

# IN A PETRI DISH UPSTAIRS

GEORGE TURNER

1

When, some fifty years after the Plagues and The Collapse, Alastair Dunwoodie put the first Solar Power Station into synchronous orbit over Melbourne Town - that is, some 38,000 kilometres above it - no warning angel tapped his shoulder to whisper, 'You have created a fresh culture and rung the knell of an old one.'

It would have been told to mind its own celestial business. With solar power now gathered by the immense space mirrors and micro-beamed to Earth for network distribution, the Golden Age was appreciably closer. With a Station in Heaven, all was right with the world.

Remarkably soon there were seventeen Power Stations in orbit above strategic distribution points around the world, sufficient for the needs of a planet no longer crawling with the famined, resource-consuming life of the Twentieth Century. The Plagues and The Collapse and yet less pleasant events had thinned the problem.

Dunwoodie was a builder, not a creator; his ideas had been mooted in the 1970s, some eighty years before, but had not come to fruition when The Collapse intervened. It was, however, notable that even in those days, when social studies of crowding and isolation had been to the fore, nobody seemed to have considered what changes might occur among the first people to live out their lives in a steel cylinder in space.

And not for a further eighty years after the launching did the Custodian of Public Safety of Melbourne Town begin to consider it - when, for the first time in three generations, an Orbiter proposed to visit Earth. When he had arrived at the vagueness of a possible decision, he visited the Mayor.

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'Do you mean to give a civic reception for this brat?'

The Mayor of Melbourne Town was unenthusiastic. 'It's an event, of sorts. A reception will let Orbiter vanity preen while it keeps the Town's society belles from claiming they weren't allowed to meet him. I hear he's a good-looking lad.'

The Custodian seemed uninterested in that.

The Mayor asked at last. 'But why? After three generations they send a youngster - nineteen, I believe - to visit. What do they want? Why a boy?'

'A boy on a man's errand, do you think?'

The Mayor's expression asked, *Why are you wasting my time?* and he waited for explanation.

The Custodian went at it obliquely. 'The Global Ethic,' he said, 'the Ethic of Non-interference - do you ever question it?'

The Mayor was a very young man, the Custodian an old and dangerously experienced one. The Mayor went sharply on guard but his expression remained as bland as his answer: 'Why should I? It works.'

The Custodian's authority outweighed the Mayor's - Mayoral duties were social rather than gubernatorial - but he had no overt power to punish. But advancement could be blocked or privilege curtailed without open defiance of the Ethic as it operated on Departmental levels.

The Custodian surprised him. 'You should, James; you should question continuously. Particularly morals, conventions, habits, regulations - and ethics. The older and more ingrained, the more questionable.'

Stiffly, 'Those are matters for Global League delegates.'

The Custodian grinned like a friendly skull. 'You shouldn't be so damned careful; I want your help, not your scalp. Review some facts.' He flicked a raised finger. 'First: the Power Stations as originally flown were rotated about the long axis to afford peripheral gravity.' Another finger. 'Second: when the final Stations were flown, the seventeen formed themselves into the Orbital League.' Third finger. 'Then they made unreasonable demands for luxuries, surplus wealth, cultural artefacts and civic privilege under threat of throttling down the power beams. That was seventy years back.'

'School is a year or two behind me,' said the Mayor coldly, 'but basic history remains familiar.'

'I'm selecting facts, not lecturing.' Fourth finger. 'So the Global Council of the time authorised use of a remote-action energy blind, a - call it a weapon - whose existence had not been publicly known. The Orbiters threatened our microbeams, so we blinded the internal power systems of Station One from a single projector in Melbourne Town. After a week of staling air, falling temperature and fouling water they cried quits and - ' fifth finger ' - the Orbital League has made no such further error since.'

'So for once the Ethic was ignored.'

'Oh, but it wasn't. We took suitable action, harming no one seriously, to preserve the status quo. That was all.'

The Mayor said, 'It was *not* all. The Stations had been earning extra revenue with their null-g factories - perfect ball bearings, perfectly formed crystals and so on. Earth stopped buying, limiting Orbiter income to the Power Charter allocation. That was reprisal and un-Ethical.'

'Earth protected herself against wealthy Stations accumulating the means of further blackmail.'

The Mayor was contemptuous. 'Semantic drivel.'

'It was a Council decision. Do you dispute it?'

‘Yes,’ said the Mayor and waited for the axe to fall.

‘Good, good, good! So you see, the bloody Ethic means whatever you need it to mean.’

The Mayor retained caution. ‘Most realise that, privately. Still, it works.’

‘Because *laissez faire* has become part of our cultural mentality. But what of the cultural mentality Upstairs?’

‘Well, we know they have developed non-Terrene conventions and behaviour. There’s been little physical contact since they cut themselves off.’

‘Quite so.’

Silence dragged while the Mayor wondered had he said more than he knew. What the Orbiters had done was to stop the rotation of the Stations and give themselves over to a null-g existence. When you thought of it, why not? To live in utter physical freedom, to fly, to leap, to glide, to dispose for ever of the burden of the body ... the wonder was that they had waited so long to grasp delight.

It followed that the first generation born in space was cut off from Earth. Once muscle structure and metabolism had settled into null-g conditions, exposure to gravity became inconceivable, possibly disastrous ... ahh!

‘This young man, this Peter Marrian - how will he deal with weight? Power-assist harness?’

‘I must tell you about that,’ said the Custodian. ‘You’ll be fascinated ...’

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The no-nonsense Orbiters preserved no fairy tales from their Earthly heritage but they had formulated a few austere anecdotes for the very young. One concerned a super-virile Orbiter who married a Terrene heiress and brought her home to live in orbit.

Peter heard the tale when he was not quite three and already absorbing Orbiter lore with a mind the commune nurses noted, in their giggly fashion, as destined for Upper Crust privilege.

‘ - then, when he’d defeated all the schemes of the rich girl’s wicked father, he joined with her in a church as they do Downstairs. Then he brought her to the Station with all her riches and the Commune Fathers awarded him such extra privileges that he lived happily ever after.’

It did not occur to him then (or later, for that matter) to ask how *she* lived ever after. His interest was in the early part of the story, which told how the young Orbiter became big and powerful in order to face the monstrous Terrene weapon, Gravity. Now, how was that accomplished?

He spat at the nurses who said he would understand when he was older. They had no idea, for they were only thirdwomen and not educated beyond their needs, and such rearing facilities did not then exist. But soon would.

Such facilities, *all* facilities, cost money. The Commune's only money-wealth was the cynically limited income derived from the Power Charter, kept at a 'reasonable minimum'. The Orbiters were welcome to pride and null-g freedom - at a suitably cheap rate.

The first generation had tried blackmail and learned a rapid lesson.

The second generation had reasoned that conditions were humiliating rather than unbearable - and in fact provided much which Earth could not - and could be endured until better opportunity offered. The important thing was to acquire money with which to buy - well, facilities.

By the third generation the Commune Fathers had grown longer sighted and the first cheese-paringly sequestered funds were being transformed into a huge centrifuge at about the time young Peter asked his question. Cutting gravity and so cutting culturally loose from Earth had been a fine gesture but there could be advantage in a squad of Orbiters who could move comfortably on Earth's surface. And recommencing rotation was out of the question for the older folk.

'I hate it!' - shrieked and repeated to exhaustion - was the reaction of Peter, aged four, to his first experience of the centrifuge. Even the fiddling 0.2 g was outrage to a physique which had come to terms with mass and inertia but knew nothing of weight, nor wished to.

On the second day, after a bout of desperate clinging to the door grip, he was allowed out after ten minutes, bellowing, while the thirdwomen giggled at his aggressiveness. It would be a useful trait in the future planned for him.

After a fortnight of systematic lengthening of his daily accustomisation - allowing internal organs to realign gently to a vertically weighted structure - increase of the g factor began. His rages evolved into arrogant self-confidence as the psychlinicians worked with cold devotion on the boy's emotional fabric.

At age six he lived most of his day in the centrifuge, a series of belts round the internal circumference of the Station and large enough to accommodate a considerable cadre now that a method had been established. With his weight at 0.5 g (he was the only one as yet on the fastest belt) he looked forward, under psychological prodding, to greater conquests. Signs of muscular shape, as distinct from subcutaneous muscular structure, were discernible.

The Commune Fathers allotted him the personal name of 'Marrian' - a joke of sorts, and their first mistake.

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'Since the Orbiters set aside wedlock and the family system, second names have been allotted on a descriptive basis, focusing on job or personal attributes. What does Marrian describe?'

The Mayor had been, as promised, fascinated by the facts but more intrigued by the Custodian's possession of them. 'I'm sure I don't know, and I know even less how you came by this knowledge. You have excellent informants.'

'If you mean spies,' the Custodian said comfortably, 'say spies. I haven't any really. Only

shuttle pilots and a few delivery agents visit the Stations, but their tattle and observations add up to this and that.'

'So they penetrated the nurseries to learn bedtime stories and discovered the centrifuge nobody else knows about - and didn't, er, *tattle* even to their best friends?'

'Well, they told *me*.'

'They thought bedtime stories worth a custodial report, these most unofficial agents?'

'Perhaps I should admit to some literary licence in fleshing out the picture.' The Mayor, played with, shrugged and was silent. 'Am I so inept? Must I tell the truth?'

Administrative secrets can be slippery, but curiosity had carried the Mayor too far for retreat. 'It would help,' he said coldly and the Custodian's instant grin warned him that he shared the pool with a shark.

'The Power Stations talk to each other. I listen. I don't hear deadly secrets, for they aren't stupid. Only occasional indiscretions and errors come my way. It has taken fifteen years to form a picture from scraps.'

'They talk in clear?'

'By line of light laser.'

The Mayor saw appalling involvements opening but the hook was in his jaws. 'Transceivers would be shielded, and you can't tap into a laser beam undetected.'

'Who can't?'

It was not really a shock, only one more privacy violated by nameless men. The Custodian offered a spin-off comment: 'The intention of the Ethic is preserved by continuous distortion of the letter.'

'Semantics!' But the repetition was half-hearted.

'The price of language. Now you know some secrets. There's a price on those also.'

'Which I pay at once?'

'There is an action to be taken and I must not be implicated. Public Safety must not seem interested in Orbiter affairs. Less obvious people are needed - like those uniformless couriers of yours who fix giddy-gossipy eyes on Town affairs and keep you informed of the social fluxes you so gently do not seem to guide.'

The Mayor said uncomfortably, 'I rarely interfere -'

'But how could you? The Ethic, the Ethic! But I want to share your knowledge of everything Peter Marrian does on Earth and every word he speaks here.'

'My boys aren't equipped -'

'They will be. Sensitised clothing and sound crystals at the roots of the hair. They'll be walking audio-cameras.'

'This is all you want?'

'For the moment.'

There it was, the - no, not 'veiled threat', but ... that phrase the pre-Collapsers had used ... the 'rain check' taken out on him. 'Am I to know what we are looking for?'

'The reason for Peter Marrian's visit.'

A part of the Mayor's very considerable intelligence had been worrying at the question since first mention of the name and had reached a conclusion. He thought, in for a credit in for a bust, and said, 'But we know that, don't we?'

The Custodian smiled, at last like a man rather than a skull. 'We do?'

'The Orbiters, if what formal communication we have with them is a reliable guide, have developed lazy habits of speech. They drop unnecessary final consonants, like g and f and h - sendin, mysel, strengt. Peter Marrian's name refers to his job, but has been misunderstood. Peter Marrying.'

The Custodian laughed like a madman. 'Do you imagine they'd waste resources preparing a brat to come Downstairs to get married? They don't even recognise marriage.'

'But we do. And isn't that the whole point of the bedtime story?'

The Custodian calmed abruptly. 'You'll do. It took me several years to realise that. The reason for it all?'

'Money. If you can't earn it, marry it. All Orbiter property is, I believe, communal.'

'Good, good. And so?'

'This visit is, perhaps, exploratory, perhaps the opening move in an Orbiter campaign for ...' He trailed off. 'For what?'

The Custodian stood to go. 'That is what I asked the Global Council to consider. They are still considering. Meanwhile it is up to you and I to see that Peter Marryin, however often best man, is never the groom.'

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## 2

It was unfortunately true that the Custodian's information derived mainly from Orbiter indiscretions and errors. Much escaped him entirely; much was filled in only after the affair was over.

He did not know, for instance, that Peter Marryin's face was not wholly his own. Orbiter technicians, observing the TV shows of Melbourne Town's entertainment idols (whom they despised utterly) with special attention to those who brought the young grovelling in ill-concealed sexual hysteria, spent two years designing the face; surgeons spent a further two creating it. The result was coldly calculated to turn the heads and raise the blood pressures of a prognosticated ninety per cent of Melbourne Town females between the ages of thirteen and thirty - a carnally desirable young lout with something for everybody and a dedication to its use.

Such thoroughness would have scared the Custodial wits out of him, more so if he had realised that the target had been narrowed to this one city on Earth.

Peter should have gone to Earth when he was eighteen, in that era an ideal age for a beginner at wiving, but the Commune Fathers were a committee and had fallen into the committee traps of indecision, vacillation and name calling, without in nearly twelve months selecting a plump enough fly for their spider.

There were too many possibilities. One of the more disastrous outcomes of the planetary Ethic of Non-interference had seen economic expertise, enhanced by psyelectronics, carve obese fortunes out of the re-industrialised planet; young heiresses were available in a wealthy world where small families were still the cautious habit of a species which had once already come within an ace of starving itself to death.

The Commune bickerings had ended with the death of old Festus Grant, right under their feet, in Melbourne Town. In wonderment they totalled the fabulous holdings - Rare Metals Research, Lunar Constructions, Ecological Rehabilitation and Exploitation, Monopole Ramjets, Mini-Shuttles Corporation, Sol-Atmos Research and Reclamation and more, more, more - The list rang louder bells for them than all the Jesus Cult cathedrals in history.

And all - all - all went to Claire Grant, only child of the dead widower.

The haste with which they groomed, briefed and despatched the casually confident Peter was worse than indecent; it was comic and contemptible. And thorough.

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At nineteen the boy had all of the traditional Orbiter contempt for Earthworms, amplified by the hundreds of teleplays he had been forced to watch in order to become familiar with customs, speech idioms and etiquette. (He still did not really understand their drama; third generation Orbiters were unable to comprehend the preoccupations and philosophies of people not reared in a steel rube.) He had also an instilled awareness of being a cultural hero in embryo, the bedtime-story-boy who lived happily ever after in a swagger of privilege.

By Terrene standards he was paranoid (by Orbiter standards arrogant) but had been coached in adapting his responses to an Earthworm norm. The coaching, brilliant in its fashion, allowed insufficiently for unpredictable encounters (encounters were rarely unpredictable in an Orbiter rube) and the shuttle was scarcely spaceborne before his furies stirred to Earthworm insolence.

The pilot was a jokey type, all bonhomie and loud mouth, saying, 'You'll find old Earth heavy going, feller,' and laughing madly at his obscure pun based on an idiom not in use Upstairs - one which sounded to Peter like a mannerless criticism. And: 'Watch the women, boy! They'll

*weight* for you to *fall* for them. Get it? *Weight* for you to -'

'I get it, thank you. Now mind your own damn business and watch your disgustin tongue.'

'Hey, now!'

The co-pilot dug him in the ribs to shut him up and grinned sympathetically at Peter, who interpreted the grin as zoological observation of the freak from Upstairs and returned a glare of rage. The co-pilot shrugged, adding fuel to a conviction of insulting pity.

The fool at the landing field, who mocked his strength by offering to carry his luggage, was saved from assault only by a memory of teleplays showing the planetary obsession with menialism - free intelligences actually *offering* service! He relinquished the bags with contempt and began to focus his accelerating dislike for things Terrene on the unfortunate girl he had been reared to meet. *She* was responsible for the shame and insult he must bear in the course of duty.

In his anger he forgot even his irrational fear that Earth gravity would be mysteriously different from his experience in the centrifuge - that 'real' weight would be something else. By the time he noticed that it was not he had calmed sufficiently to go through the mental balancing routine laid down for him by the Orbiter psychlinicians.

It was an excellent routine, devised by men who knew more about his mind than he ever could. By evening he was ready - 'debonair' was the word he favoured - to face the Reception at the Town Hall, the first in line of the haunts of the rich bitches. The Grant had better be there; he was not in dawdling mood.

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It was the Mayor, now, who sat in the Custodian's office; the audio-crystals and the transcripts Englished from them were politically too touchy to risk outside a secured area. The tape they had heard had been prepared from a crystal lodged at the root of a hair on the head of a shuttle co-pilot. How the Mayor had achieved that, far outside his sphere of authority, the Custodian had the good taste not to ask; he was certain that this young man would go far and successfully.

'An unpleasant little shit,' he said.

The Mayor (who, if age were the only factor, could have been the Custodian's great-grandson) was beginning to feel at home with the old exhibitionist. 'I think that the Orbiters are what we have made them.'

'Yes. Be properly glum about it.'

'If he looks like bringing off a marriage - '

The Custodian said harshly, 'He won't.'

'But if?'

'Very well - if?'

'We might engineer small events, derogatory to his self-esteem, to push him past his



restraints, allow him to erupt in public scenes which will make him socially unacceptable. Then we could look down our official noses and send him back Upstairs with a complaint of his behaviour.'

The Custodian laughed and asked, 'Are you ambitious?'

'In two years I will be thirty and no longer eligible for minor civil office. If I am not selected for a further Supervisory career I must fall back on commerce. The last Mayor of Melbourne Town is now a factory hand. This youth-decade in Social Administration can be a trap for the unprepared.'

'I wouldn't worry too much.'

They understood each other exactly.

But they did not understand Orbiters at all. Deny how they might, they shared in the recesses of their minds the common opinion that Orbiters were peculiar, backward and hardly to be taken seriously. In a perilously easygoing culture the problems of underdogs - their sense of grievance and drive, not for equality but for revenge - were little comprehended on realistic levels.

Nor did either understand the drive for achievement latent in a moneyed nonentity. They had thought, when assessing the field, that Peter would certainly be snatched up by the glamour crowd, and little Cinderella Claire lost in the crush.

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### 3

The hall was crowded. Not, of course, that one cared a damn for the barbarian Orbiters or their peculiar tribalisms, but one was justified in observing a Social Curiosity.

Amongst the crowd Festus Grant's daughter was strung taut, breathless at her own projected daring, at what she intended to do tonight. When this ball was over she would be the envy of the smart set, even a centre of scandal, but for once she would have shone as 'the girl who dared'.

She was a social nobody and knew it. She would, at age nineteen in a year's time, attain her majority and control of the greatest fortune in Australasia, but that meant nothing to the Pleasured Classes; after a certain number of millions money became an environment rather than a possession and simple quantity no ground for eminence.

That she was intelligent, good-hearted and socially more willing than able counted not at all against her plain features, washed-out eyes and too-plump figure. The physical defects could have been surgically corrected but among the Pleasured Classes this was Not Done; the struggling masses might falsify and pretend but One Was Above That.

Worse, she lacked taste. She was wickedly overdressed - with too much jewellery, a too blatantly fantastic hair arrangement, a dress too brightly red and too ornate and - and without the subtlety of choice which could subtract and adjust and transform her into what she wished to be.

All she had was useless money. She was accustomed to the attentions of men who pursued her prospects rather than herself and, as one who could buy any number of husbands, despised men who could be bought.

She danced with one of them to pass the time. *He* would not appear until just before the Protocol Dance, the fourth. While the eager young man found her unresponsive, in her mind she rehearsed her move. As the richest heiress present (and this was a point of etiquette wherein money *did* count) she would automatically take place next to the Lady Mayoress and be the second person presented. If *He* had been married, some wealthy matron would have been in the place of opportunity; it paid to know the rules and to be prepared to use them.

Colour and sound died as the orchestrator left the keyboard, and she rid herself of the eager young man.

When at last *He* arrived - he was anticlimactic.

Secretly she had hoped against commonsense for something strange, exotic (so, secretly, had they all), an outworld fantastication of dress, an oddity of manner or unexpectedness of appearance -

- anything but the too-ordinary pale and slender young man, in commonplace Terrene attire, who hesitated at the door as if taken with yokel surprise at the spectacle of Melbourne Town's Pleasured Class frozen in the half-bow and half-curtsey of welcoming protocol, then came uncertainly down the hall, guided by the traditional Visitor's Escort of Police Controller and Aide, whose dress uniforms outshone him utterly.

He was a mistake, a nothing. Her scandalous resolution lapsed; he was not worth it.

Then he came close. The escort fell back as he halted the correct four paces from the Mayor. At least, she thought, he had been coached in the observances. The Mayor stepped forward and the Orbiter lifted his face to the light.

Disappointment vanished before the most vitally handsome man she had ever seen. He was the epitome, the gathering, the expression of every media star and public idol who had ever roused her fantasies. He was The Orbiter - unearthly.

She scarcely heard the formal exchange; she ached to have done with it and with the visitor's formal round of the floor with the Lady Mayoress, so that she ...

Peter bowed to the Lady Mayoress as the introduction was made, but the matron did not offer her arm.

They talked.

With the orchestrator's hands poised, waiting, over the keys - they talked.

Claire was furious. The woman was waiving the protocol of the first dance. Orbiters might be socially backward, but this was diplomatic insult.

Then the Mayoress took a pace back, terminating the exchange, and still the orchestrator

waited on the Mayor's signal.

Claire saw a faint uncertainty in the Orbiter's fixed smile and knew that this was the moment. A public prank became an act of rescue.

She stepped quickly forward and he, perceiving the movement, half turned to her. She made the formal half-curtsy, knew she did it awkwardly and cared not a damn for that, and asked with a clarity that shivered to the doors of the hall.

'May I request the Protocol Dance?'

There was a stillness. She saw fury on the Mayor's face, instantly veiled. She sensed rather than heard an intake of half a thousand breaths - and realised the meaning of the disregarded dance, the substitution of formal chat. Gently the Protocol Dance had been passed over in consideration of a visitor who in a weightless community could never have learned the Viennese waltz.

Through the petrification of her shame she heard the voice that could have charmed demons: 'Why, thank you,' and felt the slender fingers take hers. Lifted from the curtsy, she gazed into the smile that had been sculpted for her to gaze into. He said, 'I shall be charmed, Miss Grant.' But it was she who was charmed that unbelievably he knew her name, and it was she who triumphed over Mayor and Mayoress, escort and orchestrator and all the Pleasured Class as he added, 'I have taken delight in learnin your ballroom antics.'

While he cursed the Freudian slip behind his plastic smile she treasured it as the needed oddity, the otherworldliness that made him truly a visitor to Earth.

If Claire Grant and Peter Marryin made a less than graceful couple, the swishing of tongues outmanoeuvred was balm to the ugly duckling's waltzing ego.

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Sensitised areas on the couriers' jackets did not make the best of cameras. Subject to crumpling and difficult to aim with accuracy, two of them yet caught Claire's expression at different times during the ball.

'She's in an enchantment,' said the Mayor.

'She's on heat,' said the Custodian, to whom romance had suddenly become a dirty word. 'He's had brat's luck.'

'Or good preparation.'

'Meaning what?'

The Mayor ran back through the audio tapes. 'This.'

Peter's voice murmured in mid-air, 'Ugly ducklin? What is that? You have charm.'

'You don't mean that.' She was coy, ecstatic, flirtatious and pleading all at once. ('Thank sanity we don't stay young,' the Custodian muttered.)

Peter's ghost voice said, 'I do mean it. Men appreciate charm in a woman.'

'They appreciate money in a woman.'

'I don' understan you.'

'You don't understand money?'

'Intellectually I do, but not as an attraction. We don' use money Upstairs.'

Then he talked of other things as though money were of no interest.

'Neat,' the Custodian agreed. 'Made his point and left it at that. Even stuck to the truth.'

'But not to the truth behind the truth. He has been very well prepared.'

'Fortunately, so have we.'

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The Custodian was wrong about that. On his fourth day on Earth Peter Marryin proposed to the infatuated, richest girl in Melbourne Town, was accepted by her and married to her (with housekeeper and maid for witnesses) by public data-record plug-in, a terminal of which was, quite naturally, located in her late father's study.

Capture and consolidation took something under fifteen minutes, whereas the Custodian had relied on an Engagement, a Round of Gaiety and a Splendid Society Wedding for time in which to generate a dozen subtle interferences. Against Peter's precision and speed no bugging system could do more than record the outwitting of science and power.

The Mayor was silently amused at the old man's raging against defeat. The backward barbarians Upstairs had foreseen opposition and surveillance and designed a lightning campaign to outflank both. He began to respect the barbarians.

But the old man stamped and raved in gutter language that stripped away the cool superiority of his public persona. It was altogether too humiliating. Embarrassing.

The Mayor raised his voice to drown the performance. 'She's under age. The marriage can be annulled.'

The Custodian snarled at him, 'Only if her guardians demand it. Do you think they give a damn while they control the money in trust?'

'There might be means to persuade one of them -'

The Custodian calmed suddenly. 'All right, you're trying. But we can't do it. Undue influence? Try and prove it! Even the newscasts are squalling "the star-struck love story" a bare hour after the event, telling the world romance is alive and throbbing. Public opinion will see interference as bias against Orbiters. Nobody gives a damn for Orbiters but everybody loves lovers, and bias will be elevated into accusations of racialism or exoticism or some bloody

pejorative coinage. And if interference were traced to me -' He shuddered.

And certainly not to me, thought the Mayor, who now had an assured future to protect.

The 'star-struck lovers' honeymooned brilliantly around the Earth for a month before Mr and Mrs Peter Marryin left for the Power Station.

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A structure two thousand metres long and five hundred in diameter, floating below a battery of thousand-metre solar mirrors, is immense by any standard, but nothing looks big in space until you are close enough to be dwarfed and awed. Dwarfed and awed Claire Marryin surely was, gasping at her beautiful husband's ambience of marvels.

She had never been in space. (After all, who had, save those whose work took them there? Nobody would *need* the stars for generations yet.) So she played with null-g, bruising herself a little and laughing at her own clumsiness, while Peter fumed and was darling enough not to show it. When the shuttle entered the vast lock in the Station's anal plate (they actually called it that, she found, with a smothered laugh) she calmed down and set herself to be a stately matron of eighteen, worthy of a wonderful man.

From the passage opening on the interior of the Station they came quite suddenly - he guiding her, at times a little roughly, because Orbiters made their topology connective at any angle instead of in terms of up and down - to a platform from which was displayed the whole panorama of the Power Station.

She looked along a huge tube whose walls were chequered with little square boxes which she only slowly recognised as dwellings, grouped around larger boxes which were community buildings and surrounded by neat squares and circles of lush green. In the gravitational centre of the tube hung a great disc whose visible face seemed to be nearly all window glass and which occupied perhaps a third of the inner diameters. But it was nearly a thousand metres distant and did not at a glance seem so big, any more than the boxes two hundred metres below and above - *around, away* - seemed large enough for dwellings.

She clapped her hands and cried out, 'It's like a toyland!'

'Toylan!' On his face an expression she had not seen there before - anger, revulsion, contempt - slipped into bleak control. He said stiffly, 'Your toylan is the home of a fine and proud people,' and led her to the conveyor belt while she held back tears for her stupidity. Then it seemed he remembered that these were new and fabulous sights for her and set himself to be kind, and within minutes she was asking shy questions, trying not to have them be foolish ones.

'The disc? The factory, we call it. It's empty.'

She asked timidly, 'But why?' and thought he considered carefully before he answered.

'It was part of the original Station, a complex for the manufacture of artifacts which could be perfectly formed only in null-g conditions. But the Station grew too rich for the comfort of Earth and an embargo was placed on our goods. The factories have stood empty for more than seventy years.'

'But that's unfair!'

'Yes!' The one word, with again the blank look of emotion repressed.

So there was a tiny cloud of resentment of her Earth. Best to ignore, allow it time to disperse. There was much to exclaim at here; for instance, she had not expected moving streetways, with railings. There were, in fact, railings everywhere. Strange for dwellers in free fall, free flight.

'There are free jump areas,' he told her, 'above roof level. There people may break their bones as they please. Once you take off you can't slow down or change direction, and in collision no weight doesn't mean no inertia. So in public places you ride and hang on, for the sake of others.'

There was a touch of explanation-to-the-child-mind about that, and some impatience as he said, 'I suppose you busy Terrenes don't think about such things.'

Her loving tongue babbled, 'Why should we, dear? It isn't our way of life.'

She did not know she had just told a paranoid hero that Orbiter affairs were not considered interesting. Or that were it not for her nearing nineteenth birthday and the Grant industrial holdings he could have wished her dead. The stupid, yammering bitch!

\* \* \* \*

The Station observed a 24-hour routine for metabolic stability, and that 'night' Peter played host. Claire understood that social customs must alter and evolve in a closed community and that personal contacts might come uneasily until she found her niche, but the function left her bewildered.

The 'party' was held on the lawns surrounding their 'house' - their living-box - like a green pool. The box itself existed for privacy; in the weatherless Station life was conducted in public.

There was nothing for her to do. A fleshy, shapeless woman appeared, requisitioned by Peter, to prepare snack dishes, and Claire's attempts to talk to her were balked upon grunted variations of 'I'm only thirdwoman and don't know those things,' making it plain that she was there to work and wanted only to get on with it.

What was a thirdwoman? A junior wife? But the Orbiters did not marry. They had some manner of temporary liaison for early child care but she, Claire, was uniquely the only *wife* on the Station. She could not question this clod but later must ask Peter.

At eight o'clock the major lights dimmed throughout the tube. Streetlamps remained and some free-floating clusters of coloured globes and rods and planes that she found restful to watch. The Orbiters' artificial night had its own soft charm.

Nothing else did. The guests arrived in male and female groups, never mixed. They congratulated Peter on his bride - and hesitated over the word or pronounced it with a sly grin or could not recall it until reminded. They seemed to regard the marriage as a triumphant joke.

After they had congratulated Peter they stared uninhibitedly at her. When Peter

introduced them, most seemed not to know what to say to her; the men in particular seemed resentful at being expected to make conversation at all.

Even the women, grouped together and apart from the men, seemed interested in her only as an exotic display piece. And well, she thought, might they stare! Plain on Earth, here she was a beauty. These shapeless females, all flesh and rounded tubes of muscleless limb, were like talking grubs. She swore she would exercise, go daily to the centrifuge and *never* let herself fall victim to null-g.

The men were as bad as their women, pipestem roly-polys; Peter alone looked like a real human being. And even he, she thought with a touch of dispirited spite, was no physical match for a real Terrene man.

Perhaps in her isolation and disappointment she had drunk too much, and had become afraid of vertigo in weightlessness, for she showed no more than a dumb resentment when a massive pudding of a woman dragged her into a disapproving group to hiss at her, 'Stop tryin to talk to the men. Sexes mix in private!'

Even Peter seemed only occasionally to recall her presence. The 'party' dragged interminably and she did not remember going to bed.

She woke to a hangover and a furious Peter dressing with compressed lips. She scarcely believed she heard him mutter, 'Drunken bitch!'

Over coffee she gathered courage to ask what a thirdwoman might be and he snapped at her, 'A bloody servan, trained for that an nothin else.'

The words were plain but she did not understand the threat in his eyes.

He said, 'I'm goin out. Stay here. Don' leave the house. I'll be an hour.'

Desolate and uncomprehending, she drifted through the living-box, with its neatness, its compactness, its accessories to comfortable living. To efficient living, she amended; the Orbiters were not a comfortable people. She recalled the ill manners of last night, the resentment scarcely repressed, the smiles that were silent laughter.

And was suddenly afraid. And as suddenly more afraid that it was too late for that.

Peter returned within the hour, in more cheerful mood, ready to kiss and play. She responded with silly relief, as if a smile could cancel ill-will already delivered. He had 'pulled strings', he told her, made an arrangement which only her special circumstances could justify.

'The Psychclinic will take you immediately.'

She fled from his arms, too affronted for fear. 'I'm not ill, Peter!'

'No, no!' He laughed, soothing and conciliating and as handsome as all hell and temptation. 'It's a teachin group. It isn fair to toss you unprepared into our ways and customs so I've arranged an implant, a rundown of all the special social conditions, etiquettes, things you need to know so as not to stub a social toe every time you step out.'

She cried a soft 'O-oh!' for a gift without price. Much of her education had been by psycho-implant and she knew what was involved. He had given her a ticket to painless knowledge she would have been months in achieving.

And a man who could command the time of a Psychlinic was no mean husband.

\* \* \* \*

The clinic was absurdly old fashioned, its 'chair' a cocoon of electrodes and leads and handles to be gripped and precision clamps and heaven knows what else. On Earth the whole thing was done with a single helmet and a hypodermic.

Perhaps her amusement showed, for the Psychlinician explained, in a tone stiff with non-apology, that the Station used its original equipment, that there was no money for new models from Downstairs.

Claire said with her friendliest smile, 'Then I shall buy it for you,' and sat herself firmly in his ancient chair.

An unreadable expression came and went as he said, 'Why, I'm sure you will.'

It might be their mode of thanks, but it lacked gratitude. She felt a mild numbness in her thighs, shifted slightly to ease it and realised that the whole buttock was losing sensation.

In sudden, frightened anger she cried out, 'You've used a penetrant narcotic! In the chair seat!'

He said bluntly, 'Yes,' and winced as her voice rose to screaming pitch.

'That's treatment for dangerous criminals and violent lunatics. I'm not - I'm not -'

He said forcefully, 'Sit back an shut up!'

And, since that was the nature of the drug, she obeyed. In the few minutes of mental freedom left her she peered into hellmouth.

What they did with her occupied several days. They fed her the acclimatisation material, of course, since she was to dwell here permanently and not be a clumsy nuisance. Then came the establishing of submissive reactions, no simple job on a mind accustomed to freedoms which to the Orbiters seemed sheer anarchy. Only then could they begin the deep probing necessary to planning the personality split. When that was done they designed and imprinted the controlled schizophrenic balance that could be tipped either way with proper triggering. It was necessary that a superficially 'normal' personality be available if Melbourne Town should send an envoy who would demand to talk with her when the inevitable questions came to be asked.

Aside from that, the Psychlinic found her a fascinating study; relaxation viewing of Terrene teleplays had not prepared them for the revealed truths of Earthworm culture.

'Effete and decaden,' said the Chief, 'floatin over realities and never seein them. Gravity or no gravity, it's we who are the strong. We are the human future.'



\* \* \* \*

#### 4

On her nineteenth birthday a healthy and self-possessed, if unwontedly serious Claire Marryin contacted her guardians by visiphone and made her wishes known. They argued against the control of immense wealth being taken out of Terrene hands; they pleaded, stormed and stalled until she threatened to settle the matter by simple deed of transfer. She behaved throughout with polite but weary stubbornness.

The Commune Fathers of Power Station One became the administrators of the Grant interests.

'That', noted the Mayor, 'makes them owners of just eight and one quarter per cent of Melbourne Town and unhealthily concerned in mining estate and development from Mars to the solar corona.'

'It was expected,' said the Custodian, 'but what will they do with it? We know better now than to guess at Orbital thinking.'

What they did was unexpected in its naivety. They tried to play the market. They not only lost a great deal of money but wreaked some small havoc with those lesser Grant holdings they chose for their experiments in finance.

'Economic stability is threatened,' said the Custodian, with a perfectly straight face. 'It is time to return their visit.'

\* \* \* \*

#### 5

The seventeen Spokesmen of the seventeen Station Commune Councils were in session on Station One when a delivery receipts clerk chattered over intercom that the Custodian of Public Safety of Melbourne Town was in the anal corridor and demanding entry.

'How large is his party?'

'He is alone, Alastair Father.'

'Delay him five minutes, then escort him here yourself.'

'Yes, Alastair Father.' The clerk returned to the corridor where the lean and lined and very patrician old man took his ease without benefit of handhold, as to the manner born. In a Terrene that seemed obscurely insolent, as did the silent waiting for the clerk to speak.

'I am to escort you to the Father, but first there are matters I must attend to. I won't be -'

The Custodian delivered arrogance with a polite smile. 'I am sure you have nothing more important on your hands than my visit.'

The clerk said, 'That's as may be,' and turned towards his office.

*Snotty Downstairs bastard!* Orbiter insularity overcame him. 'Stationhands don't take orders from Terrenes.'

'Pity,' said the Custodian equably. The clerk withdrew, wondering was that a subtle Terrene threat.

\* \* \* \*

Alastair First Father, who had been Alastair Dunwoodie, swept them out of the room like children. Before his immense prestige the communards made no attempt to argue but sought invisibility in the nearest dwellings. All, that is, save the inevitable youngest-promoted, still inclined to display intransigence rather than sense.

'Refuse him! Send him about his business!'

'He is about his business.' The First Father urged him towards the door. 'It is too soon to invite reprisals, and I am curious to see Charles again.'

'Charles! You know him?'

'We were friends once. Now, go!'

The youngest-promoted went, bemusedly reckoning the Father's age.

*Were* friends? It was an uncommonly wistful thought for Alastair. And now? Loyalties had come between. He punched an intercom number and said, 'There's a Terrene envoy here. Prepare Claire Thirdwoman.'

The Chief Psychclinician despatched his Physical Training Authority, Peter Marryin, to the hydroponic garden where the girl would be making the daily harvest of fruit and vegetables, a faintly stupid smile on her face. She was plump now, and losing shape, but seemed contented enough; it had been necessary to repress most of her emotional reaction-strength in order not to blur the edges between personalities by creating a too-obtrusive secondary.

The code phrase which brought her original persona to life was cruel to the point of obscenity but served its purpose of reaching deep into the preconscious. Peter, who had never conceived of her as more than a means to an end, gave no thought to brutality and outrage as he said distinctly into her ear, 'Peter Marryin loves Claire Grant.'

\* \* \* \*

The young Charles had worked in space and knew the rules of null-g movement, and the old Charles had wisely spent fifty hours in the shuttles reconditioning himself before facing Alastair. He would not lose face through physical incompetence.

He even managed to inject a hint of swagger into his slide-and-shuffle entry into the Council Hall where the old man stood alone at the head of the long table with its - yes, seventeen chairs. All present and correct - then hurriedly got rid of while impudent clerk obstructed.

He said, 'You're showing your age, Alastair,' and gave his skull grin. 'Old as God and no doubt twice as crafty.'

Alastair flowed to greet him in a movement which seemed to glide him, upright, down the length of the room, making Charles's swagger mere bumptiousness, and held out his hand. 'Well, ol frien!'

The Custodian returned the grip gently and allowed himself a bare sentence of old affection: 'I have always remembered you, Alastair.' Then, as they measured each other with uncertain and wary smiles, 'I bring not peace but a sword.'

Alastair, too, had been a Cultist in the old days. 'To set man against his father an daughter against her mother? Not on the Stations, Charles. Our conception of relationships does not allow inernecine frictions.'

'Not Terrene against Orbiter, those brothers on Earth and in Heaven?'

'The chance of brotherhood is gone by.'

As simply as that the lines of battle were drawn.

They sat at the table, using the bodybelts that allowed movement and gesture without reactive floating, and the Custodian launched his attack directly.

'The Governance of Australasia suggests - ' he laid the lightest of stresses on the verb, ' - that a Committee of Advice be appointed to guide your financial handling of the Grant holdings.'

'There are no Grant holdins. I suppose you mean the Orbital League holdins brought to the Commune by Claire Thirdwoman.'

So the whole League was in it; not really news. The final words penetrated less swiftly, then shockingly.

'Thirdwoman! Alastair, that's slavery!'

The First Father smiled thinly. 'What could she be good for but manual labour or childbearin? Your children of wealth learn nothin useful to an Orbiter. I assure you she is not discontented.'

'I want to see her!'

'You shall.'

'Good.' *Some double dealing there? Be watchful.* 'Now, the holdings -'

'No Committee of Advice, Charles!'

'You're amateurs. You'll go broke.'

'Our economists are learnin. We buy expert advice now from Earth. Terrenes have little that can' be bought, includin allegiance.'

'I know damned well what you buy. I also know that your first attempts to deal in millions caused a minor recession in Melbourne Town. If you succeed in bringing down the whole Grant empire there'll be economic chaos.'

'We aren't stupid.'

'But you are inexperienced. We must protect ourselves.'

'No Committee, Charles!'

'It is already set up.'

'Unset it. We won't obey it.' The Custodian's expression gave him pause. 'The Ethic, Charles! You can't interfere.' The skull grin threatened to engulf him. '*What have you done, Charles?*'

\* \* \* \*

As the declaration of love unlocked the sleeping persona, Claire burst from within herself like an emerging butterfly. Life flooded her face; her lips parted and smiled, her spoiling body straightened and she looked into her lover's eyes with an instant's joy that faded into apprehension and loathing.

He had seen it all before, was turning away when she asked, 'What do they want now?' and answered over his shoulder, 'Firs Father wants you. There's a Terrene envoy here.'

Envoy! Hope was immediately quenched. No envoy could free her. In a moment they would give her an injection and tell her what to say and do and there she would be, gabbling that she was happy and had no desire to leave the Station, that everyone was so kind and that she had fulfilment here such as Earth could never offer and more and more gushing, lying rubbish.

She asked, 'Why should I bother?'

'What?'

'What's the use? I don't want to see him, to tell force-fed lies and build myself more unhappiness.'

He faced her furiously. 'Listen, girl! You're an Orbiter and what Firs Father says, you do.'

In the rare periods of personality release, such as the visiphone communications with bankers and inquiring relatives, her hatred had been born in the schizophrenic hell of the submission drugs. During the long weeks of thirdwoman regression her subconscious mind had been conjuring powers of viciousness the little Claire Grant could never have roused from her psyche. Now, in these moments of hyper-euphoria, between the awakening and the drugging, she was uniquely herself, undrugged and unregressed - a creature of misery and rage.

She said, with a menace he did not hear because in his thinking it could not be there, 'Don't talk to me like that.'

'Come on; don' waste my time.'

She goaded, 'Your time is nothing to me.'

'Bitch!' He put out a grasping hand and she struck it away, hissing, 'Don't touch me, you filth!'

It was stunning. No woman spoke to a man like that, *no* woman. Nor would a man dare use such words to Peter the Culture Hero. And she had struck his hand! Outraged self-love rose like a scald in the throat and his fingers hooked into claws.

She said, making sure of him, 'If you touch me I'll kill you.'

She needed to kill someone, and who better than the man who had married for her money the girl who despised fortune hunters? As his hands reached for her she casually took one in hers, dragged the arm straight and kicked him in the elbow, breaking it to the obligato of his screaming. It was easy. Orbiters knew little about aggression or defence; both were difficult or embarrassingly ludicrous in null-g.

The screaming unleashed joy in her and she knew that she *would* kill him. Others in the street had heard him and heads were turning but they could not save him. She, Claire Thirdwoman, slave, dupe and Earthworm, was about to murder the Culture Hero before their eyes.

They could not realise how simple it was for her. A year of null-g had made her competent in the leaps and anglings of free fall, and her Earthworm musculature made it possible for her to achieve take-off speeds and endure landing collisions no Orbiter could match. Even her centrifuge-reared 'husband' was not her equal.

She caught his arm and he shrieked again, and hooked her foot under the moving-way guide rail. Figures now leapt towards her, too late. Taking him by wrist and smashed elbow she flung him, howling, against the wall of a dwelling twenty metres away. He hit it face forward, sprawling like a spider, and she launched herself after him, turning in mid-air to strike with her feet at his spine, and heard it crack.

She had her moments of murderer's ecstasy, sexual, blood-deep, complete. Let the surgeons and biochemists revive and rebuild him (as they would), but she had cleansed herself of shame and hatred.

Then reaction set in and with a crippling weariness of spirit she turned to defend herself  
...

\* \* \* \*

'Done?' the Custodian echoed. 'I have set up a Committee of Advice. Nothing else.'

'Unacceptable.'

'But there are, of course, alternatives.'

'Which are?'

‘One is that you should re-assign the League holdings to Claire Grant and return her to Earth.’

The First Father laughed, but uneasily because the breathtaking impudence of the demand spoke of threat behind threat. ‘You’re out of you min.’

‘We can take the money from you, you know.’

‘Not by way of Claire. She gave it to us. I feel you will have a record, verbal and written, of the whole transaction.’

‘I have, Alastair. And an expert psychological report on her speech and behaviour patterns during the exchanges with her administrators, showing a ninety per cent certainty that she was under submission drugs. I can recommend that the Marketing Court freeze your assets while the transfer is re-examined.’

‘You can’ prove druggin.’

‘You don’t deny it?’

‘Or admit it.’

The Custodian felt less regret for that old friendship. Neither was the same man he had been eighty years ago, and both were centenarians, patterns of biochemistry and geriatric technique, with interests and loyalties eight decades divergent. He found himself caring not a damn for Alastair’s needs so long as Melbourne Town survived. The perilous honesty of chauvinism at least left him unrepentant of hard hitting.

‘You’d have to kill the girl to prevent me getting the truth. Would you do that, Alastair?’

The First Father’s smile was deep winter. ‘No. I don’ wan the Global Council puttin a military prize crew aboard my Station.’

\* \* \* \*

They came from all sides, angling up towards her. Almost lethargically she struck with her feet at the first comer, a squealing firstwoman spitting anti-Terrene rage, and used her mass to change direction and clutch at the jump-halting rail on a dwelling roof. The rest fell into a confusion of collisions and Teachings for any anchored mass. Their babbling anger and shock sounded ridiculous; they lived such ordered lives that in an emergency they flapped and fluttered. If they caught her they would kick and hit and pinch and threaten but in the end she would still be thirdwoman in the hydroponic garden. And Peter reconstructed. And nothing changed.

Then why not let them take her? There was no freedom.

For an instant, looking upward, she saw where, five hundred metres away across the diameter of the cylinder, final freedom lay, and reflexively launched herself towards it.

At once she knew she had been stupid, that it was better to live. There could always be the unexpected, the reversal of fortune. In panic she began to struggle, but what Peter told her

was true: once in free fall you cannot stop or slow down or change direction.

Her launch had been deadly accurate, a simple straight line with no gravity-fed trajectory for miscalculation.

The end of Claire Thirdwoman, crying and clawing for the inaccessible sides, was entry into the twenty-metre maw of the Station disposal unit, the vast mouth that could swallow machine complexes or obsolescent building units without the need for laborious dismemberment. She died at once as the heat units sensed her, felt nothing as the grinders shredded her contemptuously in a spurt of gears and in seconds was a mist of molecules expanding into invisibility in pressure-less space.

\* \* \* \*

## 6

In a right little, tight little island in the sky there is small precedent for announcing the neo-death of a local hero and the dissolution of his killer. Inexperience blurted out the news breathlessly in front of the Earthworm stranger.

For the second time during the affair the Custodian exploded in ranting fury, cursing Orbiter and Terrene stupidity alike, reducing himself to manic gutter level, until he saw that the First Father watched him with the bleak care of a duellist who sees advantage.

He checked himself abruptly. In an access of intuition, even some residual affection, he pondered the needs and frustrations the Orbiters had brought on themselves when they sought the pastures of heaven by casting away weight.

He said, 'We need truth, Alastair, both of us. Neither was ready to move; now we must.'

The First Father bowed his head. Concealing a smile? At any event, he made no attempt to argue. In minutes the Custodian knew all he needed, including the business of the League meeting his advent had dispersed - the secret buying of weapons, offensive and defensive, from men on the five continents Downstairs who would sell honour, history and the future for money.

That was bad enough. Worse was that the First Father did not fear him.

Feeling all his years, he sat down with the other old man - friend, enemy and game-player - to plan a fresh tomorrow.

Emotion subsided; perspectives revived; Claire's death became a tactical weapon each sought to grasp. They circled, testing defences, until a confident Alastair made the first lunge.

'Charles, you can no more risk investigation of this affair than I can.'

The Custodian sighed inwardly. It had been, he supposed, inevitable that Alastair, despite his remoteness from the social psychology of the Earthworm, should recognise that.

Still, he must try. 'You certainly cannot. Your League is no danger to Terrene culture yet, but this last year holds the proof that you will be. Some day. Even soon.' He added easily, 'You will be stopped, of course.'

Too late; that hand was already lost. 'How, Charles? How will Earth explain retributive action a second time? Attempt it and I, I, will tell the story of how Claire Marryin died. I will tell the truth, all the truth. And your Earthworms will discover how their precious Ethic has created a poverty-stricken ghetto in the sky, but one that intends to kick the Ethic to pieces rather than continue as the unseen slaves of some Victorian servant quarters in the attic upstairs. Revenge on us may be swift but public scrutiny of the Ethic *and* of its manipulators will be pitiless. It will be the end of the Ethic.'

The Custodian had seen from the beginning that he was caught. It was not easy even to go down fighting. He said lightly, 'But everybody questions the Ethic in his heart. It is an elaboration of good manners, pointless in essence but providing a permanent framework of behaviour for discussion without bloodshed.'

Alastair laughed at him. 'It must be one of the great jokes of history that Earth has based its first planetary culture on good manners, then created an offshoot with none. An even better joke that the collapse of a lie nobody believes in could plunge you into cultural anarchy. All your international relationships balance on it. You won't take the risk.'

Of course he, and Earth, would not. Bluntness now would serve as well as anything. 'What do you want?'

'To be rid of you.'

That was unexpected; he said nothing at all but waited for Alastair to continue.

'You can't blow us out of the sky. Too un-Ethical and too revealing. But you can pay us to go away. And we'll go.' He grinned with sudden savagery. 'Like the classic barbarians on the Imperial borders.'

That was staggering. The Custodian groped for words, any words to stall for thought. 'The power supplies -'

'Automated platforms to replace the Stations. The plans are ready. Ten years from keel to full operation.'

That was worth a sour laugh in return. 'We've had automation plans of our own for the past twenty years. The problem has been what to do with you. Now you tell me you'll go away. Where to? Let me guess at your view of the matter.'

He ruminated.

Alastair said, 'There's something you should see. Come along.'

They floated out of the hall to a moving-way which carried them up the curve of the hull, through little nests of the living-boxes and the lawns and gardens in their patterns of cultivated brilliance. All growing things were a passion of Orbiters. Their natural art form, perhaps? They could have chosen more coldly and worse.

He said, 'I think I have it. The basic need was money. First for armaments in case Earth did indeed become provoked into violence by the demands you would one day make. Second for



*material* to implement whatever designs you have in mind. Behind this is a determination to cut loose from Earth once and for all. The cultures have diverged to the point where neither understands the other or needs the other. Cultures which don't understand each other despise each other, have no use for each other, no matter how they pretend otherwise. Am I doing well?'

'Very well.'

They left the moving-way and Alastair opened a door. Inside was nothing at all, an empty room.

'Total isolation breeds its own neuroses, Charles. Our psychologists set up this room years ago. People come here to soothe their tensions, pacify their resentments, defuse their aggressions.'

He touched switches, the room became black dark. A slit twenty metres wide glimmered faintly in the floor, opened like a vast eye, and gazed at the stars.

The Custodian understood only vaguely. 'The galaxy means little to me, but for you it has come to have psychological significance. Is this where you will go?'

'Eventually. Not yet. It is a long dream.'

'And now?'

'Firs, Jupiter. You can pay us to mine the satellites and the atmosphere.'

The Custodian knew he should have foreseen it but the politician in him asked, 'Why should we?'

'Because in a century or so you will have another population-an-resources crisis Downstairs, and you can use somebody to prepare the alternatives for you. By then we will be wealthy enough an self-sufficien to engage the universe on our own terms. There are eighty thousand people in the Stations now; we mus plan for a million. Ten Mother Islands and a hundred minin scows for a start. The resources out there will cover your nex dozen population explosions; you'll find us a good bargain. And what remains of the Ethic can seek virtue in Non-interference with our cultural destiny.'

'The impudence of it all is breathtaking. All I need to do is lay the idea before the Global Council and they'll collapse like cards before your diplomatic acumen. It will need more than a silver tongue to sway them.'

'Let the Ethic sway them!'

The Custodian swallowed a sound like a smothered laugh. 'Blackmail, Alastair!'

'But mos Ethical, Charles, within the Terrene meanin of the word. By the way, did you know that the original twentieth-century intention in suggestin space platforms was to establish free colonies in space?'

'Was it indeed?'

'Indeed. I have always said that we learned nothin from the Collapse. We've simply taken a little longer to arrive where they wished to go anyway.'

\* \* \* \*

Several hours later, when the Custodian was preparing to return home, the First Father glanced fortuitously overhead to where, across the diameter, a disposal gang loaded a day's garbage into the vent, and felt a twinge of guilt.

The Custodian, following his gaze, wondered aloud if everything was recycled.

'Not quite everythin.'

'No? Oh, yes, of course, that - tragic business; tragic ...' He was busy formulating his approach to the Global Council.

\* \* \* \*

## 7

The version retailed to the Mayor was perhaps a little slanted. He was impressed. 'You know, we'll be well rid of them.'

'For the time being.'

The Mayor's eyebrows rose.

'Nothing ends, James. Alastair First Father is quite aware that as Lords of the Solar System one day they'll come home again - as barbarians at the ancient gates. But you and I won't be around to worry over that.'

*First published 1978.*