

Once upon a time a man named Frank Stockton wrote a quite short tale destined to become immortal. It was *The Lady or The Tiger?* and which one the hero chose was left to the reader to decide. Robert Young does not avoid such issues in this futuristic version of Stockton's story. Instead, he plunges you right down onto the deadly floor of the . . .

ARENA OF DECISIONS

By ROBERT F. YOUNG

Illustrated by SCHELLING

THE Lady Bri-laithe was famed for her beauty throughout the planet-satrapy of Ingcell, of which her father, Feidlich the Rampant, was satrap. She claimed that on her late mother's side she could trace her geneology back to Homebase, and that her pedigree was responsible for her pulchritude. However, as the ancient Homebase colonists who had originally settled on Ingcell and intermarried with the natives had been exceedingly few in number, the Lady Bri-laithe's claim was generally doubted.

Among the most recent to doubt it was taxfaxman Jaskar Prell, the Homebase auditor-at-large who had come to Ingcell to audit the satrapy's taxfaxscreens for the Erthempire fiscal-period that had begun July 1, 2340 A.D. and ended July 1, 2350 A.D. He doubted it even more after he met the Lady Bri-laithe in person at the banquet which the satrap held in his honor, and more yet when he danced with her afterward in Feidlich's block-long ballroom. "Beauty too rich for use, for Homebase too dear," were the words he spoke to her at the measure's end. "It is not for you, my Lady," he continued a few moments later as they stepped through the self-actuating French doorway that led to the satrap's fabled garden, "to endeavor to validate your claim that Homebase is the origin of your genealogical line, but for Homebase gratefully to acknowledge the validity of that claim whether it be valid or not."

Ingcell's summer sky was bedecked in all its stellar finery, and a warm wind was sighing up from the south, bringing with it faint but fragrant evidence of the distant regain farms where the bright-blue blooms that had made the planet famous throughout the galaxy and that had given it one of the most enviable economic ratings in the Erthempire were robotically cultivated. The garden was a fairyland of fountains and flowers, of statues and serpentine paths. Beauty such as the Lady Bri-laithe's prospered in such a setting. Lithe yet curvaceous of figure, savage yet classic of face, she was an Ingcellian goddess incarnate. Add to these attributes a pair of large and luminous eyes the hue of golden grain and a wealth of lustrous hair the shade of midnight skies, and it becomes possible to understand why Jaskar Prell, a cynic with regard to all things and to love in particular, was in the process of being consumed by a desire such as he had never dreamed could exist.

THE Lady Bri-laithe seated herself on a marble bench flanked by marble Ingcellian tigers and backgrounded by trellised Ingcellian roses. She arranged the lower section of her blue brocaded gown in such a way as to present her figure at its best and simultaneously to indicate to Prell that he was invited to sit as close to her as protocol permitted. After Prell accepted the invitation, she said, "The proof of my Homebase ancestry lies not in my face, Jaskar Prell, but in my heart. Ever since I first viewed a geographi-tape of the planet and saw the mountains and the seas and the megalopolises I have known a nostalgia so acute that Ingcellian landscapes seem to me as vapid and as colorless as week-old wine."

"You would like to go there then, my Lady?"

"Nay—I would like to live there, Jaskar Prell. And I would be living there this very moment, were it not for Homebase's selfishness."

"Our immigration law does not stem from selfishness, my Lady Bri-laithe. Nor does the anti-miscegenation law that walks hand in hand with it. Both arise from the ineluctable fact that Homebase's population figures preclude the naturalization of even one satrapy subject, no matter how competent he—or how comely she—may be. But we do not turn visitors away from our azure door, my Lady, and a subject of your illustrious standing could obtain, merely for the asking, a passport granting her Homebase residence for a whole year."

The Lady Bri-laithe's right thumb and ring-finger executed a deft and disdainful filip. "A year indeed! And what would I do afterward, Jaskar Prell? Return to a home-planet that had bored me to distraction before I had even left it? No, Jaskar Prell, if I am to be denied the entire cake; then I want no part of the crumbs of consolation."

At this juncture, a tall young man wearing the silvered dress-whites of a high court-official entered the garden, bringing with him, through the opening and closing French doors, several bars of Ingcell's national waltz. He was Donn Deska, the PR-man to whom Feidlich had entrusted the care and the feeding and the entertaining of the auditor-at-large. He was also, Prell knew, the chief candidate for the Lady Bri-laithe's hand. If Prell hadn't known this, he would have guessed it instantly from the expression that touched the PR-man's ferocious yet somehow sensitive face at the sight of the Lady Bri-laithe sitting virtually in another man's arms.

Halting several feet from the bench, Deska said, "My most abject apologies for this intrusion, Honorable Prell. But in keeping with the wishes of his Eminence, the satrap of Ingcell, I have prepared an itinerary for the remainder of your stay here and I would like to brief you on it at your earliest convenience."

Prell nodded. "Proceed then, Donn Desire."

FROM the breast pocket of his silvered coat the PR-man withdrew a small notebook. Opening it, he began, "In the morning, Honorable Prell, it will be my privilege to conduct you through the TaxFax Building where, it is to be hoped, you will find taxfax-screens in accord with your eidetic records. Following your examination of the screens, it will next be my privilege to escort you, early in the afternoon, to the Arena of Decisions, where an accused murderer will be on trial for his life and where you may observe our simple system of justice in action. It will next be my privilege to escort you via jettrain to the southern province of Teichid, there to conduct you via mech-safari into the jungle where, on the following day, professional beaters will supply you with as many antelopes as you may wish to gun down. After the hunt, we will return to the capital city, whereupon the itinerary will be both extended and diversified, should, you elect to remain in the satrapy in excess of the estimated two days which you requested of the port authority when you berthed your ship. I trust that these arrangements will be satisfactory, Honorable Prell?"

"They will," Prell said, "after they have been altered in two respects. First, I want the Lady Bri-laithe to accompany us on our visit to the Arena of Decisions and afterward on our excursion to Teichid. Provided, of course," he added, turning toward the lady in question, "this is agreeable to you, my Lady Bri-laithe."

Lush lashes lowered briefly over golden orbs of eyes. "It is most agreeable, Jaskar Prell."

"Second," Prell went on, returning his gaze to Deska, "I will conduct my audit of the taxfaxscreens, not tomorrow morning, but tonight" He got to his feet, took the Lady Bri-laithe's hands, and pulled her up beside him. "Hence, my Lady Bri-laithe, with your permission I will now take my leave, in order that the official part of my visit may be consummated forthwith, thereby freeing my mind of business matters, and enabling me to contemplate matters that are closer to my heart."

She squeezed his hands ever so slightly before she freed her own, and he knew that half the battle was won. "Very well, Honorable Prell. I will return to the ballroom and tell the musicians to cease their airs, after which I will retire for the night, in order that tomorrow can be made to come the faster."

After she disappeared beyond the French doors, Prell turned toward Deska. The PR-man's face had

fallen apart, and he was in the midst of putting it back together again. "If you will be so kind as to lead the way, Donn Deska?"

"This way, Honorable Prell. We will take my jetabout."

NEXT to the satrap's palace, which covered six acres of once-fertile land, the Ingcellian Taxfax Building was the largest structure in the satrapy. Computers took up most of the space, but there was still enough left over to afford the taxfax-screen room the dimensions of a star-port terminal. The screens were three feet in width, extended from floor to ceiling, and covered every square inch of wall space, save for the areas allotted for the two doorways—the royal one, which Prell and Deska used, and the all-purpose one, which the cybermen used.

There was a cyberman for every six screens. Most of them were bleary-eyed, having just left their beds in response to Desire's summons. All of them, wide-awake and bleary-eyed alike, were white-faced and trembling. This came as no surprise to Prell, who knew not only the extent of his reputation, but knew as well the wish-fulfillment limerick which some unsung poet laureate had composed not long ago and which had traveled, via galactic grapevine, to every corner of the Erthempire:

*There was a taxfaxman named Prell,
Who could audit exceedingly well.
So fast were his fractions,
The McCoy Interactions
Reduced his red corpuscles to jell.*

Far from resenting the limerick, Prell was proud of being its source of inspiration, and as he proceeded on his tour of examination he took keen delight in the discomfiture of the Ingcellian cybermen, some of whom, no doubt, had been quoting the lines that very evening. Each time he paused before a screen, the cyberman in charge of it punched its fax and figures into clear-cut illumination, and he gave it a single up-and-down glance and went on. No one but a qualified taxfaxman could have made head or tail out of so complex an array of calculations, and no one but a qualified taxfaxman of Prell's caliber could have instantly and eidetically matched each set against the corresponding set that the Ingcellian satrapy had submitted to Homebase Taxfax Headquarters. So accomplished an auditor was he, in fact, that he couldn't miss a discrepancy even if he wanted to, and he almost invariably found one. In the present instance it existed between the calculations on the *rogain*-screen and the corresponding calculations which he had committed to memory. And a handsome discrepancy it was, too—20,000,000 credits, no less. At the 90% regular tax-rate, that came to cr18,000,000, while cr18,000,000 computed at the 1000% backtax rate came to cr18,000,000,000, leaving Feidlich the Rampant holding the bag to the tune of cr18,018,000,000.

Prell did not doubt in the least that the discrepancy was an accidental one. Usually such mistakes were, as their consequences were so severe that not even the boldest of satraps would risk incurring them. But regardless of whether Feidlich had meant to cheat the Erthempire or not, he was on the spot, and by the time he got off the spot, his kingdom would be in chaos, while he himself would probably end up hanging himself by the neck until dead.

None of which would have made the slightest difference to Prell if it hadn't been for the fact that he was madly in love with the Lady Bri-laithe.

Deska was standing at his elbow, nervously shifting from one foot to the other. Prell let him suffer for a little while longer, than said, "I am finished, Donn Deska—we can go now."

"I trust that you have found everything in excellent accord, Honorable Prell?"

"I will submit my report personally to his Eminence upon our return from Teichid. You may so inform him at your earliest convenience."

"Very well, Honorable Prell. Meanwhile, I will transport you to your quarters."

Prell followed him out of the building. He was not particularly surprised when Deska paused beneath

an ornate streetlamp and turned to him and blurted, "I feel that I should enlighten you as regards my feelings toward the Lady Bri-laithe, Honorable Prell, before the present situation is allowed to proceed any further."

Prell looked at his rival shrewdly. The PR-man's face was a study in distress, determination, and despair. "All right, Deska—go on."

Deska squared his shoulders and took a deep breath. "I think that it is dear to you," he said presently, "that I am in love with the lady in question. However, I am afraid that it is not clear to you that I am prepared to take whatever steps that prove to be necessary to insure my realizing my love and to insure my winning hers in return. Therefore, I must warn you, Honorable Prell, that should your present attitude towards her continue I will inform the Homebase authorities via transee-radio that your behavior is not in keeping with the dictates of the Home-base anti-miscegenation law. In other words, I will make certain that you do not realize your intentions towards the Lady. Bri-laithe, whether they be honorable or not; and it should be evident to you, Honorable Prell, that in postulating that they are honorable when, under the existent circumstances, they cannot possibly be, I am leaning way over backwards."

"I see," Prell said.

"I am glad you do, Honorable Prell."

Deska, produced a small electronic whistle and blew a soundless note on it. A moment later, his jetabout came down from its aerial parking space and opened its doors. The two men were silent all the way to Fred's quarters. "I will pick you up shortly after midday tomorrow," Deska said, as the jetabout came to rest on the guesthouse rooftop, "and transport you to the Arena of Decisions. Is it still your wish that the Lady Bri-laithe accompany us?"

"Naturally," Prell said. "In view of the fact that I invited her, I can hardly wish otherwise."

"No, I suppose you can't." Deska sighed. Then, "Good night, Honorable Prell."

Prell climbed out of the jetabout. "Good night," he said. "Fool!" he added, under his breath.

ARCHITECTURALLY speaking, the Arena of Decisions had much in common with the Colosseum, and the modern materials that constituted its structure simulated to a large extent the quarried stone that had gone into the construction of the original. The arena proper, however, consisted of a blacktopped pit surrounded by a wall of polished zonite. This wall was featureless, save for three electronic doorways. One of these doorways was on one side of the pit, and the other two were on the opposite side, situated about one foot apart. The single doorway, although much wider and higher than the other two, was of the standard variety; while the two lower, narrower ones were special jobs with an overhead bank of five oversized deactivator cells apiece. Like all electronic doors, the doors themselves were transparent, or as nearly transparent as Zwieg-field panels can be.

When Deska, Prell, and the Lady Bri-laithe arrived on the scene shortly after 1:00 P.M. Eastern Ingcellian time, the preponderance of the adult population of the capital city was already in attendance, it being the custom of the satrap to declare a national holiday whenever a major criminal was to be tried on his doorstep. In addition to the inhabitants of the capital-city proper, many of the inhabitants of the outlying districts were also present; while for the benefit of the millions who could not attend, a 3V transmitter hung from a huge boom above the center of the pit, taking in everything with its arrogant, multifaceted eye. A fawning usher escorted Deska, Prell, and the Lady Bri-laithe down a long ramp to the royal box and seated them on the satrap's left, next to the Prime Minister and the Prefect of Police, and while they were waiting for the proceedings to begin the Lady Bri-laithe and Deska alternately explained to Prell how Ingcell's system of justice functioned.

It was based on an ancient Homebase "fable", and made the accused his own judge, jury, and executioner. In order for the accused to qualify for such unique treatment, the crime for which he had been arrested had to be first- or second-degree murder, embezzlement of government funds, or, in time of war, treason; and there had to exist at least a vestige of doubt as to his guilt.

The essence of the system was embodied in the two smaller doors in the inner arena-wall. Behind one of them, there would be the lady whom the accused had elected to represent his innocence, and

behind the other there would be a ferocious Ingcellian tiger. The audience, of course, would be able to see through the doors, but the accused, who would enter the pit in a sealed mobile unit known as the Chief Justice, would view the doors on a small reflector-screen, and as the transparency of a Zweig-field could not survive reflector-transmission, he would not be able to see through them. In addition, the two images would be inverted, the one on his right representing the door on his left, and the one on his left representing the door to his right.

The upper rear section of the CJ was constructed of a special metal that permitted one-way visibility—in this case, into the interior of the unit—while the entire front section was constructed of ersatz metal that amounted to little more than painted cardboard. Below the reflector-screen, there was a small control-board by means of which the accused would operate the machine and on which he would punch out the door of his choice. All five deactivator cells above one of the doors had to be triggered in order for the door to dematerialize, a circumstance that would enable him to change his mind a maximum of eight times before making his final decision and which would augment the element of suspense, always an important consideration in a public event involving paid admission. If he deactivated the door behind which the lady stood, he would automatically be considered innocent and a deluxe wedding ceremony would be performed on the spot—unless, of course, the lady happened to be his wife (a factor that did not enter into the present case, as the accused was on trial for uxoricide). If, on the other hand, he deactivated the door behind which the tiger stood, he would automatically be considered guilty. Thanks to the CJ, however, he would still stand a chance of saving his life, and if he succeeded in doing so, he would be set free.

"There," the Lady Bri-laithe breathed into Jaskar Prell's right ear, "he's coming into the pit now!"

PRELL looked in the direction she was pointing, noting the hush that had swept over the audience. The CJ had entered the Pit via the larger door and was moving across the blacktop toward the two smaller doors. With its pear-shaped cockpit, its head-like scanner, its eye-like antennae, and its short, arm-like booms, it was grotesquely human in appearance. Its stubby "legs" extended down from a protruding gyro-axle and ended in large, ball-bearing feet, on which it rolled smoothly and soundlessly. Presently it passed beyond the royal box, and Prell was able to see into the cockpit. The accused was a dark-haired man of about thirty, and he was hunched over the control-board, eyes fixed on the reflector-screen before him and fingers hovering over the banks of buttons that governed his destiny.

Prell shifted his attention to the two doors. Through the shimmering panel of the one on the right he saw a tawny-haired Ingcellian maid of about twenty. Through the shimmering panel of the one on the left he saw a huge Ingcellian tiger. As he watched, one of the deactivator cells above the lady's door leaped into sudden brightness.

The audience caught its collective breath.

It caught its collective breath again as two more cells lighted up—this time, above the tiger's door.

The accused had brought the CJ to a halt several yards from the shimmering panels and was frozen in an attitude that suggested intense concentration. But Prell knew that it was indecision, not concentration, that was responsible for the man's immobility. Indecision—and naked terror.

Abruptly, immobility gave way to spasmodic movement, and another cell lighted up above the lady's door. A moment later, two more lighted up above the tiger's.

For the third time, the audience caught its collective breath.

Yet another cell above the lady's door lighted up. And then, as the accused—apparently unable to endure the excruciating suspense any longer—gambled all on a split-second decision, the final cell above the tiger's door lighted up.

The tiger stalked into the pit, simultaneously materializing on the CJ's reflector-screen. The roar that the beast gave vent to blended with the ecstatic screams of the crowd, and rose skyward on a mighty

pillar of sound. Then the tiger charged.

The accused, working frantically on the CJ's operational buttons, managed to roll the clumsy machine far enough to one side to elude the hurtling yellow body and to rip open the animal's flank with one of the CJ's vise-grip "hands". But the tiger charged again so quickly that it was able to rear up and deliver a swiping blow to the CJ's head-like scanner before the accused could back the machine off. The "head" lolled for a moment, then parted from the neck-like fixture that held it in place, and dropped to the ground.

IMMEDIATELY, the reflector-screen went blank, leaving the accused, to all intents and purposes, blind, and cancelling out what little hope he still had left. His only recourse was to send the CJ moving about the pit on as erratic a course as possible, and this he wasted no time in doing. For a while he was successful in eluding his infuriated nemesis, causing the animal to charge this way and that, but he was only postponing the inevitable, and he must have known it. The end came when the CJ crashed into the zonite wall of the arena and toppled over backwards. The tiger closed in, then, and tore open the machine's vulnerable "chest" with a single, frightful blow, and the accused, trapped in the interior, hardly had time to utter a single anguished scream before it was all over.

In the satrap's seat, Feidlich the Rampant was smiling the self-satisfied smile of a ruler who had decreed justice and seen it meted out. "Ineluctable are the laws of Ingcell," he proclaimed above the raucous cheers of the multitude, his two chins wagging and his face a study in ferocity gone to fat. "Nowhere in the Erthempire is justice dispensed thus efficiently and thus irrevocably." He looked past the faces of the Prefect of Police, the Prime Minister, and the Lady Bri-laithe and caught Prell's eye. "Is this not true, Honorable auditor-at-large?"

"It is indeed true, your Eminence," Prell answered. "You are to be complimented on the simplicity and the directness of your judiciary procedure."

A short while later, descending one of the outer ramps to the street with the Lady Bri-laithe leaning on his arm, he asked, "Does your father, my Lady, know beforehand which of the doors lead to the tiger and which to the lady?"

She nodded. "He does indeed, Jaskar Prell. It is he who does the deciding."

"I see," Prell said. He was thoughtful for a moment; then, after making sure that Donn Deska was far enough down the ramp to be out of earshot, "Are visitors to Ingcell who commit major crimes subject to the Ingcellian system of justice?" he asked. "I know of course, my Lady," he went on, "that diplomatic immunity is not honored here any more than it is on the other Erthempire planets; but I cannot help wondering whether a visitor who committed a major crime would be subjected to so severe an ordeal as a trial in the Arena of Decisions."

"Specifically, you are wondering whether you yourself would be thus subjected were you to commit such a crime—is that not so, Jaskar Prell?"

"Yes, my Lady, that is so."

"You would be beyond a doubt—even though there has been no precedent."

"And would I be allowed to choose any lady I wished, to represent my innocence and afterward, should I be proven not guilty, to be my bride?"

"Yes," Honorable Prell

"Any lady in the land?"

"Any lady in the land."

"H'm'm," said Jaskar Prell.

THE jettrain trip to Teichid was uneventful save for one incident. Shortly before the train passed through the *rogain*-farm region, a trainman entered the royal compartment, withdrew three oxygen masks from a sack hanging at his side, and gave one apiece to Deska, Prell, and the Lady Bri-laithe.

"I would advise all of you," he said, "to put them on now and to keep them on till *rogain* country is far behind us. It's that season, you know, and one cannot always trust the efficiency of air-conditioning

units."

After the man left, Prell turned to Deska, who was sitting between him and the lady Bri-laithe on the richly upholstered seat "To what season did he refer, Donn Deska?"

"To the *rogain* season, of course," Desks answered. "The blooms are at full maturity now, and all Ingcellians must avoid over-exposure to their scent. Although your Homebase origin in all probability makes you immune, it will still be to your best interests to take the standard precaution."

"Precaution against what?" Prell asked.

"That, I cannot tell you, Honorable Prell. There are some things which one race of people can never, in all fairness to themselves, reveal to another race of People."

Prell donned his mask and said no more, although the device was equipped with a diaphragm for speaking. Deska's words had stirred the ashes of a tiny fire of forgotten knowledge in his mind, and it annoyed him no end that his eidetic prowess should be confined to taxfax to the extent that he couldn't bring the ashes back to life. That they had to do with the *rogain* blooms, he had no doubt; but precisely what their connection was he could not determine without knowing the forgotten data which they represented.

At length, he forsook the ashes and went on to a different fire. This one was a live one, and burning more and more brightly with each passing moment. He fed it more fuel, closely watching the flames for any sign of flickering. There was none. He warmed his hands over the blaze, rejoicing. But he knew that before he could launch the plan that the fire symbolized he would need the Lady Bri-laithe's blessing.

He sought her out that night after the mech-safari which Donn Deska had engaged transported the trio deep into the Teichid jungle and unfolded itself into a modernistic and luxurious camp surrounded by a force-field bomba and supplied with running water, seven varieties of superlative mech-meals, and enough champagne for an army. Donn Deska had retired early, and at first Prell thought that the Lady Bri-laithe had gone to bed also, as only the faintest of lights shone through the windows of her tent. Such did not prove to be the case, however. "Enter, Jaskar Prell," she said, opening wide her plasti-panel door and stepping to one side. "You will have a midnight drink with me?"

"Of course," Prell said.

SHE filled two iridescent glasses, placed one of them in his hand. They drank, tacitly toasting each other in the roseate radiance of the turned-down tent-light. She was wearing a diaphanous peignoir that gave tantalizing glimpses of the black-mesh nightgown and the glowing white skin it pretended to conceal. A hammering began in Prell's temples; a tightness settled in his chest. Yes, he had to have her, and he had to have her at all costs. There wasn't a woman in the entire Erthempire who could compare to her, or at least none that he had ever known, and he had known many.

"My Lady Bri-laithe," he began, "you told me last night that it is your fondest dream to live on Homebase. To what lengths are you willing to go to make that dream come true?"

"Be more specific, Jaskar Prell."

"Will you, as a starter, consent to marry me?"

Flames flickered in her luminous eyes, then went out. "But you know as well as I do, Jaskar Prell, that the same laws that deny me the privilege of becoming a Homebase citizen also deny me the privilege of becoming your bride."

"Laws are made to be circumvented, my Lady Bri-laithe."

The flames came back into her eyes, and stayed there. "Go on, Jaskar Prell."

"I can circumvent the anti-miscegenation law quite easily, because, like all Erthempire laws, it is invalid when it comes in conflict with the administration of local justice. And once I have circumvented the anti-miscegenation law, the naturalization law will no longer apply in your case, because in the process of becoming my wife you will simultaneously have become a Homebase citizen. But before I set about

accomplishing this, my Lady Bri-laithe, I must have your assurance that you will approve of the steps I will have to take." Briefly, he told her what those steps were. "Do I have that assurance, my Lady?"

She hesitated. "Look," Prell went on, pressing his advantage with the adroitness gleaned from a thousand taxfax interviews, "you know and I know that as long as you remain on Ingcell you will never—in the eyes of the Erthempire at least—be anything more than a fifth-rate princess. But as a Homebase citizen and the wife of a taxfaxman you will enjoy the status you deserve. On Homebase, my Lady, you will be a true princess, and in addition to the public adulation which will be yours as a matter of course, you will be accorded respect of a more practical nature. Million-crediteers will curry your favor, cartel-chiefs will fawn at your feet; the First Lady and the First Gentleman of the Homebase Royal Family will fete you at the Ivory Palace, and the commodores of commerce will bring you gifts of mink and ermine and frankincense and myrrh. I ask you again, then, my Lady Bri-laithe—do I have your assurance that you will approve of the steps that I need to take?"

She moved close to him, and the fragrance of her rose round him in Paphian waves. The last words he remembered hearing for hours afterward were, "Yes, Jaskar Prell, you do."

The next morning at the hunt, the Lady Bri-laithe shot first, killing three antelopes. Donn Desks shot next, killing four. Jaskar Prell shot last. He killed five antelopes, and afterward he killed Donn Deska. He shot him through the back of the head when none of the safari personnel was looking, and from a distance of fifty paces. The only eyewitness was the Lady Bri-laithe.

AS Jaskar Prell had known he would, Feidlich the Rampant paid a visit to the accused on the eve of the trial. "Well, Honorable Prell," said the satrap, "it appears that in the very near future I am either going to have a son-in-law to cherish or the remnants of a corpse to ship back to Homebase. You must love my daughter very much to risk the claws of the tiger in order to make her your bride."

"Yes, your Eminence," Prell said, "I do love your daughter very much. But not enough to risk the claws of the tiger in order to make her my bride,"

Feidlich frowned. "Then why, pray, are you doing so? It is clear that you deliberately murdered Donn Desks in such a way as to leave a vestige of doubt as to your guilt, thereby making yourself liable to trial in the Arena of Decisions?"

"I am not risking the claws of the tiger, your Eminence, for the simple reason that I do not need to risk them. You are going to reveal to me behind which door the tiger will be, and to show my gratitude for this unprecedented act of mercy on your part, I am not going to reveal to Homebase Taxfax Headquarters that your *rogain* taxfax-screen shows an 18,000,000 credit tax-deficit and that as a result you owe the Erthempire some 18,018,000,000 credits in back-taxes."

Feidlich's face turned green, then blue, then white. "But that cannot be, Honorable Prell I employ the best taxfax experts in the satrapy!"

"Even the experts are not always infallible, your Eminence, but their fallibility does not qualify you for forgiveness—a fact of life which I am sure you are aware of. That which is yours is the Erthempire's, and that which is the Erthempire's is its own. I have already made out my report," Prell went on, watching the satrap's face closely, "and have deposited it in one of Ingcell's most inviolate safety-deposit vaults, along with written instructions, appended with my taxfaxman's seal, that it be sent to Homebase immediately should I be rendered incapable of delivering it myself."

Only Feidlich's eyes betrayed him. They transmuted from brown to gold, and then back to brown again. "I must compliment you, Honorable Prell—you play your cards par excellence. The tiger will be behind the door on your left, the Lady Bri-laithe, behind the door on your right."

"Thank you, your Eminence."

Prell grinned at the black walls of his cell after Feidlich departed. If Deska had been a fool, the satrap was a bigger one. And, like all fools, he must be made to pay as great a price as possible for his fooldom.

IT was not everyday that the citizens of Ingeell had the opportunity to see a taxfaxman on the spot.

Indeed, it was a satisfaction that hitherto had been denied them altogether. Consequently, every adult Ingcellian who could get to the capital city on the day of Prell's trial, got there, and the Arena of Decisions was packed as it had never been packed before.

Prell knew that he would be "performing" before a capacity crowd even before he guided the repaired CJ through the Doorway of the Accused and into the pit. If he had not known, the megadecibel roar that greeted the machine's appearance would have apprised him of the fact.

The arena attendants had taught him how to manipulate the CJ, and he had been permitted to practice all that morning. Hence, he had not the slightest trouble in picking up the two doorways on the reflector-screen and in guiding the CJ across the pit. Several yards from his dual destination, he brought the machine to a stop and listened to the silence that had settled over the spectators. He smiled grimly. He would give them the suspense they had paid their credits to experience, but not the satisfaction. Instead of rejoicing over his mangled body as they aspired to do, they would be dancing at his wedding.

He looked at the two image-doors on the reflector-screen. Feidlich had said that the Lady Bri-laithe would be behind the door on Prell's right, which, of course, owing to the picture's inversion, corresponded to the image-door on Prell's left. But since Feidlich, knowing even better than Prell did that a satrap had the right to impound the contents of every safety-deposit vault in his satrapy any time he wanted to, had lied, the Lady Bri-laithe was really behind the door on Prell's left, which meant that he had to light up the cells on the image-door on his right in order to prove himself innocent. He smiled again. By lying, Feidlich had merely made his future son-in-law's work that much easier.

But wait a minute. Maybe the satrap, in saying "the door on your right", had been referring to the image-door on Prell's right.

The taxfaxman began to sweat.

That the satrap had lied in either case, there could be no doubt. But in lying, the man might inadvertently have told the truth—if the door which he had meant was the image-door.

The odds had it, however, that Feidlich had meant the real door. Prell took the odds, and bet his life.

HE activated a cell over the image-door on his left, listened to the audience's collective gasp. He activated another cell over the same door. Another, and another. The crowd grew suddenly silent. Did the silence stem from anticipation or disappointment? Did it mean that the tiger was beyond the door, or the Lady Bri-laithe?

There was no way for Prell to know.

Cheeks awash with cold sweat, he activated three of the cells over the image-door on his right. Another one. The silence of the crowd was so acute now that the hoarse sound of his own breathing hurt his eardrums.

His forefinger moved to the final deactivator button of the real door on his left. Hovered over it.

For the first time in his life, he searched his soul.

Had he been right in turning the old drygoods peddler on Jonahar over to the tax troopers and letting them stomp the truth out of him?

Had he been right in feathering his nest at the expense of the plenipotentiary from Hemling and afterward turning the man in on another tax-evasion charge?

Had he been right in accepting four female centaurs from the satrap of Besancon in payment for the satrapy's tax deficit and in selling them afterward at a fabulous profit to New Hialeah Enterprises?

Had he been right in murdering Donn Deska in order that he might marry the Lady Bri-laithe and take her back to Homebase with him?

Was he, now that he was confronted with the necessity of making a life-and-death decision, belatedly developing a conscience?

Impossible! Consciences were for fools, and whatever else he might be, Jaskar Prell was not a fool.

He brought his finger down on the deactivator-button.

The image-door on his right lighted up, the Lady Bri-laithe materialized on the reflector-screen, and he knew that he had won.

FEIDLICH the Rampant looked positively ill when he congratulated. Prell after the wedding ceremony. "I would like to have a word with you alone, your Eminence," Prell said.

"Very well, Honorable Prell. But please remember that you are my son-in-law now, and that if you bring dishonor down upon my head you will bring it down upon your own also ... I will be in my chambers one hour hence."

Feidlich was as good as his word, and an hour later Prell found him seated behind his personal desk in the palace library. The taxfaxman came straight to the point. "In exchange for my silence and in retribution for your treachery, your Eminence," he said, "I want one large payload of Ingcell's most precious commodity to take back to Homebase with me."

"But that would be *rogain*, Honorable Prell," the satrap objected, "and—"

"And *rogain* blooms cannot be transported over interstellar distances except in special refrigerator-ships—is that what you're going to tell me? Well for your information, your Eminence, I have one of the new taxfax ships at my disposal, and like all the new ships it is equipped with a commodious refrigerator-hold. You would be surprised, my dear Felditch, at the variety of produce the Erthempire accepts as payment for backtaxes, and you would be surprised as well at the variety of produce taxfaxmen accept as payment for keeping their mouths shut."

"But *rogain*, Honorable Prell. You—"

"A payload of *rogain* blooms will net me a modest fortune on the Homebase market, so let us have no more 'buts'. You will see to it that the blooms are placed in the hold at once. The Lady Bri-laithe and I are leaving for Homebase this evening."

FeldHell's face seemed less fat than ferocious now, and flecks of gold had come into his brown eyes. "Very well, Honorable Prell," he said. "You leave me no choice."

He had the blooms flown in by jetfreight, and that evening he and the upper-echelon court-officials came to the starport to see Prell and the Lady Sri-laithe off. The couple waved good by as the gantry backed away, and afterward Prell closed and sealed the locks, and turned on the automatics. Soon, the taxfax ship was spaceborne.

In the lounge, the Lady Brilaithe took several deep breaths, and turned puzzledly to Prell. "I must be suffering from olfactory hallucinations," she said. "I could swear that I am smelling *rogain* blooms."

"You are smelling them, my Lady. Your father lied to me about the doors, so I exacted retribution from him in the form of Ingcell's famous flowers. The refrigerator-hold is filled with them, and the ventilation system carries their fragrance throughout the ship."

THE Lady Bri-laithe's face had gone white. "You fool!" she screamed. "Deactivate the system at once!"

"I cannot, my Lady Bri-laithe. Only the automatics can do that."

"Then turn back to Ingcell before it's too late!"

Anger was building up in Prell, and it was with difficulty that he controlled himself "Come, my Lady Bri-laithe," he said, "this is no way for a bride to behave on her honeymoon. Surely upon such an occasion you can put so minor a matter as a fancied allergy to *rogain* from your mind."

He moved closer to her and tried to take her in his arms. To his consternation, she fled from the lounge and ran down the companion-ramp toward their cabin. He ran after her, arriving at the cabin door just in time to have it slammed in his face. Furious, he tried the knob. When it did not turn, he began pounding on the panels. Finally he moved back several paces, lunged forward, and struck the door with his right shoulder. Just as the lock broke, sending him sprawling into the cabin, the ashes of the forgotten *rogain* data came to life in his mind and words flamed briefly on his mental retina:

ROGAIN: a unique species of wolfsbane which flourishes on Ingcell and which is cultivated to commercial advantage by the natives but avoided by them personally for esoteric reasons that date far back into their folklore.

With the tiger, Jaskar Prell would have stood a chance. But he had none at all with the tigress.

THE END