

"She flies," the father said, indicating the little girl dangling uncomfortably midway between a baroque chandelier and the rather mottled carpeting. "And she has for more than five years. You can imagine that it gave us quite a turn when we saw this three-year-old just swoop up from her toys and begin to bat around the room, but after a while you can become accustomed to almost anything. That's the human condition, am I right?" He spread his hands and looked at the guest directly, gave a little laugh. "Actually, she's a very sweet, unspoiled little child and I've tried to give her a healthy, wholesome upbringing to make her take her gift in stride. *Never* in front of anyone other than me without permission and *double never* out of the house. All right dear," he said, "our guest has seen everything he needs, I'm sure. Come down now."

The little girl bobbed near ceiling level. "I can turn over in the air," she said to the guest. "I can do dips and floats and even pirouettes. If I went to ballet school like I wanted to I could do even the better stuff but he won't let me."

"I'm sure he would," the guest said gently. He opened the loose-leaf binder on his knee, took a pen from his suit pocket and made a note. "You have a very kind and understanding father."

"I have a very kind and understanding father but he won't let me go to ballet school and he won't even let me fly unless he wants to show me off," the girl said. "I don't think that's right, do you? Not letting someone do what they really do best except when *he* wants me to." She revolved slowly, drifted toward the floor headfirst, reversed herself clumsily near the prospective point of impact and landed, wobbling, on her feet. "I'll go and *watch* television," she said. "I know you want me out of the room now. He always wants to show me off and then throw me out."

"That's not necessary, Jessica," her father said uncomfortably, "and you know perfectly well—"

"But it's *true*," the girl said. She nodded at the guest. "Actually I can't fly all the time," she said, "you ought to know the truth; I can't even do it every time I want to. Actually it's a very tiring thing. No more than fifteen or twenty minutes and then I have to rest for a whole day." She walked to the door, as clumsy on her feet as in the air, attempted a curtsy and left, closing the door not too gently.

The guest and her father sat in the living room, looking at one another rather uneasily for a time. The clock banged out four syllables, or then again the guest thought that it might have been five; it was very hard to keep track of the sounds which were swallowed by carpeting and then too, this was a peculiar household. Nothing was quite as it seemed to be. Four or five, however, it was certainly late afternoon and he wanted to complete his business and go on his way.

Idly, the guest imagined a large frosted cocktail glass before him. Around him was a large roadhouse, quiet conversation. He could ask this man for a drink, of course. But that would only compromise their dealings. A drink could cost him a hundred dollars in this living room. *I must get hold of myself*, the guest thought rather frantically, *this is only a job and I ought to be glad to have it, everything considered Involvement, pressures are on the agency, not on me*. "Remarkable child," he said hoarsely, scribbling something else and then slamming the binder closed, reinserting pen in pocket. "Very intelligent for her age. Of course extremely undeveloped as both you and she know. Her management of distances—"

"Well," her father said, Spreading his hands again, "I *have* tried. The fact that she has one remarkable talent doesn't excuse her, after all, from living in the world. She's in an accelerated program at school where they take her to be simply a bright, normal child and I've also arranged for reading tutorials at home and music lessons twice a week. She's studying the violin, my *favorite* instrument. Frankly, the child has almost no ability but the cultural background—"

"I understand," the guest said rather hurriedly, "you're doing an excellent job within the limits—"

"It isn't easy in a motherless household you know. I've had to be both parents to Jessica, which would be difficult with even a *dull* child, and she has to be shielded and educated carefully." The man paused, wiped a hand across his streaming forehead. "It's really been quite difficult," he said, "I'm sure that my wife had her reasons for leaving me and I was right to insist upon custody and I'll concede too that it was a *relief* when she walked out, but all of this has descended on me and I've had very little help

from the woman or anyone else for that matter. She was always selfish and inconsiderate, her mother, and I think that the flying business was the last *straw* in a marriage that frankly, was never very good." He paused again, eyes rolling meditatively. "But that's neither here nor there," he said, "and you're not over here to be burdened with my personal problems. The point is: what are you going to do? I brought you here for *your* proposal."

"Um," the guest said, "isn't the point though what *you* want to do? What do you expect, sir? The organization which I represent, you understand, is an exceptionally cooperative one and never makes outright conditions. Rather, we're here to listen to what you thought you might have had in mind."

Carefully, the guest put a hand into his jacket pocket and fumbled for a pack of cigarettes, extracted one, lit it hurriedly and then, in response to a long, poor glare from his host, put it out in a large, green ashtray at his elbow. Little foul emanations stabbed at him like vipers and he choked. "Sorry," he said. Sinus trouble again; nervous strain. Why did the caseload always turn out like this? By definition, parents of the psionically gifted, particularly the levitators and telepaths, seemed to be at least mildly insane. Maybe that was the biological secret: insanity transmuted itself to psionics in the second generation. Or then again, maybe levitators and telepathy *made* parents insane. That was a thought, although, unhappily, not a new one. He choked again. "I apologize," he said, motioning toward the cigarette, "I didn't realize that smoke offended—"

"I will not tolerate smoking here," his host said. "That woman smoked, all she *did* was smoke; it took me three years after she left to get the air cleared and the smell out of the house. Smoke also inhibits Jessica's levitation."

"It shouldn't," the guest said firmly. "There is no connection."

"But it does." The man leaned forward, almost forehead to forehead now. "The time for amenities is past, don't you think?" he said. "And I know you're a busy, responsible man. Now what I'd like to hear is your offer."

The guest sighed. "It isn't that easy."

"And why not?"

"Everybody, all of the people, think in terms of offers, simple all-inclusive figures. But there are so many other things involved: the terms, the conditions, and more importantly the strength of the talent and the degree of its refinement—"

"Flat offer," the man said, touching palms with himself. His face seemed tinted with sweat or excitement; he had to work on his forehead again. "All inclusive. Everything. Full responsibility, full control. Live-in."

"You wouldn't even want to retain—"

"Nothing," the man said quickly. "I've done everything I can for my child. Now she ought to be in the hands of people who can really develop her. I want an all-inclusive offer for total control."

"No subsidiary? How about participation in the secondary rights: performing, options, a percentage—"

The man cleared his throat. "I'll take it all on the front end, as much as I can get," he said.

"Ah," the guest said. "Ah." He opened his notebook again, extracted the pen, thought for a moment, and then quickly wrote down a figure on a fresh, blank sheet, tore it past the reinforcements and handed it to the man, who seized it. "That's really the best we can do," he said, "it's a nice little talent, but levitation is far more common than you might think, and Jessica is completely untrained. She'd have to be trained from the beginning; the first thing she would have to do is to *unlearn* levitation so that we could start her from the beginning without any bad habits. The child has no body control at all."

He closed the book, sighed. "People think that all we do is go to work," he said, "but there's more than you might think and the key issue is the training, which is incredibly complex and expensive. Believe me, I have seen many who would cost more to train than they would eventually return, like doing heavy repairs on old cars. Fortunately Jessica does show some ability, very raw, but she might be third-string somewhere and there's a need for this."

The man closed his mouth finally and handed back the paper. "This is ridiculous," he said slowly, "I mean it's robbery. It's less than a quarter of what the child is worth. A true levitator! A natural talent! Any

one of the other agencies would *double* this price. I don't care who I'd see there."

"Then I suggest you *go* to one of our competitors," the guest said quietly; he put his pen away for the second time, closed his book with a snap and stood. "I'm afraid that we do not misrepresent or pack our offers as our competitors do. Our policy is one figure, a fair offer, taking into account every aspect of the situation. If it's taken, fine, and if it's not we happily accept the loss because a higher offer would have been unprofitable and thus self-deceiving. Our policy is built on rigorous fairness and the skills of its highly-trained field staff; and now," he added, moving toward the door, "if you will excuse me, my working day is done."

"Now wait a minute," the man said slowly, the words wrenched from him one by one like sobbing exhalations from a balloon. "I didn't say no. I mean, I didn't *flatly* say no. I mean, if that's really your policy, one offer, how was I to know that?" He touched the guest on the arm, trembling slightly, backed off at once. "I mean, I know your reputation," he said, "that you're honorable people."

"Thank you."

"But frankly, I *have* to get a little more than that."

"Try one of our competitors then. You said they would do better."

"But I have to think of my *child*," the man said quickly, almost hysterically. "Now I mean to say, what's a few dollars more or less when it's your own child at issue; and I know that you'd get the best for her, make the best possible development."

"If we can."

"So maybe, well let me put it this way then." He placed the most delicate of hands on the guest's wrist again, this time let it rest there. "Would there be maybe a ten percent give in your position? On the upward arc of course."

"Of course," the guest said, "of course upward, always upward. No one ever thinks downward, do they?"

He paused, sighed, looked at the man. "Levitation is a dime a dozen," he said. "We reject more levitators than we take. In its crude, unfocused state it's worthless except as a party trick. How many violinists are there for every concertmaster? He paused again and then shrugged. "Look here," he said.

The guest put the binder under his arm, lifted his index finger and as clumsily as Jessica moved upward two or three feet, dangled his feet, kicked for effect and then swam inexpertly through the air to his chair. Breathing unevenly he hung there for an instant, then released the field and dropped into the chair. The father watched this intently.

"You see?" the guest said, taking out a handkerchief and wiping his wet forehead. "And I'll never be anything more than a field investigator."

That hung in the air for a moment. The father seemed to dwindle within himself, dropped his gaze, looked at the floor thoughtfully. At length he lifted his head, looked at the guest again and very awkwardly rose from his own chair, hanging in the air tensely.

"All right," he said. "I see. I'll sign anything."

And so the negotiations ended. Another day; another dollar, the guest thought. †

In Times to Come

The planet Mercury hasn't been kind to science-fiction writers. Several very fine stories set on Mercury have been invalidated by advancing astronomical knowledge about the Sun's nearest neighbor.

A new writer, Brenda Pearce, brings together all that's known about conditions on Mercury for a strong story of men against nature—and against each other—called "Hot Spot." It's the lead novelette in April's issue, with a dramatic cover painting by John Schoenherr.

In this age of militant feminism, it would be chauvinistic to marvel about a woman writing a "hard science" story. But regardless of gender, Ms. Pearce has produced a stunning story in the Hal Clement tradition, no mean feat for any new writer.

The science article next month will be "Extraterrestrial Organic Matter," by Louis Lenhard. It deals with the discoveries of organic chemicals in interstellar space and in meteorites, and the implications for

the origin of life on Earth.