INSIDE MAN & OTHER STORIES

Science Fiction on the Gold Standard

By

H.L. GOLD

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For information contact:

Renaissance E Books

P. O. Box 1432

Northampton MA 01060

USA

Email comments@renebooks.com

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A Futures-Past Science Fiction Classic

Selected and introduced by Jean Marie Stine

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INTRODUCTION

Between the mid-1930s and 1950, the legendary editor John W. Campbell, Jr. used the pages of the old pulp magazine*Astounding* to single-handedly turned science fiction into a serious literature based on rigorous, contemporary (rather than out-dated) scientific extrapolation, generally focused on some "hard" science like engineering or physics or ballistics. Some measure of Campbell's achievement can be found in the names of the writers he schooled and the stories they wrote for him. These include Asimov's Foundation and Robot series; Heinlein's*Double Star, Beyond this Horizon, Methuselah's Children* , and Future History stories; the best works of A. E. Van Vogt,*The World of Null-A, Slan, The Weapon Makers* ; and authors as legendary as Lester del Rey, L. Sprague de Camp, and Theodore Sturgeon, among others.

H. L. Gold effected a revolution of equal significance in the 1950s, when he emphasized social satire and a sense of humor, along with such human-centered sciences as psychology, sociology, and anthropology, into the pages of his newly-launched science fiction magazine,*Galaxy.* Although a few writers whose natural bent ran more his way than Campbell's – notably Theodore Sturgeon – moved over from*Astounding* (soon to be renamed*Analog* to better suit the more sophisticated tastes of the modern age), Gold's most notable successes were all home-grown and his record for developing stellar talent and encouraging them to write stellar works is evident in the names and stories that emerged from*Galaxy's* pages. Among them were Alfred Bester with*The Demolished Man* and*The Stars My Destination;* Frederick Pohl and C.M. Kornbluth's*Gravy Planet* and *Gladiator-at-Law* ; and Ray Bradbury's*Fahrenheit 451* ; along with William Tenn, Robert Sheckley, Margaret St. Clair, Evelyn E. Smith, and others. It should prove no surprise, then, that*Galaxy* and Gold were frequent nominees for the Hugo Award for Best Science Fiction Magazine of the Year and captured it 1953.

Gold's own fiction bears all the characteristics he focused on at*Galaxy* , a puckish sense of humor joined with a wicked flair for satire. Mix, and the result is sometimes as effervescent as champagne ("Inside Man," "Grifter's Asteroid"), as wicked a kick in the head as whiskey ("Someone to Watch Over Me"), and as satisfying as well-brewed lager ("The Transmogrification of Wamba's Revenge"). Horace Gold also liked to stand familiar science fictional notions on their head, and he does that again and again in the stories in this collection. Almost every science fiction author worth their salt has, at one time or another, written about extra-sensory perception, telepathy, and other paranormal abilities. Gold does it too, but unlike his colleagues, he dreams up brand new wrinkles on ESP no one else, including you, every thought of (as in "Inside Man" and "The Riches of Embarrassment"). When he wrote "The Transmogrification of Wamba's Revenge," Gold was given a cover painting depicting the cliched scene of a scientist experimenting on miniature human beings he has shrunk in size – the notion can be found in the old*Thrilling Wonder Tales* of 1930s fame, as well as the film*Doctor Cyclops* – but when Gold looked at the painting, he saw an entirely different possibility – one everyone else in the field overlooked. And when Gold meditates on one of humakind's age old dreams, you can be sure things don't turn out anything like the dream. The special quality of

Gold's work was endorsed by his colleagues when "Inside Man" was nominated for the Science Fiction Writer's of America Nebula Award for Best Short Story of 1965.

*The Science Fiction Source Book*hails Gold's science fictions as "witty entertainments ... evidence of [a] sharp and perceptive intelligence."*The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* noted that "there's nothing machine-made about H. L. Gold's tales. Mr. Gold is almost the only SF writer capable of creating lower and lower-middle class backgrounds (a relief, after all of SF's potentates, plutocrats and technological elite)."*Inside Man & Other Science* Fictions is a real treat for SF fans, gathering together in an exclusive ebook edition the best of H. L. Gold's uncollected work, including his Nebula nominee title story.

Jean Marie Stine

4/21/2003

INSIDE MAN

Lester Shay was married three months when he got his first Erector set. Thalia, noting that he felt tired and rundown, ordered him to get a checkup. Too tired and rundown to object, he went to see Dr. Peabody.

"Very surprising" the physician said after an embarrassingly thorough examination. "Married three months, beautiful, affectionate bride – but you get plenty of sleep, outdoors a lot, a moderate amount of exercise."

"I do all my own marketing," said Les, who owned a wholesale grocery business. "I walk every chance I get, which is considerable. Marketing is all outdoors, you know. And I have to get to sleep early, because if I don't get up early, my competitors–"

"Exactly. And I know it's not overwork. I'm overworked myself, but I'm in tiptop condition."

"How do you manage it?" asked Les, interested in a tired, rundown way.

"A hobby," said Dr. Peabody.

"Gardening? Raising tropical fish? Golf?"

"The last thing you'd expect," Dr. Peabody said, leaning forward excitedly. "I know a lot of dentists. They give me old fillings and I've got this little smelter, see, and I break down the amalgam into silver and mercury, then sell the stuff back to the dentists. Darn near pays for itself! And fun? You ought to come visit my basement sometime!"

Shambling home, Les wondered what he could take up as a hobby. Nightclubs and theaters wouldn't do. They let out too late. Besides, they weren't a hobby. Raising things was too close to his actual work; it would make him think about produce and canned goods. He did enough outdoor walking to eliminate sports.

That was when he saw the Erector set in the store window.

He stopped and studied it, looking more wistful now than tired or rundown. He had always wanted an Erector set, but his parents, believers in as the twig is bent so grows the tree, had refused to buy him one. They didn't, they explained, want their son to become a mechanic. Not, mind you, they'd added, that there was anything wrong with mechanics. But he was worthy of great things. They had also been disappointed when he went into the wholesale grocery line, were more pleased now because he was doing well in it, but that wasn't important. He still wanted an Erector set.

When he got home, Thalia looked expectantly at the large, heavy box. He had bought the biggest and most expensive set, of course.

"Oh, something for the house?" she asked, obviously hoping it wasn't.

"Doctor said I needed a hobby or something," he explained uncomfortably.

"Wonderful!" she exclaimed. "We can do it together!"

"You mean you like working on Erector sets, too?" he cried.

"Oh," she said. "Well, that's really a – well, a man's hobby."

She gave him the room that would some day be a nursery and he built a parachute jump, a stake truck, a windmill and a ski tow. The spring came back to his walk and the roses to his cheeks.

But less than a week later, lying in bed with his bride in his arms, he could sense the old tired, rundown feeling creep up on him.

"What's the matter, darling?" Thalia asked, disconcerted. "Is it the onions I had for dinner?"

"Oh, no, sweetheart!" he tried to answer hastily, only it came out a slow sigh. "It's the Erector set."

"The – Erector set? Oh! The Erector set. Well, if it's broken, darling, you can always buy another."

"It's not broken. That isn't the trouble," he sighed again, and turned over and moodily went to sleep.

* * *

The problem was still on his mind in the pre-dawn at the market. Kale was coming in nicely and he had bought all the primes offered by the farmers. He morosely helped Arnie, his driver, load up.

"What happened to the old zip?" Arnie asked concernedly. "'You were feeling great

for a while. Down in the dumps again?"

"I guess so," said Les. "Temporarily, at least. I hope."

"You ought to try tooling one of these monmouths through city traffic. Gotta judge every inch of the way. Boy, you drive one and I bet you won't have a minute to–"

Les found himself listening intently, but not to Arnie's good-natured chatter. Something was wrong. He knew it was wrong. But what?

No, not like walking barefooted on spilled sugar, he mused. Though it was a little like that – sort of gritty. But painful, too. As if he were trying to run with a sore socket in his leg.

"You've got a bearing burning out," Les interrupted.

Arnie took a fast glance at him. "Since when you know about motors, Boss?"

"A bearing," said Les. "That's what it feels like."

Les nodded at a service station up ahead. "Pull in there. I want to have it checked."

The garage man examined the motor and found a bearing rubbed so raw that Les had to turn away in compassion and disgust. He left Arnie, puzzled enough to be silent for once, at the service station and walked alone the rest of the way to the office.

Les discovered he was surrounded by sensations ranging from purrs of pleasure all the way to groans of pain. One purr came from a trim little Porsche – new tune-up job, a little heavy on the grease, but that would thin out on the straightaway, he thought, and the unexpected thought alarmed him.

Thought? He considered. It was a feeling, a very strong and explicit emotion. So was the sympathy for a passing cab that really wanted to lie down on some nice, restful junk pile. A painful click, click bothered him. He looked up. It was a tower clock, desperately clawing its way around the hours on eroded cams. Damn the sadists who would put a conscientious servant through such torture, he thought angrily.

But he felt equally guilty when he came into the office and heard Miss Zither typing. The dogs in the escape mechanism were practically howling and the keys were moving only because her slim but powerful fingers were beating them into moving.

"Leave that alone!" Les said, more sharply than he'd intended. "I mean, no more typing for today," he amended when she jumped and looked frightened.

"But the filing's all done and I have a perfect mess of correspondence to get out," she objected. "If I don't do it today–"

"Not on that battered hulk," he told her.

He called and ordered a new electric typewriter. Miss Zeichner was, as she put it, thrilled. He shrugged. She always was either thrilled or absolutely – completely and absolutely – shattered. But only over unimportant things.

For instance, was she completely and absolutely shattered by the pained limpings and clenched-teeth determination to do a job, to keep those pistons pumping no matter what the cost; completely and absolutely thrilled by the sleek, contented murmurs, the happy little laughs of conscious strength, easy power, the cared-for feeling; or completely and absolutely dismayed by the breathless puffing under a merciless load, like–

He listened sharply. He felt more sharply still.

It came from the warehouse behind the office. He sprang out of his seat savagely enough to upset Miss Zeichner again, raced into the warehouse.

A valiant little fork-lift truck, overloaded by half again too many cases of canned salmon was almost red-faced with strain.

Les leaped aboard, switched off the motor, hauled out the man, shoved him against the wall and, started a murderous swing.

"Mr. Shay!" yelped the man. "What did I do wrong?"

It was Walt's voice. Les blinked, dropped his fist, slumped. "Sorry, Walt," he mumbled. "Guess I'm all on edge. You had that forklift overloaded and it – it jarred me. Sorry."

Walt picked his shirt button up off the floor. "Hell, Mr. Shay, it's all right. I'd probably do the same if somebody was ruining my property."

"Property!" shouted Les, for him again. "Things like machines – property!"

Arnie, back while his truck was being repaired, caught Les from behind and held and soothed him into the office.

"You're all tensed up," Arnie said. "I'll get you a cab and you can go home and take a hot bath and relax with your slippers and bathrobe and newspaper. How about it, huh?"

"I suppose so," Les muttered. "I'm not much help today."

The cab was in good shape – that new pinion hurt a little, but it would break in soon and Les sat back, easing, and even joined the comfortable, unworried motor hum.

Like all affectionate brides, beautiful or otherwise, when their husbands come home half a day early, Thalia was flattered and coy, then concerned when he abstractedly pecked her only once to her dozens of kisses on the face and mouth and ears and neck, then relieved when he told her he wasn't sick, and finally delighted because now he could help plan the menu for tonight.

"Menu?" he repeated.

"The Fitches are coming for dinner."

"Fitch? Fitch – good God he has seventeen stores – if I get the account – what do you mean, menu? Caviar, bluepoints, vichyssoise, filet mignon, breast of guinea hen–"

"Darling," she said. "Mr. Fitch has an ulcer."

"Ulcer," said Les. "Milk and crackers. Cottage cheese."

"What about that new line of dietetic food you said you could tie up if you only had the outlets?"

"Hey!" he cried. "Why'd I have to go marry you and lose the best office manager I ever had?"

"Because it was one or the other."

He gave her a dirty grin.

"Well, I was tired of being a working girl," she said defensively. "Every real, honest-to-goodness woman wants–"

"I know what every real, honest-to-goodness woman wants. Let's let the menu wait, because every real, honest-to-goodness man wants what every real, honest-to-goodness woman–"

She wriggled out of his arms. "And with me going frantic? I was going to phone you to pick up those dietetic foods and bring them home with you tonight. Now we'll have to get a special messenger."

"Yeah," he said. "It's frustrating, but you're right. Why can't Miss Zeichner–"

"Oh, she'll learn, darling. Just give her time."

"Hah!" he said. "Why, you wouldn't believe it, but–"

"The menu," she told him firmly. "And the messenger."

* * *

"Well, look, damn it," Les argued the next morning, waiting for an elevator with Thalia in the Medical Building. "Just because I didn't get the Fitch account is no reason to haul me to a psychiatrist!"

"Lower your voice. People are looking," she shushed. "It isn't that and you know it, darling."

"You mean Mrs. Fitch's watch? Well, there were two damaged jewels in it!"

"But to take it off her wrist right in the middle of dinner and go racing out in search of a jeweler at that time of night–"

"I got one, didn't I? And he saw the cracked one on the top and put up a battle when I hold him about the chipped one underneath, but he took the watch apart and sure enough–"

"Yes, darling. I know. That's not what's important."

The elevator door opened and they got in.

"Then what is?" challenged Les.

She glanced at the elevator operator and whispered, "What you told me after Mr. Fitch said they couldn't wait any longer for you to get back and to send the watch – Les! You're not listening!"

But he was. He was listening very hard.

"The poor thing," he said, shaking his head sadly.

She looked around. Except for the operator, they were alone in the elevator.

"Who?" she asked.

"The elevator. When are people going to learn that too much oil–"

"That's what I mean, darling." She guided him across the corridor and opened the door to a waiting room. Shakily she said. "Now there isn't a thing to worry about."

"Oh, no?" he snapped. 'With imbeciles and bunglers tormenting defenseless machines that ask nothing more than to be done by as they do, living by the Golden Rule, which is more than I say–"

"Mr. Shay?" inquired the nurse-receptionist at the desk. "You may go right in. Dr. Hyde is expecting you."

"Dr. Hyde," snarled Les. "I bet he's got a silent partner named Mr. Jekyll."

He flung open the door and slammed it shut behind him.

With his hands behind his head, Les lay staring up at the ceiling, blinking once a minute. Thalia inchwormed rapidly toward him until her head was under his chin.

"Darling?" she said in a very little voice.

He breathed slightly harder on her hair to show he was paying attention.

"You know, we've only been, married three months," she said, "and already we act as if we'd grown old and gray together."

"Uh," he told her.

"Well, I don't feel old and gray." She paused. "Do you?"

'Um," he elaborated.

"You just lie there," she cried angrily. "Don't you give one single, solitary thought to how – how undesirable it makes me feel?"

He forced his throat to move, then his tongue, finally his lips, "You're not."

"Then what–" She stopped, was silent for a long moment. "I'm a heel," she said against his chest. "You're trying to digest what Dr. Hyde said to you today."

Les sat up abruptly with his back against the headboard, one stiff forefinger stabbing repeatedly at the mattress. "Not digest. Regurgitate."

"It made sense to me, darling."

"What? That I wanted to kill my father for not buying me an Erector set?"

"Well, didn't you?"

"Of course not! And why not my mother, too? She had just as much to do with me not getting it as he did."

"The Oedipal situation."

"And if I say she loused me up more than Dad ever did, you'll agree with Hyde that I'm displacing or something. Oh, no. You're not catching me in that no-exit trap. Besides, Dad bought me a bike right afterward and I had a hell of a lot more fun with it than I'd have gotten out of an Erector set. Mom had plenty to say about the danger of riding a bike in the city, but he trusted my judgment and bought one just the same."

"Infantilizing you, darling," she said gently, "instead of helping you learn to accept inevitable frustrations."

"Who was frustrated?" he shouted. "I loved that bike! And not only that, I didn't even think once of an Erector set till Dr. Peabody suggested I take up a hobby!" He waited. "Go ahead, say it – I repressed the whole thing, didn't I?"

"That's what Dr. Hyde said, darling."

"All right, smart guy, see what you make of this. I told him the truth, every bit of it, and he says hallucinations. So I say oh, yeah, what about the water cooler over in the corner and he says what about the water cooler. And I tell him there's a tiny leak in the refrigerating coil and he takes a look, only the crack is too small to see, but in a month or two they'll have to seal it up and put in more refrigerant, you wait and see if they don't."

"And in the meantime?" she asked. "We can't have you go around in this nervous

state."

"I know," he said miserably. "The rheostat on the electric mixer is calibrated wrong, the oil burner is feeding too fast, the bulb in the hall is about ready to blow, we got a lemon of a pre-amp in the hi-fi, the turntable is almost a full rpm too slow, and I bet there's going to be a pip of a smashup on the highway – I don't like the way the traffic light feels."

"Feels?"

"Yes," he said flatly. "Feels."

"Darling?" she started again.

"You know you're only personalizing these things the way you did when you were so awfully disappointed about the Erector set."

"Sure, sure."

"It's just a matter of accepting that emotionally."

"I'm working on it."

"And you don't need your mother any more. You have me."

He rolled out of bed. "I never thought of that," he said, and began unbuttoning his pajama top.

"Darling, what have you got in mind?" she asked, wide-eyed.

"Taking a walk to clear my head. You and Hyde have all the explanations. Without the two of you to confuse me, maybe I can find the answers."

Chilled and tired, Les wandered into Mike's All Nite Garage. Mike poked his head out from under a car on the grease pit and asked, "Do something for you, Mr. Shay?"

"No," said Les. "You fix them instead of ruining them."

"That's how I make my living," Mike said cheerfully. "If they didn't ruin 'em, I wouldn't have 'em to fix."

Les, about to retort in sudden rage, sat down on a fender instead and thought about Mike's philosophy. It was as if dentists hired thugs to bash in people's teeth so there would always be work, or veterinarians poisoned animals just enough to need treatment. He decided he didn't like Mike's reasoning. He also decided not to argue about it; he was tired of strange looks and counter-arguments.

Mike climbed out of the pit, wiped his hands on a ball of dirty cotton waste and got into the car to start the motor. He cocked his head like a music critic listening first to one section of the orchestra and then the other.

"Sounds pretty good," he pronounced.

"The generator," said Les.

Mike frowned. "What about the generator?"

"It's undercharging."

"Hell it is!"

"Hell it isn't."

Mike glanced at the needle and winked. "So, okay, more business." Then he scowled at Les. "How'd you know it was undercharging?"

"It's a long story. You have any more jobs tonight, Mike?"

"Nope. Why?"

"You've got a bunch of cars on the lot. I've got ten bucks to either prove or disprove something. Deal?"

"Deal," said Mike, leading the way out to the lot.

By the seventh car, Mike was quiet and thoughtful. Les had found only one that murmured tranquilly and when he stated what was wrong with each, and Mike checked, Les had pinpointed the trouble exactly.

"Well, how do you account for that?" Les wanted to know.

Mike did some meditative scratching. "I go by ear myself, Mr. Shay. I can listen to a motor and tell pretty near what's wrong. You just got a better ear than me, that's all."

"And when it isn't the motor? A lot of things in the body and chassis didn't squeak or rattle."

"Yeah," said Mike. "I was thinking about them. I can't figure it out."

"I can," another voice said.

Les leaped. A solemn face with a slight stubble and a greasy homburg was leaning out of a car window.

"Sorry, Prof," said Mike. "I didn't mean to wake you. Prof, Mr. Shay. I let the Prof sleep in the cars, provided he takes his shoes off and keeps his hat on."

"My pleasure, Mr. Shay," announced the Prof.

"H – hello," said Les. "You did say you could figure it out?"

"No mystery at all," the Prof said. "Can you do this only with automobiles or all kinds of machinery?"

"All kinds."

"Then the answer is very simple," stated the Prof. "Telepathy"

"Telepathy!"

"Of a very highly specialized variety." The Prof looked hopefully at Les. "Is the full explanation worth the price of a drink?"

"I'll say!" exclaimed Les.

* * *

Thalia opened red eyes and watched Les pick his way across the uncluttered floor to the closet.

"Well?" she said. "Did you find your answers?"

"Ah – you bet," said Les, carefully dropping his clothes to the floor.

"In a bottle."

"Over a bottle. With the most profound – makes your Dr. Hyde sound – listening with the third ear when he should be using all three!"

"Okay, go on," she said resignedly.

"Nothing to it. I'm a specialist."

"A specialist?"

He sat down on the bed to tangle with his shoelaces. "A born mechanic."

"Now look here, Lester Shay! If you think you're going to give up a perfectly good business to go rummaging around in cars–"

"Don't have to," he answered peacefully. "Just gotta harden myself. That's what the Prof says. He's not really a professor, only talks that way because he claims it intimidates people."

"A bum!"

"No, sweetheart. A different kind of specialist. Damn shoelaces!" He snapped them and kicked his shoes across the room. "His notion is that evolution always starts with simple, general types and works up to highly specialized ones."

"Like born mechanics!"

He smiled delightedly. "That's it. Or born mathematicians. Or born laborers. Or born artists, salesmen, farmers–"

"Bums."

"Oh, just the very, very, very, good ones," he corrected her owlishly. "The others work at it, but they're not specialists. Way he puts it, the difference is in the degree of success."

"And," she said, "you're a born mechanic."

"Right. Just never got a chance to start. Better this way, though. You see, I know what machines feel because I feel it, too. If I'd been doing that all these years, I'd be nothing but nerves. A lot of people don't treat machines right, you know. Feeling how the machines suffer would put me in just as bad shape as they are."

She sat up interestedly. "This Prof of yours sounds bright. Did he tell you how to get rid of your – your–"

"Affliction, darling. It's like when a surgeon goes down the street and he sees people in drastic need of operations and can't do anything about it. Couldn't club them, haul them away to the hospital, operate on them, could he?"

"No, of course not."

"So he has to steel himself. Or take the gardener who feels what flowers feel. And grass. Shrubbery. He has to cut the flowers, mow the lawn, clip the hedges. If he felt every slash into every bit of vegetation, weeds included well, you can imagine."

She thought. "Yes, I think I can. And what about you, darling?"

"Same thing. Steel myself. The Prof says I can't take care of all the machines in the world and he's right. So I gotta shut out the cries and groans and moans of the machinery. You see?"

"I see, but can you do it?" she asked worriedly.

"Diversion does the trick. If I receive, I just make sure I receive something else. The Prof suggested trying people. So I did, down at the tavern."

"How did you make out?"

"Noisy damned place," he said. "And full of alcoholic thoughts. But I concentrated and it blanked out the screeching fan and the pump in the cellar that needs cleaning so badly."

"People's thoughts," said Thalia uneasily. "I don't know if I like that. I know I wouldn't feel comfortable around you."

He plumped up the pillow, accidentally dropped it on the floor, tried to decide whether to pick it up, realized he would fall on top of it.

"Doesn't work that way at all, sweetheart. It's–" He hunted for an analogy. "It comes out like machinery."

"Like what?" she exclaimed.

"Here, maybe I can show you." He stood beside the bed and gazed down searchingly at her.

"Mm – humm. Your radiator is boiling over."

"What a crude way to put it!"

He continued standing there, his gaze gone remote and unseeing.

"Well?" Thalia asked irritably. "How's your radiator?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out," he replied in a distant voice.

"And?"

"It's percolating a little," he answered.

She threw the covers aside. "Come on, get in," she said. "It's better than nothing."

PERSONNEL PROBLEM

Dowd caught hold of a stanchion and braced himself – it was easier to be forceful when you didn't float off the ground with every word.

He said persuasively: "You can still change your mind, Eggleston.

"Where are you going to get another job like this? Look, you've been getting ten shares – how about if we make it twelve? The, committee will go along. That's eighty thousand dollars a year, man!"

"No," said Eggleston.

"Be reasonable! Ceres isn't as bad as all that as asteroids go – it's in a class by itself. Maybe we're a little cramped, but we're still getting organized – why, next year we'll have it fixed up so you can I get annual leave on Earth and–"

"No!" said Eggleston, even more positively than before.

Dowd blew through his nostrils, once, hard, a snort of anger and exasperation. Being general manager of the miners' co-op that had the Ceres franchise was an unrelieved headache. Here he was promising this nincompoop Eggleston twelve shares – he himself had only three, and an able-bodied vacuum-miner, risking his life and his health every day, got only one. And all because Eggleston had an engineering degree!

"It isn't the money," Eggleston said. "You know what it is."

"No" said Dowd grimly. "I don't. No."

Eggleston looked longingly at the open port of the ship. He hesitated and set down his bag – eight hundred and fifty pounds of personal belongings and equipment. It

would weigh that much on Earth; here it was only a feather-light balloon.

He said tiredly: "I've told you dozens of times. I don't see why I'm bothering to tell you again. You didn't understand it before and you won't understand it now."

"Try me!" said Dowd. "Maybe I'll finally get it!"

"All right. There's no work for me here, Dowd. And who wants to live inside a chunk of rock?"

"Two thousand of us do!"

"Then do it!" snapped Eggleston. "Not me! I'm tired of never, seeing the sun – except through filters, after I put on a spacesuit, I'm tired of breathing last year's, air. I'm tired of living with two thousand miners and their squalling brats, all cooped up in an oversized mine shaft. And when it comes right down to it, Dowd, I'm tired of you! That's why I'm leaving – right now, at fourteen twenty-two hours on June third, mean solar time – and you can take your twelve shares and–"

"Okay, okay," Dowd broke in.

"So long."

He slipped his shoes back into the magnetic galoshes that held him to the floor and clumped, teetering, away.

Behind him, he heard the shrill mechanical whine of the lock motors, sealing off the chamber where the rocket ship lay, and then the pumps that sucked the air out of the giant lock. When the lock was empty, the outer panels whined open, the noise coming shrilly through the rock; there was a sharp, shattering jar as the rockets started – then silences.

Dowd didn't even look around. It wasn't very interesting any more. Eggleston wasn't the first engineer to depart in a huff. He was the seventeenth and the whole process was becoming unpleasantly familiar.

Dowd took the elevator down and reported failure to the rest of the managing committee. They accepted the news without comment; they were getting used to it too.

Manson, the gray-haired supply manager, was the nearest to cheerful of the lot – it wasn't his problem. Except that of course, production was everybody's problem; if there wasn't enough production, there wasn't enough pay. Still, he was able to say: "Well, that's that. What do we do now?"

Dowd said glumly: "Call a general meeting. We'll have to put it up to the whole membership."

Traffic Manager Pickett scowled. "Put what up? We haven't got an engineer and we're not likely to get one. What's to discuss?"

Dowd shrugged, wishing he had the guts to call the ship back and join Eggleston in leaving this place. "The only thing we can do, as I see it, is try to get along without an engineer for a while. But that's a matter of Policy!"

Manson nodded. Policy required a general meeting; everybody knew that. He reached over, picked up the P.A. microphone, flipped it on and spoke into it: "Attention, everyone. Attention, everyone. General meeting in the Common at–" he glanced at his watch "–fifteen hundred hours exactly."

The committee was down at the mouth, but the miners didn't seem perturbed. It was a kind of holiday for them. There wasn't much doing inside the 488 mile diameter of Ceres, and even a general meeting, that invariable precursor of trouble, was better than nothing.

The miners and their families came up out of the rock-built "houses" – really cubicles. Really, said the more disgruntled inhabitants, caves. They were laid out in geometrically straight streets in the great, high-ceilinged chamber under the surface of the asteroid. They were not notably pretty or comfortable, but they would do. Enormous sun lamps hung, violet-glowing, on spindly cables from the ceiling; giant street ventilators sucked out the old air and pumped in – well, the same air, but dried, cooled, de-carboned and re-oxidated.

It sounded like the noise of wind in trees – or, anyway, that's what Dowd was in the habit of saying in his wheedling letters to prospective members of the co-op. Actually, what it sounded like was ventilators.

As general manager, Dowd led the committee toward the Common at the center of town. It was the community's showplace – synthetic grass, imitation trees, even a small pool that used to have the unpleasant habit of creeping up over its margins and drenching everything around. This was due to a combination of the high surface-tension of water and the low gravity in the interior of and the only thing that could be done about it was to roof the thing over with glass, which more or less spoiled the effect. From a distance, though, it didn't look bad, particularly when you observed the surrounding shops, the theater, the restaurant.

Dowd couldn't see any grass at all this time, not even the glassed-over pool. Every square foot of the Common was covered with people. Dowd climbed to the bandstand – once there really had been a band there, and dancing on the green; but that hadn't worked too well either, because the low gravity made even the best dancers prone to fall all over their partners.

He picked up the loud-hailer and addressed the crowd. In a few brief words, he told the miners what they already knew, and outlined the problem they had already faced: "We don't have an engineer. We aren't likely to get one. We have to try to get along without one; and that's the size of it. Now," Dowd went on, "I'll entertain a motion that we proceed on our own power."

He got his motion and it was passed unanimously – if you could call it that. At least,

there weren't any 'nay' votes, but there were also only a scattering of 'ayes' and if the expressions on the faces of the two thousand miners and their families had been ballots, the whole Ceres Mining Co-operative would have faced a veto that afternoon.

The committee went back to its work. The miners returned to their homes. The whole community kept its fingers crossed, fearing the worst.

And, two days later, an oversize blast went off and one-nineteenth of the asteroid of Ceres was blown away into space.

First concern was casualties. Dowd raced into a pressure suit and headed a party that grappled and clung its way around the mottled rock surface of the asteroid to where the accident had occurred. They found the miners – sheepish enough, pinioned under what, on Earth, would have been tons of rock, some of them; but unhurt.

The second concern was the airtightness of the living quarters and that, thank heaven, thought Dowd, was still all right The blast had occurred seventy miles from the town-cavern.

The third concern was – the Solar System Conservation Society.

Dowd returned to the main operations area and boarded a scout rocket with Manson and Simon Brodsky, the accountant. They jetted a few miles out into space, arrested their relative motion and took a good long look.

Asteroid Ceres looked like a cake with a big chunk hacked out of it.

"Oh, my God," groaned Brodsky. "Now we're in for it."

Dowd said shortly: "I know."

Manson said: "What happened? Did you find out?"

Dowd shrugged. "They had the charge all figured, and then they got worried it wasn't enough, so they added more. They were so busy arguing, they tied in with the stored explosive and the whole business went up. Lucky they weren't all killed – maybe all of the rest of us, too!"

"You can say lucky if you want to," Brodsky complained. "I'm not so sure. This is going to cost us our franchise, you know!"

Manson said: "You mean the Solar System Conservationists?"

"What else? Our contract said we couldn't do anything that would affect the external appearance or the orbit of Ceres. Believe me, this does both. Look at it!"

They looked, in an atmosphere of gloom. "Curse them," Dowd said angrily. "It's a bloody big slice, all right."

It was. The raw cut was as deep and wide as a sea, and the undiffused sunlight cast a space-black shadow that made it seem even deeper and more naked among the jagged asteroidal peaks.

"There's no doubt about it," Dowd added. "Palomar will spot that next time they look this way, – if a liner from one of the outer planets doesn't beat them to it!"

"Wait a minute," said Brodsky, thoughtfully. "There aren't any liners this time of year – none of the big planets are in opposition."

"Well?"

"And Palomar isn't going to bother with us till it has to. Listen," Brodsky went on, growing excited, "what if we get that piece and stick it back?"

Dowd stared. "Do what?"

"You heard me," Brodsky insisted. "Why not?"

Dowd looked at him in astonishment. He began to laugh – until he realized that Brodsky was serious, and then he got annoyed. "That's crazy. We're miners, Brodsky. We dig out; we don't put back."

Manson interrupted: "No, listen to him. Why shouldn't we?"

Dowd rubbed his square jaw, squinting down at the asteroid. "Well – I don't know, maybe it's an idea. Certainly we couldn't be any worse off–"

"Let's try it," Brodsky urged eagerly. "What can we lose?" It was a very good question and they all knew the answer.

"All by ourselves," Dowd mused. "No engineer to tell us what to do; no experience in this sort of thing. Well, you're right, Brodsky. We don't have any choice, do we?"

What had happened to Ceres was this: A wedge of rock had flown off into space, like an axehead hurled off the handle; it was getting farther away every second, and it had picked up a fair amount of spin. Moreover, the remaining eighteen-nineteenths of Ceres had acquired, by natural law, an equal and opposite thrust, seriously disturbing its own orbit.

The ore freighter department head checked in. "Yeah, we've got the ships," he said. "We've got eight that we can use for towing, which is enough. We can kill the spin, sure. Don't worry about that. We'll get the chunk back to Ceres, right over the cavity. Then it's up to the ground crews to take over. Of course," he added, "we'll need an engineer to check our acceleration and bearings and all that, you know. Say, when is the new engineer going to–"

"Thanks," Dowd said bitterly. "Thanks a lot. Just stand by. I'll let you know."

The loading section foreman was less confident, but he grudgingly agreed that the

problem of getting the chunk back down in place wasn't impossible. He dragged Dowd to his drafting office and showed him the plans his section had made. They all gathered around his desk, arguing over a diagram.

"See," the foreman said, "I guess we could winch it down, like. From the bottom and sides, you understand? It might mean losing a few winches underneath, but I guess it's cheaper than losing the franchise."

"Hold on," Dowd said sharply. "You guess you can winch it down? It might mean losing a couple of winches?"

"Well, what do you expect me to say?' the foreman demanded righteously. "I'm no engineer."

"Damn it," exploded Dowd, "You've been doing this kind of work for twenty years! All Eggleston would have done is check over your own diagram. Why can't you do that?"

The foreman said stubbornly: "Stress factors, things like that – what do I know about them, Dowd? It looks all right, but how can I say for sure?"

Dowd pulled his lips over his teeth and sought out the head blaster.

The blaster pointed out: "I ain't an engineer, but the way it looks to me, we can fuse the wedge in place once the loading section gets it down. Same as we did when we put in the cargo lock for the rockets, remember?"

Dowd asked: "And do you think fusing it would hold it in place permanently, allowing for orbital spin and gravitational attraction?"

The blaster spread his hands. "How do I know? Now if I were an engineer–"

"That's what I thought" said Dowd. "I'll let you know."

Dowd called the Managing Committee meeting to order in the board room. He locked the door and started the tape recorder; for several minutes, it recorded only his profane remarks about lack of guts and self-confidence.

"Hold it, Dowd," Manson said at last. "We've most of us dug all our lives – all but Brodsky. That's why he doesn't know the problems in a job like this. There are all kinds of tricky things involved."

"Like what?" Dowd savagely wanted to know.

Manson snapped: "If I could tell you that, I'd be an engineer."

Dowd drummed his fist on the desk. "Ah, what's the use? Sometimes I wish this wasn't a co-op. If I was a real boss, I'd just give the orders – and they'd damn well do what they were told, engineer or no engineer!"

Pickett glanced up at him thoughtfully, and then returned to what he was doing – paring his cuticles with a little knife. He said: "You can't, Dowd. I'd quit. I don't blame the men; I wouldn't work on anything as ticklish as that hunk of rock without an engineer. That's the way it is. On routine operations maybe we could along – but this isn't routine."

"Oh, the hell with it," Dowd said in disgust. "Here, let me tell you something. You know why we can't keep an engineer? We don't need one. Our boys have done everything that can be done with our equipment so often that they can do it in their sleep – yes, even like dragging a hunk of Ceres back to where it belongs! It's only the same things they've been doing, on a slightly larger scale. They only want an engineer to yes them because they don't have confidence. That's why we've lost seventeen engineers, one after another – they want work, not just a soft berth."

"So – I don't know." Dowd spread his hands, baffled. "I don't blame the engineers. When a man gets a degree, he wants to use it. Not just look at radar soundings-which are read for him – and approve charge formulas – which are all worked out for him – and read loading schedules and shoring diagrams and – hell, the entire job! That's why we can't keep them. And that's why we don't need them, even now."

Pickett didn't look up. "No engineer, no job," he said softly, and the rest of the room murmured agreement.

Dowd sat down heavily and stared at the ceiling. It was an impasse.

Brodsky cleared his throat. "You know," he said, "my sister Molly has a boy, David. He wanted to be a violinist, but she made him go to mining college."

Manson lifted his head questioningly. "He's probably got some nice job in a nice place," he grumbled. "You don't think he'd quit some other place just to–"

"Oh, he doesn't have a job yet," said Brodsky. He counted on his fingers, nodding. "Yes, he's just getting out of school now. I remember because my niece Leah got married when he was in his sophomore year and–"

"All right! All right! What are you getting at, Brodsky? You think you can get the kid before somebody else signs him up?"

Brodsky looked surprised. "Yes."

Manson looked interested. "What do you think, Dowd?"

Dowd banged the table. "Brodsky," he roared, "why didn't you say something about this before? Get to it, man! If he's a relative, maybe there's a chance he'll stick – anyway, even if he only stays long enough to get the damned asteroid stuck together again, that's something! Look–" He figured rapidly "–we'll get one of the oreboats to haul you to where you can pick up a liner. Pickett, you get on the radio and find out who's in port. Manson, you get the freight section ready to take Brodsky in. Move!"

"Right!" Manson smiled. "Then we've got a chance. With a mining engineer, we can do the job!"

"Yeah." Suddenly Dowd sat back again. "But only the job," he said wearily. "Then we're on our own. Relative or not, he'll never stay."

"Oh, he'll stay," Brodsky promised. "I guarantee he'll stay."

As usual in unusual situations, the membership of the Ceres Mining Cooperative was in the community square when Brodsky brought his nephew, David Bookbinder, down from the landing area.

David was a tall boy, not entirely filled out yet, with light hair that had four great waves in it – a feature that the miners' wives and daughters approved – and a long, sensitive face. He wore strong contact lenses – a feature that the minors approved; it was evidence of studiousness.

Brodsky proudly introduced him first to the managing committee and then to the foremen of the various crews, who took him around to meet the members and their families. David held a violin case in his left hand and shook with his right, smiling gently and looking a little overwhelmed. He had to show his handsome diploma over and over to the awed and respectful miners.

Dowd, Brodsky, Pickett and Manson stood near the bandstand and watched the lad answer questions, moving shyly from one group to another.

"They like him," said Down.

Brodsky nodded, pleased. "He was worried about that. I told him once in a while, say a couple of times a month, he could give a violin concert here. That would keep him happy. And who knows, people might enjoy it."

"They'll enjoy anything he does," Dowd said enthusiastically. "Speaking of keeping him happy, we ought to work that out in detail!"

Brodsky waved his hand. "Later, later. First we put Ceres back together. Then we worry about that."

"Oh, that's no problem now," Dowd assured him. "We're all set. The wedge is being towed back – the crews began that the minute we got your spacegram, saying you and David were on the way. Now he's got the data from the other sections to go over – but that won't take long."

"No, that's true," Brodsky agreed. "He'll be glad to look it over!"

"And then what?" asked Manson. "Do we lose him like the others? I'll tell you what. I'm for voting him fifteen shares, Dowd. Why not? We could build him a big rock house down in some nice section of town – put in a bar, a ballroom, whatever he wants. And we can get him a little electrocar – maybe even a chauffeur, if he wants–"

"Sure!' added Pickett. "Listen, why not get a little private rocket? It could be his – let him go to Mars once in a while. You know? Maybe the rest of us could use it when he didn't mind – but it would be his all the same. And we can put through that leave plan right away – what the devil, why not give the guy a couple months a year on Earth or Mars? With pay, naturally. And the town looks a little drab – we could spray-paint it. And a mist machine up at the ceiling to give us a blue sky and white drifting clouds–"

"You're crazy!" cried Dowd, outraged. "He's just an engineer, you idiots! No engineer is worth it!" Manson scowled blackly. "You say that?" he demanded. "After we've messed ourselves up trying to get along without one?"

Brodsky was polishing his glasses. "Gentlemen," he begged, looking distressed. "Please, we don't have to go to all that trouble. He's just a boy. The place is fine – maybe we could dress it up a little, like you say. But for us, not for David. David will stay, I assure you, and he'll be happy with the usual ten shares and our old engineer's quarters."

Wonderingly, Pickett said: "You've got more influence with your relatives than me with mine."

"Sure," said Brodsky. "Say, Dowd, can I talk to you for a minute?"

Dowd shrugged. The others nodded and walked off toward the group around the colony's new engineer.

Dowd said suspiciously: "Well?"

Brodsky cleared his throat "The fact is," he said, "David wanted to be a violinist, as I told you. But he went to mining college to please his mother–"

"As you told me. I know. What about it?"

"Well," Brodsky said hesitantly, "there was just a little trouble about his grades." He took a petty cash voucher out of his pocket. "I have here–"

"Wait a minute! What are you trying to tell me, Brodsky? He's an engineer, isn't he? I saw his diploma with my own eyes!"

"Oh, yes," Brodsky assured him. "Of course you did. Everybody did – a beautiful diploma, right? Nice sheepskin. Nice lettering. That's what this bill I have here is – five dollars for parchment, forty dollars hand lettering. I also," he added, "invested quite a lot for rosin and violin strings and things like that; but I want to pay for those myself. Call it a present for my nephew."

"A graduation present?" Dowd asked, more than a bit baffled.

"Well–" Brodsky was a little embarrassed. "–not exactly. You see, there was the thing with his grades. So I promised him that here things would be all right – he

could practice his fiddle as much as he wanted; all we'd want from him is that once in a while he had to look over whatever the foremen brought him and say yes. Easy? He thought so. But it's worth it to us."

Dowd swallowed hard. "You mean-" he started, and had to pause to swallow again. 'You mean he isn't really-"

Brodsky shrugged. "A technicality. He's been to school? He's got a degree? What more does he need?"

"But-but suppose the data's wrong! Suppose the foremen make a mistake and–"

Brodsky was shaking his head. "Never!" he said positively. "Besides, David isn't entirely ignorant. He may not be an engineer to other engineers, but to a miner, believe me, he's an engineer."

THE RICHES OF EMBARRASSMENT

The Costellos, two great little people well under five feet tall, had moved out of the one-bedroom apartment to the left of mine, and my neighbors and I wondered apprehensively who would move in. I know it's true that you can live in a Manhattan apartment house all your life and never know your neighbors, but the tenth floor of our building was lively proof that this needn't be so, and we wanted it to continue.

Dick and Charlotte Fort (two bedrooms, to right of my apartment) were airily positive that we would assimilate whoever it might be. The Masons (three bedrooms, across the hall) could use another cheery sitter for their manic kids, for the Costellos had always been happy to oblige. Betty Snowden (one bedroom, left of the Masons) hoped the new tenant(s?) would like Maxwell, her big, but*big* , cat. Being closest to the vacant apartment, I wished for somebody quiet who wouldn't mind my typing late and might welcome an occasional visit, as everybody on the tenth floor did.

After the painters were finished, two men put down green wall-to-wall carpeting. Furniture was brought in. On the door under the peephole appeared an inscrutable nameplate: J. McGivney. Bachelor? Divorcee? Couple? The name gave us no clue.

It happened to be my lot to find out. And the way I found out was this: I had just come up with the mail and was about to close the door when I noticed that the damnable top screw of my lock had worked its way loose again. So I was standing with the door half open and turning the screw with my thumbnail and the elevator came up to the tenth floor. A perfectly ordinary-seeming woman in her forties emerged and headed toward me, key in hand.

"Hello," I said brightly, introducing myself. "And you are Mrs. McGivney?"

"Miss," she said flatly, looking at what I was doing.

It did look pretty silly, and I found myself babbling, "The top screw keeps coming out, and I keep having to screw it back in. Doesn't yours?"

"I don't know what you mean," she said and unlocked her door and went in, followed by the sound of double-locking and chaining it.

When I reported this to the Forts, they laughed me out of my embarrassment and said they would thaw her out. They put a couple of bottles of wine and some glasses on a tray and invited me to come along long to see. Out in the hall, they rang Miss McGivney's bell. The peephole opened, and an eye stared at us.

"We're the Welcome Wagon!" cried Charlotte Fort gaily.

"I didn't order any," said Miss McGivney, closing the peephole.

The Forts stood there for a long moment before soberly going back to their apartment, and I went into mine. We didn't think of drinking the wine ourselves.

So far, this doesn't sound like the start of a remarkable scientific discovery, but it was, requiring only time and more data. It was Charlotte's destiny to add the next item.

"I never go out to the incinerator," she chattered later. "That's Dick's job. But we had the people from the office over, and he went to bed feeling sick, and I couldn't face all the empty bottles that had accumulated." She shuddered. "'So there I was in the middle of the night, clutching liquor bottles, and guess who came out."

"Miss McGivney?" I supplied.

She nodded. "I was pretty high myself, but not after she watched me struggle to put the empties down the incinerator. I crept into bed, positively ill with embarrassment, and tried to wake Dick, but no soap."

"That's ridiculous," said Dick heartily. "What's more natural than dumping a few bottles down the incinerator at two in the morning?"

"Fifteen," said Charlotte. "And, it was four-thirty."

Dick, the Masons and I laughed her out of it, of course. Only I knew how she felt; the others hadn't met Miss McGivney yet.

Sometime that summer, the Masons boys came home from camp for the weekend on their way to a dude ranch. Let Mrs. Mason tell it:

"Mike had brought back a snake from camp. It was a pretty little one; but he couldn't keep it obviously, and I told him to take it to the ranch and let it go. A few hours after they left, the police and firemen charged out of the elevators and made for Miss McGivney's apartment, clubs and axes at the ready. When they came out, I asked what had happened. A snake, they told me, wound up in her bathtub!"

"And for that she called the police and fire department?" asked Dick Fort, stunned.

"Not only that," said Mrs. Mason, "she scrubbed every inch of the place on her

hands and knees."

"But why?" asked Mr. Mason.

"To kill any eggs it may have laid. I know it's biological nonsense, but the poor woman was hysterical."

The Masons were visited by executives from the management office, who made it clear that Mrs. Mason should not have confessed so readily, and, the item made the local newspaper. We laughed them out of their embarrassment, but we noticed that it was getting harder and harder to do and also that we never seemed to meet Miss McGivney except under embarrassing conditions. Only Dick Fort and Betty Snowden disagreed. They said we were getting a bit paranoid.

You might say it was Betty's turn next, though not in person. Her sixteen-year-old niece from Ohio was visiting her, sleeping on the sofa because Betty, if you remember, had only one bedroom – and the girl got up early and, in her shortie nightgown, went out into the hall to get the Sunday Times that Betty had delivered to her, when the door blew shut behind the girl. She rang the bell and banged on the door, but Betty had the bedroom door closed and Flents in her ears, a longtime practice. So her niece philosophically sat down on the welcome mat and started looking at the ads. That was when Miss McGivney came out on her way to early Mass.

The girl smiled up at her as she waited for the elevator and tried to explain what had happened to her.

"I don't recall asking," said Miss McGivney, and took the elevator.

"Damn it," I said when Betty finished, "is it us or what? These are the kind of things that happen once in years to anybody, yet she walks right into them every time!"

"It's your own fault," said Dick. "If you'd used a screwdriver instead of your thumbnail, or you, Charlotte, could have waited for me to get rid of the bottles the next day, or your niece, Betty, might have turned the lock before going after the paper."

"But why does Miss McGivney always come along at just the wrong moment?" argued Mrs. Mason.

"Pure happenstance" said Dick. "And not thinking ahead."

"That's because you haven't had her walk in on you like we have," said Charlotte, too annoyed to watch her English.

"And she never will," Dick said. "I think before I act."

If life were dramatically logical, he should have been the next victim, but he wasn't. I was. The Forts had invited me to dinner, but let me finish my day's work instead of

joining their company for cocktails. Finished, I phoned to beg off, being so tired that I needed a nap. As always, Charlotte was gracious about it, and I lay down with a good conscience.

It was dark when I awoke, past the Forts' dinnertime. I took a shower, dressed and went toward the kitchen to open some, cans and eat standing up. But a slip of paper on the floor near, the front door seemed to have Charlotte's handwriting on it. I picked it up and read: "Look outside before you ha-ha make dinner for yourself. Then come on in and join us."

I opened the door. Out in the hall, directly in front of my door, was a collection of plates containing uncooked spaghetti, Charlotte's famous meat balls and meat sauce, salad and dressing, Italian bread, and shrimp cocktail and dessert. Just as I bent over to take them in, Miss McGivney's door opened. I straightened and said hello, determined not to offer any explanation.

Looking at the things on the floor, she said, "Some sort of ritual?"

My nerve broke, and I was blathering away when the elevator saved me from further embarrassment. After morosely eating, I went next door, downed two highballs, and told Dick and Charlotte what had transpired.

Dick shouted, "Listen to this, people!" and uproariously repeated my story. It took me a long time to forgive him. A matter of fact, it wasn't until he met Miss McGivney face to face for the first time; he left for work before she did and came home earlier. so they just hadn't crossed paths.

This fateful morning, Dick had overslept. He threw on his clothes, yelling to Charlotte that he didn't have time for breakfast, and was waiting for the elevator when he noticed that his zipper was open. He gave it a yank – and snagged his boxer shorts.

Need I tell you who appeared at that very instant?

Much stuff has flowed under the thing since then, including Miss McGivney and the Maloons and me moving away, and Betty's cat died, so she took a sabbatical without feeling guilty, and though I still correspond with the Forts, we've stopped debating Miss McGivney and our awful moments. It's all very clear, at least to me.

As I said earlier, she led to a remarkable scientific discovery, and so she did. In years of ceaseless research, I have never found discussion, much less theory, concerning the power that Miss McGivney clearly possessed. This can therefore be counted a First. Here it is:

Using a previously unknown and unsuspected ESP faculty of the mind, Miss McGivney unconsciously manufactured embarrassing incidents.

We on the tenth floor weren't so much victims as puppets. That was bad enough – but can you imagine what life would be like if you had her power? Wherever you

entered or exited, somebody would inevitably be doing something that you much preferred not to witness, let alone have explained unconvincingly to you. If you were devout, like her, thoughts in the form of prayers like these might race through your mind as you steel yourself to go out each morning: "Dear Lord don't let me see anything upsetting today! Save me from disgusting sights. Make people act like people instead of animals!"

And, naturally, these thoughts would create what you are praying not to occur, and the harder you pray, the more inevitable they become.

Poor Miss McGivney! Poor world of Miss McGivney!

SOMEONE TO WATCH OVER ME

(With Floyd C. Gold)

I.

Len Mattern paused before the door of the Golden Apple Bar. The elation that had carried him up to this point suddenly wasn't there any more. Lyddy couldn't have changed too much, he'd kept telling himself. After all, it hadn't been so very long since he'd seen her. Now he found himself counting the years ... and they added up to a long time.

But it was too late to go back now. A familiar thought. The commitment was moral only, and to himself, no one else – the same way it had been that other time, the time that had changed the direction of his whole life, and, possibly, of all other lives in his universe as well. There was only one human being with whom he kept faith – himself. Therefore, the commitment was a binding one.

He pushed open the door and went in.

He saw Lyddy at the end of the bar, surrounded by a group of men. Lyddy had always been surrounded by a group of men, he remembered, unless she was up in her room entertaining just one. She half-turned and he saw her face. The sun-pink lips were parted, her eyes still comparable to the heavens of Earth. She stood erect and lithe and slender.

She had not changed at all!

The tension that had built up inside him snapped with the weight of sudden relief. He lurched against a small hokur-motal table. It rocked crazily. The zhapik who owned the Golden Apple came out from behind the carved screen where he'd been sitting segregated from the customers. Many of the zhapik, who had been native to Erytheia before the Federation took over, owned businesses catering to humans. It might be degrading, but it paid well.

"Maybe you've had enough to drink, Captain?" he suggested. "Maybe you'd like to come back another time?"

"I haven't had anything at all to drink," Mattern said curtly. "What's more, I haven't come for a drink."

He strode across the room, firmly now, and brushed aside the men who clustered around Lyddy. "I've come for you," he told her.

She didn't say anything, just looked him up and down. The beautiful blue eyes skillfully appraised his worth as a man and as a customer. Then she smiled and patted the gilded hair that streamed past her bare shoulders to her narrow waist.

"You're not a Far Planets man," she said. "How come you know about me?"

Funny he should feel disappointed. Sure, he'd been thinking of her all those years, but he'd never expected her to have been thinking of him. Yet he found himself blurting out, "Don't you remember me, Lyddy?" Then he cursed himself; first because he didn't want her to remember him as he had been; second, because he knew every man who'd ever slept with her – or a woman like her – would ask the same question. And, of course, she'd have the standard answer, something like "Why, of course I remember you, honey. I'm just not good at names."

But she just looked at him levelly. "No, dear, I'm afraid I don't remember you," she said. Then a tiny frown gathered on her smooth forehead. "Seems to me I would've, though. When did I meet you?"

"Oh, years ago! I was just a kid!"

She flushed, and he realized he'd been a little tactless. If he was no kid any more, neither would she be. Still, she looked as young as she ever had, and he, he knew, looked younger.

He didn't want her to probe further, so he hastily made an appointment with her for an evening later that week. As he left, he could hear her saying, in a bewildered voice, "I could've sworn there was somebody with him when he came in."

And he quickened his steps.

She had the same room – a warm luxurious chamber, high up in the Golden Apple Hotel. Lyddy herself was the same, too, just as he remembered her.

Afterward, as they lay together in the blackness, she asked, "Can you see in the dark, Captain?"

He was surprised, and then, thinking about it, not so surprised. "Of course not, no more than you can! Whatever made you ask that?"

"I-feel like somebody's looking at me."

He rolled over on his side, so his body was as far away from hers as possible. He didn't want her to feel the sudden rise of tension in him. Something's got to be done about this, he thought. I can't put up with it now.

"Why don't you say anything, honey?" her anxious voice came out of the darkness.

"Will you marry me, Lyddy?" he said.

He could hear the intake of her breath. "Ask me again in the morning," she told him wearily. He knew what she must be thinking: Men who hadn't had a woman for a long time sometimes did strange things. In the morning, she would wake up and he would be gone.

Only, when morning came, he was still there. Two weeks later, they were married.

II.

Lyddy was curious about her husband-to-be and kept trying to find out all about him. Fortunately, in the code of the Far Planets, a man's past was his own business, so he was able to be evasive without actually lying to her. Not that he had any scruples about lying; it was simply easier to tell as few stories as possible, rather than worry about keeping them straight.

But it was all right to ask about a man's present. "Do you have anybody, Len? Relations, anything like that?"

He frowned a little, remembering the boy on Fairhurst. "No," he said, "I have no relatives. I have nobody."

Her face fell. "It would've been kind of nice to have a ready-made family."

"Oh, I don't know," he said. "There are times when it's better to-have no family."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. They might not approve of me."

"We'll be everything to each other," he assured her.

There was a ghost of a sound then – a laugh or a sigh. He hoped she didn't hear it.

The zhapik insisted on giving Lyddy's wedding, even though he himself could, of course, be present only behind the screen. Most people said the old E-T bastard knew a good piece of publicity when he saw it, but Mattern thought it might be out of genuine sentiment. He was closer to aliens than most men in this sector, any sector. Although he had originally hailed from the Far Planets, he had traveled widely and lost his prejudices. His best friend wasn't human.

Every human in Erytheia City was invited to the wedding. Mattern's four crewmen came. Three were middle-aged and had sailed with Mattern for years, but his most recent acquisition was a young man, almost a boy. Something Raines, his name was. He kept staring at Lyddy as if he had never seen a beautiful woman before, though, coming from Earth, he must have seen many. Mattern was gratified at this tribute to his choice.

"Only four crewmen!" Lyddy said, looking disappointed. "You must have a small

ship."

Mattern smiled. "Not too small." He could see she didn't believe him.

Lyddy didn't seem to be enjoying her wedding. She kept glancing over her shoulder all through the ceremony and during the reception. Finally Mattern had to ask her what was wrong, although he would rather not have known.

"Y'know, hon," she whispered, "I keep having the funniest feeling there's somebody extra here, somebody who doesn't belong. I haven't quite seen him; he always seems to slip by so fast, but I don't even think he's a man.

"Don't be silly, Lyddy," he said, almost sharply. "You know no extraterrestrial would dare to crash a human party!"

"I guess not." But she still kept looking over her shoulder.

The zhapik invited them to remain at the Golden Apple Hotel as his guests for as long as they liked. They stayed two months. Then Mattern told his wife it was time they started planning their future, decided where they were going to live. "You'll want a home of your own," he said. "Otherwise you'll get bored."

"I'm never bored," said Lyddy. "But where will we go? I mean what system?"

"Well, Erytheia is a pleasure planet, so I thought we might as well stay here. There are some attractive residential neighborhoods on this continent – or, if you'd prefer, the other one."

Her face fell. "You mean we're going to stay here?"

He didn't know why he was so anxious to remain on Erytheia. Mainly it was because for no good reason he found himself disliking the idea of making the jump with her. "If you'd rather, I could build you a city of your own, Lyddy," he tempted her.

It was obvious that even if she had taken this seriously, it still wouldn't be what she wanted. "I'd like to go away from here," she told him. "Far away."

"Just because you want a change – is that it?"

She hesitated. "That's partly it. But there's more. Somehow, ever since we've been married, I keep feeling all the time like – like I'm being watched."

His smile was strained. "Well, naturally, in 'Rytheia City, people will tend to – watch. Let's go far away from where people are. There's an island on this planet, way off in the western seas. I'll buy you that island, Lyddy. I'll build you a villa there – a chateau, a castle, whatever you want."

But she shook her golden head. "No, nothing like that. I want to go to another system. It's not that I don't want to be where people are. I like crowds. I just want to be where there are different people."

He forced another smile. "What's gotten into you, Lyddy? In the old days, you used to be so calm."

She wriggled her shoulders uncomfortably. "I keep seeing things, shadows that shouldn't be there, reflections of nothing. Only, when I turn, they don't get out of the way fast enough to be nothing."

"They?" he repeated.

"I only see one at a time, but I don't know if it's always the same one." She shivered again.

"It must be your nerves." He went on resolutely, "Maybe you do need a change of scene." Actually it was absurd to feel so apprehensive about the jump. She'd be safer in hyperspace in his ship than anywhere else in the universe. And a large metropolis might provide distractions to take her mind off – shadows. "How would you like to go to Burdon?"

"That would be real nice!" But she was not as enthusiastic about it as he had expected.

She laid a hesitant hand on his arm. "Honey," she began tentatively, "you – you seem to spend so much time all by yourself. Do I – I bore you?"

"Of course not, dear," he said awkwardly. "It just seems that way to you. Pressure of business..."

"But why do you play chess with yourself all the time?"

"I've spent so much time in space that I got into the habit of playing alone. Many spacemen do that."

She bit her painted lip. "Sometimes – sometimes when you're alone in your room, I hear your voice. Why do you talk to yourself?"

It was an effort for him to meet the beautiful, blank blue eyes. "When you're alone a lot of the time, sweetheart, you have to hear the sound of a voice even if it's your own, or you start hearing voices."

"But you have me," she said. "You're not alone. But you still do it."

"Old habits are hard to break, dear."

She looked up at him, trying to force her way past the wall in his eyes. God help her, he thought, if she ever succeeds. "Would you like me to learn to play chess?"

"Would you like to?"

"I – don't know," she murmured doubtfully. "I've never been much good at mind things. But I want to be everything to you."

"You are, sweetheart." He stooped and kissed her. "Don't force yourself to do anything you don't want to for my sake. I'm used to playing alone."

"But I want you to do things with me!"

"I'll do everything else with you," he promised.

He went to his room and shut the door behind him. But she had heard him talking there, so sounds must carry through. When they got a place of their own, he would have the walls and doors soundproofed. Meanwhile, it would be safer to go to the ship.

As he came out of the hotel door, he collided with a man who looked familiar. It took him a moment to identify the sullen, startled face as belonging to that newest member of his crew, young Something Raines.

"Hello there," he said. "Were you coming to see me?"

"N – no, sir. I was just coming in for a – a pack of Earth smokesticks. I can't stand those stinking native brands!" The boy spoke with a viciousness so unsuited to the subject that it was almost funny. He flushed, perhaps realizing this, perhaps remembering that Mattern was reputed to hail from this sector. "It's a question of what you're used to, see?" he mumbled.

"Of course," Mattern agreed pleasantly. "This is your first time on Erytheia, is it?"

"Yes, my first time here."

"Are you enjoying it?"

"Well, I dunno exactly." There was doubt in the boy's blue eyes. Something in them seemed familiar, more familiar than just recognizing one of his own crewmen. He had a look of – who? Of Lyddy? But that was absurd.

The doubt in Raines' face had changed to fear, and Mattern realized that he himself must have been just standing there, staring at him. He laughed. "You're supposed to enjoy Erytheia; it's a pleasure planet."

"Well," the boy said, choosing his words with care, "it's a pretty enough place, but it's set up more for people with money. I mean there's nothing here for fellows like me; the pleasure's for the rich people only. Even the smokesticks cost almost twice as much as anywhere else."

"We'll probably be leaving soon, so you'll only have to stick it a little while longer." Mattern's hand went to his pocket, then fell to his side as he saw the look on the boy's face. If Raines was proud, Mattern would not offend him by offering him money. "Maybe you'll find Burdon more to your liking."

"Oh, yes, sir!" The young spaceman's face was virtually radiant. He must have a girl on Burdon, Mattern thought, amused.

As he walked over to the landing field where his ship was moored, he was troubled by the memory of the boy's voice. Not that it was familiar – but there was the faintest hint of a Far Planets accent. Provincials as a rule didn't go to the terrestrial space schools, but it was, of course, possible. Raines must have had an Earth education, because Mattern followed the rule of the Marine service and never hired a man who didn't have a degree from one of the space schools. He must look at the boy's records as soon as he got a chance.

The Hesperian Queen was not a small vessel. She was one of the newest, fastest, most fully automated models. Moreover, she was large and she glittered like a dwarf star. Lyddy would get a surprise when she came to see the ship.

Mattern greeted the crewmember on watch and went up to his luxuriously appointed cabin-suite, really. Inside, a chessboard was set up, as its counterpart was set up in his hotel room, one side in the light from a porthole, the other in a corner full of shadows.

The pieces were not only in position, but a game had been started. Mattern sat down on the bright side and moved a piece.

"Lyddy's aware of you," he told the shadows. "She has no idea of what you are, of course. But she knows you're around, kqyres. She's half seen you and it's beginning to bother her. It's beginning to bother me, too."

Part of the shifting grayness flowed over the board. When it receded, a knight had changed its place. "Truly, I have tried to be careful," a quiet, rather tired voice said out of a darkness at the heart of the shadows, an area that was tenuously substantial. "Is it certain that you yourself have not in some way given her cause for suspicion?"

"Quite certain. I've watched myself night and day." Mattern smiled ruefully. "Which is damned hard when you're on your honeymoon."

"Is there anyone else who might have spoken of these things to her?" the kqyres asked.

"No one." Then Mattern remembered the young spaceman he had met coming into the hotel, who seemed to have a look of Lyddy. But that was nonsensical. Looking like her didn't mean talking to her. In any case, what would Raines know that he could tell her? Silly to be so suspicious. The Golden Apple was one of the few places in Erytheia City where one could get Earth smokestacks. "No one," Mattern repeated. "No one at all."

The patterns shifted and darkened. "Then I must be getting careless. I am growing old."

"Anyone can make a slip," Mattern said reassuringly. "Just try to be a little more careful, that's all." He moved a rook.

The grayness crept out over the board, touched a bishop, hesitated, and moved to a

pawn. He is getting old, Mattern thought pityingly, as he took the pawn. Once I could never beat him. Now I win two games out of three.

"But you are content with the woman?" his partner asked anxiously. "You are not disappointed with her in any way? She pleases you as much today as she did when first you set eyes on her?"

"Of course she does! You'd think it was you who'd been dreaming of her all these years, not me."

"I suppose we shared those dreams..."

"And you'd never seen her." Mattern stared intently at the shadow. "Are you disappointed, then?"

"Of course not. You know that to me a human woman is merely an object of art. And she is very beautiful. But I thought she might not have come up to your expectations. Reality often falls short of dreams." The shadow's voice tautened. "Has she changed much?"

"Very little," Mattern said, absorbed once more in the game. "You'd think only a year or two had passed. Surprising how women do it."

The shadow sighed. "Surprising," it agreed, its voice relaxing. "But then the female sex is mysterious."

They played on a while in silence. The kqyres finally spoke. "You will need a lot of money to provide an establishment fitting for so lovely a lady."

"I have a lot of money," Mattern said. "More than enough."

The kqyres flickered so violently that Mattern's eyes hurt. "Not enough for the things she deserves to have – jewels, palaces, planets..."

"One thing I know would make it a lot more comfortable for her," Mattern suggested. "If only you didn't have to be close to me all the time, kqyres. If only you could stay on the ship even when I'm not there. Not that I don't enjoy your company," he added quickly, "but she seems to be highly strung."

"Do you think I like the situation any better than you? But this is the way the mbretersha has ordered it."

"I suppose she knows what she's doing," Mattern sighed. In any case, the mbretersha's orders were absolute and could not be contravened – otherwise, at least one universe might be destroyed. There were still so many things he didn't understand and was not likely to learn.

"Strange," he went on pensively, "that Lyddy should have seen you, when I hardly can, and I know you're here." He knew, too, that the kqyres was deliberately vibrating out of phase, so that the horror of his appearance in this continuum would

be spared not only those he chanced to meet, but also himself. There was always the danger of passing a mirror. Knowing how the kqyres looked in his own universe, knowing how he himself looked in the kqyres' universe, Mattern didn't doubt that any revelation would be a frightful one. However, he couldn't help being curious.

"I still think someone must have told her where to stare," the shadow said, "and what for."

"Don't be absurd!" Mattern snapped, outraged at the idea that his carefully kept secret might not be a secret at all. "Just try to be careful when she's around. Vibrate harder, or something."

"I shall do my poor best." The shadowy one hesitated. "Do you not think that if perhaps you were to tell her the truth–?"

"Lord, no!" Mattern exclaimed. "She'd take a fit!"

"Once you would not have spoken of her that way," the kqyres said reproachfully.

"I didn't mean it the way it sounded," Mattern tried to explain. "It's just that – well, by now I hardly remember what the truth is myself."

III.

Did that truth go back fifteen years, to the time he had met the kqyres, twenty years to the time he had first seen Lyddy? Or even further back than that? Did it go back, say, twenty-four years, to the time when he was sixteen and had killed his stepfather? He could still see Karl Brodek lying there with his head crushed, could still feel the terror rising in him at what he had done...

Then he had turned and fled the small community on Fairhurst one of the Clytemnestra planets and made for the capital, where he shipped out on one of the small tramp freighters that voyaged among the planets of that system. None of the four other planets was human-inhabitable, but two had mining stations, and one had a native civilization advanced enough to make trading practicable, though not very profitable.

For the next four years, he drifted from one tenth-rate ship to another, one ill-paid job to another. In all this time, he never left the Clytemnestra System. As soon as he was satisfied that his former neighbors were not going to set the law on his trail, he had no desire to go away. It wasn't place liking that kept him; it was dread of the jump.

Most spacemen never do quite get over their dread of the hyperspace jump, but with Len the dread amounted almost to a mania. He was ashamed of the feeling, especially since he suspected he'd picked up that extra dollop of terror from the creatures on the native planet.

Self-respecting colonials didn't associate with non-humans, but during those first

years of fear that his fellow men were hunting him, he'd felt safe only with the flluska. He learned a little of their language, and he spent such spare time as he had on Liman, their planet. He couldn't breathe the atmosphere, but there were the trading domes; nobody minded if he used them when there was no trade going on.

The flluska were a religious people, with gods and demons similar to those of the terrestrial cosmogonies. Only, while their gods lived conventionally in the sky, their demons lived in hyperspace. Len was too unsophisticated himself to wonder how so primitive a people could have evolved such a concept as hyperspace in their theology. He merely grew to share their terror of it.

The year Len was twenty, the Perseus, one of the star freighters that made the long haul from Castor to Capella, found itself in Fairhurst Station short one deckhand. The man they'd shipped out with was in jail, waiting to see whether a manslaughter or assault charge was going to be lodged against him. The ship could not afford to wait. The station was scoured for a replacement and Len Mattern was the best man they could find.

Normally the starships did not take on untrained hands. Even the lowliest crewman was supposed to have spent a minimum number of years at the space schools, because in theory, all promotions came from the ranks, even in the merchant service. But in spite of his lack of training, they offered him the job. The bigline ships never liked to sail shorthanded; in case of trouble, that could be a basis for legal action.

Len knew the opportunity offered him was a dazzling one – not only far more money than he'd ever seen before, but the chance of breaking out of the system. He was afraid though, terribly afraid. "I've never made the jump," he told the second officer in a quavering voice.

"You'll never be a real spaceman until you do." The second officer was patient, because he knew Mattern was his only chance of making the crew up to its full complement.

"I've heard tell that – things change their shapes in Hyperspace."

"Maybe they do; maybe it's their real shapes you see out there. Who's to tell what the truth is?"

Len licked dry lips and tried again. "They say there're people – beings, anyway – living in hyperspace." That tale he had heard from spacemen who had made the jump. Even if he'd believed in the flluska's demons, he would have had the good sense not to admit such a thing to a starship officer, a man of sophistication from the Near Planets, perhaps even Earth herself. Still, spacemen were notorious myth-spinners. Perhaps he had made a fool of himself, anyway.

But the second officer wasn't laughing. "Federation law says we should have nothing to do with the creatures of hyperspace. If we leave them alone, they don't bother us."

It would have been better if the officer had laughed at him and said there was nothing in hyperspace but space. "Will we see them?"

"Does a ship going through ordinary space see any of us?" the officer returned. "The creatures of hyperspace live on their own planets, and we give those planets a wide berth. Simple as that." He added, "What are you so afraid of, boy? Not a ship's been lost in hyperspace for over two centuries, and there haven't been any blowups for years."

"Blowups?" Len repeated.

"Accidents. A technical term. You've taken worse risks shipping out in those tin can tramps."

Finally, Len gave in – to his own common sense more than to the officer's – and signed up for the voyage. He filled out the necessary forms – hundreds of them, it seemed like. When it came to each line for next of kin, he left a blank.

"Haven't you any relatives at all?" the second officer asked, surprised.

"Not a one." Len didn't bother to mention that half-brother back on Fairhurst; a five-year-old kid isn't much kin to speak of. Besides, the boy probably didn't even know he had a brother – he'd been less than a year old when Len left. One of the barren women must have adopted him and brought him up as her own.

Len Mattern filled out all the ship's papers and was inscribed on the ship's rolls. And he made the terrible jump through hyperspace for the first time.

People who traveled on spaceships only as passengers never could understand why the jump was invariably referred to as "terrible." That was because before the ship made the jump they'd be given drugs, in their cocktails, in their food at dinner, or in their drinking water – and the next day they'd wake up and find they had slept right through the whole thing, so it couldn't be so awful. Of course those who traveled around the universe a lot were bound to catch on. Someday they'd miss a meal or not drink anything and they'd find themselves awake while the ship was jumping. But the shipping lines didn't take any chances and the aberrant passengers would also find themselves locked in their cabins with smooth metal shutters where the mirrors used to be.

But one thing that couldn't be helped: They couldn't be stopped from looking down at themselves and seeing extra arms and legs; or finding no arms and legs at all, but tentacles instead; or that their skin had turned into shining scales or that there was an extra eye in the back of their head. And when the time came for another jump, they would ask to be drugged.

However, crewmen couldn't be drugged. They had to be awake to tend the ship. The credo of the Space Service was that you couldn't trust a machine to itself any more than you could trust an extraterrestrial, a non-human. If a man wasn't in charge,

ultimately everything would go to pot. That was part of the space tradition, like the primitive axes that hung on the bulkheads, so a man could smash his way to the modern firefighting equipment. Except, of course, that if fire really broke out, it would be quicker to press the button that sent the automatic fire-fighting machines into immediate action. But still the axes hung there, because they had always hung there – and, like all the metal on the ship, they had to be kept polished.

Each time a ship made the jump, the crewmen stayed awake. They saw space and time change before their eyes. They saw their own fellows turn into monsters. It was an awful thing to see, even though they knew it wasn't actually a change, but a shift to another aspect of themselves. Worse than the seeing was the feeling. It was like being turned inside out, organ by organ – your heart and your liver and your guts and all the rest, each carefully turned inside out, the way a woman takes off her gloves, smoothing each one with great precision. The hellish part was that it didn't hurt. A man felt as if he were being twisted and wrenched apart, and it didn't hurt, and it was the wrongness of that more than anything else that – well, that was why the pay was so high on the starships. So many of them went mad.

All this Len Mattern had heard of and had expected – though no amount of expectation could have braced him for that kind of reality. But there was more to it than he had heard, and it was the extra part that the second officer seemed curiously anxious to deny. "You saw nobody – nothing at the portholes," he told Mattern after that first jump. "You just imagined it."

Mattern had been a spaceman long enough to be able to distinguish imagination from reality. Perhaps the creatures of hyperspace did live on planets, but it seemed they did not breathe the atmosphere of those planets as human beings breathe air, and so they were not confined to them. They could move around freely in the starless dusk of their universe. And, if there was a pact, then they must be intelligent creatures – though he would have known that anyway, for they spoke to him. He could hear them through the tight walls of the ship – less in his ears than his mind cajoling, entreating, promising. And he shut his ears and his mind, because he was afraid.

At the end of the voyage, he was offered a permanent berth on the Perseus. "We don't usually take crewmen from the Far Planets," the second officer said thoughtfully. "They don't have the training needed. But you're a good deck hand."

Len waited tensely, not knowing whether he did want the job or not.

"The universe is opening up and sooner or later we're going to have to start diversifying our crews, take untrained men, maybe even–" The officer hesitated "–extraterrestrials. Sometimes training can restrict a man to the point where he can't think for himself. Main trouble with untrained men, though, is that often they've got too much imagination. They think things that aren't true, see things that aren't there."

"I understand, sir," Mattern said. "I'll keep my imagination stowed away until it's wanted."

From then on, he had seen no more at the ports than any of his properly conditioned mates.

IV.

Len Mattern stayed with the Perseus over three years. Gradually, from things he observed himself, from things his shipmates told him, he learned what little there was to be known about hyperspace. Everything was different there from normspace; even the mechanical properties of things changed. However, jumping was safe enough, as long as the spaceships didn't stop. As long as they were only passing through that other universe, they were, in a sense, not actually there, so that the elements of which they were composed would not change, although, to the senses, they seemed to.

Unless, of course, the ship collided with something. Then everything became very real. That was what the pact was for – to make sure they didn't collide. Every spaceship had, locked in the captain's cabin, charts of that other universe – charts which gave, in normspace terms, the coordinates of the hyperspace worlds. That way, when a ship made the jump, there would be no danger of her materializing inside one of the alien planets and destroying both. Even touching one of the hyperworlds could have a disastrous effect. Only the captains were ever permitted to see these charts; they would be far too dangerous in irresponsible hands.

Len might have grown old in the Perseus' service, if the Hesperia System hadn't been one of her stops, and if he hadn't seen Lyddy there.

Hesperia was a small, rose-pink sun surrounded by four planets and the debris of what once was a fifth. Most solar systems in the Galaxy had asteroid belts like that; some time later, Len found out why. Three of Hesperia's four planets were barren rocks. The fourth, Erytheia, was mostly water, calm water, sometimes blue, sometimes – when the sun was high – violet-tinged. There was land, a small continent in the north, where it was always spring, a slightly larger continent in the south, where it was always summer, and that large island in the west which was said to have a climate better than spring and summer combined.

The atmosphere of Erytheia was what they call Earth type – that is, Man could breathe on it. A very inadequate description, though, because men could breathe the atmosphere of Ziegler's Planet, too, only sometimes it almost seemed worthwhile to stop living in order to stop having to breathe Ziegler's air. Erytheia's atmosphere was gentler and purer than the air of Earth. The native fruits were edible and the local life-forms were small and amiable. But there wasn't enough land for the establishment of a self-supporting colony; it would have bred itself into poverty within a few generations.

What else could be done with a small paradise in a remote sector of space but turn it into a high-class brothel and gambling casino? Only the very rich could afford to travel so far to look at scenery, and by the time they reached their destination,

scenery wasn't enough. They wanted some excitement.

Naturally, the Perseus would stop at Hesperia. Naturally, Mattern would see Lyddy, who was one of the seven wonders of that system. She wasn't too many years out from Earth then, and he had never dreamed any woman could be that beautiful.

She was long-necked and slender, unlike the women of the Far Planets, who were mostly squat-built and bred for labor. It seemed to him he had seen her before – in a vision, a dream, who knew where? Certainly never in reality. But he could understand why men would travel light-years for her.

The prices she charged were also astronomical. Still, if he put away his money carefully, in a couple of years he ought to be able to save up enough for a night with her. It was a goal, and he'd never had a goal before, even such a small one; everything had been just aimless drifting. He got a tri-di of her and put it up inside the door of his locker and was happy dreaming of her, even if it meant being kidded about her by his shipmates.

When he made the next jump, he knew for certain that the creatures of hyperspace not only spoke to him through his mind, but could enter it and read it if they chose. He felt very naked and vulnerable. Why couldn't the others on his ship also see the creatures, so that he would not be the sole focus of their attentions?

"Do what we ask," the hyperspacers – the xhindi, they called themselves – said softly, "and you will have enough from just a single voyage to have her for a week, a month, a year. Do what we ask and you can have her for all eternity."

"But all I want is just one night!" he protested.

And they had laughed, and one with a honey-sweet mind had said, "Is that all you want, really all?" Then they began naming the things a man could want – and they certainly seemed to have a full knowledge of humanity and its most secret desires.

Afterward, Len had started to think. It would be nice to have Lyddy all to himself – for a while, anyway. It would be nice to be able to buy her pretty dresses and jewelry. There were other things that would also be nice. Maybe he could have his teeth fixed and his leg straightened. His stepfather had broken it the night his mother died and it had never set properly. With money, he could do a lot of things. He hadn't realized there was so much in the universe to be wanted.

Now his wages began to look as picayune as once they had seemed large. He could make more elsewhere, he told himself; he might not be educated, but he had a good mind, plus rapidly dwindling principles. He didn't need the hyperspacers, though. There were plenty of illegal ways of making money within the framework of normspace activities. So he left the secure monotony of the starship to seek an enterprise which would bring in quick and copious profits.

His first step was to go see a rather disreputable acquaintance of his, Captain Ludolf

Schiemann. Schiemann was an ancient spaceman from Earth, who owned and commanded a ramshackle craft of prehistoric design, held together with spit and spells.

Schiemann operated out of Capella IV with cargoes of whatever he could get. He was able to make a living with the Valkyrie only because he would take on jobs that no sane skipper would touch. Some were dangerous; most were illegal into the bargain. The risks were out of all proportion to the profit, which was why the only helper he'd been able to get was Balas, a big, powerful man, not old but mad. He'd been a deckhand on one of the big starships and had broken too early to be entitled to a pension.

Mattern had met old Schiemann at a bar in Burdon, the capital of Capella IV, and had had a few drinks with him, whenever the Perseus and the Valkyrie had happened to hit port at the same time. Schiemann had a favorite joke he kept repeating over and over: "If you ever get sick of the Perseus, Lennie – sick of good food and hot water and decent quarters – you can always come to the Valkyrie. I'll take care of you."

Now Mattern went to him and said he'd like to take Schiemann up on that offer.

The old man's pale green eyes protruded even further from his head. "You want to leave the Perseus for a berth on my ship! You're madder than Balas!"

"Not a berth, Pop," Mattern told him. "A share of her – a half share."

Schiemann grinned. "Now you must think I'm crazy, to hand over half my ship just like that. Maybe you'd like me to sign her over to you entirely." And he puffed; savagely upon his Venuswood pipe.

"Look," Len said, "let's not kid ourselves. You're a crook, Pop, but such a lousy crook that you make it look as if crime really doesn't pay. And I'll tell you what's wrong with the way you operate. You have no organization, no system, no imagination. I have 'em all. You contribute the ship; I'll contribute my know-how. Together, we'll make a fortune."

"Modest, aren't you?' the old man jeered. "What kind of know-how do you get working as a deckhand on a starboat? All right, maybe you're the universe's best metal polisher, but–"

"Look, Pop," Len interrupted, "I'll make a deal with you. We work together for a year. If you don't pull in at least three times the amount you got before, as just your share, my half of the ship reverts to you. What could be fairer than that?"

Schiemann still wasn't convinced that he was not being played for a sucker. Being what he was, he could never expose himself to a court battle, no matter how much justice might be on his side in a particular instance. But he didn't think Len could be so rotten as to figure on something like that. Besides, the old captain couldn't help

liking the boy. So he agreed, saying as he did so, "I should have my head examined." But before the fourth voyage was out, he realized that he had never done a wiser thing in his life. Under Len's direction, the Valkyrie as a business enterprise was cleaning up.

Only in relative terms, of course. It took six months, over a dozen voyages, before Len managed to save enough for that night with Lyddy. And every time he made the jump in the Valkyrie, the hyperspacers told him, "One night won't be enough," and the honeyminded one had insisted, "You must want more than that. You must. Who could be satisfied with so little?"

Finally, the night came. It was wonderful, it was ecstasy, it was everything he had dreamed of – but it was too short. "Goodbye, honey," Lyddy said as he left, "come back and see me again."

"When you have some more money," she meant. And it was all over.

For her, not for him. He found he couldn't get her out of his mind. One night was not enough. The xhindi had been right. Now he wanted her for his own, for the rest of his life if not for all eternity.

He had no romantic fancies that she would be willing to go off with him for the sake of true love and himself alone. He had seen himself too often in the mirror panel on the door of his tiny cabin, and he looked there now, with a chill objectivity. Undersized, crippled, pallid with the unhealthy color that comes from spending too little time in any kind of sunlight, Len Mattern was twenty-four and looked forty. Not even an ordinary woman of the planets could love him, let alone a love goddess.

But a love goddess who loved money could be bought. However, in order to win her, he'd need to have really big money. No matter how efficiently he organized the Valkyrie's operations the ship was just a battered old hulk and, in her sphere, could never be more than small-time. There was only one answer – hyperspace.

He found Schiemann puffing contentedly at his pipe in the Valkyrie's control room. "Look, Pop," he said, "we've been wasting our time on stardust. We have to aim for something big.

Schiemann looked trustfully at the young man. He had no relatives, so he had come to think of Len as his son, and, in fact, had made him his heir. "Whatever you say, Lennie. Figure on breaking out of this sector and moving in closer to Earth, do you?"

"Not exactly. We're going into hyperspace."

"Sure," Schiemann said, blowing a smoke ring. "Can't leave the sector without passing through hyperspace; that stands to reason. But where are we jumping to?"

Len tried to keep the tautening of his body from becoming apparent. "We're not jumping anywhere. We're stopping in hyperspace."

The pipe dropped from the old man's mouth. He caught it in his hand and gave a muffled exclamation as the heat burned his palm. Then he looked at his partner. "Of course you're joking, Lennie!' And he arranged his face for laughter.

Len shook his head. "No joke, Pop; I'm dead serious. We're going to take a cargo into hyperspace. To the mem – the mern – oh, hell, I can't pronounce it – the queen, I guess, of Ferr. That's one of their planets. She wants Earth stuff, she says, and she promises to do right by us if we bring it to her. Sounds like a good deal!"

The silence thickened as the two men face each other. At last Schiemann got up. "Look, Lennie, I don't make out I'm a saint. I've smuggled and cheated and stolen. But this I will not do. For the laws of the Federation, I don't give a damn – men made 'em and men can break 'em – but to go against the laws of nature, that is a different thing." He turned on his heel and went out of the control room.

Len went to his cabin and began to pack his gear. As he had expected, Schiemann interrupted him when he was halfway through.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"Leaving," Len said. "I'm sick of small-time operations."

"Leaving me? Just like that? Does our friendship mean nothing at all to you?"

"Sure it does," Len told him. "When I get a chance, I'll write."

The old man's face crumpled. "Look, Lennie, if we did move into one of the more important sectors, maybe–"

"You know we wouldn't have a chance there," Len said harshly, to conceal his true emotions. "The sectors closer in to Earth have bigger, faster ships, and bigger, tougher men to run 'em. And they wouldn't like us trying to jet in!"

"I'd rather take a chance on that than–"

"We wouldn't have a chance; it'd just be a massacre, with us on the receiving end. The only way we can break into the big time ourselves is through hyperspace. We've got to do what's never been done before!"

That wasn't quite true, from what the xhindi had told him, but near enough. It had been done before, but not very often, and not very recently. However, it had been done, so it was possible to do. Otherwise he wouldn't think of chancing it ... or would he?

"Why do you want money so much, Lennie?" Schiemann asked. "What do we need the big-time stuff for? It's nice and quiet and practically secure the way you've got things running for us, almost like we were honest businessmen. So why go looking for trouble?"

"If I'd wanted a quiet life," Len said, "I'd have stuck with the Perseus. So don't sing

me security."

The hand that held the pipe was trembling. "Look, Lennie, at least give me time to think."

"Okay," Len said. He was, in his way, fond of the old man, but there were bigger things at stake. He had to have Lyddy; he had to have money; he had to have ... something he couldn't put a name to, but desperately important nonetheless. "I'll give you six months."

At the end of half a year, Schiemann said no, he positively wouldn't do it. Len said "Good-by." Schiemann said, "All right, but you'll be sorry; we'll all be sorry," and gave in.

So they took the Valkyrie, the two of them – and Balas, of course, but naturally nobody would consult a madman – and headed for hyperspace. Len knew exactly where to go, even though he had no charts. The breakthrough he wanted was in their own sector and it had been carefully marked for him in his mind.

Schiemann left all the details to him, even the selection of cargo. Len chose coal. He knew that what the xhindi wanted was normspace materials, but not precisely what materials. Their normspace value did not matter, because normspace matter changed to another form of itself when it got to hyperspace, and that was where the possibility of enormous profit came in. Something cheap in normspace could become something quite rare and expensive in hyperspace, and vice versa. The distribution of elements was different between the two universes; each one essentially complemented the other.

There was one hitch: a stable form in normspace could become an unstable one in hyperspace. Without empiric knowledge, it was impossible for anyone going from one universe into the other to tell whether any substance he was carrying or wearing or was would remain stable. If unstable, it could turn into liquid or gas; it could turn into energy and blow up; it could cease to be a solid in any one of a number of ways.

As if that weren't bad enough, it could also happen that even a stuff previously proven to be stable in both universes could become unstable, if there was even the trace of a potentially unstable element, or if something that, stable in itself, combined with it in unstable fashion. Such an admixture could be accidental, which was what made the whole business especially tricky, and what made the reason for the inter-universe ban necessary.

The reason why that first load of the Valkyrie's had been coal was a simple one. Somewhere Len had read that coal and diamonds were different forms of the same normspace element, and he'd thought that might carry over into the other continuum. However, even an education wouldn't have helped him know what a right first cargo to take would have been. The xhindi had told him what they did know, but their terminology was not clear. They spoke his language with outward correctness but

with imperfect conceptualization; he spoke theirs not at all. Much of what they did know, they appeared to have forgotten, or only half-learned.

They managed to make him understand that certain stuffs would be definitely unsafe; they could not make it clear which stuffs would be safe, or which they would find most desirable as trade goods. He gathered that they would be satisfied with anything that came through. So he chose coal, hoping to make a splendid initial impression.

The Valkyrie reached hyperspace. It slowed down. The throbbing of its creaky engines ebbed to a hum. And it stopped and hung there in the quiet darkness of utterly alien time and place. Schiemann and Balas, expectedly, changed their appearance, but he had seen them in their monster guises before. The coal changed to something pale and glittering, but not diamonds. Everything remained quiet. The ship's instruments recorded no temperature change, but it seemed to grow colder and colder inside her.

Suddenly, Mattern knew the truth. A trap had been laid for him, and he had tumbled neatly into it And the most shameful part was that his own desires and yearnings – deliberately fostered by the xhindi – had been the bait.

He wanted to turn to the horrible thing that Schiemann had become to scream, "Let's go back!" But he couldn't. Something held tight grip of his mind. And, looking out the portholes, he saw that the xhindi had begun to swarm.

The flickering terror of their appearance became more awesome to him than it had been at the beginning, when he'd been only a transitory shadow in hyperspace. Now, although he had no doubt that they were friendly – indeed, almost ardent in their welcoming – horror chilled him all over again. He could almost feel the molecules inside his body slow down as his viscera quivered faintly and then froze into stillness.

He looked at Schiemann and Balas. Neither of them could, he knew, see the hyperspacers. Their conditioning back on Earth's space schools had ensured this. That was the real reason for the schools; any actual training was incidental. But Schiemann knew the creatures were there, and so he could sense them. And Balas, too, certainly seemed to sense something as he stood there, tense and wary and almost understanding. It must be even worse, Len thought, to know the hyperspacers were out there and not be able to see them.

"We – we can still go back," Schiemann said in a cracked voice; apparently the minds outside had not touched his. "Please, Lennie..."

"No, it's too late!" Mattern cried. Once he went back, he would never dare return, and all hope of Lyddy would fade into fog. The thought of not being able to have her was unbearable. "We can't go back now!"

The hideous mask that was Schiemann's hyperspace visage contorted, and drops of

liquid flowed where his withered cheeks would have been in normspace. "Please, Lennie...

"I can't!" Len said. "Even if I wanted to, I couldn't. It's too late, now that we've stopped."

He forced out the words, against objections that seemed to come from outside him – not objections to Schiemann's knowing the truth, but to his own admission of it.

"They're in control," he said.

V.

"We bid you welcome to our universe, Mattern," the xhindi said in his mind. "Come, follow us. We will lead you to the port on Ferr that we have made ready for you."

"Will the ship be safe there?" Mattern asked, remembering the further danger of touching alien substance.

"As safe as she could be anywhere in this space." And then the mellifluous one added, "Remember, whatever risks there are, now we share them with you."

A point of livid light that danced so Mattern knew it must be alive led them to the gleaming purpledark ovoid that was Ferr, then to the place that had been set aside for the Valkyrie. The xhindi had been right about the port so far as the ship herself was concerned. Probably they'd had a fair idea of what materials she and her contents were composed of from the ships that had passed fleetingly through their space, never pausing to become real. What they could not allow for were the random factors.

The ship set down on the "safe" port at Ferr. It made contact with the glossy alien ground. And, as it did so, Captain Schiemann very quietly disintegrated. No explosion, no sound. He simply crumbled into a white powder which slowly drifted away, and then was gone.

"Coal into diamonds," Mattern found himself saying as he stared at Schiemann's pipe rolling on the empty corridor floor, "dust unto dust." When the pipe quivered to a stop, he began to laugh hysterically.

"So you think it's funny, do you?" a gentle voice said behind him.

Mattern turned. Balas stood there.

"I'm afraid that I don't agree," Balas went on with that frightening softness. "He was good to me, and to you too, Lennie. He was damned good to the both of us. And this is the way you repay him. It wasn't a nice thing to do, Lennie."

Mattern opened his mouth to deny intent, but all that came out was the bubbling laughter.

"I know you didn't mean for him to disappear like that," Balas said, almost kindly. "It's just that I guess you don't care what happens to anybody but yourself. No, you don't care for yourself even, just the things you want. You're awful greedy, Lennie – awful greedy."

His voice was very reasonable. "If I don't do something to stop you, you'll do the same thing to our whole universe that you did to the captain. It would be wrong for me to let that happen. So, you see, I have to kill you. I'm sorry, Lennie, because I like you, but I know you'll understand."

And he lunged for Mattern, reaching out the four monstrous arms that were his in hyperspace, the eye in his forehead brilliant with that hideous sanity.

Mattern backed away, still laughing. If Balas has gone sane, he thought, then perhaps I have gone mad. Only I am still conscious of everything that's going on: the danger I am in, the way I am behaving. In fact, I have control over all of myself except my laughter. I know where we are-Balas and I are locked inside the ship alone together, and only one of us is coming out alive.

Undoubtedly the xhindi could have passed through the hull or opened the airlocks in some way, if they had wanted to. But they made no move to try, merely remained outside, watching. The two humans, in that space and time, were alone in a small private war of their own. Mattern could not tell whether the xhindi outside were enjoying themselves, as a group of humans would have under like circumstances, but he seemed to sense anxiety for the outcome – not only of that battle but of another, inner one. Why, I'm beginning to read their thoughts, too, he realized, in the middle of his fear and hysteria.

I am growing closer to them by the minute.

And Balas was getting closer to him. Mattern had a blaster, of course, but he was afraid to use it. A bolt of alien energy might produce a reaction that could rip both universes. Yet, barehanded, he was no match for the bigger, stronger man. Fortunately, he had never pretended to be a hero, not even to himself in the saneness of normspace, so he was able to turn and run. Balas pursued him through the desolate corridors of the Valkyrie, Mattern's laughter echoing crazily in the emptiness.

His only hope was to find a hand weapon – or something that could be used as a hand weapon. And, as he rounded a bend, Mattern saw the primitive fire axe hanging against a bulkhead, the traditional relic that all spaceships, large and small, carried and kept burnished and ready for a use that would never come. But there was another use it could be put to.

Instinct made Mattern seize the axe from its hooks on the wall. Instinct surged up from the handle to fill him with the power and joy and knowledge to use it. He turned to face Balas' onrush, and his laughter no longer sounded insane in his ears; it had the triumphant energy of a primeval war cry.

The madman's charge was lightning fast, but Mattern was the younger man by at least a decade.

He told himself that he meant only to stun Balas, but he was conscious all the time that, if Balas were merely stunned, the problem would be merely postponed. He lifted the axe and brought it down. And then Mattern was alone, the only human being in an alien space and an alien time, locked in this ship with the drifting white dust that had been his friend, and the bleeding corpse that had been – no, not his enemy, but his friend also, and who had, only minutes after death, already begun to haunt him. It was then that Mattern remembered the other man he had killed in the same way.

Karl Brodek had never haunted him, but that was because Len knew the killing was justified – it was retribution, not murder. For Len had seen Brodek kill his mother, not all at once, but little by little. It was her face that stayed with him always, her blue eyes and her sweet voice. She'd been the only one he ever had, really – the brother had been nothing but a wailing blob of protoplasm – and then Schiemann, a little. Now he was more alone than he'd been in all of his solitary life.

He knew that the eerie creatures outside meant him no harm, but would have liked to comfort him if they could. That made it worse rather than better. If only there were some tangible enemy to attack, to beat his fists against ... but the only enemy he could find was the monstrous form reflected in the mirror of his own cabin.

He was no longer laughing, he noticed; the fit was over. And so, he sensed, was the anxiety outside. In some way, he had passed a test.

It was then that the xhindi began to speak to him through the hull of the ship, urging him to come out. "You have come so far," they said, "and time is a precious and a dangerous commodity. We cannot afford to waste it, either of us."

He did not – could not – respond.

They could have forced him out, but they were kind – or perhaps only wise. They simply coaxed and waited. After a while, moving stiffly, as if he had cogs instead of a heart, he opened the airlock and went outside. He set foot on the dark polished surface of Ferr. But there was no thrill of strangeness or of triumph or anticipation. There was ... nothing. His physical senses were all operating. He knew there was neither gravity nor lack of it. He knew there was no atmosphere – and he accepted that, not because he accepted the xhindi's word that he would not need to breathe in this continuum, but because he didn't care whether or not he breathed; he didn't care about anything.

"Come," the xhindi said, in audible words now, and their spoken voices were as sweet as their mind voices.

He found himself moving as through a nightmare, as he proceeded according to their directions, and the xhindi themselves, with their monstrous grace and musical voices,

were a logical part of the black ballet in which he found himself participating.

The dignitaries of Ferr, a fantasy procession in the moonlit colors of hell – smoke and flame and shadow – came to greet him and to lead him to the mbretersha. She glittered splendidly upon her throne of alien substance – a monster, of course, in human terms, and yet also a great lady, as a queen should be in any terms. Through the fog of his own immediate perception, she reached out and touched him with her dignity and compassion.

"I am very sorry," she said, "that such a thing should have happened. I know you are full of grief for your comrades, and I wish that I could have postponed our interview. However, I must press you, for the longer you stay on this world, the greater the risk is for my people."

Somewhere before, it seemed to him, he had heard her voice sensed her mind pattern, anyway. If he had not known that she was the mbretersha, he would have fancied that hers had been one of the minds that had spoken to him, the most persuasive of the cajoling creatures that had sung him their siren songs as he flashed transistorily through their universe. But, he thought dully, that was impossible. She was the mbretersha, the queen.

She read his thoughts, and the pattern of her appearance altered subtly. It was a warm and kind expression of herself; it was a smile. "You must learn, Mattern, that the concept of a ruler in this universe differs from the concept in yours. Here a ruler is the servant of her people, not their master. It is her obligation to take care of them, protect them, watch over them – in whatever way seems most fitting to her. She can have no pride in herself, only in them. They are more than her children."

It was funny, Mattern thought, that she should so easily plan to break the rules of her universe. A space rat like him – that was one thing; it was to be expected. But a queen? Now that he was coming back to life a little, he began to wonder about this again.

Deftly, she picked the wonder out of his mind and answered it. "Our Federation, like yours, is an artificial creation. Its laws are no more than arbitrary regulations, devised by the various peoples of each universe with regard to the good of the majority, and thrust upon majority and minority alike."

Mattern began to understand, or thought he did. "A queen isn't likely to hold with democracy," he said – though perhaps not aloud.

She was a little impatient. "It's not a question of absolute power or divine right – simply that my people come first, even before myself; my own world is part of me, and I am part of it by nature and instinct. Its needs are my needs. When my people are hungry, I feel the pangs."

Most rulers justify themselves like that, he thought, keeping his lips pressed firmly together. But they all do the same things.

But he couldn't keep her out of his mind. "No," she said, "you're wrong. I was not speaking metaphorically. My nervous system is attuned to my people's; it is a hereditary trait bred into my family. So being the ruler is not a pleasant station to occupy."

It certainly wouldn't be, he thought, if she was telling the truth – to suffer every pang that was suffered on the planet, and, if the attuning were psychic also, every sorrow. He expected her to pick the disbelief out of his mind, but she smiled and went on to tell him about her planet.

Ferr was not a large world. Moreover, it was essentially a barren one. It had been rich only because it had previously engaged in sub-rosa commerce with Mattern's universe. "And the last traffic was long, long ago," she told Mattern. "In a day much before mine, when my mother ruled."

"What happened? What stopped the traffic?"

"Our captain died of old age, and we have had trouble finding a successor to him."

"Why is it so hard to get somebody else?" Mattern asked bluntly.

She paused. When she spoke again, it was so obliquely that he did not realize immediately that it was an answer. "Time was when we had more contact with your people. There were many who knew of the xhindi, although few had actually encountered us. It was not difficult for us to get humans to work with us then. But the barbarians took over your world and your people lost the knowledge of how to get through to us. And when they regained it, we were not why they wished to get through. Much of the problem is in making people believe that we exist."

He nodded. "The flluska call you demons."

"There are still some on Earth who call us demons, Mattern. Your rulers and administrators do not call us demons – no, they are too learned for that – but your Space Service, by means of diversions and conditionings, prevents most of those who pass through hyperspace from seeing and hearing us. And, of those who do, most are too frightened for negotiation."

She asked with sorrowful archness, "Are we so terrible in your eyes, Mattern?"

"I don't know," he said slowly, bewilderedly. "Sometimes you are, and I know you will be again. But right now, to me you look almost beautiful."

There was silence, and, for a moment, he thought that he had offended her.

Then, "Thank you," she said softly. "It is a great compliment."

He was anxious to know why they had chosen him as their human representative. "Weren't there any men who did try to get through?" he asked.

"A few – a very few – reached this space." She added reluctantly, "Some of them

proved to lack stability of substance-"

He was angry, at her, and at himself, for not realizing that he had not been chosen. It had merely been a question of survival. "Then you knew what could happen to Schiemann!"

"It could have happened to anyone, Mattern. You knew there were risks to be taken. We did not conceal that from you."

And that was true. It had not occurred to him that the risks would not be equally shared by all three members of the ship's company.

The mbretersha continued "And others of those who come through go mad. We feared that might happen to you, Mattern."

"Others go sane also," he said.

"This is the first time that has happened in my experience. But truly, Mattern, a madman would not seek to reach us."

"I wonder," Mattern said. "I wonder if anybody but a madman would."

This time he had displeased her. There was chill silence, and then: "Time is short. It is best that we return to discussing our business together. Now we will pay you for the merchandise you have brought us with a substance which is stable on Earth – at least it was in times gone by – and which used to become a stuff of considerable value. On your next trip–"

"What makes you think there's going to be a next trip? What makes you think I'm going to come back here again?" He would really have to be a madman to go through that all over again.

The mbretersha smiled. "You will come, Mattern," she said. "You will come when you see how rewarding it is to deal with us. And you will come because–"

"Because of what?" he demanded, more sharply than one should address a queen.

"Because your kqyres will make sure that you do." The tall, splendidly illuminated being who stood close to her throne bowed as she introduced him: "This is Lord Njeri, who served as kqyres with the previous captain. He will serve with you."

"Kqyres? What's that?" Apprehension quickened inside Mattern. "And what right have you to–"

"Your partner is dead," the mbretersha told him. "Lord Njeri is your new partner."

Mattern stood staring at her. No point protesting further, he knew; he was on her world, in her power. For the time being, he would have to obey her.

"Come, Captain Mattern," said the kqyres. "It is fitting that we superintend the

loading of the ship."

So they went back to the port and Mattern watched the xhindi fill the Valkyrie's hold with some queer, spongy-looking substance that couldn't possibly be of value anywhere. And beside him stood the kqyres, as he was to be beside him for the next fifteen years.

"If you are disturbed about my effect upon your people when they catch sight of me," the kqyres assured the young man, "you may ease your mind. I shall make myself so that I am barely visible in your universe. Only those who look for me can see me. You need have no fear," he added with a sigh. "I have been through all this before."

"Yeah, that's what she told me," said Mattern grimly.

"It is disloyal of me, I know," the xhind murmured, "but I had hoped the mbretersha would not find a human representative before I died. I am aware of my obligation to my world – but it is not a pleasant prospect to spend one's last years in exile, however honorable."

"Don't worry, as soon as we get to normspace, I'll send you back. I'm not going on with this."

The kqyres seemed to shrug sadly. "You cannot send me back, for I am permanently attached to you. Wherever you go, I go until the mbretersha chooses to free us, one from the other."

Mattern couldn't believe that. Once he got out of this alien universe, none of its laws could apply to him.

"Secondly," the kqyres informed him, "you will want to come back here. When you look at the cargo and see what it is, you will want to come back." He sighed again. "I know your species so well. And I do not fancy they have changed."

VI.

When the Valkyrie reached normspace, her cargo proved to be the traditional reward – gold.

Not the most precious metal in the universe any more, certainly, but still valuable. What there was in her hold would come to perhaps as much money as Mattern might, if his luck had held, have amassed in several decades of operating with Schiemann in norm space.

"Well," said the kqyres as Mattern stood goggling at the glowing bullion, "is the payment just?"

"Yeah," Mattern grunted, "fair enough." His mind was working busily: Captain Schiemann is dead, and so is Balas, so I can't do anything about that. A man's got to

have some kind of business. Why shouldn't I go on trading with the xhindi, since I seem to be one of the few people lucky enough to be able to do it? Besides, from what the mbretersha said, I couldn't get out of it even if I wanted to. So why fight? Ethics aside, it's a good deal. I'd make more money that way than any other way. I could see a lot of Lyddy.

He caught a flicker in the shifting planes of a grayness that the kqyres had become, according to promise.

"I'm thinking the way you want me to think – right, Lord Njeri?" Mattern asked self-mockingly.

"You are thinking the way any reasonable being would think."

Left to his own devices, Mattern would have disposed of the gold as quickly as he could, and then gone back to Erytheia to spend it all on a year or so with Lyddy. She came that expensive.

"And then what would you do?" the kqyres queried.

"Well, then I'd go out to hyperspace and make more, I guess. I know it's a little tough on you," Mattern added apologetically, "but you know how it is; I'm crazy about that woman!"

The kqyres evidently did not know, but he made an effort to understand. "And, meanwhile, she will go back to – doing what she has been doing, with other men?"

Mattern frowned. "Yeah, I guess so!"

"This procedure is acceptable in terms of your culture?"

"Well," Mattern said, "for women like Lyddy, sure. I mean – oh, hell – it's hard to explain."

"But it doesn't disturb you?"

"All right," Mattern said sullenly, "so it disturbs me. So what can I do about it?"

"Would it not be wiser," the kqyres suggested, "for you to wait until you can get enough money so you can have her for yourself alone? After all, how long would it take for you to get together a sufficient sum at that rate?" And the kqyres indicated the gold.

"You got a point there." Mattern could see that the xhind was right. It would be a lot more sensible to make a few more trips and himself a sizable bankroll before going after Lyddy, so he'd never have to share her again. Otherwise it would be back and forth, back and forth, until it sent him off his mental course.

So, as soon as he disposed of the gold, he went back with another cargo, and then another. Waiting for Lyddy wasn't as bad as he thought it would be, because he

could talk to the kqyres about her. He'd never had somebody he could really talk to; even Captain Schiemann hadn't really been a companion. The kqyres always seemed interested in what Mattern had to say. He never talked much about himself, but he listened patiently to Mattern's description of Lyddy's talents and charms, including some which, as a non-human, he could understand only intellectually, if at all.

And he didn't only listen, with it going in one ear and out the other or whatever the xhindi had instead of ears. He made helpful suggestions, such as maybe Mattern ought to fix himself up a little before going back for Lyddy.

"I know she is to be – bought," he said, as if he still didn't quite understand what that meant, "but would you not derive greater pleasure from your purchase if you knew you were a man whom a woman could like for his own self?"

Len was silent. He knew the kqyres couldn't understand human concepts of beauty; he had taken Len's own word that the young man wasn't much of a specimen, that his body and his teeth were crooked and his skin bad, his vision defective and his hair drab. Lyddy deserved something better than that; Len knew it himself. Even if she would go with him for the sake of the money, it wasn't the same thing.

"I could get my teeth fixed up in this sector," he said at last, "but I'd need to go to the Near Planets, maybe even Earth, to have my leg fixed. It'd take a long time and passage costs a hell of a lot. People don't go that far just for a junket, you know. For most of 'em, it's a once-in-a-lifetime deal."

"Of course," Njeri said. "Your wealth is dearly won; you wouldn't want to squander it. However, wouldn't a considerable economy be effected if you went in your own ship?"

"The Valkyrie!" Len was shocked into laughter. "She'd never make it to Earth! She'd crumple up like an old paper bag!"

"She will not last much longer, in any case," said Njeri.

Len had been thinking that himself for some time – wondering how soon he would have no ship left at all, and what he would do then.

"It would be wise," the kqyres suggested, "for you first to get enough money to pay for a new ship. Only a few more trips should be necessary. Then go to whatever planet you deem most suitable for the necessary improvements, and finally return to Lyddy – a man worthy not only of her but of any woman?"

"It'll take so long," Mattern said, tempted, and yet driven wild by the idea of Lyddy, so close to attainment.

"At your age, what are a few more trips?"

Len gave in.

Actually, it took five trips into hyperspace merely to pay for the new vessel, a much larger and more elaborate model than Len had planned on buying. "In the long run," his partner told him, "the best is most economical. A sound, spaceworthy vessel such as this one will last out your lifetime. And you can call her the Hesperian Queen, after Lyddy."

"Why?" Len asked. "Is that what Lyddy is short for?"

"It is the same as naming it after her," the kqyres said shortly. "Only it's a little more subtle."

"Oh." Somehow the kqyres made Len feel stupid, uncouth almost, even though he was the human being and the other nothing but hyperextraterrestrial.

The treatments were even costlier than anticipated, and it took many more trips to pay for them. Expenses were increased by the fact that he had to commute back and forth from his sector of space to the planet where he was being treated, since he couldn't afford to neglect his business now that his costs were mounting.

He had his leg straightened on Earth. That world was as colorful, as complex, as intoxicating as it was claimed to be. One series of marvels after another presented themselves before his inexperienced eyes like scenes in a vision show – except that he was actually there, breathing, tasting, feeling a part of this vast sophistication. Earth had many beautiful women, and he enjoyed the favors of those in Lyddy's profession, but only to prove to himself that she was much more wonderful.

He decided there was no point bothering with the other planets; he might as well have his teeth and everything else taken care of on Earth, too. "Very wise of you," the kqyres approved. "The best is always the soundest, and, hence, most worth waiting for. Like Lyddy."

"Yes," Mattern agreed, "she is the best. And the most beautiful."

"Of course," the kqyres said. "Tell me more about her."

And Mattern talked, far into the night. What he couldn't remember of her by now, he imagined, so that the picture should be complete not only for the xhind but for himself.

When his leg and his teeth had been fixed, "Why stop at that?" the kqyres asked. "If it had not been for the way that stepfather of yours treated you as a child–" for Len had found himself telling his companion not only about Lyddy but about everything "–you would be a fine-looking man today. It would be no difficult task to have you restored to what you should rightfully be."

Mattern would not, of course, do such a thing out of vanity. But the more presentable he made himself, the more he would be offering Lyddy. So it would be worth the extra time, especially since he could spend so much of it on Earth. Lyddy had come from Earth; it would be a bond between them later.

Doctors and cosmetologists got to work on him. Each treatment seemed to be lengthier than the preceding one, and more expensive. He could, however, easily afford it – all he had to do was make more trips. The kqyres not only told him what cargoes to take advised him on the investments to make with his profits.

They did very well together. As far as Mattern was concerned, did fabulously well, because he had to make enough on his end to counterbalance the entire expenses of a planet on the other. The thought impressed him. I am, in a sense, equal to the mbretersha, he thought, and she is a monarch. As a result, he walked a little more erect than even the operations had rendered him.

The dangers of his trade grew less and less frightening as he came to know his way between the universes, even though, at the same time, he began to realize how great those dangers were. He had not conceived of their immensity before. The reason there were asteroid belts in so many of the solar systems, he learned now, was that the xhindi had traded with other intelligent races in earlier eras, and there had been accidents. Those races were now extinct.

The xhindi themselves ceased to be monstrous in his eyes. He grew to accept their appearance as perfectly natural in their universe. Toward the kqyres, he came to feel something of what he had felt toward Schiemann, except that where Schiemann had looked up to him and relied on him, he found himself increasingly dependent on Njeri. He told him all his hopes and ambitions, and the kqyres listened attentively. Mattern tried to explain to him how he himself felt about Lyddy, and the kqyres tried to understand.

The kqyres taught Mattern how to play chess. "But that's our game!" Mattern said. "I mean we play it in our universe!"

"In ours also," the xhind smiled. "Who knows whether it came from our universe to yours, or yours to ours? Nor does it matter. It is an old game and a good one."

Mattern became increasingly skillful at it. He was pleased that there was an intellectual activity in which he could engage as an equal with the kqyres, and the kqyres seemed pleased, too.

When the treatments were over, Mattern looked in a mirror. He was straight; he was handsome. His skin was clear, his eyes bright He looked less than his age. Now he could go back to Lyddy, assured that most women would find his physical appearance more than acceptable.

But he found himself hesitating. Only his physical appearance would be truly acceptable. There was something still lacking in him. His body was right, but the way he stood, the way he moved, the way he spoke, all these were wrong.

"I'm not finished yet," he said stumblingly to the kqyres, "not quite straightened out. I ought to be more – well, more smooth."

"You do lack polish," the kqyres admitted, "although you are far less awkward, shall we say, than when we first met."

"That's because of you, Njeri!" Mattern declared, with genuine gratitude. "You've taught me a lot!" And he looked at his outlandish friend with a great affection.

The kqyres seemed quite moved; he flickered like a pinwheel. "You have been an exceedingly apt pupil, Mattern. When first I saw you, I did not think it possible that I should ever consider you a companion. However, I have found myself taking an increasing pleasure in your company. Sometimes I even forget you are a human."

Mattern could not speak; he was so overwhelmed by the tribute.

"The passage of time disclosed to me that there were sensitivities and perceptions beneath that – forgive me, but we know how misleading first impressions can be – boorish exterior. The very fact that you are conscious of your own deficiencies proves that you are more than the mere clod you still, on occasion, seem to be."

"Can't I improve myself that way, too?" Mattern asked plaintively. "Can't I make myself worthy of Lyddy in every Way?"

"Of course you can," the kqyres beamed. "Were you to apply yourself specifically to the acquisition of culture, I am sure you could become as polished as any human being can hope to be. But it will take time!"

"Well," Mattern said, "Lyddy's waited so long, she can wait a little longer. Things worth having are waiting for."

Under Njeri's tutelage, Mattern cultivated the arts and the amenities. As he used his ship for a permanent residence, it was there that he housed his growing collection of costly rare objects of art, and library, notable for its first editions – not only of tapes, but of books. His uniforms were cut by the best terrestrial tailors and he took kinescope courses in the liberal arts and social forms from the outstanding universities of Earth. The provincial twang vanished from his speech; he developed a taste for wine and conversation. Nobody, seeing him, could ever have fancied him once a poor wizened space rat.

As the years went by, he grew to become as much of a ruler in his way as the mbretersha in hers. She ruled one planet, he told himself, but he had a business empire farflung over many planets all of which, to some extent, he did rule through his investments. He would have worlds to lay at Lyddy's feet now, he thought complacently. No man could offer any woman more.

The first Hesperian Queen didn't have a chance to last out his life-he kept trading her in for a better model and yet another model, as better, faster, more luxurious starships were developed. Finally, he outbid the Federation Government itself for plans of the latest model spacecraft. When the government protested, he graciously gave them copies free of all charge. "I merely wanted to be sure that I had the best

ship available," he explained. "I have no objection to your having it also. But I knew that you could not afford to be as generous as I can."

He never had more than one ship, because it was too dangerous to run more than one cargo at a time. His crew was always as small in number as possible. He would have preferred none at all; actually, all spaceships could run themselves, for the controls were completely automatic. But regulations said there had to be a crew, both for the sake of "face" – many extraterrestrials couldn't seem to recognize the authority of machines – and because a power failure was not inconceivable.

So the Hesperian Queen carried four men. And, whenever she made the jump through hyperspace, even the crew – though conditioned on Earth – was drugged. Mattern carried on alone. And if, when the crewmen awakened, they found that a day had passed when only an hour should have gone by, they knew better than to ask questions.

So the years went by – busy, pleasant, profitable years. The image of Lyddy was always before him, inspiring him to further efforts. Someday soon I will go back to her, he would tell himself. On his latest birthday, he looked in the mirror closely. At twenty-four, he had appeared forty; at forty, he could have passed for thirty. Sixteen years had gone by since that night with Lyddy. Now he was worthy of her or anyone.

"I think it's time I went back for her," he told the kqyres.

"For whom?" the kqyres asked; then added hastily, "Oh, yes, of course, Lyddy. We'll do that right after we come back from the Vega System. There's a little Earth-type planet out there–"

"Before we go to Vega," Mattern interrupted. "Now."

"But why the hurry? You've waited so long already."

"I've waited too long. I'm not young any more."

"Neither is she," observed the kqyres. "Perhaps she is too old now, Mattern."

"She can't be too old," Mattern said. The tri-di in his locker was Lyddy, and the picture was young; therefore, Lyddy must still be young.

"She may have married someone else. She may have numerous children clustering about her knee."

"Then I will take her away from her husband and children," Mattern declared. "Can you imagine that a little thing like that would stop me?"

"She may have lost her beauty," the kqyres said. "She may have left Hesperia. She may have suffered a disfiguring accident."

Mattern realized then that Njeri was deliberately trying to keep him from going back

to Lyddy. Either he felt that she would interfere with the smooth operation of their business, or he was jealous of a third intruding into their company.

"I have done everything I did for the sake of winning Lyddy," Mattern said, biting off the word. "If all hope of her is gone, then my whole reason for working with you is gone. I will never go back to hyperspace."

"There are other women–"

"Not for me!"

"The business itself means nothing to you?" There was an aggrieved note in the kqyres' voice.

"It's just a living," Mattern said, "just a way of getting Lyddy. You know that was why I went into it. I thought you'd been listening to me all these years."

"I thought perhaps with the deepening of your interests–"

"They have only made me love her the more profoundly."

The kqyres took the equivalent of a deep breath. "You do not have a house or any regular place of residence. You cannot expect a lady to live permanently on a spaceship."

"I will build her a house."

"Will it not show her how carefully you have prepared for her if, first, you build her a palace worthy–"

"I have no time to build palaces.

"There is a tiny planet that circles the dim sun you call Van Maanen's star," the alien persisted. "It is always twilight there. The beings who live on that planet build crystal towers miles high and as fragile as spun glass, in dusk colors the rainbow never dreamed of."

"If she wants a crystal tower, I will have one built for her. But first I will ask her."

"Very well," the kqyres sighed, "since nothing else will satisfy you, let us return and fetch her."

And when they got to Erytheia City, Lyddy was still there, not only unmarried, but – in spite of all the years – unchanged.

VII.

And now Mattern had been her husband for several months. He had begun to know her, and he realized that she could never be let known the truth about his life and his work. She would be frightened, and, if there was any emotion left over her, angry.

He told the kqyres: "I've been thinking of taking Lyddy to Burdon. She might find distractions there that will take her mind off – things it shouldn't be on. What do you think of the idea?"

"I cannot tell," the kqyres replied doubtfully. "I have a curious feeling..."

"That what?" Mattern prompted him anxiously. It was the first time he had seen the kqyres definitely at a loss, although it had seemed to him of recent months that the xhind's assurance was beginning to ebb.

"...that I am getting too old for my work," the kqyres finished.

"Nonsense!" Mattern cried. The kqyres was his tower of strength; he would not conceive of any weakness in him. It would mean that he would be forced to rely upon himself. And yet, he thought, I am certainly old and experienced enough by now to begin relying upon myself. In fact, I'm getting a little old and tired, too.

"You know," he said to his partner, "maybe we both ought to retire."

"What do you mean?"

"You've been at this long enough and I've got all the money I want. We can see each other sometimes; no reason why I couldn't go into hyperspace just to visit."

The kqyres paled to pearl. "Now that you have Lyddy, you don't want anything else at all?"

"Now that I have Lyddy, what else is there to want?"

The kqyres flickered anxiously. "But the mbretersha has commanded–"

Mattern smiled. "Her commands don't hold good in this universe. You know that. When I was a kid, she could fool me into believing she had a hold over me. But the hold is a psychological one; that's the only thing that could carry over from universe to universe. And I'm strong enough to break it now."

Although he was not quite serious, it might be, he thought, that the hyperspace trade and the trips to Ferr had spoiled him for everyday life, made him too restless for the mundanities of any world. And it was time for him to settle down now.

He let the kqyres win the game, and then he stood up. "I'd better start getting things ready for the trip to Burdon."

"You've definitely decided to go?"

"Yes," Mattern said, pleased with himself, "definitely."

He went to the control room and got out the forms that would need to be filled out before the ship could leave port. Suddenly he remembered his puzzlement about the young spaceman – what was his name? – Raines? He pressed a button on the file,

and the boy's records flashed up at him. They seemed to be in order. Raines, aged twenty-five, born on Earth, well and good. But born on Earth ... Mattern was positive that could never have been, not from the way the young man spoke. And one false statement meant that the whole record was false.

However, he could not challenge the discrepancy before they left for Capella. If he spoke to Raines, he'd probably have to dismiss him then and there. It would be difficult to find a suitable replacement in Erytheia City. He might have to send for someone from Earth, which would take months, perhaps a year. First he'd take the Queen to Burdon, he decided, and then he would fire Raines.

Nearly three weeks went by before they could leave. Mattern found himself looking forward with some impatience to Burdon. When Lyddy had a house of her own that she could take an interest in, he told himself, things would be different; she would be different. This way she was bored much of the time, and boredom is contagious.

"I've 'vised ahead to Capella, dear," he told her as they boarded ship, "and rented a furnished multiplex, so we'll have some place to stay.

"Yes, honey" she said, with a strange lack of interest. She didn't even seem surprised at the size of the ship. Underneath her elaborate makeup, she was pale; her body was trembling. She saw that an explanation was necessary. "It's been so long since I made the jump. Silly of me to be so nervous, but you do hear things about hyperspace..."

"You're safer in my ship than anywhere else."

"Yes, I know." Was she merely expressing trust in him, or was there more to her words than that?

At first he was just vaguely suspicious. Then, the second day out, he noticed that Lyddy and Raines seemed to be together a good deal more of the time than chance would account for, and his suspicions secured a focus. The two had some kind of unspoken understanding, he thought, watching them as much out of curiosity as anger. I have become chilled with the years of alien company, he thought. I am incapable of true passion; perhaps that is what she seeks in another.

But, though he might find excuses for her, he would not condone her. A bargain was a bargain. At the end of the first week, he said to her one evening, as he sat on the edge of the bed, watching her brush her long, thick gilded hair, "Darling, I'm a little worried about one of my crewmen."

Lyddy didn't turn from the jeweled dressing table he'd had especially installed for her. "Which one?" she asked.

"Young Raines. Do you know which he is?"

"Yes." She paused. "There's only one young one. Why are you worried about him? Do you think he's sick or something?" But that was the question she should have

asked before asking the man's identity.

Mattern let a moment elapse, then said, "His papers appear to be forged."

He glanced at the reflection of her face, but it held neither relief nor fear, merely its usual sweet emptiness. "Maybe he needed a job real bad," she said.

"Maybe," her husband agreed, "but why use forged papers?"

"He might of gotten into some kind of trouble – you know how boys are."

"I'd hardly care to employ the kind of spaceman who gets into trouble serious enough for him to lose his papers. You have to do something pretty drastic to get them taken away, you know."

She said nothing.

He went on, "What I'm beginning to suspect is that he isn't really a trained spaceman at all, that he didn't go to any of the Earth space schools."

"Do you have to go to an Earth space school to be a spaceman? Can't you study somewhere else?"

"Earth's the only place where they give the conditioning." He told the truth, figuring she wouldn't understand.

She turned to look at him. "That's so the men shouldn't see the things outside when they go through hyperspace, isn't it?"

Mattern was somewhat taken aback. "How did you know? It's not public information."

She shrugged and turned back to the dressing table. "I've known a lot of spacemen, hon."

Her face was pale, but why just now? He wondered just what Raines had told her – how much the boy actually knew. Naturally there could be only one possible reason he had chosen Lyddy as his confidante.

"There's something between you and Raines, isn't there?" he asked.

There was a slight delay. Then her laughter shrilled through the cabin. "Don't be silly, hon; I hardly know the man! All I've done was speak to him a couple of times!" She got up and put her soft arms around her husband. "You're jealous, Len," she said, and there was complacency mixed with the fright in her eyes.

He felt a pang of disgust, but tried not to let it show. Gently, he put her away from him.

"But that's so silly," she murmured. "How could I prefer a dumb pimply kid to you?"

In theory, that was quite true, but Len knew women had strange tastes. And possibly "a dumb pimply kid" had more to offer her emotionally and, in reverse, intellectually, than he had. It was not impossible that she was telling the truth, but Mattern could not, of course, believe her. And there was no point in making a further issue of it now. When they reached Burdon, he would fire Raines simply on the basis of the forged papers. No need to bring Lyddy into it at all. So that problem would be easily solved, but what of the others?

He went to play chess with the kqyres. "I trust you have got over your whimsical notion to retire," the xhind said hopefully.

"No," Len told him maliciously, "I've practically made up my mind to quit. There doesn't seem to be any point to it any more."

"The woman has changed! That's the whole trouble, isn't it? Even though it's not apparent, in some way she has changed?"

"No," Len said again, "she hasn't changed at all. In fact, I think that's what the trouble is. She hasn't changed, but I have."

"I never thought of that," the kqyres confessed.

The night of the jump, Mattern turned in at the kqyres' suggestion. "For once, your men can take care of the ship," the xhind said, "since there will be no trading stop." Lyddy would be drugged, but Mattern would not need drugs, for hyperspace held no more horrors for him. Or so he thought.

But that night he was awakened by the sound of a screaming so hideous that, if he hadn't known voices don't change during the hyperjump, he would be tempted to think it was one result of the law of mutability – so monstrous were these shrill, worse-than-animal cries.

He rushed out of his cabin. In the corridor stood Lyddy, still screaming, her face so contorted with terror that only the sight of Alard Raines standing there in his normal shape let Mattern know that they had already passed the jump.

The shrieking separated into words. "I saw it! It was horrible!" And she made an ugly noise in her throat. "You were right, Alard. It's true! There's a monster on board and it did something awful to me..." Her voice ebbed to a bubble as she looked down at her body beneath the thin veil of fabric and found the same voluptuous curves she had started out with.

Mattern sighed. "Better come into my cabin, Lyddy." And then he jerked his head at Raines. "You come, too." He paused in the doorway when he saw there was no need for privacy. "Where are the other crewmen?"

"Asleep," Raines said. "Drugged. As usual. Who do you think you're fooling, anyway?"

Mattern was too disturbed at the news to take notice of the boy's manner. "But they weren't supposed to be drugged this trip! And who's in charge then? You?"

Raines flushed and struggled to pronounce the word he wanted to use in return. 'Your kek – kqyres, I'd say, is in charge. Like he always has been," he concluded triumphantly.

Mattern shut the cabin door behind the three of them. Lyddy went over and sat down on the edge of the bunk, quieter now that she found her personal transformation had been ephemeral. Seeing a monster is not, after all, anywhere near as bad as being a monster. Her fright dimmed and was outshone by a strong sense of personal injury.

"I thought all Alard's talk of kek-kek-monsters was just superstition," she babbled, "but it's true. I saw that thing with my own eyes and it's hideous! Len, why do you have it on board, especially when I'm here?"

"I have to," Len said. "He's my partner."

Her blue eyes widened in shock. "Then you've been doing more than just trading with the hyperspacers. You've been associating with them, and they're even worse than extraterrestrials because they're so much more – extraterrestrial!"

She went on talking in this vein, but Mattern ignored her and turned his attention to the boy. "I suppose you told her not to eat or drink anything so she'd see the hyperspacer?"

Raines nodded, his face essaying contempt but imperfectly concealing terror.

"And I suppose you yourself did the same thing, not knowing the men weren't going to be drugged this trip?" Len sat down behind his writing table and looked thoughtfully at the young man. "You must have done the same thing before, on other trips, to know as much as you seem to. You must have heard and seen a great deal, eh?"

"Plenty," Raines said, through brave, stiff lips. "Plenty."

Obviously the boy hates me, Mattern thought. But why? Is Lyddy enough reason?

"Why did you bring her into this?" he asked, almost mildly.

Lyddy didn't give Alard a chance to answer. "Because he wanted me to see you as you really are!" she shrieked.

The boy shuffled his feet. "I had to tell somebody."

"Why my wife, though? She owes you nothing; she owes me everything. The first woman of the streets you picked up would have made a safer confidante."

"Maybe I trusted her."

"Maybe you had no right to trust her!" Mattern cried, almost with sincerity. "It would have been wrong of her not to tell me."

"Maybe it was because I – I love her," Alard said, looking down at the thick rugs that covered the cabin floor. "If you fall in love with somebody, you tell them things."

Mattern couldn't help smiling. "I never do," he said.

"Maybe you've never been in love. Maybe you don't have any human feelings at all."

There was an uncomfortable feeling in Mattern's shoulders, as if his tailor had made a mistake for once. Had he, during sixteen years of alien trade, changed into something not quite human? Was there then a solid basis for the anti-extraterrestrial prejudice? He picked up a slender, sharp thike and ran his thumb absent-mindedly along the blade. Alard stiffened in his effort not to flush.

Mattern smiled and laid the thike down on the table. It was only a paperknife and had never been used for anything more. If he ever had need for such a thing to be done, the time was long past when he would have needed to do it himself. He looked at the crewman.

"One would almost think you told my wife because you wanted her to tell me," he suggested.

"That's ridiculous!" Alard flashed. "I may be a fool, but not that much of a fool!"

"Why are you on my ship with forged papers then?" Mattern demanded.

"I wanted – I wanted to bring you to justice."

"By committing a crime yourself? Surely a roundabout way. And why have you taken it upon yourself to help rid humanity of me?"

"Why shouldn't I?" Alard asked. "I'm a human being; isn't that enough? But, as a matter of fact, that wasn't the reason I came to your ship. I only found out later what you were doing."

Mattern waited patiently.

"You killed my father!" the boy burst out. And then tension seemed to ebb from him, as if the worst had happened. "So now you know who I am!"

Mattern picked his words delicately. "If you have proof that I murdered your father, why don't you prosecute? There's no statute of limitation on murder on any of the planets. Or don't you have proof?"

Alard's voice broke slightly. "Everybody on Fairhurst knows you killed him, but they won't do anything about it. They say he deserved what he got."

Mattern sighed, knowing now who the young man was. His brother. Another responsibility, another vain tie. "How do you know, he didn't deserve what he got?" Mattern asked.

Suddenly Alard grew shy. He lowered his eyes to the rug again. "Because I didn't deserve what I got."

And there, Mattern thought, Alard had him. Whatever the boy was now, he certainly had not deserved what he'd got then. But I was only sixteen, Mattern argued with himself; how could I have been held responsible? And then he told himself, You haven't been sixteen for twenty-four years.

"I thought one of the women in the village would have adopted you," he said.

"One of 'em did. They took me away from her after she beat me so hard she practically killed me. Every little thing I did wrong, she said it was the bad blood coming out in me, and beat me so hard the blood did come. I went from one family to another, but nobody really wanted me." His voice cracked wide across. "You don't know what it's like to grow up with nobody caring for you!"

"It so happens I do," Mattern said, "but I can't expect you to believe me!"

Alard wasn't interested in Mattern's life story; he wanted to wallow in his own in front of a captive audience. "The only hope I had was that you would come back for me some day. They told me you were probably dead, but I wouldn't believe it, see? It was all I had to hang onto."

"I thought you were part of a family," Mattern tried to defend himself. "I thought you belonged to somebody." He almost convinced himself that this was true, but, at the back of his mind, something whispered, You ditched him.

"When I was sixteen, like you'd been, I ran away to look for you. I found out where you'd gone and I followed. I even stayed a while with the flluska. I liked them better than my own people. They said I should try looking for you in hyperspace."

"They are a very wise people," Mattern said.

Alard hadn't had his brother's luck. None of the great starships offered him a berth. But there were unchartered vessels – smugglers and pirates and worse – that would hire anybody who didn't value his life very highly and knew how to keep his mouth shut. He got jobs on them. And as the bandit ships he sailed on took jumps closer and closer in to the more sophisticated sectors, Alard began to hear of a Len Mattern. It took him a long time before he could bring himself to believe that this king of finance was the brother whom he had imagined finding derelict and penniless. Instead, he was rich and oblivious, not needing anything the younger man could give him.

It was then that Alard determined revenge. It took him years to save up enough money to buy the false papers he needed – more years to buy his way into Mattern's

crew. And, finally, he had achieved his end; he was there.

"But, you've been with me almost a year now," Mattern pointed out, "and done nothing except talk to Lyddy against me. What were you planning to do?"

"I don't know," the boy said hopelessly. "Lots of times I thought of killing you, but then I'd be killing the only relative I had."

"You could have told me who you were. I'd have done something for you."

Alard's eyes blazed. "Yes, you would have. When it's easy, when it wouldn't mean a damn thing to you, you'd do something for me!"

Len pulled out a smokestick and offered it to the boy. Alard shook his head impatiently. Len lit one for himself. Neither of them said anything.

Lyddy was sobbing softly. "You never really loved me," she whimpered. "It was just a way of getting back at Len."

Alard looked away from her, met his brother's eye, and dropped his gaze to the rug, without denying the impeachment.

Mattern exhaled smoke. "All right, you had a grudge against me, but what did you have against her? If you were using her to get back at me, then I think you have no cause to reproach me for anything I did. Maybe your foster mother was right; there is bad blood in the family."

The young spaceman was still silent.

Lyddy lifted her head. There was resolution on her tear-smudged face. "I'm going to leave you, Len! I can't go on living with a man who does the awful, evil, unnatural things you do ..." Her voice petered out as her vocabulary proved unequal to her emotions. Poor Lyddy, he thought. And then, Poor Len, with emotions unequal to his vocabulary.

"Everything I did, I did for your sake, Lyddy," he told her softly, but no longer with any hope of her comprehension. "It was because I was poor and couldn't afford your love that I went into hyperspace." He couldn't help adding, "Doesn't it mean anything to you that I risked a whole universe for your sake, and that now I have worlds to offer you?"

"Don't put the blame on me, Len Mattern!" Angry tears stood in her eyes. "I never wanted anybody to do that much for me. All I wanted were nice things and somebody to take care of me and maybe love me. I never wanted to have the whole universe risked for me," Her voice broke on the truth. "Nobody's worth all that!"

She was right, he thought being given too much can be worse than being given too little. The words spilled out of her; he'd been so disenchanted by her stupidity that he gave her credit for less understanding than she did have.

"You wouldn't have been able to wait fifteen-sixteen years for me if you really loved me. But you were happy the way you were, you and that extraterrestrial of yours. All you wanted was to dream about me. You were a fool ever to have come back for me; you shoulda stuck with your dreams."

And again, he knew, she was right. He felt very tired and empty, the way he'd felt after Schiemann and Balas had died, as if nothing mattered any more. He didn't argue with her.

"What would you do if you left me, Lyddy?" he asked gently.

"I can always–" she swallowed – "go back to my old job, I guess." Alard gave an exclamation of horror, and Mattern agreed in his mind that that solution would never do. Beyond a doubt, she was his responsibility. And so was Alard. Why had he ever longed for a family?

And then an outside mind joined in with his and he knew what to do.

"Alard," he said, "before, I offered to do something for you. Now I'm not going to do anything for you, not a damn thing!"

Alard drew himself erect. "I wouldn't expect you to, see? Even if you wanted to, I wouldn't take–"

"I want you to do something for me," Mattern cut in.

Alard paled, then flushed with anger. "If this is some half-baked way of thinking you can make up for things without me feeling–"

"Hear me out before you leap to conclusions. You said that you loved my wife–"

Lyddy gave a moan. "You know he was only stringing me along to get back at you."

"He wouldn't have done that," said Mattern. "Not a fine, upstanding boy like Alard, no matter how much he hated me. You really love Lyddy, don't you, Alard, as you said before?"

The boy looked frightened. "Only in a manner of speaking," he said quickly. "I was trying to make you jealous. I think of her as a sister – a sister-in-law!"

"She's very beautiful," Mattern reminded him. And the xhindi had done their work well. She hadn't changed; they had preserved her for him just as she had been sixteen years before. If only they had let her change, then things might have worked out. They could have kept the body from growing old without holding back the mind or had they not held back the mind? Was this the fullest maturity it was capable of?

"A man who has her as his wife should be very happy," Mattern pointed out. "You wouldn't want her to go back to what she'd been doing, and she won't stay with me."

"Yes, sure." There was a desperate note in the boy's voice. "But she's not young. I mean for me although, of course, she looks young," he added, with a wild glance in her direction. "And she's not very – she isn't–"

Mattern got up and put his hand on his brother's shoulder. "Then if you feel that way about her and do as I ask, it will really be a favor to me."

"Why should I do you a favor?" Alard demanded. His eyes darted back and forth like an animal that is beginning to realize it is caught in a trap.

"To prove you're the better man," Mattern told him. "To heap coals of fire on my head. To prove that if there's bad blood in the family, it exists only in me."

Alard didn't ask what Mattern wanted him to do. He knew already.

Mattern put it into words: "I want you to take her with you."

"Take her," Alard repeated numbly. "Where?"

"Anywhere she wants to go, to Earth or back to Erytheia, or any one of the planets she chooses."

"Will she go with me?" Alard challenged. "You have to ask her; she has the right–"

"Oh, I'll go with you, Alard," Lyddy interrupted joyfully. "I'd go with anybody right now, but especially you."

"Even if you know I love you only as a sister?"

"That's better than nothing," Lyddy said. "Besides, you could change your mind. I think you and me have a lot more in common than him and me."

"I want to make sure there will always be someone to take care of her, to watch over her," Mattern told his brother. "Funny, I wouldn't have done what I did except for the sake of winning her, and now that I've won her, I can't hold her because of what I did to get her. But she was my dream and I want her to be cherished."

"That's noble of you, Len," Lyddy said. "I'll think of you often, and I won't be mad at you." She got up and linked her arm in Alard's. "You'll take good care of me, won't you, hon?"

But it was to his brother that Alard spoke. "I'll take good care of her," he promised, his voice thick with an emotion that was one part sentiment, one part resignation.

"Splendid," Mattern said. "I wouldn't want her to be cast adrift. She knows so little of any of the worlds outside her own restricted sphere."

"Sure," Alard replied miserably, "I understand. I'll do my best."

Mattern got up and put out his hand and, after a little hesitation, Alard took it.

"I hope in time you'll come to forgive me," Mattern said, "and that your hatred will dwindle into dislike, perhaps even tolerance."

"Oh, I don't hate you any more," Alard assured him. "I guess, in your way, you've had as much to put up with as I did." He frowned in perplexity. "But why did it have to be me?"

"You'll change your mind about that, too," Mattern said comfortably. "Lyddy is a very accomplished woman!"

VIII.

Len felt quite cheerful as he left the two together in his cabin. At long last, he was free of responsibility, of illusion, of dreams.

He didn't need a woman; it would be wrong for him to expect a woman to live with the kqyres, even unwittingly. Love was for the very young; he had his work. And now that he was free of all these vexing human entanglements, he'd be able to take hold of the business the way he should have been doing all along. The kqyres was getting old; it was time to assume the details of management himself. There were quite a few areas of operation which could become even more productive if the business was thoroughly reorganized.

Mattern went up to the control room. The kqyres was there, which was not his usual place. Perhaps Alard had been right when he said it was Njeri who had drugged the other crewmen and taken control of the ship. Presently, Mattern would ask him why, but there were other matters to be discussed first.

"Well," Mattern said, flinging himself into a chair, "Lyddy seems to be disposed of satisfactorily." He gave a rueful laugh. "I take it you had a hand in the arrangements. That was only fair – she's your creation." He waved his smokestick at the xhind. "However, I'm warning you, I won't let myself be manipulated any more. You're through pushing me around."

The kqyres seemed almost offended. Then there came a soft chuckle. "Manipulated, nonsense! We merely deluded you a little, in the same manner you were wont to delude yourself, but more purposefully. In truth, what else could we do? We needed you, and in order to induce you to accept our terms, we had to establish some goal, some ideal for you to aim at."

Something about the kqyres' voice disturbed Mattern; he only half listened as the hyperspacer continued: "And the resources of your mind were so pitifully meager at that time that this woman was the best we could dredge up. Later, when your horizons had broadened and your perceptions deepened, we attempted to alter your goal to a more worthy one, but the woman had already become an obsession."

"You're not the kqyres," Mattern interrupted. "You have a different voice."

"Not the same kqyres," the voice corrected. "Truly, it was unfair to make Lord Njeri

go through a thing like this twice in one lifetime. Moreover, as he grew old, he grew careless."

So that was why the men had been drugged. There had been an unscheduled stop in hyperspace.

Mattern got up and looked intently at the shadowy form. The xhind flickered a little, as if in embarrassment, and embarked almost nervously upon an explanation. "You were never intended to attain Lyddy, merely to keep her image before you like the star a mariner follows but can never reach!' And then the kqyres laughed. "Except, of course, that today he can reach his star!"

"A carrot and a donkey might be a more suitable simile," Mattern said. "Pity you couldn't have provided a better carrot."

The new kqyres ignored this comment. "Lord Njeri was transferred. He has asked me to say that he looks forward to the pleasure of renewing your friendship when you come again to Ferr. Meanwhile, I have taken his place." After some hesitation, the new kqyres added, "I hope we shall be good friends, also."

There was no use pretending any longer. "I know who you are," Mattern said. "I recognize your voice. You're the mbretersha herself, aren't you?"

She seemed pleased rather than dismayed. "Yes, I am the mbretersha. I came to realize that the post of kqyres was more difficult than that of queen. Therefore, I was the only one who should rightfully undertake it. As I told you, in our universe a ruler cannot afford pride. She lives only for the good of her people!"

"She's got to," Mattern said bluntly, "if, as you said, her nervous system is attuned to theirs. What actually did happen is that Njeri told you I was quitting the business and he couldn't control me any more. So you took his place to see if you could change my mind."

"Oh, that was a mere pleasantry!" she said. "I knew you would not give up the hyperspace trade. What else would you have left?"

What else would he have left? His money, his collections, his unpleasant memories. All his emotional ties now were with that other universe.

"Who's ruling Ferr?" he asked, evading her question,

"Lord Njeri, your former kqyres, serves as my regent. He is my father, so he is fitted by birth; his system is also attuned to the planet's, although not as sensitively as mine, since he is a male. Perhaps that would make him a better ruler; he will suffer less. And I see no reason otherwise why a male should be deemed incapable of ruling, providing he is under careful supervision."

"No reason at all," Mattern agreed.

"Moreover," she continued, "I have organized the whole government of my planet so that it runs itself. And, of course, from time to time, when we make our trips, I shall be able to check into what's going on."

"But we're not going to make any more trips," he said. Although he had not been serious about retiring – he knew that now – he wasn't going to let the hyperspacers push him around. Make her sweat a little, he thought irreverently.

"Will you not give me a chance, Captain?" she asked. "Is the prospect of my company so displeasing to you that it will make you give up the business immediately?"

"You know it's not that. I told the kqyres before you came–"

"But my people won't know it's not that. I shall lose face."

"If only you had a face!" he cried. "I'm sick of sailing with shadows!"

"My form in your universe is truly horrible, Mattern," she said softly, "truly monstrous. The xhindi who have seen themselves in mirrors in your universe have often gone mad."

"Anything is better than emptiness," be told her.

"If I appear in my true form, then will you accept me as your kqyres?"

"Well," he said, enjoying himself, "I'll make a few more trips with you, but that's all I'll promise."

"I accept your promises," she said.

He felt a tiny shiver rise up in him. Suppose her normspace form was even more hideous than her hyperspace form, which of course, was no longer hideous to him. Would his nerves be strong enough to bear it?

He held his breath as the vibrations began to slow down, the grays shimmering into substance, taking on all the colors of the rainbow and then flowing into one basic roseate hue. Bit by bit, the planes and shapes began to coalesce into the shape of ...

A woman. The most beautiful woman he had ever seen. A woman next to whom even the dream of Lyddy paled into thin air.

And, momentarily, he became the Len Mattern of fifteen years back, standing there with his mouth agape. "But you said you'd be a monster..."

"To my people, Mattern," she smiled, "this form is as monstrous as ours is to your people. You change into our doubles in hyperspace; we change into yours in normspace. Had you kept the continuity of tradition that we have, you would know what we have always known – that xhind and human are different aspects of the same race. That is why you fear us, and we do not fear you."

Of course, he thought. How else could they understand us so well? How else could they find logic in our illogic and be able to condition us according to our human natures? And he smiled to think that all objection to the xhindi from the social angle was invalid. Monsters they might be but not nonhumans.

"Once I thought this appearance was monstrous, Mattern," the mbretersha went on, in the sweet voice which suited her now, "because I thought you and your kind were, though forms of our race, monstrous forms – not only without beauty, but without dignity or intelligence or compassion."

"Maybe you were right," he said.

"But since I have learned to know you and to – like you, I have come to realize that outward semblances are meaningless. I may appear one way in your universe, another way in mine, but I am the same I. If there is beauty" – and she gave what, in a lesser personage, would have been almost a giggle – "it is an inner beauty."

Mattern could not agree with this premise. Although he had admired the mbretersha on Ferr, he felt quite differently toward her now, and because of no suddenly discovered inner beauty.

"You'll stay this way in this universe then?" he asked. "It makes it so much more comfortable for me – than just a collection of shadows," he added hastily.

"I will stay this way permanently while I am in your universe, Mattern," she told him, "if, in your turn, you will accept me as–"

"–As my shipmate," Mattern finished, "my kqyres. I have already done so."

"Not–merely as your shipmate."

"As my – wife?" he blurted, wondering whether he was reading her mind or whether she was projecting so forcibly into his that he merely spoke her thoughts for her.

She nodded.

To be chained again, after this brief moment of freedom! He wanted her, right enough, and he was delighted to have her for his partner, his companion, but he saw no need for formal commitments between them.

"You're the mbretersha," he protested, "the queen. It wouldn't be right for you to marry – a commoner!"

"And you," she retorted, "are one of nature's own noblemen, and, hence, a fitting consort for me. There is no one in either universe whom I could marry without lowering myself," she explained, "so I might as well wed where there is a basis of respect, of admiration, and, to be sure, expediency."

"But – but our ceremony wouldn't be valid in your universe, would it?" he spluttered wildly. "And your ceremony–"

"We will have two ceremonies, Mattern, one in each universe."

This, he could see in alarm, was going to be a truly lasting marriage.

Mattern was happy with the mbretersha, for she knew how to satisfy a man's every dream as well as his desires, and of course, being the kqyres, she was the only woman who would not be disturbed by the presence of one on board. Moreover, she was a woman for whom a universe could be risked, a woman to whom worlds could be offered – in short, just as he was the only man worthy of her, so she was the only woman worthy of him.

But sometimes he fancied that the mbretersha's blue eyes had the same haunting familiarity that he had seen in Lyddy's and Alard's, and he wondered. Alard's had been explicable enough; he and Mattern had had the same mother. But why should Lyddy also have his mother's eyes – and, stranger still, why should the mbretersha?

Len could not help wondering whether, to create the ideal fantasy, the ultimate carrot, the xhindi had reached far back in his mind to get the earliest -- and thus the most fundamental – illusion of beauty for him. Could both Lyddy and the mbretersha have been deliberately modeled on his mother, and was the mbretersha's form in normspace merely whatever she chose it to be – or appear to be?

Oh, well, he thought, perhaps an artful illusion is the truest form of reality.

GRIFTER'S ASTEROID

Characteristically, Harvey Ellsworth tried to maintain his dignity, though his parched tongue was almost hanging out. But Joe Mallon, with no dignity to maintain, lurched across the rubbish-strewn patch of sand that had been termed a spaceport. When Harvey staggered pontifically into the battered metalloy saloon – the only one on Planetoid 42 – his tall, gangling partner was already stumbling out, mouthing something incoherent. They tried in the doorway, violently.

"We're delirious" Joe cried. "It's a mirage!"

"What is?" asked Harvey through a mouthful of cotton.

Joe reeled aside, and Harvey saw what had upset his partner. He stared, speechless for once.

In their hectic voyages from planet to planet, the pair of panacea purveyors had encountered the usual strange life-forms. But never had they seen anything like the amazing creature in that colonial saloon.

Paying no attention to them, it was carrying a case of liquor in two hands, six siphons in two others, and a broom and dustpan in the remaining pair. The bartender, a big man resembling the plumpish Harvey in build, was leaning negligently on the counter, ordering this impossible being to fill the partly-emptied bottles, squeeze fruit juice and sweep the floor, all of which the native did

simultaneously.

"Nonsense," Harvey croaked uncertainly. "We have seen enough queer things to know there are always more."

He led the way inside. Through thirst-cracked lips he rasped: "Water – quick!"

Without a word, the bartender reached under the counter, brought out two glasses of water. The interplanetary con-men drank noisily, asked for more, until they had drunk eight glasses. Meanwhile, the bartender had taken out eight jiggers and filled them with whiskey.

Harvey and Joe were breathing hard from having gulped the water so fast, but they were beginning to revive. They noticed the bartender's impersonal eyes studying them shrewdly.

"Strangers, eh?" he asked at last.

"Solar salesmen, my colonial friend," Harvey answered in his usual lush manner. "We purvey that renowned Martian remedy, La-anag Yergis, the formula for which was recently discovered by ourselves in the ancient ruined city of Laanago. Medical science is unanimous in proclaiming this magic medicine the sole panacea in the entire history of therapeutics."

"Yeah?" said the bartender disinterestedly, polishing the chaser glasses without washing them. "Where you heading?"

"Out of Mars for Ganymede. Our condenser broke down, and we've gone without water for five ghastly days."

"Got a mechanic around this dumping ground you call a port?" Joe asked.

"We did. He came near starving and moved on to Titan. Ships don't land here unless they're in trouble."

"Then where's the water lead-in? We'll fill up and push off."

"Mayor takes care of that," replied the saloon owner. "If you gents're finished at the bar, your drinks'll be forty buckos."

Harvey grinned puzzledly. "We didn't take any whiskey."

"Might as well. Water's five buckos a glass. Liquor's free with every chaser."

Harvey's eyes bulged. Joe gulped. "That – that's robbery!" the lanky man managed to get out in a thin quaver.

The barkeeper shrugged. "When there ain't many customers, you gotta make more on each one. Besides–"

"Besides nothing!" Joe roared, finding his voice again. "You dirty crook – robbing

poor spacemen! You–"

Harvey nudged him warningly. "Easy, my boy, easy." He turned to the bartender apologetically. "Don't mind my friend. His adrenal glands are sometimes overactive. You were going to say–?"

The round face of the barkeeper had assumed an aggrieved expression.

"Folks are always thinkin' the other feller's out to do 'em," he said, shaking his head. "Lemme explain about the water here. It's bitter as some kinds of sin before it's purified. Have to bring it in with buckets and make it sweet. That takes time and labor. Waddya think – I was chargin' feller critters for water just out of devilment? I charge because I gotta."

"Friend," said Harvey, taking out a wallet and counting off eight five-bucko bills, "here is your money. What's fair is fair, and you have put a different complexion on what seemed at first to be an unconscionable interjection of a middleman between Nature and man's thirst."

The saloon man removed his dirty apron and came around the bar.

"If that's an apology, I accept it. Now the mayor'll discuss filling your tanks. That's me. I'm also justice of the peace, official recorder, fire chief..."

"And chief of police, no doubt," said Harvey jocosely.

"Nope. That's my son, Jed. Angus Johnson's my name. Folks here just call me Chief. I run this town, and run it right. How much water will you need?"

Joe estimated quickly. "About seventy-five liters, if we go on half rations," he answered. He waited apprehensively.

"Let's say ten buckos a liter," he mayor said. "On account of the quantity, I'm able to quote a bargain price. Shucks, boys, it hurts me more to charge for water than it does for you to pay. I just got to, that's all."

The mayor gestured to the native, who shuffled out to the tanks with them. The planetoid men worked the pump while the mayor intently watched the crude level gauge, crying "Stop!" when it registered the proper amount. Then Johnson rubbed his thumb on his index finger and wetted his lips expectantly.

Harvey bravely counted off the bills. He asked: "But what are we to do about replenishing our battery fluid? Ten buckos a liter would be preposterous. We simply can't afford it."

Johnson's response almost floored them. "Who said anything about charging you for battery water? You can have all you want for nothing. It's just the purified stuff that comes so high."

After giving them directions that would take them to the free-water pool, the

ponderous factotum of Planetoid 42 shook hands and headed back to the saloon. His six-armed assistant followed him inside.

"Now do you see, my hot-tempered colleague?" said Harvey as he and Joe picked up buckets that hung on the tank. "Johnson, as I saw instantly, is the victim of a difficult environment, and must charge accordingly."

"Just the same," Joe griped, "paying for water isn't something you can get used to in ten minutes."

In the fragile forest, they soon came across a stream that sprang from the igneous soil and splashed into the small pond whose contents, according to the mayor, was theirs for the asking. They filled their buckets and hauled them to the ship, then returned for more.

It was on the sixth trip that Joe caught a glimpse of Jupiter-shine on a bright surface off to the left. The figure, 750, with the bucko sign in front of it, was still doing acrobatics inside his skull and keeping a faint suspicion alive in him. So he called Harvey and they went to investigate.

Among the skimpy ground-crawling vines, they saw a long slender mound that was unmistakably a buried pipe.

"What's this doing here?" Harvey asked, puzzled. "I thought Johnson had to transport water in pails."

"Wonder where it leads to," Joe said uneasily.

"It leads to the saloon," said Harvey, his eyes rapidly tracing the pipe back toward the spaceport. "What I am concerned with is where it leads from."

Five minutes later, panting heavily from the unaccustomed exertion of scrambling through the tangle of planetorial undergrowth, they burst into the open – before a clear, sparkling pool.

Mutely, Harvey pointed out a pipe-end jutting under the water.

"I am growing suspicious," he said in a rigidly controlled voice.

But Joe was already on his knees, scooping up a handful of water and tasting it.

"Sweet!" he snarled.

They rushed back to the first pool, where Joe again tasted a sample. His mouth went wry. "Bitter! He uses only one pool, the sweet one! The only thing that needs purifying around here is that blasted mayor's conscience."

"The asteroidal Poobah has tricked us with a slick come-on," said Harvey slowly. His eyes grew cold. "Joseph, the good-natured artist in me has become a hard and merciless avenger. I shall not rest until we have had the best of this colonial conman!

Watch your cues from this point hence."

Fists clenched, the two returned to the saloon. But at the door they stopped and their fists unclenched.

"Thought you gents were leaving," the mayor called out, seeing them frozen in the doorway. "Glad you didn't. Now you can meet my son Jed. Him and me are the whole Earthman population of Johnson City."

"You don't need any more," said Harvey, dismayed.

Johnson's eight-foot son, topped by a massive roof of sun-bleached hair and held up by a foundation that seemed immovable, had obviously been born and raised in low gravity. For any decent-sized world would have kept him down near the general dimensions of a man.

He held out an acre of palm. Harvey studied it worriedly, put his own hand somewhere on it, swallowed as it closed, then breathed again when his fingers were released in five units instead of a single compressed one.

"Pleased to meet you," piped a voice that had never known a dense atmosphere.

The pursuit of vengeance, Harvey realized, had taken a quick and unpleasant turn. Something shrewd was called for...

"Joseph!" he exclaimed, looking at his partner in alarm. "Don't you feel well?"

Even before the others could turn to him, Joe's practiced eyes were gently crossing. He sagged against the door frame, all his features drooping like a bloodhound's.

"Bring him in here!" Johnson cried. "I mean, get him away! He's coming down with asteroid fever!"

"Of course," replied Harvey calmly. "Any fool knows the first symptoms of the disease that once scourged the universe."

"What do you mean, once?" demanded Johnson. "I come down with it every year, and I ain't hankering to have it in an off-season. Get him out of here!"

"In good time. He can't be moved immediately."

"Then he'll be here for months!"

Harvey helped Joe to the counter and lifted him up on it. The mayor and his gigantic offspring were cowering across the room, trying to breathe in tiny, uncontaminating gasps.

"You'll find everything you want in the back room," Johnson said frantically. "Sulfopyridine, mustard plasters, rubs, inhalers, suction cups–"

"Relics of the past," Harvey stated. "One medication is all modern man requires to

combat the dread menace, asteroid fever."

"What's that?" asked the mayor without conviction.

Instead of replying, Harvey hurried outside to the ungainly second-hand rocket ship in the center of the shabby spaceport. He returned within a few minutes, carrying a bottle.

Joe was still stretched out on the bar, panting, his eyes slowly crossing and uncrossing. Harvey lifted the patient's head tenderly, put the bottle to his lips and tilted it until he was forced to drink. When Joe tried to pull away, Harvey was inexorable. He made his partner drink until most of the liquid was gone. Then he stepped back and waited for the inevitable result.

Joe's performance was better than ever. He lay supine for several moments, his face twisted into an expression that seemed doomed to perpetual wryness. Slowly, however, he sat up and his features straightened out.

"Are – are you all right?" asked the mayor anxiously.

"Much better," said Joe in a weak voice.

"Maybe you need another dose," Harvey suggested.

Joe recoiled. "I'm fine now!" he cried, and sprang off the bar to prove it.

Astonished, Johnson and his son drew closer. They searched Joe's face, and then the mayor timidly felt his pulse.

"Well, I'll be hanged!" Johnson ejaculated.

"Laanago Yergis never fails, my friend," Harvey explained. "By actual test, it conquers asteroid fever in from four to twenty-three minutes, depending on the severity of the attack. Luckily, we caught this one before it grew formidable."

The mayor's eyes became clouded mirrors of an inward conflict. "If you don't charge too much," he said warily, "I might think of buying some."

"We do not sell this unbelievable remedy," Harvey replied with dignity. "It sells itself."

"'Course, I'd expect a considerable reduction if I bought a whole case," said Johnson.

"That would be the smallest investment you could make, compared with the vast loss of time and strength the fever involves."

"How much?" asked the mayor unhappily.

"For you, since you have taken us in so hospitably, a mere five hundred buckos." Johnson did not actually stagger back, but he gave the impression of doing so. "F –

four hundred," he offered.

"Not a red cent less than four seventy-five," Harvey said flatly.

"Make it four fifty," quavered Johnson.

"I dislike haggling," said Harvey.

The final price, however, was four hundred and sixty-nine buckos and fifty redsents. Magnanimously, Harvey added: "And we will include, gratis, an elegant bottle-opener, a superb product of Mercurian handicraftsmanship."

Johnson stabbed out a warning finger. "No tricks now. I want a taste of that stuff. You're not switching some worthless junk on me."

Harvey took a glass from the bar and poured him a generous sample. The mayor sniffed it, grimaced, then threw it down his gullet. The ensuing minute saw a grim battle between a man and his stomach, a battle which the man gradually won.

"There ain't no words for that taste," he gulped when it was safe to talk again.

"Medicine," Harvey propounded, "should taste like medicine." To Joe he said: "Come, my esteemed colleague. We must perform the sacred task to which we have dedicated ourselves."

With Joe stumbling along behind, he left the saloon, crossed the clearing and entered the ship. As soon as they were inside, Joe dropped his murderous silence and cried:

"What kind of a dirty trick was that, giving me poison instead of that snake oil?"

"That was not poison," Harvey contradicted quietly. "It was Laanago Yergis extract, Plus."

"Plus what – arsenic?"

"Now, Joseph! Consider my quandary when I came back here to manufacture our specific for all known ailments, with the intention of selling yonder asteroidal tinhorn a bill of medical goods – an entire case, mind you. Was I to mix the extract with the water for which we had been swindled to the tune of ten buckos a liter? Where would our profit have been, then? No; I had to use the bitter free water, of course."

"But why use it on me?" Joe demanded furiously.

Harvey looked reprovingly at his gangling partner. "Did Johnson ask to taste it, or did he not? One must look ahead, Joseph. I had to produce the same medicine that we will now manufacture. Thus, you were a guinea pig for a splendid cause."

"Okay, okay," Joe said. "But you shoulda charged him more."

"Joseph, I promise you that we shall get back every redsent of which that swindler cheated us, besides whatever other funds or valuables he possesses. We could not

be content with less."

"Well, we're starting all right," admitted Joe. "How about that thing with six arms? He looks like a valuable. Can't we grab him off?"

Harvey stopped filling bottles and looked up pensively.

"I have every hope of luring away the profitable monstrosity. Apparently you have also surmised the fortune we could make with him. At first I purpose to exhibit him on our interplanetary tours with our streamlined panacea; he would be a spectacular attraction for bucolic suckers. Later, a brief period of demonstrating his abilities on the audio-visiphone. Then our triumph – we shall sell him at a stupendous figure to the zoo!"

Joe was still dazed by that monetary vista when he and Harvey carried the case of medicine to the saloon. The mayor had already cleared a place of honor in the cluttered back room, where he told them to put it down carefully. Then he took the elaborate bottle-opener Harvey gave him, reverently uncorked a bottle and sampled it. It must have been at least as good as the first; he gagged.

"That's the stuff, all right," he said, swallowing hard. He counted out the money into Harvey's hand, at a moderate rate that precariously balanced between, his pleasure at getting the fever remedy and his pain at paying for it. Then he glanced out to see the position of Jupiter, and asked: "You gents eaten yet? The restaurant's open now."

Harvey and Joe looked at each other.

They hadn't been thinking about food at all, but suddenly they realized that they were hungry.

"It's only water we were short of," Harvey said apprehensively. We've got rations back at the ship."

"Hmph!" the mayor grunted. "Powdered concentrates. Compressed pap. Suit yourselves. We treat our stomachs better here. And you're welcome to our hospitality."

"Your hospitality," said Harvey, "depends on the prices you charge."

"Well, if that's what's worrying you, you can stop worrying," answered the mayor promptly. "What's more, the kind of dinner I serve here you can't get anywhere else for any price."

Swiftly, Harvey conned the possibilities of being bilked again. He saw none.

"Let's take a look at the menu, anyhow, Joe," he said guardedly.

Johnson immediately fell into the role of "mine host."

"Come right in, gents," he invited. "Right into the dining room."

He seated them at a table, which a rope tied between posts made more or less private, though nobody else was in the sal and there was little chance of company.

Genius, the six-armed native, appeared from the dingy kitchen with two menus in one hand, two glasses of water in another, plus napkins, silverware, a pitcher, plates, saucers, cups, and their cocktails, which were on the house. Then he stood by for orders.

Harvey and Joe studied the menu critically. The prices were phenomenally low. When they glanced up at Johnson in perplexity, he grinned, bowed and asked: "Everything satisfactory, gents?"

"Quite," said Harvey. "We shall order."

For an hour they were served amazing dishes, both fresh and canned, the culinary wealth of this planetoid and all the system. And the service was as extraordinary as the meal itself. With four hands, Genius played deftly upon a pair of mellow Venusian viotars, using his other two hands for waiting on the table.

"We absolutely must purchase this incredible specimen," Harvey whispered excitedly when Johnson and the native were both in the kitchen, attending to the next course. "He would make any society hostess's season a riotous success, which should be worth a great sum to women like Mrs. van Schuyler-Morgan, merely for his hire."

"Think of a fast one fast," Joe agreed. "You're right."

"But I dislike having to revise my opinion of a man so often," complained Harvey. "I wish Johnson would stay either swindler or honest merchant. This dinner is worth as least twenty buckos, yet I estimate our check at a mere bucko twenty redsents."

The mayor's appearance prevented them from continuing the discussion.

"It's been a great honor, gents," he said. "Ain't often I have visitors, and I like the best, like you two gents."

As if on cue, Genius came out and put the check down between Joe and Harvey. Harvey picked it up negligently, but his casual air vanished in a yelp of horror.

"What the devil is this?" he shouted. "How do you arrive at this fantastic, idiotic figure – three hundred and twenty-eight buckos!"

Johnson didn't answer. Neither did Genius; he simply put on the table, not a fingerbowl, but a magnifying glass. With one of his thirty fingers he pointed politely to the bottom of the menu.

Harvey focused on the microscopic print, and his face went pasty with rage. The minute note read: "Services and entertainment, 327 buckos 80 redsents."

"You can go to hell!" Joe growled. "We won't pay it!"

Johnson sighed ponderously. "I was afraid you'd act like that," he said with regret. He pulled a tin badge out of his rear pocket, pinned it on his vest, and twisted his holstered gun into view. "Afraid I'll have to ask the sheriff to take over."

Johnson, the "sheriff," collected the money, and Johnson, the "restaurateur," pocketed it. Meanwhile, Harvey tipped Joe the sign to remain calm.

"My friend," he said to the mayor, and his tones took on a schoolmasterish severity, "your long absence from Earth has perhaps made you forget those elements of human wisdom that have entered the folk-lore of your native planet. Such, as, for example: 'It is folly to kill a gom that lays golden eggs!" and 'Penny wise is pound foolish.'"

"I don't get the connection," objected Johnson.

"Well, by obliging us to pay such a high price for your dinner, you put out of your reach the chance of profiting from a really substantial deal. My partner and I were prepared to make you a sizable offer for the peculiar creature you call Genius. But by reducing our funds the way you have–"

"Who said I wanted to sell him?" the mayor interrupted, He rubbed his fingers together and asked disinterestedly: "What were you going to offer, anyhow?"

"It doesn't matter any longer," Harvey said with elaborate carelessness. "Perhaps you wouldn't have accepted it, anyway."

"That's right," Johnson came back emphatically. "But what would your offer have been which I would have turned down?"

"Which one? The one we were going to make, or the one we can make now?"

"Either one. It don't make no difference. Genius is too valuable to sell."

"Oh, come now, Mr. Johnson. Don't tell me no amount of money would tempt you!"

"Nope. But how much did you say?"

"Ah, then you will consider releasing Genius!"

"Well, I'll tell you something," said the mayor confidentially. "When you've got one thing, you've got one thing. But when you've got money, it's the same as having a lot of things. Because, if you've got money, you can buy this and that and this and that and–"

"This and that," concluded Joe. "We'll give you five hundred buckos."

"Now, gents!" Johnson remonstrated. "Why, six hundred would hardly–"

"You haven't left us much money," Harvey put in.

The mayor frowned. "All right, we'll split the difference. Make it five-fifty."

Harvey was quick to pay out, for this was a genuine windfall. Then he stood up and admired the astonishing possession he had so inexpensively acquired.

"I really hate to deprive you of this unique creature," he said to Johnson. "I should imagine you will be rather lonely, with only your filial mammoth to keep you company."

"I sure will," Johnson confessed glumly. "I got pretty attached to Genius, and I'm going to miss him something awful." Harvey forcibly removed his eyes from the native, who was clearing off the table almost all at once.

"My friend," he, said, "we take your only solace, it is true, but in his place we can offer something no less amazing and instructive."

The mayor's hand went protectively to his pocket. "What is it?" he asked with the suspicion of a man who has seen human nature at its worst and expects nothing better.

"Joseph, get our most prized belonging from the communications room of the ship," Harvey instructed. To Johnson he explained: "You must see the wondrous instrument before its value can be appreciated. My partner will soon have it here for your astonishment."

Joe's face grew as glum as Johnson's had been. "Aw, Harv," he protested, "do we have to sell it? And right when I thought we were getting the key!"

"We must not be selfish, my boy," Harvey said nobly. "We have had our chance; now we must relinquish Fate to the hands of a man who might have more success than we. Go, Joseph. Bring it here."

Unwillingly, Joe turned and shuffled out.

In a larger and heavier world than Planetoid 42, Johnson's curiosity would probably have had weight and mass. He was bursting with questions, but he was obviously afraid they would cost him money. For his part, Harvey allowed that curiosity to grow like a Venusian amoeba until Joe came in, lugging a radio.

"Is that what you were talking about?" the mayor snorted. "What makes you think I want a radio? I came here to get away from singers and political speechmakers."

"I do not jump to hasty conclusions," Harvey cautioned. "Another word, and I shall refuse you the greatest opportunity any man has ever had, with the sole exceptions of Joseph, myself and the unfortunate inventor of this absolutely awe-inspiring device."

"I ain't in the market for a radio," Johnson said stubbornly.

Harvey nodded in relief. "We have attempted to repay our host, Joseph. He has

spurned our generosity. We have now the chance to continue our study, which, I am positive will soon reward us with the key to an enormous fortune."

"Well, that's no plating off our bow," Joe grunted. "I'm glad he did turn it down. I hated to give it up after working on it for three whole years."

He picked up the radio and began walking toward the door.

"Now, hold on!" the mayor cried. "I ain't saying I'll buy, but what is it I'm turning down?"

Joe returned and set the instrument down on the bar. His face sorrowful, Harvey fondly stroked the scarred plasticoid cabinet.

"To make a long story, Mr. Johnson," he said, "Joseph and I were among the chosen few who knew the famous Doctor Dean intimately. Just before his tragic death, you will recall, Dean allegedly went insane." He banged his fist on the bar. "I have said it before, and I repeat again, that was a malicious lie, spread by the doctor's enemies to discredit his greatest invention – this fourth dimensional radio!"

"This what?" Johnson blurted out.

"In simple terms," clarified Harvey, "the ingenious doctor discovered that the yawning chasm between the dimensions could be bridged by energy of all quanta. There has never been any question that the inhabitants of the super-dimension would be far more civilized than ourselves. Consequently, the man who could tap their knowledge would find himself in possession of a powerful, undreamt of science!"

The mayor looked respectfully at the silent box on the bar.

"And this thing gets broadcasts from the fourth dimension?"

"It does, Mr. Johnson! Only charlatans like those who envied Doctor Dean's magnificent accomplishments could deny that fact."

The mayor put his hands in his pockets, unswiveled one hip and stared thoughtfully at the battered cabinet.

"Well, let's say it picks up fourth dimensional broadcasts," he conceded. "But how could you understand what they're saying? Folks up there wouldn't speak the same language."

Again Harvey smashed his fist down. "Do you dare to repeat the scurvy lie that broke Dean's spirit and drove him to suicide?"

Johnson recoiled. "No – no, of course not. I mean, being up here, I naturally couldn't get all the details."

"Naturally," Harvey agreed, mollified. "I'm sorry I lost my temper. But it is a matter of record that the doctor proved the broadcasts emanating from the super-dimension

were in English! Why should that be so difficult to believe? Is it impossible that at one time there was communication between the dimensions, that the super-beings admired our language and adopted it in all its beauty, adding to it their own hyper-scientific trimmings?"

"Why, I don't know," Johnson said in confusion.

"For three years, Joseph and I lost sleep and hair trying to detect the simple key that would translate the somewhat metamorphosed broadcasts into our primitive English. It eluded us. Even the doctor failed. But that was understandable; a sensitive soul like his could stand only so much. And the combination of ridicule and failure to solve the mystery caused him to take his own life."

Johnson winced. "Is that what you want to unload on me?"

"For a very good reason, sir. Patience is the virtue that will be rewarded with the key to these fourth dimensional broadcasts. A man who could devote his life to improving this lonely worldlet is obviously a person with unusual patience."

"Yeah," the mayor said grudgingly, "I ain't exactly flighty."

"Therefore, you are the man who could unravel the problem!"

Johnson asked skeptically: "How about a sample first?"

Harvey turned a knob on the face of the scarred radio. After several squeals of spatial figures, a smooth voice began:

"There are oninious pleajes of mobyhailegs in so – nmirand which, bowgraismon, are notch to be donfured miss ellasellabell in either or both hagasanipaj, by all means. This does not refly, on the brother man, nat tak our or mizzafil saces are denuded by this ossifaligo."

Harvey switched off the set determinedly.

"Wait a minute!" Johnson begged. "I almost got it then!"

"I dislike being commercial," said Harvey, "but this astounding device still belongs to us. Would we not be foolish to let you discover the clue before purchasing the right to do so?"

The mayor nodded indecisively, looking at the radio with agonized longing. "How much do you want?" he asked unhappily.

"One thousand buckos, and no haggling. I am not in the mood."

Johnson opened his mouth to argue; then, seeing Harvey's set features, paid with the worst possible grace.

"Don't you think we ought to tell him about the batteries, Harv?" Joe asked.

"What about the batteries?" demanded Johnson with deadly calm.

"A very small matter," Harvey said airily. "You see, we have been analyzing these broadcasts for three years. In that time, of course, the batteries are bound to weaken. I estimate these should last not less than one Terrestrial month, at the very least."

"What do I do then?"

Harvey shrugged. "Special batteries are required, which I see Joseph has by chance brought along. For the batteries, the only ones of their kind left in the system, I ask only what they cost – one hundred and ninety-nine buckos, no more and, on the other hand, no less."

Johnson was breathing hard, and his hand hovered dangerously near his gun. But he paid the amount Harvey wanted. Moreover, he actually shook hands when the two panacea purveyors collected their six-armed prize and said goodbye. Before they were outside, however, he had turned on the radio and was listening tensely to a woman's highly cultured, though rather angry voice, saying:

"Oh, you hannaforge are all beasa-tagasanimort. If you rue amount it, how do you respench a pure woman to ansver gosarnak–"

"I'll get it!" they heard Johnson mutter.

Then the sound of giant feet crossing the barroom floor reached their ears, and a shrill question: "What's that, Papa?"

"A fortune, Jed! Those fakers are damned fools, selling us a thing like–"

Joe gazed at Harvey admiringly. "Another one sold? Harv, that spiel pulls them in like an ether storm!"

Together with the remarkable planetoid man, they reached the ship. Above them, dark, tumbling shapes blotted out the stars and silently moved on. Joe opened the gangway door.

"Come on in, pal," he said to Genius. "We're shoving off."

The planetoid man grinned foolishly, "Can't go arong with you," he said with an apologetic manner. "I rike to, but pressure fratten me out if I go."

"What in solar blazes are you talking about?" Harvey asked.

"I grow up on pranetoid," Genius explained. "On big pranet, too much pressure for me."

The two salesmen looked narrowly at each other.

"Did Johnson know that when he sold you ?" Joe snarled.

"Oh, sure." The silly grin became wider than ever. "Peopre from Earth buy me rots of times. I never reave pranetoid, though."

"Joseph," Harvey said ominously, "that slick colonist has put one over upon us. What is our customary procedure in that event?"

"We tear him apart," Joe replied between his teeth.

"Not Mister Johnson," advised Genius. "Have gun and badge. He shoot you first and then rock you up in prison."

Harvey paused, his ominous air vanishing, "True. There is also the fact, Joseph, that when he discovers the scrambled rectifier in the radio we sold him, he will have been paid back in full for his regrettable dishonesty."

Unwillingly, Joe agreed. While Genius retreated to a safe distance, they entered the ship and blasted off. Within a few minutes the automatic steering pilot had maneuvered them above the plane of the asteroid belt.

"I got kind of dizzy," Joe said, "there were so many deals back and forth. How much did we make on the sucker?"

"A goodly amount, I wager," Harvey responded. He took out a pencil and paper, "Medicine, 469.50; radio, 1,000; batteries, 199. Total – let's see – 1668 buckos and 50 redsents. A goodly sum, as I told you."

He emptied his pockets of money, spread it out on the astrogation table and began counting. Finished, he looked up, troubled.

"How much did we have when we landed, Joseph ?"

"Exactly 1668 buckos," Joe answered promptly.

"I can't understand it," said Harvey. "Instead of double our capital, we now have only 1668 buckos and 50 redsents!"

Feverishly, he returned to his pencil and paper.

"Drinking water, 790; battery water, free; meal, 328; planetoid man, 550. Total: 1668 buckos!" He stared at the figures. "We paid out almost as much as we took in," he said bitterly. "Despite our intensive efforts, we made the absurd sum of fifty redsents."

"Why, the dirty crook!" Joe growled.

But after a few moments of sad reflection, Harvey became philosophical. "Perhaps, Joseph, we are more fortunate than we realize. We were, after all, completely in Johnson's power. The more I ponder, the more I believe we were lucky to escape. And, anyhow, we did make fifty redsents on the swindler. A moral victory, my boy."

Joe, who had been sunk despairingly into a chair, now stood up slowly and asked: "Remember that bottle-opener we gave him?"

"Certainly," Harvey explained. "What about it ?"

"How much did it cost us?"

Harvey's eyebrows puckered. Suddenly he started laughing. "You're right, Joseph. We paid forty-six redsents for it on Venus. So, after all that transacting of business, we made four redsents!"

"Four redsents, hell!" Joe snapped. "That was the sales tax!"

He glared; then a smile lifted his mouth. "You remember those yokels on Mars' Flatlands, and the way they worshipped gold?"

"Goldbricks!" Harvey said succinctly.

Grinning, Joe set the robot-controls for Mars.

WHAT PRICE WINGS?

"But you promised!" said Liz Blackwell. "You swore up and down that you'd have them amputated."

"Amputated!" said Dr. Jonas in horror. "I never heard of such a thing."

"You never heard of anyone with wings, either," she said. "Please, Harvey – you promised!"

"That was when you were so upset because I attracted so much attention," said Harvey Leeds. Standing in shoes and trousers, with his wings spread to their full magnificence, he looked like a modern Winged Victory, male division. "Liz, if God hadn't wanted me to fly, He wouldn't have given me wings."

Dr. Jonas put away the measuring tape he had been working with. "From top to bottom, they're five feet six inches. Wing span is eleven feet four. Subtracting what you used to weigh from what you weigh now, they're fifty-three pounds. They grow out of the shoulder blades and are connected directly with your skeletal, muscular and circulatory systems. I've never seen wings on a human before, but these look perfectly sound to me. Amputating them would be exactly like taking off a healthy leg – an unforgivable piece of malpractice, young lady."

"But he's so embarrassing to go out with now," she said. "Why did they have to grow? They were heavenly when they were the size of cherub wings."

"You asked for a checkup," said Dr. Jonas to Harvey, "and I've done my best, though I still think you should have gone to a veterinarian. Growing those wings must have taken a lot out of you. Drink lots of milk to replace the calcium you've lost. Get plenty of sleep, and eat lots of green vegetables. In other words, I have to

give you the same advice I would give a new mother."

Harvey put on his shirt and jacket backwards so they could be buttoned by Liz. They gave him an angelic and somehow clerical look, with his wing tips almost touching the floor.

"I'll have to study the old statues," he said, "to see how the clothing problem was solved."

"A good idea," said Dr. Jonas. "It's amazing how accurately the old sculptors get them. They must have been working from life. If so, you're not unique, just rare. How did the wings start growing?"

"I don't know," Harvey confessed.

"Well, I do," said Liz. "It's all because he's so damned good. He hasn't got a single vice, which, let me tell you, is unnerving to a normal girl like me. The first change was when he checked his records for one thing and found something else-he had cheated the government out of something like two dollars. He tried to pay it, but they said the books were closed and to forget about it. So he sent in the money anonymously. And that night I noticed he kind of glowed, as if he had some sort of halo all over."

"It was only right to send in the money," said Harvey defensively.

"But what about the wings?" Dr. Jonas persisted.

"Would you believe it – he's actually a virgin-at his age! I wanted to see if we were really good for each other, but he said that we should save ourselves for ourselves till we're married. And that, Harvey Leeds, is when your back started to prickle, and a few days later the wings began to sprout."

"That's right," said Harvey, modestly. "I'd forgotten."

There was silence for a moment. Then Dr. Jonas said slowly: "What you're saying is that there is a critical point to goodness; once it's reached, there are profound physiological changes. It may be the same with evil. Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde might have been based on a real-life model. It's a fascinating bit of speculation."

"But what's Harvey to do with his job?" cried Liz. "He hasn't worked the whole time his wings were growing."

"Haberdashery isn't the only job in the world, you know," said Harvey.

"That's the ticket," said Dr. Jonas. "There must be hundreds of things a winged man can do."

"If you don't get those silly wings cut off and become normal, you can forget all about me," said Liz.

He found his wings bristling like an eagle's, he imagined. "If that's all I mean to you, Miss Blackwell, you obviously aren't the person for me." He wished he could use stronger language, but he had never been able to, which, of course, partly accounted for his present situation.

"Then this is good-by." Liz snapped her pocketbook shut and went out the door.

Harvey stood uncomfortably for a while. "I guess it's good-by for me, too. I have to go out and make these wings of mine support me."

"Good luck," said Dr. Jonas. "Let me know if there is any change."

* * *

The bishop admiringly looked Harvey Leeds over from every angle. "No question of it, they're authentic wings, feathers and all. As your doctor suggested, it is quite astonishing how well the old sculptors got the wings – indeed, they must have been working from life. Quite astonishing."

"Clothes are a problem." Harvey put his shirt and jacket on again in reverse.

"Togas are the answer, my boy – same as the statues wore. A bit anachronistic-looking, but so is a man with wings." The bishop sat down behind his desk and lighted a cigar. "Now tell me just what you had in mind in coming to see me."

"Why, it's obvious." Harvey leaned against a wall; he could not sit down for lack of wing clearance. "Am I an angel or am I not?"

"I'm not qualified to pass on such theological matters, but the superficial resemblances are there. I'll even accept, for the sake of argument, your doctor's theory about the critical mass of goodness. But what can I do for you specifically?"

"I want a job as an angel," said Harvey.

"Doing what?" the bishop asked, when he had finished coughing.

"I don't know what an angel does. But that's for the church to torture out, not me."

The bishop leaned forward on his desk. "My good man, if the church took in every anomaly, it would be quite crowded, indeed. You are unusual, but in a medieval sort of way."

"There must be some way I could fit in."

"Mind you, I'm not an authority, but I can't think of a thing you could do to help the church or vice versa. There was a time when the church had a use for miracles, but that was in the Middle Ages, a time of ignorance and superstition."

"But not now?" asked Harvey.

"The church is enlightened now. It is as far beyond the Middle Ages as our computers are from the abacuses they used to count their simple tithes. The church needs good, sound, hardheaded businessmen who know the difference between a bond and a common stock, how to raise funds and what to do with them – in short, exploiting every modern mass medium calls for expert know-how to put our modern religion message across."

"You mean–"

"–That there simply no place in the church for a medieval relic like yourself."

Harvey was silent for a long moment. Then he said: "Well, that's that. It seemed like such a good idea, though."

The bishop came around the desk and put a fatherly hand on Harvey's shoulder. "You'll find something, my boy. It's just a matter of turning a disadvantage to an advantage that will pay off. If life hands you a lemon, make lemonade. We do that every day in the church."

"Thanks for the audience," said Harvey with mixed feelings, "and good-by."

"Good-by," said the bishop with no mixed feelings whatever, "and God be with you."

* * *

Sam Grubel finished his skeptical examination of Harvey's wings. "So they're for real. So what have you got in mind?"

"A job," said Harvey. "There must be people willing to pay to see a man with wings."

"In sideshows, maybe. I got a classy booking agency. I don't touch sideshow people."

"But there's TV. And the nightclubs. And movies."

"Look," Grubel said patiently. "All you got is wings. No act. One or two guest shots and that's it. The only place you can stand still is sideshows."

Harvey paused. "I hadn't thought of that. Of course I'd need an act. How do I go about putting one together?"

Grubel opened the door to a large, bare room with rings and mirrors around the walls. "There," he said. "That should give you plenty of room to fly around in. You can fly, can't you?"

"I'm not very good at it," said Harvey reluctantly. "There's no space in my apartment, and outside I just couldn't get up the nerve."

"There's no excuse here. There are only the three of us to watch you.

"Three?" said Harvey. He looked around the room and saw a short, squat man sitting beside a short, squat woman on cane chairs. They had been waiting to see Grubel, but now they were watching Harvey with great interest.

"Don't let them bother you," said Grubel. 'They're only a couple acrobats... So fly," he said, a trifle impatiently.

Harvey took off his jacket and shirt and went to one end of the rehearsal room. He spread his wings to their full magnificence and began to run. Trying hard to synchronize wings and legs, he was almost to the opposite end of the room before he became airborne. He wheeled heavily to avoid crashing into the mirrored wall.

"Not much of a start," said Grubel. "What else can you do?"

"I don't know."

"How about a loop the loop?"

Harvey considered the idea. "You know what?"

"No. What?"

"I think I've got a touch of motion sickness up here."

"Oh, great. If you can't think what else to do, come on down."

Harvey brought his feet down to a landing position. He was only doing about ten miles an hour, but the momentum made him gallop into a closed door. He folded his wings and turned around sheepishly.

"That was lousy," said Grubel, opening the door against which Harvey had landed. "Come back when you got something we can use."

"Like what," cried Harvey.

Grubel stopped with his hand on the knob. "I sell acts. I don't create them."

Harvey noted the acrobatic team nodding with great emphasis. "I'll go home and see what I can whip up."

"There's always the sideshows. Lotsa luck."

"Thanks for the interview" said Harvey.

"Don't mention it." Grubel closed the door on Harvey and the acrobats, then opened just wide enough to say: "Sorry, Lombinos. I don't have a thing for you."

They grunted politely and left. Harvey put on his shirt and jacket and took the elevator in an abstracted way. He had not a notion in his head of how to put an act

together.

Turning the key in his lock, Harvey Leeds felt a touch on his elbow. He looked behind him. A woman and a man, both of them short and squat, stood there, grunting politely.

"We follow you home," explained Mr. Lombino.

"You very easy to follow," apologized Mrs. Lombino.

"We want to talk to you about your act."

"That's nice of you," said Harvey. "Come on in."

When they had uncomfortably seated themselves, Mr. Lombino said: "We follow you because you mean a million dollars to us."

"I do?" said Harvey, leaning against a wall. "How? You want to manage me?"

"Unfortunately, no. We are the Great Lombinos – acrobats of the very best – but work we can't find."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I'm in that fix myself."

"Who needs acrobats? Nobody. But a team with wings–"

"A team?" asked Harvey, puzzled.

"You can't do an act. You're built all wrong."

"He mean for acrobatics," said Mrs. Lombino apologetically.

Mr. Lombino grunted politely. "For acrobatics, sure. For the women–" He made a little seated bow. "How much exercise do you do a day?"

"Not as a regular thing," confessed Harvey.

"There, you see?" Mr. Lombino sat back in triumph. "My wife and me, we work out every day, all day long, stay in condition and add new tricks to our already very good act. Could you?"

"I could try. I have to."

"It take maybe years to get you in condition. Then you first start working up an act. With us, we could start right away."

Harvey frowned. "I'm sorry, I got lost somewhere."

"Simple. With wings, we could make a fortune, and you could get a quarter – no, half – of everything we make."

"Of course half," said Mrs. Lombino, grunting emphatically.

"How do we do that?" asked Harvey.

"Tell us where you get the wings grafted on."

"Grafted on?" repeated Harvey in amazement. "They weren't grafted on. They grew."

The Great Lombinos stopped grunting. "We are very serious," said Mr. Lombino. "Please don't make jokes with us."

"I am serious. They just grew."

"So? How?"

Harvey told them. They exchanged quick glances.

Mr. Lombino took out a pistol. "We not just serious. We desperate. If you want keep the secret to yourself, I use this."

"Listen!" cried Harvey. "These wings have been nothing but trouble to me. Aerodynamically, I am even more ridiculous than the bumblebee. They made me lose my job. They cost me the girl I love. They don't let me sit down and I have to sleep in a harness, like an injured horse. And the way people stare at me – Grubel is right – I'm just a freak for the sideshows! Damn these wings!"

The wings fell to the floor.

Harvey looked down at them at first in horror and then with relief. "Sometimes it pays to lose your temper," he said, "and it is about time I lost mine. And," he added, reflectively, "something else of mine, too..."

Herding the crestfallen Lombinos out, he quickly dialed a phone number. "Hello, Liz?" be asked, grinning, "Liz, listen–"

THE TRANSMOGRIFICATION OF WAMBA'S REVENGE

I.

As I sit here, writing this, in a deluxe suite of the famous but resounding Waldorf-Astoria, I can look out the fourth-floor window and see the people below resembling the scurrying warrior ants of my native Africa. It was a Monday because the other married women were down at the river, beating their laundry on flat rocks, when Mr. Lundeen, the local White Hunter, came into our compound with a two-truck safari.

"What cheer, Wamba?" he said to me in pidgin Pigmy. "Why you not at river wash clothes?"

I nodded hello, ignoring his, deliberate insult. He knew perfectly well that I spoke English, having graduated from Bennington College for Women, and that as daughter

of the Super Chief of All the Pigmies and No. 1 Wife of the Head Witch Doctor, I was exempt from menial tasks.

"Me worry on you, Wamba," he continued with his atrocious accent and the vocabulary of a retarded three-year-old, while climbing out of his Land Rover. "Me think you grow one or two inch since last time."

Oh, he was an expert needler! And he touched me at my proudest spot. The women of all our tribes didn't envy me my status, which they and I had grown up with, but there wasn't one of them that wouldn't maim herself to be my height – a good three inches shorter than any other full-grown Pigmy adult! It was difficult, but I kept silent. The tribe's whole cash crop came from Lundeen's safaris, and I mustn't jeopardize it, no matter what.

My father, the Super Chief, came out of the council hut, followed by my husband, the Head Witch Doctor, just as an oldish young man clambered down from the other vehicle and handed out a woman in jodhpurs.

"Welcome! Welcome!" cried my father in English I had taught him with no little pain; he was a terrible linguist. "Great honor! Very great! Welcome!"

My husband, the Head Witch Doctor, stood waiting for the introductions, and Lundeen obliged, using all the appropriate titles, including mine. The oldish young man was a Professor Todd, and the woman in jodhpurs was his wife. We shook hands all around, ours being small and dry, theirs being large and moist.

"You come to hunt?" asked my father politely, using up the last of his English.

"In a way," said the Professor. "You've heard of penicillin, quinine, digitalis?"

"Yes," said my husband. "We use them all the time."

"Really?" Mrs. Todd said disinterestedly. "No masks or dances to drive away evil spirits?"

My husband's eyes did not waver an inch. "Of course. Faith is part of the healing process."

"Well," the Professor said briskly, "I am here to look for more such species – in the soil, the barks, the berries, leaves – everything. I have a laboratory on wheels, and I do hope you people will help me in my search."

"What did he say?" the Super Chief asked. I translated and he said, "What's in it for us?"

"Honor," said the Witch Doctor, and, "Whatever squeezes through my fingers," said Lundeen, both in Pigmy. Then, in pseudo-British/English, Lundeen said, "I say, Professor, why don't you show our royal hosts your laboratory while I show Mrs. Todd the compound?"

"Splendid," said Prof. Todd. "This way, please."

I followed the three men, but kept looking back over my shoulder. Just as I expected, the White Hunter was charming the Professor's wife, a scene I had witnessed every time there was a giddy female in a safari. This time, however, he was bold to the point of contempt, a fact that was not lost on the Professor, who stopped at the steps of the traveling laboratory and looked after the pair. She was holding Lundeen's upper arm in both her hands and smiling dizzily up at him. I saw pain cross the Professor's face before he turned and ushered us into the air-conditioned laboratory.

"Bless me!" said my husband in awe, while my father whistled. As for myself, I had seen labs of one sort or another, but nothing so marvelously compact and complete as this.

I said so, and Prof. Todd's face lit up with pride. "Thank you," he said. "Mr. Lundeen told me of your American education, Princess, and your work, Doctor, at the hospital in Mbuti, and he assured me that you both would be invaluable to our mission."

"We are yours to command," quoted the Head Witch Doctor.

"Good, good. Then you can help me organize your people in to work parties, each group to collect whatever it's assigned to – ferns, soils, barks, and so forth. And you, Princess, will be my lab assistant."

"And you'll need a cleaning woman twice a week," I said.

"No, no," said the Professor quickly. "Mr. Lundeen wouldn't trust anyone but you to keep things clean and orderly," he exclaimed and rubbed hands. "We're practically in business right now!"

"Yes," said my husband, the Head Witch Doctor. "In one way or another, Mr. Lundeen always gives us the business."

My father had been following all this with great difficulty. Now he asked me what the arrangements were. I told him.

"You mean that you, the Princess, are to be a housemaid?" he all but roared in Pigmy. "I forbid it!"

"What seems to be the difficulty?" asked Prof. Todd, bewildered.

"He's a stickler for protocols I answered. "We'll straighten it out with Mr. Lundeen."

"Good, good. We don't want any hurt feelings. Now, Doctor, I'll need to know how many able-bodied people you have, so we can set up work parties..."

Looking back over what I have written, I feel terribly unlike a professional writer. I haven't, for example, told you all I knew about the White Hunter – that he came from

Ohio, but wouldn't wear, drive or talk anything not British; his owning a Land Rover instead of a jeep was complete characteristic. You mustn't think he was typical of White Hunters. He wasn't typical of anything but a greedy, selfish, overbearing opportunist, a phony who loved to humiliate us because we couldn't hit back. And we couldn't hit back because no other White Hunter bothered with us. They used to, but that was before Lundeen arrived.

I don't know what to add about Prof. Todd. He was the average dedicated scientist who, for no discernible reason, happened to be married to a vain, stupid woman, younger than himself.

I see that I've given Mrs. Todd only one line of dialogue, when, in fact, she was anything but inarticulate, in a nasty, bored sort of way – except, I soon discovered, when she was alone with an admirer. Or thought they were alone. I made a point of watching her and Lundeen – for my people's sake, of course. I wanted them to be paid for their work and, come to think of it, mine too – because so much depended on it.

Which brings me to our tribal setup. It was commonly known that we Pigmies were primitive nomads, but I've never encountered anyone who knew that the central tribe, ours, was not. The satellite tribes all visited us in turn, for whatever meager trading we could do, but mainly for treatment of their and our sick and aged. The White Hunter was essential to this because he brought us medicines, for which he extorted every last penny he allowed us to make from his safaris.

II.

"Things are going just beautifully, Princess!" Prof. Todd said enthusiastically three days later. "The work parties would have overwhelmed me if not for your help with the tagging and classifying. I've never seen anyone pick up details as fast as you unless it's your husband!"

A lot he knew! Between that fathead Lundeen and that insipid idiot Mrs. Todd, the tribe was on the verge of mutiny, medicines or no medicines. With her hanging adoringly onto his arm, he would needle the work parties in his execrable Pigmy so that they had either to strangle him or work off their anger on their jobs. Then, when Prof. Todd came up, he could only compliment Lundeen for their zeal. (The work parties were organized into squads, with each squad searching for a different thing, like soil samples, fungi, roots, bemoes and so on. And they worked in each other's footsteps, going away from the compound, between two lines of rope which my father and husband laid out differently each day.)

After leaving the parties to the Head Witch Doctor and the Super Chief, the two would come to the lab and work me over. They knew none of us could complain to the Professor, so we were safe targets. Lundeen's favorite stunt was to ask me to wipe things far over my head, which I had to reach by standing on a lab stool, and making me clean out the animal cages. Todd didn't know what was going on,

because the orders were in Pigmy. Then Mrs. Todd would say, "Princess, darling, would it be too much trouble to light my cigarette?" And I would. And she'd blow smoke in my face – when Todd's back was turned.

I had never felt such hatred before! Nor could I vent it on anyone or anything; my husband and father had their own troubles, one treating the rebellious with tranquilizers and the other with orders to obey instructions and ignore the needling.

All this was going through my mind when I saw Prof. Todd peering at me at eye-level. "I've been driving you too hard," he said. "You look tired."

Tired? I was exhausted, working all day and staying up all night to keep an eye on Lundeen and Mrs. Todd. And I hadn't gotten anything more incriminating on my little battery-powered tape recorder than some slurping noises that I knew were kisses, but that wouldn't convince anyone else. Neither of the pair was brainy enough to be so circumspect. There had to be some reason for each staying in his own guest hut all night. I thought I knew what it was, so I let my shoulders and face slump and mumbled something about duty and honor.

"I know how you feel; I feel the same way about saving lives." Prof. Todd said, leading me firmly out of the laboratory. "But one has one's duty to oneself too, you know. I want you to take the day off and sleep!"

"Yes, Professor," I said obediently. "I could sleep for days."

"Then take tomorrow off as well," he said, taking me to my hut, and he wouldn't leave until I pretended to doze off. "Night-night, sleep tight," he whispered, leaving on tippy toes.

Take my word for it, it was almost more than I could do not to fall asleep. But I had to stay awake! What a nice guy, I thought – how could he have stayed married to this queen of the stag line? Did she, to quote Mad Ave, know where the body was buried? I didn't know, but I intended to find out.

When I was sure Prof. Todd was inside his lab and unlikely to look outside, I slipped out with my tape recorder and searched for the miscreants. As I suspected, they were nowhere in the compound. The Land Rover also was gone.

I followed the freshest tire tracks out of the compound. I was worried for the moment about being seen by the work parties, but the tracks led off in the opposite direction.

Settling down to what was, for a Pigmy, and a woman at that, and a woman three inches shorter than any other adult Pigmy to boot, a steady lope, I kept listening for the Land Rover and watching the ground for tracks leading off the rutted jungle road. Put yourself in my place, wouldn't you expect them to drive miles away and get off the trail so they wouldn't be surprised by a passerby?

Au contraire, that was expecting too much of these nasty specimens, for I came

upon the vehicle as I rounded a bend barely 15 minutes from home.

I slipped up on its blind side, hung my microphone on a tarpaulin rope and paid out wire as I backed off the road into the jungle. Screened by a bush, I could hear very clearly what was going on as I switched on the machine.

"Now do you believe me, you mad, impetuous boy?" said Mrs. Todd a little breathlessly. "I told you I love you. How many ways are there of convincing you?"

"You could tell me why you married him in the first place," Lundeen said in a sullen voice.

"Why, it's obvious, sweetheart. Everybody expects him to win the Nobel Prize."

"So that's why you came along on this expedition!"

"Came along? I took him away from teaching at the University, bought him the best portable lab money could buy, financed the whole safari–"

"WHAT?" cried Lundeen.

"You mean you didn't know I'm filthy rich?" she said. "You loved me for myself alone?"

I could practically hear the White Hunter's excuse for a brain going into reverse. Knowing him from many safaris, I could tell he had been about to say through la stiff upper lip that he'd marry her in a minute if not for his (fictitious) wife and tots at home, who needed him and the little money he brought in from his safaris.

"Of course I didn't know," he said, his voice sounding choked. "But what difference would it have made? Me a lowly–"

"Don't say it!" she cried. "You're a fine, handsome, intelligent man, and I can't stand another day with that creep, even if he does win the Nobel Prize!"

"Then let's leave him here–"

"–Without his laboratory, so he can't follow us–"

"–But would you consent to be my – my wife?"

"Dearest," she said, "I would. And you won't have to be a White Hunter unless you want to be."

"Not without you," he vowed piously. I believed him. He wouldn't let all that money go unguarded.

Well, so much for evidence. I had all I needed. So I stowed away the microphone and wire and headed back to the compound. They came in an hour later and made for Lundeen's hut. I waited till they started packing his campaign chest, then went into the hut with two glasses, a bottle of Scotch and a soda bottle on a tray.

"Dash it all, Princess, you're full of surprises!" Lundeen exclaimed. "I had sort of been looking forward to our daily snit about bringing us drinks."

"One must do what one must do," I said meekly.

"I don't leave you much choice, do I?" he boomed.

"None at all."

"Darling, you're so masterful," Mrs. Todd was saying as I left.

I went back to my hut and took out the treasure chest I kept under my bunk. My Barbie and Ken doll clothing were at the top. I took them out and then gathered all the rags I could find and returned to Lundeen's hut. It was the sickest night I had ever spent.

III.

Prof. Todd looked very upset when I came into the lab the next morning, toting a bag and my tape recorder. He was wearing a surgical mask for some reason – to avoid contaminating the white rats he was trying to work on, I suppose.

"Princess!" he cried. "My wife is gone!"

"Real gone," I said with a grin. "And that's not just her opinion. It's Lundeen's, too."

"You think–" he started to say, but couldn't continue.

I pushed aside the chemistry equipment on his table and upended my bag. Two miniature figures in little green smocks tumbled out amid the four white rats.

Todd stared as the figures jumped to their feet and, clinging to each other, looked wildly around them.

"That's Lundeen and my wife!" he gasped. "What have you done to them?"

"I can't tell you that," I said. "But I want you to listen to something so you'll know that what I've done is justified." And I played back the love scene I had recorded the day before.

"So that's why she married me," he said brokenly. "I always wondered." He bent down to the little figures. "You didn't have to leave me stranded," he cried out to Mrs. Todd, who clapped her hands over her ears. "I love you enough to give you a divorce."

Taking off his surgical mask, he turned to me. "You know that what you've done is impossible, don't you? Nothing can shrink five- or six-foot people to five or six inches!"

I backed away from him. "But that's not what's important!" I said in alarm. "Not only were they planning to leave you stranded, they were going to leave the tribe

unpaid!"

Todd lost his mad glare. "No question of it, they're a matched set of stinkers," he said. "But what have you done? How does it work? You've got to tell me all about it!"

"I can't. It's so potent a taboo that nobody but the chiefs and witch doctors know about it. I myself learned about it only by accident."

The tiny people had been making shrill noises. Now Lundeen pushed Mrs. Todd aside and piped, "Todd, listen to me!"

"What is it?" Todd asked, bending down to hear the squeaky voice.

"The secret is in the Scotch she gave us yesterday. I can't tell you what suffering we went through last night, shrinking down to this size. Get to that bottle before she does! It's in my hut!"

I was out of the lab door and running for Lundeen's hut as fast as I could go. Halfway there, Todd passed me. It was the only time in my life that I ever wished I were not so small, for my strides were five to his one. And I cursed myself for stupidly not throwing the bottle into a fire.

When he reached the hut, I stopped and went back to the lab. The tiny couple in tiny voices pleaded for an antidote as I climbed onto a stool and waited for Todd to come back, which he did a few minutes later, the bottle in his hand and a hard look on his face.

There was silence as he measured out the Scotch in droppers and fed different amounts of it to the four white rats. I turned away. Until last night, I had never seen anyone or anything shrink. It was a hideous thing. I had hoped never to see it again.

"All right, Princess, you can look now," the Professor said in a sick voice.

I turned. The rats were four different sizes, the littlest being very little indeed. Prof. Todd was cleaning up the last evidence of the shrinking process as I cleaned up after Lundeen and Mrs. Todd, in such a fright over leaving traces that I had overlooked the Scotch.

"Is this how Pigmies get small?" he asked me.

"No," I said shakily. "We breed true and are immune to what I put in the bottle."

"Then what is it for?"

"Babies of mixed parentage, Pigmy and outsider. And that is all I know about it!"

"Not even the dosages?" he demanded.

"Not even that," I said.

He filled the eyedroppers again and fed the mixture to the rats, while I looked away. When the feeding and shrinking had stopped, he said, "It stabilizes at one-tenth normal size. And you Pigmies are immune to it. Which means–" He stared unbelievingly. "That's not possible!"

"Why not?" I said, falling back until he grabbed my shoulders. "I forget which Man it was Peking Man or Java Man or something."

"But he was only nine feet tall!"

"What if he wasn't Peking Man at all, but Peking Baby?" I said.

He dropped his hands and sat down heavily. "Incredible," he said. "Absolutely incredible." He looked at me. "Princess, I've got to have a decent amount of whatever it is to work on."

"No!" I said. "No!"

"If you don't get it for me," he said, "I'll invite your husband and father in to see what you've done to these two!"

"Don't – please!" I begged. "I'll get you some. But you've got to help me with an alibi, so they don't get suspicious."

"It's a deal," he said.

"What about us?" shrilled Lundeen. "You can't leave us like this!"

Todd grinned a wicked grin. "Would you care to bet on that?"

"I'll do anything you say!" Mrs. Todd piped. "I'll give you all my money – anything–"

"Don't bother," Todd said. "I intend to have incontestable proof of your deaths. So I get your money anyhow, without you to spoil it."

He put them, kicking and trying to bite, into a cage and covered it. As an afterthought, he filled the feeder of the cage with a slice of bread and some cold cuts and water.

"Have fun, kiddies," he said merrily, and we went out and he carefully locked the door.

While the Professor stood guard, I pulled out a very old, very sturdy trunk from under my husband's bunk, opened it and scraped off as much moss as I dared from the five boulders in it, into a test tube Prof. Todd had given me. I closed the trunk and pushed it back under the bunk.

"Good, good," he said as I handed him the stoppered tube. "Now to furnish us with an alibi. Do you know any good places to lose a Land Rover?"

"There is a dandy quicksand pit not far away," I said, catching some of his excitement.

We got into the Land Rover, and I guided him to the spot. Pushing from the rear, we shoved the vehicle into the pit. When it vanished, we brushed away our footprints and went back to the lab.

I told him along the way what little I knew of the moss – that it was native only to this part of the world, that it had been totally destroyed by our ancestors, except on the five stones, after the Pigmy elephant problem, that there was no antidote, and that not the moss but selective breeding accounted for the size I was so proud of being.

That evening, we asked people if they had seen Lundeen and Mrs. Todd, who had never been this late before. As the hours passed, everyone got a little edgy, watching the gate of the compound.

At last the Professor looked at his watch and said, "No sense staying up. They must have driven further than they realized and made camp."

So we went to bed.

Around noon the next day, Todd let himself be worked up over their disappearance and consented to lead one of their search parties. My husband, the Head Witch Doctor, and my father, the Super Chief, led the other two. Naturally, I went with my husband, partly because that's a No. 1 wife's place, but mostly because I wanted him to make the discovery himself which he did with only five or six little nudges from me. The drummer sent out the message and soon the other two parties joined ours.

"A great, great pity," said my father with real feeling, looking down sadly at the quicksand pit. "Now how will we get another White Hunter to bring safaris to us?"

"Always the practical man," my husband said admiringly. "Yes, this could be the end of tribal civilization as we know it, anyway."

Todd asked me what the unseemingly grief was about, and I told him. Doing his best to look bereaved, he held up his hands for silence.

"My friends – and in the short time I have known you, you have become friends in need and in deed – I came here in search of a new wonder drug and I think perhaps I have found it," he said, with me translating as he went. "In return for the testimony of your leaders so I can inherit my late wife's moneys I shall finance the construction of a vast compound and enough huts to house all your tribes at one time!"

There was a great cheer, led by the Head Witch Doctor and the Super Chief.

"Not only that," the Professor continued, "there must be room in the compound for one hundred in guest huts, a tremendous meeting hut and a large cooking-and-eating hut, plus classroom, huts and an airfield. All this must be accomplished within less than one month. Damn the expense – full speed ahead!"

The crowd cheered again and headed homewards talking and gesticulating animatedly among themselves.

"It is very nice to become prosperous," my father said in Pigmy. "But what does he want to spend all this money for?"

"You are with him all day, every day," my husband said to me. "It would be discourteous to ask outright, but has he given you no idea?"

"None at all," I confessed.

It was true. Whatever Prof. Todd had dreamed up, he hadn't discussed or even hinted at it till now, nor could I understand it any more than they did. I promised to do everything possible, short of asking, to find out what he had in mind.

Early the next morning, we drove to Mbuti in the mobile laboratory: the Professor, the Head Witch Doctor and the Super Chief in the front seat and me in the lab, which was kept locked at all times. Mrs. Todd and Lundeen hung onto the bars of their cage as the lab bounced and lurched in and out of the ruts of the jungle road. They alternately tried to bribe and threaten me. I looked at them without listening, doing my best to figure out what Todd meant to do.

I hadn't succeeded when we reached town, nor when we each deposed as to the fates of the unlucky pair, nor when the Professor withdrew a very large amount of money and gave part of it to my father and husband to buy whatever supplies were needed, as well as a used truck and jeep that he presented to the tribe.

While the men were shopping, he and I went to the cable office, where he sent off a number of telegrams to Dr. this and Prof. that in various countries, on both sides of the Iron and Bamboo Curtains. I had no trouble getting to see what he had composed as he went through a little black book for the addresses. He couldn't have been less secretive about his invitation to "Spend Your Vacation in Glamorous, Unspoiled Mbuti! Live for Two Madcap Weeks Amid the Unchanging Pigmies of Still-Dark Africa!" And so forth.

He smiled down at me as I frowned over the inscrutable telegram.

"Puzzle you?" he asked. "It shouldn't. This is why I want all the tribes together and the huge compound and huts to house them, because we are going to have company from all over the world. Not a great many by resort standards, but enough to make room for in the jungle."

I couldn't ask, of course, but I could – and did – look worried.

"Are you thinking that I'll betray your secret, Princess?" I nodded. "I give you my word," he said, "that I shall not be the one to do so."

I brightened visibly, and when the other two men joined us, I told them about the cablegrams.

"To study us, no doubt," said the Super Chief.

"A symposium, perhaps," said the Head Witch Doctor.

"Whatever it is," I said, "it'll be in practically the only place on Earth that isn't preparing for war. Anyhow, we will know very soon. The cables gave March 22nd as the opening date."

"When is that?" asked my husband.

"I asked at the cable office. Three weeks from now."

"Then we must really hurry," said my father.

And hurry we did as each tribe reported in and went to work on its portion of the new compound and the various huts. I, meanwhile, assisted Todd in the lab, but without understanding what he was calling this meeting for.

Could it be the strange moss? Then why had he carelessly emptied the test tube of it into an enameled tray kind of thing and shoved it under the lab's night light, and seem to have forgotten it? Instead, he was taking blood samples from many of us – and even with great difficulty, a tiny amount from Lundeen and Mrs. Todd. These he made plates of, and to my unskilled eyes they looked like any other blood specimens. Which goes to show how much Bio I had absorbed at Bennington!

IV.

With March 22nd came bush planes to the landing field that had been completed only the night before. They discharged their passengers and took off to make room for more incoming bush planes. Prof. Todd shook hands with each passenger; they waved hello to each other and then were taken, along with their luggage, to the guest huts. Every hut had a sign listing the nationality of its occupants or, for the large ones, its function.

Oh, I forgot to mention that Todd had had a generator truck come in and string electrical cables to all the huts and to light the streets. The guests accepted it as normal, but our tribes were amazed and delighted.

"I say, Princess," said Lundeen in one of his rare polite moments, "the joint seems to be jumping. Is it because of us?"

"Not at all," I gloated. "The Professor gave me his word that he wouldn't betray my awful revenge."

"Awful is the word," said Mrs. Todd. "How could you do such a thing?"

"I didn't know," I said guiltily. "I knew it would shrink you somewhat, but I never suspected–"

"Never mind what you never suspected," said Lundeen, rattling the door of their

cage. "Get us out of here. It's not decent to lock up two human beings like a couple of canaries!"

"It's better than you deserve!" I snapped back, pulling the cover down over the cage to shut out their accusing voices.

Prof. Todd unlocked the door and came into the lab, locking the door again before sitting on a stool in the flow of the air conditioner. "This is the only tolerable place in the compound," he said, fanning himself. "Wish I'd had time to air-condition the huts."

"Please, Professor!" said Lundeen's muffled voice. "Take the cover off. We'll behave."

Todd ignored him, saying, "Every last person I sent a cablegram to is here! Not a single absentee!"

"That's wonderful," I said. "And you all seem to know one another."

He gave me a wicked grin. "You'd love to know what's going on, wouldn't you. But you can't ask because that would be rude. Right?"

I admitted it.

"Well," he said, "you and the other leaders of your tribes are invited to the meeting hut tonight, and you'll learn about what you and I have been doing for the past few weeks."

"But what about us?" shrilled Mrs. Todd under the cover.

"What about you?" mocked Prof. Todd. "Seems to me that your bodies just about fit your souls!"

However, it was an indication of his own great soul that he uncovered their cage and left the light on before locking the laboratory. Can you imagine what those two would have done if the situation were reversed? So could I. I said so.

"Princess," he said thoughtfully, "if a person, a family, a tribe or a nation imitates an enemy's cruelty or oppression, there would be nothing to distinguish one from the other. The more morality you give up, the more animal you become, the less you deserve to win an argument or a war."

"Even temporarily?" I asked. "Just long enough to win?"

"No! Before, during and after the duration – however long it takes – however necessary it seems!" He unclenched his fists and smiled crookedly. "Sorry. It's the one subject I get violent on. See you in the meeting hut."

Shaken by his vehemence, I watched him stride off to his own hut, a young man aged before his time by clinging to ideals all but gone in a world heading for a final

smashup.

I found my husband and the Super Chief in our hut, listening to the news on my portable radio while waiting supper for me. I sat down, and the No. 2 and No. 3 wives served us a really good warthog stew. I complimented them, and they giggled a thank you. To me, then, it was just an average cozy family scene, with no hint of the incredible turmoil so short a time away. I hope they all know how much I miss them, wherever they are.

Depressed as we always were by the world's headlong rush toward destruction, the Head Witch Doctor turned off the radio and asked whether I knew anything more than I had the day before.

"Afraid not," I said. "But the Professor assured me we would learn all about it tonight."

"Just more blood samples?" he said. I nodded. "I asked the Chest and Belly Witch Doctors what it could mean. They told me they didn't know, but judging from the attendance here, with scientists from everywhere on Earth, it must be as important a discovery as antibiotics."

"I hope you can translate it into Pigmy that I can understand," said the Super Chief.

"I'll do my best," I promised, "but science was never my best subject."

"I just hope I can stay awake," said the Head Witch Doctor wearily. "I've got a six-month backlog of mental cases since the other tribes came."

"If I can help with the laying on of hands, call on me," offered the Super Chief.

"Thanks. I'll keep that in mind. Wait! There's a young girl who–"

I left them talking shop and wandered around the compound just as the lights came on. Huge as it was, it seemed more crowded even than New York or Boston, each hut spilling adults and children of all ages into the street, and everywhere under foot ran the multitudes of dogs that had come along as part of each family. Naturally, I had to say hello every step of the way, so I was glad to join the crowd entering the meeting hut.

By Pigmy standards, the hut was as enormous as Yankee Stadium. There were wooden benches that the Professor had ordered built spaced evenly from the entrance to the movie screen at the extreme end, leaving only enough room for the aisles, which right now were jammed with men and women from all over, clustered in loud, gesticulating groups. They mostly spoke English, though I did hear some French and Russian.

"Order, please! Order!" said the voice of Prof. Todd over the loudspeakers mounted on the poles holding up the roof. "Everyone please be seated!"

The hubbub died as the people took their seats, including us Pigmies, and I saw Todd in the center aisle with a movie projector.

"This had better be good!" someone said very loudly.

"That," Todd said into his microphone, "is for posterity to judge. But I think my using the secret assembly call will be justified."

He dimmed the house lights and turned on the projector. The screen lit up with vividly colored swimming shapes that I recognized as bacteria and blood cells. This, of course, was what the Professor and I had been filming with microscope and movie camera. Into this swarming colony came a giant blunt object a pipette – and suddenly the bacteria began shrinking. The crowd murmured excitedly.

"That's our secret ingredient!" the Head Witch Doctor said to me through his teeth. "How did he get hold of it?"

"The work parties?" I suggested, innocently.

He nodded and subsided as the Professor explained that this substance, unknown anywhere else in the world, was shrinking one deadly lyacillus after another right before their eyes.

"Why doesn't it shrink the blood cells?" someone called out.

"That," Prof. Todd evaded, "needs more study. After all, I have been here only a few weeks."

"What about viruses?" somebody else inquired.

He was intimating that they too were undoubtedly shrunken, but that his equipment had necessarily been limited in portability, while I, translating all this to the Super Chief with one part of my mind, was using the other part to figure out another question: why hadn't the blood cells also contracted?

The answer came to me so suddenly that I almost jumped up and blurted it out: the blood was from us Pigmies and Lundeen and Mrs. Todd only! Which led to still another question: how would he keep the audience from testing it on their own blood? I didn't know, but my respect for him had grown even greater; I was sure he had it all worked out in his mind.

When the film ended, the scientists sat stunned. One man finally stood up and said, "If ever I have seen a discovery worthy of the Nobel Prize, this is it!"

Everybody applauded. Prof. Todd looked as if he wished he had a pebble to kick, so he could say, "Aw, shucks, fellas–" They crowded around him, noisier than before the show, while my people left the meeting hut in cold silence.

I pretended to have some reason for going to the laboratory, but my husband took my wrist in his hand and led me politely but firmly to our hut. "We have some

matters that need to be taken care of," he said, and the chiefs and witch doctors of the tribes nodded grimly.

He pulled the old trunk from beneath his bunk and opened it. The five rocks looked exactly as they always had. And why not? I had exposed the moss to light until the little scratches I had made grew back again. But I needn't have bothered, I discovered, for he dragged it into the street, filled it with firewood and threw a blazing torch into it.

"There," he said. "Wherever the professor got his sample no longer matters. It is a sheer miracle that it hadn't been discovered long ago." He turned toward me. "Princess," he said, "you must find and destroy his specimen!"

"Right!" a chief said. "If it is used by everyone, being a Pigmy won't be the great honor it is today!"

"Maybe they won't want the honor," I said diplomatically.

"Not want it?" the Super Chief repeated in outraged amazement. "Have you ever heard such nonsense?"

"Never!" said the Head Witch Doctor, and even I had to join the nodding; I hadn't believed my suggestion for an instant. He pointed in the general direction of the lab and said, "Go! Do your duty!"

I left quickly, as a good little Pigmy wife should, and a few minutes later was at the lab, ringing the doorbell. The Professor peeked at me through the peephole and let me in, pointing to the other stool. I climbed up it as he raised the volume of his radio-looking thing, which he had been listening to.

"This will give you a kick, Princess!" he said with that typical crooked grin. "Recognize anybody's voice?"

I had been looking intently at the enameled tray he had dumped the test tube into and put up near the night light and wondering how I could get up there without his noticing. It was impossible with him present. I would have to find an excuse for staying after he left and hope he would believe it.

I unfrowned and cocked my head toward the radio, pretending to listen – and almost fell off the stool, for, hearing the squeaky little voices of Lundeen and Mrs. Todd, I glanced up and saw their cage with its door open and them gone!

"How – how – " I stammered.

"By tying tag strings together and getting through the air-conditioning duct," he said happily.

"You don't look as if you cared," I said.

"Oh, but I do!" he exclaimed. "Listen! They're at the English hut."

"Naturally," I said. "Where else would that silly Anglophile go?"

A genuine British voice could now be heard saying, "It isn't as if we doubted your word, old boy, but how do we know you weren't always this size and that this perfectly ordinary-looking moss you've brought us isn't perfectly ordinary?"

Lundeen's very high, very excited and very fake British voice said, "Dash it all, try it on yourselves!"

"On ourselves?" echoed another speaker. "What if it's poisonous or something?"

"Absolutely," the first man agreed. There was silence, broken by the barking of the ubiquitous dogs outside. "I've got it!" he said. "Why not try it on one of these cursed mongrels?"

"Capital idea!" "Excellent suggestion!" and other compliments led to someone going out into the street and returning shortly with a yapping mutt.

"How do we feed it to him?" someone asked. "In Scotch, like you?"

"I don't think dogs drink.

"Scotch," Lundeen said. "Why not water?"

"Why not indeed?" said the first man. There was a splashing sound followed by a mixing sound, and he said, "Here you are, Bowser! Drink it down like a good fellow," which was succeeded by a lapping sound, then silence.

"Great Scott!" one of the men cried in horror, and the rest made a sort of suppressed retching sound.

"You see? You see?" Lundeen and Mrs. Todd kept shrilling.

When it was all over, the first man asked, "Did anyone think of measuring the poor beast before and after?"

"No, but I'd say he's no more than one-tenth his original size," a man answered.

The others agreed.

"Well," the first one said briskly, "let's get down to cold facts, shall we? The stuff works; I think we're all convinced of that. That being so, the next question is: have you brought us enough to serve as a starter set?"

"Plenty!" shrilled Lundeen. "Todd dumped the same amount into a tray and kept it under a light – and now the tray is almost overflowing!"

I looked up at the tray and down at Prof. Todd, who was listening with a great beatific smile on his face. So that was why he had emptied the test tube with such seeming indifference.

With equal seeming indifference, I moved my stool under the light. He didn't notice. I took a beaker of some acid and warily stood on the stool. His back was to me when I poured the acid into the tray. I climbed down and put the beaker back just as he turned off the radio and swung around to face me.

"Let's get out of here, Princess," he said, grinning. "Those two have to get back in again without suspecting we know what they've done."

Of course, I assented readily. Half of my job was done. The only problem remaining was: how could I get rid of the last of the moss in the British guest hut?

Todd and I said good night, and he made for his hut while I went toward the British one. Crouching in its shadow, I waited until after the light was doused. When I was sure they were all asleep, I began edging to the door. I heard a faint noise and stopped dead. A man in pajamas came stealing out. He darted from hut to hut, pausing at each one to look about before going on to the next. He slipped into the seventh hut, and in a moment the light went on.

I sneaked up to the hut and listened – in its shadow, naturally.

"–Mean by waking us up?" a heavy Slavic voice was demanding.

"I had to," a British voice said urgently. "It's of the utmost importance. Now please listen attentively. I may not have time to repeat." And he told them all about Lundeen, Mrs. Todd, the moss and the dog.

When he finished, someone laughed. As if at a signal, the others began laughing, too.

"Please! Please!" the British voice said. "If you don't believe me, try it on a dog. But do it quickly, before I'm missed!"

"It is your story," another Slavic voice said. "You get the dog."

I retreated behind the hut as the man in pajamas came out and looked up and down the street. "Just my luck," he muttered bitterly, "they're all asleep. Here, Spot! Here, Prince, Fido, Rags!" And he snapped his fingers until a dog a few huts away came ambling up with its tail wagging drowsily.

He took it inside. For the next space of time I was glad again that I only had to hear the process instead of seeing it.

"So," the first Slavic voice said stolidly. "It is like you say. The dog is maybe a tenth of its former size. So?"

"What good is that?" another said. "Who would want such little dogs?"

"For this you expect to get paid?" the leader asked.

"Damn, damn and double damn!" the Englishman exploded in a furious whisper. "Do you think I'm a traitor? I brought you some of this stuff because it might have

military importance. Don't ask me how – I'm only a scientist. But if it does, I don't want one half of the world using it on the other half – and that means your half as well as mine!"

"Da, we have such soft-headed people among us, too," said the leader. "But it could be. It could be..."

"Well, you work it out yourselves," the Englishman said. "I must get back now."

"Wait!" said the leader. "What should we do with the little dog?"

"That's your problem," said the Englishman, sprinting out the door.

So I set the hut afire, then went down to the British hut and did the same there. They were lovely fires. I stood admiring them while the men of both huts came rushing out.

"Did you save anything?" one of the Englishmen asked another.

"Just the moss and my tennis racquet," the second replied.

My heart fell. But it lifted as I followed the Englishman with the peculiar morality to the Russian hut.

"Did you save the moss?" he asked anxiously.

"Just that and my balalaika," the leader said.

I trudged worriedly home to bed. My husband, the Head Witch Doctor, opened his eyes and asked, "Have you destroyed the moss?"

"Half of it," I said with elliptical truth. I didn't dare tell him now I had two more halves to destroy.

V.

When he was gone the next morning, I took the revolver from his footlocker and put it in my pocket, then went asking for the English and Russian scientists. I was told that Dr. Perry and Prof. Kropotkin were with Todd, whom they had asked to radio for a bush plane. I ran to the lab. Todd and the two men were in the jeep, about to leave.

"Stop!" I yelled. "I have to come along!"

They waited for me. When I was aboard, Todd stepped on the gas. I looked at their luggage. Each had an overnight bag, donated, no doubt, by luckier fellow countrymen. And each overnight bag carried the moss, I was sure.

"Terribly sorry about the fire," said Todd. "Lost everything, eh?"

"Down to the last button," Dr. Perry said.

"Me, too," said Prof. Kropotkin. "But why only our two huts?"

"I can't possibly imagine," said Todd dauntingly.

I sat back, trying to work out my strategy. I could shoot Todd and perhaps one of the others, not both, before being overpowered. The jeep would smash into something – and spill the moss all over the place. No good. I had to get aboard the bush plane somehow and wait for my chance.

The plane was waiting on the airfield when we got there. Pulling up alongside it, Prof Todd shook hands with both men, put his hand in a pocket, brought it out and shook my hand. When he let go, I felt something wadded up in, my palm. I didn't have time to look as he all but pushed us into the plane.

"Have a good trip!" he sang out. "As for you, Princess Wamba, come back when you're ready!"

The pilot closed the door and came through for the fares. I opened my hand and found in it a ball of green papers. When I smoothed them out, the pilot goggled and said. "Golly, Princess, I can't change that!"

Prof. Todd had slipped me four thousand dollar bills!

I smiled nervously and promised to have one changed when we landed, so I could pay him. He said, "Never mind. Royalty rides free on my plane!"

"Thank you," I said regally.

He disappeared up front, closing the door behind him. I sat in back of the two men until we took off and leveled out. Then I got up and menaced them with the revolver.

"All right," I said, "hand over the moss – and no funny business – or you get plugged!"

Dr. Perry studied me and the gun. "What bad movie is that from?"

"C'mon, c'mon!" I ground out. "The moss – hand it over!"

"You really seem determined," Perry said thoughtfully. "But why both of us? Do you know something I don't know?"

"Yes! Somebody in your party is a traitor – gave some of the moss to the Russians. Now let's have it – or else!"

He turned to Prof. Kropotkin. "Is that true?"

"Of course," Kropotkin said with a smile. "I trust you do not expect me to reveal his name."

"Not at all, not at all," Dr. Perry said hastily. "No more than we would turn over our list to you."

I was getting exasperated with this dialogue which shut out me and my revolver. I waved it and threatened to shoot if they didn't come across.

Dr. Perry stood up and moved toward me. "My dear girl, this is preposterous. Now if you'll just give me the gun, we'll all forget the whole unpleasant incident."

"No, you don't!" I cried, panicking. I ran to the door of the cockpit, grasped it and pulled. "It's locked!"

"Did you think you were the only person who ever tried this?" Perry asked soothingly. "Now do be reasonable..."

I shut my eyes and squeezed the trigger with both hands. Nothing happened!

He took the revolver away quite easily, saying, "Every gun I've ever been personally associated with had a safety latch, you know. Sort of evens things up with idiots who didn't know it was loaded, wouldn't you say?"

I sat down with my face in my hands. "Now I'll never be able to go home again! They would abandon me in the jungle!"

"In this day and age? Never!"

Prof. Kropotkin said, putting an arm around my shoulder and holding me comfortingly against his chest.

"No, really they would," Perry told him. "I read it somewhere. Well, there's only one thing to do. I'll take her back to London with me.

"And what is wrong with me taking her to Moscow?" Kropotkin demanded.

"I don't want to go with either of you," I sobbed. "Won't you please give me the moss so I can destroy it and go home?"

"Dreadfully sorry, Your Highness," said Perry.

"Not a chance," said Kropotkin. "I would like to destroy his moss and he would like to destroy mine. But we are rational human beings, with no love for violence. So come with me!"

"No, me!" cried Perry.

I looked at them through a blur of tears. "Then I guess I'll go with you, Dr. Perry. At least I know the language. I'll come to Moscow, Prof. Kropotkin, after I finally destroy Dr. Perry's specimen."

"Fine!" exclaimed Kropotkin. "I promise you full-scale red-carpet welcome – from primitive Africa to People's Democracy!"

"That will be nothing compared with our reception!" said Perry. "You won't regret your decision, Princess!"

We were all quite friendly by the time we reached Mlarki, the nearest jet airfield. I didn't really know what to expect, but it certainly wasn't supersonic military airplanes waiting for us, one from England and the other from Russia. There was time only for a last friendly wave before Dr. Perry and I were hustled into our plane and Prof. Kropotkin into his.

As soon as we were airborne, Dr. Perry opened his overnight bag, and I was amazed to see Lundeen, Mrs. Todd and the tiny dog climb out.

"About time!" shrilled Lundeen.

"I look simply dreadful!" Mrs. Todd complained. "Couldn't you have brought my cosmetics along?"

"Plenty where we're going," Perry said. "And now, if you'll excuse me, I must catch up on my beauty rest."

He dozed right off. The tiny people and the dog all began barking at me, so I closed my eyes and ears and went to sleep.

It was just lunchtime when we landed in England. Dr. Perry put them into the overnight bag and closed it on Lundeen's yapping about carrying it carefully, and we disembarked – into a screaming, jostling mob, all pushing papers and pens at me for my autograph.

"What is this all about?" I shouted at Perry,

"We wirelessed ahead," he shouted back. "Look at the headlines."

I did. The newspapers I was being asked to autograph read:

U. K. HAILS ARRIVAL OF PRINCESS WAMBA!

So I signed everything happily, enjoying every minute of it. When I looked up for Dr. Perry, I saw him surrounded by a flying wedge of soldiers.

"Where are you going?" I shrieked in alarm.

"To be debriefed," he yelled. "I'll ring you up when you're settled in."

And he was led away just as a Rolls-Royce came onto the field, and I was ushered inside and we drove off. Two men sat in the front seat, looking very formidable, and I jumped when a voice next to me said, "Allow me to introduce myself, Your Highness. I am Lord Fairfax."

"That's nice," I said, trying to see where Dr. Perry was being taken, but he disappeared from view. I turned around to Lord Fairfax and said, "Why are he and I being separated?"

"I'm afraid I don't know," said Lord Fairfax.

"Then suppose we go back and pick him up and–"

"Oh, that would be militarily impossible!"

"What about my staying at his house?" I said nastily.

"Against protocol," he stated. "I'm sure Dr. Perry is a perfectly splendid host. But he is, after all, a commoner."

"Well, where am I staying?"

"Why, with me, to be sure. At my town house. I shall do everything possible to make your stay as pleasant as possible." He frowned. "That makes two 'possibles' in one sentence, doesn't it? Dreadfully sorry. Is there anything in particular you would like for luncheon?"

"Yes," I said. "Aardvark steak."

"I shall comb all London for one," he promised.

"And then," I said, "I want to go straight to Dr. Perry's house. Commoner or no commoner."

"Yes, Your Highness," Lord Fairfax said, retreating to his, corner of the seat.

VI.

Unless you've been given the royal treatment, you can't imagine how busy it keeps you. I met Lord Fairfax's wife and servants, dozens of them, was assigned the East Wing of the manor, then lunched – on aardvark courtesy of the zoo – and world-famous designers took my measurements for the most astonishing wardrobe, which I was most grateful for when it was delivered; London is awfully chilly that time of year, and I had only the clothes I wore when leaving home.

Then, when I was presentable, there were dinners, high teas, elevenses, a ball in my honor and I was presented to King Charles and the entire court, which I had to be prepared for days in advance. His Majesty was most gracious and, as we used to say at Bennington, I got a real charge out of the whole royal business. Oh, and the ballet, the opera, the theater – I fell into bed every night, so exhausted but overstimulated that I said, "Who?" when Dr. Perry phoned, weeks later.

"Africa," he said. "Mlarki to London."

"Oh, the man with the moss!" I exclaimed.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said guardedly. "I called to invite you to dinner."

I checked my date book. "I'm over my head with appointments – three magazine covers to pose for, two interviews, a profile, sessions with the person who's writing

my autobiography–"

"Yes, yes," he said. "You're the hit of the season; can't open anything in print without seeing your face or by-line. Now when can we have dinner together?"

"Would some time next month do?"

"That depends on when you want to light a little bonfire," he said.

"Oh." I said. "That's different. I'll cancel everything. Just tell me the time and place."

"My home. Tomorrow night. Alone."

He gave me the address and hung up. Next night, Lord Halifax's chauffeur handed me out of the silver Rolls-Royce right on the dot. I told him, to wait; I didn't expect a long visit, just dinner and burning the moss and home by ten. Dr. Perry himself opened the door, so promptly that I thought he'd been waiting for my ring. He sort of reeled back as I entered.

"Princess!" he cried. "I'd never have known you! You're dazzling!"

He stroked my sable coat a moment, before hanging it up. Then he led me to his little bar, and we had a little drinkie and then to dinner, which he told me he had cooked himself – and which he served himself.

"Are your chef and butler off for the evening?" I asked.

"Chef and butler?" He laughed himself red in the face. "I don't even have a wife or mistress," he said, coughing.

I shuddered inwardly as I remembered, my insistence on staying all these weeks at his house. Imagine weeks without servants – and a bachelor's flat at that! But I kept up my end of the conversation which was mostly about my adventures in London, until I could decently mention the moss.

He finished his wine, a very ordinary vin ordinaire, and took me to his little laboratory at the rear of the house. "There!" he said, picking up a little chafing dish kind of thing and handing it to me. "It is yours to do with as you with!"

"It seems like such a little bit of moss," I said.

"I give you my word that it's exactly the same amount we started with."

I laughed with girlish glee as I set fire to it. "Well, that's that," I said. "Now how about Prof. Kropotkin's moss?"

"Everything is arranged," he said. "There will be a Soviet plane to take you to Moscow at noon tomorrow. Kropotkin will be among the delegation to meet you."

"It's so terribly sudden," I said. "I have to call off so many appointments. How can I do it with so little notice?"

"You'll find a way," he told me. "You do want to see your husband and father, don't you?"

And so I spent a sleepless night writing excuses and a hurried morning, phoning those I couldn't write to. Then I thanked the Fairfaxes, gave each servant a handsome gratuity, and was at the airport with 15 minutes to spare, complete with the fantastic wardrobe I had accumulated in London with my personal appearances and endorsements.

I slept aboard the plane and nodded through the reception at' Moscow, until Prof. Kropotkin came into view among the high dignitaries. I shook his hand and asked when I could destroy the moss.

"First you must give us equal, time with England," he said jovially.

So I lived in the Kremlin, reviewed the military might, walking, riding or being dragged through Red Square – from Lenin's tomb, of course – inspected factories, appeared at ballet, theater, opera, on TV and in the newspapers and magazines. I made a great hit when I said, "If I weren't a princess, there is nothing I would rather be than a commoner in London or Moscow."

For the sake of brevity, let me state simply that between those two great capitals, I was worn skinny before they let me visit Kropotkin for dinner and mossburning. Then I flew back to Mlarki and home. At last! But would my husband, the Head Witch Doctor, and my father, the Super Chief, welcome me as gladly as had Moscow and London?

"You've burned it all?" my husband asked.

"Every bit Kropotkin and Perry had," I told them.

They both put their arms around me. As I dabbed at my eyes, I saw Prof. Todd grinning crookedly down at me. We shook hands enthusiastically and he said, "My lab's gone to pot since you left. Want to come back?"

I nodded, too overcome by emotion to speak.

And that, I innocently thought, was that.

But Todd and my two men toured the whole gigantic compound with me in the tribal jeep, where I was shown everybody talking back to phonographs that were talking to them in English and other languages, and then to the airfield, where they showed me Pigmies learning to fly planes.

"What on Earth is going on?" I asked blankly.

"We Pigmies are about to take our rightful places," the Super Chief said – in perfectly good English!" When I commented on that, he said, "You can't beat the phonograph to teach foreign languages."

"All of us?" I said.

"Every man, woman and child," the Head Witch Doctor replied. "We are going to bring peace to the world."

"When?" I asked. "How?"

"You'll know when before anybody else." said Prof. Todd. "The how will be explained in an article I'm writing for the British medical magazine Lancet."

And that was all I could get out of them. I doubted if my husband and father knew how it all would come about, for I plagued them with questions. But why would I know before anybody else?

VII.

Some months later, when I was reluctantly tuning in my radio, which had been bristling with every nation threatening its neighbors, I heard only silence. Puzzled, I changed the batteries, then turned the dials slowly. Nothing! From nearby Mlarki to the farthest Greenland – not a sound, not a voice!

When I told this to my husband he suggested telling Prof. Todd. I did, panting from running to his hut.

"You see?" he said triumphantly. "I said you would be the first to know. Now we must assemble all the tribes, and put Plan C into effect!"

"What were Plan A and Plan B"?' I asked in bewilderment.

"Dr. Perry and Prof. Kropotkin," he explained on the run.

"What about them?" I yelled, but he was out of earshot.

He had been heading for the meeting hut. I followed him. By the time I reached it, sirens were blaring all over the compound. Everybody came from everywhere and raced to the meeting hut.

Inside, Prof. Todd was standing at a lectern at the front of the huge auditorium, waiting for all of us to take our seats. His grin was more crooked than I had ever seen it. The Super Chief and the Head Witch Doctor were seated behind him, facing the audience. He beckoned to me to sit with them. As I obeyed, the bustle ceased. Every eye was on him.

"Brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews," he said, "The day has come! We have labored long and hard for this moment. Every one of you, including the children, knows English, and most of you know another language besides, as well as the history, customs and economics of the country you have been assigned to. We must move swiftly to bring order out of the chaos the world is in. Can we do it?"

"Yes!" the crowd roared.

"Good, good," he said. "Now let's line up according to continent."

"What about us?" I asked my husband.

"We're the Supreme Arbiters," he said. "Didn't the Professor tell you how we've been organizing ourselves?"

"Not a word," I answered. "We've been busy experimenting on all kinds of vegetations "With what results?"

"None," I said. "Not a thing."

"That's wonderful!" cried my, father. "Absolutely wonderful!"

"What's wonderful?" I asked in complete confusion. "Why won't anyone tell me what this is all about?"

Prof. Todd had turned toward us, listening and grinning. "Please join me in leading the parade to the airfield," he said, "and I'll explain on the way."

We fell into step with him. Suddenly I remembered running, after him, when my stride was five to his one. Now – I compared him with my two men and realized what I had not noticed, the change had been so gradual. Prof. Todd was mere inches taller than them, instead of almost two feet, and our strides were just about equal!"

"You guessed it, Princess," he said cheerfully. "Every living thing on Earth – except vegetation – is on its way toward becoming a tenth of its former size!"

"The moss?" I asked. He nodded. "But I destroyed it all!"

"Token amounts," he said. "Just enough to keep you from unwittingly spoiling Plan C."

"You haven't explained Plan A and Plan B," I said, angry at being made a mere puppet.

"Dr. Perry and Prof. Kropotkin did what I wanted them to do," he said. "They turned over the moss and the tiny people and dogs to their military, who immediately saw its strategic value. Their nations grew the moss as fast as it would grow – which is phenomenally when exposed to light hydroponic tanks – and shared it with their allies. When they had enough of it they spirited it into the streams, rivers, lakes and reservoirs of their enemies. There isn't one single piece of land, from all the continents to the tiniest island, that isn't clogged with it."

"But how did they do it?" I asked.

"Tourists," he said.

"And what is Plan C?"

"To take over the world." He laughed teasingly. "But first, let's get your people distributed."

There were many bush planes on the airfield, which were loaded according to ultimate destination, and flown to Mlarki by Pigmy Pilots, where supersonic jets stood waiting, also manned by Pigmies. Each jet had its destinations clearly marked and filled up with people who knew exactly where they were going, why, and what they were to do there.

Except me.

I found my hand being shaken while my husband and father took turns hugging me and saying goodbye. "Wait!" I wailed. "I don't know what's expected of me! And when will I see my two men again?"

"The Pigmies assigned to each nation are responsible to you, the Head Witch Doctor and the Super Chief," said Todd, finally letting go of my hand. "You'll see them both two weeks a year, on your vacations."

"With pay!" added my father.

"And what will you do?" I asked Prof. Todd.

"Go back to the specimens we gathered, an experiment rudely interrupted," he said. "But I'll need a lab scaled down to the size I'll soon be."

"Don't grieve," my husband said comfortingly. "It's the noblest job a people can have, bringing peace and justice to the world. Anyhow, we'll be talking by telephone as often as the budget will allow."

"And will I always be your Number One Wife?" I asked fearfully.

"Always," he said.

"Promise?"

"Promise!"

We all took separate planes and I was whooshed to New York and my deluxe suit at the Waldorf-Astoria, where, looking out the fourth-floor window, I can see the people scurrying like the warrior ants of my native Africa.

There. I think the story is complete. Prof. Todd asked me to write it for posterity, and he has been waiting patiently for me to finish it. He wants to add a few words.

Prof. Todd:

Thank you, Princess Wamba.

I find the forgoing extremely accurate, but a little unclear about Plan C. I wasn't trying to tease Her Highness or create suspense; there were just too many details and

getting people into their proper planes to allow me to explain Plan C.

To put it as briefly as possible, it consists of the Pigmies acting as Governors General, each aiding his assigned country to make the transformation to an environment ten times too large for it, with the Princess, Super Chief and Head Witch Doctor acting as Supreme Arbiters in disputes between countries, which have been predictably few. We tiny people were overwhelmed by the immensity of our environments – our tenfold abundance of food and housing and clothing, metals and minerals and fuels, and our suddenly adequate means of transportation – everything! Only the Pigmies, of all the world, were not stupefied by the change.

Princess Wamba has asked me, What about the danger of war? To which I can openly reply, With what? Weapons we tiny people can't operate? Warplanes we can't fly? Besides, who needs somebody else's territory and resources when suddenly there is ten times as much of everything?

But what about later, you ask, after the transition is complete?

By that time, Pigmy rule will be solidly entrenched. And what Pigmy would let his country go to war against a brother Pigmy's?

Moreover, it's remarkable even now how possessive each country feels about its Pigmy Governor General. Why shouldn't they? After all Pigmies, being the only creatures on Earth who were immune to the moss, are the biggest people on Earth.

Now doesn't everything work out wonderfully?

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