "I guess so."

"That's nothing to be proud of. Any other bitch as young and pretty as you could do the same."

"Who are you calling a bitch?"

"My job will be a hell of a lot easier if you go home."

"Who's swearing now?"

"I don't use words like you do."

"Like these?" she said, and listed them.

Lyn didn't hesitate. He took her by the shoulder and led her into one of the washrooms

just inside the base. She didn't struggle until he began to push her over a basin.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" she demanded.

"You wash your body, don't you?" he said. "You wouldn't like it to be offensive. Well, your mouth is."

HE BENT her back over the sink. Although she fought violently, she was helpless, unable to make the best use of her strength or tear him with her nails. Holding her wrists above her head with one hand, he crammed soap in her mouth.

Not for quite a while did he release her, by which time her teeth and lips were covered with soap and her curses were smothered in bubbles. When she was free she gathered herself to dive at him, but changed her mind. It was more urgent to wash out her mouth.

She did so. Lyn had an opportunity to walk out on her. He didn't take it.

When she had spat out all the soap she straightened to face him furiously. Her face was red, her hair a mess, and one of the straps of her halter had snapped.

"I could kill you!" she breathed, and he believed her. "You did that so I'd leave on the *Meredith*, didn't you?"

"If you want the truth, I did it to try to make you talk cleaner. How would you feel

if people found out that you wore your slip for a month without washing it?"

"You're crazy. I don't—"

"You talk as if you did."

As she appeared to have no comeback, he turned to go. "I take it I'm no longer to be honored with your company?"

She shrugged. "You take it wrong. I might as well come. There's nothing else for me to do."

Lyn had had talks with Gunther and Dr. Allison, the station's medical officer, to supplement his theoretical knowledge of Bullance. There was no danger from the Bullanese, no danger from the small animals of the jungle, no danger at all in walking about except the risk of getting lost, which was slight with the station's radio mast to guide them.

Lyn and Roxie walked in silence for a while. There were a lot of Bullanese about, all staring at Roxie. She ignored them.

There was certainly very little to see, once the first impression of a yellow-green and red world had been established. There were no mountains in this part of Bullance, and no seas. Small rivers fed a multitude of lakes which were rarely as much as a mile long. As far as the eye could see there was nothing but flat country overgrown with yellow-green plants and red plants, with

an occasional stream or lake breaking the monotony.

"Is there any danger in swimming in these lakes?" Roxie asked abruptly.

"None at all. The fish are like ours—they stay out of the way of anything bigger than themselves."

"I wish I'd brought a swimsuit out here with me."

"Bathe without it."

She looked at him sharply. "Of course I'm shameless too?"

"Well, aren't you?"

She didn't answer. Nothing more was said until she almost tripped over one of the Bullanese. "Oh, obscene these Maniacs!" she exclaimed irritably. Her irritation dissolved in a grin. "That just came out. But it doesn't matter. You've got no soap with you."

It was the first time he had seen her smile. He changed his mind. Well, why not say so?

"I hope you don't go back in the *Meredith*," he said.

"Obscenity," she said rudely. "You're a nursemaid after all."

That was why not say so. She couldn't take anything resembling a compliment.

"Did you ever love anybody, Roxie?" he asked.

"Yes, and got kicked in the belly."

"Naturally. You invited it."

She frowned. "Huh?"

"You always get what you



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want, don't you?" Lyn said.
"Obscenity," she said again,
and turned and left him.

VII

THAT night Gunther told Lyn excitedly that twenty-five tons of manna had been brought in during the day.

"Isn't that usual?" Lyn asked. "I mean, don't they bring it in when the ship arrives?"

"They never have before. You remember, just this morning Zin came to ask for some back. I thought it would be weeks before they brought any more."

"They seemed very interested in Miss Dainton. Could that have anything to do with that?"

"Interested? What do you mean?"

"When we went out for a walk we saw scores of them. They were in every bush, all staring at Roxie."

Gunther became excited. "That's it, Mr. Barr. That's it! They're a polite race. If they're curious about something around here, they bring manna—as an excuse to come and watch. It's happened once or twice when we were building things or making a dam."

"Then I'll hold back the *Meredith* and make sure the Bullanese get a chance to see Roxie again tomorrow."

"It won't last. It never does. A couple of days, no more."

"You've tried to make it last?"

"Of course. Offered to teach them how to do things. They come for two days, bringing manna in. Then they stop."

"All the same, we'll keep this business going as long as we can."

That night, before sleeping, Lyn considered the possibility of turning Roxie into a white goddess. The corny tactic, he knew, worked more often with primitive peoples than it had any right to.

Now what would be a goddess for a race prepared to accept a living creature as divine? A beautiful creature, for a start. Roxie was that, even to the Bullanese. Or maybe she was fascinatingly ugly. It didn't matter—Roxie still had something which the other twenty-eight men and women at the station obviously didn't have. Next, intelligence. Well, Roxie was more intelligent than a Bullanese genius. True, many of the other twenty-eight were more intelligent, but they didn't look like Roxie.

Anything he could do to set up Roxie as a Bullanese goddess, Lyn was prepared to try. Meantime he had given orders holding the *Meredith* for a few days—and he no longer had any thought of trying to persuade Roxie to leave on the ship.

This might be the thing he was looking for.

Next morning Roxie didn't want to go out.

The Bullanese never entered the station. If Roxie was to be on view, she had to go out.

Lyn considered telling Roxie his real reason, but decided against it. He already knew that cooperation wasn't a word in her dictionary.

"Let's go for a swim," he said.

"I don't feel like it."

"You're not ill, are you?"

"I just don't feel like it. Leave me alone."

"Okay," he said.

His patience was rewarded. An hour later, having searched for diversion in the station and failed to find it, Roxie came looking for him, carrying a towel.

At first, as they made their way to the nearest lake, they saw no Bullanese. Then there were a few in the bushes. Then even more than there had been the day before—scores, perhaps hundreds.

Lyn rejoiced, hoping Gunther was right and they wouldn't come without bringing manna.

"I hear the bugs brought in twenty-five tons yesterday," Roxie abruptly said.

"That's right," said Lyn guardedly.

"That just shows, doesn't it? They've got it all the time, stored somewhere. All we have to do is beat a few of them."

"Hobley's here to stop that."

"Hobley can be bribed, can't he?"

"I doubt it. I get the idea he's a little stupid, but conscientious and thoroughly honest."

"What a dull man he must be." And that marked the end of Roxie's interest in Hobley or in manna.

She had a swimsuit under her dress. They bathed for half an hour, and Lyn found that it was not merely possible, but quite easy, to have fun with Roxie. She liked swimming and was a good swimmer. At a pool she could be an ordinary girl.

Afterward, as they lay in the hot sun, letting it dry them, he wasn't in any hurry to start talking. He knew already that conversation with Roxie was rather like walking a tightrope over a bed of nettles.

"I wanted to go to a dangerous world," Roxie said, "not one like this."

"Why? Want to get killed?"

"No, but I don't think I'm meant to live long."

"You mean you don't want to live long?"

"I never want to be old." She shuddered.

"Being old is all right if somebody loves you."

She laughed her hard, strident laugh. "Are you going to make love to me?"

"No. I'm just telling you

that if you got people to start liking you, you could face the thought of being old."

SHE laughed again, mirthlessly. "When people like me, it's the old man's millions they like."

"Not necessarily," said Lyn Barr.

"How can I tell?"

"If it was me, you would know it. As of now, I don't like you. Despite your father's millions. So, if I suddenly started to like you, you'd know it was because of you, not your father's millions."

"Think I care a damn whether you like me or not?" she asked scornfully. "If I ever fall in love again, it's not likely to be with you."

"I'm not talking about love. You may not care whether I love you or not, but you do want me to like you."

She was silent for a long time.

There were Bullanese all around them, silently watching, but it was possible to forget them after a while. Roxie seemed to have done so already. Lyn didn't want to forget them. He was keeping Roxie on show as long as possible.

"Anyway," she said bitterly, "you don't like me. You've said so."

"It's the truth," he nodded. "But I'm a simple sort of fellow. If you become likeable, I'll like you."

The hard laugh rang out again. "So I was right. You're trying to make me a solid citizen."

"Roxie, do you ever take a good look at yourself?"

"Physically, all the time. The way you're talking about, no."

"Even if you do, you can't see the important thing. People don't."

"And you can?"

"Yes. You won't find happiness, Roxie, in new things, things you haven't experienced before, like being premier of a PDC world. If you're ever going to find happiness, it'll be in the ordinary things, the things you've already scorned."

"When I want a sermon, I'll ask for it."

"Sermon or not, Roxie, that's the truth."

There was another long silence. This time Lyn broke it. "Anyway," he said, "I like you a lot better today than I did yesterday."

"Why?"

"You know why."

She didn't answer, so she probably did. She hadn't been obscene or profane all day.

That day the Bullanese brought more than thirty tons of manna.

VIII

WITHIN a week the *Meredith* was fully loaded, and Lyn sent her off with a

personal letter to Edgar Dainton.

It had been agreed that Lyn was neither to be blamed if the *Meredith* returned empty nor congratulated if she had a good load. The real test was the size of the second consignment, after Lyn had been on Bullance for two months.

However, the *Meredith* had the first full load of fresh manna ever to be consigned, and Lyn saw no reason why he shouldn't take the credit for it. His letter wasn't modest; it was almost cocky. If he succeeded, he did not want his success to be ascribed to blind luck.

Roxie didn't leave on the *Meredith*. "I guess I might as well stay," she said grudgingly.

Lyn laughed. "You might as well."

She shot a suspicious glance at him. "What's so funny?"

"Admit it, Roxie. You've been happier the last five days than you've been for years."

She shrugged. "Oh, sure. It hasn't been too bad—apart from those bugs following me around everywhere. I've almost been happy. But that's only the first few days. It won't last. It never does."

"If you're determined it won't, it won't"

"Don't be an idiot," she said irritably. "Of course I want to be happy. Who doesn't? It's just—every time I get around to enjoying anything, some-

thing happens and it all crumbles to dust."

"Maybe it won't this time."

"Lyn, tell me the truth. Please. Did my father hire you to try and straighten me out? I've got to know. Please tell me."

"If he did," Lyn observed, "I guess I must be doing a pretty good job. You just said 'please' twice. You never used to do that."

"Lyn, tell me the truth. Please!"

"I'm here to arrange manna shipments," Lyn said carefully. "I told you that and it's true. But your father also said that if I could do anything for you—that was his phrase, 'if you can do anything for Roxie'—Bullance could go to hell."

"I see," Roxie bitterly said. "So you're only obeying orders. Keeping little Roxie out of mischief."

"Would I have told you that just now if that were all there was to it?"

Her expression was half suspicious, half hopeful. He knew that she was beginning to think she was falling in love with him. Whether she was right was another matter. He certainly wasn't in love with her, and he suspected that she was merely responding to decent treatment from somebody who could take a lot without losing his temper.

"Frankly," he said, "at first I'd have been glad to have you leave on the *Meredith*. I get

a hundred thousand dollars if I manage to clear up the trouble with manna supplies. I would have been quite glad to get rid of you and concentrate on that. But I changed my mind."

"When?"

"That day when I crammed soap in your mouth. You didn't bear malice. You came out with me afterward. I admired you for that, Roxie. I hadn't known you could take it as well as handing it out."

"Want me to burst into tears?" she said in a hard voice.

"Not unless you want to."

"Well, I guess if I had a heart to break it was broken a long time ago." With sudden vehemence she added: "Only, for God's sake, Lyn, if you're going to try, do it now and not later."

THE armistice between Roxie and Lyn lasted for nearly a week more without incidents. He still took her swimming every day, although the Bullanese had gradually lost interest in Roxie and the manna deliveries had practically stopped.

Lyn was studying the Bullanese language, which was neither extensive nor complicated, and at the same time learning everything else he could find that might be of use to him.

The Bullanese didn't have much sense of time. It was

clear enough to Lyn now that he would never get them trained to bring in manna every two months or every six. There was no way of *making* them produce it. The code under which PDC was licensed to operate was strictly enforced by Hobley, and it was a fair enough code. No interference with the local people, no threats, no display of force.

All the Bullanese wanted from the Terrans was a supply of small, portable articles to make life easier for them—knives, needles, scissors, matches, electric torches, nails, screws, screwdrivers, compasses, pins, hand mirrors, razors and the like. They had quite enough sales resistance to refuse anything they didn't really need—politely, for they were a polite people.

Consequently, the only bargaining point PDC had was the not very strong desire of the Bullanese for certain items which they could get any time they cared to bring in a little manna. PDC had made strenuous efforts to sell them other things, including buildings, tractors and weather control, but the Bullanese simply didn't want any of these things.

There seemed to be no way to make them bring in manna in April rather than in June. Refusing to take it at the wrong time did more harm than good. They didn't care—

and having got the idea that the strangers no longer wanted manna, and passed it around by the efficient bush telegraph of primitive peoples, they ceased bothering to bring it at all. It was far better from PDC's point of view to take it at any time than to allow the Bullanese to think they were no longer interested.

It was still anybody's guess why the Maniacs had been so interested in Roxie at first, why their interest had waned, whether it could be kindled again and how to go about it.

"Not much is known about the Bullanese, really," Dr. Roza, the psychologist, told Lyn. "They're harmless, courteous, but not very interested in us. They don't regard us as gods and never did. We can fly in the sky, but they don't want to fly. Only an ambitious race would admire our human civilization and they're not ambitious."

"I never thought of that," Lyn admitted. "We think some of the things we do are pretty wonderful. But you're quite right—only a race that wanted to do the same things would be impressed by them."

"They wouldn't care if we all disappeared one night," Roza said. "In the old days, we'd have made them slaves and forced them to respect us, or pretend to. Under the present regulations, we more or less invite them to ignore us."

"What about religion? Do you know about that?" Lyn asked.

Roza shook his head. "There are ceremonies of some kind—at irregular intervals, for they don't even have a calendar and, as you know, there are no seasons on Bullance. I've asked to attend them but I was put off—politely, of course. I don't think they can amount to much, because there's no particular excitement before or after."

Nevertheless, Lyn was very interested in this. He believed that the Bullanese had at first regarded Roxie as some kind of goddess and that their interest had dwindled only when she failed to do whatever their idea of a goddess should do.

Anyway, it was a line to try. And there wasn't much doubt that if he could re-establish Roxie as a goddess, the manna would start rolling in again. Which would be a good thing, for the next ship, the *Henry James*, was due in about seven weeks.

IX

ROXIE hummed to herself as she hurried through the corridors to Lyn's office. When she noticed what she was doing she stopped at once, telling herself sharply that you couldn't make yourself happy just by humming a tune.

About to enter the office, she paused to tuck her blouse down into the waistband of her skirt and pat her hair.

And she heard Lyn say: "I still think we can make them interested in Roxie again. After all, you say there's never been anything like it before—nearly 200 tons in a week."

Gunther's voice said: "They don't come and look at her any more?"

"For the last week we've hardly seen the natives at all. And when we do run into one of them, he looks at Roxie pretty much as he'd look at you or me."

"When they did come, was it only males, or females too?"

"That's the funny thing—nearly as many females as males. They didn't seem to want to touch her, only to be near her, to look at her. I used to get her to sunbathe close to the bushes, so that lots of them could—"

Roxie flung the door open and faced him, eyes blazing. "So all you cared about was manna!"

"Come on in, Roxie. I'll be with you right away."

"Those times we went swimming and sunbathing, you were putting on a show for the bugs. I didn't matter at all—all you cared about was how much manna the God-damned Maniacs brought. When I thought you were interested in me, what you were

really interested in was a hundred thousand dollars!"

Lyn smiled. "How about coming swimming with me, Roxie?"

"No," she screamed, "and I never will again!"

Her high heels struck like machine-gun bullets as she ran down the corridor.

"I'd better go after her," Lyn said to Gunther. "Excuse me."

She wasn't in her room. She wasn't in the station. She wasn't at any of the pools in which she and Lyn had swum. He gave up the search, knowing she'd have to come in sometime.

He didn't curse fate, or himself, or Roxie. Earlier, he hadn't dared tell her that part of his reason for spending all those hours swimming and sunbathing with her had been the effect it seemed to have on manna supplies. By this time, he wouldn't have thought she would fly off the handle like that. But then, part of her trouble was her gloomy certainty that at any moment something would spoil everything and throw her back into the pit.

She had been sure she would find something like this sometime. Being sure, she had found it.

SHE ran through the bush until she was exhausted by the heat. Her thoughts weren't coherent; there was

nothing but a dull misery in her heart. Her anger was gone.

She didn't particularly want to swim, but she was beside a lake and she was hot. She had no towel or bathing suit. Carelessly she threw down her skirt and her blouse, stripped and waded into the water.

When she had swum across the lake she began to feel better. Perhaps there might be excuses for Lyn, she thought. She would never trust him the way she had. She would always be on her guard. All the same, now that he had shown himself to be no better and no worse than most of the men she had known in the past, there was no reason why she shouldn't . . .

Still swimming, she found herself crying. That hadn't happened for years. She had thought she had shed her last tears, that there were none left.

Slowly she began to wade from the lake. Her temper flared again when she saw a Bullanese squatting by her clothes, watching her.

She sank under the water again. "Go away!" she shouted. He didn't move. She swore at him, using all the foul words she hadn't used for nearly two weeks now.

Her rage mounted. Reason told her that since the creature on the bank was of a different species from herself, it didn't matter being naked be-

fore him any more than before a dog or a cat. But she wasn't listening to reason. She wanted to climb out of the water and get dressed.

Suddenly her anger boiled over. "I'll teach you," she muttered, and waded out of the water. The Bullanese continued to stare at her, not moving.

She hit him in the middle and he folded. She hit him several times with small, hard fists. He seemed to have no idea of self-defense, and each time a blow landed he jerked convulsively.

When he fell on the ground, twitching, Roxie turned her back on him, dressed and left him where he lay.

At the entrance to the station she met Lyn. "You've got trouble," she said grimly. "I've just beaten up one of your Maniacs."

She pushed past him into the building.

Hobley arrested her five minutes later.

X

THE Bullanese wasn't dead, but he wasn't far from it. Two of the porters carried him to the nearest village, Morat, on a stretcher. The Bullanese in the village took charge of him without making a fuss about it; perhaps they assumed there had been an accident, and the injured Maniac, being unconscious, was

in no position to give his story.

At the PDC base, Hobley convened a court. Lyn didn't say a word. Although he was Premier of Bullance, immediately a crime was committed, all of Lyn's power passed to Hobley.

The charge was attempted murder.

The trial was brief and businesslike. Roxie was sentenced to detention within the base until the next ship arrived, and then deportation.

"And you're very lucky, Miss Dainton," Hobley told her, "that we don't have power to do more than deport you. Natives on PDC worlds have the same rights as humans. You should get ten years for this."

Roxie said nothing. She had been white, frightened, incoherent, very much alone ever since she had been arrested. The court proceedings seemed like a bad dream.

It was Gunther who brought the steel band and fitted it on her wrist. "You know what this is, Miss Dainton? You can go anywhere you like within the station, but if you attempt to leave it, a needle will prick your arm and you'll black out. You understand?"

She nodded. This couldn't be happening either.

Then everybody was filing out and she was left alone in the projection room which had been used for the court.

She sat down and let her forehead rest on the table in front of her.

Only a couple of hours ago she had been happy. She had believed in Lyn Barr as she had never believed in any man before, almost loved him, certainly respected him as she had never thought she'd respect any human being again.

Then her idealistic picture of him had been shattered, and in her angry misery she had attacked a native and . . .

She still was a little hazy about that. Even after the solemn words and grim faces of the court, it still seemed to her that all she'd done was what anybody would have done in the heat of the moment—anybody but Lyn, of course.

There she went again, thinking Lyn was something special. In fact, he had shown himself to be just like . . .

"Roxie," said Lyn.

She sat up. Suddenly she was crying, and in his arms for the first time.

"If only you hadn't run out like that," Lyn said when she had dried her eyes. "Roxie, you gave yourself a lot of heartache for nothing. You know that now, don't you?"

"No, I don't know it now." She tried to be sharp and bitter and unforgiving, but it's hard to cut a man down to size when you've just been convicted of a crime.

"Well, I'm telling you, then.

What did you hear? That it was the Maniacs' interest in you that made them bring manna to the station. That ought to give you a kick, instead of making you furious."

"You know it wasn't that. It was learning that all you cared about was—"

"Roxie, that first day we went out I didn't know the natives were going to bring manna because of you. Yesterday and today I knew they weren't, because they stopped days ago. Did I say to you, 'Roxie, the natives don't care about you any more, so I'm sure you'll understand if I haven't any time for you now—good-by—thanks for your help'?"

"No, but that first week you were thinking about the manna, not about me."

Lyn grinned. "If you think I can lie beside you and think about manna, with you in that white swimsuit of yours, you must have a very curious idea of the things men think about."

Her eyes were hardly dry, but she was laughing. And she was sorry about the native now, for he'd been beaten up for nothing.

LYN went to the village rather warily, uncertain of his reception. But the Bullanese seemed indifferent to the fact that one of their number had been half killed.

Zin was the one he usually

talked to: "Is the injured man all right?" Lyn asked.

Zin held out his hands in the Bullanese equivalent of the Gallic shrug.

"Did he speak?"

"Yes. Zar said the White Lady por. But some of us went to see and she did not por."

"What is 'por'?"

Zin held out his hands again. Por was por.

Questioning a Bullanese was rather like discussing Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* with a somewhat backward child, but Lyn had nothing to lose.

"Why did you like the White Lady?"

"Because she por."

Lyn tried to work that out. Zar, the Bullanese whom Roxie had injured, had said she por; the Bullanese used to like her because she por.

"She doesn't por now?" he asked.

"No. Some of us went to see, and she does not por."

Zar, who had said Roxie por, had seen her wade nude from a lake. Formerly, when apparently she por, she had sunbathed beside a pool. But that wasn't it; until yesterday she'd continued swimming and sunbathing, yet it seemed she didn't por any more.

"The White Lady is beautiful," Lyn said tentatively.

"Yes."

Quick agreement, but that wasn't it either. She was still

beautiful and she didn't por any more.

Yet there was a possibility there. That the Bullanese, although they belonged to a different race, had found Roxie attractive was beyond doubt. Zin himself, that first day, had found her interesting in coveralls, but more so when she took them off. Yet one could grow tired of even a beautiful girl in a swimsuit, especially if she was of an alien race. But suppose, after one had grown tired of her in a swimsuit, she took it off?

Well, that would explain how Roxie could cease to por except to Zar that morning. And if that explanation was correct, Roxie might be a source of more manna yet, if she could be persuaded . . .

Back at the station, Benders, the language expert, wasn't much help about "por."

"I've come across it once or twice," he said, "without being able to establish its meaning. It's connected with religion somehow."

"That I guessed," Lyn said. "The tentative conclusion I reached was too damned simple. You're sure it's nothing to do with beauty—attraction—even sex as well?"

Benders shook his head. "I'm not sure. Get an invitation to one of the Bullanese religious ceremonies and you might find out. If you do, let me know."

Lyn knew Benders was be-

ing mildly sarcastic, but the suggestion gave him an idea. "I will," he said thoughtfully. "I will."

XI

BEFORE mentioning his plans to Roxie, Lyn went to Hobley to plead with him.

"I'm sorry, Premier," Hobley said firmly. "I haven't got the power to interfere with the sentence. And whether the Bullanese are concerned about the crime or not is neither here nor there. Miss Dainton was found guilty and sentence was passed. I really can't do anything."

"Hobley," said Lyn, "I know you're autonomous and I'm not trying to bribe or intimidate you. But if the base here is abandoned and Bullance is closed to commerce, and if I report that this happened because Mr. Hobley wouldn't cooperate with me, do you think you'll be popular with your own superiors?"

Hobley, who was a fat man, began to sweat. "If that isn't intimidation, I don't know what is."

"Mr. Hobley, you're a man of intelligence. Now, as you no doubt know, the fact that the *Meredith* left with a full load of manna was due entirely to the interest of the Bullanese in Roxie Dainton. If I am to achieve anything before the *Henry James* arrives, I need Roxie Dainton—and I need her outside the station."

Hobley found a face-saver. "Well, of course, if you'll be with her all the time and are prepared to take full responsibility . . ." he said. "After all, I don't want to be uncooperative, Premier."

Roxie was a tougher nut to crack. She didn't get furious and tell him she'd see him in hell first. She merely frowned slightly and said: "Lyn, I wish I knew how to take you. Sometimes I think I could trust you with anything. And other times it seems you'd sell me and your own soul and anything else you could think of, just to have another manna load waiting for the *Henry James*."

"If you did trust me," said Lyn cheerfully, "things would be easier for both of us."

She shook her head somberly. "It isn't as easy as that to start trusting people."

"I'm telling you honestly, Roxie, I'm trying to fix up Bullance for your father, and for the hundred grand I'm going to get for doing it, and at the same time I'm getting to like a girl and she's getting to like me. I haven't made a pass at you yet, have I?"

"No," she said. "You haven't."

"If and when I do, I'll mean it. Doesn't the fact that I haven't, so far, show that you can trust me?"

"I don't know what it shows. I don't know where I'm at, and you're trying to do

so many things at once, I don't know what you really want either."

"If you want to stay cooped up here until the *Henry James* arrives, you can. If you don't, come swimming with me the way we used to."

"Except that I have to swim in the raw and you call all the Maniacs from far and wide to come and look at me."

Lyn grinned. "To tell the honest truth," he said, "all this is an elaborate plot to get you to swim with me."

"I'm not too happy about that either."

"No, but that's all right. I am—and you trust me, don't you, Roxie?"

THE Bullanese came, scores of them. They kept out of the way as much as possible, as before.

After some hesitation, Roxie, who had been relieved of the bracelet meant to keep her a prisoner in the base, threw off her clothes. Lyn kept his bathing trunks on.

They swam and returned to the bank. Roxie had promised to sunbathe and to try to forget the Bullanese ogling her from behind every bush.

But she didn't have to try. Before they reached the bank, the Bullanese were gone, every last one of them.

"Well, it didn't work," she said, throwing her wet hair back out of her eyes.

"I told you," said Lyn, "it

was all an elaborate plot to get you to swim in the raw."

"Lyn, you really don't mind that it didn't work? That the Bullanese don't care about me any more?"

"Roxie, even if you made the Bullanese sick, I'd still like you the way you are."

She reached for her clothes. "This was science, remember?"

"Yes," he said. "You'd better get dressed. Because I'm still not going to make a pass at you, and it's heroic work not to."

"SHE DID not por," said Zin. He wasn't angry—Bullanese were never angry. He didn't blame Lyn—Bullanese never blamed anybody.

"Zin, what do you have to do to por?" asked Lyn Barr.

"I cannot por."

"No, but the White Lady—what was she doing when she did por?"

"Nothing."

Lyn searched in his mind for a formula which might get the right answer. It wasn't ignorance of the language which stumped him; it was the language itself. So there wasn't much hope of finding other words to explain por.

Then Lyn had an idea. "Sometimes you have ceremonies," he said.

"Yes."

"Suppose the White Lady attended one of these ceremonies?"

Zin started to make a polite, roundabout refusal.

But when he was allowed to speak, Lyn said: "If she was present at such a ceremony, she might por."

Zin was silent for a long time. At last he said: "Next time, I will send for you and you will bring the White Lady."

XII

THE *Henry James* arrived three weeks early. All the manna there was at the base was twenty tons which the *Meredith* hadn't been able to take.

Although Lyn had the right to hold the *Henry James* at least three weeks, and more if necessary, he wished she hadn't been early. Something might have happened in the next three weeks—a Bullanese religious ceremony, for instance.

The arrival of the ship, however, did give him an opportunity to make another experiment. He borrowed the prettiest girls on the *Henry James*, had them immunized against Bullanese bacteria, and took them swimming with Roxie.

It was another flop. Quite a few Bullanese came to watch, wildly curious. But apparently not one of the girls could por.

No manna was delivered.

Roxie had been silent and withdrawn while the girls

were around, and especially as Lyn had laughed and had fun with them.

Later, when the girls were back on the *Henry James*, she said: "That little redhead certainly has a nice figure."

"Yes, but you don't need to be jealous," Lyn said. "Her father isn't a millionaire."

Roxie turned to him quickly. "Lyn, I know what it's like now. When I used to compete with another girl for a man—any girl, any man—I always won because I didn't give a damn about either of them. It's easy when you don't care."

Lyn didn't say anything.

"Don't get me wrong," she said. "I know I'm different now, happier, less unsure. And you've done it, Lyn."

He shook his head. "I didn't do anything. If somebody who's all mixed up starts untwisting himself, others can help, but they can't do the job. I told you once I'd like you if you became likable, Roxie. Well, I like you now. I like you a lot."

A COUPLE of weeks passed and then the summons came. There were no regular dates for ceremonies any more than the Bullanese had regular dates for anything. Apparently what happened was simply that everyone felt it was time for a ceremony.

"And you're lucky you only had to wait a couple of

weeks," Roza told Lyn. "We don't know every time they hold a ceremony, naturally. But there's sometimes more than six months between them." He sighed. "I wish I were coming with you."

"Sorry," Lyn said. "The invitation is purely for Roxie, in the hope that she'll por again. And it's assumed I'll go along because they've hardly ever seen Roxie without me."

"Well, don't miss anything," Roza said.

Roxie wasn't keen on the affair. She had never really taken to the Bullanese; despite their alien grace they repelled her, and probably when she had beaten up Zar part of the reason had been a fear of him, an unthinking urge to destroy him.

However, by this time it seemed so natural to do as Lyn told her that she never seriously considered refusing to go, although she did say: "Lyn, does this manna business really matter to you? Suppose the Maniacs never did bring any more and you had to go back and say you'd failed?"

"I wouldn't like to do that," he said. "But I don't suppose it would break me. After all, your father knows that the chances of success aren't high. And I guess he's pretty pleased to get one full shipload—something that never happened before."

"Suppose you do fail—will you be sorry you tried? Will you be sorry you ever came to Bullance?"

He grinned. "I know what you want me to say, but I'm not going to say it. Not now."

He didn't mention any possibility of danger to Roxie, apart from warning her, whatever happened, not to show surprise or lose her head. However, he knew that even a polite, peaceful race like the Bullanese, who had never harmed a human being, might suddenly become very different during the fervor of a religious ceremony. In his pockets he had two guns which between them could fire several hundred bullets singly or very rapidly. And he had arranged for Hobley and Gunther to be listening not too far from the village, ready to come running if any shots were fired.

As for Roxie, he merely had her dress in a shimmering white gown with spangled tights underneath it, just in case she should be called on to take part in the ceremony or preside over it, or anything of the sort. Although lately it had seemed that whatever por was, it had nothing to do with Roxie's physical charms, he still wasn't entirely convinced.

As night fell they went to Morat and Zin motioned them to sit in the shadows of an open hut. The village looked

the same as usual and the only preparation which had been made was that two posts had been driven into the ground about eight feet apart.

"What is going to happen, Zin?" Lyn asked.

Zin disappeared into the shadows, pretending not to have heard.

There was no elaborate ceremonial at the beginning, at any rate. Gradually the clearing in the center of the village filled. There was little or no talking, for the Bullanese were not a talkative race. They stood about in their ordinary clothes as if waiting for a *deus ex machina* to arrive and start the proceedings.

THOUGH Lyn and Roxie were in deep shadow, the Bullanese knew they were there, and periodically shot curious glances at them. There was nothing resembling the eager interest which had once been shown in Roxie.

Presently a wooden box was brought out and all the Bullanese, male and female, crowded around it. Some sort of draw seemed to be going on. When it was over, five of them stood to one side—two women and three men.

Still there seemed to be no excitement, no feeling of anticipation. Someone pointed with a kind of wand and one of the five lay down.

Before Lyn and Roxie sus-

pected what was going to happen, the Bullanese with the wand had driven its sharp point into the bulbous pelvis of the man on the ground. The stick went straight through and pinned the creature to the soft ground beneath him. He moaned, writhing and twitching like an insect on a pin, clearly in mortal agony.

Roxie made a muffled exclamation of horror. Lyn grabbed her arm and pressed it. At such a time, it might be dangerous to draw attention to themselves.

Now there was excitement and pleasure. The Bullanese filed past the dying Maniac, looking down on his agony in simple delight.

A few minutes later the second of the five victims was similarly skewered and his moans mingled with those of the other. Then one of the women was pinned to the ground, and the other man. The four of them screamed and groaned in torture, their gray limbs thrashing about. They formed a square about the two posts.

Roxie closed her eyes, but almost immediately opened them again. Some of the Bullanese held flares now, and it was impossible not to watch the scene in the center of the dark clearing.

There was a sort of pattern in the wanderings of the Bullanese, through the square of

victims, out at the other side and back. Although there was no singing and dancing, everybody was happy—except the four dying creatures with sharp wands through them.

The remaining victim, a young female, stood aside. She was not bound. Only at the last moment, when they came for her, did terror take over and she tried to flee.

They caught her and brought her to the center of the square. Her ankles were tied to one post about five feet from the ground. Her wrists were bound to the other, and she lay in mid-air, stretched taut. About her the four other victims still moaned and writhed.

There was a shout and at the signal the girl tied to the posts was surrounded. For a moment Lyn and Roxie couldn't see what was happening. Then Roxie put her hands over her eyes, and Lyn turned his head away, sickened.

He would have taken Roxie away right then if he could, but it was several hours before they could go. By that time the four skewered Maniacs were dead. They hadn't been eaten. Apparently it wasn't worth eating anybody unless he was alive. The body of the girl, what remained of it, still hung from the posts.

One by one the Bullanese had left the square and gone into their own cottages. At last, when the square was

empty except for the bodies of the five victims, Lyn pulled Roxie to her feet and they began to run back to the base.

She was crying helplessly.

XIII

IN THE large, bright room at the top of the PDC Building, Lyn said: "I took the whole colony off Bullance, with all the most valuable equipment. We're not allowed to interfere."

Dainton shuddered. "Roxie saw this?"

"She's getting over it. She used to think she was cruel. Now she knows she's not."

"I still don't get it. What was por? Why were the Bullanese fascinated by Roxie at first?"

"Nobody guessed that such a primitive race had a kind of telepathy," Lyn said. "Empathy, rather. They draw strength from misery and grief and pain and bitterness. When Roxie arrived on Bullance, she was quite a treat for them. She was por. By just being near her, they could get a real jag—no need to torture one of themselves to death.

"But Roxie stopped being so bitter and miserable. She began to be almost happy. No thanks to the Maniacs—they don't draw grief out; they just stand around and get drunk on it. Anyway, Roxie wasn't so bitter any more. She wasn't in mental agony—ex-

cept that day when she beat up Zar, and as he truthfully told the others, she por again. Only by the time the other Bullanese got close enough to her to sense it, she didn't por any more."

"I see," said Edgar Dainton thoughtfully.

"PDC employees are well balanced, stable. Roxie was the first and only human of her type the Maniacs ever encountered. Now if you really want manna and aren't too concerned about your methods, you can hire a lot of miserable people and send them out to Bullance. You'll get a lot of manna."

"I don't think I will, somehow . . . Hey, sit down! We've hardly started to talk!"

"I've finished," said Lyn pleasantly, "and I've got a date with your daughter. For a change, we're going swimming."

Dainton didn't smile, but his eyes were warm and a little moist. "You are, are you?"

"I'm going to make a pass at Roxie. Do you mind?"

"Mean you never have?"

"Not like this one. I had to see you first and make sure her father's prospects were good enough to marry her."

"Take care of her," Dainton said huskily.

"That's one thing I'm good at," Lyn said. "All Roxie ever needed was love. I'm going to see she gets it—from you and me both."

END

ASSASSIN

Everyone is allowed to commit an error. The trouble was that I couldn't.

I DELIBERATELY dug my heels into the concrete floor of the corridor of the Pentagon. The steel plates on the heels of my black uniform boots heralded my approach with sharp anvil sounds as I marched confidently toward the unmarked door five hundred feet ahead.

What was that expression used by Earth people of the 20th century? I shifted back through my training, shuffled through the facts about Earth's past history with which I had been indoctrinated, searching for the word. *Assassin!* That was it. But the term fell short. It lacked in magnitude. There was a difference in the murder of one person and the assassination of the occupants of an entire planet!

One foot in front of the other, I paced off the distance toward the end of the hallway, carefully duplicating the strut which was a trademark of the Earth Council's Security Police. I'd practiced the peculiar, jolting method of walking a thousand times, but I began to feel the effects of Earth's heavier gravity before I had covered half the distance. It had been impossible to simulate the difference in gravity in my training.

The two guards standing outside the door alertly watched my approach. When I was still four paces away, one of them ordered me to stop. They ignored as though they were not there the gold stars prominently displayed on the shoulders of my tunic.

The guard on the left said, "Your ID card, sir."

The guards were well trained. They would not hesitate to shoot if I made the slightest slip.

I handed the card to him and watched as he held it up to a visi-scanner in the wall. The scanner glowed into life and purred softly, rapidly checking the invisible identification codings on the card against the ID component of Earth's Master Machine. Then it dulled and was silent. The strident alarm siren over the scanner remained inactive. The ID card was returned to me and the guards snapped

smartly to attention as I went on into the room beyond the door.

I had passed the first test.

THE reception room was small. Thick carpeting deadened the clump of my heels as I marched toward the chromed desk guarding a second unmarked door. A flawlessly proportioned redhead sat behind the desk. Her eyes and face showed no expression when I stopped in front of her. Her tight-fitting uniform was black and bore the gold trim of the Security Police.

Constricting my throat, I let the words snap out crisply, as I had been trained.

"General Spicer," I said, "commanding general of the Security Police, reporting to the Secretary of Defense. As requested."

I waited.

Her eyes, still showing no outward expression, ran over me rapidly. Then she thumbed a button on the desk and a screen, recessed into the chromed surface, glowed into life.

Almost immediately, a full-face reproduction of the features of General Spicer appeared on the screen in color. She checked the image against my face, her eyes flickering to the tiny scar under my left eye and to the old blaster burn across my right ear. When the image changed

to a profile view, I turned my head to give her the same angle.

She nodded, pressing the button on her desk which darkened the screen.

She said, "You're early. Your appointment with Secretary Bartlett is—"

"For 1300 hours," I filled in automatically, when she hesitated in one last routine test. "I was in the building on another matter, however, and came here after I had finished my other business."

"Yes, of course," she said. "Please take a seat. Senator Chambers is ahead of you, but his business will not take long."

I fought back the sudden impulse to pivot and stare in the direction her eyes were indicating. *Senator Carl Chambers*. My briefing on him had been lengthy. For 60 Earth years, he had headed the un-Earth Activities Committee. As General Spicer, I was supposed to have a nodding acquaintance with him, but no more than that. During the years, our rivalry had become legend. His unanticipated presence in the waiting room could prove disastrous. Chambers would not be fooled easily.

Turning slowly, I nodded stiffly and curtly in Chambers' direction and then selected a chair across the room from him.

The senator's head merged

directly into the shoulders of his grossly rotund body. Small, round eyes stared unblinkingly at me from the red pudginess of his face. They hesitated on the black swagger stick which I held loosely in my right hand, moved on, and then returned to it. The invisible scars, made by the electro-surgical knives in redesigning my body, began to tense slowly. I shifted the swagger stick in my hand.

Then the redheaded secretary stood up. She said, "Secretary Bartlett will see you now, Senator."

FOR a fraction of a time, I thought Senator Chambers had not heard her. His expressionless eyes were still on me. Then, with a grunt, he lifted himself to his feet and disappeared through the door behind her. A tiny clicking noise indicated that it locked automatically.

I shifted my gaze and saw that the secretary was looking at me intently. It was impossible to guess at what might be going on behind those eyes. The tension began to build inside me again, but I kept my own eyes as expressionless as hers.

The girl picked up a folded piece of paper out of a receptacle on her desk and brought it over to me.

She said, "While you're waiting, General, you might like to read the latest fac-

simile. Or have you already seen it?"

I shook my head. "I saw the 1100 fac-report, but I missed this one."

She handed it to me and returned to her desk. There was just the slightest suggestion of a rolling movement in her walk, not at all unpleasant.

When I looked down at the facsimile sheet, the headline screamed silently up at me. I swiveled my eyes over at the secretary, but she was working her recordo-writer, her fingers moving rapidly, mechanically.

The headline read: ALIEN INVADER DISCOVERED! The story that followed reported that two Security Police guards had intercepted someone who looked like and was dressed like an Earthman, trying to enter the Senate at 1109 hours that morning. A discrepancy had been discovered during the routine ID card check and the imposter had tried to escape. The guards had opened fire at close range, scoring two direct hits.

While the account was obviously censored, it intimated that a full report to be released later by Security Police Headquarters would be almost unbelievable. It hinted that the hideous mess revealed when the guards' weapons had ripped through the surprisingly soft body armor of the impostor positively con-

firmed the fact that the individual was an enemy alien.

Before I could read any further, there was a muted tone from the direction of the desk. The secretary acknowledged the signal, spoke several words which I couldn't hear, then looked at me.

She said, "You may go in now, General Spicer."

I placed the facsimile sheet on her desk and waited while she activated the circuit, which would release the catch on her side of the door.

Who had it been? There had been four of us. Volunteers. We had been selected, briefed and trained separately. We had been housed separately during the mental and physical tortures of the surgical and the psych labs. The ship which had brought us to Earth had released us at separate points above the Earth capital. Only our ultimate goal was the same. But now there was one less of us to accomplish that goal! And we had lost the element of surprise.

The door clicked twice and swung open. I stepped through, just in time to see the rotund shape of Senator Chambers go out a private exit on the far side of the room. Both doors closed at almost the same moment and I stood alone before the Secretary of Defense for the planet Earth.

The secretary sat behind a desk on the far side of the

room. He was a powerful man, in keeping with the importance of the job he filled. But the huge memory bank which he relied upon and which filled the entire wall behind his desk seemed to dwarf him.

Without looking up immediately, Secretary Bartlett carefully rewound a tape he had been referring to and fed it back into the open mouth of the memory unit.

HE SAID, "Spicer, we've been talking about you. Do you have anything new on this alien incident? Chambers said an impulse cleared the Master Machine last night, indicating there may have been some sort of ship overhead."

"No, sir," I lied. "My people are working on it, but we don't have much more to go on than appeared in the latest fac-report."

"If there was a ship overhead, it was protected by a new type of anti-identification device. The Master Machine probed for more than six minutes and registered only a void. Chambers, of course, is always—"

Bartlett didn't finish the sentence. His words trailed off into a moment of puzzled silence as he turned and looked squarely at me for the first time.

Something had gone wrong. Something that I had done or hadn't done had revealed to

him that I wasn't General Spicer.

Secretary Bartlett started to rise. "Why, you're not Spicer! You're an impostor!"

His eyes displayed neither fear nor surprise, but his hand was less than a time point from the alarm buzzer on the top of his desk when I touched the tiny stud on the hilt of my useless-looking swagger stick.

For the tick of a pulse, he sat there with his body bathed in the colored ray, his finger poised above the warning buzzer. Then his body began to glow. I closed my eyes when the heat and brightness reached my face. When I opened them, there was nothing left of Bartlett but a swirl of dust motes.

Stepping behind the desk, I stripped off the thin plastic mask which had disguised my features to look like those of General Spicer. My hands moved almost automatically. Each motion had been rehearsed, timed, analyzed, and timed again.

I reversed my coat, hiding the gold markings of the Security Police, and revealing the precious-metal insignia which had been worn by the Secretary of Defense. The now-useless ID card, which I had obtained earlier when I destroyed the real General Spicer, was dropped into the office incendiary tube, along with the mask and the remov-

able steel cappings of my boots.

By the time I had finished, only the swagger stick remained to connect me with General Spicer. I carefully telescoped its length, twisting and turning the artfully designed tubing, until it was identical to Bartlett's cane of state, leaning against the desk. The real cane I disposed of by dropping it into the incendiary tube after the other articles.

I turned the stiff black collar of my coat up, in the same manner that Bartlett had worn his. The upturned collar hid the tiny metal electrodes protruding from the base of my neck, under each ear.

WHEN I sat down behind the desk, the image reflected up at me from the chromed top was, feature for feature, that of Defense Secretary Bartlett. The electro-surgical knives, wielded by experts, had done a good job. I grimaced. I puffed out my cheeks. I rolled my eyes. And, in turn, the reflected image grimaced, puffed out its cheeks, and rolled its eyes. The texture of my skin was that of Bartlett's. Even the pore structure.

This had been the final big hurdle. The rest was now up to me.

No! More accurately, the rest depended upon routine—a routine established more

than 70 Earth years ago—a routine so inflexible that it had not been broken for a single day. My mission was to break that routine.

Destruction of Spicer and Bartlett was important only as a means to an end. As soon as they were missed, others would fill their places. I had to destroy *all* Spicers and *all* Bartletts. I had to destroy the residents of Washington, of London, of New York, of Earth!

My mission was to destroy so that we could live. That was what the technicians in the psych-labs had told me. That was what the physicians behind the electro-surgical knives had told me. It had been drummed into me over and over, through every phase of the mental and physical preparation that I had been put through.

So I sat in Bartlett's office, looking like Bartlett, waiting. I knew almost to the exact time point when the buzzer on the desk in front of me would sound. I expected it, but when the strident tone filled the room, I jumped.

I thumbed the switch on the desk video-com and the features of the redheaded secretary looked out at me from the recessed screen. I deepened my voice to mimic Bartlett's.

"Yes, Meta?"

The video-com was a two-way security system and I knew that she could see me,

too. She continued to stare, and I felt the scar tissue tighten around the electrodes in my neck.

Through some flaw in transmission, for a brief moment, I thought I saw the twinkle of an expression deep in her eyes. But that was impossible. Her lips twitched and the transmission flaw, or whatever it might have been, was corrected. Her eyes were as inscrutable as ever.

She said, "It's 1324, sir. The inspection group will be here in two minutes. Shall I bring them in?"

I nodded my head to one side slightly, in a manner peculiar to Bartlett. "Thank you, Meta. Yes, of course. Bring them in as soon as they arrive."

I switched the video-com off and let my fingers lightly play with the button on the desk that activated the lock on Bartlett's private door into the inner corridor. It was a temptation to open the door and attempt to go the rest of the way on my own. But I wouldn't make it. Not even disguised as Defense Secretary Bartlett. I had been warned not to try.

MY ONLY hope lay in the routine set up by Earth's scientists more than 70 years ago—the daily inspection of the unit. As a member of the inspection party, I could pass through the security guards. More important, as a member

of the group, I would arrive at the protective force sphere at the hub of the Pentagon at the only time and at the only place the force sphere could be breached.

I waited.

Precisely at the end of Meta's two minutes, the lock buzzed on the door to the reception room. I touched the control which opened the door and stood as the group filed into the room. My briefings on each of them had been exhaustive, but I examined their faces for some sign that one or more might penetrate my disguise as Bartlett.

The redheaded Meta nodded. She had been with Bartlett as his security secretary for 70 years. Senator Chambers, as a representative of the electorate, darted rapid glances around the room as soon as the door had closed, counting noses. General Whit Marshall, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the police systems, nodded with the cold reserve of the high-ranking military to the higher-ranking civilian. The fourth member of the group, Chet Meyers, chief Master Machine technician, was the only one to speak.

The lanky Meyers looked around the room. "Where's General Spicer, sir? Senator Chambers was telling us you were going to invite him because of this scare today."

The invisible scars which

cobwebbed across my body from the electro-surgical knives tensed so suddenly that I almost screamed. I made myself reach for my cane casually. I had come so close!

No, wait—there was the bitter rivalry between Chambers and Spicer. Chambers was too complete a politician to pass up an opportunity to discredit General Spicer.

His black pin-prick eyes darted up toward the time unit on the wall.

"There's no time to wait, Meyers," he said eagerly. "Spicer knows the schedule. We must go without him."

Conscious of the stares of Meta and Meyers, I pushed the button which opened the door into the inner corridor.

I looked directly at the Master Machine technician. "I asked Spicer to get a late report on the incident for us. But you know that Chambers is right—we cannot afford to wait any longer. Perhaps he'll catch up."

We followed the corridor toward the hub of the Pentagon. Senator Chambers led the way, almost at a trot, as though he were afraid that Spicer would catch up. General Marshall and Meyers, hard put to keep up, were strung out behind him, with Meta and me bringing up the rear.

That was the way we went through the check points manned by the security guards.

Twice I caught Meta looking at me. At one of the check points, I thought she was going to say something. I lifted the tip of my cane and put my finger near the stud, but she remained silent.

THE tension began to mount inside me as we approached the door opening on the invisible force wall. Through the wall, I could see the squat, ugly building in the center of the hub of the Pentagon, which was our destination. I held my cane ready. But even a CT-bomb wouldn't break through the force field.

As we drew near the final guard point, a scrubwoman who had been working on the floor of the corridor picked up her bucket and fell in with our party.

Chambers was already gesturing at the guard to set the combination, which would open the force wall at precisely 1330. I looked at the time unit on my wrist and saw that we had twenty seconds to wait. I resisted the betraying impulse to rub the irritated area around the electrodes set in my neck.

When I looked up from the time unit, everything was too quiet. Senator Chambers was no longer dancing around impatiently. He was staring at the bucket carried by the scrubwoman.

The inside of the bucket was not even damp. And the

mop she had been using was dry. The implication must have hit both Chambers and me at the same moment. I wanted to shout a warning.

Chambers jumped back against the wall, yelling at the guard, "Shoot her! Shoot! She is an alien!"

The scrubwoman did the wrong thing. She turned and tried to run, her legs lifting awkwardly against the pull of the unaccustomed gravity. But the guard's weapon was already at his shoulder. The low-velocity missile thudded into the body of the scrubwoman, flipping her up into the air in a graceless somersault. She landed on the concrete floor with a second thud, which echoed softly down the long hall. A pool slowly widened around her body and she lay still.

I looked at my wrist time unit again. It was 1330. The door through the force wall was open. I went past the huddled heap lying on the floor, careful not to step in the pool of moisture.

Too hideous to put into words in a public fac-report! That's what the facsimile sheet had hinted about the broken body of the other "alien." Two from four left only two. But the door through the force wall was open. I had to get through the door and into the building.

Senator Chambers stepped out from behind the guard

and blocked the doorway. His little eyes flashed from one expressionless face to another as he tried to come to some inner decision. His shoulders slumped.

"I—I don't like it," he said. "The door is open now. I think perhaps we had better wait for General Spicer, after all."

But Meta shook her head and pushed past Chambers. She said, "No. You know the routine as well as we, Senator. We are required to inspect the unit. Leave the guard on duty here."

I TOOK advantage of the indecision of the others and pushed through the door after her toward the squat, ugly little building that was my goal.

Meta was almost to the door of the building when I heard Chambers yell.

"Stop her, Secretary Bartlett! She's malfunctioning. We've all been ordered to wait outside for an ID check." I ignored him and he yelled again. "Guard, open fire on the girl. Don't let her get inside that door!"

But he was too late. Meta disappeared through the door into the black building. I stepped inside just as it slammed shut and the first missile smashed against the door from the guard's weapon.

The building was not large. The Master Machine squatted like a huge, thick-bodied black

spider in the center of the building. A cobweb of power lines and control cables crisscrossed the floor and fed into the base of the unit.

A myriad of tiny moving parts, levers and cams and elbowed arms and gears pulsed and shifted and moved to give the impression that the Master Machine was breathing, that it was alive. Tiny multicolored lights twinkled on and off. Giant vacuum tubes hummed and glowed. And all the while, it munched on endless tapes.

The black monster was the heart of Earth's civilization, and it was the means of it. As I started toward the machine, a grid at the top turned slowly and ogled me. Almost immediately, a red tube blinked on, and the moving parts on one section of the machine plunged into a frenzied rhythm of action.

I ran forward, breathing heavily under the strain of the unaccustomed gravity. I had only seconds in which to act. At any moment, Senator Chambers and the guards would be coming through the door behind me.

I raised the cane and touched the stud.

The finger of lavender light knifed toward the machine, searching for its heart and memory unit.

The ray fused and melted and burned, cutting deeper and deeper into the maze of

wires and tubes and relays. There was a blinding flash and one section of the machine ground to a stop. Other sections immediately increased their tempo of movement.

Behind me the door slammed open, and Senator Chambers and two guards stumbled into the building.

Chambers yelled, "He's over there in front of the Master Machine. Hurry up . . . and . . . shoot! Before it's . . . too late! *Shoot!*"

His face almost a cherry red, Chambers danced out of the way. The guards raised their weapons and sighted.

Then the ray from my cane cut deeply into the very innermost section of the master unit and the machine died. A dial on the front of the blackened, twisted mess spun slowly to a stop. There was no more noise and no more movement.

It was done.

AS I released the stud on the cane, the weapons of the guards were pointed directly at my back. Chambers' eyes were like two black marbles, staring at me, his head strained forward to watch the results of the missiles.

I took a careful step to the left. And another. And then another. They didn't move.

The guards' weapons remained trained on the spot where I had been standing. Senator Chambers continued

staring at the place where I had been.

None of them moved. They remained there, pointing at nothing. The electrodes at the bases of their necks reflecting the molten glow from the wrecked Master Machine.

I relaxed. I rubbed the tender skin around the dummy electrodes set in my neck. It was finally over.

Then a shadow moved against the wall where there should have been no movement. It lengthened and took on the shapely form of the redheaded Meta.

Only now her eyes were no longer dead and expressionless. They were alive with feeling.

I said, "So you are the other one. I should have guessed when you ran into the building ahead of me. But I was too busy thinking of those guards and of Chambers."

She nodded. Her lips relaxed into a smile.

Two from four leaves two! But we had accomplished our mission. And outside the building, in Washington, London, New York—in every Earth city—figures on the streets, in office buildings, and at home had become motionless, poised like mechanical toys with their springs run down. Housewives, cab drivers, copter pilots, passengers, shoppers, policemen, government workers had ceased to move, had stopped function-

ing with the destruction of the Master Machine.

The redhead said, "It's really over, isn't it? They're stopped." She looked at the still figures, the dummy electrodes in her neck quivering in a shiver. "They can't kill any more?"

I said, "It's over."

"They can't destroy or move?"

"Without the Master Machine, they have no power supply—nothing. And they can't kill or destroy."

She walked over to look at the figures. "What went wrong? What happened to them?"

I shrugged. "You can't blame them any more than you can blame a boiler that explodes or a dam that breaks. It was the human race itself that was responsible for what happened. We became lazy, careless. We built too many time-saving gimmicks to do too many jobs for us."

"**B**UT the machines were designed to help us," she said. "To make life better and more pleasant."

"At the beginning," I agreed, "but we didn't know where to stop. We started with labor-saving devices. We replaced ourselves in factories, offices, restaurants, stores. Still it wasn't enough. We designed robots to serve as traffic policemen, to drive cars, and to handle thinking

tasks. Then we designed humanoid robots, mechanical replicas of man and woman, controlled by the computing sections of the Master Machine, activated by its power supply, able to move and talk and think. We used them as servants. We had the means to replace ourselves completely—everywhere.”

“Why did they turn on the human race?” she asked.

I pointed to the smoldering wreck of the Master Machine in the center of the room. “Perhaps there was a weak circuit, or a tape was garbled, or a relay didn’t close properly. The scientific colony on the Moon helped some of us to escape. The rest of mankind was destroyed by the robots—systematically and ruthlessly.”

The redhead shivered again and walked over to the door leading from the building. She stood there, looking up at the

thin curve of the Moon showing in the blue of the afternoon sky.

Finally she said, “Up there, by now, they will know that we have accomplished our mission. In a few hours, they will be filing out of the underground caverns and loading onto the giant rockets. They’ll be coming back. But only the very oldest will have been on Earth before. Like us, thousands of them will be coming to a new world for the first time. A world of beauty and opportunity—if they want it that way. What will they decide?”

What *would* they decide?

I looked down at the redhead. Deep in her eyes, I saw the emotions which no humanoid robot could ever know. I saw them, and suddenly the tension eased out of my muscles.

The answer to her question was in her own eyes. **END**

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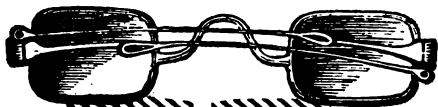
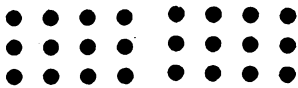
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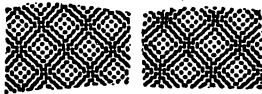
This was a world where minding your manners was more than just a full-time job—it was murder!



THE POLITE PEOPLE OF PUDIBUNDIA



By R. A. LAFFERTY



“WELL, you will soon see for yourself, Marlow. Yes, I know there are peculiar stories about the place. There are about all places. The young pilots who have been there tell some amusing tales about it.”

“Yes. They say the people there are very polite.”

“That is the honorable ancestor of all understatements. One of the pilots, Conrad, told us that the inhabitants must always carry seven types of eyeglasses with them. None of the Puds, you see, may ever

gaze directly on another. That would be the height of impoliteness. They wear amber goggles when they go about their world at large, and these they wear when they meet a stranger. But, once they are introduced to him, then they must thereafter look on him through blue glasses. But at a blood relative they gaze through red, and at an in-law through yellow. There are equally interesting colors for other situations.”

“I would like to talk to Con-

rad. Not that I doubt his reports. It is the things he did not report that interest me."

"I thought you knew he had died. Thrombosis, though he was sound enough when first certified."

"But if they are really people, then it should be possible to understand them."

"But they are not really people. They are metamorphics. They become people only out of politeness."

"Detail that a little."

"Oh, they're biped and of a size of us. They have a chameleon-like skin that can take on any texture they please, and they possess extreme plasticity of features."

"You mean they can take on the appearance of people at will?"

"So Bently reported."

"I hadn't heard of him."

"Another of the young pilots. According to Bently, not only do the Puds take on a human appearance, they take on the appearance of the human they encounter. Out of politeness, of course."

"Quite a tribute, though it seems extreme. Could I talk to Bently?"

"Also dead. A promising young man. But he reported some of the most amusing aspects of all: the circumlocutions that the Puds use in speaking our language. Not only is the Second Person eschewed out of politeness, but in a way all the other Persons

also. One of them could not call you by your name, Marlow. He would have to say: 'One hears of one who hears of one of the noble name of Marlow. One hears of one even now in his presence.'"

"**Y**ES, that is quite a polite way of saying it. But it would seem that with all their circumlocutions they would be inefficient."

"Yet they are quite efficient. They do things so well that it is almost imperative that we learn from them. Yet for all our contacts, for all their extreme politeness coupled with their seeming openness, we have been able to learn almost nothing. We cannot learn the secret of the amazing productivity of their fields. According to Sharper, another of the young pilots, they suggest (though so circumspectly that it seems hardly a suggestion, certainly not a criticism) that if we were more polite to our own plants, the plants would be more productive for us; and if we gave the plants the ultimate of politeness, they would give us the ultimate of production."

"Could I talk to Sharper, or is he also—"

"No, he is not dead. He was quite well till the last several days. Now, however, he is ailing, but I believe it will be possible for you to talk to him before you leave, if he does not worsen."

"It would still seem difficult for the Puds to get anything done. Wouldn't a superior be too polite to give a reprimand to an inferior?"

"Probably. But Masters, who visited them, had a theory about it, which is that the inferior would be so polite and deferential that he would do his best to anticipate a wish or a desire, or would go to any lengths to learn the import of an unvoiced preference."

"Is Masters one of the young pilots?"

"No, an old-timer."

"Now you *do* interest me."

"Dead quite a few years. But it is you who interest me, Marlow. I have been told to give you all the information you need about the Polite People of Pudibundia. And on the subject of the Polite People, I must also be polite. But—saving your presence, and one hears of one who hears and all that—what in gehenna is a captain in Homicide on the Solar Police Force going to Pudibundia about?"

"About murder. That is all I ever go anywhere about. We once had a private motto that we would go to the end of the Earth to solve a case."

"And now you have amended your motto to 'to the end of the Earth and beyond'?"

"We have."

"But what have the Polite People to do with murder? Crime is unknown on Pudibundia."

"We believe, saving their feelings, that it may not be unknown there. And what I am going to find out is this. There have been pilots for many years who have brought back stories of the Puds, and there are still a few—a very few— young pilots alive to tell those stories. What I am going to find out is why there are no old pilots around telling those stories."

IT wasn't much of a trip for a tripper, six weeks. And Marlow was well received. His host also assumed the name of Marlow out of politeness. It would have been impossible to render his own name in human speech, and it would have been impossible for him to conceive of using any name except that of his guest, with its modifiers. Yet there was no confusion. Marlow was Marlow, and his host was the One-Million - Times - Lesser - Marlow.

"We could progress much faster," said Marlow, "if we dispensed with these formalities."

"Or assumed them as already spoken," said the One-Million - Times - Lesser - Marlow. "For this, in private, but only in the strictest privacy, we use the deferential ball. Within it are all the formulae written minutely. You have but to pass the ball from hand to hand every time you speak, and it is as if the amenities

were spoken. I will give you this for the time of your stay. I beg you never to forget to pass it from hand to hand every time you speak. Should you forget, I would not, of course, be allowed to notice it. But when you were gone, I should be forced to kill myself for the shame of it. For private reasons I wish to avoid this and therefore beseech you to be careful."

The One - Million - Times-Lesser - Marlow (hereafter to be called OMTLM for convenience but not out of any lack of politeness) gave Marlow a deferential ball, about the size of a ping-pong ball. And so they talked.

"As a police official, I am particularly interested in the crime situation on Pud," said Marlow. "An index of zero is—well, if I could find a politer word I would use it—suspicious. And as you are, as well as I can determine, the head police official here, though in politeness your office would have another name, I am hoping that you can give me information."

"Saving your grace, and formula of a formula, what would you have me tell you about?"

"Suppose that a burglar (for politeness sake called something else) were apprehended by a policeman (likewise), what would happen?"

"Why, the policeman (not so called, and yet we must be

frank) would rattle his glottis in the prescribed manner."

"Rattle his gl— I see. He would clear his throat with the appropriate sound. And then the burglar (not so called)?"

"Would be covered with shame, it is true, but not fatally. For the peace of his own soul, he would leave the site in as dignified a manner as possible."

"With or without boodle?"

"Naturally without. One apprehended in the act is obliged to abandon his loot. That is only common politeness."

"I see. And if the burglar (not so called) remains unapprehended? How is the loss of the goods or property recorded?"

"It goes into the coefficient of general diminution of merchandise, which is to say shrinkage, wastage or loss. At certain times and places this coefficient becomes alarmingly large. Then it is necessary to use extraordinary care; and in extreme cases a thrice-removed burglar may become so ashamed of himself that he will die."

"That he will die of shame? Is that a euphemism?"

"Let us say that it is a euphemism of a euphemism."

"Thrice-removed, I imagine. And what of other crimes?"

HERE OMTLM rattled his glottis in a nervous manner, and Marlow hurriedly transferred his deferential

ball to the other hand, having nearly forgotten it.

"There being no crime, we can hardly speak of *other* crimes," said OMTLM. "But perhaps in another matter of speaking, you refer to—"

"Crimes of violence," said Marlow.

"Saving your presence, and formula of a formula, what would we have to be violent about? What possible cause?"

"The usual: greed, lust, jealousy, anger, revenge, plain perversity."

"Here also it is possible for one to die of shame, sometimes the offender, sometimes the victim, sometimes both. A jealous person might permit both his wife and her paramour to die of shame. And the State in turn might permit him to perish likewise, unless there were circumstances to modify the degree of shame; then he might still continue to live, often in circumscribed circumstances, for a set number of years. Each case must be decided on its own merits."

"I understand your meaning. But why build a fence around it?"

"I do not know what you mean."

"I believe that you do. Why are the Polite People of Pudibundia so polite? Is it simply custom?"

"It is more than that," said the polite Pud.

"Then there is a real reason

for it? And can you tell it to me?"

"There is a real reason for it. I cannot tell it to you now, though, and perhaps not ever. But there is a chance that you may be given a demonstration of it just before you leave. And if you are very wise, you may be able then to guess the reason. I believe that there are several who have guessed it. I hope that we will have time for other discussions before you leave our sphere. And I sincerely do hope that your stay on Pudibundia is a pleasant one. And now, saving your presence, we must part. Formula of a formula."

"Formula of a formula and all that," said Marlow, and went to discover the pleasures of Pudibundia.

Among the pleasures of Pud was Mitzi (Miniature Image a thousand-times-removed of the Zestful Irma) who had now shaped up into something very nice. And shaped up is the correct term.

At first Marlow was shocked by the appearance of all the females he met on Pud. Crude-featured, almost horse-faced, how could they all look like that? And he was even more shocked when he finally realized the reason. He had become used to the men there looking like himself out of politeness. And this—this abomination—was the female version of his own appearance!

But he was a man of resources. He took from his pocket a small picture of Irma that he always carried, and showed it to the most friendly of the girls.

"Could you possibly—?"

"Look like that? Why, of course. Let me study it for a moment. Now, then."

So the girl assumed the face of Irma.

"Incredible," said Marlow, "except Irma is red-headed."

"You have only to ask. The photo is not colored and so I did not know. We will try this shade to start with."

"Close, but could you turn it just a little darker?"

"Of course."

And there she was Irma of the most interesting face and wonderful hair. But the picture had been of the face only. Below that, the girl was a sack. If only there were some way to convey what was lacking.

"You still are not pleased with me," said the Miniature Image a thousand-times-removed of the Zestful Irma (Mitzi). "But you have only to demonstrate. Show me with your hands."

Marlow with his hands sculptured in the air the figure of Irma as he remembered it, and Mitzi assumed the form, first face on, then face away, then in profile. And when they had it roughly, they perfected it, a little more here, a little less there. But there were

points where his memory failed him.

"If you could only give me an idea of the convolutions of her ears," said Mitzi, "and the underlying structure of the metatarsus. My only desire is to please. Or shall I improvise where you do not remember?"

"Yes, do that, Mitzi."

And how that girl could improvise!

MARLOW and Mitzi were now buddies. They made a large evening of it. They tied one on; formula of a formula, but they tied one on. They went on a thrice-removed bender. At the Betelgeuse Bar and Grill, they partook of the cousin of the cousin of the alcohol itself in the form of the nono-rhumbezoid, made of nine kinds of rum. At the B-flat Starlight Club, they listened to the newest and most exciting music on all Pudi-bundia. At Alligator John's, one checks his inhibitions at the door. Here one also checks his deferential ball. Of course the formulae are built into the walls and at each exchange it is always assumed that they are said.

But the Iris Room is really the ultimate. The light comes through seven different colors of glass, and it is very dim when it arrives. And there the more daring remove their goggles entirely and go about without them in the multi-colored twilight. This is il-

legal. It is even foolhardy. There is no Earthly equivalent to it. To divest oneself and disport with Nudists would be tame in comparison. But Mitzi and her friends were of the reckless generation, and the Iris Room was their rendezvous.

The orgy will not be detailed here. The floor show was wild. Yet we cannot credit the rumor that the comedian was so crude as to look directly at the audience even in that colored twilight; or they so gauche as to laugh outright at the jokes, they who had been taught always to murmur, "One knows of one who knows of one who ventures to smile." Yet there was no doubting that the Iris Room was a lively place. And when they left it at dawn, Marlow was pleased and sleepy and tipsy.

There was a week of pleasure on Pudibundia: swimming with Mitzi down at West Beach, gourmandizing with Mitzi at Gastrophiles, dancing with Mitzi, pub-crawling, romancing, carrying on generally. The money exchange was favorable and Marlow was on an expense account. It was a delightful time.

But still he did not forget the job he was on, and in the midst of his pleasure he sought always for information.

"When I return here," he said slyly, "we will do the many things that time does

not allow. When I come back here—"

"But you will not return," said Mitzi. "Nobody ever does."

"And why not? It is surely a pleasant place to return to. Why won't I return?"

"If you cannot guess, then I cannot tell you. Do you have to know why?"

"Yes, I have to know why. That is why I came here, to find out. To find out why the young men who come here will never be able to return here, or to anywhere else."

"I can't tell you."

"Then give me a clue."

"In the Iris Room was a clue. It was not till the color-filtered light intruded between us that we might safely take off our goggles. I would save you if I could. I want you to come back. But those higher in authority make the decisions. When you leave, you will not return here, or anywhere else. But already one has spoken to one who has spoken to one who has spoken too much."

"There is a point beyond which politeness is no longer a virtue, Mitzi."

"I know. If I could change it, I would."

SO THE period of the visit was at an end, and Marlow was at his last conference with OMTLM, following which he would leave Pudibundia, perhaps forever.

"Is there anything at all

else you would like to know?" asked OMTLM.

"There is almost *everything* that I still want to know. I have found out nothing."

"Then ask."

"I don't know how. If I knew the questions to ask, it is possible that I would already know the answers."

"Yes, that is entirely possible."

OMTLM seemed to look at him with amused eyes. And yet the eyes were hidden behind purple goggles. Marlow had never seen the eyes of OMTLM. He had never seen the eyes of any of the Puds. Even in the Iris Room, in that strangely colored light, it had not been possible to see their eyes.

"Are you compelling me to do something?" asked Marlow.

"I may be compelling you to think of the question that has eluded you."

"Would you swear that I have not been given some fatal sickness?"

"I can swear that to the very best of my knowledge you have not."

"Are you laughing at me with your eyes?"

"No. My eyes have compassion for you."

"I have to see them."

"You are asking that?"

"Yes. I believe the answer to my question is there," Marlow said firmly.

OMTLM took off his purple

goggles. His were clear, intelligent eyes and there was genuine compassion in them.

"Thank you," said Marlow. "If the answer is there, it still eludes me. I have failed in my mission for information. But I will return again. I will still find out what it is that is wrong here."

"No, you will not return."

"What will prevent me?" asked Marlow.

"Your death in a very few weeks."

"What will I die of?"

"What did all your young pilots die of?"

"But you swore that you did not know of any sickness I could have caught here!" Marlow cried.

"That was true when I said it. It was not true a moment later."

"Did all the pilots ask to see your eyes?"

"Yes. All. Curiosity is a failing of you Earthlings."

"Is it that the direct gaze of the Puds kills?"

"Yes. Even ourselves it would kill. That is why we have our eyes always shielded. That is also why we erect another shield: that of our ritual politeness, so that we may never forget that too intimate an encounter of our persons may be fatal."

"Then you have just murdered me?"

"Let us say rather that one hears of one who hears of one who killed unwillingly."

"Why did you do it to me?" demanded Marlow.

"You asked to see my eyes. It would not be polite to refuse."

"It takes you several weeks to kill. I can do it in a few seconds."

"You would be wrong to try. Our second glance kills instantly."

"Let's see if it's faster than a gun!"

BUT OMTLM had not lied. It is not polite to lie on Pudibundia.

Marlow died instantly.

And that is why (though you may sometimes hear a young pilot tell amusing stories immediately—oh, very immediately—on his return from Pudibundia) you will never find an old pilot who has ever been there.

END

THAT OTHER GALAXY

How's your star gazing? These cold-weather nights give you a good chance to see some interesting sights, even with the naked eye.

For instance, probably you can locate the constellation Casseiofia. It's in the northern part of the sky, shaped like a wobbly sort of letter "W", and if you locate the Big Dipper, proceed to the Pole Star and keep going an equal distance on the other side, you can't miss it.

A little farther in the same direction—oh, say about the apparent length of Casseiofia's "W" itself—you'll find something about as bright as a star, but queerly fuzzy in appearance. That's the Great Nebula in Andromeda—M-31, as astronomers call it—a galaxy about as big as our own and, presumably, with just as many planets, just as high a percentage of which can bear civilized, intelligent life.

What you see, of course, is only the core of the galaxy—the densely populated inner globe where stars are relatively close together. A big telescope will show a spiraling cloud of arms, but they are so sparsely scattered that the aggregate of their light makes no impression on low-powered instruments, including that low-powered instrument we carry around with us, the eye.

M-31's core is exactly matched in our own galaxy. We call it the Milky Way. And our own sun? That's in one of the spiraling arms.

So it will do you no good to wave to a possible Andromedan observer—he can't even see our sun, much less you. And if he could, it might take him a while to wave back. The round-trip time for light takes some three million years.

Tuesday's Child

IF is going to be Tuesday's child . . . The second Tuesday of every month. This means that next issue will be on sale, let's see, January 10th—

And it also means that, by asking your newsdealer to be sure and order IF for you each issue, you can be sure you won't miss a single exciting number!

The apartment was empty. So was she. But not for long.

VASSI

By ART LEWIS

ILLUSTRATED BY RITTER

THE APARTMENT is called a single. It contains a Murphy bed, a chest of drawers, an overstuffed chair, a sofa, a coffee table, a seventeen-inch television set, a bookcase partially filled with the volumes A through F of an encyclopedia from the super-market, assorted paperback books, and a radio that doesn't work. In the ceiling is a fixture with two twenty-five-watt bulbs. A short hallway leads to the bathroom and the kitchen.

Julia Fenway stood outside her apartment, fumbling in her bag for her keys. She had never had any trouble finding her keys before. Her purse was always neat and orderly. And she was breathing hard. Breathing hard from the short walk from the bus at the cor-

ner and down the long corridor to the private, the lonesome apartment door.

Those keys! Where are those keys! I'm becoming a regular pack rat lately. Look at that bag! Did you ever see so much junk? She thrust her hand deep inside and felt around. A crumpled kleenex, worn-out lipstick, change purse, pencils, movie stubs . . . a coldness, the keys. Her heart was pounding. She pressed the hand with the keys to her bosom. It *was* pounding. At least it was working.

She managed to get the door open just as the landlady's door down the hall gushed forth cooked cabbage odor and Mrs. Shultz stuck her head out. Julia closed her door behind her until she heard the lock click. Of all the people in

the world, why was it the Mrs. Shultzes she attracted?

At the sound of the lock, the cat, Belle, poked her head out of the kitchen. She walked lazily into the room, rubbing her side along the wall to scratch off the sleep. Then she leaped to the top of the dresser and started to wash herself.

JULIA STOOD with her back against the door. Her arms, tired of reaching out, hung limply against her sides. A ray of sunlight streamed through the partly open window and a little pool of it snuggled on her pillow. It had been such a long ride in from Beverly Hills and on two buses. She had sat in the back where it wasn't so crowded and the smell of exhaust was still in her nostrils.

She walked over to the dresser and put her purse down beside the cat and ran her fingers caressingly through the soft fur. Belle took a swipe with a hind paw. Julia rested her head on the dresser.

"I'm going to die, Belle."

The cat sat up and lifted a front paw. She washed it with little delicate strokes from her tongue.

Julia moved over to the bed and sat down on the edge of it. She slipped her shoes off. Her feet hurt. They always hurt in heels. Why does one get dressed up to see the doctor? He could have told her she had

six months to live while she was wearing flats.

He didn't actually blurt it out as I walked in the door. He fooled around under that sheet for a long time. And then he said it. No, not then either. He just looked pained and hurt and a little white around the lips and he told me to get dressed and come into his office. He had the lab reports on his desk and he pounded on them and he said you're as good as dead now!

I wish he had! Then I could hate him. I could hate instead of feeling numb all over. He didn't want to tell me anything. Just get ready for an operation. No, there really wasn't any rush. But soon. And then I dragged it out of him. I insisted I had a right to know. It was my life. No, I don't have any family here. No one . . . no one! A brother in New York. Don't call him! The doctor stammered like a schoolboy who's unprepared in class.

Julia fell back on the bed. She stared at the unlighted ceiling fixture. She should cry, but she'd cried in the doctor's office and there was nothing left to cry. Six months to live. Maybe only five months. Certainly no more than seven with the operation.

A spring in the bed got her in the back. She ought to tell Mrs. Shultz to fix that. She certainly didn't want to spend her last six months sleeping

on a loose spring. Spend her last six months!

She turned over on her stomach and pressed her face into the blanket. Her body was rigid. She tried to contemplate her own death. She should call her brother. No, she would die first.

"Hello, excuse me, my name is Vassi."

Julia raised her head and looked around the room. It was empty.

"Would you say this is a typical prior dwelling?"

Julia sat up. There was no one.

"Oh, I hadn't thought of that possibility. I suppose we don't have a similar frame of reference. You'll never understand my thoughts."

SHE GOT off the bed. She walked around the room and her stocking feet made little padded sounds on the cotton carpet. Then she crossed to the door of the apartment and pressed her ear against it.

"Are you a ventriloquist?" she said.

"A ventriloquist? Oh, my, no. I'm an historian." The voice was in her head.

"I'm insane." It had to happen. She touched her fingertips to her mouth.

"Is that so? That's too bad. We're over and done with that sort of thing."

"I'll wash my face with cold water. It must be the strain.

I shouldn't have forced the doctor . . ."

"You *are* alone, aren't you? I looked around rather carefully. I didn't see anyone except that . . . that thing on that piece of furniture."

Julia looked at Belle. The cat was asleep on the dresser. She started to walk to the bathroom but stopped in front of the bed and sat down. Her head was going to burst.

"Please" she said. "Please stop."

"I really don't want to intrude. But I have my recorder right here. It won't take long and then I must move on. Now I notice you're fully dressed. Most remarkable. We always thought you prior people indulged in sex orgies almost continuously."

"My God!"

"Your thoughts are confused. Is it because you're insane? You haven't had much experience in thought projection, have you?"

Julia jumped from the bed and ran into the bathroom. She locked the door behind her and turned on the cold water full force. She cupped her hands under the faucet and plunged her face into the cascading coldness.

My name is Julia Fenway. I'm a file clerk at Continental Insurance. I'm going to die and I'm not preoccupied with sex.

She turned off the faucet and stared into the sink. The

water gathered into a little whirlpool and disappeared down the drain. There was a knock on the bathroom door.

The voice was in her head. "I wonder if I could see that. We have some rather indistinct writings on running water. I'd like to bring them up to date."

The cold water didn't help. If anything, it was worse now. The knocking came from the door. She was sure of it. But the voice . . . the voice was inside her.

"May I come in?"

Julia sat down on the edge of the tub. She squeezed her head between her hands. I don't deserve this. What did I do to deserve this?

"Please. I'm on a tight schedule."

"So am I! Go away!" She was talking to it. She was talking to the voice in her head.

Then it was very quiet. Julia watched the door, waiting for someone to walk through its solidness. Nothing happened. She lowered her head and started to count the tiny tiles in the floor.

If I count one row very carefully, it will take me five minutes, two rows ten minutes, three rows . . .

She started to count.

AS SHE was midway through the fourth row, the voice said, "I don't think you realize the importance of

my visit. We recognize your right of privacy, but don't you feel in this case . . . ?"

Julia jumped up and pulled open the door. "Let me die in peace!"

She ran into the other room and stood in the middle of it, looking all around, breathing hard. Belle leaped down from the dresser, her doze finished, and rubbed against Julia's leg.

The water in the bathroom was running.

She hadn't shut it off. But she had. She had.

The water started again. It stopped. It started. It stopped.

"How quaint."

There is someone here!

"Who are you?"

"Vassi."

"Vassi?"

"I'm chief historian, research division. It's my first trip in time. The scientists have been playing around with this thing for years and they've only just let us take it over."

A time traveler! Julia stood very still. Her eyes searched the room slowly once again. The window was open about three inches. Too small for anyone to squeeze through. The door was locked from the inside. There was absolutely no one in the room. In her desperate state, she was hunting for an out. She was involved in a fairy story. Her body started to relax.

"I can't see you, Mr. Vassi."

I can't accept death. I'm looking for escape.

"You can't see me? I'm standing right in front of you."

"I can't see you."

"I don't understand. I can see you. Here, take my hand."

For a moment, Julia hoped. There was nothing.

"Why, I can't touch you!"

Not even a breath of wind.

Julia walked over to the dresser and took a package of cigarettes out of her handbag. She carried it over to the sofa and sat down.

"You walked through me!"

She lit the cigarette, inhaled deeply and blew out the smoke in a long steady stream. When she was a little girl and she had a sharp pain in her side, her mother would say it's only gas, hold on, it'll pass.

She would hold on . . . Mother, help me!

The voice in her head. "I wish I had paid more attention to those scientists. What was it they said? I had so much to do before I left. Something about transporting living matter . . . Are you *sure* I'm invisible?"

"I can't see you."

"Do you people have trouble with your eyes? No, that's not it. I can't touch you. And I'd expected to bring back some artifacts. I am terribly disappointed."

"I'm sorry."

"And well you might be.

It's going to be extremely difficult going around asking people a lot of questions when they can't see me. You must have had quite a start."

"Stop it! Stop it! My head. Oh, dear God, my head!" Julia got up. "I'm going out!"

"You are having trouble with the thought projection. I'll sit down and be quiet for a moment."

THE voice stopped. Julia paused at the door. The room was quiet. Breathing! She heard breathing. Her own? She held her breath. It was there in the room. She was sure of it.

It was a whisper in her throat. "You are real."

The faucet, the water, the knock on the door. "You are real!"

If she held on, it would pass like gas. "You are real!"

She moved trancelike back into the room.

"You see me now."

"No. I heard you breathe."

"Can you touch me?"

"No."

She heard her own blood in her ears. Her own breath forced itself between her lips. His breathing was gone. It was a dream.

She said, "You're gone."

"Over here on the arm of the couch."

She turned. She fought to silence herself. She heard the soft breathing from the direction of the couch.

"Who are you, Mr. Vassi?"

"It's just Vassi, no mister. I already told you who and what I am."

"A time traveler from some distant future," she said.

"Most of your records disappeared in the final war. We want to pick up the traces. Best way to do that is to travel back in time."

"It sounds like such a long way. How long?"

If it was true, it was a miracle. If it wasn't . . . Julia, you're a realist!

"It would be a meaningless term for you. It's an age, an eon away."

Julia sat down on the edge of the overstuffed chair. She noticed a faint layer of dust on the coffee table. The apartment looked messy with the bed out of the wall. Ever since the first visit to the doctor three weeks ago, she hadn't thought of cleaning.

"I'm afraid the apartment doesn't look very presentable."

"Aren't you comforted to know that the world has survived?"

"But I won't survive." She looked at the dust again. "You see, I don't do much entertaining."

"Is that so? I wouldn't know. Do you mind if I record our conversation?"

"I don't mind. It's nice to have someone to talk to, even if I can't see you." Julia, you're a realist!

"Yes. Well, that is a bother. Now would you mind telling me a few pertinent facts about civilization as you know it?"

"I don't think I know too much about that sort of thing," said Julia.

"I'D HOPED to land in the middle of a library of some sort . . ." His voice broke off. "You don't seem to have much of a collection of books here."

Julia said, "Are you near the bookcase?"

"No wonder the records didn't last, if this is the way they were kept."

"Vassi, can you touch the books?" She got up and went to the bookcase.

"Yes."

"Pick one up."

"They're no use to me. This isn't history."

"Pick one up!"

"I haven't got the time. I have to move on."

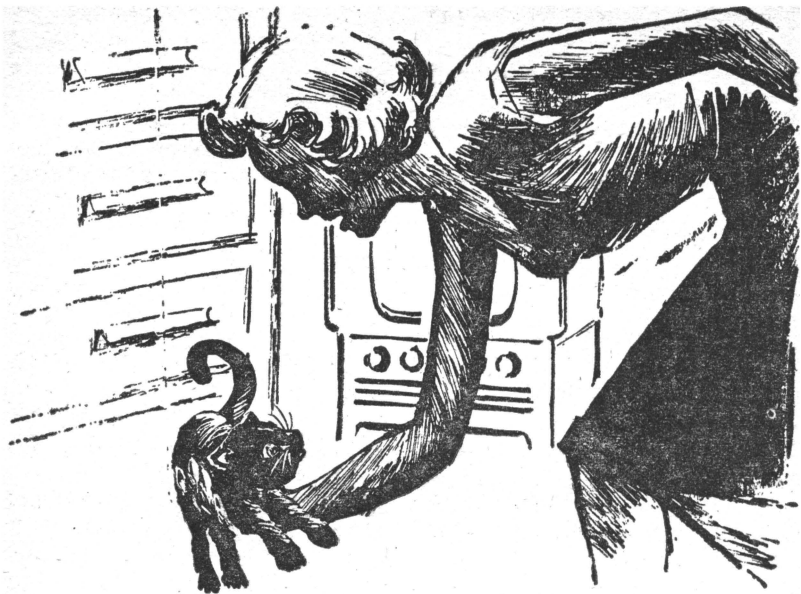
"Vassi, you touched the faucet, didn't you? And you knocked on the door."

"Yes . . . That *does* mean I can bring back artifacts!"

"Why can't you touch me?"

"Now I have to get to a place that will do me some good. A library, a store, isn't that what you call them? A museum . . . Are any of these things nearby?"

"Let me go with you. I'll be your guide. I'll—I'll show you my time."



"But won't you be uncomfortable? I'm invisible."

"I don't care! No one can steal you from me this way."

"Steal me?"

"Vassi, why can't you touch me!"

"I'm not too sure. I think it's because you're alive. You see, life is a transient thing. Matter is continuous in one form or another. Matter existing today always existed and will always exist, or something like that. I didn't listen too carefully. Anyhow, it's possible for someone to travel back in time but not ahead. Do I make myself clear? It's out of my line, you know."

Julia reached down and

scooped up Belle. "Can you touch her?"

"What is that?"

"My cat. Can you touch her?"

"A cat? My, the anatomists would love to see that! But it's the same as with you. My hand passes right through her."

Julia put Belle back on the floor. Her mind was racing.

Vassi said, "She's sitting right where I'm standing."

"I've got to believe it's not a nightmare. I've got to believe you're real and that you can help me."

"If I can do it quickly. I have so much else to do. Others are waiting to use the machine."

"Are people well where you come from?"

"Very well, thank you."

"Are there any incurable diseases?" She tried to listen for his breathing.

"Incurable? You mean sickness that doesn't respond to treatment? No, of course not."

"Then take me with you!" she cried.

"You just said you wanted to guide me here."

"Take me with you to your time."

"I can't do that. I can't even touch you."

"There must be a way. You have got to think of something."

"Even if I could take you, I'm not supposed to."

"Why?"

"It would mix up history to remove persons from their time. It might even be dangerous with artifacts. I suppose we couldn't hold onto them very long."

"History? I have no history. I'm going to die very soon. No one depends on me. I have no one. Please take me, Vassi."

"I feel very strange."

"Are you all right?"

"Yes. I just feel—odd."

"How . . ."

"First you want to guide me, then you want to come with me, you don't care about mankind's survival. You sound so terrified and confused."

JULIA sank down on the couch. If only she could see him. "Don't leave me to die."

"How strange to talk about dying," said Vassi. "We all live so long we never think about it."

"You will take me with you, Vassi?"

"If people in your time have such short lives, then why does dying trouble you? It would seem a matter of course."

"Vassi, I haven't lived yet."

"This is out of my line. I'll tell you what. When I return, I'll talk to one of the scientists. If they're interested in the project, they'll send someone back."

"How long will that be?"

"Now let's see if I can figure in your time. Hmm . . . I'd say about a year . . ."

Julia closed her eyes. She felt dampness under the lids. Her voice was hollow as she spoke to the empty room. "I'll be dead in six months."

And the voice in her head echoed, "Six months . . ."

"Vassi, isn't there someone you can talk to now?"

He didn't answer her.

Julia looked around the room. "Vassi, are you still here? Vassi? Vassi, if you don't talk, I can't tell if you're still here! Vassi, please answer me. Did I talk too much? I didn't mean to run on about my problems. I know you have a job to do. Maybe you

can squeeze me in. I don't want to keep you from your work. Vassi, you didn't go, did you? You didn't leave me! Don't leave. I believe in you. I believe in you . . ."

And now she had the aloneness she had longed for. He was gone and she would be left with the Mrs. Schultzes and the doctor.

She went from the living room to the kitchen to the bathroom and back into the living room, listening, hoping to catch the small sound of his breathing. But her body would not be quiet and she heard nothing except herself.

She stood for a long while looking down at the bed. The sunlight drifted from the pillow onto the covers and finally spilled off the foot of the bed onto the floor and the room was a shade darker. She was a stone, but a stone whose blood gurgled and stomach rumbled and heart beat and pulse pounded, so loudly she could hear nothing else.

Her legs gave way and she crumpled to the bed and she was silent at last.

The breathing came from the direction of the window.

She spoke into the covers. "Vassi, why didn't you answer me?"

"You tempt me and I have so much to do, so much ground to cover."

"You can come back."

"We haven't got enough of these time centers. There's

quite a lineup to use them. If I go now, there's no telling how long it'll take me to get back."

Julia got up and went to the window. "Am I facing you?"

"Yes."

"You're my only hope, wild as it seems. Vassi, wouldn't it be helpful to your research to have a real live person from my time to study?"

VASSI spoke slowly. "You mean you would be willing to have us—study you?"

"Within limits . . . No, not within limits."

"They'll be very angry if I come back without my research project."

"Are people that cold in your time?" asked Julia.

"Cold?" Vassi repeated in bewilderment.

"Heartless?"

"Heartless? I hardly think so."

"I mean callous, without pity, without compassion."

"I've been very busy. I haven't thought about it."

"Do men and women marry in your time?"

"Yes, they do."

"Are you married?"

"No, you see, I'm not very—presentable. Besides, I have my research."

"To me you're the most beautiful man in the world."

"You can't see me. If you saw me, you wouldn't think so."

"I can hear you. That's all I need."

Julia turned from the window and walked back to the couch. When she sat down she could feel herself trembling. Never, never in her life had she spoken to a man like that. Maybe, if she could see him, his eyes would be mocking her.

She said, "If you take me back with you, then later when I'm well I could come back with you and show you everything you would want to see. Then I could be your guide."

He was standing in front of her. She could hear him breathing again. There was excitement in his breathing; she was sure of it.

He said, "I wish I could touch you. You're very beautiful."

"Vassi, in my own time I'm ugly. Perhaps I belong in your time."

Then the excitement that was in his breathing was in his voice. "All right. All right. I'll see what I can do. You wait right here. It may take me several years to get back. But I'll do it if I can . . ."

"Several years! Vassi, I can't wait that long!" She was very near despair.

"No, no, you don't understand. In your time it'll only be a matter of minutes. The controls would be set to right now, however long it may

take to have the project approved in my time."

The room was quiet. A slight breeze drifted in through the open window. Julia sat very still on the couch for a few moments. Belle rubbed herself against the coffee table and then climbed into Julia's lap.

She had to hold on. She had to believe. A world with no illness. A world where people live practically forever. A world with Vassi.

She scratched the cat behind the ears. Belle started to purr softly.

"Belle," Julia said, "what am I going to do with you? Vassi will think of something. He's coming back, Belle. He's coming back and he'll take both of us with him."

She picked up the cat and put it on the couch. Then she got up and went to the mirror over the dresser. She pushed her hair back from her face.

He said I was beautiful. Not even my mother ever said I was beautiful. What will they think at the office when I don't come in tomorrow or even phone? They won't think anything. They'll get Sheila with the black hair and the big bust to do my work and they won't think about me at all.

Even *that* one didn't say I was beautiful. Not even right after I moved in here and he was a little drunk and he could have said it then. Then,

of all times, but he didn't. He just looked a little ashamed, maybe disgusted afterward, and he talked about being late for a dinner appointment.

THERE was a knock on the door. Julia whirled from the mirror. Vassi must have gotten a little off course. She hadn't thought of that possibility. She walked quickly to the door.

"Vassi?" she asked.

"It's me, Mrs. Shultz."

"What do you want?"

"You went to the doctor today. I expected you'd come by. Tell me, how are you?"

"Go away."

"Julia, open up. Maybe I can do something for you."

"Go away. Please go away."

"You're not feeling so well?"

"No."

"Bad news, maybe?"

"I don't want to see anyone, Mrs. Shultz."

"I understand. I'll come back later."

Footsteps went down the hallway. A door opened. The sound of a television set. A door closed.

Vassi, hurry! I don't know whether or not it really happened. I'm not sure now, Vassi. I am going out of my mind. I am clutching at straws. Come back, Vassi. Come back. Reassure me.

"They said it would work."

"Vassi!"

"They said it would work,

but it sounds like a terrible risk. We'll do it with the cat first."

"Vassi, where are you?"

"Right in front of you. Now listen carefully."

"Are you going to take me with you?"

"We'll try the cat first. If it works with the cat, then we'll try you."

Julia was trembling. "What do I do?"

"The first thing we have to do is kill the cat."

"What are you talking about!"

"When the cat is dead, it will become as inanimate an object as any of those books over there. In that state I should be able to transport it to my time. There the doctors will revive it. Everything is ready."

"I can't kill my cat!"

"If it works, it's only temporary."

"And if it doesn't work?" she whispered.

"I'd rather it be the cat than you."

"I never dreamed . . ."

"We'll have to hurry. They are waiting."

"I can't kill Belle."

"You're not killing her. You're transporting her."

The tears were in Julia's eyes again. "It's crazy. I'm crazy."

"Look, I'd do it, but I can't physically touch the cat."

"I know. I know."

"They said suffocation was

best. It leaves fewer complications."

JULIA bent down and picked up the cat. Her tears fell on the animal's fur. She held it close to her. The cat was quiet, unknowing.

Julia said, "Do me first."

"Even if I could, I would not," said Vassi. "The cat first."

"I've had her since she was a kitten, a little round ball with a button for a nose. I can't do this to her. If it does not work . . . This is my madness, not hers!"

"What were you going to do with her six months from now?"

"Six months . . . Alone, she would be left alone . . . Belle has never been alone except for the hours when I'm at work. Who would take care of her? She's such a fussy eater. I have to feed her liver from my hand . . ."

"You'll be together."

"Together . . ."

"Take one of the pillows on the bed. Don't think about it! Do it!"

Julia carried Belle over to the bed. As she tried to put it down, one of its claws became entangled in her dress. The cat started to struggle as if finally awakened. Julia reached over for a pillow. Sweat stood out on her forehead. Her tears blinded her. She saw the mass of fur. She saw the softness. The claws

were freed. She brought the pillow down over Belle.

Julia blacked out, sprawled across the pillow.

She couldn't have been out long. She pulled herself from the bed. The pillow was on the floor. Belle was gone.

Vassi's voice was in her head. "It worked! The anatomists are wild! I've never seen so much excitement!"

"Belle is all right?"

"Wonderful. It took them no time at all to revive her. The laboratory is a bedlam. Everyone wants to examine her."

"How should I do it? I'll never be able to suffocate myself." She laughed a little. "I can't even turn on the gas range. Mine is electric."

She looked around the apartment. If she slashed her wrists there would be too much blood. She hated blood. The thought of poison repelled her. Wait—she had it.

She pulled one of the sheets off the bed and twisted it. She pushed the overstuffed chair into the center of the room and stood on one of the arms to attach an end of the sheet to the ceiling fixture. At the other end she made a noose.

There was a knock on the door again.

"Julia, if you're not well, it's no good you should be alone," Mrs. Schultz said.

Julia slipped the noose over her head.

"Vassi, do you love me?"

"Of course. I just hope you'll love me."

Mrs. Schultz knocked hard. "Julia, I hear you talking. I know you're home. Let me in. I have some soup for you."

"Vassi, do you think I'm beautiful?"

"The most beautiful woman I have ever seen."

Mrs. Schultz pounded on the door. "Julia, why don't you answer me?"

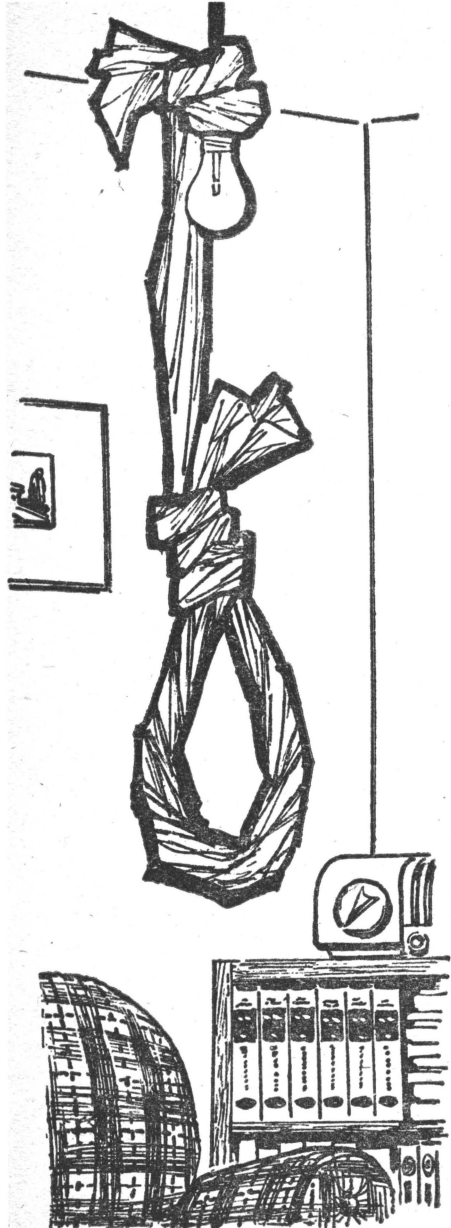
As Julia stepped off the arm of the chair, she saw the open window. A thought crossed her mind before the noose tightened. Belle could have jumped out of the window when I passed out. *Julia, you're a realist!*

MR. SHULTZ put down the pot of soup and opened the door.

The apartment is called a single. It consists of a Murphy bed, a chest of drawers, an overstuffed chair, a sofa, a coffee table, a seventeen-inch television set, a bookcase partially filled with the volumes A through F of an encyclopedia from the supermarket, and assorted paperback books, and a radio that doesn't work. In the ceiling is a fixture with two twenty-five-watt bulbs. From the fixture hangs a twisted sheet with a hangman's knot in the end of it. The noose is quite empty. So is the apartment.

END

ART LEWIS





The title "the contact point" is written in a large, bold, serif font. The word "the" is lowercase, while "contact" and "point" are lowercase. The text is centered and flanked by decorative elements: stars, arrows, and diamonds. The word "the" is on the left, "contact" is in the middle, and "point" is on the right. A large, stylized bracket connects "contact" and "point". The stars are scattered around the text, with some above and some below. The arrows are also scattered, pointing in various directions. The diamonds are arranged in a cluster on the right side, above and below the word "point".

the contact } point

Somewhere on Mars there had to be a meeting of the minds . . .

LIEUTENANT Lloyd spotted the first alien in the ruins of the strange red Martian city on the second day of exploration. His first impulse was to call out to the other men—but then, afraid his voice would startle the creature down at the end of the rubble-strewn street, he silently unholstered his military service pistol and crept forward toward the back (he hoped it was the back) of the alien, his breath rasping behind his faceplate.

He was a mere ten paces short of his goal when loose gravel beneath his heavy boot betrayed him. Even in the thin Martian atmosphere, the sound was a sharp one. The creature spun about, one appendage gripping the haft of a slim crystal tube. He froze there, watching Lloyd with odd oval-shaped eyes, yellow-orange in color. Lloyd's thumb slid back the safety catch on his automatic, slowly, carefully.

Then the creature lowered

the tube and its wide lipless mouth curled in what had to be a grin. "Ookl okkl?" it said distinctly.

Lloyd looked into the alien eyes and was pleased to see the intelligence within their depths. He reholstered his pistol and held out his hand. "Lieutenant Lloyd of the *Sherlock II*," he said.

The alien hesitated, then inserted the four flaccid stalk-things at the end of its "arm" into Lloyd's hand. They shook these clasped appendages solemnly, then withdrew their own with relief.

"Boy, am I glad you Martians are friendly!" Lloyd laughed. "When I saw you up the street, I envisioned a full-scale guerrilla attack and—Damn, you're not getting a word of this, are you?"

In reply, the creature pointed to its thoracic region and said, "Ulkay Blet." It pointed to Lloyd again and enunciated carefully, "Lieutenant Lloyd."

"Glad to know you, Ulkay. Or do I call you by both names? Or just Mister Blet?"

"Ulkay," the alien said. "Blet," he added. "Ulkay Blet," he clarified, with an almost Earthlike shrug.

IT WAS strictly a take-your-pick name, Lloyd saw. He took his pick. "Ulkay, tell me, are you the last of your race, or are there others of your kind still left alive on Mars?"

Ulkay just stared, friendly but lost.

Lloyd tried again. "I—" he pointed to himself—"am here with more like me—" he pointed to himself, held up one finger to Ulkay, then pointed in a long sweep behind himself toward the end of the street and held up four fingers. His only success was an envious look from Ulkay at Lloyd's extra finger.

"Hoo boy!" said Lloyd, smacking his brow in chagrin. "This is a rough one. Look, Ulkay, you hold on and don't be scared." He laid a hand upon Ulkay's shoulder for assurance, then turned his head and shouted, "*Here! This way, men!*"

The sound of heavy booted feet began, far up the cluttered street. Lloyd felt Ulkay grow tense. "It's all right," he said slowly, soothingly, as one talks to a horse or dog, knowing the tone conveys what the words cannot. Ulkay seemed to sense the assurance and relaxed a little.

In another minute, Kroner, Harrison, Tandy and Craig were beside their commanding officer, gaping with unconcealed glee at the slightly under five-foot form of Ulkay, who stared right back, steadily if not boldly.

"Our first contact with a Martian!" Kroner exulted, his voice metallic through the oxygen helmet.

"Does he talk?" Harrison

wanted to know immediately.

"Where are his friends?" asked Tandy, frowning.

Craig, unable to think of a question, was silent. But it was to Craig that Lloyd addressed his first statement. "He speaks a language. His name is Ulkay Bret. Think you can rig a written or oral Rosetta Stone for us, Craig?"

Craig shuffled his feet bashfully. "I can try."

"Is he *alone*, though?" said Tandy, irked that his question had gone unanswered. "His buddies might be around here waiting to pick us off. This is their city, after all, and we're trespassers."

Lloyd shook his head dubiously. "I think you're wrong, Tandy. Ulkay's got some sort of weapon with him and he put it away without trying to use it. If there are others, they're probably intelligent and friendly, too."

"Unless I'm mistaken," Kroner remarked dryly, "we're about to put your statement to the test."

"What—?" said Lloyd, and looked where Kroner was now facing.

Seven creatures like Ulkay were on their way toward the group, each bearing one of those long crystal rods. At first glance, they all looked alike to Lloyd. Then, as they drew nearer, he saw that they were as different from one another as he from his own men.

"Ulkay," he said softly, "would you tell *your* friends that we're *their* friends? They look kind of trigger-happy and . . ."

Ulkay, catching Lloyd's meaning from the way he looked toward the approaching squad, turned and babbled something at them. They hesitated. Then all put their crystal rods into short scabbards hanging from their belts.

BEHIND him, Lloyd heard Tandy's sigh of relief. He turned to Craig. "You and Ulkay see if you can set up something to bridge the language barrier, while Kroner and I go back to the ship and radio the news back to Earth."

"Okay," said Craig. He was the expedition's linguist, but extremely shy, considering he was the liaison man with any aliens they encountered. "I'll start them with numbers; that's usually a good kicking-off place, and then I can work into body parts, relationships, and—"

"Whoa," said Lloyd. Craig could be talkative on his professional topics. "I don't want the details, just some results. Kroner and I should be back in about an hour. I'll talk with Ulkay then, if you can show me how to reach him."

He and Kroner strode off to their ship, set onto the cold red sands a mile away.

It would take nearly three minutes for a message to reach Earth, and another three, at least, before the reply came back, so Lloyd, dispensing with formality, sent, "This is Lieutenant Lloyd of the *Sherlock II*. We have landed successfully on Mars, discovered a decaying Martian city, and eight inhabitants, so far. If you read me, set up a recorder and signal me when you are ready to tape my report."

He sat back in the chair with a sigh. "There, that cuts out a lot of fuss," he remarked to Kroner.

"And the less time spent away from our men, the better."

"Yes," said Lloyd. "How does this thing—well, how does it *feel* to you?"

"Too easy," said Kroner without hesitation. "Of course, there's no reason why it should feel at all *hard*, is there?"

"No," Lloyd admitted reluctantly. "No reason at all why we shouldn't establish contact with these Martians, find them friendly, get our information about their city, way of life, and so on, and go back safely to Earth and home. But—"

"Yeah," said Kroner. "*But!*"

"They *act* friendly."

"Maybe that's all it is, an act. But if they're not going to be chums, why go to all this

trouble? You know what I mean, sir?"

Lloyd leaned back in the padded chair and scratched his short-cropped head. "Beats me. And yet I can't help feeling uncomfortable about—There's the blinker. Earth's ready to record." He dropped the conversation and set himself to telling Earth of developments so far.

"**I**S it some sort of taboo or what?" Lloyd demanded irritably of Craig. It was three hours since he and Kroner had returned from the ship, and communication with Ulkay and his bunch had been established—but with one annoying and unexpected feature.

"I can't seem to find out, sir," Craig said miserably. "He's responsive on almost every other topic, but when I ask him about the city here, he says he can't tell me. I've asked him why, but his answer escapes me."

"When he says he 'can't' tell you, does he mean he is physically unable to, or forbidden to?"

"I'm not even sure if it's 'can't.' It might just be 'won't.' But I *am* sure it's a negative of some sort. They shake their heads and nod same as we do for yes and no."

"Let's see that list," Lloyd said, his voice tired.

Craig held it out, but Kroner took it. "You've looked at

it ten times in the past hour, sir," he apologized. "Let me have a whack at it."

Lloyd started to argue the point, then gave it up. "Okay, Sergeant. See what you can make of it. If you can ask a clear question of Ulkay and Company with those choice bits of language, I'll put in your name for a decoration."

Kroner scanned the list, noting with fading hope the vocabulary he had to work with. "Wish we had more verbs!" he said.

"They're the hardest, always," said Craig. "Active ones are easy enough, though the tenses and irregularities can be tough, but the non-active — the intransitive — can't be demonstrated the way actions and things can."

"Well, we've got *Mars*, and *city*, and—that's a good one—*men*. That's them?"

Craig nodded.

"Hey, weren't there *eight* of those guys a while back? We're two short!"

"What?" said Lloyd, looking over at the aliens. "You're right, Kroner! Ulkay's gone, and—let me see—that heavy-set one with the big shoulder-span. Where the hell—?"

Tandy and Harrison came up at that moment.

"Sir," Tandy looked disgusted, "we can't find out a thing from the rubble. No heavy radiation present, so it kind of discounts an atomic war, although—"

"Never mind the surmises for now," said Lloyd. "Tell me just what you know for sure."

One side of Tandy's mouth twisted. "Yes, sir. Very little of the rubble seems to be due to any *heavy* damage. I mean, no buildings have collapsed or anything like that. It's just as though time had crumbled off a brick hole here and there, and nobody bothered sweeping the street."

"The city gates were knocked down," Lloyd protested.

TANDY shook his head. "Not knocked down, sir—fallen. It's my opinion this place is just obsolete, a sort of last-year's model that needs a new coat of paint and an engine overhaul. Except for all the dust, sand and crumbled material, it's in pretty good shape."

"You mean it's unfashionable but serviceable?" said Kroner. "Like a spring-driven phonograph?"

"That's about it, Sergeant," Tandy nodded. "Anything else, you're going to have to ask the Martians themselves."

"Which brings me back to my earlier apprehension," said Kroner. "I don't like the idea of two of those guys being missing. Hold on—there they come! And with a small cannon, unless I miss my guess!"

The Earthmen were all on their feet now, facing the pair of aliens who lugged a heavy contraption with a tubular nozzle on the front of it up the street toward the waiting group.

"It can't be a cannon," said Lloyd, puzzled. "Why would they bother, when hand-weapons would do?"

By that time, Ulkay and his crony had the gadget set down on a tripod base and were turning dials on its side. The Earthmen, every one of them, loosened pistols in their holsters, but only Tandy actually brought his out.

Then they jumped as a metallic voice came out through the gadget's nozzle. "Men!" said the voice. "Do not possess fear."

"A miracle!" gasped Craig. "It's a translating machine!" He rushed forward to view this thing, his face glowing with delight.

Lloyd, recovering from his start, saw that Ulkay was speaking into a tube at the side of the machine, and realized that his translated voice had been the one heard.

"Ulkay," he said, going toward the machine, "does this work both ways?"

Ulkay nodded and pointed to the nozzle on the front. "This," said his voice from the nozzle, "picks up as well as receipts."

"*Receives,*" said Craig automatically.

"—as receives," said the nozzle automatically. "There will exist some few ungrammatics, but it will mostly make sensible."

"Man, this simplifies everything!" Lloyd exclaimed. "Ulkay, do you mind if we ask you some questions?"

Ulkay, via the nozzle, replied with dignity, "You and your Craig have questioned with relentless of us. Can we be allowed the similar luck?"

"I beg your pardon," Lloyd said sincerely. "Go ahead and ask."

"These transparents you wear upon your faces, why?" asked the nozzle, in a mechanical monotone.

"The air." Lloyd gestured with a sweep of his arm. "It is too thin to support our kind of life without these masks."

"Strange," said the nozzle. "And where are your women?"

"We did not bring them with us," said Lloyd. "We made this trip strictly to find you."

Ulkay stared at Lloyd a long moment. Then the nozzle asked, "What trip?"

"To your city," said Lloyd. "To your planet."

ULKAY frowned, then fiddled a moment with a dial on the side of the machine. The nozzle spoke slowly this time. "Repeat your response. It was not a sensible."

"We came here. To Mars. To find you." Lloyd said it carefully and distinctly, feeling very uneasy.

"But this is Earth," said the nozzle loudly.

"To *you* it is Earth," said Lloyd, with a tolerant smile. "I think we're having a semantic problem, Ulkay. Each planet's self-name would translate as 'Earth.' This machine cannot make the proper distinction."

"No, no, no!" came the nozzle's voice. "You say your planet is called 'Earth'. Why do you now call it 'Mars'?"

"We don't," said Lloyd, bewildered. "We call *this* planet Mars. *Our* planet is called Earth—"

"Sir!" Kroner grasped his arm tightly. "Wait a minute! I think I get it! . . . Ulkay! Is this *your* planet?"

"No," said the nozzle. "Is it not *yours*?"

"Numbers!" said Craig. "Ask him by the *number* of the planet from the sun."

"We are from Earth, the third planet from the sun," said Lloyd, holding up three fingers for emphasis. "Where are you from?"

"We are from Earth," said the nozzle, "the second planet from the sun." Ulkay held up two digits.

"Venusians?" Tandy squawked, while Harrison doubled up in a fit of laughter as the idea sank in. In another moment, both groups—Ul-

kay's and Lloyd's—had joined him in a tension-breaking paroxysm of mirth.

"Where are *you* parked?" asked Kroner, the first to recover some semblance of control.

Ulkay, still chuckling, pointed in the opposite direction to that in which the *Sherlock II* was standing. "Outside the west gate of the city," said the nozzle. "Where are you?"

"Outside the east gate. We thought you were Martians—people of this, the fourth planet."

"And we in turn thought you were Martians," said Ulkay, through the nozzle. There was more laughter in both groups.

"For Pete's sake!" muttered Lloyd. "For Pete's sake! Look, Ulkay, why don't both our groups get some rest and we'll make our inspection tour of the city tomorrow, the two groups together?"

Ulkay, after a babble of discussion with his men, was in agreement with this plan, and they and the Earthmen shared a large room within one of the old abandoned buildings.

"Will your air supply not run out?" Ulkay queried.

"Not on these," Lloyd explained. "They're not tank masks; they're compression masks. A hydraulic system inside the suit keeps a compressor running in this gadget on

our backs, as long as we're moving about. Martian air is thin but non-poisonous."

"But if you sleep?"

"The air runs low, which makes us fidget, which pumps more air through the compressors," Lloyd explained.

Ulkay expressed admiration at the cleverness of Earth scientists, and then joined his men in slumber. The Earthmen, tired and happy, fell soundly asleep.

IT was still dark, the chill purple dark of Mars at night, when Lloyd awakened abruptly. His body was tense and his mind keenly alert. Something was wrong. He felt it, but couldn't place the source of his uneasiness.

He sat up and looked about him. Starlight, coming in bright pinpoints through a high arched window, glinted reassuringly off the helmets of his men, lying in pools of deep shadow all about him. He looked for Ulkay and his group, and saw their smaller silhouettes huddled on the stone flooring. Feeling a little better, he lay down once more and tried to fall back to sleep. But there was a gnawing, nagging something in his mind that would not allow sleep to come.

"What's bothering me?" he asked himself. "Is it something about Ulkay and his bunch? The only really odd thing about them is that they

don't wear any breathing equipment in this thin air, right? And didn't Ulkay explain that the atmosphere on Venus is just as thin? It didn't jibe with Harrison's opinion about atmospheres, but Harrison hasn't actually *been* to Venus, after all, and the cloudiness still keeps its atmosphere a secret from Earth's spectroscopes, right?"

His mind assured him that this was right and he felt a little better, but not much.

"So what's eating me? A hunch? Intuition? Or just alien-planet nerves?" he went on. "Why should I wake up in the middle of the night feeling scared? Aren't my men all present and accounted for? Aren't they sleeping quietly, just as they should be?"

Feeling annoyed with his own nebulous fears, Lloyd sat up again and looked over the groups, Ulkay's and his own. As he watched, Kroner grunted in his sleep and rolled over. Tandy's helmet emitted gentle snoring noises. Harrison and Craig lay more quietly, but their chests could be seen, even in that dim light, rising and falling normally. Lloyd excoriated his imagination for worrying him—it had fed him a quick suggestion that perhaps his companions' masks had been slit, suffocating them silently to death.

"I *must* trust Ulkay; it's necessary," said Lloyd to himself. "I can't let these ground-

less fears spoil future relations between Earth and Venus. The Venusians are friendly and intelligent, and not really odd-looking, once you discount the number of digits on their hands and a few unearthly color schemes on their torsos. So what am I scared of?"

Cold touched his spine, shocking him into alertness, as he isolated his fear. He rolled over and shook Kroner awake with barbaric callousness.

"Huh? Wha?" said Kroner, sitting up.

"Sergeant," said Lloyd, trying to confide his fear to the other man, "when we got here, we were nervous about making contact with aliens, right?"

"Yeah," Kroner said sleepily. "But it turned out okay, sir, didn't it?" He shook his groggy head. "I mean, Ulkay and his bunch are okay, aren't they?"

"Yeah," said Lloyd shakily. "They are fine—but, Kroner, they're not the right aliens!"

It took Kroner a moment to get it. When he did, he came awake with a jolt. "And we haven't even posted a guard!"

Lloyd, his worries abetted by Kroner's response, got to his feet, shouting, "Mayday! Mayday!"

His men—and Ulkay's a few seconds later—were up, everybody snapping on portable torches and setting the chamber alive with flashing lights.

"Ulkay!" Lloyd said, rushing to the Venusian. "If you're not the Martians, and we're not the Martians, then there is still a chance that someone *else* is the Martians!"

Ulkay yelled something to his men, and Lloyd watched with horror as each Venusian fumbled at an empty scabbard upon his belt. Lloyd's hand shot to his holster and found there just what his men were finding in their own holsters: nothing.

"Do you think we've discovered the Martians?" said Kroner, his voice hoarse with fright.

Then the glaring overhead lights of the room came on, revealing the surrounding phalanx of hard-eyed, armed creatures.

"Unless I'm mistaken," Lloyd said, "the Martians have discovered us."

An instant later, there was nothing in the center of the alien room but half-molten air compressors and the charred, smoking remains of a funny-looking little nozzle, still echoing a bilingual chorus of agony.

END

Worlds of if

Book Reviews by Frederik Pohl

ON the jacket of *Venus Plus X* (Pyramid), the book is called "the strangest science-fiction novel Theodore Sturgeon has ever written." It is strange, all right, but Sturgeon has a talent for strangeness. Often he has seemed to want to shock his readers with his daring. It is love that he writes about, in whatever form love may appear.

Some of the forms repel. "I wrote an empathetic sort of tale about some homosexuals," he reminisces, in a postscript to *Venus Plus X*, "and my mailbox filled up with cards drenched with scent and letters written in purple ink with green capitals . . . You cannot be objective about sex, especially when it's outside certain parameters." But I can, he is saying.

It is this point of view, this objective compassion for queerness - for - its - own - sake coupled with a godlike contempt for those who do not have the same warmth and the same objectivity, that has caused some otherwise first-rate Sturgeons to leave a bad taste in the mouth of the read-

er. Sturgeon clearly feels that beauty can be found in mire. And it can; but not by pretending that mire is beauty.

Then, too, Sturgeon is hip, and a lot of the time too hip for comfort. His characters don't talk, they do routines. *Venus Plus X* is by no means free from this. Threaded throughout its length is a series of gray-flannel dialogues. In the past this sort of thing has been unhelpful to his story. If the interludes had a connection, it was not always easy to see; once found, it was not always worth the trouble.

And now here comes *Venus Plus X*, a story set in a human but not a bisexual world, where anyone can do what, and with which, and to whom; and, lo! the thing turns out to be *wonderful*. It is not very surprising that Sturgeon has written an excellent book. But it is surely astonishing that he has built it not out of his strong points, but out of his weaknesses!

Sturgeon has something to tell us in *Venus Plus X*. He says it with irresistible authority. He has invented a

new, fascinating, self-consistent, exciting world and peopled it with a remarkable, plausible, provocative new species. He has put into that world a sympathetic, comprehensible, well-intentioned human being named Charlie Johns. And he has let world, species and human interact before our eyes, so that we are told everything we should know and nothing we needn't; and in the process he has evoked our compassion, our pleasure and our love.

If there has been a better science-fiction novel in the past few years—say, since James Blish's *A Case of Conscience*—this reviewer has not seen it. It is so good that it can't be praised in detail, because the detail deserves to come to you as Sturgeon intends it, seriatim. This one you've got to read for yourself and don't let anyone spoil it for you.

Now, even *Venus Plus X* is not all perfection. Charlie Johns is the name of a real man—a nonce-figure of a couple decades ago, who got to be a nonce-figure by marrying a nine-year-old bride. It is hard to escape the suspicion that Sturgeon (a man who seldom does anything by coincidence) is enjoying some sort of private joke in giving his lead character that name. And then the postscript tacked to the end of the book is—well—smart-alecky. It is

as though, having finished the novel and having seen for the first time what a really remarkable piece of work it was, the author couldn't resist the temptation to crow.

Well, let him crow. The man is entitled.

Venus Plus X may or may not be the strangest science-fiction novel Sturgeon ever wrote. But it is his best.

IN *The Challenge of the Sea* (Holt-Rinehart-Winston), Arthur C. Clarke provides young readers with a useful and uniformly entertaining book about the world of water. This is not a subject that has previously occupied Clarke, except as far as the sea is a necessary adjunct to skin-diving, but he acquits himself with grace and merit. He always does.

There are, it is true, a few annoying lapses. Some are plain slips of fact: e.g., the name of the most successful abyss-penetrating vessel is uniformly, but wrongly, spelled as "bathyscape." Some are errors of omission: e.g., where in listing the economically likely ways of extracting fresh water from the sea Clarke includes distillation, ion-exchange and osmotic barriers, but does not even mention what is at present the chiefest contender: simple freezing. And some are in the area of opinion. For instance, it is possible

that, as Clarke says, farming ultimately "will have abandoned the continents and moved out into the ocean." It certainly is not *likely*. Of all the false hopes the anti-Malthusians have held out for humanity, the prospect of limitless food from the sea is surely the most illusory. Land plants are inherently more efficient than aquatic ones. Moreover, although it is true enough that there are many edible fish uncaught, it is also true that the total contribution of the sea to the human diet is quite small, and even multiplying it many times cannot make it decisive.

Nevertheless, the book's merits vastly exceed its few faults. Clarke has been everywhere and read everything, and his reliable talent for imagining the consequences of known scientific fact let him fill in his marine future background with plausible detail. The publisher lists *The Challenge of the Sea* as a "young adult" book. Oddly enough, that's about right. Teen-agers will be able to read it with pleasure and profit, but so will adults.

ROBERT SHECKLEY's *The Status Civilization* (Signet) is a rarely uneven book, a story that makes a point, but reaches its goal only after threading the most remarkable maze of portentous blind alleys and scamped

explanations since Van Vogt.

The story concerns a man, Will Barrent, who is exiled to a prison planet, his memory wiped away. The planet is a hell of topsy-turvy moral values—"Evil is that force within us which inspires men to acts of strength and endurance. The worship of evil is . . . the only true worship"—and lethal violence: "I'm going to shoot you . . . We have the right to shoot down any new peon who leaves his barracks area." "But I wasn't told!" "Of course not. If you new men were told, none of you would leave your barracks area."

Barrent manages to survive both the informal potshots of the citizens and the elaborately organized "Games" to which he is (inevitably) subjected. He then tackles the central problem toward which the story has been heading, the understanding and mastery of the Earth from which the prisoners have been exiled.

It is in this last section that Sheckley finds his way. Back on Earth, in the last seven of the book's thirty chapters, the author pulls himself together and gives us a sharply drawn picture of a stagnant planet and the culture which has made it so.

But the bulk of the book is neither sharp nor convincing. Sheckley does not scruple to advance his plot by tricks,

and some of the tricks are dubious. The gladiatorial games as an ingredient of science fiction have become a cliché; those in *The Status Civilization* are kissed off so briskly that they seem hardly to interest the author. The behavior of the book's minor characters is uniformly preposterous. Those who have a secret go to elaborate lengths to advertise its existence. A girl from the underground movement (naturally there is an underground movement, nothing is spared us), who has gone to great trouble to help Barrent survive, concludes that he is worthy of the help she gave him because he *did* survive. (Obviously, this girl can't lose. If she had decided not to help him, he would have died. This would have proved she was right in not helping him.) Barrent both knows everything and knows nothing. He has psi-sensed "mutants" to read the past and future for him, but their powers are oddly limited. They can, in fact, see only what the author needs to move the story along, and nothing to simplify it.

The book seems, all in all, to add up to a long series of false starts, climaxed by an excellent novelette which is more or less irrelevant to what has gone before. The "novelette" is well worth reading. It's too bad about the false starts.

A TIME for reminiscing comes to us through the joint efforts of Avalon and Ballantine. Avalon has two novels which seem to belong to an earlier age of science fiction, while Ballantine has reissued the short science-fiction stories of the trail-blazer himself under the title of *Best Stories of H. G. Wells*. There is not much point in a critical assessment of Wells, at this date, but there is much point in reading him. His "futures" are now often enough well in our past—aircraft and armored warfare are among his projections—but where he guessed wrong he was plausible, and where he guessed right he was uncanny. Moreover, the texture of his writing is a standing reproof to most of those who followed.

Avalon's pair of books are nothing like Wells for quality, but they have much sentimental interest for old-timers. Actually, *Next Door to the Sun*, by Stanton A. Coblenz, is not really a resurrected magazine story (or, if it is, is one which this reviewer missed.) But it has so much of the exact quality of the same writer's *Into Plutonian Depths*, *The Bue Barbarians*, *After 12,000 Years* and so on that it might just as well be. Coblenz is a poet of considerable attainments, and some thirty years ago was considered to be science-

fiction's leading satirist. Very few traces of either quality now appear. *Next Door to the Sun* takes place, of course, on the planet Mercury, populated by a lost settlement of humans who talk with a Pennsylvania Dutch accent and live under a regimented society whose principal comprehensible feature seems to be a distaste for red-haired men. There is some heavy-handed comedy, but there was also, at least for this reviewer, enjoyment in reading. It may be that some of the enjoyment was nostalgia.

For the same reasons Otis Adelbert Kline's *The Swordsman of Mars* was pleasant to read. At roughly the same date as Coblenz's pre-eminence, science-fiction readers were witnesses to one of the most dogged manhunts in literary history. It seemed that wherever Edgar Rice Burroughs sent John Carter, Otis Adelbert Kline's characters were only inches behind. Venus was predominantly Kline territory, as Mars belonged to Burroughs, but both executed many sorties on the other's holdings. *The Swordsman of Mars* was one of the sorties. It has exactly the merits of the Burroughs Mars books—excitement and a sure victory of good over evil—and exactly the faults.

AVALON has also a brace of L. Sprague de Camp

novels: *Solomon's Stone* and *The Glory That Was*.

Solomon's Stone is a dream-world fantasy; the author proposes that men and women imagine themselves to be different than they are, and that these imagined characters have flesh and blood existence on another level of reality. The story concerns a man who incautiously tampers with a demon and is thrust into the other world for punishment. Fast, entertaining, rather slight.

The Glory That Was presents a near-future world in which the Emperor Vasil, a hobbyist of enormous dimensions, has recreated ancient Greece, complete with Parthenon and smelly drains, and peopled it with brainwashed 21st Century human beings hypnotically persuaded that they are Pericles, Kritias, etc. De Camp is always exact in his history—well, maybe a little more than exact; "pedantic" suggests itself as a possible term sometimes—and his recreations of the past are first-rate. Still, the book has the air of an author repeating himself. *Lest Darkness Fall*, an earlier and far better de Camp story, has no particular resemblance to this one in terms of plot; but the feelings of the characters, the conversations, the paradoxes are so similar that it is impossible to think of the one book without thinking of the



CHIPPER CHARLIE

Never been sick a day in his life. But he knows it can happen to him—so he gets a health check-up every year—just in case. He also supports the American Cancer Society's Crusade. Send your contribution to "Cancer," in care of your local post office.

AMERICAN CANCER SOCIETY



other. *The Glory That Was* suffers. *Lest Darkness Fall*, where one man proposes to change the whole course of humanity for a millennium and a half, contains a theme of scope and power; and *The Glory That Was* is, after all, only an adventure.

IN HIS incarnation as an ethnologist, the present reviewer edited a series of collections of originals for Ballantine under the general title of *Star Science Fiction Stories*. Doubleday has just published a hard-cover selection of the selections. It is called *Star of Stars*, and it contains what the undersigned deems to be among the finest works of C. M. Kornbluth, Alfred Bester, William Morrison, Arthur C. Clarke, Henry Kuttner, H. L. Gold, Fritz Leiber and Jack Williamson, with three or four less familiar names (at any rate, less familiar in connection with science-fiction stories: Gerald Kersh is one of them) thrown in.

A similar collection, from *Galaxy Magazine*, is called *Bodyguard and Four Other Short Novels* (also Doubleday), containing not only Christopher Grimm's story, from which the book's title is taken, but stories by Clifford D. Simak, Daniel F. Galouye and others. The editor here, of course, is H. L. Gold.

END



Gingerbread Boy



PHYLLIS GOTLIEB



*He was a boy. He never could be a man.
He could only help them—and love
them—and flee from them—*



BENNO was sitting in the closet with the door closed. It was dark and stuffy, and the toe of a shoe was digging into the base of his spine, but he liked the closeness. He had been grown in

a tank as narrow as this closet, in dark, warm liquids. He had no real memory of that time, but he closed his eyes and imagined that he could remember the warmth, and the love and kindness that



seemed to be around him then . . .

There was a thump and a yell of laughter, and he blinked. Poppy and her ball. Well, she had nothing to worry about. He had been playing with her a few moments ago. He would throw the ball and she would miss it and run after it shrieking.

"Come on, Benno, throw it, Benno!" and Benno threw it, mouth drawn in the thin, ironical line that served him for a smile.

Finally, running to catch it, she overreached herself and fell. She sat there a minute, lower lip shoved out and mouth drawn down at the corners into a deep inverted U before it opened into a howl.

"No, no, Poppy. Don't cry, lovey," said Benno, pulling her up as Mrs. Peretto ran into the room.

"Benno, what did you—" She bit off the words and turned to the child. "Tell Mummy what happened, sweetie."

Benno said quietly, "Mrs. Peretto, why don't you ask Poppy *what I did to her?*"

The woman whipped around and he saw that she was trembling. She loosened her hold on the little girl and stood up.

"Benno, I—I don't know what's got into you. You never used to be like this. You used to call me Mom—" Abruptly she went out of the room.

But she had left the child behind—*afraid to let me know she doesn't trust me*—and Poppy trotted up to Benno and yanked on his trouser leg. "Come on, Benno, let's play some more."

"No more for now, Poppy." Benno gently pulled away from the sticky fingers. "Go find your Mummy."

So he went and sat down in the closet with the door shut and brooded. He would have enjoyed one of Wenslow's cigars now, but the closet was no place to smoke it. Anyway, this was no good. But as he was about to rise he heard a different sound: Mrs Peretto dialling on the intercom. He stayed still.

"Helen? Oh—fine, I guess. Nothing new really, but—I've been having a bit of trouble too. Thing is, I can't even say it's anything I haven't made up in my own mind. But I'm beginning to be a little frightened. . . ."

Benno waited for a while to be sure she had gone. For her to know he skulked in closets when he felt moody wouldn't have helped at all. As he opened the door, he saw himself in the full-length glass, an image of a broad stocky twelve-year-old boy.

But he was five years old, not twelve. He had been made in this shape and he would die in it: pseudo-male and sterile, hairless except for the strong, dark line of brow and the

close-cropped head of hair so black and wiry it looked artificial. Even the temper of his skin was dark and sullen.

He ran a hand over his face. He had been grown from a piece of Peretto's flesh, so the features were Peretto's; but Peretto was a man, and Benno a second-hand copy pretending to be his child.

He sneered at the image and slipped out of the house.

PERETTO and Wenslow shared one of the shabby portables in Administration. It contained the lab where Benno had been born and a small private office, and when Benno reached it he was glad to find Peretto in and Wenslow out.

Peretto looked up as he closed the door behind him. "What's eating you, Benno?"

"Not me," said Benno. "You."

"I don't think I'm giving you any trouble. What is it?"

"Mrs. Peretto thinks I've got it in for Poppy, or something. She thought I hurt her when she fell today."

Peretto shrugged. "It's not unusual for parents to be worried about jealousy problems between older and younger children."

Benno helped himself in Wenslow's humidor and lit up.

"She's not worried. She's frightened. I heard her saying so to Mrs. Metzner on the phone when I was sitting in

the closet thinking. She's scared of me."

Peretto said hesitantly, "That's not so, Benno. I think she's feeling a little guilty, like a lot of the rest of us."

"Because it's hard to keep loving made-up things like us when you've got real kids of your own."

"We put a lot of love into you—"

"But that was different. That was when you thought you couldn't have any kids."

"Earth was pretty hot when we left it. We couldn't be sure we wouldn't be sterile forever. We had to have something, Benno."

"So now you've got something and you're stuck with it." Benno looked out of the window where the yellow sun of Skander V was shining on experimental plots and groves of trees, on Residential, on the dunes and the salt lake and the rest of the Colony beyond. "And it makes you sick to look at us and think you wanted and loved us."

"Benno!"

"But it's true! Dickon told me Wenslow said that to him."

"Oh, Wenslow."

"Well, maybe you don't like him so much either. But you and he are on the same side."

"Do we have to pick sides?"

"We can't help it. A lot of the guys are talking funny, too."

Peretto waited. The an-

droids were unable to lie and he was unwilling to make Benno compromise himself.

Finally Benno said uncomfortably, "About Bimbo Harrington . . ."

"But you know he drowned. We couldn't do anything for him."

"Nobody ever saw his body."

"It wasn't a thing to see. He—the android body decomposes so—it's not anything we can help."

"Well, they think—" Benno was beginning, but the door opened.

It was Wenslow. His pale eyes flashed and his thin nostrils twitched at the smoke in the air.

"At the cigars again, I see, Benno," he said pleasantly. Benno blew a mouthful of smoke into his face and walked out.

After the door had closed he could hear the voices:

"I swear to God if that thing belonged to me—"

Peretto interrupted wearily: "You leave cigars around because you get a good snide laugh out of seeing him smoke them. If he manages to do it without amusing you, too bad for you. Now let's stop niggling and get to work."

"AND then she said, 'I don't know what's got into you, you used to call me Mom until—'"

"And if you tried it she'd

twist your ears off for you, the bitch!"

Benno watched Dickon's face across the campfire and realized that Dickon had probably paid very bitterly for his own enjoyment in blowing smoke at Wenslow. He would have to be more careful of his pleasures in the future.

He said, trying to keep the peace, "The Perettos aren't bad, Dickon. You have to be fair to them."

The shadows in Dickon's eyes were as deep as the humps of the dunes against the night sky. "You can say that, smoking cigars and turning yourself into a clown to suck up to them."

"If I did that, I'd be selling my soul," said Benno. "But if I left off smoking when I like it just for fear of anything they might do, I'd be selling my soul twice over."

"Soul! I'd like to see you show me where you've got a soul."

"Nothing *you* could see! Oh, hell. I guess if I had to live with the Wenslows I'd be as big a bastard as you are."

Dickon answered him in kind, and he waited for a slackening.

"—but don't you see? They loved us and made us love them, so they think we've got immortal souls. That's the only thing that's keeping them from wiping us out."

"So what makes you think

they haven't started wiping us out already?" asked Rudi Metzner. "What about Bimbo?"

"I asked Peretto about that today," Benno said slowly. "He said he'd drowned."

"And you believed him? Sure he drowned. But it was in one of those tanks, you can bet. Did you know they'd started up the tanks again? What's your guess about what they're doing?"

"I don't get you."

"Take a look in one of those tanks," said Dickon softly. "Try it in the middle of the night, sneak around the back where the guard won't see you. You'll see they've got a thing in there, something new they're making, and I'll bet they started it with Bimbo. Maybe Peretto and Wenslow wouldn't bloody their hands on us, but that don't stop them from making a new kind of android to do their work, a killer that's not so scared of souls! Take a look and see."

"I'll promise this," said Benno. "You try messing around with the Perettos and I'll kill you dead, Dickon. Because *you* haven't got the soul of a flea!"

THE stars were dim beyond the two moons that made the shadows shift and fall; rustling trees covered his footsteps in the grass. He cursed them, he didn't believe them,

he had sworn he wouldn't go. But here he was. He had wakened in the middle of the night as though he had planned it, and dressed and crept out. He stood still for a moment. If his world broke now, he would never be able to love the Perettos again, and there was nothing else. Yet he went on.

At the back of the fence he had the whole building between himself and the guard. He climbed the chicken-wire and dropped down silently. He knew that the lock of the tank-room window was broken. No one was worried about theft. The guard was there only to prevent the disturbance of delicate adjustments.

He pushed at the window. It creaked, but the wind covered the noise.

Inside it was very dark, but he knew this room well. Two steps and he had found the bank of switches on the first tank. One dim light was all he dared. Even in the dusk beyond the peephole that one was certainly empty. He pressed back the toggle and moved on. The second was empty too, and he began to hope. But the third—

He was afraid to turn on more than one light, and the liquid was cloudy, but there was definitely a creature there.

In a second it became sensitive to the light and began to turn and thresh about. The

cloudiness enveloped it again, but he had seen it. Sickened, he turned the light out and groped for the window. He dropped down and climbed the wire again, but without caring where he was going or whether he was caught.

A few steps away from the fence a group of figures emerged from the bushes and encircled him.

"Couldn't resist, eh, Benno?"

"What do you want?" he whispered.

"We had a bet on you," said Dickon, grinning. "Go ahead, tell us what you saw there."

Benno was silent for a moment, and said finally, "All right, I saw something there, but not clearly enough to tell what it was."

"But we told you what it was and you know. Go on, won't you?"

"Yes," said Benno.

"Not feelin' so snotty now, are you, Benno?"

Hurrah for our side. He would have lashed out at them, and turned to find the weak point in the circle, but they were his equals.

"Let me go," he said.

"Okay, for now. But remember, we'll be calling on you one day. You'll come."

He ran, and their laughter followed him.

IT was afternoon and, with Poppy swinging on his hand, Benno tramped along

the stretch of sand that threaded through the tufted dunes and separated the back gardens of Residential from the lake. The sun was shining, but not for Benno.

He tried to tell himself that he had no proof for anything, but he felt weak inside in the face of Dickon's hatred of the humans.

"Let's dig here," said Poppy, "and we'll find the treasure." Benno sat down while she went to work. Her presence was Mrs. Peretto's way of saying: I was a fool yesterday, and didn't mean what I said. If that was the case, he had nothing to fear there. He looked around. The beach was quiet, the waters rippled sluggishly.

A few houses down, a woman came through the back gate and out onto the sand, a naked baby tucked under one arm and a flannel blanket under the other. It was Mrs. Harrington. She was wearing brief red shorts and a fluffy blouse; a black ponytail bobbed on her tanned neck.

She trotted down to one of the sundecks near the water and sat there, sloshing her feet while the baby kicked on the blanket beside her, making bubbly sounds.

Then Harrington, out from work, swung down the garden, leaped over the gate, and ran across the sands. He grabbed the ponytail, pulled

the woman's head back, and kissed her upside-down face. He whispered in her ear, gesturing back toward the house. She shushed him, glancing at Benno and Poppy. He cajoled; she resisted. Finally he pulled her by the arm and she shrugged, tucked up the baby, and followed him back to the house. Benno could hear them giggling as they went.

"When I get big, I'm going to be a mummy," said Poppy. "And you can be the daddy, Benno."

"Yeah," said Benno.

He crouched there, trapped in the amber of twelve-year-old boyhood on Skander. Peretto had said to him, "We would have been happy to make you—complete, if we could. We just don't know enough." But Benno, watching the Harringtons, knew very well what he would never be.

Poppy put aside her pail and shovel and came over to him, bracing herself between his knees and resting her forehead against his. Her breath was like apples; she scratched his face gently and he kissed her, rich with the pleasure of feeling a living being against him. *This is all I'm good for.* He hugged her as she giggled, and ruffled his hair in her neck, grunting like the wild pigs the colonists hunted for sport.

Someone shrieked behind him: "You filthy beast! Let

go of that child at once, do you hear?"

He was so taken with surprise that he fell back in the sand, pulling the child on top of him. Mrs. Wenslow was standing over him, fists tight, face contorted:

"Dirty, dirty thing! Wait till everybody hears about this! Oh, to hear the Perettos, butter wouldn't melt in your mouth! I'll tell them different, you—"

But Benno righted himself and ran, leaving Poppy howling behind him. The woman knew he couldn't—! But it was no use stopping to argue. He ran.

In the hills he knew a few caves, under a matting of low gnarled trees. He squatted in one of them, nursing his hurt as the sun sank and the moons swung by. He thought and thought till his mind turned sickly and his head ached. Was he as innocent as he thought? He was afraid to search into the unexplored reaches of his mind, but he knew for sure that his loins were empty, and he cursed himself and his makers.

Exhausted finally, he groped in his pocket for one of the cigars he had filched the day before. He stared at it, shrugged and lit it.

He sat there smoking and watching the stars as they filtered in and out of the leaves. He didn't know what he was waiting for.

"PUT that out, you nut! You want to get caught?" Benno peered ahead; he could see nothing but stars and branches.

"Dickon?" he called tentatively.

Pushing aside the boughs, Dickon slipped in and sat beside him. "Go on, put it out. They'll see us a mile off."

"I don't care."

"I do, God damn it, the thing's suffocating me."

"You wouldn't have found me without it," said Benno sensibly as he put it out.

"Now they're not going to find us," said Dickon. "What happened? I was out hunting, and they rounded us up and sent us to bring you in. Huh!"

"I was playing with Poppy, horsing around. Somebody thought it was something dirty."

"Boy, I love you for that!" Dickon thumped him on the back. "It's what I've been waiting for, but I never thought you'd be the one. Who was it? Not Peretto?"

"No. It was Mrs. Wenslow."

Benno was shocked by the silence. No sneers, no laughter. He turned to look for Dickon's face in the dark, and thought suddenly: *he loves them.*

Dickon said in a low voice, "Nobody would play with that scrawny kid of theirs. They've got him so he's scared to let out a peep."

"I'm sorry, Dickon."

"What for, you bloody fool? What do you mean?"

"Nothing," said Benno.

Dickon raised his head: "Listen, there they are. Halloo! Halloo!" he called softly down the hill.

"Who?" asked Benno.

"The rest of us; I've got two dozen down there, only ten missing." He divided the branches and called, "Come on up, you guys, I've found him!"

"But what—" Benno began, but Dickon was waving the others in.

"Hi!" they cried. "What was all the business about?"

DICKON guffawed. "He was horsing with the Perotto brat and they thought he—"

He elaborated to an extent that made Benno glad the darkness hid his flushed face. He could see their eyes glittering in the dimness. They were staring at him with respect.

"Gee, lemme touch you! You been holdin' out on us, Benno? Maybe you got—"

"Shut up, shut up, for God's sake!" snapped Benno. "He's feeding you a line. I'm just the same as you are." His people!

Dickon laughed again, nastily. "All right, forget about that for now. We've got to get the others together first. Then we can start out."

"Start out for what?" Ben-

no felt the incredulous stares around him.

"You all there? What do you think we've got these guns for? We're all set to knock the lot of them off the planet."

Benno caught his breath. "Just for me?"

"Who else? Think we're gonna let 'em get away with it?"

Benno stared at their set faces in the dusk. "But they're not mad at you, you damn fools!"

"What do you mean? Think you're going to back out after getting us all up here?"

"I didn't. You came after me." He tried to keep his voice level. "They got nothing on you. I just came up here to think for a while. Let me go back and take my lumps and we'll forget the whole business."

"Forget it!" Dickon swung up the rifle. "You're coming down with us right now. I'm giving the orders and you're gonna do what I say!"

"Yeah? You want to fight, okay, but you don't pin it on me." Benno grasped the rifle barrel and pulled it to his chest. "Go on, kill me."

Dickon stood indecisive. Everyone knew that if Benno were dead the whole affair would collapse. Then he pulled the rifle out of Benno's hands and set it aside, snarling.

"Okay, you guys. Put away the guns and let the scab have it!"

WORDS rattled at him: ". . . betbetbetterterter i-i-idededea . . ." He shook his head and the words sounded in his ears as he pulled himself out of his sleep or coma, he never knew which.

Mist was pushing into the cave. The trees outside seemed clotted with cobwebs. His lids were heavy and crusted. His body felt flayed to the bone, sore in every joint, muscle, nerve. His tongue pulled away from his palate with a wrench and his arms flopped like dying fishes. He looked at them and saw that the wrists were bound.

". . . don't know why I never thought of it before . . ." Benno moved his head again and nearly groaned. There was no comfort in the sickly early dawn rolling by in wet drifts of fog.

"Much better idea," Dickon was saying. "We can't just run down there waving guns. They'd have us knocked off in an hour. But if we pick up one of their brats they'll come after us. They'll never know where to find us in all these holes, and we can do what we like with them."

Benno pulled himself up till he sat hunched over his knees. He didn't dare touch his face, even to rub his eyes.

"All we have to decide is whose kid," said one of the others.

"There's the scab up," said Dickon. "Knock him on the head, somebody."

"Leave him alone, Dickon, he never hurt you." Dickon cocked an eyebrow at the speaker and went back to his plan.

"Whose! Think anybody'd miss Wenslow's brat? We want Peretto's. They'll put it on Benno, and if he gets killed, nobody'll worry."

Benno stared at Dickon with horror and pity. His personality had disintegrated like a child's in a tantrum, leaving only an idiot rage. But the other androids were shifting about, looking at each other.

Finally, Rudi said, "We didn't figure on anybody getting killed in this, Dickon."

Dickon turned on him: "What did you think, you were playing tiddleywinks?"

"We wanted to get even a bit, get them under our thumb and give them a scare—"

"Yeah, and end up with love and kisses and an all-day sucker!"

Benno said, "Isn't that what *you* want, Dickon?"

"You shut up! Keep your mouth out of this!" He was almost sobbing. "I could kill you now easy as—"

"No you couldn't, Dickon," said Rudi quietly.

"Jesus, a bunch of cup-

cakes! I used to think you wanted to be men! But I'll do it, I'll do it myself, and I'll pull you in with me. Watch, you'll see I'll split the whole damn planet in two!"

HE LEAPED out and flung himself down the slope with a crash of branches and was lost in the mist.

"Oh, God," said Rudi. He was about to follow when Benno cried out, "Don't do it! It's too thick to find him in that."

"But if he hurts the kid they'll wipe us all out!"

"Undo my hands," said Benno. They freed him.

"What do you think you can do?"

"I shouldn't have run off in the first place." Benno peered into the mist that was slowly settling like water down a clogged drain. "He won't get much of a head start in that; if I can reach Peretto he'll listen to me."

"But you're a mess."

Benno rubbed his wrists. "We'll all be pretty messy if I don't go."

Rudi said, "We've got the guns—"

"We'd end up killing somebody. Besides . . . this is really between the Wenslows and me, and that's how it'll have to be settled."

"What do you want us to do?"

"Oh, wait around here half an hour, and when you get

back, tell them I got away. That way your tongue won't tie up on you, it's true as far as it goes."

"But hell, they'll know there's something fishy there!"

"Sure, but they won't do anything about it." Benno rubbed his sore head. "They might even respect you for sticking up for me."

Rudi said awkwardly, "Don't rub it in, Benno. Here, take a gun anyway."

"Nuts. I don't want to shoot anybody. Or give them an excuse to shoot me."

HE scrambled down, aching at every move, catching drunkenly at the dripping branches. At the bottom he stopped to get his breath and pull together his ripped clothes.

How would Dickon go about stealing a child from the midst of Residential?

The children usually played outside after breakfast when the mist had cleared and the grass dried off a little. Sometimes the androids took care of them after their work in the fields and vegetable gardens. Today there would be no androids, and perhaps the children would not be trusted outdoors. Would the humans be expecting an attack? Dickon would take the chance and find out.

Benno cut over towards the lakeshore and the dunes, in

spite of the possibility that they might be ambushed. There weren't enough men to hide behind every dune. As the sun came out he climbed a rise and checked his direction. The quarry might have changed plans a hundred times already, but with Dickon's anger, and the rifle under his arm, Benno thought the chance was small.

He dipped in and out among the dunes. He saw no one else on the sands yet, but he knew that his dark moving figure would be eminently noticeable. He scrambled on, glancing uneasily at the buildings across the way. Dickon might have ended up at Administration with an attempt to attack Wenslow, but he thought there would have been more noise and running about in that case. No, he would have to assume that Dickon, like himself, was still skulking. But there was very little time.

Here, now, was the place where he and Poppy had been—yesterday? And where Mrs. Wenslow—he closed his mind on it, but here, also, was where he had watched the Harringtons with lewd eyes as they whispered together:

—don't start on me here, Bob, for God's sake. There's Benno and Poppy over there, watching us.

A kid and an android? What's it got to do with them anyway?

I don't know. Some of those androids . . .

Some of those androids lie awake at night, listening for sounds of love.

BENNO lay on the hillock of sand, the sun was risen. The throbbing aches in his body washed away, he was comfortable. The warmth of the sun told him this was all he could ever want; men were hateful, he did not need them, but the warmth and the sun . . .

Dickon! Where was Dickon? He leaped up, afraid that he had slept an hour, and what Dickon could have done in that time—but the sun hadn't moved. His drowsiness had only stretched the moment. But the danger of sleep was real. He shook his head and rubbed his eyes.

Then he saw his first man, down behind him where the sundecks began.

He couldn't tell whether he was armed, but he was moving east and heading for Benno. Benno scrambled for the next hillock. The man speeded up. *That's done it.* He would never make the last quarter mile at this rate. He gave up and began to run.

“. . . or I'll shoot!” came the end of a yell. Benno thought he was a liar. The noise of the shot knocked him off his feet with fright. He scurried on, glancing back once to see the pursuer run-

ning, not stopping to aim. *Because I'm not armed.* He had no idea how he would stop Dickon without a gun, but if he had brought one, he would have been dead by now. He looked back again. Now there were two of them. Good!

He cut north, straight through the trees, and made a beeline across the central green, gathering pursuers and frightening children with his beaten face.

Then he heard a shriek from back of the Perettos'.

In the yard he found Dickon at last. Poppy screaming under one arm, rifle in the other hand, Mrs. Peretto at bay. Benno stopped at the look on Dickon's face. It was as though he had evolved from some other feral animal and were now reverting to it.

Benno screamed, “Dickon! Dickon!” and without thinking tore up a lump of sod from the border edge and threw it. It struck Dickon in the face, but almost before it struck Benno heard the sound of the rifle, and Dickon fell, shot through the heart.

Behind them, Wenslow lowered the rifle.

Dickon sprawled grotesquely, his face tamed at last, and his mouth full of dirt.

I didn't have to do that to him . . . and I'm the only one who's sorry . . . Poppy flung herself against him, Pe-

retto and his wife crowded them. Peretto said teasingly, "I think you love him more than us, don't you, Poppy?"

"He has perverted the child," snarled Wenslow furiously.

BENNO was packing. Since nearly all he owned had been given to him by humans, he was too proud to take everything he wanted. But he had a knife, the clothes he wore, a few things he had made himself . . . He left off a moment, went over to the window and looked out at the familiar scene.

Below, the children were playing, and he watched their wheeling patterns on the grass; their cries were like birdcalls in the misty verge of evening. . . .

The door opened. Peretto came in and closed it behind him. His eyes took in the colored handkerchief in the best tradition spread out with Benno's possessions.

"You need an icebag for that face," he said. "I brought it."

"I don't want it." But he took it and held it to his swollen jaw.

Peretto drew in on his cigarette and let the coil of smoke drift away on his words. "Why are you running away?"

"You saw what he did," said Benno. "You heard what he said."

"Do you know anyone who agrees with him?"

Benno looked away.

"They're all afraid of us," he said after a moment, not very loud.

"You've shown them not to be. The rest are back and there won't be any trouble now. You know, you didn't have to go running off yesterday, nobody believed that woman."

"I—I'm not going because of her."

"You're running away so you can be by yourself. And pretend you're a man."

"That's a lousy thing to say!"

"You're an android, Benno," Peretto said gently. "You can only be a man between the ears."

"I'm nothing." They stared at each other, two cloudy images peering from beyond the looking-glass.

"The men and women who have the androids love them and—"

"They ruin them and kill them," Benno said stubbornly.

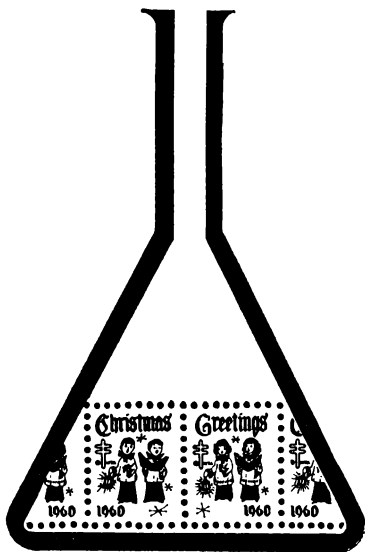
Peretto sighed. "There were some wild stories flying around about what was in the tank, weren't there? Dickon started most of them. Don't deny it."

"Well?"

"It's only that the Harringtons wanted another android in their family. Another Bimbo."

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"OH..." said Benno. Then he sneered. "So he can mind the baby while they—" He clapped his hand over his mouth and sat down on the bed, trembling, unable to make himself stop.

Peretto said very quietly: "You sounded exactly like Wenslow when you said that. You even looked exactly like him."

Benno saw a black gulf falling away before him, the proud goal he had been running for, a cave in the hills where he would eat hate till his soul was consumed, his humanity gone, and he had become the animal looking out of Dickon's eyes when he died.

"What am I to do?" He clasped his aching head in his hands.

"What can you do, except learn to live without envy or hate?"

When he looked up, Peretto was gone. The dark was rising to blend him with the room, the house, the Colony. There was nothing else. All he could ever have was right here.

He sat there while the moons rose and swung in their eccentric orbits. When he stood up finally, he did not unpack his bundle. Not yet. But he left it behind him on the table and went down to the Perettos.

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Al owned a profitable plumbing company. Was cupidity going to make it go down the drain?

THE HOUSE IN BEL AIRE

By MARGARET ST. CLAIR

A SOLID gold toilet seat is unsettling to the mind. Alfred Gluckshoffer, proprietor of the Round the Clock Plumbing Company, raised and lowered the lid several times experimentally and decided that it, too, was gold. It looked like gold, it felt like gold: Gluckshoffer, whose brother-in-law Milt was a salesman for a firm of manufacturing jewelers, and who had heard Milt talking about carats and alloys as long as he had known him, was sure it was gold. About fourteen carat.

From the doorway the elderly party in the dusty dress

suit cleared his throat. It was not a menacing sound, but Alfred jumped. Hastily he picked up his screwdriver and began prying at the valve in the float again.

"Oh, it's a genuine stone," Milt said later that day. "They cut the synthetics out of a boule, see, and they always show the curved lines. Yours has a good color, too. The deeper the color in sapphire, the more valuable, and this one is nearly true cornflower blue. A beauty. Worth maybe four or five hundred. Where'd you get it, Al?"

Gluckshoffer decided to be frank. "Out of that house I

was telling you about. The one where they called me to fix the can in the middle of the night. I dropped my pliers under the washbasin, and when I got down to pick them up, I found it. There was a sort of patch of inlaid work over the tub, wire and stone and tile and stuff, and I guess it must have fallen out of that."

Milt stuck his hands in his pockets and began to walk up and down the shop. Cupidity was coating his features with a dreamy, romantic glaze. "Think you could find the house again, Al?" he asked.

"I don't know. Like I told you, they called for me in a car with all the blinds down, and before I got out they tied a cloth over my eyes. I couldn't see a thing. There was a swimming pool on the left as we went in—I could tell by the way it echoed—and when I was getting out of the car I brushed up against a big tall hedge. Oh, yes, and from the way the streets felt, I think it was out in Bel Aire."

Milt sagged. "A house with a hedge and a swimming pool in Bel Aire. That's about like looking for a girl with brown eyes."

"Oh, I don't know," Gluckshoffer said perversely. "I might be able to tell it if I ran across it again. There was a kind of funny feel to the place, Milt. Sleepy. Dead. Why? Why're you so keen on locating it?"

"Don't be a dope," Milt said. "You want to be a plumber all your life?"

THEY located the house on the fifth night. It stood by itself on what must have been nearly two acres of ground, a whitely glimmering bulk, lightless and somnolent.

"Looks like there's nobody home," Milt said as he brought the car to a noiseless halt. "You oughtn't to have any trouble, Al."

Gluckshoffer snorted softly. "There's at least two people on the place," he whispered, "the chauffeur and the old geezer in the dress suit that called for me that night. Remember what you promised, Milt, about coming in for me if I'm not back in forty-five minutes. After all, this was your idea. And don't forget about honking twice if a patrol car comes by, either." His tone, though subdued, was fierce.

"Oh, sure," Milt said easily. "Don't worry about it. I won't forget."

Al Gluckshoffer got out of the car and began to worm his way through the pale green leaves of a tall pittosporum hedge. As he padded past the swimming pool (on the left, as he had remembered it) in his tennis shoes, he found himself swallowing a yawn.

This was the darnedest place. As he'd told Milt, there were two people at home—

probably more, since you wouldn't keep a chauffeur unless there was somebody for him to drive—and the old party in the dress suit must sleep in the house because he'd said something to Al about the noise of the can having awakened him. But the feel in the air was so sleepy and dead that you'd think everybody on the place had been asleep for the last hundred years.

At the back of the house a window looked promising. Al tried it and found it unlocked. Stifling a yawn, and then another one, he raised the window and slipped inside.

He went into a lavatory on the ground floor first. He had unscrewed the gold faucets on the washbasin and pried eight or ten stones out of the mosaic on the wall before it occurred to him that he was wasting his time. Would people in a house like this put their best stuff in the cans? Obviously not. The place to look for the hot stuff—the really hot hot stuff—would be in the bedrooms upstairs. Palladium-backed clothes brushes. Mirrors set with big diamonds all around the edges. He was a dope not to have thought of it before.

Al wrapped the faucets carefully in the old rags he had brought to muffle their chinking and put them in his little satchel. Noiselessly as a shadow, he stole up the stair.

In the upper hall he hesi-

tated. His idea about the bedrooms was all very well, but it wouldn't do to pick one where the old geezer in the dress suit, say, was asleep.

THE moonlight slanting through the big windows in the hall and falling on the door to his right put an end to Al's difficulties. There were cobwebs thick between the door itself and the jamb, cobwebs all over the frame. A room like that must be perfectly safe. There couldn't be anybody in a room like that. Softly he turned the knob.

The bed, swathed in shimmering gauze, was at one end of the room. Al paid no attention to it. His eyes were fixed on the dressing table where, even in the subdued light, he could make out jewelry—earrings, rings, tiara, bracelets—lying in a corruscating heap. The pendants at the corners of the tiara were teardrop-shaped things, big as bantam's eggs, and the earrings and bracelets were set all over with flashing gems.

Al licked his lips. He put out a skeptical hand toward the tiara and touched the pendants very cautiously. They were cold, and from the motion his hand imparted to them, they started to swing back and forth and give out rays of colored light.

From sheer nervous excitement he was on the edge of bursting into tears or some-

thing. The stones in the bracelets seemed to be square-cut diamonds, and the pendants on the tiara surpassed anything he had ever imagined. They made him feel like getting down and kowtowing in a p̄aroxysm of unworthiness. He controlled himself and began to put the jewels away in his bag.

The earrings were following the bracelets into custody when there was a slight creak from the bed. Al turned to stone. In very much less than a second (nervous impulses, being electrical in origin, move at the speed of light, which is 186,000 m.p.s.), he had decided that the jewelry was a trap, that the trap was being sprung, and that he was hauling tail out. He began backing toward the door. There was another creak from the bed. This time it was accompanied by a wonderful, a glorious, flash of prismatic light.

Al Gluckshoffer faltered, torn cruelly between cupidity and fear. If it *wasn't* a trap, the biggest diamond in the whole world must be hanging around the throat, or otherwise depending from the person, or whoever was sleeping in the bed. Indecision almost made him groan. Then he made up his mind and, the sweat starting out on his forehead, tiptoed in the direction of the flash of light.

The beauty of the girl lying

on the bed in the moonlight was so extreme that he forgot all about the necklace which clasped her throat. He stared down at her for an instant. Then he put his bag on the floor, knelt beside the bed and drew the curtains back. He leaned forward and kissed her on the lips.

HIS heart was beating like a hammer. Slowly her shadowy lids opened and she looked into his eyes. A faint, joyous smile began to curve her lips.

The expression was succeeded almost instantly by a look of regal rage. "By the scepter of Mab," the girl said, sitting up in bed and glaring at him, "you are not His Highness at all! In fact, I perceive clearly from your attitude and bearing that you are not *any* Highness. You are some low creature who has no proper business of any sort in the palace. You are Another One."

With the words, she pressed a button beside her bed. While Al cowered back, there was a clamor as strident as that of a burglar alarm, and then the elderly party in the dress suit came in, yawning and rubbing his eyes.

"He awakened me in the proper way," the girl said, gesturing in Al's direction, "but he is by no means the proper person."

"So I see, Your Highness," the old gent said with a bow.

"I believe—" He peered closely at Gluckshoffer, who pushed himself hard against the wall and tried to pretend that he wasn't there. "I believe he is the plumber whom I called in last week to repair the lavatory. I am sorry. What disposition does Your Highness wish me to make of him?"

"Use the transformation machine to make him into something," the princess said, turning around and punching at the pillows on her bed. They were embroidered with a little crown.

"What would Your Highness suggest?"

"Anything you like," the princess replied. The pillows arranged to her satisfaction, she lay back on them once more. "Something appropriate, of course. Frankly, Norfreet, I'm getting tired of being waked once or twice a year by some incompetent idiot who has no legitimate business in the palace in the first place. The next bungler who wakes me up, I want you to turn into a mouse and give to the cat next door to play with. Good night." Delicately she closed her eyes.

"Good night, Your Highness," the chamberlain replied with another low bow. He turned to Al, who had been

listening to this talk of transformations with a comforting sense of its impossibility, and fixed him with a hypnotic gaze. "Come with me," he said sternly. "Before I transform you, you must repair the damage you have done."

SOME twenty minutes later, the chamberlain gave the solid brass cuspidor which had been Al Gluckshoffer a contemptuous shove with his foot. He ought to take the thing up to the attic and leave it, but he was getting dreadfully sleepy. He needed his rest at his age. Some other time.

He got into bed, his joints creaking. Her Highness was right; there were altogether too many intruders in the palace these days. They needed to be shown their place, made an example of. The next person who woke him up was going to be the object of something special in the way of transformations. Norfreet began to snore.

And on the other side of the pittosporum hedge, Milt looked at his watch and decided that it was time to go in and see what had happened to Al. He started to worm his way through the hedge.

END

CASE RL472 XYA 386.
Oral report of Claims Adjuster
Mark Atkinson (#384 762).
Transcribed by Telepath Oper-
ator #842 765J (Tellus).
First and Final Report.
CASE CLOSING SYMBOL:
AAA.

*When a planet turns in an insurance claim, it could
run to more than real money.*

A MATTER OF TASTE

By JOSEPH WESLEY
ILLUSTRATED BY RITTER

I ARRIVED on the fourth planet of Sunder's Pride stark naked and stood comfortably in the snow, listening to the wind howl by, while waiting for the Expedition Manager to approach from the edge of the small clearing and welcome me. The Manager's name is Obadiah Jones. Like the rest of the expedition, he's from one of the minor Vegan colonies—Kinnison III—but he's undifferentiated Earth stock.

He hustled forward, wearing a full protective suit and helmet—the temperature is thirty degrees below zero centigrade at noon and the atmosphere is poisonous—but I could see the expression of relief on his face through his face plate.

"You're from Interstellar Insurance?" he panted under the one and a half G of Sunder's Pride.

I assented with a dignified nod.

He looked me up and down—my skin wasn't even showing goose pimples, of course—and then shrugged his shoulders. "The insurance company sent a first-class Mental Control Operator, I see, but it was a waste of talent. Maybe they didn't believe our reports. We've had our own operators here—good ones, too—and they haven't been able to find any solution. The Aliens are much better at all sorts of Mind Control than even our most talented men. I know our Policy says that you can keep us from calling in the military authorities for a week, but it's just a waste of time—and, more important, it's a waste of lives, too. I suggest that you give us authority to call in the Navy right away."

"How many lives have you lost so far?" I asked.

"Only a dozen, but at regular intervals."

"That hardly seems excessive for an exploratory expedition," I commented.

He shook his head impatiently. "I said *at regular intervals*. The Aliens treat us like we were cattle. Or sheep."

"Not exactly," I said, "or you would scarcely have called *me* in. You must be operating at a profit, and that means you're trading with these Aliens."

He scowled, but did not deny it.

OF COURSE I knew this already. As an independent Claims Adjuster, it goes without saying that I'd checked into the case before teleporting to the planet. Their profit was enormous, and our losses would be proportionately large if the military was invited to come in and spoil trade while saving lives.

Their charter called for exclusive trading rights on any planet they opened for ten years. And they had the usual clause in their Policy against loss by "government" action, meaning the military, even at their own invitation. The military is fast, but it's not neat. The cost could run to billions for us, so my job was to try to find another way.

"Well," he said, "can we send an emergency signal to the Navy?"

"When does the next regular interval expire?" I asked.

He checked the timepiece set into the sleeve of his suit, and then scratched some number in the clean wind-swept surface of snow. His watch kept local time, of course. "In about fourteen Earth hours," he translated at last.

"Then there's no hurry, is there?" I leaned against the gale that was blowing across the clearing. "Why don't we go to your office so you can brief me?"

He turned and stumped his way heavily to a gap at the edge of the clearing, and then

along a narrow path that wound its way circuitously among tall, slender, tinkling, half-living ice trees. I strolled lightly beside him, but my bare feet left deep imprints in the crustless snow. In about fifteen minutes we reached the human settlement, with its airlock set modestly into a great mound of snow.

Here we had a little difficulty; the lock was designed to pass bulky protective suits. If I had gone through it bare, I'd have let in some of the poisonous atmosphere into the camp. We solved that, though. Mr. Jones passed a suit out to me through the lock and I put it on. I wore it all the way to his office, and then he rustled me up one of his spare kilts—an ugly purple thing.

"Now, Obadiah," I said, after I'd lighted one of his stogies and settled myself into his most comfortable chair, "why this urgent call for help? Our records show that you've never hollered copper in your life, and you've had two expeditions nearly wiped out around you. You've got the best profit record in your organization."

"It's those Aliens," said Mr. Jones. "They arrived here on Sunder's Pride just a few days behind us. I've always felt that someday we'd come up against some life-form that would be too much for us, and I'm afraid that we've done it at last. They trade us some of

the most magnificent works of art that have ever been seen in the universe—you've undoubtedly admired some of them, and I'm sure you know the prices they bring—and they do it as if they were tossing glass beads to savages."

"And if we are such savages, what can we have to trade in return?" I asked.

"They don't seem to be any great shakes with mechanical things," he answered. "They call them 'gadgets,' but they buy them. The only trouble is, that's not all they buy." He was sweating, his face turning as green as the polka dots on his kilt. He mopped his face and chest with a large handkerchief, and then sat there holding it and looking at it as if he'd never seen a bandanna before.

I FELT sorry for him. These provincial types have an automatic feeling of horror at the thought of meeting some superior creatures that will replace man in the Galaxy. So I let him sit there for a couple of minutes to recover before I prompted him.

"Well?" I said at last. "The additional stuff they buy—what is it?" This hadn't been part of the reports.

"Oh. Yes. Once every five days they take one man. I may have given you the idea that they killed them. They don't. They ship them off. They say we are very popular, and

when there are enough of us on the market to bring the price down, we should make ideal pets. And we can't do a thing to stop them."

I flicked the ash of my cigar delicately onto his carpet. "You can't? What have you tried?"

He leaped to his feet and balled his fists belligerently. "I'm trying to call in the military, but first I've got to get through the red tape of calling in you insurance people. Now will you give me authority to call in a fleet before it's too late?"

I smiled in a superior manner and straightened a pleat on the hideous kilt. "If you feel this way, then why do you worry about money? Why didn't you just call the fleet directly and forfeit your insurance?"

He glared at me through red-rimmed eyes. "I tried that," he said. "If only we had some central government to turn to—but that's impossible in space, of course. So I went to the only centralized force there is. And they said that they have to count on voluntary contributions from the member planets, and they couldn't afford to answer every call for help. They told me to contact my insurance company."

"Which," I commented mildly, "is another centralized force in space, in spite of what you say. It's widespread,

it's profit-making, and it gets the job done. Nobody has to try to beg for voluntary appropriations from penurious planetary governments."

"This isn't a crackpot fear of aliens," he said, as soon as I stopped talking. "I've seen aliens before, in all parts of the Galaxy. I don't panic."

"Then you must have tried something else before hollering Uncle," I said. "Like, perhaps, keeping all of your men inside the dome here when the time for another abduction approaches?"

HE WAVED a hand impatiently. "We've tried everything a large group of top-flight minds can think of," he said. "My own organization has an exceptional research staff, as I'm sure you know. The Aliens work by mental control. We've had everyone brought into this building, have double-checked them, and have sealed the doors with a time lock. It turned out that one of the men was missing—we'd only imagined he was among us when we assembled.

"We scoured the planet before we landed and saw no signs of the Aliens. We've seen no Alien ships land since we arrived. We have no idea where they are, except that there's one sizable area not far from here that we can't seem to penetrate. The only evidence we have that the

Aliens arrived after we did is that they told us so. Whatever that's worth.

"We've brought in some of mankind's best Mental Control Operators. People like you, who are able to walk around in a poisonous atmosphere in sub-zero weather without any protection or any clothes at all. Every one of them is now among the victims. The Aliens apparently thought it would be a good joke to take them."

He paused. "So you see, we don't expect you to be around very long. Just so you call in the military before the Aliens call *you* in, we'll try to control our grief when you go."

"That's courteous of you," I said. "But you are suffering under an understandable misapprehension. You seem to believe—probably because of my somewhat unorthodox costume when I arrived—that I am a Master Controller. In point of fact, nothing could be farther from the case. I have no such powers. Or almost none, anyway.

"I arrived naked because of the enormous expense of tele-transportation. Those machines require gigantic amounts of power and skilled technicians. At ten thousand a pound, I saved the company five thousand by leaving my kilt behind, and even more when you consider my shoes. As for a protective suit—why, such an unnecessary cost would have

been thrown out by our accountants in a minute."

Obadiah Jones sneered at me in disbelief, but I tolerantly ignored his attitude. "Let's admit, for the time being, that these Aliens are better at Mental Control than we are," I said. "Then does it make sense for us to fight them with their own weapons, giving them cards and spades before the start of the game? Now take me to the edge of this place where you say we can't go."

In spite of Mr. Jones' urgent pleas, I refused to wear a protective suit, except to go out through the lock. I knew he was worried about the Mind Control he still was convinced I was using to survive unprotected on the surface. He was afraid that when I came up against the Aliens and what he called their "superior powers," it would mean my death, if I didn't have a suit. Since I had equally valid reasons for not wearing the suit, and since I didn't want to explain them, I refused to argue. I just took the thing off as soon as we were outside. I left the kilt on, though. I thought its ugliness might irritate the Aliens.

OBADIAH Jones kept up a running patter of conversation as he led me toward the forbidden area. "We haven't been idle," he said. "We've learned a lot about the Aliens'

Mind Control. For one thing, they work on our emotions. Several of us who are still alive have been exposed to that. There were eight or nine of us in a group, the first time one of us was Chosen. He said an overwhelming feeling of love was drawing him in one direction; right after that, the rest of us felt a strong sensation of revulsion and fear. We ran away, leaving him behind. We never saw him again.

"They also control our senses. We see and hear what they want us to. It's perfect hallucination. But you'll know that for yourself in a few minutes."

I knew it already, of course. It had been in Jones' reports—all except the bit about their capturing his men. And I had come prepared. I must admit to feeling a distinct sensation of excitement as we approached the area. But it was not induced, I am sure, by the Aliens, and in any event it was not sufficiently intense to trigger my defense mechanisms.

"Here we are," said Obadiah Jones at last, pointing to a marker attached to one of the ice trees. "Beyond that sign the troubles begin."

"It doesn't look like an alien artifact to me," I said, examining the crudely made marker carefully.

"It isn't. I had it put up after one of our men was missing for two days, wander-

ing around in that area that they claim for themselves."

"Well, I'll find out just how good their claim is," I said. "I'm going in there."

"Good luck," said Mr. Jones. "I'll wait for you here. But, just in case I never see you again, won't you please give me authorization to call in the Fleet? You can postdate it, and cancel it if you get back."

I nodded. "I'll give you an authorization dated tomorrow—if you'll give me your gun first. You might just accidentally happen to kill me after getting that paper from me, considering how important you think it is to get the Fleet here fast, and how sure you are that I'll be trapped."

Jones looked startled, and then sheepish, and gave me the gun without comment. I wrote out the paper he wanted, and then strolled up the path past the marker. It didn't look any different on the other side. It went straight into the forbidden area, and I do mean straight. It went on without the slightest sign of a turn, as far as the eye could see, and there were no cross trails anywhere along it.

I stepped out at a good swift pace, striding along it long after Jones disappeared from view behind me. I saw no signs of Aliens; I saw no signs of anything unusual at all, until, about two hours after I started, I saw a mark-

er in the distance ahead of me. Jones was sitting on the snow, just on the other side of the tree with the marker on it. I strolled up toward him, crossed the invisible line, hiked up my kilt to keep it from getting damp, and sat down on the soft snow beside him.

“HELLO,” he said non-committally. “You made pretty good time. In fact, that’s a new record for the course.”

“Then I’m not the first man to take that walk?” I asked.

“Nope. Just the fastest. I’m glad you didn’t try to turn around and come back along the path. That way, you’d have gotten lost. Well, shall we go back to the camp and call in the Navy?”

“No, I’m going back in,” I said calmly.

He waved one gloved hand at me. “It’s your funeral,” he said. “Or what amounts to the same thing, anyway.”

I stood up, dusted off the snow where some of it had stuck to me, and settled my kilt into as fashionable a manner as was possible. I crossed the line and started down the trail again, just as I had before, but this time I didn’t follow my eyes. Soon after losing sight of Mr. Jones, I cut sharply off the clearly visible trail to the right and started to weave my way through a thicket of the ice trees.

Gradually a sensation of

fear entirely foreign to my usual nature built up within me, but I ignored it and kept going. As the sensation increased to a nearly uncontrollable level, one of the automatic mechanisms I had had the foresight to have implanted in my body operated, and a few drops of a drug were shot into my veins and almost instantly took effect. I still felt the fear sensation, but it no longer had the power to bother me much. With that drug in my blood stream, no emotion could affect me strongly.

As I worked my way through the tinkling jungle of ice trees, there was an amazing change. Before my eyes, the trees suddenly seemed to clothe themselves in leaves and bark, and the sounds became those of birds and insects. I was working my way through a jungle of Earth. The heavy gravity of *Sunder’s Pride* had not disturbed me before, but now it was replaced by the almost buoyant feeling resulting from the far lighter gravity of Earth. The harsh yellow glow of the sunlight striking on eternal ice was replaced by the vibrant blues and greens of tropical Earth.

My fear sensation, which had been generalized, suddenly sharpened. I was reminded of a time, on Earth, when I had nearly died in a tropical river teeming with piranha

fish. I still have a couple of scars from that episode. Before me I could see the river flowing. Even under the calming influence of the drug, I could feel my heart pounding in my throat.

I must confess that it took a distinct effort of will for me to wade into the water. It was boiling with the flashing forms of angry fish. As I stepped forward I could feel their greedy jaws snapping into my flesh, feel the pointed rows of teeth on the bones of my ankles, then my legs, then my thighs.

DESPITE the agony I continued on, and the water level gradually rose until it closed over my head and my sight faded as the fish bit out my eyes. I think I might have screamed then, if I hadn't already felt the fish tear out my throat, so that I knew screaming was impossible. Besides, I didn't want to open my mouth and let them get to work on my tongue. I protected the soft spot under my chin with the hand that held Obadiah's gun.

If any of you homeside heroes ever wonder if we Claims Adjusters really earn our considerable salaries, let me clue you: We do.

When, stripped to a skeleton, I still kept moving stolidly ahead, the boiling of the water slowly died away, the pain ceased, and my sight

gradually came back. The jungle was still there, but I found that I was climbing up out of the river onto a trail that somehow seemed familiar. The fear sensation was gone, too, to be replaced by a very different one.

I remembered why I had gone into the jungle on Earth, so many years before, and why the trail was familiar. And who had been at the end of it. And who *was* at the end of it. She was soft and beautiful, and she had loved me for a while. She loved me still, I realized, and she was waiting for me. I hurried my steps and the automatic mechanism again put a few drops of the drug into my blood stream.

I could still feel the sensation of longing, but the urgency was gone. I let the feeling continue to pull me forward without fighting it, and willingly followed the twists and turns of the still familiar trail.

As the trees thinned out until I could see the well-remembered cottage with its thatched roof, its single room, its wide veranda, I slowed. The house stood alone, with no trees around it, just the way she and I had wanted it.

I stopped at the last tree and looked at the house for several minutes. Nothing moved that I could see. Circling slowly from tree to tree, I continued watching the house until I was staring at it

from a point nearly opposite the place where I had first seen it. Then I began to walk toward it. Even the sound of the birds had faded away, although I could still smell the heady fragrance of tropical flowers. She had always kept a large bouquet of them on the table beside the bed.

When I had reached a point about twenty paces from the house, I wheeled suddenly and leaped forward, aiming at a spot where nothing showed to the eye. There was a moment—the merest instant—of dizziness, and then a room suddenly materialized around me. The room looked alien, and there were two Aliens at the far end of it. The usual drag of one and a half Earth gravities had returned.

THIS, I felt, was the first undistorted view any man on Earth had had of these Aliens, except as a pet. They had not expected any human to be able to find his way here, to this room at the center of their base.

The room was not what I had expected. I had thought that I would find myself on the inside of a spaceship, and by no stretch of the imagination could this ever have traveled between the stars. It was unmistakably a prefab hut.

The two Aliens better fitted my preconceptions. They looked something like overgrown sea anemones, with three

multi-jointed arms and three short legs. They were just over two meters tall. They were extremely sluggish in their movements, as might be expected from creatures that depended almost entirely on their mental abilities for control of their environment.

They looked at me for a few minutes—all of their eyes were startlingly humanlike in appearance—and I imagine that they had expressions of surprise, if I could have found any expression, or interpreted from their tendrils just where their faces were. Finally one of them moved slowly to the far wall, extended one of his arms and depressed a lever on a rather crude-looking panel attached to that wall. He then moved slowly back to his companion and both of them continued to stare at me.

I waved cheerily at them. "Hi, fellows," I said. I could detect no answer, but the room wavered a little before my eyes. I blinked and shook my head and my vision cleared.

"So you haven't been trained in the techniques of Mental Control of Earthmen," I commented. "That's interesting."

A feathery stalk slowly rose from among the coiling things that circled their tops, and at the same time I heard a gentle dragging noise approaching the door of the hut.

"It sounds as if we might be about to have company," I

said. "That will be pleasant."

I examined my two hosts closely, because I had the feeling that I wouldn't be able to see them much longer as they really were.

"It's good of you to be so cautious," I said. "If you hadn't been so careful as to shield this hut, just in case we Earthmen turned out to have adequate Mind Control powers of our own, I wouldn't have had this chance to see you two in all your natural ugliness. Your friends out there would have kept me under control all this time.

"And what's more," I added, "I wouldn't even have known that you creatures had something that would shield your power. Our scientists will be very interested in examining this hut in great detail."

JUST then the door of the hut swung open and two elflike creatures appeared to walk briskly in. I glanced at them and then back to where my two slow-moving acquaintances had been standing. They were no longer in sight.

"Perhaps we can make things a little more comfortable for you," said one of the brisk elves. "You have earned most special treatment from us." He gestured and the strangeness of the room strangely disappeared. The walls were suddenly paneled

in mahogany and hung with rich drapes. Easy chairs were placed at intervals around a long, brilliantly polished table. A picture window showed a bucolic scene bathed in cool sunshine. A deep pile rug covered the floor.

I looked around appreciatively. "Very nice," I complimented them. "And in excellent taste. But you have forgotten one thing, haven't you?"

"What's that?" asked the second elf, in a piping voice.

"Why, you forgot about the gravity. It's still at Sunder's Pride normal."

"So it is," said the elf. "But then you can't expect us to think of everything. Besides, it doesn't seem to bother you the way it does most of the other creatures of your kind."

The gravity did not appear to change.

"No matter," I said politely. I strolled over to the table and stroked it with the hand that was not holding the gun. It seemed very real.

"Won't you sit down?" asked the first elf. "I'm sure you will find the chairs very comfortable."

"I'm sure I would," I said, "but no, thank you. I'm certain it would provide you with a lot of innocent merriment if I squatted in thin air under the impression that I was settled into a cosy chair, but I did not come here to amuse you."

The elf smiled. "You are very different from the others who lumbered to this planet in those clumsy artifacts. You are almost like a Person, in spite of your feverish rushing around. Several of our laboratories will bid very high for the right to examine you."

I bowed acknowledgment of his compliment. "I'm not in one of your laboratories yet," I said mildly.

"It will be very interesting to find out how you managed to get here in spite of our Mind Control," said the second elf. "Your arrival without the necessity of swaddling yourself in awkward garments indicated a certain amount of ability along mental lines, but I sense no more of it in you than several others of your kind have managed to muster. The others all brought premium prices on the market, despite conveyances and garments."

"I gather you don't think much of mechanical contrivances," I said lightly.

ALIENTHE First shrugged. "They make interesting toys," he said. "But, of course, they are useless crutches in building a civilization. They bring good prices when peddled for the amusement of our children and the shallower-minded adults."

"Listening to your remarks about our spaceships," I continued, "I presume all of you

teleported here. We Earthmen may not be very good at Mind Control, but I think we have a good grasp of the principles, and I don't see how you could teleport without some sort of terminal device. Didn't you have to send that here by machine?"

There was a brief silence, and then ALIENTHE Second answered. "I suppose it doesn't matter if we tell you. After all, we have you in our possession. As you suggest, we do need a terminal device. But we didn't use machinery; we used minds—the minds of you Earthmen. When the first of you landed on this uninhabited planet, we discovered that your undirected capacities were sufficient to serve as the terminal of a teleport system.

"We couldn't go directly to any of your more populous planets, because the vast numbers of your untrained minds cause so much static that the noise level is too high to permit a sharp enough focus for teleporting.

"Of course, now that we're here, where you've set up a teleport terminal that connects into your foolish mechanical network and ties into all of your thousands of planets, we'll have no trouble going anywhere among your worlds that we want to. And as soon as we have built up enough consumer demand for you creatures as house pets, we'll move in for the harvest."

"It might not be too bad at that," I said. "I've got a cat back home on Earth and she runs my household pretty much to suit her fancy. But I'm afraid it's not the same thing for Earthmen to be house pets."

"The ones we've got are doing a very good job at it," said Number Two. "And, as we indicated, you won't get the chance to be a pet."

"You seem very sure that you have me under your control."

"Very sure," said Number One. "In this confined space, with our training, the two of us could overcome all but one in a thousand of our own kind—so do you think you have a chance?"

I decided that a simple expletive would suffice as an answer. I didn't know enough about them to be sure it was biologically possible for them to carry out my suggestion, but it wasn't important. They ignored me.

AT LEAST they didn't answer me. Instead, a cage suddenly appeared around me, leaving me scarcely room to move around. I reached out and tapped one of the bars. It seemed very strong. I didn't think I was even close to panicking, but the implanted device in my body fed some more of the drug into my veins. I may have felt a little more tense than I realized.

At any rate, the time for action seemed to have arrived, and it was not on the mental level. I spun toward an apparently empty portion of the room and emptied Obadiah's pistol. The sound of the explosive pellets was very loud in the room.

The bars writhed, wavered and disappeared, as did the elflike creatures. The atmosphere of the room turned momentarily opaque, and when it cleared, what I could see was once again a clumsy pre-fab. Two of the Aliens were still standing in a corner. The remains of the other two were splashed pretty generally throughout the room. It was quite a mess.

"Well," I said, "thanks for the party. You'll excuse me for running."

There was no answer. The two surviving Aliens hadn't learned much about Earthmen. I walked over and lifted one of them. He weighed about three hundred pounds, I judged. That would be a couple of hundred on Earth. Hefty creatures. I figured that one was about all I could handle. I looked around at the articles in the room and then decided not to use any of them. I was sure that everything I saw was actually there, but it didn't seem wise to take chances.

I took off Obadiah's purple kilt and tore it into strips without regret. Then I used



the strips to fasten one of the Aliens securely, so he couldn't use his arms or his legs. I didn't know if he could do anything, loose, but I didn't want him to try. The other Alien I heaved up onto my shoulders. Then I walked out of the room.

There were a few of the ice trees scattered around, but the countryside looked barren. I couldn't visually identify any landmarks, but I started off without hesitation, and in about three hours I was back at the marker. From there on I used my eyes to follow the path back to the airlock. I had no trouble.

This time Mr. Jones gave me a checked kilt. I know you won't believe me, but it was even more hideous than the purple one. The red and yellow squares were at least three inches across. Luckily, I didn't have to look at it—just wear it.

Jones was a little confused as to why I had brought back one of the Aliens. He didn't even recognize it as an Alien at first, of course. He'd never seen one of them before—just the elfin form they'd wanted him to see.

I'd had no more hallucinations and the other Earthmen seemed to be seeing normally too. Apparently there had been only the two trained beings among the Aliens on Sunder's Pride—and only the four of them in all.

NEVERTHELESS, I was in a hurry. I sent out an urgent call for one of the most skilled Mental Controllers in Interstellar Insurance. I'll admit that there are times when they can be put to use.

Jones and I went down to the clearing that was the teleport terminal to welcome him.

The company chose to send that young self-styled genius Ralph Carter. He's supercilious and conceited and altogether obnoxious—I don't know why you hire such people—but no question of it, he's a real expert in his field. He was dressed in a dark green kilt in the latest style, and he smirked when he saw the thing I had on. I ignored his attitude, as befitted a gentleman.

I figured that it was time to move fast. While I showed Carter the way to the headquarters, I explained why I had called for him. I wanted him to get into communication with the Alien and find out the location of his home worlds.

"But how can I do that?" Carter asked. "I don't know anything at all about these Aliens."

"Can't you use your mental training to help you learn to talk mind to mind?"

"I suppose so. That shouldn't take more than a few days. The techniques are well established with other new races we've encountered. But learn-

ing his language won't make him answer."

I looked at him with my most superior manner. "While you're learning his language, I suggest you learn some of his psychology. Then you can get some of our engineers to design you a machine that will function the way a polygraph does with humans—act as a lie detector. With the proper choice of questions, you should find out anything you want to know."

He shuddered delicately at the mention of that naughty word "machine." Mentalists sometimes become purists and make fools of themselves by trying to do without machinery—something like the attitude of the Aliens.

When I had given Carter his instructions, I turned to the rest of the expedition. "I want all of your weapons," I said. "And don't try holding out on me. That's to include knives and scissors, too. We'll lock them up in Jones' vault."

"Now see here," said Jones. "Some more of those Aliens may show up any time. We can't afford to go out without our guns."

"That's just the reason you've got to get rid of them. I don't want you to start shooting each other—and me. Now, send out a party as fast as you can to bring back a sample of the building material that blocks out their minds. We'll ship it back to

Earth and see if they can put it into mass production. Have the party bring back that second Alien, too. If we happen to spoil the one we've got making him talk, it would be nice to have a spare."

WHILE the small group was away, I had Obadiah improvise some leg irons out of light chain and padlocks, and used them to hobble all of the Earthmen who remained in camp. Jones screamed like a holta whose mate has estivated, but it didn't do him any good. I had the authority.

He got even madder when I put the irons on him and at the same time turned him down again when he wanted to call in the military. The idea of a space fleet around while the Aliens were still free to use their mind powers gave me cold chills.

When the group returned from the Aliens' camp, they did so without the Alien. They brought back the still tied strips of the purple kilt. It looked as if he'd teleported right out of them. But at least they did have a piece of the prefab hut with them. I had it sent back to Earth, but not until after I'd attached chains to the party's legs, so that they had to creep along with six-inch steps like the others.

As the days passed without any apparent action from the Aliens, dissatisfaction and

grumbling grew. My precautionary action with the chains was very unpopular. At the end of the first week after my arrival on Sunder's Pride, Jones tried to invoke the Policy he'd signed with the company to call in the military, on the grounds that the situation hadn't been resolved in the prescribed time, and that the use of chains proved that the colony was in even greater danger than before I had arrived.

I invoked the "substantial progress" clause, of course, but the fact that I'd changed the combination to the vault and had the only gun in the entire camp outside of it probably was more convincing to him.

Carter called in a top-flight Engineer and made real progress in developing lie-detector techniques against the Alien. The Aliens were basically a guileless lot. I almost felt sorry for them.

Things eased up a little when Earth sent us a stack of sheets they claimed would be just as good in blocking out thoughts as the sample we had sent them. The Alien captive told us, after Carter persuaded him a little, that the blocking power was impressed on their building materials by a mental process. We used electronic techniques, and our Engineers said they could have done it years before, if Mentalists and they could have

gotten together on the work.

By testing, we found that the stuff we had blocked out anything Carter could transmit, so I let the rest of our people take off their chains as long as they were inside camp—as soon that is, as we had it fully protected. They worked faster on that job than they ever had worked in their lives before.

A FEW hours later, I was strolling down toward Telepath Clearing with a courier to send a report back to Earth when the Aliens returned. The first warning we had was a sudden wave of hate that struck like a physical blow. It brought the courier to his knees, momentarily helpless. Even with an automatic and instantaneous shot of the drug, it had me grinding my teeth.

Whether it was the rapidity of my recovery and my quickness of thought, or whether it was just the effect of the hate spasm, I didn't know—at any rate, I did the right thing. Before the courier could get up off his knees and try to kill me, as I was sure he would do, I slugged him alongside the ear with the butt of my pistol.

The hatred sensation seemed to be channeled and directed. It made us want to destroy Aliens—not each other—and that was unexpected to me. And because the courier was

on his way back to Earth, I'd left the chains off him. In another few seconds, I figured, he'd have tried to kill me—or, at least, that was my initial thought, until I realized that, since I am a human, he wouldn't have felt hate for me. By that time, and quite properly, I had laid him out cold.

I reached down and picked up the courier, intending to toss him lightly across my shoulder and start back to the camp. I found that I had a problem—I couldn't figure which one of my three stumpy legs to start walking with. I extended all my eyes and examined myself. I looked like an Alien wearing a checked kilt.

Unhappily, I tried to lick my labial fringes with my tongue—and suddenly realized that I had no tongue! It was an unnerving realization, even to me. But then I knew why the Aliens were transmitting hatred of themselves; any Earthman who knew what an Alien looked like would attack me on sight.

I closed all of my eyes and concentrated, but I couldn't seem to be able to figure out which of my three hands held the gun, for I could no longer see it. I decided it was time for me to get back inside the barrier.

That was a devil of a lot easier to decide than it was to do. I could see three legs and I could feel three legs, but I

didn't know how to operate three legs. I was slowed down to a sort of hobble. It wasn't as slow as the sluggish amble of the real Aliens, but it wasn't any faster than the other Earthmen could move, hobbled by chains.

I couldn't afford to delay very long, though. Some of the unchained men inside of the shack might take it into their heads to step outside without remembering to hobble themselves, considering that I was not there to remind them, and I didn't feel up to trying to handle anything like that.

I SNEAKED up as close as I could get to the lock without being seen. There were six men gathered in front of it, waiting for me. I couldn't think of anything else to do, so I just lit out for the airlock, shuffling along as fast as I could go. The men swarmed around me. I threw the courier at the first group to arrive—he was still out—and gained a few seconds. But then they hung on me, they pummeled me, they bit and they clawed.

I just kept struggling bravely forward; I couldn't think of anything else to do. At the last minute, just as I thought I was going down under the mass of feet and fists, two of the men somehow got tangled in each other's chains, and I managed to break loose

long enough to pull myself into the lock.

As the outer door swung closed, I found myself with two arms, two legs and, praise be, a tongue. Obadiah's kilt was missing and I'm happy to say that I never saw it again. The gun was visible once more, still firmly clutched in my right hand. It was empty; my fingers were squeezing tightly on the trigger. Much good it had done me!

I passed quickly into the headquarters building, bringing with me a breath of poisonous outer air that set the men inside, except for Carter, to gasping and choking. Not even pausing to say hello, or to apologize for bringing in some of the outer atmosphere with me, I hurried over to the control panel and switched on the visual receptors that showed the outside of the lock. The men out there were fighting each other to get inside the building and kill me. As they managed to battle their way in through the lock, they looked bewildered for a moment, and then all of them, released from the frenzy of hate, collapsed into unconsciousness.

We were a bloody mess, every one of us, but not one of us was seriously hurt. The Aliens had outsmarted themselves. While I had looked like one of them, those parts of me—like my eye stalks—that had seemed to be most vulner-

able, so that the Earthmen had gone after them, had turned out to be things like ears and noses. They hurt, but they didn't put me out of action when they were battered. That's all that had saved me from being killed. I didn't figure that out till later, I must admit.

I counted us. We were all safe inside. Then I used an amplifier, connected up to a loudspeaker outside, to call the Aliens. I called for several minutes, without receiving any response, before I realized that they spoke with their minds exclusively and couldn't penetrate into the headquarters where we were with their pseudo-voices.

I sighed and started to go outside, but Jones hauled me back and made me put on a protective suit. He said he couldn't stand another whiff of that atmosphere.

ONCE outside, I had no trouble communicating with the Aliens. They were very anxious to talk. Apparently they were convinced that, since they believed my mental powers were at least as strong as theirs, there were probably many more Earthmen like me that they wouldn't be able to tackle. I had no trouble at all making a lucrative trading deal with them for Jones' company, once I convinced them that I knew the location of their planets,

and that it would be an easy matter to blast them from the face of the universe with primitive, uncivilized fusion bombs. They even promised to send back the men they had taken as pets.

After that, I staggered back inside the camp and slept the clock around.

When I woke, I found that all of the men were very anxious to know the secret of my success, especially Carter, who knew very well that I had no skill at Mental Control.

I was glad to oblige them, as a reward for Carter's courtesy in giving me his stylish green kilt, which fitted me very well. Obadiah gave Carter another of his horrors—and it was the worst we had seen to date, as I let that young worthy know with a simple cock of an eyebrow.

It was all very simple, as I explained to my admiring audience. The reports we'd had back at the headquarters of the Interstellar Insurance Company indicated that it was useless to try to compete with the Aliens on the mental level, where they were strongest. This was the mistake that Jones and his so-called experts had made.

I decided, when I was given the assignment to straighten things out, that the best way to compete was where we Earthmen are strongest: with mechanical "gadgets." So I had our scientists implant a

power source in my body. It made use of short half-life radioactive isotopes for the energy source—not too well shielded, but what the hell, I've already fathered my family—and gave me more power than I could ever need.

In order to be able to use that power, I'd had the scientists set up a closed-cycle system in my body. The combustion products created by the "burning" of food by my body cells, as in all humans, were carbon dioxide and water. These were broken down, in another gadget implanted in my body, into oxygen, carbon and hydrogen.

The oxygen I used directly; another compact machine synthesized carbohydrates to complete the closed-loop cycle. I neither breathed nor ate during the entire time I was on Sunder's Pride, except for the purpose of talking, and that breathing never went past the larynx.

IT WAS lucky I didn't need to breathe, too. Otherwise I'd have drowned in imaginary water while wading in that river the Aliens had created in my mind.

"Also," I explained, "I had a sort of supersonic sonar device set into me, with the transponder in my chest. That's why I had to avoid wearing a protective suit; unless my chest was bare, I squelched the signals. I used

this sonar to judge what was going on around me, no matter what I seemed to see."

"Now don't feed us that," said Jones belligerently. "We aren't that dumb. Don't you think we tried using sonar and radar to fool the Aliens? They worked on all our senses. What we saw on a radar or sonar screen matched perfectly the false picture we thought we were seeing with our eyes. It was the same when we used aural reception. What came in through our ears matched what we thought we saw. So now stop kidding around and tell us the truth."

I smiled condescendingly. "I am telling you the absolute truth, Obadiah. You didn't use your head. Of course the sound signals I received from the sonar matched what I thought I saw. I didn't underestimate the Aliens. It's just that sound to my ears wasn't the only read-out method I used. In addition to connecting to the nerves of my ears, which the Aliens expected, the sonar output also connected to the nerves of my tongue. Anything ahead of me tasted sweet, and anything behind me tasted salt. To my left was bitter, to my right acid.

"The Aliens didn't expect me to *taste* what was to be seen around me, and what they didn't know about, they couldn't counter. No matter what I saw or heard, I just followed my tongue.

"I had a few bad moments one time, when by accident, more or less, the actions of the Aliens almost made me imagine that my tongue was being destroyed, but I managed to work my way out of that by keeping my mouth closed. Just the other day, though, I had some more rough minutes when I found that, along with thinking I had the body of an Alien, I also thought I had no tongue, like them.

"You see, I used what the Aliens consider to be primitive mechanical toys. Oh, and one more thing, not quite so primitive: my brains. You might all profit by trying that once in a while."

"Well," said Jones at last, "I've got to give you credit. You knew what you were doing."

"That's all right," I said magnanimously. "I had the choice of trying to combat them with Mental Control, where the Aliens are stronger, or with mechanical science, where humans are stronger. Which I chose to use." I punned, "was just a matter of taste."

End of report. I'm going on a long vacation with my bonus money.

And what I do while I'm away is none of your business. Don't send me any of your preaching letters this time. How I have my fun is also a matter of taste.

END

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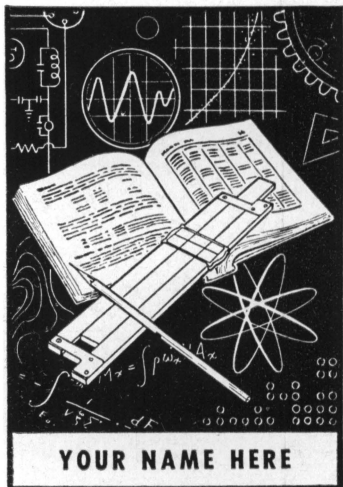
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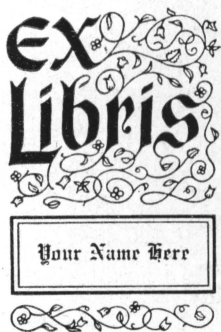
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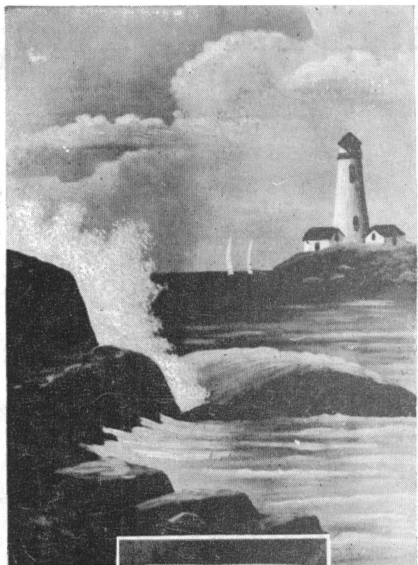
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