

Too Many Boards

Harl Vincent

It's time for another public domain story by forgotten science fiction pioneer [Harl Vincent](#). Today's story comes from the April 1931 issue of [Amazing Stories](#) magazine. At this point, three years into his writing career, Vincent is an established pro, with twenty-four stories in print. He has even sold a story to [Argosy](#), the Cadillac of pulp magazines. Not bad for a mechanical engineer who writes as a hobby. And now, for the first time since its original magazine publication 78 years ago, the Johnny Pez blog is proud to present the first installment of . . .

Too Many Boards
by Harl Vincent

"Why not take your medicine and have it over with, Larry?"

The words were gently spoken by Arthur Hovey, who sprawled lazily on a divan in his friend's luxuriously appointed apartment.

Laurence Conover cut short his restless pacing and crushed a half-smoked cigarette in the already heaping tray. For a moment he glared at the speaker. Then he smiled grimly and shrugged his shoulders.

"Guess I'll have to," he admitted. "Odds against me are too great. But it burns me up. I've only two months, too."

"Yeah. Two months." His friend gazed dreamily at nothing in particular.

Art Hovey was that way. Larry's companion since boyhood, he had ever been easygoing -- a dreamer too. Larry, though two years his senior, was more impetuous, the leader in all their youthful adventures and leader still, having attained the presidency of the corporation for which Art worked as a department manager.

"It isn't that I dislike Alta Farrish," continued Larry, "she's a good friend. But, hang it, I don't want to marry her. Guess I'm old-fashioned, but I'd like to go back about a hundred years to the days of Lindbergh and [Gene Tunney](#) and [Owen D. Young](#). They did things in those days. And they didn't have their every conscious act controlled by legislation."

"They had prohibition."

"You would bring that up. That's what started the whole business, too. The gloom-dispensers got away with that and they've gotten away with murder ever since. But our Board of Eugenics beats anything they ever cooked up. I rebel against having a bride forced upon me. Think of it! I'm two months short of thirty-two and have to marry before my birthday. Have to! And not outside of class A2."

"What's the matter with A2? There's only one higher class, and it with only eighteen members."

"Nothing the matter with it. But I haven't found romance in my own rating. I want to choose my own mate; court her as they used to; take her away from someone if necessary. What do I care about their intelligence tests, their blood counts, and other ratings? Maybe our ancestors didn't raise a regulated

number of kids; kids who wore thick glasses at five years of age and quoted [Ovid](#) as ours do today. But they loved and hated normally; played and fought, and got a kick out of life. How're you going to do it today?"

"Can't. But it's a pretty good old world at that. Better than Mars or Venus."

"Sure it is. But that's not the point. It's this infernal regulation of everything. The Martians and Venusians were used to it. So was most of our old world population. But in America we've had our heritage of freedom and independence taken from us. And to some of us it comes pretty hard."

"But we don't do anything, Larry."

"No. A lot of sheep!"

"You couldn't do anything anyway. Alta's guardian, you know."

"I know. John X. Mills votes fifty-one percent of our stock. And he's set on the match. Otherwise there's a lot of other A2's I might look over in two months."

"Still thinking of romance?"

Larry laughed. "Good old Art," he said. "Romance means nothing in your life, does it?"

"Not a thing."

Arthur Hovey gazed reflectively at the swarms of dancing aircraft high above the crystal expanse of New York's roof. These visits to Larry's apartment were his greatest joy. Here he could lie in the light of the sun. He could revel in its warmth as it came through the fused quartz covering of the homes of the wealthy and influential in the topmost level of the world's greatest city, one hundred and ten stories above ground. It was great! Cares and dissatisfactions seemed of no consequence.

* * *

Next morning Larry sat at his desk and stared disapprovingly at the pile of work that lay before him. He glanced at the calendar. Fifty-nine days left! He rang for his secretary.

"Miss Henderson has resigned, Mr. Conover." The voice of his chief clerk spoke from the optophone, simultaneously with the appearance of that individual's alert features in its disc.

"Resigned? Wasn't she satisfied?"

"Yes indeed. Board of Vocational Supervision de-rated her and she was ashamed to remain with us. She's taken a lesser position elsewhere, Sir."

"What? Can't we determine the fitness of our own employees?"

"Yes sir. That is, I mean, no sir. The Board is sending a substitute at once."

"Oh damn the Board!"

The startled face of the chief clerk vanished from the disc.

For a long time Larry scowled at the silent instrument before him. Boards, Boards, Boards! There was a Board for almost everything, it seemed. Well, there was nothing he could do. Might as well submit to the inevitable. He was only a cog in the huge machine that moved at the command of the terrestrial government. A fairly easily-worked cog it was true, but immutably fixed in position and function. What was the use?

The optophone spoke. "Miss Sinclair to see you."

"Miss Sinclair?"

"Yes sir, from the Board. Applying for Miss Henderson's place."

"Oh yes. Send her in."

Larry was utterly unprepared for the vision of loveliness that met his eyes a moment later. His heart skipped a beat, and he sprang from his chair with unconcealed eagerness. Then he caught himself short in embarrassed realization of the situation.

"Miss Sinclair?" he faltered.

"Yes, Mr. Conover. Una Sinclair, VR1869."

"Never mind the numbers. You're an experienced secretary?"

"Five years with the Board of Tri-planetary Communication."

"Another Board, so help me!"

"I beg your pardon?"

Larry chuckled. "Don't mind me, Miss Sinclair," he apologized. "Think you'd like to work for United Synthetic Food?"

"I'm sure I would."

"Very well. Tell Mr. Sprague I've put you on. He'll arrange your salary with you. Then return to me for instructions, please."

When Una Sinclair tripped from the room, Larry took up the nervous pacing that was becoming a habit with him. Not such a bad Board at that, this Vocational one!

This is the second installment of "Too Many Boards", a story by pioneering science fiction writer Harl Vincent. The story first appeared in the April 1931 issue of *Amazing Stories* magazine, and has since passed into the public domain. This is the first time "Too Many Boards" has seen the light of day since its original magazine publication 78 years ago. The first installment can be found [here](#).

In part 1, Larry Conover, the President of United Synthetic Food, laments to his friend Art Hovey the fact that the Board of Eugenics is forcing him to marry his friend Alta Farrish. It's the year 2030, and by

law all members of classification A2 must marry by age 32. Conover is an A2, and two months short of the deadline. Then he meets his new secretary, Una Sinclair . . .

* * *

"I've found her at last."

Ten days had passed, and Larry was again entertaining Art Hovey in his apartment.

"That's no news. Una Sinclair, isn't it?"

"Of course."

"How about her B. of E. rating?"

"A2. I wanted to do a handspring when she told me."

"Easy now, Larry. You're getting all excited. And, quit your eternal tramping. Don't you know that old man Mills is getting set for your marriage to Alta?"

"Sure, but I'm going to call it off. Right now, too, over the opto. Alta'll be tickled silly. She doesn't want me any more than I want her."

"All the same, you can't do it, Larry. Mills'll break you. United Synthetic will hit bottom in this crazy market, if he starts unloading. Then where'll you be?"

"Hang it! I'm in love, I tell you. What do I care for the money? I can earn a substantial living. Maybe have to live in level forty, but what's the difference?"

"Have you asked Una?"

"Not yet. But there've been things -- more than mere hints. I'm pretty sure she'll have me."

"With your money gone?"

"Another crack like that, Art Hovey, and I'll crown you. Una isn't that sort."

"Sorry, Larry. I know it. But you're in for trouble, do you know that?"

"Trouble? If there's any I'll start it right away."

Larry turned to his optophone.

"Hello Laurence," came the hearty voice of John X. Mills, when his ruddy features materialized on the disc, "what brings you to the opto on a rest day?"

"It's about Alta, John. The wedding's off."

Larry spoke crisply and the bristling eyebrows of John X. Mills raised in surprise, the red of his round cheeks deepening perceptibly.

"What do you mean, off? Everything is arranged."

"I know it and I'm sorry, John. But I have other plans. My decision will come as a relief to Alta -- you know that."

"Come, come, my boy. Don't be hasty. That new secretary of yours has turned your head."

"Perhaps. But this is final." The conversation was growing distasteful to Larry, and Mills' appearance of imminent apoplexy made him want to laugh.

"Final? Final? I'm not sure of that, Laurence. At any rate, you'll not marry that red-head in your office." The disc went dark, for Mills had disconnected.

"Red-head! Red-head!" yelled Larry to the unresponsive instrument. "You old fossil!"

Then he stared foolishly at Art, who remained calm and wholly undignified where he lay stretched among the cushions.

"Told you so," his friend remarked soothingly.

* * *

The die was cast, and Larry hastened to be sure of Una. He rushed from the apartment, leaving Art to shift for himself. Panicky doubts assailed him when he entered the uptown pneumatic tube and took his place in the bulletlike car that would whisk him to the upper reaches of Westchester Borough. He had been rather hasty and abrupt with Mills. Should have talked with Una first.

The girl, he thought, greeted him with some indication of constraint, but he imagined this to be due to the fact that this was his first visit to her modest eighteenth-level apartment. She flushed as prettily as ever when she pressed his fingers, and he plunged headlong into the subject of his chaotic thoughts.

"Una," he blurted forth, "I love you, and I want you for my wife. In these past few days you have become to me the essence of all that is worth while -- the . . ."

She dropped weakly into a chair as he spoke, and a look of fear widened her eyes. "But Mr. Conover -- Larry --" she protested.

"I know, dear -- it is short notice. But this thing is real with me. I can think of nothing else. And somehow I've come to believe you reciprocate. Am I wrong? Do you?"

"No -- no -- it isn't that!"

"What then? There's no one else?"

"No one. And -- I do care -- but --"

Suddenly the girl was in his arms -- weeping uncontrollably. She clung to him in terror, it seemed. He had not been wrong. But the depth of her feeling frightened him. He sensed calamity.

"Larry," she finally whispered, "I do care for you. More than you will ever know. But we can not wed."

"Can not wed? But why? Why?" He held her at arm's length and his heart sank at what he saw written on her blanched features.

"My eugenic rating -- it -- it --"

"But it's A2. I saw your card."

"It *was* A2, Larry." She was quieting now and spoke with hopeless finality, "But now it is F2. Day before yesterday I took my annual test and I just received notice this morning."

"There isn't any 'F' grade. Only the five letters and their sub-numbers. You must be mistaken."

"It's the new classification. Something to do with pigmentation, they tell me. Guess it's my freckles." And she smiled bravely through her tears.

Larry raved. These rotten restrictions again! But he had never anticipated this, and had entirely forgotten the added classification. To think that Una, of all girls, should be reclassified! He thought darkly of Mills and his threats. But this was no doing of his. The Eugenics department was incorruptible. Besides, it had been done two days ago. But how Mills would gloat over him! Suddenly he stopped in his tracks -- he had been walking the floor again, he realized shamefacedly -- and wrinkled his brow in thought.

Una regarded him kindly and sympathetically from where she sat. She was as crushed as he, but, being a woman, was more resigned. Her heart ached more for Larry than for herself, and she longed to pillow his head on her knees and mother him. He was such a big, overgrown boy!

"Say!" Larry's forceful exclamation startled her. He was at her side in a single bound and squatted beside her chair. "Are you game to elope with me?"

"Elope? We can't. It is impossible to be legally married on either Earth, Venus, or Mars. Where else is there to go?"

"Mercury!"

"Larry! It has a terrible climate and is -- oh -- uncivilized. Besides, its government is unrecognized by the Tri-planetary Alliance. We'd be exiles in an awful land where we could never live in peace."

"Honey -- listen! It's just the opposite. I've a very good friend, Chick Davis, who's captain of the *Rocket III*, one of the Tri-planetary liners. He tells me Mercury is one of the finest of the inhabited bodies. It's terrifically hot on the side always toward the sun and frigid on the other, but there's a narrow belt where the climate is moderate -- semi-tropical by earthly standards. And it's not uncivilized, but highly cultured. They've a real democratic government there and aren't members of the Alliance only because it's their own desire to remain aloof. Our rigid laws and the resulting standardization of types, habits, and activities of our people are distasteful to them. But Chick's been there and he says it's ideal -- the very place for such as we. We could be free and untrammled -- happy."

"But the liners are not permitted to stop there."

"Good reason. The Alliance fears their population would be educated to a spirit of revolt if they saw too much or knew too much of the conditions on Mercury. So they permit no voyagers to land there. But I'll bet I can get Chick to smuggle us in somehow. He's a great schemer."

"It seems so -- I don't know -- barbaric somehow. Are you certain of all these things your friend has told you?"

"Absolutely. Chick hasn't a reason in the world to misrepresent it to me. And there aren't barbarians there, sweetheart. They are a kindly people, and wise -- too wise to mix with the others of the outer planets. I'm sure we would be welcome. And I'll work; I'll break my back to make you happy there. What do you say?"

"You almost convince me." Una's eyes were starry. They now visioned a ray of hope.

Larry drew her fiercely close. "You've got to, honey," he begged, "it's our only chance. Six weeks you know and I've got to marry -- someone in A2 -- someone I don't love. Else it's the penal colony of Mars for the rest of my life -- laboring on the canals. I swear I'd rather --"

Una placed the tips of her warm fingers over his lips. "Don't say it, dear," she whispered. "It isn't necessary. I'll go. I'm not afraid. And, oh Larry -- I -- I need you."

Wordless happiness crept in to replace the erstwhile gloom of the tiny apartment.

This is the third installment of "Too Many Boards", a story by pioneering science fiction writer Harl Vincent. The story first appeared in the April 1931 issue of *Amazing Stories* magazine, and has since passed into the public domain. This is the first time "Too Many Boards" has seen the light of day since its original magazine publication 78 years ago. The first two installments can be found [here](#) and [here](#).

As we join our story, Larry Conover, the President of United Synthetic Food, is being forced by the Board of Eugenics to marry his friend Alta Farrish. It's the year 2030, and by law all members of classification A2 must marry by age 32. Conover is an A2, and two months short of the deadline. Then he meets his new secretary, Una Sinclair, and falls in love with her. When Sinclair is reclassified as an F2, Conover decides that they must elope to Mercury. Travel there is forbidden, but Conover is certain his friend Chick Davis, a spaceship captain, can smuggle them in . . .

* * *

The *Rocket III* was berthed on her huge float, fifty miles off Montauk Point. A monster dirigible from the mainland had just discharged its cargo, the highly concentrated liquid explosive which provided tremendous propulsive energy for the liner in limited storage space, and was headed for home. Scores of smaller private aircraft hovered at a respectful distance, awaiting the take-off of the great vessel -- a sight they had come hundreds, even thousands, of miles to witness.

Captain Davis stood at the hyper-optophone in the control room of his space ship. He had reported to the Board of Tri-planetary Transportation in Washington that all was well for the one hundredth voyage of the *Rocket III*. He grinned when he turned from the disc. The Board was due for a surprise this trip.

The published passenger list had carefully omitted the names of certain of those actually aboard. Captain Davis had seen to that, as he had seen to the obtaining of Una's and Larry's passports, ostensibly for a trip to Venus. Other essential matters there were too, that had required his personal attention. But it was

a job that Chick Davis liked, for he doted on romance. Besides, he scented an unusual adventure.

The time for departure was at hand, and the shrill siren on the float warned the surrounding visitors to withdraw to a safe distance. The screaming exhaust of the vessel's rocket tubes was a thing to be feared, an incandescent blast that could wither and destroy the greatest of the ships of the lower air.

With its five hundred feet of glistening length resting in the chute, its blunt nose pointed skyward at an angle of thirty degrees, the *Rocket III* was a thing of beauty, a monument to the genius and scientific attainment of mankind. But, when the mighty energies were released from within, it became a monster of terrifying power, a mechanism that went roaring into the skies ahead of a trail of blinding magnificence, splitting the protesting air with a screech whose intensity was beyond all belief.

Precisely on schedule, the *Rocket III* hurled itself into the heavens. When the last vestige of its flaming tail had vanished, the awed spectators turned their ships homeward, stunned and silenced by this marvel of the twenty-first century.

Far outside the earth's atmosphere the vessel straightened away on its course and settled to its carefully regulated rate of acceleration. The captain was entertaining a much excited couple in his cabin.

* * *

There was consternation in the despatching room of the Tri-planetary Transportation Board in Washington. The *Rocket III* had long since left her berth and the engineers in charge had observed her progress on the chart for more than ten million miles. Then the tiny light-point of red that traveled so slowly from the blue-white representation of the earth's orb flickered and went out. Frantic efforts to raise the ship's hyper-optophone failed utterly, and the chief despatcher made haste to report the calamity.

Every available space ship of the terrestrial government was pressed into service and the liners of the Tri-planetary system already in transit were advised by optophone to keep close watch for the wanderer. But little hope was entertained of locating the vessel in this manner. In the vastness of space even the largest of liners was an infinitesimal mite, and, with its opto inoperative, became but one of myriads of tiny bodies that hurtled through the blackness at enormous speed.

The nature of the disaster which had overtaken the *Rocket III* could but be conjectured. Nothing of the sort had occurred during more than thirty years of continued interplanetary service. Great fear there was in official circles that the vessel's fuel compartment had exploded. Though such an accident was deemed highly improbable, it was not beyond the bounds of possibility, and it was an undoubted fact that something of a serious nature had happened to the mighty vessel of the skies.

Efforts were made to keep the news of the disaster from the public, but, as is usually the case, there was a leak. Within a very few hours the public and private news optos throughout the world blared forth the incredible tidings. Frantic relatives and friends of the more than twelve hundred passengers and three hundred members of the crew besieged the various departments of the terrestrial government in Washington for confirmation or denial of the terrible news. In the lower levels of the great cities, the public squares were jammed with horror-stricken humanity, waiting in vain for definite assurance from the news announcers.

Hour after hour the vigil was kept and eventually the reports of the government scouting ships commenced coming in. But these held forth nothing of hope. There was but one chance in many millions

that trace of the lost ones would ever be uncovered.

But the officials of the Board refused to give up their vessel as lost, though hoping against hope. Its captain, Charles Davis, was the most resourceful and experienced in the service. They could not conceive of him as unequal to any emergency which might have arisen.

* * *

On the planet Mercury an unusual conference was in progress in the executive chambers, or *Dairofa*, in Luzan, the capital city of the realm. In the great plaza before the palace there rested a space ship of strange design, a small and sleek craft that had been the subject of discussion throughout the city during the twelve *aka* (about six and one-half earth days) since its arrival from afar.

The huge blood-red disc of the sun shone hotly at the horizon, its almost horizontal rays making of the city a motley of sweltering highlights and dark shadows. Rose tinted mists hung low over all, effectually obscuring the heavens above. It was always thus in Luzan, the sun never leaving the horizon entirely, but circling it once every eighty-eight earth days and alternately rising to a point that exposed the lower rim of the enormous disc, then sinking to a point where the topmost edge just peeped through the mists above the undulating line of demarcation between land and sky.

Suddenly there came from above a fearsome sound, a screaming roar that brought the populace to the streets and the officials and their subordinates from the palace. Once, twice, thrice, the sky was shot with a blinding stab of light. A huge shape swung into view through the mists. Another and larger space ship! A moment it poised at the edge of the plaza, then swooped to a landing and rolled slowly to a lumbering stop.

The assembled Mercurians stared agape when the main port was opened and the gangplank lowered. Never before had one of the huge liners of the Tri-planetary Alliance made actual landing on the globe. Murmurs of surprised interest greeted the appearance of the only three visitors to disembark from the giant vessel -- a girl, a young woman of fragile and delicate mold by Mercurian standards, and two men who were likewise of terrestrial littleness in stature.

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* * *

"Careful now, you two," Chick Davis warned, as Una and Larry edged gingerly along the gangplank, "it'll take you a little time to get used to the lesser gravity and rare air. Though you weigh less than a third of what you do on earth, the slightest effort will exhaust you here. So, just take it easy."

Una laughed nervously. "I feel as though I could leap across the plaza," she said.

"You could -- nearly," agreed the captain, "but, until your lungs are accustomed to the change and your heart to the extra load imposed by the scarcity of oxygen, you'd better not try anything of the kind."

"Say Chick," exclaimed Larry, "that's a terrestrial government ship over there. Wonder what's up?"

"Probably they've been searching for us since our octophone went out of commission. Guess I'll be in for an argument after a bit. But they can't prove anything. That reminds me too -- better find the trouble now and report our whereabouts." Captain Davis winked and grinned as Larry turned a scared face toward him.

"They'll discipline you, Chick."

"Let 'em. I wouldn't have missed this for anything. I've had a circus on this trip. And I guess I can square myself."

Una drew back suddenly in alarm, grasping Larry and pointing a trembling finger. "Look!" she gasped. "There's John Mills!"

It was incredible, but true. On the platform facing the plaza there stood a group of Mercurian officials and with them were four terrestrials. One of these, a pudgy human with ruddy countenance, was undoubtedly John X. Mills.

Larry groaned, then stiffened in anger. "Miserable swine!" he snarled. "Been spying on me and learned my plans! I'll show him!"

So quickly did he ove in the direction of the triumphantly leering financier that his leap carried him a distance of thirty or more feet. He lost his balance and sprawled ignominiously at the edge of the platform. John X. Mills laughed.

Chick Davis was at Larry's side in an instant, and, as he helped him to his feet he hissed, "Keep your shirt on, you idiot! We're in a jam. Got to be diplomatic."

Una hurried to join them, her breath coming in painful gasps. She wanted to cry. Larry grumbled sheepishly as she made nervously ineffectual attempts to dust his clothes with her handkerchief.

Captain Davis strode to the center of the platform and faced the Dairo, president of the Mercurian high council, speaking rapidly in Termarven, the universal language which had been developed when interplanetary communication was first accomplished in 1988.

"Your excellency," said Chick, "I am captain of the *Rocket III*. A disarrangement of our electrical system partially crippled the vessel and it was necessary for us to land here to make repairs. Meanwhile I learned that these two young people of our world were endeavoring to escape persecution in their own land. They wish to marry but cannot on account of one of our rigid laws -- the Eugenics Act, with which you are undoubtedly familiar. I beg of you that they be permitted to make their home here and to wed in accordance with your laws. They freely renounce allegiance to the terrestrial government."

"I remember you, Captain Davis," replied the Dairo. "You have visited us before, though you have never honored us by landing your vessel. But I cannot accept your request."

"Can not? There is no treaty. Mercury is independent of the Tri-planetary Alliance."

"True. But a minor agreement has just been signed with representatives of your government. We have agreed that all terrestrials who might visit our globe are returnable at the demand of your government and are subject to your laws for so long a time as they remain with us. However, if your ambassador agrees, we will welcome this man and woman."

Larry understood Termarven but imperfectly and he stared from one to the other of the speakers in uncertainty. Una clung desperately to him.

The Dairo indicated one of the four terrestrials, a pompous individual who bowed ceremoniously at the acknowledgement.

"Hjalmar Nordstrom, Captain," he said in English, "at your service."

"You heard?"

"I heard, Captain."

"He lies!" croaked Mills. But Nordstrom frowned him into silence.

"Captain," said the ambassador, "it is impossible to grant your request. As you know, we have been trying for years to come to an understanding with the Mercurians and this mission of mine is the latest attempt. It has succeeded thus far, and the preliminary treaty is an entering wedge that we cannot afford to nullify by an immediate violation of one of its provisions. I must further remind you, Captain, that you are subject to disciplining for landing your vessel here."

"I'll take care of that, Mr. Ambassador. But, may I ask you who was the instigator of this special mission -- who wrote this clause?"

"Why -- why --" The ambassador flushed and John X. Mills coughed warningly.

"Ha! I thought so!" Chick Davis glared at Mills belligerently, then disdainfully at Nordstrom. "No wonder the Mercurians have always refused to treat with us, when our government sends such as you to deal with them. Don't see why they listened this time."

"Sir! I'll have you broken for this! I -- I --" The ambassador was sputtering with rage. Mills grasped his arm and whispered in his ear.

Larry was doing his best to comfort Una, who had buried her head on his shoulder. The Mercurians watched silently, the Dairo stretched to his full seven feet of dignified stature, arms folded across his broad chest.

"I demand their arrest!" shouted Mills. "The girl and Laurence Conover. They are fugitives from justice. Attempting to evade both the Compulsory Marriage Act and the Eugenics Act. I'll appear against them before the Boards."

The ambassador nodded agreement and the remaining two terrestrials advanced toward Una and Larry, flashing badges of the Secret Service. Larry's muscle tensed in his fury and Una gripped him more tightly.

"Don't dear," she whispered. "Please -- for my sake. It'll only be worse for you."

Chick Davis paused uncertainly, then turned on his heels and rapidly made for his vessel, covering the intervening distance with a peculiar shuffling lope that was admirably adapted to the gravity conditions.

"Chick! Chick!" called Larry.

But his friend continued on his way. Bitterly Larry watched him go. He'd deserted him, and in the time of greatest need. But, after all, what could he do?

Larry's muscle relaxed and Una sighed her relief. The officers were upon them and she had been horrified at the thought of the result of resistance on his part.

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* * *

"A moment please," asked the Dairo. "Do I understand that these two are to be arrested and returned to Terra to stand trial?"

"It is our law, your excellency," replied Nordstrum.

"A strange law it is that separates lovers so obviously suited to one another. But I presume that your solons know best. I do not profess to understand, but would know more regarding the circumstances. Shall we retire to the Dairofa and discuss the case in detail?"

"As you wish, excellency." The ambassador was chagrined, but could do naught but acquiesce. Mills figited and fumed.

Larry pricked up his ears over the Dairo's speech. The sympathy of this president of the Mercurian council gave him renewed hope. He would present his own case. There still might be some way in which that cursed treaty could be abrogated. But that forlorn hope was quickly blasted when the Dairo addressed them from his place at the head of the council table.

"The treaty stands," he said. "It has been officially signed and sealed. But I feel that we are entitled to the facts of this unfortunate case. Our people will question the justice of such a procedure as is proposed and apparently necessary. We must be prepared to satisfy them as to the wisdom of our judgment in carrying on this and future negotiations with the outer planets."

"We understand, honored Dairo," smiled the ambassador. His precious agreement was safe. "But I must ask Mr. Mills to give you the complete history of the affair. I am unfamiliar with the details."

John X. Mills cleared his throat. This would be somewhat difficult, as he spoke no Termarven and would have to tell his story to the interpreter. The members of the Mercurian council cast solemn yet kindly glances on Una and Larry when Mills pointed an accusing forefinger at them.

"These two -- " he began. But there came an interruption.

A page advanced hurriedly to the council table and the Dairo motioned Mills into silence.

"Captain Davis," announced the page, "demands admittance."

The Dairo brightened. "Send him in," he ordered.

The conversation was in the Mercurian tongue and Mills stood perplexedly silent. But Larry had caught the name of his friend and guessed at the meaning of the interruption. He squeezed Una's hand joyfully. Good old Chick! He hadn't left them after all. And somehow he felt that things would happen quickly now.

Chick Davis advanced to the council table with a broad grin on his face. He was accompanied by two terrestrials, a man and a woman.

Larry craned his neck to see who they were. Art Hovey! Why, the big stiff! He had been on the *Rocket III* -- and never looked up his friend. What did it mean? And the girl! Alta Farrish! He blinked his eyes in amazement.

"Alta!" gasped John X. Mills, "what are you doing here?"

"That is what I intended asking you." She smiled sweetly, but it seemed that she drew a bit closer to the side of Arthur Hovey.

Larry was completely mystified. But he felt an almost uncontrollable impulse to laugh aloud in this great domed chamber. One more shock like this and Mills would surely die of apoplexy. His purpled features and bulging eyes would have made a horse laugh.

The irate financier forgot himself. He forgot that he was in the presence of the nobility and the highest authority of a strange planet.

"What do you mean?" he roared. "Am I not your legal guardian? Who gave you permission to leave home? Answer me!"

The Dairo frowned in annoyance, but he did not interfere.

Art Hovey stepped forward, keeping Alta in the background. "You are speaking to my wife, Mr. Mills," he said quietly.

There was a momentary silence. Then John X. Mills far outdid his previous efforts. He shook his fist in the face of the young man who had so calmly announced the preposterous affront to his authority. He ranted and stormed.

The Dairo pounded vigorously for silence. This terrestrial was insufferable.

Ambassador Nordstrom spoke sharply to his compatriot and Mills subsided, mopping his perspiring brow with a large silk handkerchief. He wished he had these two youngsters at home.

* * *

"Ambassador," asked the Dairo, "will you be so kind as to request the young people to present their side of the story? It seems to be much involved."

Nordstrum translated rapidly and Art Hovey stepped to the table. Larry regarded him in astonishment. Guess he hadn't known his friend as well as he thought. Such a transformation he had never considered possible. The usually phlegmatic Art was supremely confident; dominant; compelling. He directed his remarks at the ambassador.

"Mr. Nordstrum," he said, "you have been hoodwinked by Mills. He has used this mission as a means to a personal end. His sole object in appealing to Congress at this time was to prevent the marriage of my friend to the girl he loves and force him to marry the woman who is now my wife. John X. Mills is a scheming and unscrupulous rascal."

"I am beginning to believe that is true," interjected Nordstrum. This thing was a sorry mess. He felt suddenly ashamed.

"I know it is true," continued Art, "for I have investigated and have learned many things. For years I have loved Alta Farrish, his ward, but I never courted her, for Mills had planned her marriage to my dear friend, Laurence Conover. I thought she cared for him and that eventually he would submit to Mills' wishes. But my friend had other plans and I wished to help him, so I set about to learn the true state of affairs. First off, I found that my fondest dreams were possible of realization. I -- " He hesitated and glanced at his bride for approval. She nodded happily.

"Anyhow we were married -- perfectly in order -- A2 classification and everything. But my friend, to be happy, must escape the laws of the three outer planets. He planned to settle here on Mercury and found a way to reach this planet. But I learned that Mills had been watching him by means of the detectoscope -- had followed his every movement. So I watched Mills. I discovered the machinations he used in engineering this official mission to the inner planet. So I followed on the *Rocket III*, though my friend did not know I was on board. I wanted to surprise him -- here -- to be of some assistance should it be necessary."

"Art, you're a brick!" exclaimed Larry. He could scarcely credit his senses. To think of Art doping this out -- fooling him!

"But I haven't told you the worst." Art paused dramatically. "Mills not only deceived my friends; he deceived his ward. The stock he votes in United Synthetic Food is but half his own. The other portion is Alta's. He voted it by proxy and has forged papers which convinced her that he could thus control it until her marriage. This has been the club he held over Larry Conover and over his ward to force the union he planned -- a union that interested him only because he thought it would permit him to retain control of the vast business he has dominated for so many years."

"Liar!" grated Mills. But his tone was far from convincing.

"It's the truth. Here's the proof." Art handed a sheaf of papers to the ambassador, who scanned them

carefully.

Larry could have kicked himself. Fool that he had been not to investigate the matter himself.

"Mills," said Nordstrum sternly, "he's got the goods on you. I'd keep my mouth shut now, if I were you. I'm through."

He turned to the Dairo. "Your excellency," he said, "I offer humble apology. I find that this young man speaks truth and that I have been deceived into becoming an unwitting party to the selfish schemes of my countryman. On behalf of my government I now propose to cancel the treaty we have signed, if it be your desire that this be done."

John X. Mills slumped low in his chair and stared at the floor. He seethed with rage. Yet he dared not retort.

"Ambassador," announced the Dairo, "you have acted in good faith and we blame you not for the deeds of this -- this member of your party. It is thought best, under the circumstances, that the papers be destroyed and the incident forgotten. The young couple who are not permitted to wed by your laws may remain with us if they wish. There is no bar to their union here."

The interpreter repeated his words in English and the five terrestrials from the Rocket III gathered in an excited huddle losing all interest in the ceremony of destroying the agreement.

Chick Davis could not restrain a joyous "Hooray!"

* * *

"You old fox!" exclaimed Larry, gripping Art's hand tightly. "You sure did put it over on me. And boy, you saved the day."

Una clung to her lover, an unaccountable lump in her throat. She was happy to be with him, happy in the knowledge that nothing now prevented them from joining their lives. But somehow she was frightened; homesick. She saw the disapproval of her own kind in the eyes of the Mercurians and she feared they would not be as welcome as the Dairo implied. But she would stick to Larry through anything. He was all that mattered, after all.

"But Art," objected Alta, "we can't leave them here. We must have Larry in New York. United Synthetic Food depends on him, and so do we. The reorganization -- we must vote our stock with his to keep control and to save the business from my guardian. Besides, I don't think Una likes it here as well. I know I didn't."

"You forgot," said Art, "the classification -- Una's rating."

Here was a facer. Larry looked into Una's eyes and saw that what Alta said was true. She didn't like it in Luzan! Matter of fact he wasn't so hot for it himself. It had sounded better when Chick told about it. Lord, what a mess! But he'd stay in Hades to have Una.

Art's usually placid brow was furrowed in thought. Good old Art! He had come through in a blaze of glory. Didn't think he had it in him. Guess Alta'd pepped him up. He had something to work for now. Imagine -- holding secret his feelings for her -- all these years.

"Psst! Una -- quick!" Art was whispering in her ear, "Your Board of Eugenics tag -- give it to me. Got an idea."

Wonderingly she took the tiny silver chain from her wrist and handed it to Larry's friend. Carefully he examined the markings on the surface of the little tag. Then he strode to the council table.

"Your excellency," he said, when the Dairo greeted him, "may I ask one question of John X. Mills?"

The request was quickly repeated by the interpreter and the Dairo signified his assent.

Art advanced to the now cowering financier. Ambassador Nordstrum groaned. What revelation was coming now? Wasn't it bad enough without further fuss? The mission was already a failure. But this young Hovey seemed to know his business.

"Mr. Mills," said Art in a steely voice, "you know Raymond Phelps, do you not?"

Mills dropped his eyes. His high color faded to a sickly mottled pallor. He stammered unintelligibly but did not reply.

"Answer him, Mills," warned the ambassador.

"Yes -- I know him," breathed the thoroughly frightened man.

"You bet you know him!" Art's voice rose in anger. "Know him too dam' well. And you bribed him to derate Una Sinclair -- an official of the incorruptable Board of Eugenics! But you'd corrupt a saint. You did it. Now -- didn't you?"

The pudgy hands of the financier twitched nervously where they gripped the arms of the chair. he half rose from his seat, then fell weakly back.

"Did you, Mills, did you?" The ambassador's voice was chill. "You miserable skunk -- answer!"

But John X. Mills was unequal to speech. He stared in terror at the livid face of the ambassador and nodded his head in agreement.

"Good Lord!" Nordstrum was aghast. To think that he had assisted this dirty hound! "You'll pay for this, John Mills. And, right now, your first act is going to be a full and complete confession to the Manager of the terrestrial government -- over the optophone. Get me? March now! By George, you'll not only confess, but you'll go back with me -- under arrest. Subsidize our officials, will you? Furthermore, we'll have Miss Sinclair reinstated in A2 at once. This vile scheming of yours can no longer affect them. These two young people can be married immediately -- on the *Rocket III* if they wish -- Captain Davis has authority."

He propelled Mills from the room ungently, the Mercurians looking on with open approval. Chick Davis indulged in an undignified jig.

"Boy, you're a marvel!" Larry hugged Art gleefully. "And, I know who our new Vice President in charge of sales is going to be. You could sell ice to the Eskimos."

Alta gurgled her approval. She knew that Art had it in him. Poor boy! He'd always kept himself in the background -- and on her account. Things would be different now.

Una didn't know whether she wanted to laugh or cry. It was all too good to be true.

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Ambassador Nordstrum was as good as his word, for within the space of a very few minutes he returned from the government vessel with news that Una's reinstatement was already approved. He personally voided her tag and wrote a temporary certificate of classification.

Alta pleaded for her guardian, and, eventually, Nordstrum agreed to free him from the cell in which he had been placed and to suspend action on the serious charges he faced.

The tiny government ship took off from the plaza, the Mercurians watching stolidly as it was lost in the mists above. But the *Rocket III*, due to its tremendous exhaust, would have to be towed to an isolated spot outside the city for its take-off. The Dairo appointed a committee to make the necessary arrangements.

"Now," said Chick Davis, when the tow ropes were attached to four huge tractors and his party made ready to enter the vessel, "I have to make my peace with the passengers. Some of 'em were sore as the devil because I wouldn't let 'em off the ship. But I guess the excitement of a shipboard wedding'll keep 'em quiet. Let's go."

When they entered the main air lock he whispered to Larry and Art, "Say! Maybe you think there hasn't been hell to pay back home. The world went crazy when the news broadcasts reported us lost. But they're happy again now, and, thanks to Nordstrum in great part, I'm sitting swell with the Board. So everything is O.K."

"That's great, Chick," said Larry, "I was afraid you'd get in a peck of trouble over this. And I don't know how to thank you, as it is."

"Aw, forget it. Art's the baby you have to thank."

"He knows how I feel about him."

Larry grew thoughtful. The girls had hurried to their staterooms to remove the traces of their trying experience. It seemed they were to spend the double honeymoon in the trip to Venus and Mars which must now be continued by the *Rocket III*. What a difference from the original plans! Then back to the restriction and regulations -- the Boards of this, that and the other thing. But, after all, these could affect them but little now. And they were so used to life on earth. For all its many annoyances, it wasn't so bad. Not so bad. Then there was Art. He'd get somewhere now. He was finally awake -- and how!

"Say, Art," he said, struck by a sudden thought, "how in the name of time did you find out that old man Mills had bribed that Board of Eugenics bird?"

Arthur Hovey grinned. "Didn't," he admitted. "Saw the name Phelps on the tag and took a flier on the hunch I had."

"It worked, too."

"I'll say it did!" chuckled the captain.

Larry shook his head in growing amazement. "Why, you son-of-a-gun!" he breathed admiringly. "You're good!"

THE END