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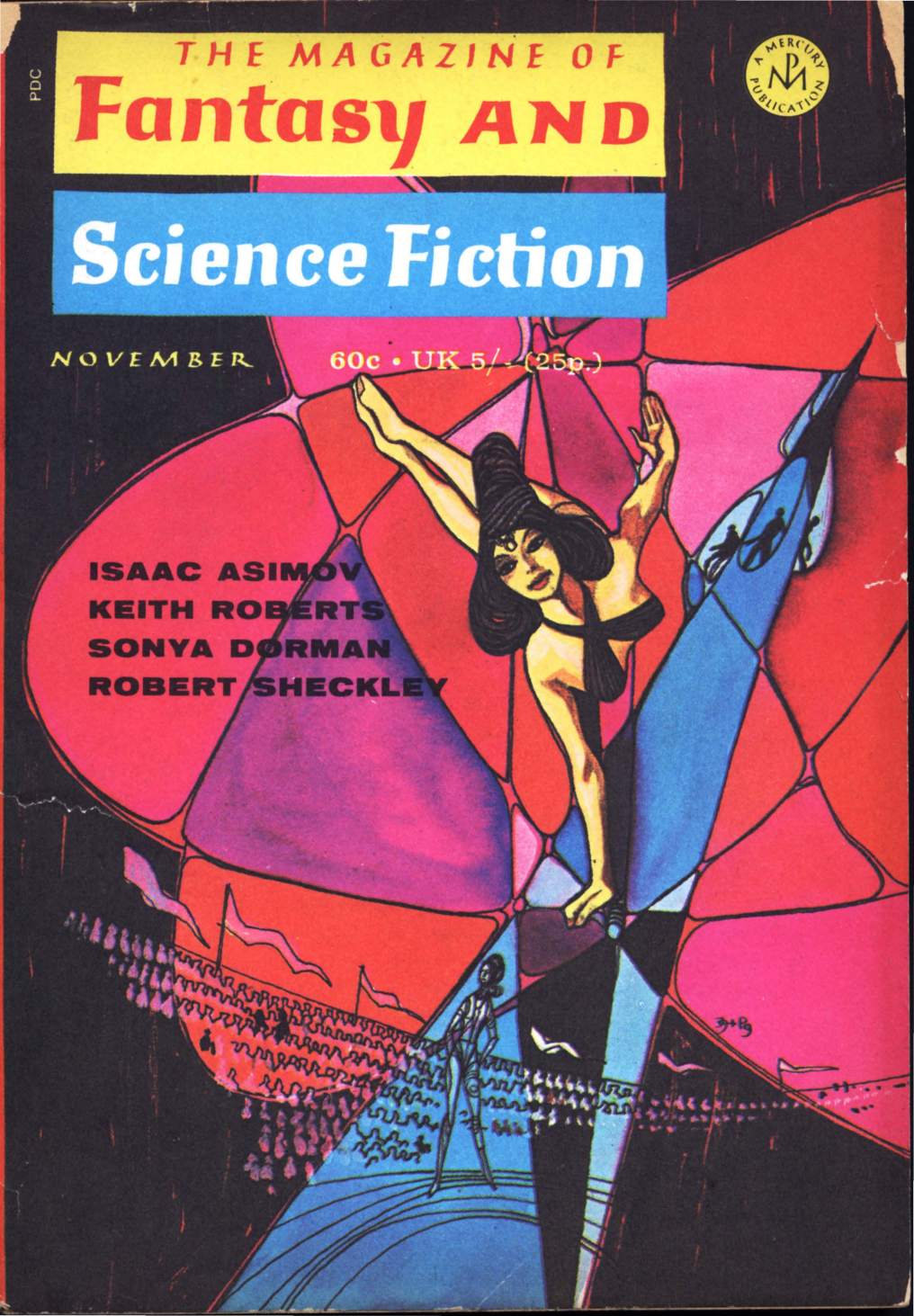

# Fantasy and Science Fiction

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*Keith Roberts is an Englishman; his most recent novel was* PAVANE *(Doubleday). His first story for F&SF in some time is one of a series of tales about Anita, who is, believe us, one colorful witch. Here, Anita is involved in some mermaid recovery work, part of the ecology of magic that humans (present company excepted) care so little about. Next month we'll bring you an equally enchanting Anita story. (Both will be included in a collection to be published by Ace.)*

# *The Mayday*

## by Keith Roberts

THE MESSAGE CAME WITH A chittering and piping. It seethed through the old high grass of downlands, thrilled and rustled in the leaves of trees. Furry feet thundered it, strange creatures yapped it at the moon. It swung from the skirts of storm clouds, clanged in summer hail. It came a weariness of miles, but always, wherever it moved, noses pointed, tails twitched, wings with feathers and wings with thumbs waved it on toward the north. It faltered and weakened, threatened to disperse, boil away to nothing. It was a suggestion, a whimper, but finally, at long last, it reached its destination.

Anita was walking in Deadman's Copse. She stopped and stiffened; her ears twitched, her nose tasted the air. Above her the trees stirred; the unease came again. The bright sky pleaded, silently.

She trotted to the edge of the wood, badly bothered, stood turning her head and frowning, tuning her ears till they might have heard a needle drop on the moon. The message came again, stronger then dying, ending with a *wash, crash,* like an undertow half a lifetime away. Waves beat on an inland hillside, creamed and murmured and lost themselves again. Anita shook her head angrily, like a

horse in a cloud of flies, but it was no good; the thing that wanted her was gone. She turned and hurried off, worry lines showing on her forehead. Nothing can reach out across so many miles unless it needs you terribly badly. Unless it's life and death, or worse.

Anita and her granny sat tensely in the living room of the cottage. Evening had come but the lights were not turned on. In Anita's hands the oldest magic of all hummed and burned; the crystal ball winked, throwing back reflections of a sky banked with the pink-tipped clouds of sunset. Deep inside the little globe other lights flashed and moved. "It's still there," said Anita breathlessly. "And it's a Mayday, I can tell. But it isn't coming through channels . . ."

*"Sssss* . . ." Granny Thompson was rocking, eyes hooded, one thin finger raised. "Shut up, gel, om *trackin'* . . ." High above the cottage a bat fluttered desperately, sideslipping to keep in station. His electric ears turned and probed; through his eyes both witches could see the darkening countryside, the high grey smoke palls of the woods. "Left a bit," muttered the old lady. " 'Old it . . . bit more, jist a *smidgin*. . ." Anita turned, holding the crystal on her knees, lining up body and ears and brain, hardly daring to breathe.

*"Got it!"* Granny Thompson rapped her stick sharply. "Yer lined up, gel. Weer's it *comin'* from, though . . ."

It was Anita's turn to shush. She stepped up the power in the crystal, feeling the impossibly faint vibrations twanging against her mind. The spell locked on; the bat, released, fell away gratefully, took an insect with a snap of his tiny jaws, and scuttered off into the dark like a flake of burned paper. In the cottage, the crystal lit up; blue reflections burned on the ceiling, glowed on Anita's awed face. *"Gosh,"* she said, forgetting herself in her excitement. "Gran, it's the *Jennifer* . . ."

Granny Thompson wrinkled her nose, assuming an automatic expression of disgust; then she so far compromised her dignity as to peer over Anita's shoulder. "Direck transmission," she muttered feverishly. "By 'Im wot's Down Under . . ." She licked her lips, eyes glittering. "Yer wun't 'old it, gel, not fer no time. Yer *kent* . . ."

*"Shhhhh!"* Anita raised the crystal level with her eyes. The mermaid waved desperately; a flicker of interference blotted her out, then she was back. "What is it?" asked Anita urgently. "Jennifer, what's *wrong*?"

Under water, tears couldn't show, but they were there. The sea girl's flukes trembled, her small breasts heaved. Her voice lisped and twanged in the sphere,

like an insect caught in a raindrop. "*Gosh,*" said Anita again. "Oh, *no* . . ."

The Jennifer arched about, rocking with misery. The interference came back; Anita was nearly blinded. Earth was swinging, the moon tugging at the sea. The mermaid was drifting with the great pull of the tide, moving out of range. Anita retuned, to farthest limits; the globe seemed to swell till the room was filled with the restless night ocean. "That's *awful,*" she said. "Gran, it's one of her sisters. She's been *caught* . . ."

"Wot, by *'oomans?*"

"Yes. Listen, she's telling us . . . Oh, the poor thing . . . They've got her in some sort of beastly box or cage. Gran this is terrible . . ."

"Eh?" Professional concern for once rattled Granny Thompson's calm. "That ent ever 'appened afore," she muttered, shaking her head. "Not in livin' mem'ry it ent . . . Wot were it adoin' of, ter git caught . . ."

"I don't know, I can't hear . . . But she wants help. She says . . . she says our people down there can't do anything. Something about the Dorsetshire Controller says it's irregular, it's got to be referred to a Lower Authority . . . You can see what it is," said Anita bitterly. "Another departmental muck-up. They're scared of having their knuckles rapped because sea things aren't under their jurisdiction. An' I suppose while they're sitting there deciding who's to do what, the story's spreading everywhere. That's why she called me, I'm the only one she knows on land. Though what she thinks I can do I don't . . . *what?* But they can't, they wouldn't dare . . . Yes, Jennifer, of course I will. Please don't worry, it'll be all right . . ."

The mermaid held her arms out; she started to say something else and there was a surging, a bang, a ringing black void. Anita just stopped herself tumbling mind-first into it. The glow died from the crystal; it became once more just a quiet grey ball of glass. Contact was broken.

Granny Thompson sat back with a self-satisfied air. "Well," she said, smirking. "Well. Direck contact . . . 'Ow fur d'yer reckon that were, gel? One up on Aggie Everett anyways . . ." She picked the globe from Anita's unresponding fingers and patted it affectionately. "'Ad 'ers *transistorized* larst week she did, jist ter show orf, an' now she kent even raise *Titchmarsh* with it . . ."

But Anita wasn't listening. "Gran," she said, "I shall have to go down there. It's vital . . ."

Anita wandered down the High Street of Compton Holywell, a suitcase in her hand. It was a very smart case; it had been bought

new in Kettering only that morning. As she walked she stared round her at the old buildings and the bustling traffic and people. The afternoon light warmed the greyness of the ancient stone, sparkled from the paintwork of doors and window shutters. Anita stopped outside a pub. Barrels crowded with flowers stood to either side of the door; there were old insurance plaques on the walls, and the roof was steep and lichened. She could have reached up and touched the jettied windows of the upper floor with her hand. Its sign proclaimed it the Mermaid Inn, and there was a saucy painting of a Jennifer; she was a little too full-bosomed for Anita's taste, but she had a sweet face. Anita shrugged and stepped through the partly open door. One place was as good as the next; and the sign might prove to be an omen.

Getting a room was easier than she had expected. The landlord told her she was lucky, he'd had a last-minute cancellation. Anita liked him on sight. He was short and jolly faced, and some physiological accident had robbed him of hair, even to his eyebrows. He put her in mind of a pink celluloid Puck.

He showed her the room. It was in front of the pub, facing the street, and had one of the little windows she had admired. It was small, neat and bright; its white walls were set off by old twisty timbers. There was a chest of drawers and a dressing table with mirrors poised above it like a nest of geometric butterflies. Anita proclaimed it perfect; the landlord nodded and smiled, and said he'd leave her to "get settled in, like." He bounced off down the stairs humming to himself, and she was on her own.

She swung the case onto the bed, opened it and sat staring somewhat helplessly at the contents. The thoroughness of the packing showed her Granny's hand very clearly; left to herself Anita would have panicked and scrambled half the contents of her wardrobe and then not been able to shut the lid, and would still not have had anything she really wanted.

She lifted out a small stack of undies and another of handkerchiefs. She felt round inside the space she had made, and took out the crystal. She sat with it in her hands, feeling it throb first hot then cold; then she put it aside resolutely and started putting her things away. She hadn't brought much with her. There was no need; by this time tomorrow everything would be sorted out one way or another.

As she worked she tried to ignore the buzzing deep inside her that meant she was scared. She had never been this far from home on her own before; she'd wanted

her Granny to come with her, but it had been impossible. The old lady had recently, to her unconcealed disgust, been made "area secertry" in charge of various dark matters, and there was a coven meeting later in the week that had to be attended as a matter of policy. She had worked out a spell, an odd little taradiddle of her own, to blanket the emissions from Anita's ragbag of extra senses; the tiny locket that held it was hanging round her neck right now. But that was all the help Granny Thompson had been able to give. From here on, Anita was on her own, and there was disaster in the air, she could smell it.

She wished she could have brought a Familiar at least. Winijou had wanted to come but she'd been forced to say no. She wanted to attract no attention; a seal-point Siamese on a jeweled lead would scarcely have helped in that respect. She might have managed one of the tiny ones, somebody like Dickon or Jill, they could have traveled in her pocket or her handbag; but they would be no use on a job like this, and in any case they were too flighty, apt to scent mischief, and scuttle off and get involved in it. Anita didn't feel justified in taking risks, not when there was so much at stake.

She finished unpacking, pushed the suitcase under the bed, and lay down with her arms behind her head. She closed her eyes and felt the room still swaying slightly. That was because of the train; she used railways so seldom that their effects took a long time to wear off. She opened her mind, cautiously, and at once the bed seemed to reel. The West Country was thick with magic; she heard the soundless roaring of the hills as they butted the sea, felt the rage of giants lying buried, all buckled and disorted by the strata, their pictures carved above them like x-rays in the turf. Old voices rang from barrows atop windy downs, thudded from underground where fossils lay like coiled watch springs in the rocks. She sensed the power of the Great Henge away to the north, the dumb stone anger of Corfe; and from far in the west, where the place names clashed and tinkled like ancient weapons, came the blue shouting of the Great One, the Thing men sometimes call Merlin. She closed her mind with an effort, sat up feeling half drowned; she reminded herself, unhappily, that they really batted in the big league down here . . .

She picked the crystal up, sat holding it against her chest. She daren't try to transmit; she was here without a work permit, in fact without a clearance at all. If the Dorsetshire folk triangulated on her, all Hell would very literally break loose; and she could hear their voices everywhere, the syllables rolling and tilting like the

contours of the hills. She could receive though, surely. She concentrated, narrowing her eyes. The globe beneath her fingers clouded and then cleared; she saw a line of hills, a great heath clean with wind. She extended her range, and the picture began to alter, like the changing view from the window of a helicopter. She crossed a town, then another, lost herself in Wiltshire and struggled to reorient. She swerved round Salisbury spire, sharp and thin as a needle; then pop, flutter . . . the images were gone, dissolved back to greyness. Anita bit her lip, feeling close to tears. She needed, more than anything else, a glimpse of the flat fields and red earth of Northamptonshire. If she could only see the cottage and her Granny and Winijou maybe, just for a second . . . She tried again and reached Berkshire, recognized the Great West Road; but atmospheric conditions were bad up there, and she was already near the limit of her power. She took a breath, beamed her mind for a final effort, and somebody tapped on the door.

She gasped and nearly dropped the crystal. She set it down hastily on the dressing table and flung a woolly over it. She clenched her fists, shivering a little, and her voice when it came sounded all wrong and wobbly.

"Y-yes . . .?"

The door opened a fraction, then wider. A shining pink face beamed through the crack. "We was just havin' a bite, like," said the landlord. "Reckoned you might like a cuppa . . ."

Anita's held breath escaped with a whoosh. "Gosh," she said, "thanks. Thanks very much . . ."

There was more than just tea; there was a tray with sandwiches and cakes, as much as she wanted to eat. When she had finished she took herself for a walk round the little town. The evening air was fresh and sweet; it put some color back into her cheeks, and after an hour of watching the people and the boats in the harbor, she had almost forgotten her homesickness. She went back to the Mermaid as dusk was falling. The place was crowded now and the landlord in fine form; he was beaming round a long, rank-smelling cheroot, and bouncing from end to end of his little domain like a ball on a piece of elastic. Anita settled herself in a corner of the Public and drank half pints of bitter and watched and listened as hard as she could. All the customers were locals, and most of their talk was of the sea. There were tales of boats and torn nets and shoals, tides and cuttlefish, and a buoy that had come loose from its moorings, but no word, no whisper anywhere, of a captured mermaid.

Anita began testing, cautiously. That man at the bar now, the big one in the reefer jacket and jeans

and heavy boots. She probed his mind; it was filled with a tinkling blue susurration like the sea, through which his thoughts came swelling up easy and calm and big, like rollers or the rolling crests of downs. She even found his name, tucked in a corner of his brain; John Strong. But there was nothing else, nothing at all. John Strong hadn't heard about the Jennifer.

She watched him nonetheless, fascinated. His face was so seamed and tanned by the wind that his eyes looked paler than they really were; they watched out from under black swatches of eyebrows like chips of quiet blue ice, while his voice went rumbling on and on and his hands worked steadily, haggling tobacco from an ounce of iron-hard twist, teasing the hard little chips into a ball of fibers. He lit the pipe and drew, steadily, tamping the glowing tobacco with a calloused fingertip; and Anita heard about the day a Stuka shot his dad up while he was making a hayrick, and how they saw the bodies in the water after Jerry tried to invade and got burned up with oil. There was anger still in John Strong when he thought about the war, but that was a recent thing. This was the land Judge Jefferies clawed, boiling and cutting, selling children for stitching the hems of flags; and behind his red ghost tramped others, knights and shadowy minstrels, Normans and Saxons and Romans. Beyond were others and still more, the old men who lugged the magic stones up to the downs, left them there for the rain and wind to harden. Anita, entranced, lost track of time; she was amazed when the landlord started calling for the glasses. The evening was over, and John Strong swallowed down the last of his beer and rolled out the last of his words and rolled off into the night. She heard his van start up and drive away.

She collected the glasses from the tables, helped her host wash them, and hung the teacloths up to dry. After supper she talked awhile with the landlord and his wife, about Dorset and the sea and the old things still alive in the West. But she was keyed-up now; she excused herself as soon as she could, went to her room and shut the door. She lay down on the bed. The sheets smelled of lavender and were cosy and snuggly, but she knew she daren't sleep. She read instead from the one book she had brought with her, a collection of the essays of Richard Jefferies. It was the only thing that could calm her down once she got really panicky and upset. The lovely balanced sentences and the quiet thoughts under them had their usual effect; in an hour she was nearly relaxed again.

She set the book down and listened. It was well past midnight,

and the town was quiet. The curtains across the window stirred in a breath of wind, making a little clicking of rings, but there were no other sounds. She tested carefully; the landlord and his wife were both asleep. She turned the light off, tiptoed to the window and peeped out. The moon was up, silvering the fronts of the High Street buildings, but nothing moved.

She changed in the dark. At first haste made her fumble; she forced herself to slow down again. By the time she was ready it was nearly one o'clock. She crept across the room and opened the door. The landing was pitch-dark. A burst of sonar located the head of the stairs. She reached the saloon bar, using her bat sense sparingly, trusting to the charm round her neck to scramble the emissions. The Dorset folk were busy tonight; the air round her hummed silently with messages, instructions, snatches of laughter. Near the door she stiffened, knowing for the first time her journey hadn't been for nothing; she heard quite plainly the talk about a captured Jennifer. The speakers were some distance away and were plainly very worried. Anita set her lips and began working on the side door of the pub.

Easing the bolts seemed to take an age, and she was terrified all the time; the landlord and his wife had lived in the place for twenty years, and folk who stay that long in one house come to know every squeak and creak it can make. Shape-shifting would have been the answer, but she daren't even think of it; the great splash of energy would have given her away instantly. She got outside at last and risked a low-level spell to cover her tracks. She drew a finger slowly across the door, heard the slithering inside as the bolts closed themselves. She edged out into the High Street, keeping to the shadows.

She was feeling spooky again now. She had dressed all in black: black sweater and trews, black ankle socks and pumps, a black chiffon scarf for her hair. That on its own had been enough to start the shivers. She felt a little better when she reached the open space of the harbor. She circled it, found a place where she could get to the beach. She dropped down and started to run. She still had a long way to go.

Seen at night, the bay was nothing like she remembered. The great mass of the headland loomed threateningly, looking a mile tall; round it the sea creamed and seethed, flashing with phosphorescence as the waves smashed themselves against rocky teeth. The ocean was full; Anita could feel the rage in it, the swilling and piping and unrest.

She reached the headland at last, ducked into the cave at its

foot. Inside, masked by the rock, she could at least use her sonar freely. She reached the inner pool and knelt on wet rock, calling and shivering. She hadn't dared try to contact the Jennifer again; she could only hope the sea girl would remember where to meet her. The minds of sea things are strange and wandering at the best of times, they just don't work in predictable ways; and the mermaid was dreadfully upset, she might do anything. Anita asked herself, with another shiver, what would happen if she lost her head completely.

The sea rolled and bawled; the cave was awesome and black as a cathedral, filled with a great harsh smell of salt. She called louder, risking detection, beaming her mind out from the coast. And there was an answer, a thin crying that move and wavered uncertainly, then homed and locked and began to streak in toward the land. Anita held her breath. Nothing, nothing human, could move that fast under the sea. Nothing except a great fish or . . .

The mermaid surfaced. Anita's normal sight picked up the swirl from the water, her abnormal senses heard the bursting shout from the sea. She jumped off the rock impulsively, felt the lithe strength of the Jennifer. Arms locked round her neck; lips pressed her cheek, hair swirled across her eyes. She writhed about, spitting. "Steady on . . . Jennifer, you'll drown me . . ."

The sea girl was panting. "You *came* . . . I didn't believe you would, none of us did. I waited hours, it was terrible . . ."

"It's all right . . ." Anita managed to stand up. "Jennifer, what's happening? Where's your sister . . ."

"I don't know . . ." The Jennifer sounded half choked. "She's in a . . . *piuf* . . . bay just along the coast but . . . *owf* . . . we can't get near . . ."

Anita was struggling with her clothes. "What's wrong, you sound terrible . . ."

"Sewers," said the sea girl viciously. "Horrible great . . . *owf* . . . pipes and things everywhere. We can't come in any more, we get choked . . ."

Anita tried to hurry. Sea pollution was new since she was last here; she could imagine what it must be like for gill-breathers. "Will you be all right?"

"For a few minutes. But be quick . . ."

Anita rolled her clothes up, tucked them out of the way under a ledge of rock. She felt the mermaid grip her round the waist. "Don't try to swim," said the sea girl. "And mind your head . . ."

Anita ducked, sonar working overtime; rocks flew by close, then they were in the open sea, heading out from the coast. The mermaid moved fast, great mackerel tail

beating the water. Anita tried to keep her head up, but it was no good, she just wasn't streamlined enough for this sort of thing. She called to the Jennifer to slow down, but she ignored her. "They're taking her away," she said. "We think it's tomorrow . . ."

"Where . . . where is she?"

"In a cage, the stupid little thing. That's all we can tell. We don't even know how she got caught. She isn't very old," piped the mermaid. "She just hasn't got the sense she was *born* with . . ." She slackened pace at last; Anita dog-paddled while their bright wake died away to blackness. They had come miles; the land was a dark, humped outline a long way away. The Jennifer pointed. "She's there somewhere, I can hear her, but you'll have to hurry. She's getting weaker, I don't think she's been feeding . . ."

Anita nodded, feeling the tide tug at her. "I'll do what I can . . ."

"You'd better . . ." The Jennifer's eyes glowed suddenly, like moons, and Anita was frightened without knowing why.

"What do you mean . . ."

The sea girl brushed her hair back from her face and grinned, showing bright pointed teeth. "There'll be some trouble . . ."

"What . . . what do you mean? What sort of trouble?"

"There's hundreds of us here already," said the Jennifer. "Listen, and you'll feel us. The Wardens are backing us, they say it's time . . ."

"W-what?"

"We're tired," said the mermaid. "The sea was ours to live in, once. But the humans spoiled it. They mined it for coal and drilled it for oil and fished in it and let horrible great bombs off in it and killed us . . ." Her eyes burned blue with rage. "We want our kit back," she hissed. "Tregeagle is awake, and Fingal muttered in his sleep. We've sent for the Serpent . . ."

"What will the S-Serpent do . . ."

"Breach the Chesil Bank. And we're working on the storms . . ."

Anita saw it all, instantly; the Dorset folk doing what they had always done, fishing and cutting stone and making butter and bread; and the wall of water coming bluely, smashing up from the coast. She gulped, swallowed salt and spat. "Jennifer! You mustn't . . ."

"It won't just be here," said the mermaid. "It will be all over the world. All the magic in the sea, all the magic that's left, working together. We've waited too long already . . ."

"Please," said Anita. "Please listen . . . Jennifer, all humans aren't bad . . ."

"It'll be all of us together," said the mermaid. "Coming up the riv-

ers, letting in the sea." She arced in the water, breasts gleaming. A wind howled round her, tumbling the waves, smashing spray from their tips. "I've brought my comb and glass," she said. "Do you want to hear me sing?"

Anita screamed, and the wind was gone as quickly as it had risen. "I'm sorry," said the mermaid. "Please try and get her back. She's so small . . ." She turned away, sinking into a trough of foam, and Anita paddled toward the land. She didn't trust herself to speak again.

The bay she finally reached was semicircular, guarded at each side by great bulging headlands. The whole of the foreshore was littered with boulders, some of them over a yard across. She splashed between them carefully, stood up when the water would no longer cover her and waded the rest of the way to the beach.

There was no mistaking now where the mermaid was; thin distress-pipings from her jangled Anita's already overstretched nerves. There were people on top of the cliffs too, her people; she fingered the amulet round her neck, hoping the salt water hadn't ruined the spell.

Everything stayed quiet. She walked to where she could see a gleam of light. It came from a small, humped cottage set a few yards back from the water. She moved forward again, half crouching and ready to bolt. There was a slip for launching boats; beside it were piles of clumsy black baskets. She recognized them as lobster pots; they were like the eel traps she had seen sometimes at home, only bigger. The crying was coming from behind them.

The cage was half submerged in the sea, anchored to the beach by thick chains. Old sacks had been flung over it. Anita lifted them away and instantly a threshing and boiling started inside. Foam flew; she called desperately, trying to tune in on the panic-emissions. "It's all right, stop it . . . Stop, you'll hurt yourself . . ."

The threshing subsided. A wild, heart-shaped face glared out, small teeth gnashed. Anita pushed her arms through the cage, risking being bitten. The Jennifer was so little; she wanted to hug her but she couldn't because of the bars. She stroked her hair till she was quiet, making soothing-noises and watching the cottage windows worriedly. There was a man inside, she could feel him moving about. "It's all right," she sent again. "Oh, you poor little wretch . . . how did you get into a mess like this?"

The kit gripped the bars with her small fists and gazed up wonderingly. "Who are you? You're not one of us . . ."

"Your sister sent me," said Anita. She lied gallantly. "Well,

you *are* pretty. You're even prettier than she is . . ."

The Jennifer threshed her tail. "Get me out. Please . . ."

"I'm trying . . ." Anita was fumbling over the bars, but she knew already it was useless. They were solid iron, it hurt her even to touch them. There was a lock, but it was huge and old and stiff. She pried at the wards but they wouldn't budge; they burned her mind and she had to let go. No spell she could raise would take on them, she was sure of that. She leaned on the cage panting a little. "How did you get caught?"

The little Jennifer lowered her eyes unhappily. "It was my own fault, I shouldn't have done it. I was close in to land, sis kept telling me. I was just being greedy . . ."

"How?"

"There was this l-lobster. A great fat juicy one. An' I . . . wanted it, it looked easy. I put my hand in the pot and got hold of it. Then the boat came and the man started pulling it up and I didn't know what to do. I couldn't think . . ."

"Oh, no," said Anita. "Like monkeys with gourds . . . You silly little thing," she scolded. "Why didn't you let go?"

The kit looked more miserable than ever. "I don't know," she said. "I think I was too scared to work it out . . . and then he got me and . . . it was awful . . ."

"Gently," said Anita. "Gently, it'll be all—ssss . . ."

A bright oblong showed in the night, the opening door of the cottage. Anita flicked the sacks back over the cage and wriggled away desperately. She slid into the sea just in time. A light flashed, picking out boulders, and a voice rasped and grumbled.

"Who's *there* then . . ."

The fisherman was only a silhouette behind the bright silver eye of the torch, but Anita hated him instantly. She began to hiss with rage. He turned back and she heard a stick rattle against iron. Water seethed as the mermaid tried to get out of the way. "Quieten down, damn 'ee," said the man. "Scuttle as much as ye likes ye woan't get out o' there . . ." There was more rattling, and a squeak of fear. The flashlight moved forward again to the edge of the water, quested suspiciously among the stones. The man waited another five minutes, silently; Anita could see now the long shape of a gun under his arm. Then he swore to himself and spat, hitched at his belt, and stumped back into the cottage. The door shut with a slam.

"I've been sold," said the mermaid. "I know just what's going to happen, I can tell nearly everything he thinks . . ."

Anita nodded. "Don't worry about it," she said. "Tell me what

he's going to do. It's very important."

The kit mewed plaintively. "There's a truck coming, tomorrow night. It'll have a tank on it, they're going to take me to what they call a r-research laboratory. They're paying him a huge lot of money. He didn't know what to do with me at first. Then he wrote to them and they didn't believe him so he cut a piece of my hair off, and two men came in an awful state and bought me on the spot. He's very clever, he didn't breathe a word to anybody else—"

"It's all right," said Anita. "I often make noises like that, don't be scared . . ." A plan was forming in her mind; it was wild and vicious, but she couldn't think of anything better. "You'll just have to be brave till tomorrow," she said. "I can't possibly get you out of this thing but I think I can fix the truck."

The mermaid looked frightened. "What will happen?"

Anita knelt upright, staring at the cottage. "I might have to kill somebody," she said stonily. "But don't worry, you'll be all right . . ."

Anita had chosen the spot carefully. The road wound across the shoulder of a chalk hill; she lay hidden near its summit in a clump of bushes. From her ambush she could see nearly half a mile in the direction from which the truck would come. It had passed once already, an hour ago; it should be back any moment. This time it would be carrying the Jennifer. She strained her ears for the sound of its engine, ran through the spell a final time to make sure she had it just right. She wouldn't get a second chance.

Her ears twitched suddenly. She frowned, concentrated, and was sure. The truck was coming at last, moving fast. Her mind touched the mind of the kit reassuringly; then she got to her feet and began to wind up in Granny Thompson's best tradition. By the time the truck came into sight the grass round her feet was alight with blue cracklings. They would register as interference across half the country, but that couldn't be helped. She would just have to make sure to be away from the area before the local folk arrived. She tensed, choosing her moment; then rose, lifted her arms and threw the spell down the hill with all her strength.

It took like a thunderclap. It was a thoroughly nasty charm, the worst she'd ever worked single-handed. When the smoke had cleared, there was a crater in the road a yard or more deep. Anita put her hands on her hips and waited for the truck to come to a bone-shaking halt.

She had completely misjudged the speed involved. The truck swerved desperately as its driver

saw the obstacle; then its front wheel struck the edge of the pit. Anita's hands flew to her mouth, but it was too late. The truck hit the bank almost below her, tearing a long wound in the grass and sending earth and stones flying. A tire exploded with a sound like a gunshot. Then the vehicle was gone over the edge of the road, plunging away down the slope beyond. The crashing seemed to go on for an age. When the wreckage came to a halt, flames leaped up brightly.

Anita jerked out of her trance and started to run. As she neared the truck, two men staggered away from it toward the road, their hands to their heads. She ignored them; all she could think of was the Jennifer.

The truck was lying on its side. She climbed in over a litter of old boxes. The kit was threshing about among the junk. Anita hauled her to one side, coughing. The sea girl was heavier than she looked. She got her to the tailboard, tumbled her outside. The Jennifer lay on the grass, flopping and gasping. Anita lugged her to a safe distance and ran back. Water from the spilled tank was streaming out of the truck; she soaked her headscarf, scurried back to the Jennifer, and wrapped it round her throat. The kit's breathing eased as the dampness touched her gills. Anita picked her up and staggered away. Behind her the fuel tank of the truck exploded. The heath was lit almost as brightly as day.

Half a mile was all she could manage. By then her knees were wobbly and she was gasping for breath. She laid the Jennifer down in a grassy hollow and sat beside her, hanging her head and panting. The sea was still miles away and the kit's breathing was becoming labored again. Her mind wheezed at Anita. "I think I'm going to die . . ."

Anita snapped, "What rot . . ." But she knew it was true. She put her face in her hands. Everything had gone wrong, from start to finish. She'd made a mess of it all, she had no right calling herself a witch. She couldn't go to her own people, not now; the trouble that would result wouldn't only involve her. Granny Thompson would be in for it as well, and that just wasn't fair. If the worst happened and the Area Controller revoked her license, she'd lose her cottage, her living, everything. It just didn't bear thinking about.

She sat up, eyes glowing. If the witch world was closed to her, then there was only one other way.

"Listen," she said. She caught the Jennifer's wrists and shook her to make sure she was taking it in. "I can't carry you any farther myself, but I'm going to get you back to the sea. So I'm going to fetch a . . . a friend. Will you be all right?"

"I'll try," said the Jennifer faintly. "Please don't be long . . ."

Anita hugged the kit quickly. Bits of dirt and grass were stuck all over her; she looked terrible. "Try not to worry," she said. "I'll be as quick as I can. Lie quiet, you won't need so much air . . ." She jumped up and started to run again, like the wind.

Compton Holywell was over two miles away; by the time she reached it she thought her lungs were going to burst. She'd been meaning to shape-shift and fly back, but she hadn't dared; patrols of her own people were out already, quartering the entire area, hunting angrily for whoever had been wildcatting. She reached the High Street finally, turned left past the Mermaid and right. There was a line of little cottages; she ran to the nearest and banged the door.

Lights were on in the sitting room but nobody came. She hammered again, desperately. Then backed off and shouted as loud as she could.

"John Strong . . . *John Strong* . . ."

The door opened abruptly; he stood silhouetted against the yellow glow. "Who the Devil might that be . . ."

Anita came forward again till he could see her. Her chest was still heaving and her hair had flopped across her face. "Please," she said, "it's me. I . . . need help, it's terribly urgent. Can I come in?"

It seemed he stood for an age, legs spread. She couldn't see his face but she knew he was scowling. Then he moved back, gesturing curtly with one great hand. Anita scurried past him gratefully, flopped on the nearest chair. The cottage room was plain and small, smelling of tobacco. An old wireless set stood in the corner, and there was a cupboard with china on the shelves. An alcove housed coats and a pair of waders. There was a table with the remains of a meal, an old spotty picture of a man o' war, and a spray of wax flowers under a glass.

John Strong shut the door behind him and leaned on it, still frowning. He was even bigger than she remembered, and his eyes watched unwaveringly. Anita gulped, patted at a strand of hair, tried to simper, gave it up, and started to talk.

What she said she could never really remember. Certainly there were enchantments in it, witches and fairies and glowworms and hills full of fossils and Gods, the things that have always been and always will be, till the sea comes mumbling in and ends them all. Sooner than he realized, if he didn't help. "Fisherman," she said, swallowing, "if I told you there was an . . . old thing, out on the heath, and that it needed your

help, that it had to . . . get to the sea, would you help? Please . . .?"

He didn't answer; his face was as set and black as when she had started. She looked at the floor and twined her fingers, feeling very small and lost. "You think I'm mad," she said. "Don't you . . ."

He still stood and stared; then he reached, slowly, for his coat, shrugged himself into it. "I reckon," he said, "I reckon you might be, easy." He picked a flashlight up from the sideboard. "But I reckon I might just go an' see for myself . . ." He gripped her elbow and raised her; she felt the strength in his fingers as he propelled her through the door.

The pickup bounced across the grass, its headlights cutting wild swathes through the darkness. Anita banged the fisherman's arm to make him stop. She was out of the cab and running before he'd pulled up. She had grabbed an old tarpaulin from the truck; she wrapped the mermaid in it and lifted her over the side. The kit was still breathing, but she was very sick. They hadn't got long.

The truck moved back fast the way it had come, through the little town to the harbor. John Strong's boat was tied up at the end of the quay, a sturdy forty-footer with a single stumpy mast. Anita climbed down into it, carrying her burden. While the fisherman was starting the engine and casting off, she loosened the scarf round the sea girl's throat, dabbled it over the side, and tied it back again. Infected water was better than none at all.

The engine settled to a steady puttering; the lights of the town fell away astern; the boat started to lift and roll to the movement of the sea. Anita hugged the Jennifer, feeling angry thoughts pinging at the bottom of the hull. "A *human* has her still . . . She trusted another *human* . . ."

Once through the harbor mouth the sea breeze revived the kit. She began to chirp and wriggle, struggling to get free. Anita clung to her, feeling the voices thrill through the water. The sea folk were converging in their scores, coming from all sides. She told herself desperately, "It's all right . . . it's *all right* . . ."

The engine noise died abruptly. The boat lost way, rolling slowly on the waves. John Strong walked forward and stood staring at Anita, feet spread on the deck. The sea slapped and chuckled; there was no other sound. The fisherman pursed his mouth, looked up at the sky and back to the dark loom of the coast. "All right then, miss," he said. "I done what 'ee wanted. I reckon this be far enough."

Anita felt her mouth start to go dry.

"What you'm got there?" said John Strong deliberately. "What is it as matter so much to 'ee?"

Anita tightened her grip on the bundle. "I . . . I can't tell you. Honestly. Please start the engine again."

He rubbed his face, watching her, jaw set like rock. "I carried some funny stuff in my time," he said broodingly. "It wouldn't do to deny it. But I likes to know what I'm about, see? I reckon that's fair . . ."

Anita blazed at him. "You *promised* . . ."

He shook his head slowly. "No, I never. I said I'd come an' see for myself, didn't I? What I doos now is up to me . . ."

Round them the sea was holding its breath. "Fisherman," said Anita reluctantly, "do what I said. Otherwise . . . I'm sorry, but you won't ever get back to land again."

He laughed at that, long and slow, throwing his head back, showing his even white teeth. "That's as mebbe," he said. "But I says this. No man dies afore his time, an' if it's come to that time, it's no good arguin' anyway . . ." He moved quickly, quicker than Anita would have believed. His hand gripped the edge of the tarpaulin, yanked; the mermaid yelped despairingly, rolled across the bottom of the boat. She lay staring up and panting, her long silver tail trembling against the boards.

Anita froze with horror; round them, the sea dropped to a millpond calm. At the edge of the circle of quietness, spots of fire slid and glittered; there was a howling and sighing, spray curled up in white fountains in the moonlight. If John Strong saw, he paid no attention. He stood with the tarpaulin still gripped in his hand, and sucked air slowly between his teeth. The thick muscles of his throat moved and writhed as he swallowed. "Well, damn I," he said finally. "Damn I . . ."

Anita gulped, not daring to move. "You've seen what you wanted," she said. "You've seen far more than you should. *Now start the engine* . . ."

The fisherman still stood staring down, immovable as a cliff. The noise from the sea increased; waves slopped and cheered far out in the night. "Look at that," said John Strong. "Just look at 'en, lyin' there. Think what a thing like that'd be worth . . ." He rubbed his jaw, slowly, and shook his head. "A man could work the sea all his days," he said, "and never see the like o' that again . . ."

Far away, the strange wind increased its force. The boat began to rise and fall once more; Anita clung to the gunwale to keep from being flung across the deck. They neither of them had very long now; the sea folk were raising the storm. "I thought you were different," she said bitterly. "I thought you would understand . . ."

He faced her directly, for the first time. "Now listen t'me, miss," he said. "This is my boat. I

worked for her, an' I earned her, an' I doos with her what I choose. I doan't take no orders, 'cause that ain't the way. An' I says this. I work wi' the sea. It's my livin'. That's the way it always has bin, that's how it always will be. An' what's took out o' the water, that's mine by rights to do what I want with. You wouldn't get nobody else t'say no different."

He moved again, equally fast, scooped the mermaid up before she even had time to bite, and held her over the side. "I doan't want nobody tellin' me what's right and what ain't," he said, looking back at Anita. "Not even you, miss . . ." He lowered the kit gently into the water. "Get *out* on it," he said. "Afore I changes my mind . . ."

The sea seemed to explode. Green flames reared, hissing; Old Things pranced and thundered, things made of bubbles and weed, things of foam, things of deep-sea slime. The boat tilted, shocks banging at her planks. The light increased, and Anita leaped to her feet, stood arms raised, the wind tearing at her dress. "You heard what he said," she shouted. "You listened to him, you saw what he did. You've got your kit back, that was what you wanted. Now go away. Turn the monster; *let these people be* . . ." And slowly, slowly, the noise faded and sank, boiling away, the lights trembling and darkening, vanishing with a sound of deep blue bells, sliding deep and deeper into the everness of the sea. The night was still at last, and quiet.

Anita did the silliest thing of her entire life. The strain she'd been under, the power she had used, the sudden relief, were just too much. She clapped a hand to her forehead, moaned something indistinguishable, turned round twice dramatically, and passed out like a light.

The boat chugged back slowly toward the land. Anita lay in the crook of John Strong's arm, his coat round them both, feeling the firmness of his great gnarled fingers. Her eyes were closed, dreamily, and he was talking about fish suppers.

"Lobsters now," he said. "There's only one way to have 'em. Have 'ee ever tasted 'em fresh from the sea, straight out the pot? That's how 'ee eats a lobster . . ."

Anita pulled a face. "I think it's beastly. They squeal when you drop them in the water . . ."

"I reckon," said John Strong solemnly, "somebody told 'ee wrong. They doan't make a sound . . ."

Anita wriggled, fitting herself against him more firmly. "In that case," she said, "I might just consider it . . ." She opened one eye far enough to see the moon sinking, throwing a quiet silver track across the sea.

*Robert Sheckley's new story is, in one sense, a very funny spoof of the perceptions obtained under the influence of "mind expanding" drugs. In another sense, it is about a time of chaos and disaster among a very ancient race, and you should not scratch anywhere until you finish the story.*

# STARTING FROM SCRATCH

## *by Robert Sheckley*

LAST NIGHT I HAD A VERY strange dream. I dreamed that a voice said to me, "Excuse me for interrupting your previous dream, but I have an urgent problem and only you can help me with it."

I dreamed that I replied, "No apologies are necessary, it wasn't that good a dream, and if I can help you in any way—"

"*Only* you can help," the voice said. "Otherwise I and all my people are doomed."

"Christ," I said.

His name was Froka and he was a member of a very ancient race. They had lived since time immemorial in a broad valley surrounded by gigantic mountains. They were a peaceable people, and they had, in the course of time, produced some outstanding artists. Their laws were exemplary, and they brought up their children in a loving and permissive manner. Though a few of them tended to indulge in drunkenness, and they had even known an occasional murderer, they considered themselves good and respectable sentient beings, who—

I interrupted. "Look here, can't you get straight to the urgent problem?"

Froka apologized for being long-winded, but explained that on his world the standard form for supplications included a lengthy statement about the moral righteousness of the supplicant.

"Okay," I told him. "Let's get to the problem."

Froka took a deep breath and

began. He told me that about one hundred years ago (as they reckon time), an enormous reddish-yellow shaft had descended from the skies, landing close to the statue to the Unknown God in front of the city hall of their third largest city.

The shaft was imperfectly cylindrical and about two miles in diameter. It ascended upward beyond the reach of their instruments and in defiance of all natural laws. They tested and found that the shaft was impervious to cold, heat, bacteria, proton bombardment, and, in fact, everything else they could think of. It stood there, motionless and incredible, for precisely five months, nineteen hours and six minutes.

Then, for no reason at all, the shaft began to move in a north-northwesterly direction. Its mean speed was 78.881 miles per hour (as they reckon speed). It cut a gash 183.223 miles long by 2.011 miles wide, and then disappeared.

A symposium of scientific authorities could reach no conclusion about this event. They finally declared that it was inexplicable, unique, and unlikely ever to be duplicated.

But it did happen again, a month later, and this time in the capital. This time the cylinder moved a total of 820.331 miles, in seemingly erratic patterns. Property damage was incalculable, and several thousand lives were lost.

Two months and a day after that the shaft returned again, affecting all three major cities.

By this time everyone was aware that not only their individual lives but their entire civilization, their very existence as a race, was threatened by some unknown and perhaps unknowable phenomenon.

This knowledge resulted in a widespread despair among the general population. There was a rapid alternation between hysteria and apathy.

The fourth assault took place in the wastelands to the east of the capital. Real damage was minimal. Nevertheless, this time there was mass panic, which resulted in a frightening number of deaths by suicide.

The situation was desperate. Now the pseudo-sciences were brought into the struggle alongside the sciences. No help was disdained, no theory was discounted, whether it be by biochemist, palmist, or astronomer. Not even the most outlandish conception could be disregarded, especially after the terrible summer night in which the beautiful ancient city of Raz and its two suburbs were completely annihilated.

"Excuse me," I said, "I'm sorry to hear that you've had all this trouble, but I don't see what it has to do with me."

"I was just coming to that," the voice said.

"Then continue," I said. "But I would advise you to hurry up, because I think I'm going to wake up soon."

"My own part in this is rather difficult to explain," Froka continued. "I am by profession a certified public accountant. But as a hobby I dabble in various techniques for expanding mental perception. Recently I have been experimenting with a chemical compound which we call *kola,* and which frequently causes states of deep illumination—"

"We have similar compounds," I told him.

"Then you understand! Well, while voyaging—do you use that term? While under the influence, so to speak, I obtained a knowledge, a completely far-out understanding . . . But it's so difficult to explain."

"Go on," I broke in impatiently. "Get to the heart of it."

"Well," the voice said, "I realized that my world existed upon many levels—atomic, subatomic, vibrationary planes, an infinity of levels of reality, all of which are also parts of other levels of existence."

"I know about that," I said excitedly. "I recently realized the same thing about my world."

"So it was apparent to me," Froka went on, "that one of our levels was being disturbed."

"Could you be a little more specific?" I asked.

"My own feeling is that my world is experiencing an intrusion on a molecular level."

"Wild," I told him. "But have you been able to trace down the intrusion?"

"I think that I have," the voice said. "But I have no proof. All of this is pure intuition."

"I believe in intuition myself," I told him. "Tell me what you've found out."

"Well, sir," the voice said hesitantly, "I have come to realize—intuitively—that my world is a microscopic parasite of you."

"Say it straight!"

"All right! I have discovered that in one aspect, in one plane of reality, my world exists between the second and third knuckles of your left hand. It has existed there for millions of our years, which are minutes to you. I cannot prove this, of course, and I am certainly not accusing you—"

"That's okay," I told him. "You say that your world is located between the second and third knuckles of my left hand. All right. What can I do about it?"

"Well, sir, my guess is that recently you have begun scratching in the area of my world."

*"Scratching?"*

"I think so."

"And you think that the great destructive reddish shaft is one of

my fingers?"

"Precisely."

"And you want me to stop scratching."

"Only near that spot," the voice said hastily. "It is an embarrassing request to make, I make it only to save my world from utter destruction. And I apologize—"

"Don't bother apologizing," I said. "Sentient creatures should be ashamed of nothing."

"It's kind of you to say so," the voice said. "We are nonhuman, you know, and parasites, and we have no claims on you."

"All sentient creatures should stick together," I told him. "You have my word that I will never ever again, so long as I live, scratch between the first and second knuckles of my left hand."

"The second and third knuckles," he reminded me.

"I'll never again scratch between *any* of the knuckles of my—left hand! That is a solemn pledge and a promise which I will keep as long as I have breath."

"Sir," the voice said, "you have saved my world. No thanks could be sufficient. But I thank you nevertheless."

"Don't mention it," I said.

Then the voice went away and I woke up.

As soon as I remembered the dream, I put a Band-Aid across the knuckles of my left hand. I have ignored various itches in that area, have not even washed my left hand. I have worn this Band-Aid all day.

At the end of next week I am going to take off the Band-Aid. I figure that should give them twenty or thirty billion years as they reckon time, which ought to be long enough for any race.

But that isn't my problem. My problem is that lately I have begun to have some unpleasant intuitions about the earthquakes along the San Andreas Fault, and the renewed volcanic activity in central Mexico. I mean it's all coming together, and I'm scared.

So look, excuse me for interrupting your previous dream, but I have this urgent problem that only you can help me with. . . .

# FILMS

## Baird Searles

THAT OLDEST OF FANTASY FILM genres, the vampire film, has not changed much since its earliest days. Discounting the addition of color and a bit more gore, I can think of only one vampire film in the past score of years that has aimed at something different, that one being Roman Polanski's ill-fated *The Fearless Vampire Killers* (a title MGM saddled it with). Ill-fated because it was cut so badly on U.S. release that Polanski renounced it, and because it was on this film that he met Sharon Tate. In any case, it had some strikingly imaginative moments in it, showing a visualization of the vampire thing unutilized on screen since the first *Dracula*. The latest is based on the TV-horror-soap-opera, *Dark Shadows*, (MGM) and is the vampire flick we all know and love, but it has its original moments. I was hoping, like the television show, it would have everything going but the kitchen sink, but it chooses to concentrate on its teeny-bopper-beloved bloodsucker, Barnabas Collins, and his entrance into the supernatural-prone Collins clan. He's been locked in the family crypt for 175 years, and on being freed, he insinuates himself into the family as a long lost English cousin, doing in most of his relatives and the hired help before getting his just deserts.

What originality there is here is either visual or campy. The latter quality comes from its soap-opera progenitor; there's a good deal more emotional involvement than usual. Julia, the lady doctor, loves Barnabas, who loves Maggie, the governess, who loves Jeff, not to mention Todd, who loves Carolyn Collins, who loves Barnabas—you see what I mean.

Its visual moments come from the fact that the film was shot on location in three ancient mansions, an atmospheric device the British often use, but rare here. The family mansion, Collinwood, is "played" by Lyndhurst, a Hudson River Gothic pile full of Tiffany glass and Victorian *objets* that no designer could duplicate, and the results are far from the usual "cheapie" look that so many horror films have. The high point of the film is when the daughter of the house returns as a vampire to have a go at her young cousin, which takes place in the (for real) abandoned and decaying (and dry) swimming pool of the estate, a building in itself now falling to pieces. This scene, and the one in which she is captured and destroyed in the old stables, has a visual horror, *and* beauty, that make the film worth seeing.

The performances vary, but several rise above average. Joan Bennett lends her star quality to a

useless part, Grayson Hall does an excellent character bit as the lady doctor in love with a vampire, and Nancy Barrett as the vampire daughter is fine, if only for her pale and perfect beauty.

Whether *On A Clear Day You Can See Forever* (Paramount) is technically a fantasy depends, I suppose, on your belief in reincarnation. A musical *Bridie Murphy,* it concerns a frump from New Jersey (being Barbra Streisand, a very stylish frump) who goes to a psychiatrist to be hypnotized out of smoking, thereupon discovering a former life as a prescient Regency golddigger. The flashback sequences are done in a purported Regency style guaranteed to give Beau Brummel dyspepsia; the modern bits are pure Broadway, i.e., stale, flat, and weary.

Upcoming: George Lucas' s-f feature *THX-1138* with some new film techniques, and finally in production, *The Lord of the Rings,* directed by John Boorman, whose other films include *Point Blank, Hell in the Pacific,* and *Leo, the Last* (encouraging, eh what?). At this writing, the great search for an actor to play Frodo is still continuing.

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*This action story matches an Interstellar Patrol agent with great reflexes against a telepathic megalomaniac, and this matchup leads us to the question—yes, we must ask it—is the hand really quicker than the psi? That out of the way, you may now move on to this good, strong story.*

# THE THRONE AND THE USURPER

***by Christopher Anvil***

IN THE MOONLIT FOG, THE gentle swell of the sea rolled past toward the beach. Straight ahead, there was a faint pale flash, as of a white robe peeled off and tossed on the sand. Then there was the flat splash of a swimmer hitting the water in a flying dive.

Vaughan Roberts, watching intently, was up to his chin in cold salt water. He gripped in his hands a flat smooth rock heavy enough to overcome his buoyancy, and breathed steadily and deeply. At the sound of the splash, still breathing deeply, he began to count, and when he reached ten, he ducked underwater, and let the rock take him down to the soft sand at the bottom. Methodically, he kept on counting. As he counted, mental pictures of what was taking place at the surface, where someone had just dived in for a moonlight swim, were suggested to him by the numbers of the count:

*Fourteen.* Not far from the swimmer, a small buoy-like object bobbed to the surface.

*Fifteen.* A puff of vapor escaped from the buoy into the fog.

*Seventeen.* The swimmer, breathing vapor, went slack in the water.

*Eighteen.* Flipper-like hands slipped a mask over the swimmer's nose and mouth.

*Twenty.* Other hands gripped the lower part of the slack body, and slid the swimmer under the surface.

*Twenty-one.* The buoy-like object dipped out of sight.

*Twenty-five.* The fog, drifting past, carried away some remaining traces of the rapidly decomposing vapor.

As Roberts counted, toward the moment when he could surface, his thoughts traveled back, and in his mind he snapped the spool from the viewer, to turn exasperatedly to the lean sector chief of operations, Colonel Valentine Sanders.

"Can't the Space Force put a bullet through this murderer's head?"

The colonel sat back.

"If they kill Lieutenant Gafonel, what happens to the 'exotic gases' last known to be in the lieutenant's possession?"

"Since he escaped from the courier ship to this resort planet, Idyll, it follows that the exotic gases aren't far from Idyll."

The colonel nodded, and clasped his hands behind his head.

"Remember, the courier ship itself has disappeared without a trace."

"Then the courier ship is somewhere on Idyll. If not, the Space Force should have located it."

"To know the rough general whereabouts of the ship doesn't solve the problem. The Space Force has got to recover the actual vials of gases. Even in their shockproof cases, these are small and readily transportable. Contents unknown, each vial could be sold for a fortune. Used by someone who understood their properties from the beginning, the trouble they could cause is impossible to predict. And the only key to their whereabouts is Lieutenant Gafonel. The Space Force would doubtless like to put a bullet through the lieutenant's head. Unfortunately, he is the only link to that shipment. And they can't reach him, because he has them legally blocked. They can't even prove his story false without the courier ship for evidence, the ship has disappeared, and deduction suggests the ship is hidden where they can't go in and search. Where does that leave them?"

"He's still a deserter. They can get him on that."

"In the medical and legal situation the lieutenant has constructed, even *that* isn't any too clear." The colonel added, "Of course, what *actually* happened is obvious enough. But how do they prove it?"

"All right, then. Let them kidnap him and put the screws to him."

The colonel shook his head.

"The Space Force isn't set up to carry out illegal operations. And this resort planet, Idyll, is a for-

tress of legalities. It's a resort—a playground—mainly for the rich and influential. They, for their own purposes, have come to a mutually satisfactory understanding with the native inhabitants—the descendants of the original settler—so that the planetary government—"

Roberts could feel the sticky spider-strands of legal logic start to descend on him, and spoke impatiently.

"Yes, sir. I know. But—"

"But," said the colonel, "this is the problem. The actual control of the planet's government has been left in the hands of the native inhabitants, who legally select a king to be titular head of the government. This king isn't necessarily one of their own number. Usually, they choose a rich and influential vacation-time resident. He, in turn, gives a lavish present to the natives. The wealthy resort-dwellers thus have a benevolent government which routinely provides law and order, but doesn't interfere otherwise. The natives have congenial work at good pay, plus bonuses from grateful tycoons who are tickled at the thought of being kings. The arrangement is mutally beneficial, *and legal.*"

Roberts massaged his chin.

The colonel, leaning back, hands clasped behind his close-cropped head, smiled faintly.

"Consider, Roberts, what will take place if the Space Force stages a raid on this planet, populated by vacationing influential people, including the heads of various governments, of giant business organizations, of huge universities—including retired officers and generals still on the active list. Suppose the Space Force says 'Legality be damned,' nails Gafonel in their midst, shoves the populace into a corner, and searches the planet for the missing ship? Where will the officers in charge of this operation ultimately end up?"

Roberts nodded slowly. "On an outdated destroyer, cataloguing asteroids by hand—if they're lucky."

"Exactly. And the search for the courier ship and gas capsules may be stopped before there are any results. You see, they *cannot* use force."

Roberts, exasperated, considered the lieutenant's record. Born on a frontier world, Gafonel had enlisted in the Space Force with a mental test score slightly above average. In service school he made an impressive record and tried to apply for admission to the Space Academy. His commanding officer arbitrarily refused. Soon, a black-market operation was traced to the commanding officer, who was sacked, and Gafonel went on to the Space Academy, where his scholastic record was dazzling. On graduation he married the daughter of the commandant and the commandant's estranged but

wealthy wife. Then peculiar things began to happen.

The day following the wedding, the little sports flier carrying the lieutenant's rich new mother-in-law went up in a dazzling flash, the cause of which proved hard to discover, since there wasn't much of anything left to examine.

The mother-in-law's fortune was willed, not to her estranged husband, but to her daughter.

The daughter promptly took a fatal overdose of sedative.

The mother-in-law's fortune passed on to the daughter's new husband—the lieutenant.

The lieutenant had a nervous breakdown and went into the hospital, to come out a tragic figure, brilliant but apparently unlucky, and incidentally rich.

In view of his brilliant scholastic record, he was put on the staff of the general in charge of chemical warfare research and development, who sent him as assistant to the major in charge of a shipment of exotic war gases, to be delivered to a distant base, aboard the ultrafast Space Force courier ship *Whippet*. The last thing heard about the *Whippet* was that a meteor shower had hit the ship at enormous velocity, and the lieutenant, inside but still wearing a tank suit in which he had been inspecting the hull, had been the only survivor to escape alive, in the ship's tender. The *Whippet* itself vanished without a trace.

Roberts shook his head.

"That s.o.b. is too tricky for subtleties. One good grenade, dropped on him without warning—"

"That leaves the exotic gases unaccounted for."

"Yes, sir. But it would end *him*, and that might be more important in the long run. His record up to this business is tricky enough, when you think it over. But this explanation about the courier ship—"

The colonel smiled. "A little hard to swallow, isn't it? It's almost superfluous to find that he had already, before the trip, transferred his wife's money to a bank on the resort planet."

"Yes, and on top of that, to have set it up for himself to be proclaimed 'king'—so that now he is King Oumourou, Head of State—"

Roberts ran out of words.

The colonel added drily, "Don't forget the 'retroactive amnesia,' Roberts. There would be no point questioning him anyway, because the dreadful experience destroyed his memory of everything connected with the event, soon after he gave his report. We have copies of the medical affidavits from Idyll certifying to *that*."

"He being the king of the place."

"Naturally."

"Sir, with a record like that, so far, what comes *next*? He's pro-

moted himself from nobody on a remote planet to riches and kingship, with a shambles of betrayal and dead bodies behind him. Where does he go *next?*"

"He seems to be enjoying himself. He has his private mansion, plus the local palace, and a little sixteen-room cottage at the beach, a bank account running to seven figures, his private harem, two seagoing yachts—what more would he want?"

"He might feel cramped on just one planet. Meanwhile, there's no telling what he may try with these gas capsules."

"*That's* the problem."

"Why not warp him into a cooperative viewpoint with the want-generator?"

"It's a densely populated planet, and most of the time he's out of sight. To keep an emotional-field generator focused on him is impossible in this situation."

Roberts thought it over. "Then, when he goes for this habitual nightly swim of his, seeing the Space Force is bashful, suppose *we* drop down there some dark night, grab him, put the screws to him, and find out about these gas capsules."

The colonel beamed.

"Fine, Roberts. Now, that's more sensible than blowing his head off, isn't it? But after we find out where he's got the gas capsules, then we have the problem of doing something about it. His disappearance, of course, will cause an alarm locally. Isn't it better, from our viewpoint, if he *doesn't* disappear? In order to avoid that, our man, thoroughly disguised by our—ah—make-up department, could be right there to take his place and so be in a position to get the capsules. Now, Roberts, there isn't much time to waste, so we'll follow your plan at once, and since it's *your* suggestion—"

Lungs straining, the cold water swirling around him, Roberts let go of the rock and came to the surface. He sucked in a deep breath, exhaled, breathed again deeply, and swam for shore. He staggered out of the water, his feet sinking deeply in the wet sand, and strode up onto the beach.

Just ahead was that lighter patch where the "king" had tossed his robe.

Roberts crouched, to feel carefully around the robe. If Gafonel had been wearing a swimsuit when he was captured, it was to have been tosssed here by the crew that captured him.

Finding nothing, Roberts shrugged into the robe and walked along the beach. His mental timetable told him these evening swims and strolls usually lasted about twenty minutes. This left plenty of time for the other members of Roberts' party to check and be sure this *was* Gafonel. If by

some accident they had the wrong man, the precisely repeated call of a sea bird was to warn Roberts. Hearing no call, Roberts kept walking. He reminded himself that Gafonel's swim was usually followed by a hot, spiced drink and possibly a midnight frolic with the companion or companions of his choice. Considering Gafonel's position, this offered a wide selection. As Oumourou, the "native" king, there were the native girls to choose from. As the rich Gafonel, there were the non-native daughters of wealthy families on the resort world. As the proprietor of a cache of advanced gases of enormous price, there was still further bargaining power.

Roberts felt again the urge to plant a bullet in Gafonel's brain. But then he felt something else—uneasiness.

Considering the craft of his opponent, could his capture have been so easy?

Frowning, Roberts strolled back along the beach, belted the robe more tightly around him, and headed for the faint glimmer of light that his mental diagram told him was the beach mansion's so-called cabana. The light, mounted above the roof, offered little enough illumination outside and left the interior of the open building unlit.

Roberts paused just outside, and as the fog drifted past silently, there was a sense of distance and a not-quite-there sensation that vanished when he stepped forward, felt the cold flagstones under his feet, and then stubbed his toe on a flagstone set slightly higher than the rest.

He sucked in his breath, and somewhere to his left, there was a soft feminine laugh.

"Ooh— Is Oumourou so impatient? Who is Oumourou impatient for?"

Roberts instantly recognized trouble.

In the fast preparation for this job, it had been found out that Gafonel's two favorites were a local girl named Dianai, and the vacationing daughter of a wealthy exporter, named Janine. Each was violently jealous of the other.

Since these were the two people most likely to spot the substitution, their appearance and known histories were all but imprinted on Roberts' brain. *But he didn't know their voices.*

Somewhere, the girl giggled.

Roberts peered around in the gloom. Now—was this Dianai, Janine, or some other member of Gafonel's harem?

She called softly, playfully, "Are you now so bashful? Tell me, who is Oumourou impatient for?"

All Roberts had to do was to give the wrong name, and there would be a volcanic eruption.

In a rough whisper, he called, "Come here, and I'll show you."

There was a giggle, followed by

the soft patting of bare feet on flagstone.

Her voice spoke out close at hand, in a faintly mocking, teasing tone.

"Does Oumourou want his mintmig?"

*Mintmig* was the local hot, spiced drink. But they didn't serve it here. They drank it in front of the fireplace in the beach mansion.

Roberts realized he was now up against some kind of private joke. It was almost as good as running into a prearranged code word, since a wrong guess would give him away.

He murmured, "Come close." That, at least, seemed safe.

There was a soft brushing sound and a faint scent of perfume.

Roberts stretched out a hand, to touch cool petal-soft skin.

An explosion of sparks burst across the sky. Darkness opened up, and he fell into it headlong. The awareness came to him dimly that he had not been out of the water half an hour before Gafonel's defenses stopped him cold. And that meant—but then the thoughts trailed out in a long, long thread, and then he lost track of them entirely.

Somewhere, there was a sound of voices, and now and then a snatch of conversation began to come across:

". . . sure? The net didn't show . . ."

". . . remarkable, I know, but . . ."

". . . not a trace . . . There's no chance he was rung in earlier?"

"No. It had to be the beach. And that fits the girl's story."

Roberts came awake with a painfully throbbing head, felt a light blanket over him, and a firm support under him. He tried carefully to move one limb after the other and discovered a gentle but increasingly firm restraint that drew his limbs solidly back where they had been to start with. Meanwhile, the conversation went on:

"Hard to see how it was done." This voice was slightly the deeper of the two. "The whole beach was wired. His approach *should* have showed on the board."

"Out of my field. But it suggests very sophisticated equipment."

"Well—I suppose we don't need to worry about it. As Supergaf says, 'Control the human element, and you control all.' When should we—?"

"He's coming awake now. And I'd watch that 'Supergaf' routine."

"Listen, I—"

"It's not just that the *walls* have ears, you know."

"Every time I think of—"

"The thing to *think* is that we're well paid for our trouble."

"I suppose. Well—he's conscious. Let's deliver him."

Roberts heard footsteps approach, felt a sense of motion, and heard the hiss of tires. He opened his eyes, to see a bright-yellow-tiled wall slide past, and shiny cabinets with glass fronts. Overhead, the ceiling was softly aglow. The air held a faint trace of antiseptic. The wheeled stretcher he was lying on approached a wall.

From behind Roberts, the deeper voice growled, "Next, the corridor."

A pair of metal doors slid back.

Roberts caught a glimpse, through a window, of a beach outside.

"Where are you taking me?"

"To see Mr. Gafonel—himself."

There was a mocking emphasis on the "himself" that brought a warning hiss from the other attendant.

The stretcher rolled into an elevator, and the door slid shut. The elevator plunged, slowed, accelerated horizontally, dropped again, accelerated sidewise, and finally slowed to a stop.

The stretcher rolled out on a platform.

Roberts, looking up, was treated to the sight of a ceiling pattern apparently made up of the muzzles of selected guns packed together vertically so that snouts of various types and sizes looked down on him in a regular pattern until the cot rolled past an open metal door into a small metal cubicle. Another door opened to one side, and the cot was rolled out, around corners and along inclined ramps whose changing directions suggested the approach to an ancient castle. Eventually, they emerged into a wide, high-ceilinged hall facing two oversize bronze doors topped by an enormous gold G. To either side stood an armed guard dressed in black with a gold G on his tunic.

The stretcher stopped before the door, and the two attendants stood tensely silent.

Slowly, the bronze doors swung open, and the stretcher wheeled forward through a high-ceilinged anteroom to a second set of doors that reflected in a dazzling golden glitter the brilliant light from a chandelier overhead. These doors, in turn, swung slowly open, the stretcher rolled forward, and Roberts found himself looking at a solitary crowned figure in silver and gold robes, seated on a purple throne atop a dais raised six steps above the floor.

A voice boomed out, *"Kneel to the Presence!"*

Roberts took a hard look at the crowned figure. Obviously, this was Gafonel. But, if this was Gafonel, then *who had been picked up at the beach?* Since no warning signal had been given, it followed that *that* had been Gafonel.

Either Gafonel was twins, or

the Gafonel picked up at the beach had been a double. That fit in with snatches of conversation Roberts had overheard earlier. But, in that case, the double must have been *bait*.

The two attendants, meanwhile, had dropped to their knees. There was a brief silence as Gafonel looked at Roberts, and Roberts looked intently back.

Gafonel's lips moved slightly. *"Unbind the prisoner!"*

As the command boomed and reverberated, Roberts glanced around. There were no visible guards in the room—only Gafonel and the two attendants. Roberts relaxed his muscles. All he asked was to be let loose for a few minutes.

The two attendants straightened, and one said hesitantly, "Sir, this is a strong and dangerous man—"

Gafonel's lips moved slightly, and there was a crash like thunder.

*"Obey or die!"*

The guards made haste to obey.

The cover was pulled off Roberts, and the webwork of bonds that held him to the stretcher was released. Roberts was swung to his feet.

*"Remove the stretcher!"* roared the voice. *"Withdraw from the Presence!"*

Roberts let go the light grip he had taken on the nearer attendant's sleeve.

The attendants turned and rolled the cart out the huge doors. The doors swung shut behind them.

Roberts turned to face Gafonel, and suddenly the situation made no sense. After installing himself in massive underground defenses, with a double in view for the opposition, would Gafonel risk capture alone at close range? Somehow, this must fit in with *Gafonel's* plan.

Roberts glanced around for any hint of hidden devices, and saw nothing—which, of course, was exactly what he could expect to see.

Gafonel, on the throne, watched Roberts intently.

Roberts, trying to fit bits of information together, could not find a pattern. Somewhere, there was a piece he didn't have. Meanwhile, precious seconds ticked past.

Gafonel rose smoothly from the throne and began to descend the six steps to the marble floor.

Roberts wearied of trying to untangle it mentally.

As Gafonel descended, Roberts walked toward him, testing his muscles and estimating distances as he walked. Somewhere, there ought to be a weak joint in Gafonel's setup. All this business with the throne, the crown, and the amplified voice—on a planet where kingship was a legal formality for sale to the highest bidder—it all suggested a case of galloping

megalomania. That was *bound* to produce weaknesses.

As Roberts thought this, Gafonel removed his jeweled crown and tossed it.

"Here—the amplifier control goes with it."

Roberts at that instant got a favorable response to his estimate of time, distance, and muscular readiness, and sprang for Gafonel.

Gafonel snapped a short-barreled weapon from his silver-and-gold robes, and there was a faint *buzz.*

Roberts' left leg from the knee down went numb. As he broke the fall with his hands, his lower right leg also went numb.

Gafonel, smiling, put away the gun.

"Excellent reflexes. Impressive muscular conditioning. You have, of course, been consistently outthought, but that is to be expected. What counts is that you are inherently loyal and tenaciously obedient to orders. Very good. Now, let's see . . . you are? . . . yes, Vaughan Nathan Roberts, of the Interstellar Patrol. Rank of captain. Formerly captain of the fast transport *Orion*. Before that, in the Space Force, let go in the economy drive; earlier, special training in the Tactical Combat Command Advanced Training Center. All excellent. Now, how did you come to enter the Patrol? Let's see . . . h'm . . . Duke of Trasimer—what the devil! Earl of Aurizont? *Prince-Contestant to the—"*

Just what Gafonel was doing, Roberts didn't know. But his tone of voice showed confusion, his expression was momentarily dazed, and he was standing not far from where Roberts had hit the floor.

Roberts could ask for nothing more.

With his lower legs numb, he couldn't run. But he could so brace his feet and legs as to lay the foundation for one attempted spring. While Gafonel had talked, Roberts had positioned himself almost unconsciously. And now Gafonel showed confusion.

Roberts sprang.

For a brief instant, Space Force close combat clashed with Interstellar Patrol close combat.

Then Roberts had the gun. Gafonel was laid out senseless.

Roberts paralyzed Gafonel's hands and feet, then laboriously swapped clothes with him.

Now, so far as any uninitiated onlooker could tell, Roberts was the wealthy Gafonel, king of the planet, and Gafonel was the infiltrating impersonator, Roberts.

This was more like it. But it occurred to Roberts to wonder about the other double, picked up at the beach.

So far, counting himself, there were *three* Gafonels around. Could there be more? How could he be sure this was the *real* Gafonel?

There was a low moan, and the figure in pajamas opened his eyes.

Roberts aimed the gun.

Gafonel's eyes glittered.

Roberts watched alertly.

Now, anger suggested a failure of plans. Perhaps, this *was* Gafonel.

"Excellent weaponry," said Roberts pleasantly. "Impressive fortifications. You have, of course, been consistently outreflexed, but that is to be expected. Keep your voice low, or I'll give you a dose of this in the vocal cords."

Gafonel tried to grope at one of the wide blocks that formed the floor and discovered that his hands were numb. He looked at Roberts with a fairly sick expression.

Roberts, groping for the next move, ran into the fact he was still in an underground fortress. Before he could act with confidence, it would be necessary to get a little more information.

Before Robert's eyes, Gafonel's sick expression evolved into a look of assurance.

Roberts glanced around. Save for the two of them, the room was still empty. What had caused this change of attitude? Considering that this was Gafonel's own place, paralyzing hands and feet might not be enough. It might be a good idea to—

Awkwardly, Gafonel sat up.

"It fires a cone, not a beam. You've already paralyzed my arms halfway to the elbow."

Roberts considered this reply to an unspoken thought.

Gafonel said, "What I can't understand, Roberts, is that you, with your want-generator, *could,* in all truth, have become the ruler of an empire. You *were* the ruler! And yet—you gave it up, stepped back—" He looked at Roberts intently. "*Why,* Roberts?"

Roberts stared at him.

Gafonel, his expression intent, hesitated a moment, then went on. "Yes, I see, you assumed the rank merely to do a job—to save the inhabitants from a serious difficulty. But you had the means, as you well knew, to expand the control you exercised— After all, with a device that controls *desires,* you could ultimately have gained control of the whole human system. Wherever you could put the device, there you could exercise control."

Without Roberts saying a word, Gafonel was following his thoughts.

Abruptly, Roberts had the missing piece, and everything else fit together.

In his mind's eye, Roberts could see Gafonel's record in a new light. The first ordinary mental test, the bright record among bright students in service school, the sacked commanding officer who had made the mistake of getting in Gafonel's way, the dazzling record among the elite at the Space Academy, the murdered

mother-in-law, the murdered wife, the slaughtered crew of the courier ship—all steps in a staircase to power, built by an unscrupulous—

Gafonel interrupted. "You don't understand, Roberts. The jailing of that jackass commanding officer, the explosion of that sports flyer, that overdose of sleeping pills, and the premature departure of the crew of that courier ship—this was not murder and betrayal. When you kill a chicken, Roberts, that is not murder. When you select a watchdog, that is not friendship. Murder and friendship imply some equality of biological status. A man does not murder a weed, or a mosquito. He *swats* the mosquito, and *uproots* the weed. Similarly, the spanking of a child is not assault and battery. Again, there is no equality of biological status—only a potential equality. So you see, Roberts, you would not be justified in pulling that trigger. Quite the contrary. You—"

With a very faint tingle, the paralysis was gone from Roberts' legs, first the left one, then a moment later the right one.

It dawned on him that this flood of words was at least partly meant as a distraction.

"Right, Roberts," said Gafonel. A moment later, he added, "Yes, it was irrational for me to risk this situation. I did it because you are important to a plan I have in mind. And I suppose I overrated my special talent. But now you are underrating it. Remember, Roberts, there is not always so much difference between the man at the top and the man at the bottom. It takes only a very slight advantage, compounded again and again at every turn, to produce an ultimately very large difference in position. And this present position is a mere stepping stone, Roberts. What amazes me is that you have already had the opportunity that is now mine, and you set it aside. *Why?* This device your friend stumbled on—this want-generator—with that you could ultimately have ruled the universe. Even I, with my talent, would have become your loyal follower. Why *not,* Roberts?"

Roberts could feel an intense desire to end this conversation. Unfortunately, there was still the question of the chemical gases.

"Yes, Roberts," said Gafonel. "Well, I will gladly show you those gases—"

How many minutes had passed since Roberts paralyzed Gafonel's hands?

Roberts raised the gun.

Gafonel's hand, resting on an apparently blank block, suddenly moved.

The whole room seemed to explode in a dazzling flash.

Then, once again, Roberts was aware of the vague sound of a voice.

". . . not necessary. Just . . ."

". . . sir . . ."

Roberts lay still. He was flat on his back, apparently this time on a mat thrown on some hard flat surface. He opened his eyes, to see a row of vertical bars, extending from floor to ceiling.

"Right." Gafonel's now familiar voice spoke with satisfaction. "You are in a cell, Roberts. It will do you no good to lie there with your eyes half shut. I was aware of your thoughts the instant you came partly awake. It isn't necessary even for you to be fully conscious of the thought yourself. No, you cannot deceive me indefinitely by refusing to think. I repeat, I detect not only the thoughts you are actually thinking—consciously—but others that are somewhat below the surface. Ordinarily, I can follow certain mental paths, frequently used, with ease. In your case, there has been a very evident attempt to deceive me, by superimposing on your habitual thought patterns, another layer that is completely irrelevant. This is somewhat puzzling, but nevertheless, I can penetrate it."

Roberts started to speak, but changed his mind. The voice answered his unspoken thought.

"No, you are not aware of this special treatment. Of course not. If you had been aware of it, I would immediately have known the answer. As it is, I am somewhat slowed by the deception. There is no mental link in your mind to classify this other layer of latent thoughts as fantasy. It is a remarkable effect. But I accept the Interstellar Patrol as an opponent of merit. Think how much more effective the Patrol will be, Roberts, when *I* control it."

Roberts felt a wave of negation and disgust, that was impossible to conceal.

There was a brief silence, and then Gafonel spoke in a slower and more serious voice.

"My apologies, Roberts. I realize that it is inexcusable for me to toy with you. Let me restate what I have just said: The Patrol may operate more effectively under the guidance of my special talent, to our mutual advantage."

Roberts kept a careful grip on himself. It came to him that, among other things, he was now being used for a sounding board.

"Right, Roberts," said the voice.

Roberts sat up.

Gafonel said humorously, "Not a promising view, is it, Roberts?"

From ceiling to floor, a ring of vertical bars surrounded Roberts. He was on a folded white blanket on a pale-brown tile floor that stretched beyond the bars to another row of bright vertical bars. This second row reached straight across the room from one wall to the other. On the far side of the room, beyond the straight row of bars, stood Gafonel, wearing a close-fitting dark-purple garment,

with a wide black belt and two holstered guns.

To get to the telepath, Roberts had to somehow get past two sets of bars, and when he got there, he would be unarmed, and Gafonel would have a gun in each hand—and would know in advance every move Roberts planned to make.

Gafonel chuckled.

Looking around at this setup and then back at the telepath, Roberts realized that everything in this place cost money. Enormous sums of money. Just how rich had the telepath's mother-in-law been? Or was he just one member—perhaps the tool—of a combine of extremely rich individuals seeking to infiltrate the Patrol for their own ends?

Gafonel said quietly, "No, not a member or a tool, Roberts. The leader. You see, you still don't appreciate the advantage conferred on me by my—special ability. What do you suppose it means, for instance, to be able to talk with an expert and to be able to follow, not only his words, but nearly *his complete process of thought*? The ultimate result of such experiences is a mental advantage, completely apart from telepathy as such. What does it mean to grapple with a close-combat expert and share his sense of balance and an awareness of the sequence of his moves? The result is a swift understanding of his purposes that would ordinarily take a long time to acquire. What does it mean to take a sum of money to a broker and to know his actual thoughts at the same time as his recommendations? What does it mean to go to a financier and follow his thought processes, his intuitions, his basic structure of general and specific observations about his own experiences and those of others? What does it mean to make a suggestion and know at once the true underlying reasons for the responses of others? Now, you see, these and other advantages, Roberts, result from the one basic talent. But the resulting mental and material advantages in time become so great that—even without the talent—these other advantages, taken by themselves, would still be formidable. After you learn enough from others, you have the knowledge yourself. No, the evidence of wealth you see around you is not derived from anyone else, though it is true that I need the *cooperation* of others—and pay well for their services. I am in a position to pay well. Consider that, Roberts."

Roberts, again wearing the cotton pajamas, came to his feet, aware of the cold tiles underfoot as he methodically tested the bars. Each one was solid.

Gafonel said thoughtfully, "There's no way out of there, Roberts. I am surprised to see a member of the Interstellar Patrol refuse to accept the self-evident."

Roberts didn't answer, and kept moving.

The tile floor also was solid.

Roberts swiftly climbed the bars and struck the ceiling with his fist. Flakes of paint fell off. Cracks shot out from the place he had struck. He struck it again. A chunk of plaster fell off, uncovering a flat metal box bearing several short cylinders, one with a lens at the end. Roberts wrenched the box loose, saw a couple of dangling wires, and touched the ends.

There was a dazzling spark. The lights in the room went out.

Above Roberts was a square hole through which light shone dimly. Roberts shifted grips on the bars, reached up, caught an edge, and squeezed himself up through the hole.

Gafonel's voice reached Roberts from below.

"My guards are on the way, Roberts! Don't move!"

A quick glance showed Roberts that he was in an access space, completely unfinished, that provided room for cables, air ducts, pipes, and wires, which looped and crisscrossed around him. A heavy flanged metal plate the size of the hole Roberts had come through leaned against a brace nearby. The dim light in the access space came from an overhead luminous panel about five feet away. A walk, of rough boards, extended past the hole in the direction of another luminous panel some thirty feet away. Beyond that, other panels lit more distant spaces.

Roberts seized the heavy metal plate, pictured himself diving behind the plate toward the sound of Gafonel's voice, and heaved the plate. The heavy plate tore loose a chunk of ceiling, and narrow lines of light slashed up as Gafonel fired from below.

Roberts screamed, pictured himself clawing for support, and simultaneously jumped.

He plunged into darkness, and one arm brushed cloth. That was all he needed.

A few minutes later, the lights in the room came back on. The door to the corridor burst open.

Roberts glanced down at the battered figure in cotton pajamas, shook his head, and glanced around as two guards in black burst into the room, guns in hand.

Roberts raised one arm, clothed in dark-purple velvet and pointed to the circle of bars across the room.

"He went up those bars, smashed through the ceiling, got into the access space, and dove through the ceiling here. Thanks to someone's carelessness, there might have been trouble."

One of the guards glanced at the heap on the floor, looked around at the hole in the ceiling, and swallowed.

"We don't—"

"I know. Go get medical help."

The guard stepped back, saluted, whirled, and ran out down the corridor. The other guard swallowed, stepped back, saluted, and shut the door, to stand on guard outside.

Roberts glanced around the room. He still had no idea where to find the exotic gases.

There was a sound of running feet, and the door opened again. The two—attendants?—who had taken care of him at first stood nervously on the threshold.

Roberts adopted Gafonel's arbitrary manner and gestured to the one who had expressed criticism of "Supergaf."

"You, come in." He glanced at the other. "Close the door and wait outside."

The attendant came in warily. Roberts glanced at the motionless form on the floor.

"Examine him."

Frowning, the attendant knelt. After a few moments' silence, he looked up.

"He's in pretty bad shape. However, he'll live. He should regain consciousness soon and be available for further questioning."

There was a faint hint of reproach in the voice, and Roberts wondered how well he could imitate the telepath. Coldly, he said, "Spare me your mental criticism."

The attendant stood up. He said tightly, "Is that all you want, sir?"

"No," Roberts said, "your thoughts are *not* your own."

"Damn it! Keep out of my—"

Roberts stepped forward and clapped a hand over the attendant's mouth, turning him at the same moment so that he was off-balance and ready to be thrown to the floor.

"No argument! If you want mental privacy, *do your job*! You haven't examined this man carefully. Now, do a *thorough* examination!"

The attendant, looking dazed, knelt again at the crumpled figure. He felt carefully of the limbs, caught his breath, and felt very thoroughly of the skull. After a moment's silence, he looked up wide-eyed at Roberts, glanced around, and motioned toward a spot further from the door. He spoke in a whisper.

"How did you do it?"

"Where are the surveillance devices?"

"None in this end of the room. There was a combination bug- and execution-box over the cell. There's nothing here."

"How can you be sure?"

"I helped put in the system. Gafonel didn't want things that could be used to spy on *him*. How did you get him?"

"Who designed that cage?"

"Not me. Why?"

"There was an opening in the ceiling to service this combination box you speak of. That plate above

that opening was left loose. That gave a clear path through the access space and down on his head."

"Good. I tried to tell the fool you were tough."

"What's your job here?"

"Electrical installation to start with. Now I mostly help with first aid. I took medic's training in the Space Force but got out because I wanted to be on my own. I never thought I'd end up in an outfit where there was no privacy even in your own head."

"Any other dissatisfied followers?"

"Those that aren't scared are dissatisfied."

"Why?"

"There's no team sense. We're trained animals. The boss is the next stage in evolution beyond the human. All that holds this outfit together is fear and money."

"What about his girls?"

"That I don't know. He has a unique advantage there, I guess. On the other hand—" He shook his head. "I don't know."

"Who is his most trusted collaborator?"

"Supergaf has no trusted collaborators. You only collaborate accidentally, when he picks your brains—or else purely for hire."

"How about his rich associates?"

"That's above my level. But I don't think they're associates. More likely customers or subordinates."

"And the guards?"

"They'll obey, if they recognize him. I guess they're as loyal as any you can buy."

Roberts considered the situation in silence and glanced at the crumpled heap at his feet.

"Will the other medic notice what you've noticed? And, if so, what will he do?"

"He's more likely to notice than I was. As for what he'll do—if there's money in it, and no danger, he'll do whatever he's told, as far as I can see."

"Anything Gafonel tells him?"

"Or whoever else pays his wages. As for myself, I'm fed up. I won't kill him. But if you want to finish it and take over, I'll just step outside, and keep my mouth shut. Then the outfit will be all yours."

Roberts nodded thoughtfully. The picture was clearer, but he still had no idea where to find the missing gases. He glanced at the attendant.

"How did the girl in the cabana know there'd been a substitution?"

"She's one of his guards. He's the only one who can touch a finger to his girls—and since he's a telepath, there's no cheating. None of the girls knows at the time, when he goes for this walk and swim of his, whether it's Supergaf or, more likely, his double. But when he comes back, they challenge him and think of the answer they want him to give. Su-

pergaf, being a telepath, can give it. The double can't. You didn't give the answer, so you weren't Supergaf. You did call the girl over and put a hand on her—which the double would have been afraid to do, knowing the telepath would find out. She therefore knew you were an intruder."

Roberts considered the explanation. As Gafonel had pointed out, there were more advantages to his particular skill than appeared on the surface.

"Are you familiar with any of Gafonel's recent operations?"

"No. There's no gossip. No rumors. He'd trace any leak back to the source and eliminate it. There was plenty of talk about this Space Force ship he was supposed to have hijacked, but that was at the beginning. It wasn't actually so long ago, but it's decades away in attitudes. All speculation ended once he put out the red-hot tongs and made an example. We don't even *think* about any of his possible operations. Personally, I just take it for granted he wants to take over the universe, and let it go at that. Why, is there something you need—some evidence—some stolen device from that Space Force ship?"

"Yes."

"Sorry, but I don't know anything about it. I don't think there's anyone who *would* know. There's another thing. Information flows from us to him. All that flows back is orders. And pay, I'll grant him that."

"Is there any safe room, any strong point, anything like a citadel in this fortress of his?"

"Yes, his own quarters."

"How do I get to them?"

"We aren't far away right now. Go out this door and turn left. At the end, the corridor turns right, then left again, and goes on to an elevator that's never used. It may be a dummy. When you turn right at that first corner, place your hand flat against the wall, anywhere just around that first corner. I'm not clear how it works, but if you're as close a double as you seem, it *might* open for you."

"Worth a try. All right, get your helper—"

"I'm *his* helper. He'll wonder why you singled me out to talk to."

Roberts gestured to the ripped ceiling.

"About improving the surveillance system. I'm boiling mad about this incident. This double here, on the floor, has a distinct trace of telepathic talent, and to an extent, he can seize control of your faculties if you're in physical contact with him. He's dangerous and belongs to an organization that I—Gafonel—am in a tough fight with. We need to tighten up internal security, and I'll want to see you again to go into further detail. How does that sound?"

The attendant nodded approvingly.

"That should do it. Okay, we'll try to get this interloper tied down where he can't do any more damage."

The wall, when Roberts placed his right hand flat against it, at once opened up, the left-hand section rolling back to reveal a curving high-arched doorway.

Roberts looked at beveled foot-thick edges of exactly matching steel surfaces and thought of that access space above the bars. If he had seen what he thought he had seen, that access space extended above even this ultimate stronghold.

What was the point of a foot-thick wall, with a paper-thin ceiling above it?

Roberts, frowning, stepped into a small, luxuriously paneled foyer with Gafonel's initial, the letter G in gold, inset in the center of each panel. Behind him, the corridor opening whispered shut. He pushed open the door leading into the apartment and found himself in a kind of living room paneled from waist height to ceiling with mirrors. Below the mirrors was a border of small interlinked G's. On the ceiling was a crowned golden G surrounded by shining rays of gold leaf. The door to the next room bore a full-length mirror under a crowned G. There were G's on the doorknobs, the cabinet handles, the rugs, bedspreads, sofa cushions, draperies, bathroom tiles, shower curtains, bath mats, and around the edge of the sunken oversize tub. There were G's in all styles, in silver and gold, in royal purple, jeweled, and bordered with pearls and diamonds. One often-repeated favorite was made of a black, glistening stone with a surface that shimmered and glinted so that from certain angles the G seemed to stand out from the wall and hang in space.

Where there were no G's, there were mirrors, and Roberts looked around irritatedly at the multiplied reflections.

Where, in this palace of self-worship, was there any place where the canisters of exotic gases could be hidden?

He pulled open drawers, to find towels and blankets marked with G's. He opened closets, to find jackets with crowned G's, and robes bearing G's in wreaths. He knelt to glance under an oversize bed with G on the coverlet and found a pair of bedroom slippers ornamented with tiny gold G's running around the sides, to form a pattern of bouquets of flowers with a crowned G at the toe.

Roberts searched the whole place and found nothing resembling the Space Force's missing gases.

Then there came a sudden rending sound, and Gafonel's voice warned, *"Don't move!"*

This time, when Roberts came

awake, he was simultaneously aware of the headache and of tight bands that gripped him despite the fact that he seemed to be spiraling over and around at the same time, as if lashed to a spit on a merry-go-round.

He opened his eyes a slit, and the whirling dizziness faded to an illusion of sidewise rotation that was mild by comparison.

The light was dim. Wherever he was, it was cold. He could see a wall of small glass doors, rotating slowly but steadily, and then his own rotation somehow synchronized with the rotation of these glass doors, and both were uneasily still.

Roberts came fully awake and realized that he was lashed to pipes in a gray, dimly lit, refrigerated room.

"So, Roberts—" Gafonel's voice had a grim quality—"you are conscious again."

Roberts carefully began to test his bonds.

Instantly, there was the sound of footsteps, followed by a *buzz-buzz.*

Roberts' right arm and leg went numb.

"This time, Roberts," said Gafonel, with a faint tone of regret, "the trip will be final. After this, I will have no further unbiased opinion from you. But it will all be for your own good."

Roberts continued testing his bonds with his left hand.

Gafonel stood studying him with a peculiar expression.

The paralysis time, Roberts was thinking, was about ten minutes. The glass in the little doors in that wall would break, to make cutting edges. If these pipes the rope was fastened to were thin enough, it might be possible to squeeze them together and get a little slack in the rope. Did the pipes run straight from ceiling to floor? If so, they would squeeze together more easily from a standing position. The pipe was wet with condensation. It was small diameter piping. That water would lubricate his wrists. What type of rope? This pipe had a rough spot. Would the rope chafe? Here was a pipe union with a projecting edge that felt sharp. What was the floor made out of? Suppose he stood up and heaved against the ropes? Would the pipes bend? It looked as if there were only two lights in the room. There was a switch box on the wall. Put the lights out, and then what? Was Gafonel's telepathy directional? Doubtful. What's behind those glass doors? Would Gafonel dare use anything but that paralysis weapon?

Aloud, Roberts was saying, "I suppose so. It looks like you've got me this time. How did you get away from the attendants?"

Gafonel, scowling, walked around to Roberts' left side, and raised the gun. *Buzz. Buzz-buzz.*

"Pardon me, Roberts. If you are a fair sample of the Interstellar Patrol, I can see the futility of trying to *persuade* the Patrol to cooperate with me."

Roberts looked around, to see that he was near a bend in the rear wall of the room. To his left was a partly open door, looking into the paneled foyer he had entered on going into Gafonel's apartment. The "foyer" must actually be—

"Correct, Roberts," said Gafonel. "It is an elevator. And you are paralyzed hand and foot, arm and leg. Whatever plan your mind may create, you cannot carry it out in *that* situation. I have to admit, my experiences with you have given me a respect for the power of determination and fast action, even with a blind mind—"

"A *what*?" said Roberts.

"A blind mind, Roberts. A mind imprisoned in a cage of bone, unable to reach out and share the thoughts of other minds."

"That's an inaccurate comparison. A *lone* mind is what you mean. And this *loneness* can be overcome in quite a number of ways."

"Who are you to—"

"Inaccurate comparisons," said Roberts, who had ten minutes to use up, "lead to inaccurate thinking. Inaccurate thinking leads to blundering. Blunderers aren't equipped to rule the universe simply because they have a useful special ability, the lack of which was already fairly well compensated for even before the rise of technology."

Gafonel said grimly, "Nevertheless, I *will* rule. Bear in mind that I am younger than you. I have time to learn. *You* have missed your chance."

"What chance?"

"Your chance to truly be king and emperor. King and emperor of the *universe,* Roberts!"

"And have chains of my own gold R's running around the mirrors in my palace?"

Gafonel stiffened.

Roberts said, "The justification for rank is superior insight and ability. For a person with rank to dwell on the glory of his rank warps his insight and saps his ability. It undermines the justification for his possession of the rank. For me to be a duke, on a backward planet, was justifiable. Only by assuming that rank could I have the authority to get the planet out of the mess it was in. To seize the same authority over equals and superiors, when there was no need, would have been unjustifiable. It would have ended up as a case of self-glorification, which is poison. When you tell me I missed my chance, what you say is that I had the opportunity to get drunk on poison, and passed up the chance. Well—I can't say I miss it."

Gafonel frowned. "This may hold for you, but I—"

"We were talking about me, remember?"

"Nevertheless, I *do* have superiority. I see your point, Roberts. It was well for you not to claim the kingship. *My* situation is different."

"When you feel the power running through your veins and start spending time thinking how impressed other people are with you, look out. Your special ability is limited, and you can't use it properly while meditating on your own glory. The fact that you do glorify yourself demonstrates a lack of insight, regardless of your special ability."

Gafonel turned away. After a considerable silence, he opened two doors in his wall of small glass doors and took out two squat metal containers, each one a little smaller than a man's clenched fist. One of these containers was dark purple. The other was diagonally striped, black and silver. Gafonel walked over toward Roberts and set the two containers on the floor, well out of Roberts' reach.

"The Patrol, Roberts, is a shrewd and somewhat baffling opponent. I will admit, if I possessed *only* my special ability, I would be at a loss how to approach the Patrol, although it offers an ideal instrument for a ruler. But, as I have explained, a special ability such as mine is not just a thing in itself, merely *added* to other abilities, like a new pistol added to an arsenal of guns. That is not it. Such an ability *compounds at every turn my other abilities.* Mentally, socially, financially, I am far stronger than you imagine. The contest between us has been physical, so you do not appreciate this point. The self-glorification you sneer at induces an 'aura of power' that has a highly effective reaction on many people. When it does not work, I need merely switch it off, because *I instantly know the effect I am creating.* Now, to seize control of the Patrol, or of any segment of it, would be nearly impossible by my special skill alone. It would even be difficult with this skill plus my other abilities. But—this skill gives access to yet other resources. Do you follow me?"

"I see the point. The trouble is, a king can't judge the worth of an approach solely by how it impresses other people. As for this 'access to other resources'—you mean the 'exotic gases'?"

Gafonel glanced at the two roughly fist-sized containers on the floor.

"—Among other things. The Patrol obviously has some interesting devices. But so does the rest of civilization. You realize that the usual aim of the Space Force, for instance, is maximum effect with minimum loss of life. This purple container, Roberts, contains a

minute proportion of the gas that was in one vial from the *Whippet's* shipment. When this container is sprayed at you, you will become totally attentive. You will hear, and believe, whatever I say to you. It is the *command chemical.* From that time forward, if I so direct, you will be my obedient subordinate. Unlike the Space Force, I will not later release you from this obedient state, nor will I release the other members of the Patrol as I extend my control over them.

There was a lengthy pause, in which Roberts kept a tight hold on his mental responses.

Gafonel went on.

"No, Roberts, the fact that the Patrol has a kind of partial computer control will not nullify the effect of human loyalty to me. Not at all. Because the computer will be eliminated, subject to its realignment in accordance with my *own* aims."

He raised the diagonally striped black-and-silver container.

"You see, the Space Force, too, faces the difficulty of computer-directed defense systems. A surprisingly small concentration of this gas in the atmosphere will find its way through any crevice or opening into no matter how effective a computer, to start a reaction—and that is all that is needed, just the *start* of that reaction. This is another 'tailored chemical,' Roberts. The computer's essential internal elements will suffer a change which will render them inoperative. The computer will break down. Then only the *human* component remains to be considered. The command chemical will decide that battle."

There was a silence as Roberts considered it.

"You have the problem of getting it there."

"True. And here I have a considerable advantage. You see, Roberts, I can instantly detect the difference between the deceptive product of advanced robotics and an actual human, while there is some delay before the Patrol can detect the same difference. When you came ashore, my 'double,' so-called, was captured. This 'double' was a highly specialized robotic product which sensed the alteration in the atmosphere, lay still, and sensed the arrival of the Patrolmen who sought to capture it. Your patrol ship, I admit, skillfully neutralized my warning system, but that didn't matter. My robotic bait, an outwardly exact replica of myself, with my own voice, appeared to regain consciousness, surfaced, and in the resulting violent and unexpected struggle, *released the command chemical and stated the basic requirements of obedience to me.* The three members of the Interstellar Patrol became my loyal subjects, just as you will, Roberts, be-

fore I am through. They made a slight delay, to report to me on the beach shortly after you were captured. They returned to your patrol ship with their 'prisoner' and their own stocks of the obedience chemical. I was flattered to learn from them that an Interstellar Patrol dreadnought was close at hand, expecially to take care of me. This short distance made the return of the patrol ship to the dreadnought a brief trip. So, you see, Roberts, the plan has already been put into action."

Gafonel straightened and watched Roberts intently.

Roberts, as he had intended, had now forgotten everything but this conversation. Frowning, he tried to estimate the chances of the plan for succeeding, and at once ran head-on into the fact that the Patrol was very sparing with its information. No one, for instance, had ever explained to Roberts the functioning of the dreadnought's air system. No one had mentioned the location of what must be a master computer of some kind. That there was a type of monitor system that watched activity throughout the ship, he knew, as he had used it—but how did it work? No one had tried to prevent him from learning these details. But no one had volunteered the information. If he wished to spend his free time delving into mountains of facts, that was *his* business.

He hadn't done it.

He therefore had no way to know if Gafonel's plan would work.

Gafonel watched him, frowning.

Roberts shook his head.

Gafonel said, "The commands on the dreadnought were to be given in the guise of a joke, Roberts. One of my men would approach one of the as-yet-unconvinced members of the Patrol, motion to him, and say, smiling, 'Have you heard the one about the Space Force general?' My man would then show a small star made of very thin silvery paper, impregnated with the command chemical and having a faint minty fragrance. He would whisper the command in the ear of his 'recruit,' who, meanwhile, aware of the mint aroma, would sniff curiously and absorb the chemical. My man would give the new recruit a small stock of the impregnated stars, with instructions to pass some on to each person he tells the joke to. One of the whispered commands, by the way, instructs the new recruit to laugh uproariously at the conclusion of the whispered 'joke.' Would your symbiotic computer interfere with a private joke, Roberts?"

"I don't know." Roberts glanced at the wall across the room. "Is that filled up with all the exotic chemicals?"

"Yes. We are in a place where

no one can reach them but myself."

Roberts said drily, "I suppose these two chemicals are just a sample?"

"That's right. The entire shipment is right here under my thumb, immune to any outside attack and a source of fantastically varied power, or if I choose to trade it—wealth."

Roberts was only dimly aware of numbness going out of his right arm and leg, then a few moments later, out of his left arm and leg. His mind was still grappling with the problem as all the numbness evaporated, and his reflexes, like an alarm clock set beforehand, suddenly triggered his body into action.

The ropes slid as Roberts thrust himself upright, sucked in an enormous breath, braced arm and shoulder muscles against the rope—

Gafonel jerked the gun up.

Roberts' legs swung up from the waist, his outstretched feet jarring the gun barrel upward.

There was a sudden yielding of the rope that held him, and Roberts dropped, catching himself awkwardly as his feet fell, his back still against the pipes.

Gafonel sprang back, well out of reach.

Roberts threw the tangle of suddenly loose ropes over his head and dove for the squat purple can.

There was a buzzing sound, and Roberts' right arm went numb.

There was another buzz. And another, and another.

Roberts sucked in a deep breath as if to hurl himself across the floor by sheer strength of will.

Gafonel, shaken, grasped at the purple can, aimed it at Roberts, and pressed the plunger. He shouted, "You will obey my orders! *I am the king!*"

Roberts blanked his mind and lay motionless, unbreathing.

Gafonel, breathing hard, suddenly gasped.

Roberts raised his head, to see the triumph on Gafonel's face change to shock.

Roberts let out his hoarded breath:

"*YOU* WILL OBEY *MY* EVERY COMMAND! KNEEL NOW, SILENT AND MOTIONLESS, TILL I STATE MY WILL!"

Gafonel's face went blank. He dropped to one knee and, head bowed, waited like a statue.

Roberts sucked in a breath, aware of a faint scent and a sudden blank-minded eagerness to please. All that was necessary now was for someone, anyone, to state a comand. Roberts would dutifully obey.

But no one else was there except Gafonel.

And Gafonel knelt, silent and motionless, as the air slowly cleared.

When the numbness passed, Roberts got to his feet.

A day and a half later, Roberts again faced the chief of O-Branch.

"Sir," said Roberts, "with all due respect, if I had had some idea what was going on now and then, I think I could do a better job."

The colonel leaned back behind his desk, smiling. "Well, Roberts, we trust your power to improvise. Any *plan* you might have thought of could have been nullified by the telepath."

Roberts looked blank for a moment, then nodded.

"With his advantage, he should have had such a superiority that I'd have had no chance at all. But—there was that impregnable retreat with foot-thick walls and a tissue-paper ceiling. And that ring of bars with the loose plate at the top out of the way. At the end, when he tied me up, the knots didn't hold. And he was so sure of the effect of the obedience gas that he sprayed it at me—then breathed it himself. *Phew!* If that's telepathy, he can have it."

The colonel smiled. "Telepathy plus megalomania. You can't judge telepathy with *that* handicap. Great success without self-control is dangerous, and Gafonel had had enormous success. At some point, it dawned on this telepath that he had a 'seeing mind,' could look into all other minds, learn their processes of thought, their true reasons, their honest opinions, and hence outshine them all." The colonel shook his head. "There was the hole in his reasoning, but he never recognized it."

Roberts said, "He could look into other minds and learn their true reasons and honest *opinions*."

The colonel nodded. "Their *opinions*. He thought he was *omniscient*. Instead, he was *omniopinient*. If one expert worked on one part of his arrangements, and another worked on another part, he thought he need only scan their minds, to learn whether each one had done his job. But that only told him the answer *so far as they themselves knew*. If he got well-meant bad advice at some point, he had no way to analyze it on his own. This weakness didn't bother him in his investments, because on balance the advice was usually right. But when a man tries to make himself Emperor of the Universe overnight, little flaws in his arrangements have a tendency to magnify themselves."

"And yet, he certainly had a special advantage."

"Yes, and as often happens to people with a special advantage, he let it become a substitute for his own thought. If you look back at the past experience of humanity, you'll see that this or that specialty—strictly formal logic, religion, government, science—some

one thing or viewpoint, has been expected to solve all the problems. But reality is too varied to be handled completely by one method. As soon as the one method is nicely codified, then the whole crushing burden comes to bear on one solitary support. It doesn't work. A little thought would suggest that it won't work, but once there's an official solution around, people tend to quit thinking."

Roberts said, "There ought to be some saying about this, for a warning."

"There is."

"What?"

"You tell me."

Roberts looked at the colonel with a familiar sense of exasperation. Then his thought processes jarred into action.

"No special skill," he said, "no standard attitude, no technology—no matter how valuable—can safely replace thought itself."

The colonel smiled. "Close. But you've omitted a common substitute."

Roberts frowned, and then in surprise he saw one reason why the Interstellar Patrol provided so few ready-made answers to its men.

Roberts cleared his throat before he spoke.

"No special skill, no standard attitude, no technology, and no *organization*—no matter how valuable—can safely replace thought itself."

The colonel nodded.

"*Now* you've got it."

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*Charles Fritch is forty-three and lives in California, where he has been a full-time free-lance writer for about ten years. "A few months ago, my first sf collection was published under the title* CRAZY, MIXED-UP PLANET. *My hobbies are photography and collecting nostalgic items (comics, old radio shows) to remind me of those golden days when I was a ratty kid reading science fiction mags and wishing I could be in their pages." Mr. Fritch has been in the pages of many sf magazines (including this one), mostly in the mid-fifties. This short fantasy—about one of the considerable hazards of eating Chinese food—is his first appearance in the field in some time.*

# THE MISFORTUNE COOKIE

## *by Charles E. Fritch*

WITH AN EASE BORN OF LONG practice, Harry Folger cracked open the Chinese cookie and pulled the slip of paper free. He smoothed it out on the table and read the message printed there:

YOU WILL MEET AN OLD FRIEND!

Harry chuckled to himself. It was inevitable that he would meet an old friend. He met them every day—on his way to work, at the office, in his apartment building—even in the various Chinese restaurants he frequented.

He bit into the cookie, crunched the remnants between his teeth, and washed them down with a swig of the now lukewarm tea. He enjoyed the fortune cookie as much as the fortune itself. But then he enjoyed everything about the Chinese food that he always ate, without ever tiring of it—the chow mein, the chop suey, the chicken fried rice, the won ton, the egg foo yung, the—oh, why go on? Heaven, to Harry Folger, was eating in a Chinese restaurant.

And as he was leaving the place, he met an old friend.

Her name was Cynthia Peters, or had been until she'd married. She was not old in the chronological sense, however, but a young woman not yet in her thirties. Harry had fond memories of the tempestuous affair he had ex-

perienced with the lady when both were younger, and frequently his dreams were filled with such pleasant recollections.

"Cynthia!" he said, surprised but pleased.

"Harry!" she exclaimed, tears of sudden happiness welling in her hazel-green eyes.

And Harry knew that despite the fact they were both married, he was going to have an affair with her.

When he finally got around to thinking about it, Harry marveled at the coincidence of his meeting old friend Cynthia right after a fortune cookie had forewarned him of such an occurrence. It was a coincidence, of course, for it could be nothing else. Harry enjoyed reading the messages—written, he always assumed, by coolie labor somewhere in Hong Kong—but he did not believe them to contain the absolute truth.

Not just then, he didn't.

The meeting places of himself and Cynthia were, needless to say, Chinese restaurants. Her husband, she told him, was a beast who made her life miserable. His wife, he informed her, was a bitch with whom he was quite unhappy. On one of these occasions, after a delicious meal of sweet and sour spareribs, Harry cracked open his fortune cookie to discover this message:

WATCH OUT! SOMEONE IS FOLLOWING YOU!

He looked up to discover Cynthia's irate husband entering the restaurant. There was barely time enough to spirit her out the rear exit. There would have been no time at all if the Chinese fortune cookie hadn't alerted Harry to the imminent danger.

Coincidence again, Harry decided—until he received a similarly worded message an instant before his wife (who hated Chinese food) entered the restaurant where he and Cynthia were eating, and once again Harry escaped in the nick of time.

As a result, Harry began taking the messages more seriously. He was hoping for some invaluable tip on the stock market or some winning horse in Saturday's race, but none came. For the most part, except for emergencies, the messages were bland bits of wisdom and random advice.

With one noticeable exception.

It occurred as he and Cynthia (who, like him, loved Chinese food) were finishing off the remaining morsels of Mandarin duck and she was telling how suspicious her husband was getting and how sure she was that Harry's own wife must not be blind to the secret rendezvous. At that precise moment, Harry cracked open a crisp fortune cookie, pulled out the slip of paper and read:

YOU ARE GOING TO DIE!

Harry gulped and almost choked on the piece of cookie in

his mouth. It was ridiculous, of course. Then his attitude changed abruptly to one of indignation. What the hell kind of message was that for some underpaid coolie in Hong Kong to stuff into a fortune cookie? He thought of complaining to the manager, but he changed his mind. Instead, he decided he didn't feel well. He took Cynthia home, letting her off in front of her apartment.

As he was about to drive off, he heard a noise at the opposite window. He looked to see Cynthia's husband pointing a gun at him. He gasped, flung open the car door and scrambled out, bumping into his wife, who also had a gun in her hand.

Harry ran. He was vaguely aware that two guns fired simultaneously, but he felt no pain and was not about to stop his flight. He ran, not pausing for breath until he was a good four blocks away. Then he leaned against a building, dragging in lungfuls of air, to take inventory. There didn't seem to be any holes in him, nor was there any sign of blood.

Thank God, he thought, for the lousy aim of the two irate spouses.

Even so, he was shaking uncontrollably. He had to go someplace and relax. They might still be after him, and he'd be safer in a crowded place. He looked up at the building to see where he was.

He was standing in front of a Chinese restaurant.

It was one he'd never been to before, and his curiosity was aroused. Also his appetite, although he'd eaten a Chinese meal only an hour before. Besides, he always felt secure in such a place.

Harry Folger walked in, sat at a table. Surprisingly, he was the only person there. When a waiter appeared, Harry ordered the number-two dinner. He ate it, enjoying each mouthful, forgetting the unpleasant episode in the street. Then he cracked open his fortune cookie and read the message that had been tucked inside.

The words didn't register at first. When they did, he looked up in sudden panic—to see the waiter grinning derisively with a skull face. Harry looked around wildly for a way out, but there were no doors or windows in the restaurant, no way to get out now or ever.

He started screaming.

When he tired of that, he felt hungry again. He ordered another meal, ate it. The message in the fortune cookie this time was exactly as the first.

He had another meal after that one, and another after that, and another after that—and each time the message in the fortune cookie was the same. It said:

YOU'RE DEAD!

*Richard Lupoff returns with a story as domestic as his last one (THE WIZARD OF ATALA, April 1970) was exotic. It concerns a contemporary family and their new acquisition: a dog who, despite his apparent lack of AKC credentials, turns out to have some astonishingly useful abilities.*

# TIME DOG

## by Richard A. Lupoff

AS SOON AS HE HAD PUT THE car away, Stan dropped his briefcase in the living room and went upstairs two at a time to Janet's room. He saw that she was still awake, so he went in and gave her a hug and a kiss, and was rewarded with an invitation to sit on her bed and admire her pretty clown pajamas.

"What did you do exciting today?" Stan asked her.

"Mommy took me to the doctor and he gave me a lollipop," she told him, "and when we got home I saw a real doggie in the living room but he went away."

"A real doggie, eh?" Stan said. "Did Mommy see him too?"

"No, he went away too fast."

"Oh, I see," Stan said. "And where did he go? Onto the lawn?"

"No, just away."

"I see. He was a nice doggie, though, wasn't he?"

"No!" Suddenly Janet's face turned tragic. "He took away my medicine and when I told Mommy she scolded me and it was the doggie's fault and Mommy said there was no doggie and there *was*, he was little and brown and he stole my medicine!"

"Okay, baby," Stan said. "Maybe he'll bring it back and Mommy will be sorry she scolded. Now you go to sleep so you can rest and get big and strong!" He

bent over her and hugged the thin child again, holding her to him a second longer than necessary, until she began to squirm and he put her back down, patting her hair against the pillow before he went back downstairs.

In the kitchen Susan was making dinner, but as he entered the room she dropped a long-handled spoon on the counter and ran to bury her face in his shoulder, burrowing into him as he put his arms around her back and pressed his chin against the top of her head. After a minute he said, "Do you want to tell me what Scheiman thinks?"

She shook her head violently *no,* rubbing simultaneously against his chin and his shoulder.

"Well, I think you should."

She leaned back from him and drew a shuddering breath, looking at a point somewhere below the knot of his tie so he couldn't catch her eyes with his own. "No good," she said. "You know his bedside manner, the inhaler helps some and she'll be all right until next time if we take good care, and come back in six weeks, but I could tell underneath what he was saying. Stan, she's so little and such a good girl, it isn't fair!"

"I know, I know. Look, what's this business about a dog?"

Now Susan looked at him. Her face was wet. "Oh, that," she sniffed, "she lost her inhaler and made up some story about a little brown dog stealing it. I shouldn't have been so hard on her, but it was just too much. That medicine is expensive and she *knows* how much she needs it. I just . . ." The words trailed into tears and soft sobbing. Stan led her into the living room and they sat quietly on the couch while she cried.

After a while they managed a dinner of sorts. Over a plate of something nondescript Stan tried to make conversation. Susan had put a portion of food at her own place but only poked at it with her fork. Stan asked if Scheiman had ever said anything about pets.

"No cats," Susan replied. "There's a strong chance she'd have an allergic reaction to them, and her breathing's bad enough already. A dog might be all right if she didn't run around too much with him, but you know she would, and so do I."

"Probably so. But she wants one so much. Now she's made one up. If a puppy would make her happier, maybe—"

Susan was crying again. Dinner was over, and a long, cold evening was under way.

Another day and Janet was well enough to go back to school. Susan picked her up afterward and drove her home to spare her the noise and bounces of the school bus. As they neared home Susan watched Janet out of one corner of her eye, listening at the same time to her whistling breath.

"Did you have a nice day?" Susan asked.

Janet nodded her *yes*.

"And when we get home, how about a nice cup of soup and a nap?"

"Can I take my new doll to bed?" Janet asked. "Her name is Molly Tammy Mary and Soapy brought her for me."

"Really," Susan answered. "I didn't know you had a new doll. Who's Soapy?"

"Oh, you know. Soapy is my doggie. He's so silly, he always takes things and goes away but he brings me things too. He brought me my new dolly, her name is Molly Tammy Mary and she has lace on her dress and curly hair."

Susan laughed, a rarity these days. "Yes, darling, of course you may take Molly to bed for your nap. May I give her a kiss too when I tuck you in?"

Surprise was, when Susan tucked her in, Janet *had* a new doll. Or a very old one—the painted cheeks and eyes, the curled and ribboned hair, the long velvet dress with its lace edges were all in the style of another era. But Janet had eaten her lunch and slept, to Susan's gratitude.

When Janet woke, Susan found a damp spot on her bed. Janet blamed Soapy. "I scolded him myself, but he's only a puppy and he forgets."

But Janet was hot in the morning, and instead of school, Susan drove to Dr. Scheiman's office with her. Her breaths were loud and Susan found it difficult to watch her, unable to help or even offer comfort.

"Keep up the inhaler," Scheiman said.

Susan told him it didn't help very much.

"I know." He shrugged and looked at a framed diploma while he spoke to her. "But it's the best we have. They keep working on these things, a few years ago we didn't have even this. But . . ." He looked back at Susan and turned his hands palm upward. "Does she still want a puppy so badly?" he asked.

Susan was startled by the question but stammered an answer of *yes* after a moment.

"I think you should get her one, then," Scheiman said.

Sunday afternoon Stan took them both to a kennel that advertised in the fat weekend edition of the paper. He'd called first, it was an easy drive, and Janet would be able to help pick her own puppy. Stan wore the baggy, comfortable clothes he affected weekends, and Susan had on slacks and a loosely hanging shirt, but Janet insisted on wearing her party clothes to pick out her puppy: a ribbon in her hair, her short velvet dress with lace at the collar and cuffs, pale tights, and patent leather shoes with straps and shiny buckles.

At the kennel they strolled around the cages looking at breeds of dogs, Janet squealing and darting from one wire enclosure to another until her breath was short and Stan picked her up to carry her around. Susan had Janet's inhaler with her and a few whiffs of medicine helped to calm the heavings of her chest.

After much looking and exclaiming over collies and shepherds and huskies, they looked at smaller breeds. Stan inclined toward a brown and white spotted spaniel. Susan preferred a gray poodle. "Janet, it's going to be your puppy," Stan said, "which would you rather have?"

"That one!" she said emphatically. She pointed toward a gawky, fuzzy thing in another cage. It stood swaying on legs as long as a fawn's. Its coat looked like caramel-tinted down, a pointed black snout sticking out of one end and a ludicrous tail looping up from the other in a complete circle.

"That's my Soapy!" Janet insisted, and reached for the dog. When he saw her coming he wagged his circular tail and scratched his own bony spine through the fuzz.

At home, Soapy was installed in the kitchen on a temporary mat of Sunday newspaper sections which were soiled and replaced at frequent intervals.

Monday morning Janet was better again, but Susan kept her home from school another day. "Soapy can keep me company now," she exulted. "Before he only came to see me sometimes, now he can really live with us!"

Susan brought the puppy to Janet's bedroom and let him play on the bed until Janet seemed tired again. Then Susan got Janet's promise to take a nap so she could give Soapy a reading lesson when she woke up. She had her first-grade book in her room and could hold it for Soapy while she helped him sound out the words.

Janet woke up wheezing badly and Susan went to get her the inhaler, saying nothing about any suspicion that the dog was responsible for the attack. When she got back to Janet's room, the child had an inhaler in her hand and held it up to Susan.

"Mommy, look, Soapy brought it back."

Susan stood, nonplussed, in the doorway.

Janet looked superior and tolerant. "Don't you remember, Mommy? Soapy took my medicine before we brought him home and now he brought it back in my bedroom."

"Impossible," said Susan. "Soapy's been locked in the kitchen during your nap, and he didn't bring any medicine with him when he was up here before. Let me see that." She reached out one hand and took the inhaler

from Janet, comparing it with the other she already held. They were indistinguishable.

Janet's lip trembled and her eyes began to brim. "He did too bring it, Mommy, after you went out he was here and he dropped my medicine and then he went away again."

"All right," said Susan. "Maybe he did. Anyway, let's take a deep breath." She held the inhaler and Janet breathed in her spray. After two inhalations the child's breathing became less labored. She was able to dress herself and come to the kitchen for lunch with her mother, Soapy sprawled on newspapers spread near the kitchen door, his long legs and oversized feet seeming to cover half the women's page and an entire section of classifieds.

In the afternoon Susan left to shop for groceries. Before putting on her coat she got Janet's promise to be good while she was out, to keep Soapy closed in the kitchen, to admit no one to the house, and to answer any telephone calls with the message that Mommy would be back in a little while and please try again.

Susan departed, Janet settled on the living room couch with Molly Tammy Mary on her lap and a doll bottle at hand in case Molly Tammy Mary cried for milk while Susan was at the store.

When she returned, Molly Tammy Mary lay disheveled in the easy chair, Janet was galloping around the room doing her best to roar in time with the up-and-down motions of a silvery toy that floated around her head, the kitchen door had been shoved open, and Soapy was leaping around Janet, a trail of dark spots soaking into the rug in an irregular path from the kitchen to the girl.

At the slam of the front door behind Susan, Janet whirled about, grabbed the toy near her, and flicked a switch before shoving it guiltily into a corner of the easy chair. Susan stalked into the kitchen and deposited her burden of vegetables and dairy goods. She returned to the living room and dragged a whimpering Soapy, tail under belly, into the kitchen and closed him there.

Again in the living room she stood over Janet and demanded an accounting of the condition of the house.

"I couldn't help it, Soapy wet," Janet said.

"I know that," Susan replied. "You promised to leave him in the kitchen! Why did you let him out?"

"I didn't! Soapy's wife let him out."

"Soapy's—*wife*?"

"Yes," said Janet miserably. She began to wheeze again, but Susan ignored that.

"Soapy has no wife. You let him out yourself. Janet, you're a

big girl, almost six years old. You know better than to make up stories like that."

"I didn't make it up. Soapy's wife was here and she let him out of the kitchen. She looks just like Soapy only she's a different color and her name is Wendy, she told me. She said her name is Lady Blodwen of Blenheim but to call her Wendy . . ."

"Janet!"

"And she brought me a toy, look!" She held up the trinket she had been making sound effects for.

"I'm not interested in a silly toy," Susan said. "I want you to stop making up foolish stories when you're naughty!"

With a rush of tears and sobs that made her thin chest heave, Janet insisted she had told the truth. "I just wish Wendy was still here, Mommy, so you could see!"

"Where is she?"

"She went away, like Soapy used to before he came to live with us!"

Susan gave up.

When Stan arrived from work, Janet was again playing in the living room. Stan hugged and kissed her, then went into the kitchen. Susan was slicing squash angrily. "What's the matter?" Stan asked her.

Susan began a recitation of the afternoon's incident. Shortly before she reached the end of the story, Soapy streaked between Stan's legs and through the half-open door into the living room. Susan and Stan stood motionless for a moment, then started after the puppy.

There was a silent instant from the living room, then came the sound of teeth grinding on plastic and metal, shrieks from Janet, and an incongruously deep growl as Janet and Soapy struggled for possession of the new toy. At last, gasping with exertion, Janet trotted to her parents, the silvery plaything clutched tightly in both hands.

"See, Mommy and Daddy," she said, "it's a moob scout helicopter."

"Moon, Janet," said Susan.

"No, Mommy, moob."

"Moon, dear."

"Moob, Mommy, look. Can't you sound out your letters, it says moob, scout, helicopter." She held out the toy.

Annoyed, Susan took it from her and read. She looked up in surprise and said, "Stan, take a look at this. It really says moob scout helicopter. What can it mean?"

Stan looked at the toy. "Must be an error," he said. "Maybe made in some foreign country where they don't know English, and it's supposed to say moon."

"Wendy gave it to me," Janet said.

"Very nice," said Stan. "Will you show me how it works?"

Janet took back the toy and turned it on. It began circling her head, bobbing a few inches vertically as it went. In the silent kitchen it made a low but audible whooshing noise.

"Well, I'll be damned," said Stan.

He plucked it from the air near Janet and moved one hand gingerly over and under the toy while he held it stationary with the other. "I'll be pickled in brine and get green warts!"

"Stan, what is it?" Susan demanded.

"These toy companies are ahead of the real engineers! Somebody at work was telling me about a helicopter they were planning for later moon exploration. The trouble is, there's no atmosphere up there, and air-cushion vehicles have to carry their own compressed air, and they use it up so fast that the whole system breaks down.

"So some crackpot or genius—I don't know which and I don't think the government does either—had this crazy idea for a moon helicopter that carries a small compressed-air supply with it. It's released from the front and end of the helicopter, and before it can dissipate, the rotors revolve in it to keep the craft off the ground.

"That pushes the air down too, and there's a row of suction holes in the bottom of the helicopter that recapture the air and pipe it back to the front and rear vents so they keep using the same air over and over again."

Susan looked dubious. "I don't really understand all that, but it doesn't sound very convincing to me. I mean, I supppose they have to have something to push against, but this is crazy."

"Yeah, I thought so too, but whoever built this little toy—maybe a guy named Moob, I don't know—whoever it was, they seem to have the system really working.

"Look!"

He flipped the toy into the air and it began circling again, tandem rotors whirling at its ends.

Somehow Soapy's and Janet's conduct and the mysterious Wendy were completely forgotten until after Janet's bedtime. Then Susan and Stan occupied themselves otherwise than with problems of discipline.

They both dressed in robes later when they went to check Janet in bed. Her breathing was labored but she was asleep; they decided it was better to let her sleep on than to waken her for medicine that seemed to be becoming less effective with repeated doses. Back in their own bed they lay together, Susan's head on Stan's chest. Susan found herself unable to sleep. "They ought to stop spending money on this silly moon stuff and use it to help people," she said.

"Mmm?" Stan replied.

"I mean all those billions they spend on rockets could be used to find a cure for sick children like Janet."

"They're working on it."

"They could work harder!"

"Didn't Scheiman say there were bettter inhalers coming in a few years?"

"Stan, in a few years! But Janet . . ." She shuddered and dug her hands into his flesh. He put his hands on her back and she heard him sigh. Susan pushed herself off his body and walked quietly to Janet's room again. She stood over her daughter's bed listening to her gasps as long as she could, then ran back to bed. Stan's forearm was thrown over his eyes, and he breathed evenly.

This time she got Stan to phone his office and say he would be late for work so that he could help her with Janet going to Scheiman's. Janet acted listless in the house, almost entirely ignoring even her friends Soapy and Molly Tammy Mary. Again her inhaler was nowhere to be found, and Janet said that Wendy had taken it. Susan found herself unable to scold or argue and silently vowed to keep the medicine high up, out of Janet's reach, when it was not in use.

When they had driven to Scheiman's office, Janet was half asleep and Stan carried her into the doctor's office.

Scheiman shook Janet gently and she woke and greeted him. He checked her over and called his receptionist to take her back to the waiting room with its toys. Then he turned to Susan and Stan and asked if they had bought Janet her puppy yet.

After a moment of surprise at the question Stan said they had.

"She happy?"

"Yes."

"Good."

Another silence, then Stan started a question, backed off, tried again with, "Dr. Scheiman, it's time for frankness. Is she going to get better? She only seems to be getting worse."

Scheiman looked at him without expression, then: "Anything can happen, we try never to lose hope."

"But?"

Scheiman took a deep breath. "This is a progressive condition. I've never tried to mislead you about that. There will be a cure sometime, I am certain that there will, but we just don't have it yet."

"So you mean she's going to—" He could not complete the sentence.

Scheiman again looked at him without expression.

Stan said, "Could they do more at a hospital?"

"The child is happiest at home. Try to keep her there. Use the inhaler when she needs it. That's all that can be done."

"But if—" Stan began again.

"If she lapses into a coma or if she develops a high fever and difficult breathing, phone me and I'll come."

Stan took Susan and Janet home, then doubled back to the druggist's for a fresh inhaler for Janet. He dropped the medicine at home and drove back to work. In the afternoon Susan phoned and Stan came home again. He came through the door calling, "What is it? Is Janet—?"

"She's all right. She's in bed. I just couldn't stay alone."

"All right, I understand that." Stan started up the stairs.

"Soapy is taking a nap on the foot of her bed," Susan called after him.

Stan found Janet sitting up in bed, her moob scout helicopter making foot-diameter circles over her knees. She held out her thin arms when she saw him and got a hug. "Daddy, guess who was here!"

"Molly Tammy Mary?" he asked.

"No. Somebody real!"

"Santa Claus!"

"Silly!" she giggled. "It isn't Christmas! Another Soapy was here!"

Stan looked for the gangly puppy and found him curled in the corner beyond the foot of Janet's bed. "I should have known. He's still here. Hello, Soapy!" He scratched the dog's head and was paid with a huge yawn and a noise somewhere between a squeak and a bellow. "Good puppy."

"No, Daddy!" Janet stopped for a difficult deep breath, her face reddening, but she went on happily. "That's my Soapy but there was *another* Soapy. He brought me a comic book to read and he looked at my Soapy and they sniffed each other and then he went away again."

"Yes. When your doggies go away, Janet, where do they go?"

"Just away. But he left my comic here." She pushed a bright magazine under Stan's gaze. He took it from her, read the childish title, the price, the date improbably advanced beyond the calendar, and handed it back. The back cover carried an ad for a moob scout helicopter.

"That was very sweet of him, Janet. Did he take anything away this time?"

"Last time he took my medicine but now Mommy puts it high and Soapy can't reach it."

"Wasn't that Wendy who took your medicine?"

"They both do. They're married, Daddy!"

"Oh, yes." He left the room. Janet's moob scout helicopter was still flying in circles.

Downstairs Stan told Susan that Janet seemed fairly well. "She has a comic book the dog brought her. Damn, those things are getting expensive. When I was kid they cost a dime, and I knew

they'd gone up to fifteen cents, but this is ridiculous."

Susan brought coffee for them both into the living room, and they sat sipping it cautiously until it cooled a bit. "Little by little, though, she's getting worse," Susan said.

"I know."

"And Scheiman won't do anything but act sympathetic! Why won't he help her, get the new medicine he always talks about! I let you do the talking today, why didn't you make him?"

Stan said, "There isn't any new medicine, Susan. You didn't listen to him. He says they're working on something new. Maybe in a few years. These things come slowly. Remember how long they had to work on polio."

"Stan, she can't wait. She's dying, Stan!"

He looked at her helplessly. He put down his cup and made a helpless gesture with his hands. "What can we do?" he asked.

Susan left her coffee and went upstairs to their bedroom. Stan continued to sit in the living room, staring at a piece of bric-a-brac given by some forgotten guest years before, then at a piece of furniture with a complex textile pattern in its slip cover. He picked up his coffee again and sipped.

After a long time he stepped quietly upstairs, found Susan asleep, and retreated to the kitchen to make Janet's dinner himself. When he brought it to her, she was wheezing very badly and asked for medicine. He left the food on her dresser and brought the new inhaler to her room. After she had eaten he took the dirty dishes back to the kitchen, absently munched a nondescript sandwich which he made himself, and prepared wearily for bed.

Susan had slept through, and he covered her and turned off the light.

In the morning they found Janet flushed, her face very hot to the touch. Her breathing was loud and gasping. Susan phoned Scheiman's office, found he had not yet arrived, and left an urgent message. They took turns sitting with Janet and striding nervously to the living room window in hopes of seeing Scheiman's car.

Instead, after seeming hours, the phone rang and it was the doctor. Stan explained the situation, and Scheiman said he would come immediately. Meanwhile they should have her use the inhaler as much as they could get her to.

Susan ran to the high shelf and cried out, "Stan, it's gone again!"

For seconds neither spoke. Stan racked his brain. The medicine, the new inhaler. It wasn't on the shelf. But last night—

"I brought it to her room last night! Look on the dresser!" He heard Susan running, did the same, heading for the child's room.

Pounding through the doorway of Janet's room, he collided with Susan. They performed an inane ballet, blockading each other until he grasped her by the upper arms and turned them both like dancers. He ran to the dresser and rummaged through white cotton underwear and pink socks with flowers embroidered around their tops. A battered doll with half her hair and all her clothing missing. Warranteed nontoxic wooden blocks splintered and marked with puppy teethmarks. No inhaler.

From the bed Janet moaned, her breath rasping. "Daddy," breath, "the big Soapy," breath, "and Wendy," breath, "took my medicine," breath, "and traded."

Stan whirled to the corner where the puppy liked to sleep. There he crouched, holding an inhaler between his forepaws. Stan leaped for the inhaler, snarling at the puppy. Soapy looked startled, then cringed farther into the corner as Stan swept the device up in one swing of his hand, wiped it clean and dry of dog spittle on his shirt, pulled off the cap, and in two quick strides moved to Janet's bedside again.

He dropped onto the edge of the bed, raised Janet with one hand, and held the inhaler for her with the other. She gazed at it, her eyes dull, her breath coming in loud but shallow wheezes. "Come on, baby," Stan pleaded. "Try for Daddy!"

Janet opened her mouth, took the mouthpiece of the inhaler carelessly between her teeth, continuing her fast, shallow breathing. Stan begged again, "Try to get it down, I'll count for you." Ceremoniously, trying to prevent his voice and his hands from shaking, he counted to three aloud.

At the count of three Janet closed her glazing eyes and clenched her fists on the cover in her lap. She sucked in a deep breath. Stan squeezed the pressure release on the inhaler, forcing an aerated spray of medicine into her mouth, into her throat, into her lungs. She opened her eyes and relaxed her fists. After holding the medicine down as long as she could, she expelled it. Stan recoiled from the acrid, unfamiliarly strong odor.

Janet coughed, gasped, then relaxed against Stan's supporting hand. Her breathing began to come in a deep and regular cadence. Again Stan held the inhaler for her, and she drew a second dose of the medicine deep into her lungs. And a third. The third seemed slightly shorter than the previous doses.

Stan held the inhaler to his ear and shook it, then tried spraying medicine in the air. None came. "I thought this was a new inhaler," he said to Susan.

He turned when he heard her answer. She stood crying over himself and Janet. She sank to her

knees at the child's bedside, one arm around Janet, the other around Stan. "I don't care, I don't care," she sobbed. "Just look at her!"

Janet was sitting up, breathing easily, ignoring her parents. She reached under her rumpled pillow and extracted her moob scout helicopter, turned it on and launched it into familiar orbit. The front doorbell rang and Susan left to admit Dr. Scheiman.

In an hour Susan and Stan were serving coffee to Scheiman in the kitchen while Janet remained playing upstairs with Soapy. Scheiman was questioning them. "You're sure you got this inhaler at the same store and on the same prescription as always?"

They assured him that they had.

"It's a pity that it's empty," Scheiman said. "I've seen our standard prescription help these children before, for a while, but I have never, never seen the symptoms disappear as completely, as absolutely, as Janet's. We'll have to watch her for a long time, but I'll wager you a bottle of whatever you like that this is a *cure,* and I've never seen one before.

"And there's enough of the stuff left in there for a little lingering odor, and it's not the odor it ought to be. You're *positive* you got this in the regular place?"

They were.

Scheiman held the inhaler upside down, extending his arm across the table. "You see this?" He pointed to a series of digits sunk in the small bottle's plastic-coated bottom. "This serial number identifies the batch that this inhaler was filled from at the pharmaceutical house. Your druggist doesn't make this stuff up."

Susan said, "Aren't the batches all the same?"

"They're supposed to be, but just in case there's ever a deviation, we want to be able to track all medicine from that batch."

"Then you should be able to trace *this* medicine!"

"That's the strange part of it. You see this number. It's much, much too high. There's no such batch as the one with this number, and won't be for years."

He slipped the bottle into a baggy pocket of his tweed jacket. "I'll take the inhaler with me if you don't mind, and try to follow it through, but I doubt that I'll get anywhere. You're *sure* this didn't come from any, ahh, unconventional source?"

Stan and Susan looked at each other. "She makes up silly stories about imaginary dogs bringing her things and taking things away. But all children have imaginary friends or pets. Even after we bought her a real dog, she went on with two more invisible ones."

"Well," said Scheiman, "let's not look a gift horse in the mouth, I suppose. Now that you two have

had the best news that parents could possibly hear, I think I'll just get back to my practice." He put down his cup and pushed his chair away from the kitchen table.

After Scheiman had left, Susan and Stan went upstairs to check again on Janet. She was flying her moob scout helicopter around Molly Tammy Mary's head while Soapy, curled now on the foot of her bed, warily followed the toy's progress. On the middle of Janet's rug were a series of puddles and small heaps of droppings.

"Did Soapy do that?" Susan asked.

"No, Mommy."

"Then who did? You're not going to tell me that Wendy did it!"

"The grown-up Soapy and Wehdy were here just now," Janet said, "but they didn't do it. They're married, you know." She giggled and blushed a little-girl blush.

"What does that mean?" Susan asked.

"You know!" Janet said. "When anybody gets married. Dogs are like people." She covered her face with a flower-printed quilt.

"Janet, what are you talking about?"

"They make babies, Mommy. You know that. The grown-up Soapy and Wendy made babies and brought them to show them to me. They're very pretty but they made on my rug."

Stan rubbed his head while Susan went to bring paper towels.

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*Prosper Mérimée was one of the most fascinating figures in French nineteenth-century literature. His work is largely unknown to the English-speaking world except through the opera* Carmen, *which Georges Bizet based on Mérimée's short story of the same name. Mérimée originally studied law, but never practiced it. Instead he served his nation in a succession of posts. At the age of 27 he was secretary to the ministers of commerce and marine, and a year later he was appointed inspector of ancient monuments. The latter position provided him with the background for "The Venus of Ille." At age 41 he was elected to the prestigious Academy, and he later was a senator of France and a commander of the Legion of Honor.*

*Mérimée had the habit of publishing some of his archeological theories and discoveries in works of fiction. "Carmen" contains valid observations on the gypsies in Spain, and in "The Venus of Ille" Mérimée is doubtless presenting valid theories regarding the Phoenician influence on the southern part of France next to Spain, even though the story ridicules them. "The Venus of Ille" was written in 1837 when Mérimée was 34 years old. Mérimée might have been influenced by the legend of Pygmalion. The idea of a malevolent statue appears later in the nineteenth century in the works of the English writer, F. Anstey. "The Venus of Ille" will long remain in your mind after you have finished reading it, just as it has remained solidly ensconced in an honored position in the world's literature of fantasy.*

—FRANCIS B. SHAFFER

# *The Venus Of Ille*

## by Prosper Mérimée

## (translated by Francis B. Shaffer)

"May this statue be benevolent and propitious for us
because it is so true to life." —Lucian, Philopseudes

I WAS DESCENDING THE FINAL slope of Mt. Canigou, and although the sun had already set, I could distinguish in the plain the

houses of the small town of Ille, toward which I was traveling.

"Surely," I said to the Catalan who had been acting as my guide since the previous evening, "you know where Monsieur de Peyrehorade lives?"

"I sure do," he said. "I know his house as well as I know my own. If it weren't so dark, I could point it out to you. It's the finest house in Ille. He has lots of money, Monsieur de Peyrehorade has, and he's marrying his son to someone even richer than he is."

"Will this marriage take place soon?" I asked him.

"Very soon. It could be that the violins for the celebration are already engaged. This evening perhaps, tomorrow, or maybe the day after, who knows! It will take place at Puygarrig, because Monsieur de Peyrehorade's son is marrying Mademoiselle de Puygarrig. It will be very impressive."

My friend, Monsieur de Passa, had recommended that I see Monsieur de Peyrehorade, whom he had described as a very well-informed and extremely obliging antiquarian. He would be happy to show me all the ruins within ten leagues. So I was counting on him to visit the region near Ille, which I knew to be rich in monuments dating from the medieval and earlier periods. The marriage, of which I had just learned for the first time, upset all my plans.

"I'm going to spoil the party," I said to myself. But I was expected. Monsieur de Peyrehorade had been informed of my coming, so I had to appear there.

"Let's make a bet, sir," said my guide when we were already on the plain. "Let's bet a cigar that I can guess what you're going to do at the Peyrehorades'."

Handing him a cigar, I answered, "That isn't difficult to guess. At this hour, after having walked six leagues over Mt. Canigou, the most important thing is to eat supper."

"Yes, but what about tomorrow? I would bet that you are coming to Ille to see the idol. I guessed that when I saw you sketching the statues in the church at Serrabona."

"Idol? What idol?" The word aroused my curiosity.

"How's that? Didn't they tell you when you were at Perpignan that Monsieur de Peyrehorade had found an earth idol?"

"Do you mean to say an earthenware idol of baked clay?"

"Not at all. It's copper, and you sure could make a lot of coins from it. It weighs as much as a church bell. And we found it deep in the earth at the foot of an olive tree."

"Were you there when it was discovered?"

"Yes, sir! Two weeks ago Monsieur de Peyrehorade told us, John Coll and me, to dig up an old olive tree that died of the cold last year,

a bad winter, as you remember. Well, while working away, John Coll, who was really putting his back into it, gave a swing of his pick, and I heard a ding . . . as if he had struck a bell. 'What's that,' I said, and we kept digging and digging, and then we could see a black hand sticking out of the ground like the hand of a dead person. It made me afraid. I went to Monsieur de Peyrehorade and told him. 'There are dead people buried beneath the olive tree. We have to call the priest.' 'What dead people?' he said to me. He came and as soon as he saw the hand he cried, 'An antique statue! An antique statue!' You would have believed that he had found a buried treasure. And he started working like crazy with his hands and his pick, and doing almost as much work as we two."

"What did you finally find?"

"A tall black woman, more than half nude, begging your pardon, sir, all made of copper, and Monsieur de Peyrehorade told us that it was an idol from pagan times . . . like from the age of Charlemagne."

"I know what it is. A bronze Virgin Mary from some destroyed convent."

"A Virgin! I sure would have recognized it if it had been! I tell you it's an idol. You can see that just by looking at it. She looks at you with her big white eyes. You'd say that she stares you down. You have to lower your eyes when you've looked at her."

"White eyes? They must be inlays in the bronze. Perhaps it might be a Roman statue."

"Roman, that's it. Monsieur de Peyrehorade says that it's Roman. I can see that you're a scholar like him."

"Is it whole and well preserved?"

"Sir, there's not a thing missing. It's more beautiful and better done than the painted plaster bust of King Louis Philippe at the city hall. But for all that, I don't like the face of that idol. It has a wicked look, and she is wicked, too."

"Wicked? What mischief has it ever done to you?"

"Not exactly to me, but you'll understand in a minute. We were really sweating trying to get her set up, and Monsieur de Peyrehorade was also heaving on the rope, a fine man, although he's as weak as a kitten. After a lot of trouble we got her upright. I was picking up a piece of broken tile to wedge her up, when clack! She fell over backwards all in a heap. I shouted, 'Look out below,' but not quickly enough, because John Coll didn't have time to get his leg out of the way."

"Was he hurt?"

"His poor leg was broken like a matchstick. When I saw that, I was furious. I wanted to stave in the statue with my pickaxe, but

Monsieur de Peyrehorade held me back. He gave some money to John Coll, but just the same, he has been in bed for two weeks since it happened, and the doctor says that he'll never be able to walk as well with that leg as with the other one. It's a shame because he was our best runner, and after the son in the Peyrehorade family, our best tennis player. Mr. Alphonse de Peyrehorade was really sad, because Coll always used to play with him. It was really beautiful to see how they could return the ball. They would never miss."

While chatting thus, we entered Ille, and soon I found myself in the presence of Monsieur de Peyrehorade. He was a little old man, hale and hearty, with powdered hair, a red nose, and a jovial and talkative air. Before opening the letter of introduction from Monsieur de Passa, he seated me before a beautifully set table, and to his wife and son he introduced me as an illustrious archeologist who could rescue the Roussillon region from the neglect it was suffering at the hands of the scholars.

I ate with a good appetite, because nothing makes you hungrier than fresh mountain air. While eating, I examined my hosts. I have already said a few words about Monsieur de Peyrehorade. I should add that he was liveliness itself. He spoke, ate, ran to his library, brought me books, showed me engravings, poured wine for me to drink. He was never still for more than two minutes. His wife, a bit too fat, like most Catalan women over forty, looked to me like a typical woman of the provinces, interested only in her household. Although the supper was enough for at least six persons, she went to the kitchen, had some pigeons killed and some corn cakes fried, and opened I don't know how many glasses of jelly. In an instant the table was covered with platters of food and bottles, and I would certainly have been dead of indigestion if I had merely tasted everything they offered to me. However, each time I declined something, she made new excuses. She said that I wouldn't like being at Ille, that in the provinces they don't have much, and that Parisians are so hard to please.

During the comings and goings of his parents, Alphonse de Peyrehorade was as motionless as a post. He was a tall young man, twenty-six years old, with facial features that were good looking and agreeably formed, but lacking expressiveness. His athletic appearance justified his reputation in the region as an indefatigable tennis player. This evening he was elegantly dressed, exactly like the fashion plate in the latest issue of the *Journal des Modes*. But he appeared uncomfortable in his finery. In his collar he was stiff as a sentry, and turned both body

and head in order to look in a different direction. His heavy, sunburned hands with their short fingernails contrasted singularly with his attire. They were the hands of a laborer coming from the sleeves of a dandy. Furthermore, although he examined me carefully from head to toe because I was from Paris, he spoke to me only once during the whole evening, and then only to ask where I had bought my watch chain.

"Well, now," said Monsieur de Peyrehorade as the supper was ending, "You're mine now, you're my guest, and I won't let you go until you have seen everything unusual that there is to see in our mountains. You must get to know our Roussillon region, and you must do it justice. You can't guess all that we're going to show you. Monuments from the Phoenicians, Celts, Romans, Arabs, and Byzantines. You'll see everything from A to Z. I'll take you everywhere, we won't skip a single brick."

A coughing spell made him stop talking. I took advantage of the opportunity to tell him that I would be extremely sorry to disturb him at a time of such importance to his family. If he could just give me his excellent advice on what excursions I should make, it wouldn't be necessary for him to accompany me.

"Ah. You're referring to my son's marriage," he said, interrupting me. "It's a trifle and will be all over the day after tomorrow. You'll celebrate the occasion with us as part of the family. The bride-to-be is in mourning for an aunt of whom she is the heiress. Therefore no big celebration, no ball. It's a shame. You would have seen our Catalans dance. The girls are pretty, and perhaps you might have decided to follow Alphonse's example. They say that one marriage leads to others. On Saturday after the young folks are married, I'm free, and we'll make some trips together. I'm sorry to bother you with a country wedding. For a Parisian surfeited with parties—and then to see a wedding celebration without dancing. Nevertheless, you'll see a bride—a bride—you'll be delighted. But you're a serious man and you don't worry about women. I have better things to show you. I'll really show you something. I'm saving a great surprise for tomorrow."

"Goodness," I said to him, "it's difficult to have a treasure in your house without everyone knowing about it. I think that I can guess the surprise you're preparing for me. If it's a question of your statue, the description that my guide gave me has excited my curiosity and made me ready to admire it."

"Ah. He spoke to you of the idol, because that's what they call my beautiful Venus Tur . . . but I don't want to say any more. Tomorrow you'll see it in broad day-

light, and you'll tell me if I'm right to believe it to be a masterpiece. You couldn't arrive at a better time. There are some inscriptions that I, a poor ignoramus, explain in my own way. But a scholar from Paris! Perhaps you'll make fun of my interpretation. For I've prepared an essay, I, an old provincial antiquary. I've made a start. I want to keep the printing presses busy. If you were to read it for me and correct it, I could hope . . . For example, I'm very curious to know how you will translate the inscription on the pedestal: CAVE . . . But I don't want to ask you anything yet. Tomorrow. Tomorrow. Not a word about the Venus today."

"You're right, Peyrehorade," said his wife, "to stop talking about your idol. You must see that you're keeping him from eating. And at Paris he's seen many more beautiful statues than yours. In the Tuileries Gardens, there are dozens, also in bronze."

"There's real ignorance, the confounded provincial ignorance," Monsieur de Peyrehorade interrupted. "To compare an admirable antique statue to the dull statues of Coustou." Paraphrasing Moliere, he continued, " 'How irreverently my wife speaks of the gods!' Did you know that my wife wanted me to melt the statue down in order to make a bell for the church? She would have been the sponsor. A masterwork by Myro!"

"Masterwork! A fine piece of work that statue did, breaking a man's leg."

"Dear wife, do you see that?" said Monsieur de Peyrehorade resolutely as he extended toward her his right leg, which was clad in a stocking of dyed silk. "If my Venus had broken that leg for me, I wouldn't be sorry."

"My God, Peyrehorade, how can you say such a thing? Fortunately, the man is getting better. And I still can't bring myself to look at the statue which did it. Poor John Coll."

"Wounded by Venus, sir," said Monsieur de Peyrehorade with a broad smile. "Wounded by Venus, the rascal complains 'Venus nec proemia noris.'* Who hasn't been wounded by Venus?"

Alphonse, who understood French better than Latin, winked with an intelligent attitude and looked at me as if to ask, "Do you understand?"

The supper ended. An hour ago I had stopped eating. I was tired, and I couldn't succeed in hiding my frequent yawns. Madame de Peyrehorade was the first to notice and remarked that it was time to go to bed. Then she commenced anew to excuse the poor accommodations that I would have. It wouldn't be as in Paris. In the

*"You will not know the gifts of Venus." Virgil, the Aeneid, IV.

provinces things aren't so good. I would have to forgive the people of the Roussillon region. In vain did I protest that, after walking through the mountains, a bundle of straw would have been a comfortable resting place. She continued to ask me to pardon the country folk if they didn't take care of me as well as they might have liked. Finally, I went up to the bedroom that had been selected for me, accompanied by Monsieur de Peyrehorade. The staircase, whose upper steps were made of wood, ended at the center of a corridor which led to the doors of several rooms.

"To the right," said my host, "is a group of rooms destined for my future daughter-in-law. You understand," he added with a refined tone of voice, "that we have to isolate newlyweds. You are at one end of the house, and they are at the other."

We entered a well-furnished room in which the first object I saw was a bed that was seven feet long, six feet wide, and so high that I needed a stool to crawl into it. After showing me the bell pull and seeing that the sugar bowl was full and that the bottles of eau de Cologne were properly placed on the wash stand, my host asked several times if I needed anything, wished me good night, and left me alone.

The windows were closed. Before undressing, I opened one to breathe the fresh night air, which was delightful after a long supper. Before me was Mt. Canigou, which was always worthy of admiration, but which appeared to me that night to be the most beautiful mountain in the world, illuminated as it was by the brightly shining moon. I remained several minutes looking at the mountain's wonderful outline, and I was going to close my window when, looking down, I perceived the statue on a pedestal about ten yards away from the house. It was in the corner of a hedge which separated a small garden from a larger level square, which, I learned later, was the city's tennis court. Monsieur de Peyrehorade had given the land to the town in response to his son's urgent requests.

At my distance it was difficult to distinguish the statue's pose; I could only judge its height, which appeared to be about six feet. At that moment two of the town boys, whistling a pretty folk song, "Regal Mountains," came across the tennis court rather close to the hedge. They stopped to look at the statue. One of them even spoke to it. He spoke Catalan, but I had been in the region long enough to understand what he said.

"There you are, you slut." (The Catalan term was still stronger.) "You're the one who broke John Coll's leg. If you were mine, I'd break your neck."

"Hah!" said the other. "With what? She's made of copper, and so hard that Etienne broke his file trying to make a mark on her. It's copper from pagan times, harder than anything I know of."

"If I had my cold chisel," (It appeared that he was an apprentice locksmith.) "I'd pop her big white eyes out of her head like an almond out of its shell. There's enough silver to make a hundred silver francs."

They continued several steps away from the idol.

"I have to say 'good evening' to the idol," said the taller of the two apprentices, stopping suddenly.

He bent down, probably to pick up a stone. I saw him raise his arm and throw something, and the bronze resounded with its impact. At the same instant the apprentice put his hand to his head and uttered a cry of pain.

"She threw it back at me!" he cried.

The two scoundrels took to their heels. Apparently the stone had bounced back off the metal, and thus the outrage that he committed against the goddess was punished. I closed the window, laughing heartily.

"Still another vandal punished by Venus. I wish that all who damage our old historic monuments would be hit in the head like that!"

With this charitable thought I went to sleep.

It was broad daylight when I awoke. Near my bed were, on one side, Monsieur de Peyrehorade in his dressing gown, and on the other side, a servant with a cup of chocolate sent by his wife.

"Let's go. Get up, my fine Parisian. Here's a lazybones from the capital," said my host as I dressed hastily. "It's eight o'clock, and still in bed. I've been up since six. Three times I've come upstairs. I crept up to your door on tiptoe, and not a sign of life. It's not good for you to sleep too much at your age. And you haven't seen my Venus. Come on. Drink this cup of Barcelona chocolate quickly. It's genuine smuggled goods. Chocolate like this you can't get in Paris. Get your strength together, because once you see my Venus, we won't be able to tear you away."

In five minutes I was ready, that is to say half shaved, my shirt buttoned crooked, and scalded by the chocolate I had to drink while it was still too hot. I went down to the garden and found myself before a wonderful statue.

It was indeed a Venus, and of marvelous beauty. It had the upper part of the body bare, as the ancients customarily represented the great divinities; the right hand, elevated to about the level of the breast, was turned palm inward, the thumb and first two fingers extended, and the two others slightly curved. The other hand,

near the hips, supported the drapery that covered the lower part of the body. The attitude of the statue recalled that of the statue of the murra* player, which is called, I don't know why, Germanicus. Perhaps they wanted to depict the goddess playing murra.

Whatever the truth might be, it is impossible to imagine anything more perfect than the body of that Venus, nothing more soft and voluptuous than her contours, nothing more elegant and noble than her drapery. I was expecting some work from the later Roman Empire, but I was seeing a masterpiece from the golden age of sculpture. What struck me more than anything else was the exquisite likeness to reality of her form, so that you could think it cast from a living model, if nature were able to produce so perfect an original.

The hair, combed back from the forehead, appeared to have been gilded at one time. The head, small as in almost all ancient Greek statues, was bent forward slightly. As to the face, I shall never be able to describe its strange quality which differed from every other ancient statue that I could remember. There was none of that calm and austere beauty of the Greek sculptors, who systematically endowed all the features with a majestic immobility. On the contrary, here I was surprised to see the artist's clearly indicated intention of rendering malice to the point of depravity. All the features were faintly contracted, the eyes a little oblique, the mouth upturned, the nostrils a bit distended. Disdain, irony, and cruelty could be seen in this face, which, nevertheless, possessed an unbelievable beauty. Truly, the more I looked at this wonderful statue, the more troubled I felt that such marvelous beauty was associated with a complete lack of tender-heartedness.

"If the model ever lived," I said to Monsieur de Peyrehorade, "and I doubt that heaven ever produced such a woman, I feel sorry for whoever loved her! She must have delighted in making them die of despair. There is something ferocious in her expression, and just the same, I have never seen anything so beautiful."

"It's Venus completely engrossed in her prey," cried Monsieur de Peyrehorade, pleased by my enthusiasm.

The expression of hellish irony was perhaps augmented by the contrast between the very brilliant silver-inlaid eyes and the dark-green patina that time had given to the whole statue. These brilliant eyes produced an illusion of reality, of life. I remembered what my guide had told me, that

*A game in which one of the players tries to guess quickly how many fingers are extended by the other player who rapidly uncovers his hand.

it made whoever looked at it cast his eyes down. That was almost true, and I couldn't avoid a feeling of anger at myself in feeling ill at ease before that bronze face.

"Now that you've admired everything in detail, my dear colleague in antique wares," said my host, "let's start, if you please, a scientific discussion. What do you say about the inscription, of which you haven't taken heed up to now?" He indicated the statue's pedestal, where I read these words:

CAVE AMANTEM

"Quid dicis, doctissime?"* he asked me while rubbing his hands together. "Let's see if we agree on the meaning of this *cave amantem*!"

"But," I answered, "there are two meanings. You could translate it as 'watch out for him who loves you, distrust lovers.' But in this sense, I doubt if it would be good Latin. From the diabolical expression of the lady, I would rather believe that the artist wanted to warn the spectator against this terrible beauty. Therefore, I would translate it as 'Watch out for yourself if *she* loves you.' "

"Humph," snorted Monsieur de Peyrehorade. "Yes, that's a possible meaning, but don't be offended. I prefer the first translation, which I'll elaborate. You know the lover of Venus?"

"There are several."

"Yes, but the foremost is Vulcan. Didn't the sculptor mean to say, 'Despite all your beauty, your disdainful air, you'll have a smith, an ugly hunchback, for a lover'? That's a deep lesson for flirts!"

I couldn't avoid smiling, because the explanation seemed so far-fetched.

"Latin is a dreadful language because of its conciseness," I observed in order to avoid openly contradicting my host, and I stepped back several paces in order better to contemplate the statue.

"Just an instant, colleague," said Monsieur de Peyrehorade, catching me by the arm. "You haven't seen everything. There is still another inscription. Climb onto the pedestal and look at the right arm." While so saying, he helped me up.

Without too much ceremony, I held on by throwing an arm around the neck of the Venus, with whom I was beginning to become familiar. I stared at her face for just an instant, and from close up I found her still more malicious and still more beautiful. Then I saw that there appeared to be several characters of cursive writing engraved on the arm. With the help of spectacles I spelled out what it was, and Monsieur de Peyrehorade pro-

*What do you say, most learned doctor?

nounced each word as I finished it, approving by voice and gesture. Thus I read:

VENERI TVRBVL . . .
EVTYCHES MYRO
IMPERIO FECIT

After the word *turbul* in the first line, it seemed to me that several letters had been effaced, but *turbul* was perfectly legible.

"What does it mean?" asked my smiling host, whose face was glowing with malice, because he thought that I wouldn't easily get past this *turbul.*

"There is one word that I don't yet understand," I told him. "The remainder is easy. Eutyches Myro has made this offering to Venus by her order."

"Good. But what do you make of *turbul*? What is his *turbul?*"

"*Turbul* bothers me a lot. I can't think of a well-known epithet for Venus which could help me. Come now, what would you say to *turbulenta?* Venus who disturbs, who agitates? You see that I'm still preoccupied by her malicious expression. *Turbulenta* isn't too bad an epithat for Venus," I added diffidently, for I wasn't very well satisfied with my own explanation.

"Venus the turbulent! Venus the roisterer! Do you think my Venus is a cabaret girl? Not at all, sir. She's a well-bred Venus. But I'm going to explain this *turbul*—at least if you promise not to reveal my discovery before my paper is printed. You see, I expect some slight renown from the discovery. You have to leave some corn for us poor devils in the province to harvest. You scholars in Paris already have so much."

From atop the pedestal where I was still perched, I gave him my solemn oath that I would never stoop to stealing his discovery.

"*Turbul* . . . sir," said he, coming closer and speaking softly so that no one but I could hear, "should be read as *turbulnerae.*"

"I still don't understand."

"Listen carefully. One league from here at the foot of the mountain is a town called Boultenère. It's a corruption of the Latin word *turbulnera.* Nothing is more common than such an inversion. Boultenère, sir, was a Roman town. I have always surmised it to be the case, but I never had the proof. But here is the proof. This Venus was the local divinity of Boultenère, and this word, Boultenère, which I can show is of ancient origin, proves that before it was a Roman city, Boultenère was a Phoenician city."

He stopped a moment to catch his breath and enjoy my surprise. I succeeded in repressing a strong urge to laugh.

"Actually," he pursued, "*Turbulnera* is pure Phoenician. *Tur,* pronounced *toor* . . . *tur* and *sur* are the same word, aren't they?

*Sur* was the Phoenician name for Tyre. I don't need to remind you what that is. *Bul* is Baal, Bal, Bul, slight differences in pronunciation. As for *nera,* that gives me some trouble. I'm tempted to believe, lacking a Phoenician word, that it comes from the Greek *neros,* humid, swampy. So it would be a hybrid word. In order to justify *neros,* I'll show you how the mountain streams form stagnant ponds at Boultenère. Furthermore, the ending *nera* could have been added much later in honor of Nera Pivesuvia, the wife of Tetricus, who might have done some favor to the city of Turbul. But because of the ponds, I prefer the etymology from *neros."*

With a self-satisfied air he took a pinch of snuff.

"But let's leave the Phoenicians and return to the inscription. I translate it as: To Venus of Boultenère, by her order, Myro dedicates this statue, his work."

I refrained from criticizing his etymology, but I wanted to gain some credit for my own sharpness of observation, so I said to him, "Just a moment, sir. Myro did dedicate something, but it doesn't necessarily have to be this statue."

"What!" he cried. "Wasn't Myro a famous Greek sculptor? His talent must have been perpetuated in his family, and one of his descendants must have made this statue. Nothing could be more certain."

"But," I replied, "on the arm I see a small hole. I think that it must have been used to fasten something, a bracelet perhaps, that Myro gave to Venus as an expiatory offering. Myro was unlucky in love. Venus was angry with him, so he appeased her with a golden bracelet. Note that *fecit* is often used in place of *consecravit.* They are synonymous. I'd show you several examples if I had the books by Gruter or Orellius here. It would be natural for someone in love to see Venus in a dream and imagine that she was commanding him to give a golden bracelet to her statue. Myro consecrated a bracelet . . . Then the barbarians or some sacrilegious robber . . ."

"Oh, it sounds as if you've been writing fiction," said my host as he gave me a hand to help me down. "No, sir, it's a work of the school of Myro. Just look at the workmanship, and you'll agree."

Having made a rule never completely to contradict headstrong enthusiasts of antiquity, I bowed my head with an appearance of having been convinced, and said, "It's an admirable piece of art."

"Oh, God," said Monsieur de Peyrehorade, "a new mark of vandalism. Someone must have thrown a stone at my statue!"

He had just noticed a white mark a little above the breast of the Venus. I pointed out a similar mark on the fingers of the right

hand, which I supposed to have been produced by the stone, or by a fragment that was split off by the impact and ricocheted against the hand. I told my host about the insult to the Venus the previous night and the rapid punishment that followed. He laughed about that, and would have liked to see the two apprentices changed into white birds, like Diomedes and his companions in the ancient legend.

The dinner bell interrupted this classical discussion, and exactly like yesterday evening, I had to eat for four people. Then the tenant farmers of Monsieur de Peyrehorade arrived, and while he was with them, his son took me to see an open carriage he had bought in Toulouse for his fiancée. It goes without saying that I praised it. Then we went into the stable where he kept me a half hour boasting about his horses, giving me their pedigrees, and describing the prizes they had won in races in the region. In connection with a grey mare that he was going to give to his fiancée, he finally began to speak to me about her.

"We'll see her today," he said. "I don't know if you'll think she's pretty. At Paris you are hard to please, but everyone here finds her charming. The great thing is that she is very rich. Her aunt in Prades left her everything. I'm very fortunate."

I was profoundly shocked to see a young man appear more interested in his fiancée's dowry than in her beauty.

"You know jewelry," continued Alphonse. "What do you think of this? Here's the ring I'll give her tomorrow."

From his little finger he took a heavy ring ornamented with diamonds and formed of two clasped hands, an allusion that seemed to me very poetic. The workmanship was very old, but I judged that it had been reworked to add the diamonds. On the inside of the ring in Gothic letters were the words, *Sempr' ab ti,* that is to say, always with thee.

"It's a pretty ring," I said, "but these added diamonds make it lose some of its character."

"Oh, it's much prettier this way," he answered, smiling. "Those are twelve hundred francs worth of diamonds. My mother gave it to me. It's a very old heirloom . . . from the time of knights in armor. It belonged to my grandmother, who received it from her grandmother. God only knows when it was made."

"The practice at Paris," I told him, "is to give a plain ring, ordinarily of two different metals, such as gold and platinum. That other ring you are wearing would be very appropriate. This one, with the hands in relief and the diamonds is so big that it would be hard to wear a glove over it."

"My wife may do as she likes. I

think that in any case she will be glad to have it. Twelve hundred francs on one finger is pleasant. This little ring," he added, looking with satisfaction at the plain ring he had on his hand, "this ring was given to me by a woman in Paris during Mardi Gras. I really let myself go in Paris two years ago. There's where to have a good time." And he sighed with regret.

We were to eat that evening at Puygarrig with the parents of the bride. We climbed into the carriage and drove to their chateau, about a league and a half from Ille. I was presented and received as a friend of the family. I shall speak of neither the supper nor the ensuing conversation in which I scarcely took part. Alphonse, seated next to his fiancée, spoke a word into her ear at intervals of a quarter of an hour. She scarcely lifted her eyes, and each time her fiancée spoke to her, she blushed modestly, but answered him without embarrassment.

Mademoiselle de Puygarrig was eighteen years old. Her slender and supple figure contrasted with her fiancé's robust and muscular body. She was not merely beautiful, she was fascinating. I admired the perfect naturalness of all her responses. Her appearance of goodness, which, however, was not exempt from a slight tinge of mischief, made me think, despite myself, of my host's Venus. In the comparison that I performed inwardly, I wondered if the superior beauty that I had to grant to the statue didn't consist largely of its tiger-like expression, because energy, even in base passions, always excites in us astonishment and a sort of involuntary admiration.

What a shame, I thought to myself while leaving Puygarrig, that such a lovely girl is rich, and that her dowry makes her sought after by a man who is not worthy of her!

Back at Ille, not knowing what to say to Madame de Peyrehorade, but nevertheless thinking it proper to engage her in conversation from time to time, I said, "You are very courageous here in the Roussillon. You're going to have a wedding on Friday. At Paris we are more superstitious. No one would dare to take a wife on a Friday."

"Goodness! Don't talk to me about it," said Madame de Peyrehorade. "If it had been my decision, I would certainly have chosen another day. But my husband wanted it on a Friday, and we had to give in to him. It bothers me just the same. What if something bad happens? There must be some reason why everyone is afraid of Friday."

"Friday," said her husband, "is the day sacred to Venus. A good day for a wedding. You see that I'm always thinking about my Venus. On my honor, it's because of her that I selected a Friday. To-

morrow, if you like, before the ceremony we'll make a little sacrifice to her. We'll sacrifice two pigeons, and if I knew where to find some incense . . ."

"For shame, Peyrehorade," interrupted his wife, who was completely scandalized. "Burning incense in front of an idol! That would be an abomination. What would they say about us around here?"

"At least you'll let me put a crown of roses and lilies on her head. 'Scatter handfuls of lilies,' says Virgil in the Aeneid. You see, sir, the king's charter was in vain. We don't have religious freedom."

The plans for the morrow were arranged in the following way. Everyone should be ready and dressed at ten on the dot. Having had our chocolate, we would go to Puygarrig by carriage. The civil ceremony would take place at the city hall, and the religious ceremony in the chapel of their chateau. Then would follow lunch. After lunch we would pass the time however we liked, and at seven we would return to Ille where the two newly joined families would dine. The rest would take care of itself. Since dancing was not possible, the meals would be as grand as possible.

At eight o'clock I was seated before the Venus, pencil in my hand, trying for the twentieth time to draw the head of the statue, but I still couldn't capture her expression. Monsieur de Peyrehorade kept coming and going around me, giving me advice and going over his Phoenician etymology. Then he placed some Bengal roses on the pedestal, and with a tragicomic voice he addressed some vows to her for the married couple who were going to live under his roof. At about nine he went in to dress, and at the same time Alphonse came out, dressed in a tight-fitting new dress coat, white gloves, patent-leather shoes, embossed buttons, and a rose in his lapel.

"Will you do a portrait of my wife?" he asked me, leaning over my sketch. "She is pretty also."

At that moment a game of tennis began on the adjacent court that I have already mentioned. It immediately attracted Alphonse's attention, and I, tired and despairing of being able to draw that diabolical face, soon left my sketching in order to watch the players. Among them were several Spanish muleteers who had arrived the preceding evening. They were from Aragon and Navarre, and almost all were skilled players. The players from Ille, although encouraged by Alphonse's presence and advice, were rather quickly defeated by the newcomers. The French spectators were dismayed. Alphonse looked at his watch. It was only nine thirty, and his mother still had to fix her hair. He did not hesitate;

he took off his jacket, asked for a tennis racket, and challenged the Spaniards. I was surprised.

"I have to maintain their respect for Ille," he said.

Then I found him truly impressive. He played with all he had. His clothing, about which he was so concerned a few mintues ago, now meant nothing to him. A few minutes earlier he would have been afraid to turn his head for fear of mussing his necktie. Now he no longer thought of his carefully combed hair and the carefully pleated dickey of his shirt. And his fiancée? . . . I believe that if it had been necessary, he would have put off the wedding. I saw him quickly change shoes, roll up his sleeves, and with a confident attitude take over the defeated team, like Caesar rallying his troops at Dyrrachium. I jumped over the hedge and took a convenient position in the shadow of a tree where I could watch both sides.

Alphonse missed the first ball, which was served to him. True, it came low along the ground, hit with surprising speed by an Aragonese who appeared to be the leader of the Spaniards. He was about forty, thin and sinewy, six feet tall, with an olive skin that was almost as dark as the bronze of the Venus.

Alphonse, in a rage, threw his racket to the ground.

"It's this cursed ring," he shouted. "It's too tight for my finger, and it made me miss an easy one."

With some difficulty he took the diamond ring from his finger. I went forward to take it, but he forestalled me by running to the Venus and putting the ring onto its ring finger. Then he returned to the court.

He was pale, but calm and resolute. From then on, he made not a single mistake, and the Spaniards were decisively defeated. The enthusiasm of the spectators made a fine sight. Some shouted for joy and threw their hats into the air. Others shook his hand and thanked him for saving the reputation of Ille. If he had repulsed an invading army, I doubt that the congratulations he would have received could have been more animated and more sincere. The disappointment of the defeated team added still more to the joy of his victory.

"We'll play again, my friend," he said in a superior voice to the Aragonese, "but I'll give you points."

I would have preferred Alphonse to have been more modest, and I was almost hurt by his rival's humiliation.

The tall Spaniard deeply resented this insult. I saw him pale beneath his swarthy skin. Dejectedly, he looked at his racket and clenched his teeth together; then, with a choking voice, he said very

quietly, *"Me lo pagaras."**

The voice of Monsieur de Peyrehorade interrupted his son's triumph. My host, very surprised not to see him supervising the preparations of the new carriage, was still more surprised to see him all sweaty with a racket in his hand. Alphonse ran into the house, washed his face and hands, put on his new coat and patent-leather shoes, and five minutes later we were on the way to Puygarrig. All the tennis players of Ille and many of the spectators ran after us with shouts of joy. The powerful horses which pulled us could scarcely maintain our lead ahead of those intrepid Catalans.

We were at Puygarrig and the wedding procession was starting toward the city hall when Alphonse slapped his forehead and whispered to me, "A fine kettle of fish! I have forgotten the ring! It's on the finger of the Venus, damn it! Whatever you do, don't tell my mother. Perhaps she won't notice."

"You could send someone to get it," I told him.

"Hah! My valet stayed at Ille, and the servants here I scarcely trust. Twelve hundred francs in diamonds! That would tempt a lot of people. Furthermore, what would they say here about my carelessness? They would make fun of me. They'll call me the statue's husband . . . provided it has not been stolen. Fortunately, the common folk are afraid of the idol. They don't dare come within an arm's length of it. Oh, well, it does not matter; I have another ring."

The civil and religious ceremonies took place with the proper degree of pomp, and Mademoiselle de Puygarrig received the ring that formerly belonged to a Parisian milliner in the belief that her fiancé was giving her a token of his love. Then we sat down at the banquet table where we ate and drank in a very leisurely manner, with singing between courses. I felt sorry for the bride on account of the rough merriment around her; however, she maintained a better countenance than I would have hoped for, and she was troubled neither by clumsiness nor by affectation.

Perhaps courage comes from difficult situations. The meal ended at four, and the men went for a walk in the magnificent grounds of the chateau, where they watched the peasants of Puygarrig, dressed in their holiday clothes, dance on the lawn. In this way we spent several hours. Meanwhile, the women were very attentive to the bride, who showed them the wedding presents. Then she changed her clothes, and I noticed that she covered her beautiful hair with a feathered hat, because women find nothing more urgent than to assume as rapidly

*You'll pay for this.

as possible the ornaments that they may not wear while they are still single. It was nearly eight o'clock when we were ready to leave for Ille. But first a pathetic scene took place. Mademoiselle de Puygarrig's aunt, an aged and devout woman, who had been a mother to her, was not to accompany us to town. At the departure she delivered a touching sermon to her niece on the duties of the wife, which sermon resulted in a torrent of tears and endless embraces. Monsieur de Peyrehorade likened the separation to the abduction of the Sabine women. Finally we left and on the way everyone attempted to take the bride's mind off the farewell and make her laugh, but in vain. At Ille a dinner awaited us, and what a dinner! If the loud merriment earlier in the day had shocked me, I was still more disturbed by the ribald remarks that were directed at the groom and especially at the bride. The groom, who had disappeared briefly before sitting down to table, was pale and serious as death. He was drinking almost all the time an old wine of Collioure that was almost as strong as brandy. I was next to him and felt obliged to warn him. "Watch out, the wine is supposed to . . ."

I don't know what stupid remark I made to him to match the spirit of the others at the banquet. He nudged me with his knee and said in a low voice, "When we leave the table . . . I have to tell you something."

His solemn voice surprised me. I looked at him more attentively and noticed a strange alteration in his features.

"Do you feel all right?" I asked him.

"No," he said, and continued drinking.

However, in the middle of shouts and hand clapping, an eleven-year-old boy, who had crept under the table, emerged to show to the guests a pretty pink and white ribbon that he had just taken from the bride's ankle. It was called her garter, and immediately cut into pieces and distributed to the young men, each of whom tied a piece to the buttonhole in their lapel, following the custom that is still observed in some old-fashioned families. The bride blushed to the roots of her hair. But her confusion reached its peak when Monsieur de Peyrehorade, after calling for silence, recited some Catalan poetry that he said was made up on the spur of the moment. Here is its meaning, as I understand it.

"What have we here, my friends? Has the wine I drank made me see double? There are two Venuses here . . ."

The groom turned his head with a start, which made everyone laugh.

"Yes," pursued Monsieur de Peyrehorade, "there are two Ve-

nuses under my roof. One I found in the ground, like a truffle, and the other, more like a gift from heaven, has just shared her belt with us."

He meant to say garter.

"My son, pick the Roman Venus or the Catalan Venus, as you prefer. A scoundrel would take the Catalan Venus, for her marriage portion is better. The Roman Venus is black, the Catalan Venus is white. The Roman is cold, but the Catalan will set anyone on fire."

This disastrous poem excited such a shout, such noisy applause, and such deep laughs that I thought that the ceiling would fall on our heads. I don't know why a marriage always makes me sad. Even more, this one disgusted me a little.

The last songs were sung by the deputy mayor, and I must say that they were very improper. We went into the salon to see the departure of the bride who was soon to be taken to her chamber.

Alphonse drew me into a recess by a window and said to me without looking at me, "You're going to make fun of me . . . but I don't know what is the matter. I'm bewitched. The devil has me in his power."

The first thought that came to me was that he felt unable to perform his conjugal duties. "You drank too much Collioure wine," I told him. "I warned you."

"Yes, perhaps. But it's something that is still more horrible."

His voice broke. I thought he was completely drunk.

"You know, my ring?" he continued after a pause.

"Well, was it stolen?"

"No."

"In that case, you have it."

"No . . . I . . . I can't get it off the finger of that damned Venus."

"You didn't pull hard enough."

"Yes, I did . . . but Venus . . . she has closed her finger." He gave me a haggard look, leaning on the window latch to avoid falling.

"What a tale," I told him. "You pushed the ring on too far. Tomorrow you'll get it off with pliers. But be careful you don't damage the statue."

"No, I tell you. Her finger is folded. She has closed her fist. Don't you understand? She is my wife because I gave her my ring . . . She doesn't want to give it back."

I felt a sudden shiver run up and down my spine, and then a big sigh that he made sent me a whiff of alcohol, and my emotions vanished. The wretch is completely drunk, I thought.

"You're an antiquary, sir," the groom added in a lamenting voice. "You know those statues. Perhaps there is a spring, or some trickery that I don't understand. Would you go see?"

"Gladly," I said. "Let's go."

"No, I'd rather not go with you."

I left the salon.

The weather had changed during the banquet, and rain was beginning to fall heavily. I was going to ask for an umbrella when a thought stopped me. I would be a real fool, I thought, to go check what a drunk told me. Furthermore, perhaps he wanted to play a nasty joke on me to give his provincial friends a laugh. The least that could happen to me was to get wet to the skin and catch cold.

From the door I glanced at the statue which had rivulets of water running down it. I went to my room without returning to the salon. I went to bed, but sleep was long in coming. All the events of the day came back to me. I thought of the sweet, innocent girl delivered to a hulking drunk. What an ugly thing, I thought, is marriage for money. The mayor puts on his red, white and blue sash, the priest puts on his crucifix and cassock, and the end result is that this sweet young thing is given to the Minotaur. What can two people who don't love each other say to one another at this moment, a moment for which two lovers would willingly risk their lives? Can a woman love a man once she has seen him behave like a beast? First impressions are not forgotten, and I'm sure Alphonse will deserve to be hated.

During my monologue, which I have greatly abbreviated, I heard a great amount of activity in the house, doors being opened and closed, and carriages departing. Then I seemed to hear the light steps of several women going to the end of the corridor farthest from my room. Probably they were accompanying the bride to her room. Then they went down the stairs. The door of the new Madame de Peyrehorade was closed. How worried and ill at ease that poor girl must be, I said to myself. I was in a bad mood, and I tossed and turned in my bed. A bachelor plays a silly role in a house where there is a wedding.

For some time all was quiet, and then the silence was broken by heavy steps upon the stairs. The wooden steps creaked loudly.

"What a lout," I told myself. "I bet he's going to fall down the stairs."

Everything became quiet again. I picked up a book to change my train of thought. It was a statistical summary for the region, containing a treatise by Monsieur de Peyrehorade on the monuments around Prades left by the druids. I fell asleep on the third page.

I slept poorly and woke up several times. It might have been five o'clock in the morning, and I had been awake for more than twenty minutes when the rooster crowed. Dawn was breaking. Then I heard

the same heavy steps, the same creaking on the stairs, that I had heard before falling asleep. It seemed strange. I yawned and tried to guess why Alphonse was getting up. I could imagine no likely reason. I was going to close my eyes again when my attention was newly aroused by strange footsteps mixed with bells to call the servants, and the sound of doors being opened and closed noisily. Then I distinguished some indistinct screams.

The drunkard must have set fire to something, I thought as I scrambled out of bed.

I dressed quickly and went into the corridor. The screams were coming from the other end of the corridor, and one heart-rending voice dominated all the others. "My boy! My boy!" Obviously, something had happened to Alphonse. I ran to the nuptial chamber. It was full of people. The first thing that struck my eye was the half-dressed young man lying across the bed. The bedstead was broken. He was livid and motionless. His mother was crying and screaming beside him. Monsieur de Peyrehorade was rubbing his son's temples with eau de Cologne and holding smelling salts under his nose. Alas! His son had been dead for a long time.

His wife was on a couch at the other end of the room, wracked by horrible convulsions. She was uttering inarticulate screams, and two maids could scarcely keep her under control.

"My God!" I said to myself. "What has happened?"

I went to the bed and lifted the body of the wretched young man. It was already stiff and cold. His clenched teeth and darkened face expressed the most frightful agony. It was obvious that his death had been violent and his agony excruciating. However, there was no trace of blood on his clothing. I opened his shirt and saw a bruise that extended around his ribs and back. One might have thought that he had been crushed in an iron ring. My foot felt something hard on the rug. I bent down and saw the diamond ring.

I took Monsieur and Madame de Peyrehorade to their room. Then I had the bride brought to them.

"You still have a daughter-in-law," I told them. "You owe her your care." Then I left them.

To me it did not seem doubtful that Alphonse had been the victim of murder by people who had found a way to enter the bride's room during the night. The bruises on the chest and their circular shape bothered me greatly, because a stick or iron bar could not have produced them. Suddenly I remembered having heard that at Valence bandits had used a long leather bag filled with fine sand as a murder weapon. Right away I thought of the Aragonese

muleteer and his threat. Just the same, I scarcely dared think that he could have taken such a terrible vengeance for Alphonse's casual remark.

I went through the house looking for traces of forced entry, but found nothing. I went into the garden to see if the murderers could have come in this way, but I found no definite indications. Furtheremore, the rain of yesterday evening had soaked the ground so much that it couldn't retain a clear imprint. I observed, however, several footprints pressed deep into the earth. They went in two opposite directions, but along the same line, leaving from the corner of the hedge next to the tennis court and ending at the door of the house. These could be from Alphonse when he went to get his ring from the statue. On the other hand, since the hedge there was not so thick, the murderers must have broken through it there. I stopped a moment in front of the statue to contemplate it again. This time its expression of wicked irony made me afraid when I looked at it. With my mind full of the horrible scene that I had just witnessed, I seemed to see an infernal goddess rejoicing in the misfortune that had overtaken that house.

I returned to my room and remained there until noon. Then I left it and asked for news of my hosts. They were a bit calmer. Mademoiselle de Puygarrig, or I should say Alphonse's widow, had regained consciousness. She had even spoken to the royal prosecuting attorney from Perpignan, who was in Ille on his tour, and he had taken a deposition from her. He asked me for a deposition. I told him what I knew, without concealing my suspicion of the muleteer from Aragon, whom he ordered to be arrested immediately.

"Have you learned anything from Alphonse's wife?" I asked the prosecuting attorney after my deposition was signed.

"That poor young thing has gone mad," he said. "She's totally insane. This is what she told me: She said that she had been in bed a few minutes with the curtains of the bed closed, when the door of the room opened, and someone came in. She was at the side of the bed, her face toward the wall. She didn't move, thinking that it was her husband. A short time later, the bed creaked as if an enormous weight had been placed on it. She was too much afraid to turn her head. She's not sure of the time, but five or ten minutes might have elapsed. Then she made an involuntary movement, or else the person who was in the bed did, and she came into contact with something cold as ice. Those are her very words. She shrank back toward her side of the bed, trembling all over her body.

Shortly later, the door opened a second time, and for a second time someone came in, who said, 'Good evening, dear little wife.' Soon thereafter the curtains of the bed were opened. She heard a muffled cry. The person in bed beside her sat up with arms extended. She turned her head and saw, so she says, her husband on his knees close to the head of the bed. He was in the arms of some sort of greenish giant who was squeezing the life out of him. She told me over and over, the poor woman, that she recognized the bronze Venus, the statue of Monsieur de Peyrehorade. Since it has been dug up, the whole countryside is talking about it. But to return to the madwoman's story, at this sight, she fainted, and probably a short time earlier, she had lost her mind. She can't tell how long she remained unconscious. When she came to, she still saw the apparition or statue, as she always refers to it, sitting motionless in the bed with her lifeless husband in its arms. A rooster crowed. The statue got out of bed, dropped the body and left. Madame de Peyrehorade rang for the servants, and you know the rest."

The Spaniard was brought in. He was calm, and he defended himself with composure and presence of mind. He did not deny uttering the seeming threat of the day before, but said that the only thing he meant was that after a day of rest he would have won the return match. I recall that he added the following:

"When a man of Aragon is insulted, he doesn't wait until the next day to take his revenge. If I had believed that Monsieur Alphonse had really meant to insult me, I would have knifed him right then and there."

His shoes were compared with the prints in the garden; the shoes were much the larger. Furthermore, the innkeeper where he stayed attested that the muleteer had spent most of the night doctoring one of his mules that was sick and giving it a rubdown. Furthermore, the Aragonese had a good reputation, and he was well known in this region, which he visited each year on business. They apologized and let him go.

I'm forgetting the deposition of a servant who was the last to see Alphonse alive. When Alphonse was just about to go upstairs to his wife, he called the servant to him and asked anxiously if he knew where I was. The servant answered that he had not seen me. Thereupon Alphonse didn't speak for a minute, and then he said, "The devil must have got him also!"

I asked the servant if Alphonse was wearing his diamond ring then. The servant hesitated to answer, but at last he said that he didn't think so, but that he hadn't really noticed. "If he had had the

ring on his finger," he added, recollecting himself, "I would surely have noticed it, because I thought that he had given it to his bride."

While speaking to the servant, I began to feel the superstitious terror that had spread through the house as a result of the deposition by the new Madame de Peyrehorade.

The prosecuting attorney looked at me with a doubtful smile, and I did not persist in questioning the servant.

Several hours after Alphonse was buried, I made ready to leave Ille. Monsieur de Peyrehorade's carriage was to drive me to Perpignan. Despite his weakened state, the old man accompanied me to the garden gate. We walked without speaking, and he leaned heavily on my arm. When the time came to say farewell, I cast a last look at the Venus. I anticipated that my host, although he did not share the fear and hatred that it inspired in some members of his household, would be glad to get rid of an object that would forever remind him of a dreadful misfortune. My intention was to induce him to put it into a museum. I hesitated to broach the subject, but Monsieur de Peyrehorade automatically turned his head in the direction where I was looking. He saw the statue and immediately burst into tears. We shook hands, and without daring to say a word, I climbed into the carriage.

Since my departure I have learned that nothing has cleared up the mysterious circumstances of Alphonse's death.

Monsieur de Peyrehorade died several months after his son. By his will he left his manuscripts to me. Perhaps some day I shall publish them. Nowhere did I find his essay concerning the inscriptions on the statue.

P.S. My friend, Monsieur de Passa, has just written to me from Perpignan that the statue no longer exists. After her husband's death, the first thing Madame de Peyrehorade did was to have a bell made of it, and in that new form it hangs in the church in Ille. But, adds Monsieur de Passa, a curse seems to follow whoever owns that bronze. In the time since that bell rings over Ille, the grapes have twice been ruined by frost.

# —BUT HOW?

*by Isaac Asimov*

SOMETIMES I WISH I WERE SMART enough to know when I've happened to say something smart, so that I can get it down on paper and notarize it, as proof for posterity.

For instance, back in 1952, I was listening to the news of the election-day Eisenhower landslide with considerable gloom* when a ray of sunshine penetrated the darkness.

It seemed a young Democrat had just won his election to the Senate by a comfortable margin in the face of the tidal wave in the other direction at the presidential level. He was shown thanking his election workers and, in doing so, displayed such irresistible charm, that I turned to my wife and said:

"If he weren't a Catholic, he'd be the next President of the United States, after Eisenhower."

You're ahead of me, I know, but that young man was John F. Kennedy, and I was remarkably prescient. Unfortunately, I have no record of the remark and my wife—the only witness—doesn't remember it.

On the other hand, at about the same time, in the early 1950s, I said, in the course of a discussion at a social gathering, "This is the last generation in which the unrestricted-right-to-breed will remain unquestioned. After this, birth control will be enforced."

"What about the Roman Catholic Church?" someone asked me.

"The Roman Catholic Church," I said, "will have no choice but to go along."

I was hooted down by unanimous consensus, and it was the general

**I will hide nothing from you. I am a Democrat.*

feeling that being a science fiction writer had gone to my head—but I still stand on what I said nearly twenty years ago.

So we'll limit births for reasons I explained last month.

—But how?

There are many methods of birth control practiced. There is abstention and chastity, for example. (Don't laugh! For some people, this works, and we are in no position to turn down the help offered by any method, however minimal. There is the rhythm method, of choosing, or trying to choose, that time of the month when a woman is not ovulating. There is the practice of withdrawal, or of surgical and permanent sterilization, or chemical and temporary sterilization, or of mechanical interception, and so on.

All have their value as far as birth control is concerned; all have their disadvantages; no one method will do the trick by voluntary acceptance; perhaps even all together will not do the trick.

Nevertheless, we must try, and if anyone can think of some technique that is not being tried but ought to be, it is his duty, in this crisis facing mankind* to advance it as forcefully as he can. This I intend to do.

The real enemy, as I see it, is social pressure, which is the strongest human force in the world. Love laughs at locksmiths and may flourish under the severest legal condemnations, but it is love indeed that can persist under no punishment worse than the cold-hearted ostracism of society.

Social pressure is irrepressible. The rebels who stand firmly against the Establishment and who object to all the moss-grown mores of yore, quickly develop a subculture with mores of its own which they do not, and dare not, violate.

And it is social pressure, inexorable social pressure, that dictates that people shall have children—lots of children—the more children the better.

There is reason for it. Despite what many think, the conventions of society are not invented merely to annoy and confuse, or out of a perverse delight in stupidity. They make sense—in the context of the times in which they originate.

Until the 19th Century, there was virtually no place on Earth and virtually no time in history in which life expectancy was greater than thirty-five years. In most places and most times it was considerably less.

*See THE POWER OF PROGRESSION, May 1969, and MY PLANET, 'TIS OF THEE, July 1970.*

There was virtually no place and no time in which infant mortality wasn't terrifyingly high. It was not the death of children that was surprising, but their survival.

Through all the ages of high infant mortality and low life expectancy, it stood to reason that each family had to have as many children as possible. This was not because each family sat down and worried about the future of mankind in the abstract. Not at all; it was because in a tribal society, the family is the social and cultural unit, and as many young as possible were necessary to carry on the work of herding or farming or whatever, while standing to their weapons to keep off other tribes at odd moments. And it took all the children the women could have to supply the necessary manpower.

With death so prevalent through hunger, disease and warfare, the problem of overpopulation did not arise. If, unexpectedly, a tribe's numbers did increase substantially, they could always move outward and fall on the next tribe. It was the withering and extinction of the tribe that seemed the greater danger.

Consequently, social pressure were in favor of children, and naturally and rightly so.

We needn't go off into anthropological byways to see evidence of this; we have it at our fingertips in the Bible—the most important single source of social pressure in Western civilization. (And this is crucial, for it is Western culture that controls the Earth militarily, and Western culture that will have to lead the way in population policy.)

The first recorded statement of God to humanity after its creation is: "And God blessed them and said unto them, Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the Earth—" (Genesis 1:28).

On a number of occasions thereafter, the Bible records the fact that the inability to bear children is considered an enormous calamity. God promises Abram that he will be taken care of, saying, ". . . Fear not, Abram: I am thy shield and thy exceeding great reward" (Genesis 15:1). But Abram can find no comfort in this and says, ". . . Lord God, what wilt thou give me, seeing I go childless . . ." (Genesis 15:2).

In fact, childlessness was viewed as Divine punishment. Thus, Jacob married two sisters: Leah and Rachel. He had wanted only Rachel but had been forced to take Leah through a trick. As a result, he showed considerable favoritism and of this God apparently disapproved; "And when the Lord saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb: but Rachel was barren." (Genesis 29:31).

Naturally, Rachel was upset. "And when Rachel saw that she bare

Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, "Give me children, or else I die." (Genesis 30:1).

There is the case of Hannah who was barren, despite constant prayer, and who was miserable over it, despite the faithful love of her husband. He overlooked her barrenness (which made her worthless in a tribal sense and which placed her under strong suspicion of sinfulness) and expressed his love for her most touchingly, "Then said Elkanah her husband to her, Hannah, why weepest thou? and why eatest thou not? and why is thy heart grieved? am not I better to thee than ten sons?" (1 Samuel 1:8).

But Hannah perseveres in prayer and conceives at last, bearing Samuel. The second chapter of the book contains her triumphant song of celebration.

A particularly clear indication that barrenness is the punishment of sin arises in connection with the history of David. David had brought the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem and, in celebration, had participated in the ritualistic, orgiastic dance of celebration, one in which (the Bible is not clear) there may have been strong fertility-rite components. David's wife, Michal, disapproved strongly, saying sarcastically, ". . . How glorious was the king of Israel to day, who uncovered himself to day in the eyes of the handmaids of his servants, as one of the vain fellows shamelessly uncovereth himself!" (2 Samuel 6:20).

This criticism displeased David and, apparently, God as well, for "Therefore Michal the daughter of Saul had no child unto the day of her death." (2 Samuel 6:23).

So strong was the tribal push for children that if a wife were barren, she herself might take the initiative of forcing her husband to impregnate a servant of her own, that she might have the credit of children by surrogate. Thus, when Abram's wife, Sarai, proved barren, she said to her husband, ". . . Behold now, the Lord hath restrained me from bearing: I pray thee, go in unto my maid; it may be that I may obtain children by her . . ." (Genesis 16:2).

Similarly, Jacob's wife, Rachel, lent her husband her maid, Bilhah, while his other wife, Leah, not to be behindhand, made her maid Zilpah available. These four women, among them, are described as being the mothers of the various ancestors of the twelve tribes of Israel.

It worked the other way, too. If a husband died before having children, it was the duty of the nearest member of the family (the brother, if possible) to make the effort of impregnating the widow in order that she might have sons which would then be counted to the credit of the dead man.

Thus, Jacob's fourth son, Judah, had an oldest son, Er, for whom he arranged a marriage with a young lady named Tamar. Unfortunately, Er died, so Judah told his next son, Onan: ". . . Go in unto thy brother's wife and marry her, and raise up seed to thy brother." (Genesis 38:8).

Onan, however, did not want to. "And Onan knew that the seed should not be his; and it came to pass, when he went in unto his brother's wife, that he spilled it on the ground, lest that he should give seed to his brother. / And the thing which he did displeased the Lord: wherefore he slew him also." (Genesis 38:9-10).

Thus, the sin of Onan is not masturbation (which is what the word "onanism" means) but what we call "coitus interruptus."

The pressure to bear children exists because a tribal society would not long survive without converting women into baby machines, and the Biblical tales reflect this.

To be sure, there are religious sects which glorify birth control—in the form of chastity and virginity—but almost invariably because they expect the imminent end of the Earth.* The early Christians were among these, and to this day chastity is a Christian virtue, and virginity is considered a pretty praiseworthy thing. Yet, even so, it is taken for granted in our traditional society that the greatest fulfillment a woman can possibly experience on Earth is that of becoming a wife and mother; that motherhood is of all things on Earth the most sacred; that to have many children is really a blessing and to have few children, or none, through some act of will, is somehow to be selfish.

The pressures produce important myths about men, too, for to have many children seems to be accepted as proving something about a man's virility. Even today, the father of triplets or more sometimes manages a look of smug modesty before the camera, an "oh-it-was-nothing" expression that he thinks befits the sexual athlete. (Actually, whatever a man does or does not has no connection at all with multiple births.)

All these pressures inherited from the dead past exist, then, despite the fact that the situation is now no longer what it was in tribal days. It is completely and catastrophically the opposite. We no longer have an empty Earth, we have a full one. We no longer have a short life expectancy, but a long one. We no longer have a high infant-mortality rate, but a low one. We are no longer doubling Earth's population in several millennia, but in several decades.

*Which, in a way, is why the modern population experts are pushing for birth control, too, because otherwise they expect the imminent end of the Earth.*

Yet when we speak of birth control even today, we still have to overcome all the age-old beliefs of the tribal situation. Clearly, social pressure can be fought only with social pressure, and as an example I have sometimes suggested (with a grin, lest I be lynched on the spot) that we begin by abolishing Mother's Day and replacing it with Childless Day, in which we honor all the adult women without children.

Social pressure involves more than merely a question of having children or not having children. The social pressures that for thousands of years have insisted on children, have gone into detail to make sure that these children come to pass. They have definitely and specifically outlawed the easiest methods of birth control; methods which require no equipment, no chemicals, no calculations, no particular self-control; methods which, if applied, *under tribal conditions of yore*, would have threatened the tribe with extinction.

So successful has this pressure been that such methods of birth control have passed beyond human ken, apparently. At least, when I hear proponents of birth-control speak, or read what they write, I never seem to hear or see any mention of these natural methods. Either they are blissfully ignorant of them, or are afraid to speak of them.

The fact is, you see, that there are a variety of sexual practices that seem to give satisfaction, that do no physiological harm, and that offer no chance, whatsoever, for conception.

One and all, these stand condemned in our society for reasons that stretch back to the primitive necessity for babies.

For instance, the simplest possible non-conception-centered sexual practice is masturbation (in either male or female). It reduces tension and does no physiological harm.

Yet for how many years in our own society has it been viewed as an unspeakable vice (despite the fact that, I understand, it is almost universally practiced). The pressure to consider it as more than a vice, and as actually a sin, has been such that in the effort to find Biblical thunder against it, Onan's deed was considered masturbation, which it most certainly was not.

Clearly, the real crime of masturbation is that it wastes semen, which, by tribal views, ought to be used in a sporting effort to effect conception. To say this, however, would be alien to the spirit of our society, so lies are invented instead. Masturbation (the threat goes) "weakens" you; by which is meant that you won't perform effectively with women—a horrifying possibility to most men. Worse than that is the wild threat that masturbation gives rise to degeneracy (whatever that is) and even insanity.

Actually, it does none of these things. It does not even have the evils implicit in its being a "solitary vice." It can be indulged in, in company, and not necessarily in "vile orgies," but in ordinary heterosexual interaction.

The strictures and fulminations against masturbation never succeeded in wiping it out. It continued universal. What the lies did do, however, was to force the act to be carried on in secret, in shame, and in fear, so that those lies helped raise generations of neurotics with distorted and utterly unnecessary hangups about sex. And why? To pay lip service to practices necessary to primitive tribes, but *fatal* to ourselves.

Part and parcel of the battle against masturbation is that against pornograph. There have been periods in history when pornography was driven underground with scorn and disgust. This did not wipe out "dirty books," "dirty pictures" and "dirty jokes." It lent them an added titillation, if anything. But the drive against pornography did make it clear that sex was filthy, and therefore utterly distorted the attitude of millions concerning an activity which is both necessary and intensely pleasurable.

And what is the reason usually given for forbidding pornography? The one I hear most often is that it will inflame minds and cause people encountering such "filth" to go ravening out into the street like wild beasts, seeking to rape and pervert.

It is ridiculous to think so. I suspect that what happens when you involve yourself with pornography, assuming it succeeds in arousing "vile impulses" within you, is that you masturbate at the first opportunity. It releases tension rather than builds it.

It is, in fact, by building tensions through a studied effort to consider sex dirty and forbidden, that one is most likely to be driven to rape.

No, the real evil of pornography in a tribal society is that, by encouraging masturbation, it diminishes the chance of conception.

There is a whole array of practices which, by the society and therefore by law, are stigmatized as perverse, as unnatural, as unspeakable, as "crimes against nature," and so on. That these are unnatural is clearly not so, for if they were, they would be easy to suppress. Indeed, there would be no need to suppress them for they wouldn't exist. It is unnatural, for instance, to fly by flapping your arms, so that there are no laws against it. It is unnatural to live without breathing, so no one has to inveigh against it.

What is true about the so-called perversions is that they are *very* natural. They are so natural, indeed, that not all the shackles of the law, and not all the hellfire of religion, can serve to wipe them out.

And what harm do they do? Are they sicknesses?

I frequently hear homosexuality spoken of as a sickness, for instance, and yet there have been societies in which it was taken more or less for granted. Homosexuality was prevalent, and even approved, in the Golden Age of Athens; it was prevalent during the Golden Age of Islam; and despite everything, it was prevalent (I understand) among the upper classes of the Victorian Age.

It may be sickness, but it does not seem to be inconsistent with culture. And how much of its sickness is the result of the hidden world in which it is forced to live; the fear and shame that are made to accompany it?

What is the real crime of all these so-called perversions? Might it not be that one and all are effective birth-control agents. No practicing, exclusive homosexual, male or female, can possibly become pregnant. No one can ever impregnate or be impregnated by oral-genital contacts.

So what's wrong—in a time when birth-rate *must* be lowered?

I don't mean that there aren't practices that *do* do harm, and these one ought to oppose. Sadomasochistic practices carried beyond the level of mild stimulation are not to be encouraged, for the same reason we oppose mutilation and murder. Those practices which involve seriously unhygienic conditions should be discouraged for the same reason any other unhygienic condition is discouraged.

Nor do I imply that we must *force* people to practice "perversions."

I, for instance, am not a homosexual and wouldn't consider becoming one just to avoid having children. Nor would I persuade anyone to become one for that purpose and that purpose only.

I merely say that in a world threatened by overconception, it is useless and even suicidally harmful to carry on a battle against those who, of their own accord, prefer homosexuality, who in doing so do us no harm, and who, indeed, spare us children. Furthermore, there are borderline cases who might be homosexuals if left to themselves; shall we force them, by unbearable social pressure, into loveless heterosexual marriages, and into presenting the world with unneeded babies? How do we justify this in the endangered world of the late twentieth century?

Social pressure, and the law, invades the bedrooms of even legally married individuals and dictates their private sexual practices. I am told that if a man and wife wish to practice anal or oral intercourse and are caught at it, they can be given stiff jail sentences in almost any state of the Union.

Why? What harm have they done themselves or anyone else? It is punishment without crime.

"The "harm," of course, is that they've practiced a completely effective birth control method that requires no equipment, no preparation, and supplies them, presumably, with satisfaction—something incompatible with the needs of a long-dead-and-gone tribal past.

I have heard it said that the practice of "perversions" is "corrupting"; that it replaces the "normal way," which is then neglected.

I've never seen evidence presented to back this view, but even if it were true, what then? What is the "normal way" in a world like ours which must dread overconception? And if someone doesn't like the "normal way" and therefore doesn't have children, whose business is that? If that same couple chose not to have children by practicing abstention, would anyone care? Would the law care? Then what's wrong with not having children another way? Because pleasure is a crime?

In David Reuben's book *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex,* he devotes a section to oral-genital contacts, of which he seems to approve, but concludes that "regular copulation is even more enjoyable."

Actually, I suppose that is for each individual to decide for himself, but even if "regular copulation" *is* more enjoyable, what then? If you find roast beef more enjoyable than bread-and-butter, is that a reason to outlaw bread-and-butter? And if you can't have roast beef and must choose between bread-and-butter and starvation, would you choose starvation?

It might very well be that it is variety that is best of all, and that for law and custom to try to insist on a monotony which, of all monotonies, is most dangerous to us today, is the greatest perversion of all.

Let's summarize, then.

I think that the importance of birth control is such that we ought to allow no useful method to lie unused.

All the common methods have their drawbacks: abstention is nearly impossible; sterilization is abhorrent; the rhythm method is cold-blooded and deprives the female of sex at just the time of the month she is most receptive; mechanical devices slow you up just when you least want to slow up; chemicals are bound to have side-effects. I think, then, there is room for another method, particularly one which has none of these drawbacks.

With that in mind I think that social pressure against those practices commonly called "perversions" ought to be lifted, where these are not physiologically harmful. The very qualities that made them perversions

in a conception-centered society make them virtues in a non-conception-centered society.

I think that sex education ought to include not only information concerning what is usually considered "normal" but also about those practices which are non-conception-centered. No one need to be taught to indulge in them exclusively, but by knowing they exist and aren't "wrong," the number of occasions that so-called normal intercourse need be indulged in, with all the complications and drawbacks of artificial birth-control methods, can be reduced. And, of course, if a couple have no children, and want one or two, they will know what to do.

For those who can't stomach "perversions" and insist on doing everything by the numbers in the way that was good enough for their grandmother (I wonder!)—well, good luck to them, but they had better be careful.

One way or another, birth control must be made effective, and what I have suggested here is only one more method; one which, joined to the others already available, increases by that much the general effectiveness of the system as a whole and makes the chance just a little bit greater that the world might yet be saved.

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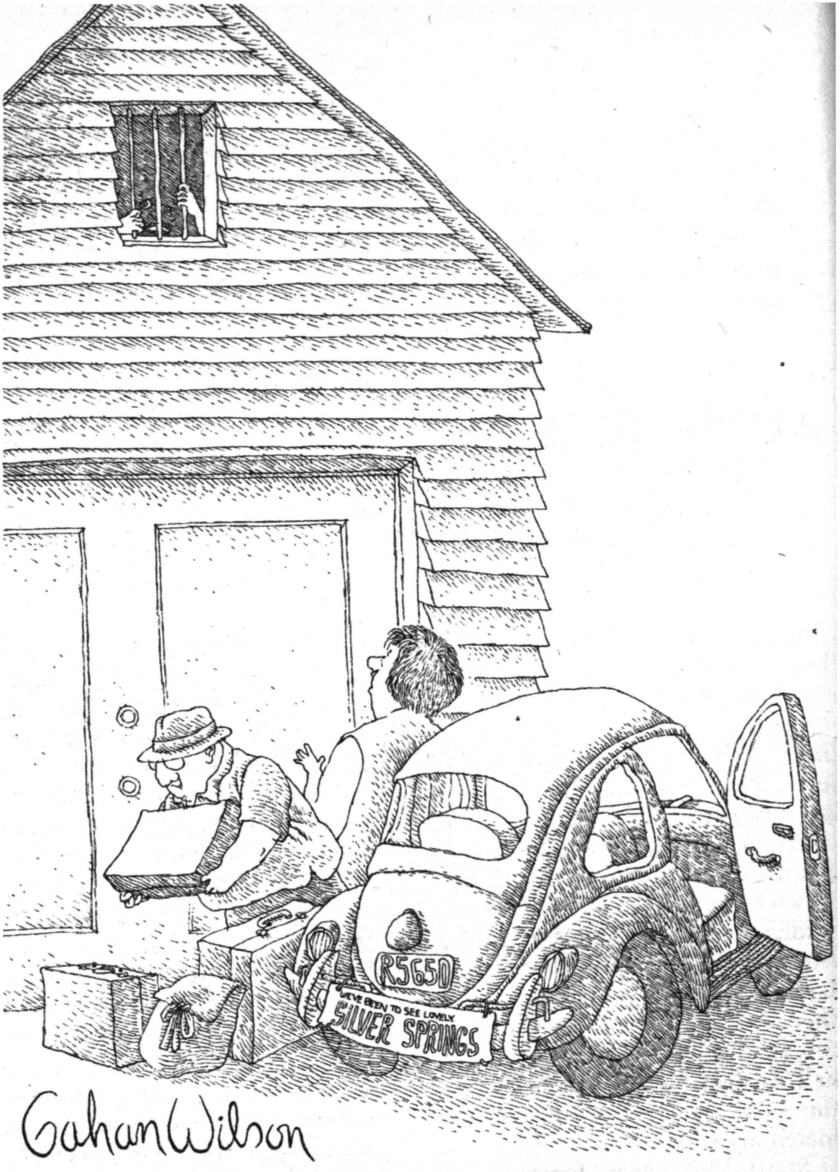


*"Oh, my God—we completely forgot about Uncle Fred!"*

*This is a second* (BYE, BYE, BANANA BIRD *December 1969*) *colorful adventure in the budding career of Corporal Roxy Rimidon of the Planet Patrol, here on special duty for Games, where the competition can be savage. Sonya Dorman, whose verse has also appeared in these pages, has just had a collection of poems published by the Ohio State University Press.*

# ALPHA BETS

## *by Sonya Dorman*

SOMEONE RAN BY ON THE beach, scuffling a spray of warm sand over my breasts and throat. I brushed it off, turned over again, buttocks to the sun, and closed my eyes. This morning when I arrived in Acapulco, I'd checked in at Planet Patrol Headquarters only to get my assigned room, then rushed down to the beach wearing a shift. Didn't even stop to get a towel. I'd thrown myself into the water, floated for a few minutes, and then stretched out with the shift for an inadequate sand cover. In half an hour I could acquire just the honey-gold color of skin to match my hair.

Starting at dawn, tomorrow, I was on special duty for Games, here in Inter-Dominion West. The long, narrow land bridge separated America Dominion from the blue islands and great southern land mass of Cuba Dominion. The cities contained recreational parks and beaches, theatres and music houses, the fields and stadia for Games, and one of the three Planet Patrol Headquarters where every six months each one of us must spend two days for physical and psych check before returning to duty. Outside the cities lay towns in both desert and mountain; most of the Inter-Dominion Councilmen lived out there.

There were two other Inter-Dominion areas. One was a small continent with outlying islands

southeast of India Dominion, where Games were held at alternate six-month periods. The other lay far north in the Atlantic. It had dome cities used for Inter-Dominion meetings, where the Council presidents from the ten Earth Dominions, as well as Vogl and Alpha, met to discuss their problems. There was also a six-mile border zone there, set aside for Winter Games during the northern summer.

"Tanning nicely," a voice said, and I opened my eyes, but whoever it was had already gone by. All I could see were the long, sinewy legs, probably those of a runner, striding up the beach. It was kind of fun to lie out here like a tourist; the beach was one of the few places I could be out of uniform and thus anonymous.

"Tanning very nicely," I said aloud to the sky as I turned once again, a forearm across my brow to keep the sun's brilliance from blinding me. Just this way, my brother and I used to lie and watch the clouds move like ships through blue space.

I thought of him, now called Gyro Rim, and remembered him at ten, or twelve, practicing balance on fence tops, rock peaks, town curbs. He had phenomenal balance, and was one of the youngest tumblers to compete in senior Games.

Competition between Dominions was often savage. Once the Torch was lighted, the Games got under way and for ten days, every six months, swarms of young men and women contended with each other. Year round they were in perpetual training. Competition was tough, sometimes bloody, occasionally fatal. We worked off our problems, our trade battles, our border squabbles, through the Games.

Through them we also exchanged with each other the courage and beauty from each Earth Dominion. Next year, the first athletes from off planet would compete. The expense of bringing them in was very high, but the price of the colonies' increasing resentment at being left out might be higher. At the last Inter-Dominion session, it was decided they should compete with the rest of us. Who knew what marvelous skill might be developed out there on Vogl, with its swamps and waterways hidden under a quilt of hot mist? or on Alpha, first planet to be colonized.

I lay on the beach at Acapulco, turning myself honey-gold, and thought of the old myth that the cosmos was created from the mystic letters of the alphabet. Man, speaking his word, was moving outward. We hadn't given up the old dream of meeting others who would speak some other alphabet, though as yet there was no indication they existed.

Toes touched me softly. I

couldn't make out whether it was a prelude to love play, a summons to work, or a warning of danger. I turned my head and opened one eye, squinting to look up. A little, delicate, dark-skinned girl stood there, and grinned down at me. "Are you Corporal Rimidon?" she asked.

"Yes," I said. I sat up, brushing the sand from my skin.

"I couldn't tell, you aren't in uniform."

I rolled to my knees and pulled on the beach shift. "Then how did you guess?" I asked.

"I didn't. I just poked everybody all the way down the beach until I got to you."

I looked back up the curve of blazing white sand and saw a lot of curious people staring at us. "And who are you?" I asked, thinking she was a nervy child.

"Captain Wananga's daughter. She would like to see you in her office. You're a nice color."

"Thank you," I said, getting to my feet. "So are you." After all, she'd done the most practical thing, if she'd been sent to find me. Hardly anyone on the sand wore clothes, let alone identifying insignia. I followed her back up the beach. She kept tilting her head to look up at me and our smiles got warmer as we went. I revised my opinion of her from brat to smart kid to delightful child, as we went.

"I want to go to a P.P.A. Academy too," she said, as we turned up one of the beautiful mosaic paths to a moving walkway. "I want to be good at everything. Mother says I have to have more discipline, though."

"Why, you're only a kid," I said, cheerfully. "How old are you?"

"I'm only nine," she said with a big sigh. "Look at all the years I have to wait." She took my hand and guided me onto the walkway which moved toward Planet Patrol Headquarters.

"Don't you think I ought to change to uniform?" I asked her.

"Mother said you aren't on duty yet, it's all right."

Then what the hell does she want to drag me off the beach for, I wondered.

If I'd been prepared for the child's mother to be small, too, I was wrong. Captain Wananga stood six feet tall. She had a long, narrow skull on which the black hair curled into a tight cap, an aquiline nose, huge black eyes. In the light-blue summer Patrol uniform, she was breath-taking.

"I see Neeba found you," she said in an easy voice.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Sit down, why don't you, Corporal." She sat down behind her desk and I sat opposite her, with the cool light from the opaqued window on my face. Her elegant head and shoulders showed in silhouette against the windowpanel.

She said, "I wanted to meet you, and brief you a bit, before you go on duty. You don't mind? It is your personal free time."

"Yes, ma'am," I said, swallowing my annoyance.

"The few of us who are assigned to Games are those who can be spared from other areas and who have a record for keeping cool heads. The Councilmen handle most of the Games situations, as they arise, and we're not even very popular around here at this time. Usually, very few of us are called in. At any rate, there can't be any partisanship for Planet Patrol members."

"I realize that," I said, and wondered what she was talking about. My brother, perhaps? "Is this about my brother?" I asked.

"Brother?" she echoed. "I don't understand."

"Gyro Rim. He's competing here."

She curled her fingers up into her palms, and I noticed that her left wrist was crooked. Planet Patrol must be mighty busy to call her back on active duty. And she didn't look much more than thirty, though she had a child of nine. I was awfully curious. Thirty was the age at which most of us just began to think of marriage and a family.

"Are you very attached to your brother?" she asked.

"I'm proud of him, and I like to see him win, but he can't win all the time. He's only nineteen."

"Only! How old are you?"

"Twenty-three."

She was thoughtfully silent for a moment. "Well, you see, they've dragged me out of my hidey-hole for this duty, in spite of the fact that I have an artificial radius."

"Is it the new porous plastic?"

Her eyebrows rose. "You're familiar with it? Unfortunately, mine was one of the very early jobs, as you can see."

"My mother's an orthopedic surgeon, she put in a new spine for my Uncle Wrexel last year. It's the first porous plastic spine ever done. He grows foodgreens in Inter-Dominion North, in a glasshouse." I tried to restrain my smile, feeling she wouldn't appreciate a family joke, but she had an extraordinary power which drew everything from me until I nearly babbled. So I couldn't help smiling, and said, "It creaks, in the cold climate. My uncle's spine, I mean."

"And that's funny?" she demanded.

"Uncle Wrexel makes jokes about it. They tried to retire him, but he refused. So he gets around all right, and they have a special chair for him at work, he only creaks outdoors," I checked my giggle as well as I could. "He's busy hybridizing vegetables this year."

"Raul must know of him," she said. "He's spent the last three

months revising the *Standard Encyclopedia of Foodgreens*. We carry twenty pounds of reference film with us wherever we go. When I was called here to duty, we came down together, and he disappeared into C for Cabbage. He did say he'd meet me for dinner, though," and she reflectively rubbed her wrist, and looked at it. "Creaks!" she snorted.

Then she changed, and became brisk. "Corporal, there have been rumors that some young people from Vogl may try to make trouble, though it is only rumor, so far. Of course there are Vogl Council families here, but there's a group of youngsters who have threatened to come in and make trouble, because they feel they should be competing this year. You must have heard some of this?"

"I've heard there's a group called Vogl Independents who want to establish a dominion and free themselves from Earth. There's plenty of the same talk from Alpha, too, Captain."

"There's an extreme Vogl group called Insurrectionists, who create most of the trouble. There's quite enough tension and hair-trigger temper at the Games, between Dominion members, without dumping an outside group in our laps. We're supposed to keep an extra sharp eye on things, so patrol at ease but keep a careful eye on the practice pits and walkways. Needless to say, if there's trouble and no Councilman handy, you take care of it. Have you seen your brother here?"

"No, ma'am. But I thought it would be a good idea to stop off at the tumblers' pit tomorrow and say hello. That way, he'll know I'm on duty, and we can stay out of each other's way. I mean, I'd be sorry to have to mix it up with my own brother if he got into trouble."

"Very sensible," she said. She thumbed the light button on her desk. The door opened and Neeba came in. She stood at attention, all three and half feet of her, in front of her mother's desk. A real charmer, that kid.

Her mother said, "It's time for you to go back to our quarters, and please remind your father he's to meet me for dinner." As Neeba was going out, Captain Wananga called, "Don't you dare stay up late tonight. You've been keeping groggy hours all week."

"Yes, *ma'am,*" Neeba said, disappearing with a fiery grin.

"Oh, I like her," I said.

"She's a nice child, but wild. She wants to do everything just right the first time, and has no patience for learning or hard work."

"Does anyone, at nine?"

She looked me hard in the eyes. "I did."

For that, I had no reply. The captain began to pack up some microfiles that were on her desk; she

put them into their locker and turned the disc to secure it. "Now!" she said. "You're not on duty, and as of five minutes from now, I'm off duty myself. I think you ought to come along and have dinner with us. I know Raul will want to talk to you about your uncle."

In solemn silence we sat opposite each other for five minutes. Then she shot up out of her chair and said, "I've got my change of clothes here. Why don't you go on to your room—you did bring a dress?—and I'll pick you up in half an hour. Wear dancing shoes if you have them, I promise you won't sit still for long."

She's going to turn out to be a heller, I said to myself, as I took the walkway toward the Patrol dormitory. I couldn't ask for better company off duty. Or on, for that matter, though she must be usually on a desk or teaching job. Usual routine was often upset for Games, and I might find her out in the crowds tomorrow, or I might not see her again at all.

I washed off the last of the beach sand and put on my dress, which was the exact shade of blue-green to compliment my gold skin and hair. Expecting Captain Wananga to be prompt, I hurried, hooking my mother's gift, two little diamonds, into my ears, and slipping my Patrol credit card into the seam pocket of my dress.

She was in the lounge, waiting, wearing a bright pink dress which was like another skin painted onto her long torso to the hips, where it flared into an extreme cut of drapery. She wore chains of pink quartz in her ears. I'm five-eight and not many women can make me feel small and plain, but for the first few moments when we went out, that's how I felt. Nobody gave me a second glance, and I wasn't used to that.

If Neeba gave off sparks, she got that fire from her mother. We plunged through the mob at the door of the Cocoarico, where Raul was supposed to meet us, and a general, with a major in tow, swooped over through the crowd of athletes and tourists. "Nannan!" he yelled, "you're off duty!"

We found our table and sat down with the general and major, who ordered a bottle of Rio brandy. It went down our throats slick as a serpent and danced the Pachanga in our stomachs, heads, and hearts. "Raul must have been delayed by carrots, or possibly corn," Nannan said.

"I don't mind if he doesn't show up at all," the general said happily.

We ordered a tray of small foods to help us sop up the brandy, and Nannan and the general got up to dance. Her energy was enormous and beautiful. Maybe I could get assigned to her permanently; there'd be no one better to work for; together we'd

take each mystic letter of the alphabet and create our own cosmos with the sun for a light bulb and the elongated silver bubbles of space ships for moths. And I would get off planet, one of these days.

"Hey, Roxy, your glass is empty," the major chided me, but I had sense enough to put my hand over it before he could pour me any more of that brandy.

I'd lost track of Nannan and the general in the crowd of dancers, but they reappeared, Nannan with her husband, who was taller and darker than she. Side by side they looked wonderful; in a tipsy swoop of sentiment I thought it no surprise they'd married young, they were so well matched. Of course that was nonsense, looks having nothing to do with it, and only the Rio brandy could have felled me with such a silly conclusion.

The general and major took off for greener fields, and Raul sat down with us, and we ordered dinner. He said to me, "I want to hear about your uncle, Roxy, and all his vegetables."

"His spine creaks," Nannan muttered, and flexed her wrist close to her ear.

"That's been well oiled," Raul said to her and they grinned.

Dinner was served, and Raul said to me, "Well?"

"My father's family have all been in foodstuffs. Dad had a shelf farm, and Uncle Wrexel's up in I.-D. north in a glasshouse tower. He's just hybridized a yellow cucumber."

Nannan gave me a droll look and we burst into laughter. "A yellow cucumber, what for?" she shrieked.

"It's got carotene," I shrieked back.

Raul tilted the empty brandy bottle and shook his head at us. "Better eat, before you do any more talking." He held the bottle over his glass; three or four pale drops slid out. "Churls," he said. "Never saved me a drop."

"Oh, order another," Nannan said.

"Nothing doing. I've got to go back and finish Celery tonight." He smiled at me. "Perhaps you'll tell me how to get in touch with your uncle. If he's really developed such a cucumber, it's got to go into my book."

I wrote my uncle's call number for him, and we fell into a comfortable silence while we ate. When we'd finished the meal with Atlantis Supreme, a custard sunken into a bowl of fruit, Raul said, "I'm sorry to leave you, but you won't lack for company."

Nannan turned to him, and they exchanged a look of humorous, warm complicity. I'd never shared that with a man, and probably wouldn't for a long time yet, but I looked forward to the time when I would.

Raul had been right, of course. The platters were hardly cleared from the table when a Councilman named Hennessy appeared, saying, "Nannan, you're off duty!" just as the general had. He sat down with us and ordered another bottle of brandy. When they got up to dance, a tall man wearing the white with red circles of Soviet Dominion came over.

"I'm a runner, so I can't drink, but I certainly can dance," he said. And he did, indeed, dance, until as we circled and circled the floor, I was sure the soles were worn out of my sandas.

I felt pretty off-planet as Nannan and I got onto the walkway that took us back toward our quarters. It was a mellow night, the stars faintly visible above the great lights of the city. Xenon markers, like fireflies, showed the walkway turnoffs. In a little while maybe my head would stop bobbing so independently, like a raft on a wave.

"It was a wonderful evening," I said. "I didn't know anyone down here and thought I'd just spend the evening at a flick and go to bed early."

"You have to get out and meet people when you're in the cities," she said. Just in time, she gave me a push at one of the markers and we shifted to another walkway.

"You don't need to see me all the way back," I said, losing my balance and grabbing her arm to steady myself. "Oh, hell, I hope that wasn't your synthetic," I said apologetically.

She put the arm around me and half lifted me off the walkway to the ramp. "It's strong enough, I carried Neeba on it until she could walk. Roxy, you better take a charge pill, or you won't be fit for duty in the morning."

I paused on the step to my room, which gave me four inches, making me as tall as Nannan Wananga. "Many thanks, Captain," I said.

"My pleasure, Corporal. If I don't see you during Games, please come to my office before you leave, to say good-bye."

I floated into my room, carefully hung up my dress, took off my sandals, one of which did have a hole danced through it, and swallowed the charge pill to clear my head. I put my hormone tab box on the shelf beside my cap so I wouldn't forget to take one in the morning, and wished for the hundredth time they'd get that once-a-month injection perfected. Then I fell flat on the bed.

Gamma twisted off from the sun's corona and formed itself into a gazelle which leaped over the moon. Two cucumbers followed it, green mother and yellow child, shrieking with laughter. Lamed, with its Bactrian hump, marched slowly across the desert of Alpha where I met it, waving a brandy bottle in my hand. "Thank you, Corporal," the lamed said, taking

the bottle in its teeth. It continued to march with splendid dignity right off the curved edge of the planet. There was a soft plonk! as it landed somewhere below.

PLONK! went the timer, and I opened my eyes to morning light. I felt fine as I put on the open-collared summer Patrol shirt, then the gauze-weight pantaloons, then socks, and boots with the pantaloons tucked into the tops. Brush hair, gulp hormone, slap cap on back of head. I should have had a haircut before coming down; the waves were growing long down the back of my neck. When I made captain, I would damn well grow it to my waist, as it had been before I went to the Academy. Then I could roll it up under the cap or let it down for off duty, just as I pleased.

The low buildings were all polarized glass set into white or pastel walls. There was a good breeze coming in off the Pacific, the sun was bright, the walkways filling up. I got a quick, high-protein breakfast and took the speedway through the city toward the Games field and practice pits. I could have taken a heli but I wanted to see, smell, feel, as much as I could. The blue Patrol uniforms were scarce, though the beige shirts and shorts of Councilmen were everywhere.

A group of hurdlers from Asia Dominion turned onto the speedway ahead of me. I could recognize them by that extra clump of muscle at the top of the thigh, which came from pushing off from the ground for a high-speed jump. A little further on, they were joined by a hammer relay team in the white and silver moiré tights of Scandia Dominion. There's nothing more beautiful than people who feel healthy and walk happy, and they made me enjoy the feel of myself, in top physical condition, hard-muscled, fast, Gamma for the gazelle I was. This morning I could easily jump over the moon.

I stopped off at the sprinters' pit for a while, to watch them warm up. The walkways that ran above the pits were motionless, so that one could stand and look down. A ramp led down to each pit, and there was a constant coming and going. One of the sprinters looked up, and I heard a hissed whisper: "Patrol, Patrol!" There were uneasy glances, as if I'd brought trouble, and I left.

In the middle distance of the field stood the pair of thirty-foot towers where the tumbler judges would sit. Between them was strung the cable on which the gyro cage rose, with the tumbler inside, the man or woman who was part dancer, part gymnast, and all nerve and coordination. Maybe I'd get a chance to watch Gyro up there. It would give me the same ache it always had, a combination of fear, admiration, and love.

I heard it again as I walked toward the tumblers' pit: "Patrol!" It came from the lips of a young man, standing with his Alpha Council family, watching the tumblers. His father wore the white headscarf adapted from desert regions on Earth, and his mother wore a variation of it, but the young man had taken his off and tucked it into his belt. It looked as though he'd discarded more than a regional tradition. As I approached, he stared at me. He looked no more than seventeen.

"Hi, Patty," he said, using the off-planet slang for the Planet Patrol. "You'll see me up in the cage next year."

His father touched him on the arm, to quiet him, but he went right on: "I've been in training for four years. Bet you I'm first, best, and top winner, next year."

He looked in good enough shape to give the other tumblers good competition even this year, so I sort of saluted him and turned away a bit to look down into the tumblers' pit. Four people were there, two of them in the blue stripes of America Dominion.

A practice pole had been raised six feet above the ground, and a girl, in the blue stripes, was whirling with one knee hooked around the pole. Her back was arched and both arms outflung; her speed increased until she was a whirling blue. In a few hours, she would do that in a cage which was slowly tumbling in any one of six directions, thirty feet above the ground. It moved in an established pattern which the tumblers had to memorize. If a tumbler forgot it, or lost his balance or grip, nearly always he could grab a bar of the cage and save himself. He was given one chance to return to the center pole and continue. Now and then, a tumbler missed, and fell through.

I started down the ramp to the pit. "Patrol!" They all turned to look at me as I stepped onto the practice sand. Face to my own face. His nostrils flared with surprise; he had automatically gone into a semicrouch and I, too, had the same reflex.

His reaction time had always been better than mine. While I stopped to think, which I shouldn't have—thinking: I can let him put me down, because I'm his sister, but I can't let him put me down, because I'm Planet Patrol—Gyro reached out and snatched the cap from my head. He gave a whoop and hurled it past me to a friend. A series of gleeful exclamations came as they passed the cap between them. A silly kids' game, if I hadn't represented order and control. I lost my head. With a yell of outrage, I reached out and pulled Gyro's hair, just as if we were still school kids at home.

He let out an answering yell and grabbed mine, drawing my

head over to his shoulder. His friends had turned silent. Gyro was two inches taller than I. We had the coloring, the broad cheekbones, the wide lower lip from our father, and his temper bloomed in us, too.

"You . . . little . . . Pippa," my brother said, verbally demoting me to nonrank status. He gave my hair such a hauling I could have screamed, and then faster than I could think, he flipped me over and I came down thump on my back, and he was sitting on my stomach with both hands raised in a gesture of triumph.

I rolled my eyes around at the faces which looked stern and a little scared. The girl had come down off the pole, and was standing behind my brother. She said, "Gyro, that's *Patrol.*"

I did what I could. I said, "Ow."

Somebody snickered. It flared into giggles which ran through the group.

I said, "Ow ow, that hurt," and put my hands on my brother's shoulders. He leaned down and kissed me, then got up and helped me to my feet. The stares were wider and more strained.

"Rimidon!" came a voice of tremendous authority from the walkway above out heads. I looked up and there stood Captain Wananga.

"Good morning, ma'am," I said brightly. Someone put my cap into my hand. I slapped it against my hip to dust it and put it back on my head. Then I took my brother's arm and pulled him forward to my side. "I'm pleased to introduce my brother, Gyro Rim."

A long breath went around the circle. Someone laughed. Captain Wananga came down the ramp at a deliberately stately pace. The sun flashed from her boots, and from her insignia.

"I'm delighted to meet you," she said to Gyro in a dry voice. "I'd appreciate it if you'd treat her a little less brotherly, when she's in uniform. Rimidon, I'll see you in my office before dinner.

"Yes, ma'am," I said.

She departed with the same slow, suspenseful gait.

"Hell, Roxy, I'm sorry," Gyro said. "You know, in that first flash all I saw was the blue uniform, and then when I realized it was you, I couldn't resist it. I'm touchy anyhow, we've lost two tumblers with strained muscles or tendons. There's just me and Debra to uphold the honor of America Dominion."

The others had turned back to practice, and we walked a little away from them. "It's all right," I said. "It was my own fault. I stopped to think about you being my brother, or you'd never have put me down."

He said, "Oh, no? You're in fair shape, aren't you?"

"I'm fine. Have you been home

lately? Mom's been named head of the Bone Bank."

"We're a pretty good family, aren't we?" He smiled. "Yes, I was home last month. We've done all right, the three of us, haven't we? If you'll forgive the vulgar display of family pride." He touched my shoulder patch. "You've made corporal."

We had been very close, especially the year Dad was killed. I could remember calling out the timing for Gyro as he worked out on the pole at the local arena. He had the balance and courage very young; the incredible, continual flow of one figure into the next only came with maturity.

"Will you do me a favor?" he asked, and gave the hair on my neck an affectionate tug. "Stay out of my way here. I get along fine with everyone. You're not all that welcome in the pits."

"I know. I came down on purpose to see you, so you'd know I was around, and we can keep out of each other's way. Though I'll watch you in the cage, if I can."

"I'm going to win," he said, and walked back to the pit. I went up the ramp, and looked down. He was on the pole, at arms' length: *one* two three, shift hands and reverse; *two* two three, shift hands and reverse; *three* two three, up into the air, a double somersault, and down to the pole, horizontal for an instant like a bird taking a current, and then whirling around with no grip, belly to the pole, speed and centrifugal force keeping him in place. The ache of admiration and love started. I turned onto the walkway without looking back.

Further along, I glanced down at the swordsmen. There'd been a slight accident, blood showed on one man's arm. They wore face guards, padded vests, and shorts; they all had scarred arms. During Games, they lost more blood than anyone, which was one reason they were so popular. Along with the tumblers and hammer relay, they drew the biggest and loudest crowds.

The sun was getting high, the stadium seats filling up. From the pits rose the tension of waiting, the twanged nerves and tight voices. There would be some down there who had already resigned themselves to failure. Now and then one of these would disappear before Games began, preferring social suicide to public shame, if there really was any difference.

I was looking down into the pit where the marathon runners warmed up when a group, several adults and a girl of about fifteen, stopped near me to watch. I recognized the Vogl dress which even the Council families wore, the pants cut tight to fold in just below the knee. Wetboots were usually worn outdoors, and no one wanted sloshy trouser bottoms, or

the trouble of continually tucking trouser ends into boots and shaking them out again. Vogl people wore them wherever they went, as a kind of symbol. After all, they were conquering a steaming wet world and were proud of it.

After a few minutes, they started on their way, but the girl turned back, toward me. She had light-blue eyes which now looked like ice.

"Someday I'll go to your Academy," she said. Her hate was visible, like frost. Her father gave a shocked exclamation and tried to pull her along with them, but as she walked backward, she went on: "I'm just as good as you are." She was yelling, and everyone on the walkway stopped to listen. "In five years the Academies will be full of us from off planet. Next year we'll eat up your little Games and then we'll fill up your Academies. We'll have our own Patrol, who needs you Patties from Earth."

I kept right on walking at the same pace, with my eyes on hers. "Look me up when you're off duty, and I'll buy you a drink," I said.

Her mother, in an agony of embarrassment, said, "Thank you, Corporal. The kids can't understand the travel expense is prohibitive. They have no patience to wait for the new space drive."

"It won't take long," I said. "You'll have your own Academies and Patrol."

"Stinking Patty!" the girl screamed at me, the frost forming tears in her eyes. They dragged her away, hushing her, and I was left feeling weary and sad.

The people of Alpha and Vogl were half a step outward into the universe, not much of a distance, but a start on the way. It gave them a prestige they never asked for, and the necessity for living up to a reputation as pioneers, another necessity they never requested. Not too long from now, they'd be in our position: holders of the jumping-off place for another step out.

There was a deep sound, like the ocean pouring into a valley. The voice of the crowd as the Torch was lit. Games began. I could see the men grouping for the broad jump, and shaded my eyes against the brilliant light to watch the first of them take off, a tremendous surge of muscle, feet reaching out to land as far forward as possible.

Back behind me, from one of the pits I'd already passed, came a scream, and I whirled around. Athletes from several pits ran up onto the walkway and down the ramp. No Councilmen were in sight; I ran back, my boots drumming and the thump of them jarring my heart. The scream had been horrible, and I could hear a following uproar. As I got closer to the tumblers' pit, I choked on my own heart.

I pushed down the ramp, yelling, "Clear it! Clear it!" to get through the crowd.

The practice pole had snapped in two, hurling the girl Debra like a pebble from a slingshot to crash into the broad support of the walkway. Half her face was broken, and she was so covered with blood I couldn't determine the rest of the damage. Someone had already punched the emergency signal, and an ambulance heli was coming down. Gyro sat on the ground with the girl in his arms. I felt for her pulse; it wasn't strong but it kept on.

"That leaves just me," Gyro said. His eyes were narrowed with shock. "Just me for all of America Dominion, and she was good, she was as good as I am, and that leaves just me."

The heli men put her on a stretcher, and I pulled Gyro up by his hands.

"Okay," I said. "Okay, it isn't the first time there's been only one competitor from a Dominion. The tumblers don't start until this afternoon, and maybe there's a chance to find someone else."

"Not a chance, Roxy. There's not a chance at this late date. She was good, you know."

"Okay, stop it," I said roughly. I knew one tumbler in training. I took my brother by the arm, and he was so dazed he didn't even resist. His white shirt was smeared wet with Debra's blood, and he kept trying to brush it off with the palms of his hands, only spreading it more.

One of the pit officials came down, and I said to him, "Get another practice pole up and see that it's a good one. There's going to be hell to pay for this." Councilmen were all around, holding back the curious and morbid.

Gyro followed me up the walkway, and I stopped him when we got away from the crowd. I made some notes on my Patrol card, forced it into his hand and directed him: "You follow this, walkway to speedway D5, to slowway 84, right up to the Patrol Headquarters. You go in there, to Captain Wananga's office, give her the card and wait for me. Promise?"

He looked less shocked, and less brotherly. "What are you up to?" he asked.

"Just give me a chance, I don't even know if it'll work. Go on. Get into her office and tell her what happened. I'll be there as soon as I can."

I got him started off and then went on myself, jog-trotting, hoping I could catch them before they got into the stadium where it would take me all day to locate them. Since the tumblers weren't going up until afternoon, there might be a chance.

Quite a few Vogl and Alpha families were around; perhaps there were always this many at

Games. Since an Inter-Dominion meeting up north was scheduled for right after Games, it wasn't surprising that families from both other planets had come days early, to take in the competition.

I caught up with one Alpha family, but it was the wrong one, and I passed them at a lope. Several Councilmen called out offers of aid, or questions, when I passed them, but I only shook my head and went on. The family I wanted was just entering the east gate of the stadium, and I called out, desperately afraid they'd go in and be lost to me.

"Tumbler! Hey, Alpha tumbler!" I yelled, not knowing any other way to get his attention. He heard me all right, turning fast, shocked at being called that.

As I came up, his father swung around in front of him protectively and faced me, his expression cold. I said, "I'd like to borrow your son for a little while, sir."

"Certainly not."

"Please. I want to take him to the captain's office, and I promise he'll not only be safe, but probably welcome."

The young man stepped to his father's side. "What is it?" he asked. "What could you possibly want with me in a Patrol office?"

"I'd rather you heard it from Gyro Rim," I said.

"Him! He's down in his practice pit."

"Please," I said. The man turned to look at his son, and asked him, "Do you want to go and see what this is about?"

"Be careful!" his mother warned.

"Yes, I'll go," the son said.

He came along with me, hurrying as I was. "You really are a tumbler, I hope," I said. "You weren't just making a big Alpha noise."

"What kind of a fool do you take me for? Of course I'm a tumbler."

"Got records of training, and everything," I said, shoving him onto the walkway that moved toward the helis behind the stadium. I flagged a flyer and he opened the door for us. "Patrol Headquarters," I said.

The flyer eyed the young man, with his Alpha headscarf tucked casually into his wide belt, but he made no comment.

Neeba was standing outside the office door. "Corporal, you have stirred up something in there," she said. She opened the door, and gestured us in grandly. Any other time I would have been amused by her manner.

Gyro was sitting in the corner when we came in. His nylon shirt had been rinsed out and was still damp, though drying on his body. Captain Wananga, standing up before the window, said, "Sid-down!" We did. A splendid showman, she marched up and down the office, giving off sparks of hell-

fire. She moved with her chin jutted forward from her long neck, and each time she passed me, she'd whip her head around to give me a glare, and then continue the forward march, about turn, forward march.

"I see you have a young man from Alpha," she said at last.

"Yes, ma'am. He's trained as a tumbler. His records are available—"

"—Within three hours, of course," she said, marching.

"No, of course not. But I thought if he were willing to compete for America Dominion—"

The young man bolted out of his chair. "Are you crazy?" he shouted. "What do you mean, America Dominion? You think I'm going to put on your big blue stripes when I can come back here next year for Alpha and mop you up?"

Gyro had been watching this whole circus with a sly, sharp expression.

"It's out of the question," Captain Wananga said. "You can't put an unregistered athlete into competition."

"Why not?" Gyro asked. "It can't take your computer very long to file records on him. We have two tumblers registered for Games, and one's in the hospital. Why not?"

The captain turned on me. "Goddamn it, Rimidon, what are you trying to do, futz my relays? We can't set a precedent like this; he's got to wait until next year, and come in all nice and legal, and you know it."

The Alpha youngster was looking down at Gyro, his head cocked to one side. "You really want me in?" he asked Gyro.

"Well, first I want to see you in the practice pit, to see how good you are and how fast you can memorize the tumbling pattern. And if you're good, I want you in. If you can put aside the ghastly shame of wearing colors other than those of Alpha." My brother looked slyly at the headscarf in the other boy's belt.

"My God, I'd give anything to get up in that cage," he said. "Anything. I don't care if I'm wearing a helmet and Vogl bogshoes. Just to get up there and show you what I can do."

Captain Wananga asked him, "What's your name, tumbler?" She sounded subterranean, like a volcano beginning to seethe.

"Tray Thomas."

"Well. Well, well." She sat down at her desk and slammed the communicator with the heel of her hand. After a moment, she said into it, "General? We have a little problem in my office, could you spare us ten minutes?" A long pause, and in a softer voice she said, "Five minutes, then? Or shall we all pour down to your office?

"He'll be over," she said to us,

and sat. I'd never seen anything so dangerous looking as her stillness.

Tray Thomas sat down beside my brother and asked, "How old are you?"

"Nineteen," Gyro said. "And you?"

"Eighteen."

"Start us young, don't they?" Gyro remarked, and winked at the other, but Tray sat with his fists on his knees, tense and absorbed in himself.

I was beginning to sweat at my own folly. If much more time passed, we couldn't get Tray registered for Games before the cage went up for the first time, not to mention give him the practice essential to memorize the tumble pattern. The general would surely take a fit at the whole idea. The Alpha families would surely find it hard to swallow, one of their kids in an Earth Dominion outfit.

In his own good time, the general did arrive. We all stood up, and he waved us down. It took Captain Wananga only a few precise sentences to fill him in, and his face slowly darkened while she spoke.

"Outrageous," the general said, and turned around to look at me. "Don't you think we're having enough trouble with colony malcontents?" He fingered the breast pocket of his Patrol shirt with stubby fingers, and in a peculiar gesture, drummed on his own chest.

"Yes, sir, but one of their quarrels is they haven't been allowed to compete."

He turned around several times, giving out warning flashes like a beacon, then stopped to look at Tray Thomas. "And you'll go along with this? Alpha-born, you'll compete for America Dominion?"

"Sure I will, I'd do anything to get up there in the cage. I figure it's an extra practice session for me, you see? Next year I can come back. I bet you I win for Alpha."

"Oh, indeed!" the general snorted. Athletes, like Planet Patrol members, are never noted for their modesty, but the general seemed to find Tray Thomas more outgoing than customary.

The general turned toward the desk. "Wananga, can you get through to the computer men and get this mess in order, and recorded?"

"Yes, sir, I'm sure I can."

"Well, let's go," Gyro said, getting up quickly. "Come on, Tray, let's get down to the pit and see what you can do."

Tray came over to me and said, "Corporal, I'd appreciate it if you'd tell my family." He took their seat plate from his pocket and gave it to me. "I ought to be competing for Alpha, so don't expect me to thank you, but I'm sure my mother will offer you her undying gratitude."

I wasn't at all sure of it; very few mothers enjoyed the spectacle

of their sons tumbling in the cage the first time. My own mother had seen Gyro only once, complimented him on his speed and grace, and never returned to watch him again.

That's the Patrol, the dirty jobs all the time. If I hurried to report to his family, I might even have time for lunch, then get back to a walkway near the towers and watch. I stood up.

"Siddown!" the general said. "I wouldn't like to think that one of our Patrol members in any way sympathized with malcontents," he said.

I took a deep breath. "There's quite a difference between sympathy, and action, sir."

"As you've so nicely shown us today," he retorted. "I suggest you be thoughtful, young woman." He bent a little at the waist to look down into my face; he was quite serious and very sober looking. "And I mean thoughtful, Corporal. Be sure what your own position is on any matter, before you act." His heels squeaked on the polished floor as he turned. He did close the door very softly behind him.

The silence grew long. When Captain Wananga was still, it was still as a rock, or a tower.

"Well," she said. "Time's getting on. My cousin's in the hammer relay, so I'm going out to take a look. Why don't you catch lunch with me? And Roxy, for God's sake don't tilt at any more windmills today, or tomorrow, or any of the ten days on duty. There's nothing wrong with your sympathies, but you can't always act so directly. You hear me? I don't ever, ever want to see you in this office until Games are over and you come to say good-bye."

"Yes, ma'am," I said.

It was a very quick lunch. I had to cover half the stadium to find the Thomas family. They were incredulous.

"You mean he's actually going up there?" Mr. Thomas asked.

"Oh, I can't watch," Mrs. Thomas said, riveting her eyes on the thirty-foot towers, though the cage still rested on the ground with its gate open. I could see she wasn't going to take her eyes off the site until her son was safely down, winner or loser.

The hammer relay had just begun when I joined Captain Wananga on a walkway. The five men of the first team were strung out in a line about thirty meters apart across the big field. The first man took up the handle in his gloved hand; it was attached to a short thong from which hung the round weight of the hammer ball. He took his stance, swung his shoulders and torso right, left, then turned in a full circle gathering momentum. The hammer streaked from his hand toward the next man, in padded gloves and armwraps, who must catch it by

the handle and repeat the swing and throw, to the next man in line. They were all tremendously fast and powerful. The team with the best time and no misses would be the winner.

You could hear the sound of the hammer, with its thong and handle streaming out like the tail of a comet behind it, and the *whuck* as it was checked in midair and snapped back. The fourth man just missed; the groan of the crowd drowned out the sound of the hammer as it landed beyond him, sending up a shower of dirt and making a small crater where it hit.

The next team walked out, wearing the black zigzags of Africa Dominion. "He's third in line," Captain Wananga remarked.

"I suppose I won't get close enough to watch the tumblers," I said.

"Here, stop grumbling." She reached to her belt pocket and took out a small black case, which she unfolded and extended.

"Sighters!" I exclaimed. They were powerful and very expensive binoculars, designed so the complicated lens mechanism slid into its case and could be folded down flat as a wafer.

"A present from Raul," she said. "He uses them more than I do, for his field trips. Picks out all sorts of green eatables at a distance instead of crawling around on his hands and knees after them."

She used the sighters to watch her cousin. His team finished with good time, and the third team came out. From the beginning I didn't like the feel of it, and said to her, "There's going to be an accident, I can feel it."

"Yes, your dossier mentions a biological communication skill, but is it genuine? Can you really tell?"

"I'm often wrong," I admitted, but I stood there with my shoulders hunched up protectively, waiting for something bad to happen. Sure enough, the second man made a poor throw; the hammer streaked out low, only a few feet above ground, hit sideways, rose into the air; and although the catcher had thrown himself to the ground, he wasn't fast enough and the hammer caught him on the shoulder. The crowd jumped up and screamed, yelled, stamped. The heli ambulance, always hovering, started to come down. The man must have a broken shoulder, if nothing worse.

The captain folded the sighters into the case. Her jaw was jutting out and her head thrust forward on her long neck. "Right you were," she said. "Pity you can't use it to help."

The usual futile anger rose in me, and I put it down. "It's not a stable sensitivity; at least a third of the time I only imagine some-

thing. Would any of the officials have listened to me?"

"No, of course not. But it's a pity we can't have more like you on duty, and with the courage of your convictions. Here, take the sighters and go up the west walkway, near the towers. You can drop them off at my office later."

I reminded her, "I'm not supposed to ever be in your office again during Games."

"Don't let me *see* you," she warned.

I followed the walkway around to the west side of the field, where the judges were going up into the towers to start the electronic clocks and gear. Games officials were checking the cage and its cable. The tumblers had moved out from the pit, Gyro and Tray side by side and behind them, a girl from India Dominion and a short, fair man from Canada Dominion. I deliberately damped down any sensitivity I had. I'd watch this like any other spectator. I would love to see my brother win, but he had won last year. I would like to see Tray win, for his pride and the future of off-planet athletes. I'd like to see the best tumbler win, and no one miss his grip and fall.

The man from Canada Dominion entered the cage. Its gate was sealed, slowly the cage rose and hooked onto the cable thirty feet in the air. I unfolded the sighters and looked through. The tumbler was in place, sitting relaxed on the pole which ran through the center of the cage. The bell rang. I could see his arm muscles tighten; he got his starting count and turned backward neat and easy, in three quick turns. He was good, but there were seams in the performance which should have been all of one piece, seamless, smooth, a single, perfect fabric of motion.

Gyro went up, and I held the sighters down at my side. It wasn't fair to want so much for him, and by not being able to distinguish his features, I could cheat myself into thinking I didn't care as much. But I became ashamed of my cheap evasion, and toward the end I looked through the sighters again, and saw how beautiful he was, what a nearly perfect performance he gave. He got big applause from the crowd, most of whom were using sighters.

The girl from India Dominion was next. She had something bright twined in her hair at the side and it glittered like a minute star in the sunlight, until shadow from the cage bars obscured it.

The minute she started I knew she was something special; in another moment the hair was rising on my scalp. If Gyro was phenomenal, this girl must have been born only to tumble in a cage. She was a bird dancing in there; the pole didn't seem to exist; it was as if she were riding on nothing but air. I was breathless, and the

crowd broke out into a terrific roar, everyone on his feet, as the cage came down. She stepped out, slim, dark, the glitter in her hair, and bowed slightly.

"Let Tray beat that," I murmured to myself. I knew he couldn't. I knew she was today's winner and probably winner of the season.

Although Tray was smoother and easier than the first man, he was much slower, and finished well over the time limit. For his first try in the cage it was fine, and I hoped he knew that. As the four tumblers grouped to leave, motion at the side of the field caught my eye. In the knee-tight brown trousers of Vogl and the white desert headscarves of Alpha, half a dozen young men raced out toward the tumblers.

One of them yelled, "Sell out!" and they closed in around Tray Thomas and the others. My feet started before I had time to think, but I checked in midstride as three Councilmen ran toward the boiling group. I could see Gyro's blond head bobbing like a cork in the melee; then the girl, and the man from Canada Dominion, broke loose and jogged away, not even glancing back.

I still wanted to go down there but had no excuse to mix in; the Councilmen were holding onto elbows and wrists, shouting, or rather, out-shouting the young men. Gyro was tossed out, landing on his knees and hands and instantly springing to his feet. An angry circle surrounded Tray; they were haranguing him furiously for competing for an Earth Dominion. One of the Councilmen took Gyro's arm to steer him off the field, but my brother shook him away and plunged back through the circle to stand with Tray.

While the angry voices went on and on, the Councilmen stood alert. Even while they were at it, the circle with its central pair of tumblers began to move off, for the officials were clearing the field and the women's high jump was being prepared, the sand raked, the pole set at 1.6 meters.

All at once, the whole young group turned and looked back toward the thirty-foot towers. I saw Tray salute the air where a little while before the cage had turned with him inside. Gyro, too, saluted that space; then the two tumblers walked off the field together, the angry off-planet boys slowly falling behind, gesticulating and still shouting, but now in argument with each other.

I put the folded sighters, which I'd been clutching in a damp hand, into my belt pocket, and went back to duty.

At the end of the day's Games, I went to the captain's office and found Neeba. "Please give these to your mother," I said, handing over the sighters.

She asked, "Are you sad because your brother lost today?"

"No, love, not at all. He won last year, and there are two more days in the cage, and anyway, he'll have another try in six months."

I returned to my quarters and washed off the day's sweat under hot water. I was sitting with the electric brush, working on my hair, when someone sounded the buzzer and I went to the door.

"Hi, sis," Gyro said. Tray stood just behind him. "How'd you like to go out with us?"

Tray was looking past my shoulder. He stood with his feet planted apart, thumbs hooked into the wide belt; a clean headscarf was settled on his brown hair.

"Thanks, Gyro, but I was out last night and I ought to get more sleep."

"Okay. Then maybe I won't even see you for the rest of Games, so good-bye, Roxy. Are you going home for a week?"

"For a few days, that's all."

We hugged each other, brief, hard, and Gyro backed off. I said, "Good-bye, Tray, see you next year," and held out my hand.

He lifted his chin. "Good-bye, Patty," he said, ignoring the hand, and they both went off. I closed the door and went back to working on my hair, mostly for something to do. I'd have a light meal, go to a flick, and sleep early and long, before my few days' visit at home.

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## Coming soon . . .

Next month, in fact, are stories by **Ron Goulart** and **Kris Neville** and another "Anita" (see page 5) story by **Keith Roberts.**

With this issue, F&SF moves into its 22nd year of publication. Even at this early date we have enough exciting things lined up to make 1971 a very good year indeed.

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