

Venus and the Seven Sexes

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It is written in the Book of Sevens:

When Plookh meets Plookh, they discuss sex. A convention is held, a coordinator selected, and, amid cheers and rejoicing, they enter the wholesome state of matrimony. The square of seven is forty-nine.

This, my dear children—my own meager, variable brood—was the notation I extracted after receiving word from the nzred nzredd that the first humans to encounter us on Venus had at last remembered their promise to our ancestors and sent a cultural emissary to guide us on the difficult path to civilization.

Let the remaining barbarians among us cavil at the choice of this quotation; let them say it represents the Golden Age of Plookhdom; let them sneer that it shows how far we are fallen since the introduction of The Old Switcheroo by the gifted Hogan Shlestertrap of Hollywood California U.S.A. Earth.

The memory of Hogan Shlestertrap lives on while they disappear. Unfortunately—ah, well.

Please recall, when you go forth into the world to coordinate your own families, that at this point I had no idea of the kind of help the Earthman wanted. I suspected I had been honored because of my interest in literary numerals and because it was my ancestor—and yours, my dear children, your ancestor, too!—the nzred fanobrel, to whom those first Earthmen on Venus had made the wonderful promise of cultural aid.

A tkan it was, a tkan of my own family, who flew to bring me the message of the nzred nzredd. I was in hiding at the time—this was the Season of Wind-Driven Rains and the great spotted snakes had come south for their annual Plookh feed; only a swift-flying tkan could have found me in the high grasses of the marsh where we nzredd hide at this season.

The tkan gave me the message in a few moments. It was possible to do this, because we had not yet been civilized and were still using our ancestral language instead of the cultivated English.

"Last night, a flame ship landed on the tenth highest mountain," the tkan told me. "It contained the long-promised emissary from Earth: a Hogan of the Shlestertrapp."

"Hogan Shlestertrap," I corrected. "Their names are not like ours; these are civilized creatures beyond our fumbling comprehension. The equivalent of what you called him would be 'a man of the Shlestertraps.'"

"Let that be," the tkan replied. "I am no erudite nzred to hide lowly in the marshes and apply numbers categorically; I am a tkan who has flown far and been useful in the *chain* of many families. This Hogan Shlestertrap, then, emerged from his ship and had a dwelling prepared for him by his—what *did* the nzred nzredd call them?"

"Women?" I suggested, remembering my Book of Twos.

"No, not women—*robots*. Strange creatures these robots: they participate in no chain, as I understand it, and yet are reproduced. After the dwelling was completed, the nzred nzredd called upon this—this Hogan Earthman and was informed that the Hogan, who feeds and hatches in a place called Hollywood California U.S.A. Earth, had been assigned to Venus on our behalf. It seems that Hollywood California U.S.A. Earth is considered the greatest source of civilizing influence in the universe by the Terran Government. They civilize by means of something called stereo-movies."

"They send us their best," I murmured, "their very best. How correctly did my ancestor describe them when he said their unselfish greatness made dismal mockery of comparison! We are such

inconsequential creatures, we Plookhh: small of size, bereft of most useful knowledge, desired prey of all the monsters of our planet who consider us transcendently delicious morsels—and these soaring adventurers send us a cultural missionary from no less than Hollywood California U.S.A. Earth!"

"Will the Hogan Shlestertrap teach us to build flame ships and dwellings upon mountains in which we may be secure?"

"More, much more. We will learn to use the very soil of our planet for fuel; we will learn how to build ships to carry us through emptiness to the planet Earth so that we can express our gratitude; instead of merely twelve books of numbers we shall have thousands, and the numbers themselves will be made to work for us in Terran pursuits like electricity and politics. Of course, we will learn slowly in the begin-ning. But your message?"

The tkan flapped his wings experimentally. He was a good tkan: he had three fully developed wings and four rudimentary ones—a very high variable-potential. "That is all. The Earthman wants help from one of us whose knowledge is great and whose books are full. This one will act as what is known as 'technical adviser' to him in the process of civilizing the Plookhh. Now the nzred nzredd's small tentacle is stiff with age and badly adjusted for the speaking of English; he has therefore decided that it is you who must advise this Hogan technically."

"I leave immediately," I promised. "Any more?"

"Nothing that is important. But we will need a new nzred nzredd. As he was giving me the last of the message outside the dwelling of the Earthman, he was noticed by a herd of tricephalops and devoured. He was old and crusty; I do not think they found him very good to eat."

"A nzred is always tasty," I told the winged Plookh proudly. "He alone among the Plookhh possesses tentacles, and the spice of our tentacles, it would seem, is beyond compare. Now the nzred tinoslep will become nzred nzredd—he has grown feeble lately and done much faulty coordination."

Flapping his wings, the tkan rose rapidly. "Beware of the tricephalops," he cried. "The herd still grazes outside the Hogan's dwelling, and you are a plump and easily swallowed tidbit. This will be a difficult time for the family to find another nzred."

A lizard-bird, attracted by his voice, plummeted down suddenly. The tkan turned sharply and attempted to gain altitude. Too late! The long neck of the lizard-bird extended, the fearful beak opened and—

The lizard-bird flew on, gurgling pleasurably to itself.

Truly it is written in the Book of Ones: *Pride goeth before a gobble.*

He was a good tkan, as I said, and had a high variable-potential. Fortunately, a cycle had just completed—he was carrying no eggs. And tkann were plentiful that season.

This conversation lasted a much shorter period than it seems to have in my repeti-tion. At the time, only a few nzredd had learned the English that the first human explorers had taught my ancestor, nzred fanobrel; and the rest of the Plookhh used the picturesque language of our uncivilized ancestors. This language had certain small advantages, it is true. For one thing, fewer of us were eaten while conversing with each other, since the ancient Plookh dialect transmitted the maximum infor-mation in the minimum time. Then again, I was not reduced to describing Plookhh in terms of "he," "she" or "it"; this English, while admittedly the magnificent speech of civilized beings, is woefully deficient in pronouns.

I uncoiled my tentacles from the grasses about me and prepared to roll. The mlenb, over whose burrow I was resting, felt the decreased pressure as my body ceased to push upon the mud above him. He churned to the surface, his flippers soggy and quivering.

"Can it be," the foolish fellow whispered, "that the Season of Wind-Driven Rains is over and the great spotted snakes have departed? The nzred is about to leave the marsh."

"Go back," I told him. "I have an errand to perform. The spotted snakes are raven-ous as ever, and

now there are lizard-birds come into the marsh."

"Oh!" He turned and began to dig himself back into the mud. I know it is ungracious to mock mlenbb, but the wet little creatures are so frantic and slow-moving at the same time that it is all I can do to keep a straight tentacle in their presence.

"Any news?" he asked, all but one third of him into the mud.

"Our tkan was just eaten, so keep your flippers alert for an unattached tkan of good variation. It is not pressing; a new cycle will not begin for our family until the end of this season. Oh—and the nzred nzredd has been eaten, too—but that does not concern you, little muddy mlenb."

That does not, but have you heard the mlenb mlenbb also is gone? He was caught on the surface last night by a spotted snake. Never was there such a Season of Wind-Driven Rains: the great of the Plookhh fall on all sides."

"To a mlenb all seasons are 'never was there such a season,' " I mocked. "Wait until the Reason of Early Floods, and then tell me which you like better. Many mlenbb will go with the coming of the early floods, and our family may have to find a new mlenb as well."

He shivered, spattering me with mud, and disappeared completely underground.

Ah, but those were the carefree times, the happy childhood days of our race! Little indeed there was to trouble us then.

I ate a few grasses and began rolling up and out of the marsh. In a little while, my churning tentacles had attained such speed that I had no reason to fear any but the largest of the great spotted snakes.

Once, a tremendous reptile leaped at me and it seemed that the shafalon family would require a new nzred as well as a new tkan, but I have a helical nineteenth ten-tacle and this stood me in good stead. I uncoiled it vigorously and with an enormous bound soared over the slavering mouth of the spotted snake and on to solid ground.

This helical tentacle—I regret deeply that none of you dear little nzredd have inherited it from me. My consolation is that it will reappear in your descendants though in modified form; it unfortunately does not seem to be a dominant trait. But you all—all of this cycle, at any rate—have the extremely active small tentacle which I acquired from the nzred fanobrel.

Yes, I said your descendants. Please do not interrupt with the callow thoughts of the recently hatched. I tell you a tale of the great early days and how we came to this present state. The solution is for you to discover—there must be a solution; I am old and ripe for the gullet.

Once on solid ground, I had to move much faster, of course: here the great spotted snakes were larger and more plentiful. They were also hungrier.

Time and again I was forced to use the power latent in my helical tentacle. Several times as I leaped into the air, a lizard-bird or a swarm of gridniks swooped down at me; now and again, as I streaked for the ground, I was barely able to avoid the lolling tongue of a giant toad.

Shortly, however, I reached the top of the tenth highest mountain, having experienced no real adventure. There, for the first time, I beheld a human habitation.

It was a dome, transparent, yet colored with the bodies of many creatures who crawled on its surface in an attempt to reach the living meat within.

Do you know what a dome is? Think of half the body of a newly hatched nzred, divorced of its tentacles, expanded to a thousand times its size. Think of this as transparent instead of darkly colorful, and imagine the cut-away portion resting on its base while the still rounded part becomes the top. Of course, this dome had none of the knobs and hollows we use for various organic purposes. It was really quite bald.

Near it the flame ship stood upright. I cannot possibly describe the flame ship to you, except to say that it looked partly like a mlenb without the flippers and partly like a vineless guur.

The tricephalops discovered me and trampled each other in an attempt to get to me first. I was rather busy for a while evading the three-headed monsters, even grow-ing slightly impatient with our savior, Hogan Shlestertrap, for keeping me outside his dwelling so long. I have always felt that, of all the innumerable ways for a Plookh to depart from life, the most unpleasant is to be torn into three unequal pieces and masticated slowly by a tricephalops. But, then, I have always been considered some-thing of a wistful aesthete: most Plookhh dislike the gridnik more.

Fortunately, before I could be caught, the herd came upon a small patch of guurr who had taken root in the neighborhood and fell to grazing upon them. I made cer-tain that none of the guurr were of our family and concentrated once more upon attracting the attention of Shlestertrap.

At long last, a section of the dome opened outward, a force seemed to pluck at my tentacles and I was carried swiftly through the air and into the dome. The section closed behind me, leaving me in a small compartment near the outside, my visible presence naturally exciting the beasts around me to scrabble frenziedly upon the transparent stuff of the dwelling.

A robot entered—answering perfectly to the description of such things by nzred fanobrel—and, with the aid of a small tubular weapon, quickly destroyed the myriad creatures and fragments of creatures who had been sucked in with my humble person.

Then—my variegated descendants—then, I was conducted into the presence of Hogan Shlestertrap himself!

How shall I describe this illustrious scion of a far-flung race? From what I could see of him, he had two pairs of major tentacles (call them flippers, vines, wings, fins, claws, talons or what you will), classified respectively as arms and legs. There was a fifth visible tentacle referred to as the head—at the top of the edifice, profusely knobbed and hollowed for sensory purposes. The entire animal, except for extremi-ties of the tentacles, was covered with a blue and yellow striped substance which, I have since learned, is not secreted by it at all but supplied it by other humans in a complicated chain I do not fully understand. Each of the four major tentacles was further divided into five small tentacles somewhat in the manner of a blap's talons; fingers, they are known as. The body proper of this Hogan Shlestertrap was flat in the rear and exhibited a pleasing dome-like protuberance in the front, much like a nzred about to lay eggs.

Conceive, if you can, that this human differed in no respect from those described by my ancestor nzred fanobrel over six generations ago! One of the great boons of civilization is that continual variation is not necessary in offspring; these creatures may preserve the same general appearance for as many as ten or even twelve generations!

Of course, with every boon there is a price to be paid. That is what the dissidents among us fail to understand...

Hogan Shlestertrap was occupying a chair when I entered. A chair is like—well, possibly I shall discuss that another time. In his hand (that part of the arm where the fingers originate) he held a bottle (shaped like a srob without fins) of whiskey. Every once in a while, he and the bottle of whiskey performed what nzred fanobrel called an act of conjugation. I, who have seen the act, assure you that there is no other way to describe the process. Only I fail to see just what benefit the bottle of whiskey de-rives from the act.

"Will you have a chair?" Shlestertrap requested, dismissing the robot with a finger undulation.

I rolled up into the chair, only too happy to observe human protocol, but found some difficulty in retaining my position as there were no graspable extremities anywhere in the object. I finally settled into a somewhat strained posture by keeping all my tentacles stiff against the sides and bottom.

"You look like some spiders I've seen after an all-night binge," Shlestertrap re-marked graciously.

Since much of human thought is beyond our puny minds, I have been careful to record all remarks made by the Great Civilizer, whether or not I found them compre-hensible at the time. Thus—"spider"?

"all-night binge"?

"You are Hogan Shlestertrap of Hollywood California U.S.A. Earth, come to bring us out of the dark maw of ignorance, into the bright hatchery of knowledge. I am nzred shafalon, descended from nzred fanobrel who met your ancestors when they first landed on this planet, appointed by the late nzred nzredd to be your technical adviser."

He sat perfectly still, the little opening in his head—mouth, they call it—showing every moment a wider and wider orifice.

Feeling flattered and encouraged by his evident interest, I continued into my most valuable piece of information. How valuable it was, I did not then suspect:

"It is written in the Book of Sevens:

"When Plookh meets Plookh, they discuss sex. A convention is held, a coordinator se-lected, and amid cheers and rejoicing, they enter the wholesome state of matrimony. The square of seven is forty-nine."

Silence. Hogan Shlestertrap conjugated rapidly with his bottle.

"Pensioned off," he muttered after a while. "The great Hogan Shlestertrap, the pro-ducer and director of 'Lunar Love Song,' 'Fissions of 2109,' 'We Took to the Asteroids,' pensioned off in a nutty fruitcake of a world! Doomed to spend his remaining years among gabby mathematical spiders and hungry whatchamacallits."

He rose and began pacing, an act accomplished with the lower tentacles. "I gave them saga after saga, the greatest stereos that Hollywood ever saw or felt, and just because my remake of 'Quest to Mars' came out merely as an epic, they say I'm through. Did they have the decency—those people I picked out of the gutter and made into household names—did they have the decency to get me a job with the distribu-tion end on a place like Titan or Ganymede? No! If they had to send me to Venus, did they even try to salve their consciences by sending me to the Polar Continent where a guy can find a bar or two and have a little human conversation? Oho, they wouldn't dare—I might make a comeback if I had half a chance. That Sonny Galenhooper—my *friend*, he called himself!—gets me a crummy job with the Interplanetary Cul-tural Mission and I find myself plopped down in the steaming Macro Continent with a mess of equipment to make stereos for an animal that half the biologists of the system claim is impossible. *Big deal!* But Shlestertrap Productions will be back yet, bigger and better than ever!"

These were his memorable words: I report them faithfully. Possibly in times to come, when civilization among us shall have advanced to a higher level—always assuming that the present problem will be solved—these words will be fully under-stood and appreciated by a generation of as yet unborn but much more intellectualized Plookhh. To them, therefore, I dedicate this speech of the Great Civilizer.

"Now," he said, turning to me. "You know what stereos are?"

"No, not quite. You see only one of us has ever conversed with humans before this, and we know little of their glorious ways. Our Book of Twos is almost bare of useful information, being devoted chiefly to a description of your first six explorers, their ship and robots, by the nzred fanobrel. I *deduce*, however, that stereos are an essential concomitant of an industrial civilization."

He waved the bottle. "Exactly. At the base of everything. Take your literature, your music, your painting—"

"Pardon me," I interposed. "But we have been able to build none of these things as yet. We are chased by so many—"

"I was just spitballing," he roared. "Don't interrupt my train of thought. I'm build-ing! Now, where was I? Oh, yes—take your literature, music and painting and you know what you can do with them. The stereos comprise everything in art; they present to the masses, in one colossal little package, the whole stirring history of human endeavor. They are not a substitute for art in the twenty-second century—they *are* the art of the twenty-second century. And without art, where are you?"

"Where?" I asked, for I will admit the question intrigued me.

"Nowhere. Nowhere at all. Oh, you might be able to get by in the sticks, but class will tell eventually. You've got to romp home with an Oscar now and then to show the reviewers that you're interested in fine things as well as money-making potboilers."

I concentrated on memorizing, deciding to reserve interpretation for later. Perhaps this was my mistake, perhaps I should have asked more questions. But it was all so bewildering, so stimulating...

"The stereos have gone a long way since the pioneering sound movies of medieval times," he continued. "Solid images that appeal to all five senses in gorgeous panoramas of perception."

Hogan Shlestertrap paused and went on with even more passion. "And wasn't it said that Shlestertrap Productions had their special niche, their special technique among the senses? Yes, sir! No greater accolade could be accorded a stereo than to say it had the authentic Shlestertrap Odor. The Shlestertrap smell—how I used to slave to get that in just right! And I almost always succeeded. Oh, well, they say you're just as good as your last stereo."

I took advantage of the brooding silence that followed to clack my small tentacle hesitantly.

The emissary looked up. "Sorry, fella. What we've got to do here is turn out a stereo based on your life, your hopes and spiritual aspirations. Something that will make 'em sit up and take notice way out in Peoria. Something that will give you guys a *culture*."

"We need one badly. Particularly a culture to defend us against—"

"All right. Let me carry the ball. Understand I'm only talking off the top of my mind right now; I never make a decision until I've slept on it and let the good old subconscious take a couple of whacks at the idea. Now that you understand the technical side of stereo-making, we can start working on a story. Now, religion and politics are dandy weenies, but for a good successful piece of art I always say give me the old-fashioned love story. What's the lowdown on your love-life?"

"That question is a trifle difficult to answer," I replied slowly. "We had the gravest communicative difficulties with the first explorers of your race over this question. They seemed to find it complicated."

"A-ah," he waved a contemptuous hand. "Those scientific bunnies are always looking for trouble. Takes a businessman, who's also an artist, mind you—first and last an artist—to get to the roots of a problem. Let me put it this way, what do you call your two sexes?"

"That is the difficulty. We don't have two sexes."

"Oh. One of those a-something animals. Not too much conflict possible in that situation, I guess. No-o-o. Not in one sex."

I was unhappy: he had evidently misunderstood me. "I meant we have more than two sexes."

"More than two sexes? Like the bees, you mean? Workers, drones and queens? But that's really only two. The workers are—"

"We Plookhh have seven sexes."

"Seven sexes. Well, that makes it a little more complicated. We'll have to work our story from a—SEVEN SEXES?" he shrieked.

He dropped back into the chair where he sat very loosely, regarding me with optical organs that seemed to quiver like tentacles.

"They are, to use the order stated in the Book of Sevens, srob, mlenb, tkan, guur—"

"Hold it, hold it," he commanded. He conjugated with his bottle and called to a robot to bring him another. He sighed finally and said: "Why in the name of all the options that were ever dropped do you need *seven* sexes?"

"Well, at one time, we thought that all creatures required seven sexes as a minimum. After your explorers arrived, however, we investigated and found that this was not true even of the animals here on

our planet. My ancestor, nzred fanobrel, had many profitable talks with the biologists of the expedition who provided him with theoretical knowledge to explain that which we had only known in practice. For example, the biologists decided that we had evolved into a seven-sexed form in order to stimulate variation."

"Variation? You mean so your children would be different?"

"Exactly. You see, there is only one thing that all the ravening life-forms of Venus would rather eat than each other; and that one thing is a Plookh. From the other continent, from all the islands and seas of Venus they come at different times for their Plookh feed. When a Plookh is discovered, a normally herbivorous animal will battle a mighty carnivore to the death and disregard the carcass of its defeated opponent—to enjoy the Plookh."

Our civilizer considered me with a good deal of interest. "Why—what have you got that no one else has got?"

"We don't know—exactly. It may be that our bodies possess a flavor that is uniformly exciting to all Venusian palates; it may be, as one of the biologists suggested to nzred fanobrel, that our tissue contains an element—a vitamin—essential to the diet of all the life-forms of our planet. But we are small and helpless creatures who must reproduce in quantity if we are to survive. And a large part of that quantity must differ from the parent who himself has survived into the reproductive stage. Thus, with seven parents who have lived long enough to reproduce, the offspring inherits the maximum qualities of survival as well as enough variation from any given parent to insure a constantly and *rapidly* improving race of Plookh."

An affirmative grunt. "That would be it. In the one-sex stage—*asexual* is what the bio professors call it—it's almost impossible to have varied offspring. In the bisexual stage, you get a good deal of variation. And with *seven* sexes, the sky must be the limit. But don't you ever get a Plookh who isn't good to eat, or who can maybe fight his way out of a jam?"

"No. It would seem that whatever makes us delicious is essential to our own physical structure. And, according to the biologists of the expedition again, our evolutionary accent has always been on evasiveness—whether by nimbleness, protective coloration or ability to hide—so that we have never developed a belligerent Plookh. We have never been able to: it is not as if we had only one or two enemies. All who are not Plookh will eat Plookh. Except humans—and may I take this occasion to express our deep gratitude?"

"From time to time, our Books of Numbers tell us, Plookh have formed communities and attempted to resist extermination by united effort. In vain; they merely disappeared in groups instead of individually. We never had the *time* to perfect a workable system of defense, to devise such splendid things as weapons—which we understand humans have. That is why we rejoiced so at your coming. At last—"

"Save the pats on the back. I'm here to do a job, to make a stereo that will be at least an epic, even if I don't have the raw material of a saga. Give me a line on how all this works."

"May I say that whether it is an epic or a saga, we will still be grateful and sing the greatness of your name forever? Just so we are set on the path of civilization; just so we learn to construct impregnable dwellings and—"

"Sure. Sure. Wait till I get me a fresh bottle. Now—what are your seven sexes and how do you go about making families?"

I reflected carefully. I knew full well what a responsibility was mine at that moment; how important it was that I give our benefactor completely accurate information to aid him in the making of stereos, the first step we must take toward civilization.

"Please understand that much of this is beyond our ken. We know what seems to happen, but for an explanation we use the theories of the first flame ship's biologists. Unfortunately, their theories were multiple and couched in human terms which even they admitted were somewhat elementary when applied to the process of Plookh re-production. We sacrificed a whole generation of the fanobrel family for

microscopic experimentation and only a broad outline was worked out. Our seven sexes are—"

"I heard it was complicated," Shlestertrap interrupted. "The biologists left five miles of figures in the Venusian Section of the Interplanetary Cultural Mission after they returned from this expedition. You see, there was an election right after that: a new party came in and fired them. I wasn't going to wade through all that scientific junk, no sir! One of them—Gogarty, I think—pulled every wire there was to take this job away from me and come here in my place. Some people just can't stand being out after they've been politically in for so long. Me, I'm here to make stereos—good ones. I'm here to do just what the prospectus of the Venusian Section called for—'bring culture to the Plookhh as per request.' "

"Thank you. We did wonder why the Gogarty—pardon—why Gogarty didn't re-turn; he expressed such an enormous interest in our ways and welfare. But no doubt the operation of firing him by the new party after the election was far more productive in the human scheme of things. We have not yet advanced to the state of parties and elections or any such tools. To us one human is as omniscient and magnificent as the other. Of course, you understand all relevant data on human genetics?"

"Sure. You mean chromosomes and stuff?"

I flapped my small tentacle eagerly. "Yes, chromosomes and stuff. Especially stuff. I think it is the part about 'stuff that has made the whole subject somewhat difficult for us. Gogarty never mentioned it. All he discussed were chromosomes and genes."

"No wonder I got such a crash bio briefing! Let's see. Chromosomes are collections of genes which in turn control characteristics. When an animal is ready to reproduce, its germ-cells—or reproductive cells—each divide into two daughter cells called gametes, each daughter cell possessing one-half the chromosomes of the parent cell, every chromosome in each gamete corresponding to an opposite number chromosome in the other. Process is called meiosis. Correct me if I'm wrong anywhere."

"And how can a human be wrong?" I asked devoutly.

His face wrinkled. "In the case of humans, the female germ-cell has twenty-four pairs of chromosomes, one pair being known as the X chromosome and determining sex. It splits into two female gametes of twenty-four corresponding chromosomes, one X chromosome in each gamete. Since the male germ-cell—if I remember rightly—has only twenty-three identical pairs of chromosomes and an additional *unmatched* pair called the X-Y chromosome, it divides into two male gametes of twenty-four chromosomes each, of which only twenty-three have a twin in each gamete; the twenty-fourth being the X chromosome in one male gamete and the Y chromosome in the other. If a male gamete—or sperm-cell—containing an X chromosome unites with a female gamete—ovum, or egg-cell, the briefing guy called it—carrying an X chromosome, the resultant zygote will be female; but if the Y chromosome gamete fertilizes the ovum, you have a *male* zygote. They really jammed that stuff in me before they let me leave Earth. Lectures, sleep-sessions, the whole bit."

"Exactly," I said enthusiastically. "Now in our case—"

"I recall something else, come to think of it. The Y is supposed to be a slightly undeveloped or retarded chromosome and it makes the gamete containing it a little weaker or something. The sperm-cell with the X chromosome is faster and stronger and has a better chance of fertilizing the ovum. It also shows why women can take it better than men and live longer. Simple. How's it work with you?"

The extended conversation was making me giddy, and the atmosphere of the dome—with its small vapor content—dried my faculties. However, this was a historic occasion: no personal weakness must be allowed to interfere. I stiffened my tentacles and began.

"After the matrimonial convention, when the chain is established, each sex's germ-cells are stimulated into meiosis. The germ-cell divides into seven gametes, six of them with cilia and the seventh secreted either inside or outside the Plookh, depending on the sex."

"What's this chain?"

"The chain of reproduction. The usually stated order is srob (aquatic form), mlenb (amphibian), tkan (winged), guur (plant-like), flin (a burrower), blap (tree-dweller). And, of course, the chain proceeds in a circle as: srob, mlenb, tkan, guur, flin, blap, srob, mlenb, tkan, guur, flin, blap, srob—"

Hogan Shlestertrap had grasped his head with his hands and was rocking it slowly back and forth. "Starts with srobs and ends with blaps," he said, almost inaudibly. "And I'm a—"

"Srobb," I corrected him timidly. "And blapp. And it doesn't necessarily start with one and end with another. A birth may be initiated anywhere along the chain of a family, just so it passes through all sexes—thus acquiring the necessary chromosomes for a fertilized zygote."

"All right! Please get back to chromosomes and sanity. You just had a germ-cell dividing—a srob's, say—into seven gametes instead of a decent two like all other logical species use."

"Well, so far as our weak minds can compass it, this is the chromosome pattern worked out by Gogarty and his assistant, Wolfsten, after prolonged microscopic examination. Gogarty warned my ancestor, nzred fanobrel, that it was only an approximation. According to this analysis, the germ-cell of a given sex has forty-nine chromosomes, seven each of Types *A*, *B*, *C*, *D*, *E*, *F*, six of Type *G* and one of Type *H*—the last, Type *H*, being the sex determinant. Six mobile gametes are formed through meiosis—each containing an identical group of seven chromosomes of Types *A* through *G*—and a seventh or stationary gamete containing chromosomes *A*, *B*, *C*, *D*, *E*, *F*, and *H*. This last Gogarty called the female or *H* gamete, since it never leaves the body of the Plookh until the fully fertilized cell of forty-nine chromosomes—or seven gametes—is formed, and since it determines sex. The sex, of course, is that of the Plookh in whose body it is stationary."

"Of course," Shlestertrap murmured and conjugated long and thoughtfully with the bottle.

"It has to be, since that is the only *H* chromosome in the final zygote. But you know that for yourself. In fact, operating with a human intelligence, you have probably anticipated me and already extrapolated the whole process from the few facts I have mentioned."

Moisture gathered at the top of our civilizer's head and rolled down his face in the quaintest of patterns. "I understand you," he admitted, "and of course I've already figured out the whole thing. But just to make it clear in your own mind, don't you think you might as well continue?"

I thanked him for his unfailing human courtesy. "Now, if it is a srob with whom we start our chain, it will transmit one of its six mobile gametes to a mlenb where the gamete will unite with one of the mlenb's *A* through *G* cells, forming what Gogarty called a double-gamete or pre-zygote. This pre-zygote will contain seven pairs of *A* through *G* chromosomes, and, in the body of the tkan—next in the chain—it will unite with a tkan mobile gamete forming a triple-gamete with seven triplets of *A* through *G* chromosomes. It proceeds successively through the rest of the sexes capturing a seven-chromosome gamete each time, until, when it is transmitted to the blap, it contains forty-two chromosomes—six *A*'s, six *B*'s and so on through to six *G*'s. At this point, the sextuple gamete loses its cilia; and unites, in the blap, with the stationary *H* gamete to form a forty-nine chromosome zygote which, of course, is of the blap sex. The egg is laid and it hatches shortly into a baby blap, guarded—when at all possible—and taught in ten days all that its parent can teach it about surviving as a blap Plookh. At the end of ten days, the half-grown blap goes its way to feed and escape from danger by itself. At the end of a hundred days, it is ready to join a family and reproduce in full adulthood.

"The chain may be said to begin at any point; but it always travels in the same direction. Thus a flin will transmit the original seven-chromosome gamete to the blap of his chain where it will become a double-gamete; the blap will transmit the double-gamete to the srob, who will make it a triple-gamete; eventually, in this case, the process will come to fruition on the vines of the guur resulting in a guur zygote. Was not Gogarty clever, even for a human? He suggested, by the way, that it was possible we were not really a seven-sexed creature, but seven distinct species living in a reproductive symbiosis."

"Gogarty was a damned genius! Hey, wait a minute! Srob, mlenb, tkan, guur, flin, blap—that's only six!"

At last we were getting to the interesting part. "Quite so. I am a representative of the seventh sex—a nzred."

"A nzred, huh? What do *you* do?"

"I coordinate."

One of the robots scurried in in answer to his yell. He ordered it to bring a case of these bottles of whiskey and to place it near his chair. He also ordered it to stand by, prepared for emergencies.

This was all very enjoyable. My information was creating even more of a sensation than that described by my ancestor, nzred fanobrel. It is not often that we Plookhh have an opportunity to sit thus with an animal of a different species and provide intellectual instead of gustatory diversion.

"He *coordinates!* Maybe they can use a good expediter or dispatcher?"

"I fulfill all of those functions. Chiefly, however, I coordinate. You see, a mlenb is primarily interested in winning the affections of a likely srob and finding a tkan whom *he* can love. A tkan merely courts a mlenb and is attracted to a good guur. I am responsible for getting a complete chain of these individuals in operation, a chain of compatibility where perfect amity runs in a complete circle—a chain which will produce offspring of maximum variability. Then, after the matrimonial convention, when the chain is established, each sex begins to secrete its original germ with the full forty-nine chromosomes. A busy time for nzredd! I must make certain that all germ-cells are developing at a uniform rate—each sex attempts to fertilize seven *H* gametes in the course of a cycle—and the destruction of one individual in the middle of the cycle means the complete disarrangement of a family except for the gametes which he has already passed on in multiple state. Replacement of an eaten individual with another of the same sex, the remainder of whose family has been wiped out, is occasionally possible with the aid of the chief of his sex."

"I can see they keep you hopping," Hogan Shlestertrap observed. "But how does a nzred get born if you aren't in this chain thing?"

"A nzred is outside a chain, yet inside it as well. The six sexes which transmit gametes to each other directly form a chain; a chain plus a nzred equals a family. The nzred, in his personal reproductive functions, fits himself at any point in the chain which the exigencies of the situation seem to demand. He may receive the sextuple super-gamete from the tkan and transmit the original single gamete to the guur, he may be between the flin and blap, the blap and srob, whatever is required. For example, in the Season of Twelve Hurricanes, the tkan is unable to fly and pursue his reproductive relationship with the guur wherever it has rooted itself: the nzred fills what would be a gap in the chain. This is rather difficult to express in an unfamiliar language—the biologists of the first expedition found this process slightly more complicated than the mitoses of the fertilized Plookh cell, but—"

"Hold it," Hogan commanded. "I have an ounce of sanity left, and I might want to use it to blow my brains out. I am no longer slightly interested in how a nzred weaves in and out of this crazy reproductive dance, and I *certainly* don't want to hear about your mitosis. I have troubles of my own, and they grow nastier every second. Tell me this: how many offspring does a sex have each cycle?"

"That depends on all parents being alive throughout, on the amount of unhatched eggs due to over-variation in particular cases—"

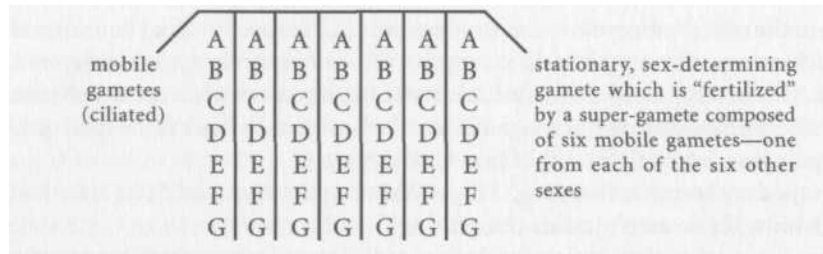
"OK! At the end of a perfect cycle—when the smoke clears—how many baby plookhs do you have all told?"

"Plookhh. We have forty-nine young."

He rested his head on the back of the chair. "Not very many, considering how fast you seem to go out of this world."

"True. Dismally true. But a parent is unable to hatch more than seven eggs in the conditions under which we live, and completely unable to rear more than seven young so that all will get the full benefit of his survival-knowledge. This is for the best."

"I guess so." He removed a pointed instrument from his garment and a sheet of white material. After a while, I recognized his actions from nzred fanobrel's description. "In just a moment," he said, while writing, "I'm going to have you shown into the projection room where you'll see a recent stereo employing human performers. Not too good a stereo: colossal in a very minor way; but it'll give you an idea of what I'll be doing for your people in the line of culture. While you see it, figure out ways to help me on a story. Now, is this Gogarty's description of your chromosome pattern after the parent germ-cell has undergone meiosis?" He extended the sheet under my sensory tentacles:

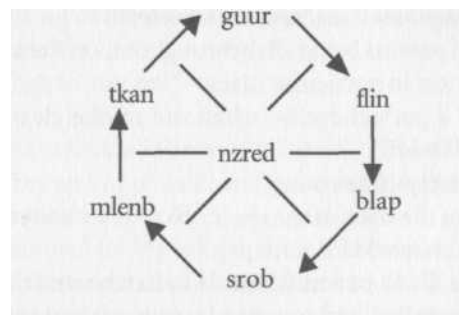


"Quite correct," I said, marveling at the superiority of these written symbols to those we are still forced to scratch in sand or mud.

"Good enough." He wrote further upon the sheet. "Now, which of your sexes is male and which female? I notice you say 'he' and—"

I was forced to interrupt him. "I only use those designations because of the deficiencies or limitations of English. I understand what a wonderful speech it is and how, when you came to construct it, you saw no reason to consider the Plookhh. Nonetheless, you have no pronouns for tkan or guur or blap. We are all male in relation to each other, in the sense that we transmit the fertilizing gametes; we are also female, in the sense that we hatch the developed zygote. Then again—"

"Slow down, boy, slow down. I have to work a story out of this, and you're not doing me any good at all. Here's a picture of your family—right?" He held the sheet out once more.



"Yes. Only your picture of the nzred is not exactly—"

"Listen, Pierre," he growled, "I'll call it the way I see it. And that's the way I see it. A love-story, now, let me think..."

I waited while he celebrated upon this strange thing called a story which was essential to the making of a stereo, which, in turn, was essential to our beginning upon culture and civilization. Soon, soon, we would have dwellings like this powerful one in which I sat, we would have tubular weapons like that the robot had used when I entered—

"How would this be?" he asked suddenly. "Understand, this isn't the finished product—I'm just working off the cuff, just trying it on for size. *Srob meets mlenb, tkan loses guur, flin gets blap.* How's it sound? Only one I can't fit in is the nzred."

"I coordinate."

"Yeah, you coordinate. That would make it, srob meets—Ah, shaddap! All you're supposed to do is say 'yes' once in a while." He murmured a few words to the robot who moved over to my chair. "Bronzo will take you to the projection room now. I'll think some more."

Tumbling painfully to the floor, I prepared to follow the robot.

"A love story is going to be tough," Shlestertrap mused behind me. "I can see that right now. Like three-dimensional chess with all pawns wild and the queen operating in and out of hyperspace. Wonder if these potato sprouts have a religion. A nice, pi-ous little stereo every once in a while—Hey! Got a religion?"

"Yes," I said.

"What is it? I mean what do you believe in, generally speaking? Simple terms: we can save the philosophy for later."

After the lapse of an interval which I felt I could approximate as a "while," I said again, very cautiously: "Yes."

"Huh? Cut the comedy on this lot, if you know what's good for you. Just because I told you not to disagree with me when I'm thinking out loud—No sloppy gags when I ask you a direct question!"

I apologized and tried to explain my seeming impudence in terms of the simple conditions under which we Plookhh live. After all, when a tkan flies in frantically to warn a family that a pack of strinth are ravaging in its direction, no one thinks to take the message in other than its most literal form. Communication, for us, is basically a means of passing along information essential to survival: it must be explicit and definitive.

Human speech, however, being the product of a civilized race, is a tree bearing many different fruits. And, as we have discovered to our sorrow, it is not always easy to find the one intended to be edible. For example, this mind-corroding intangible that they call a pun—

Shlestertrap waved my explanations back at me. "So you're sorry and I forgive you. Meanwhile, what's your belief about a life after death?"

"We don't exactly have a belief," I explained slowly, "since no Plookh has returned after death to assure us of the possibilities ahead. However, because of the difficulties we experience in the one life we know and its somewhat irritating shortness of dura-tion—we like to think we have at least *one* additional existence. Thus, we have not so much a Belief as a Hope."

"For an animal without lungs, you sure are long-winded. What's your Hope, then?"

"That after death we emerge into a vast land of small seas, marshes and mountains. That throughout this land are the pink weeds we find so succulent. That, in every direction as far as an optical organ can see, there are nothing but Plookhh."

"And?"

"Nothing else. That is our Hope: to arrive sometime, in this life or the next, in a land where there are nothing but Plookhh. Plookhh, you understand, are the only creatures who we are *certain* do not eat Plookhh. We feel we could be very happy alone."

"Not enough there to make a one-shot quickie. If only you believed in a god who demanded living Plookhh sacrifices—but I guess your lives are complicated enough. Go and see the stereo. I'll work out something."

In the projection room, I twisted up into a chair the robot pushed forward and watched him and his mates insert shiny colored strips into five long, mlenb-shaped objects attached to the walls and ceiling. Naturally, I have learned since that the hu-man terms are "film" and "projector," respectively, but, at that time, everything was new and strange and wonderful; I was all optical tentacles and audal knobs.

The sheer quantity *of things* that humans possess! Their recording methods are so plentiful and

varied—books, stereos, pencil-paper, to name but a few—that I am convinced their memories are largely outgrown evolutionary characteristics which, already atrophying, will be supplanted shortly by some method of keying recording apparatus directly to the thinking process. They have no need of carrying Books of Numbers in their minds, of memorizing individually some nine thousand years of racial history, of continually revising the conclusions drawn from an ancient incident to conform with the exigencies of a current one. Contemplation of their magnificent potentialities almost dissolves my ego.

Abruptly, the room darkened and a tiny spot of white expanded into the full-color, full-sound, full-olfactory and slightly tactile projection we have come to know so well. For some reason, the humans who make these stereos neglect almost completely the senses of taste, brotch, pressure and griggo—although the olfactory appeal stimulates an approximation of taste and an alert individual may brotch satisfactorily during an emotional sequence. The full-color—yes: it should be obvious that humans use only three primaries instead of the existing nine because they consider it a civilized simplicity; the very drabness of the combinations of blue, red and yellow, I believe, is a self-imposed limitation instituted as a challenge to their technicians.

As the human figures came to seeming life before me, I began to understand what Hogan Shlestertrap had meant by a "story." A story is the history of one or more individuals in a specific cultural matrix. I wondered then just how Shlestertrap would derive a story from the meager life of a Plookh; he had known so few of us. I did not know of the wonderful human sense of imagination.

This story, that I saw on that awesome first day of our civilization, was about their two sexes. One representative of each sex (a man, Louis Trescott—and a girl, Bettina Bramwell) figured as the protagonists of the film.

The story concerned the efforts of Bettina Bramwell and Louis Trescott to get together and lay an egg. Many and complex were the difficulties this pair faced, but, at last, having overcome every obstacle, they were united and ready to reproduce.

Through some oversight, the story ended before the actual egg-laying; there was definite assurance, however, that the process would be under way shortly.

Thus, the first stereo I had ever seen. The colors sharpened in company with the sound of this obscure business called music, then all faded and disappeared. The lights returned to the room and the robots attended to the projectors. I went back to Shlestertrap, quivering with new knowledge.

"Sure," he said. "It's good. It's good enough, considering the budget. Now, look, I have an idea for a stereo. It's got to jell and whatnot, but meanwhile it's an idea. What's the animal you bugs are most afraid of?"

"Well, in the Season of Twelve Hurricanes, the strinth and sucking ivy do a large amount of damage to our race. In the other hurricane seasons—which are the worst for us, after all—the tricephalops, brinosaur or gridniks—"

"Don't tell me *all* your troubles. Put it this way: which animal are you afraid of most right now?"

I considered lengthily. Ordinarily, the question would have given me thought material for two days; but The Great Civilizer was shifting from foot to foot and I grigged his impatience. A decision was necessary; this may have been my mistake, my off-spring, but remember we might never have received *any* of the benefits of civilization if I had taken more time to determine which creature was eating most of us at that season.

"The great spotted snakes. Of course, it is feared only by the nzredd, mlenbb, flinn and blapp. At this time, guurr are eaten principally by tricephalops, while srobb—"

"All right. Spotted snakes. Now let's go to the observation corridor and you point one out to me."

In the room where I had entered the dome, I extended my optical tentacles toward the transparent roof.

"There, almost directly above me. The animal which has half swallowed a dodle and is being

attacked by gridniks and sucking ivy."

Shlestertrap faced upwards and shivered. At the sight of us, the creatures scabbled even more frantically on the dome's structure, continuing to eat whatever they had been eating when we entered. The sucking ivy dragged the great spotted snake away.

"What a place," Shlestertrap muttered. "A guy could make a fortune here with an anti-vacation resort. 'Come to this home away from home and learn to giggle at your nightmares. All kinds of dishes served, including you. Be a guest of the best diges-tions. Everybody to his taste and a taste to fit everybody.' "

I waited, while his human mind explored concepts beyond my primeval grasp.

"OK. So that was a great spotted snake. I'll send a crew of robots out to get some shots of one of those babies that we can process into the stereo. Meanwhile, what about the cast?"

"Cast?" I fumbled. "How—what kind of cast do you mean?"

"Actors. Characters. Course I understand that none of you have any experience, even in stock, but I'll treat this like a De Mille documentary. I'll need a representa-tive of each one of your sexes—the best in its line. You should be able to dredge them up with beauty contests or whatever you use. Just so I get seven of you—all different."

"These can be obtained through the chiefs of the various sexes. The nzred tinoslep will be the new nzred nzredd and a replacement for the mlenb mlenbb should have been chosen if enough mlenbb dared to congregate in the marshes. And this is all we need to do to take the first movement toward civilization?"

"Absolutely all. I'll write the first story for you—it's only mildly magnificent right now, but I'll have plenty of time to work it up into something better."

"Then I may leave."

He called for a robot who entered and motioned me in front of a machine much like a stereo projector.

"Sorry I can't send a robot to protect you down the mountain, but we're only half unpacked and I'll need all of them around for a day or two. All I have here are Government Standard Models, see; and you can't get any high-speed work out of those babies. To think that I used to have eighteen Frictionless Frenzies just to clean up around the house! Oh well, a sick trance isn't glorious Mon-days."

Admitting the justice of this obscure allusion, I tried to reassure him. "If I am eaten, there are at least three nzredd who can replace me. It is only necessary for me to get far enough down the mountain to meet a living Plookh and inform him of your—your character requirements."

"Good," he told me heartily. "And I'm pretty sure I can play ball with any of your people who speak English fairly well. That sews up that: I'd hate to leave my stuff lying around in crates any longer than I have to. Dentface, throw a little extra juice into that beam so the kid here can get a big head start. And, once you get him out, quick-quick turn the dome back on fast, or we'll have half the empty stomachs on Venus inside trying to work us into their ulcers."

The robot called Dentface depressed a lever on the beam projector. Just as I had turned wistfully toward it in the hope that my meager mentality could somehow preserve an impression of the mechanism that would enable us to adapt it to our pressing needs, I was carried swiftly through a suddenly opened section of the dome and deposited halfway down the mountain. The opening, I observed as I got to my tentacles and rolled away from a creeper of sucking ivy, was actually an area of the dome that had temporarily ceased to exist.

I was unable to reflect further upon this matter because of the various lunges, snaps and grabs that were made at me from several directions. As I twisted and scud-ded down the tenth highest mountain, I deeply regretted Hogan Shlestertrap's need of the robots for unpacking purposes.

This, my children, was the occasion on which I lost my circular tentacle. A tricephalops, it was—or possibly a large dodle.

Near the marsh, I observed that my remaining pursuer, a green shata, had been caught by a swarm of gridniks. Accordingly, I rested in the shadow of a giant fern.

A scrabbling noise above me barely gave me time to stiffen my helical tentacle for a spring, when I recognized its source as the blap koreon. Peering from the lowest fan-leaf, he called softly: "The nzred shafalon has come from the dwelling of the human who was to give us many and mighty weapons, yet still I see him fleeing from empty bellies like the veriest morsel of a Plookh."

"And soon you will see him mocking all the beasts of prey from the safety of a dome where he and his kind live in thoughtful comfort," I replied with some impor-tance. "I am to aid the human Shlestertrap of Hollywood California U.S.A. Earth in the making of a stereo for our race."

The blap loosed his hold on the immense leaf and dropped to the ground beside me. "A stereo? Is it small or large? How many great spotted snakes can it destroy? Will we be able to make them ourselves?"

"We will be able to make them ourselves in time, but they will destroy no great spotted snakes for us. A stereo, my impatient wayfarer upon branches, is a cultural necessity without which, it seems, a race must wander forever in ignoble and fearful darkness. With stereos as models, we may progress irresistibly to that high control of our environment in which humanity exults on Earth. But enough of this munching the husk—our sex-chiefs must conduct Beauty Contests to select characters for the first Plookh stereo. Where is the blap blapp?"

"I saw him last leaping from bough to bough in the fifth widest forest with a lizard-bird just a talon's length behind him. If he has not yet ascertained the justification of the Hope, any tkan should be able to guide you to his present lair. Meanwhile, I think I know where the flin flinn has most recently dug."

He scampered to a mass of rocks and scratched at the ground near the outermost one. The heavy body of an old flin shortly appeared at the mouth of the hole he made. I rolled over and told the flin flinn of Shlestertrap's requirements.

The doddering burrower examined his broken claws nervously. "The chiefs of the other sexes will probably want to convene above ground. I know how important this stereo is to our race, but I am old and not at all agile—and this is the Season of Wind-Driven Rains—and the great spotted snakes are ravenous enough below the surface—"

"And it will shortly be the Season of Early Floods," I interrupted him, "when only tkann will have time for conversation. Our civilizing must begin as soon as possible."

"What have you to fear, old one?" the blap jeered. "A snake would find you tough and almost without flavor!"

Flin flinn edged back into his hole. "But not until he had experimented in a re-grettably final fashion upon my person," he pointed out gloomily. "I will communi-cate with the new mlenb mlenbb—their moist burrows connect with ours again. Where might we meet do you think, O coordinator who gathers human wisdom?"

"In the sheltered spot at the base of the sixth highest mountain," I suggested. "It will be fairly safe during the next great wind. And consider, in the meantime, which is the living flin most fitted to represent our race in this our first stereo. Tell the mlenb mlenbb to do likewise."

After the sound of his claws had diminished in the under distance, the blap and I moved back to the giant fern. It is written in the Book of Ones: *A bush nearby is worth two in the by and by.*

"The only other sex-chief whose whereabouts I griggo," the tree-dweller observed, "is the new nzred nzredd. He is in the marsh organizing the coordination of the next cycle."

"The nzred tinoslep that was?"

"Yes, and little did he relish his honors! Plentiful rose his complaints to High Hope. Vainly he insisted he was still in the very prime of coordination—that he had a good many novel arrangements yet within him. But all know of the pathetic hybrids produced in the last tinoslep cycle. You have heard, I suppose—"

And he told me the latest septuple entendre that had been making the rounds.

I was not amused. "Beware, scratcher of bark, of ridicule at the expense of him whom your coordinator obeys! Another blap may fill your place in the chain, while you gaze morosely at unhatched eggs. The nzred tinoslep, that was, organized mighty cycles in his time and now uses accumulated wisdom in the service of all the Plookhh, unlike the blap blapp and the flin flinn who have the responsibility of a lone sex."

Record this speech well, my nzreddi. Thus it is necessary to constantly impress upon the weaker, more garrulous sexes the respect due to coordination; else families will dissolve and each sex will operate in ungenetic independence. The nzred must ever be a Plookh apart—yes, yes, even in these shattering times of transition should he maintain his aloofness jealously. Even at present there are good reasons for him to do so—Please! Allow me to continue! Save these involved questions for another session, you who are so recently hatched, I know there are now complications...

The blap hastened to apologize.

"I meant no ridicule, none at all, omnipotent arranger of births! I thoughtlessly passed on a vulgar tale told me by an itinerant unattached guur who should have known better. Please do not tear me from the fins of the finest srob that I have ever known and the most delightful flin that ever brotched in a burrow! The nzred koreon is already displeased with me for two baby blapp I varied to the point of extinction, and now—"

Something coughed wetly behind us and we both leaped for the lowest frond of the fern. The blap streaked to the top of the plant and thence to a long-extending bough of a neighboring tree; I bounced off the leaf and into the marsh with powerful strokes of my helical tentacle. Behind me, the giant toad sorrowfully rolled his tongue back into his mouth.

I went my way fully satisfied: this blap would not mock nzredd again for many cycles.

The leader of my sex was surrounded by young nzredd in the weediest section of the marsh. He dismissed them when I approached and heard my recital.

"This meeting-place you suggested to the flin flinn—the land sexes may find it very easily, but what of the srob srobb?"

"A little stream has pushed through to the base of the sixth highest mountain," I informed him. "It isn't very wide, but the leader of the srobb should be able to swim to the sheltered place without difficulty. Only the mlenb mlenbb will be at a disadvantage there because of the stream's newness."

"And when is a mlenb not at a disadvantage?" he countered. "No, if a stream is there, the sheltered place will serve us well enough—during a wind, in any event. You have ordered things wisely, nzred shafalon; you will yet survive to be a nzred nzredd when your more thoughtless contemporaries are excreta."

I wagged my tentacles at this praise. To be told that I would escape assimilation long enough to be nzred nzredd was a compliment indeed. And to think I am at last chief of my sex and yet still able to coordinate effectively! Truly, our race has been startled by civilization—to say nothing of its highest manifestation, The Old Switcheroo.

"You need a tkan," the nzred nzredd went on; "I believe tkan tkann has a satisfactory one for you. The tkan gadulit is the sole survivor of an attack of tricephalops upon his matrimonial convention (I must remember that the gadulit name is now available for use by new families). He has fair variation. Suppose you meet him and introduce him to the chain if all else is good in your own judgment. As soon as the sex-chiefs have met and approximated this odd business of Beauty Contests, we will assemble the

individuals selected and you may escort them to awesome Shlestertrap. And may this stereo lead quickly to the softness of civilization."

"May it only," I assented fervently, and went to meet the new tkan. He was variable enough for all normal purposes; the guur shafalon found him admirable; and even our mlenb, stodgy and retiring as he was, admitted his fondness for the winged mem-ber. The tkan was overwhelmed at being admitted into the shafalon family, and I approved of his sensible attitude. I began to make plans for a convention—it was time to start another cycle.

Before I could communicate with my srob, however—he always swam a good distance from land during the Season of Wind-Driven Rains—the tkan tkann flew to inform me of the sex-chiefs' choices and lead me to them. I regretfully postponed the initiation of offspring.

The Plookhh selected by the Beauty Contests were the very glory of our race. Each was differentiated from the other members of his sex by scores of characteristics. United in one family, they might well have produced Superplookhh.

With infinite graciousness, the tkan tkann told me that I had been considered most seriously for the nzred protagonist—only, my value as Shlestertrap's assistant being primary, another was selected in my place. "No matter," I told the chief as he soared away, "I have honors enough for one Plookh: my books runneth over."

The gasping srob represented the greatest problem and the tkan-character volunteered to fly him directly to the dome without waiting for the rest of us so that the finny one would not dry up and die. Then, with the nzred-character and the blap-character carrying the plant-like guur between them, we began our ascent of the tenth highest mountain.

Although the Season of Wind-Driven Rains was almost over, there were even more great spotted snakes than before crawling upon the dome; and, grappling with their morbid coils, were more slaving dodles than I remembered seeing at one time; even a few brinosaur ranged about now, in anticipation of the approaching Season of Early Floods. I deduced, in some surprise, that they considered the human a palat-able substitute for Plookhh.

I had gone ahead of my little band since I knew the terrain better and was more likely to attract Hogan Shlestertrap's attention. This was fortunate, for we had not worked halfway up the mountain before we were feverishly eluding what seemed to be the entire fauna of Venus. They poured off the dome in a great snapping, salivating horde, pausing occasionally to gouge or tear at their neighbors, but nonetheless pursuing us with a distressing concentration. I found additional cause to be grateful for the wise choices of the sex-chiefs: only really diversified Plookhh with the very latest survival characteristics could have come through that madness of frustrated glut-tony unscathed. Relatively unscathed.

It was only necessary for me to cross once in front of the robot in the outer com-partment of the dome. Gridnik-fast, the beam poured out and captured me, swing-ing thence to the rest of my elite family and carrying all of us through the open space of the dome which seemed to be materializing shut almost before we were inside.

I was particularly grateful, I recall, since the beam had snatched me from between the creepers of the largest sucking ivy I had ever stumbled upon. A helical tentacle is all very well, but it does not help over-much when one is too busy evading three liz-ard-birds to notice what lies in wait upon the ground.

One of the robots had already constructed a special tank for the srob, and he also rapidly found some soil into which the guur could root sighingly.

"That a real plant?" Shlestertrap inquired. He had changed from his previous cov-ering into a black garment becomingly decorated with red splotches which disguised his dome-shaped middle protuberance in a way I could not quite fathom. On his head, he now wore what he called a cap with the visor pointing behind him—a cus-tom, he explained, which was observed by stereo people in deference to their ancient greats.

"No, it is a guur, the Plookh which relies most on blending into its surroundings. Although it does derive some nourishment photosynthetically, it is not quite a veg-etable, retaining enough mobility to—"

"A guur, you call it? Helpless, huh? Got to be carried over the threshold? Keep still—I'm thinking!"

I throbbed out a translation. We all froze into silence. The srob, who had lifted his head out of the tank to survey the dome, began to strangle quietly in the open air.

Finally, Shlestertrap nodded and we all moved again. The mlenb flapped over and pushed the srob, who had become insensible, back under the surface of the tank.

"Yep," said our civilizer. "It adds up. I have the weenie. A little too pat for an artistic stereo, but I can always dress it up so no one will know the difference." He turned to me. "That's the big gimmick in this business—dressing it up so they can't tell it's the same thing they've been seeing since they got their first universal vaccination. If you dress it up enough, the sticks will always go nuts over it. Maybe the critics will make cracks, sure, but who reads the critics?"

Alas, I did not know.

Much time passed before I had extended conversation with the human again. First, it was necessary for me to teach English to the first Plookh thespians so that they could follow Shlestertrap's direction. Not very difficult, this: it simply required a short pe-riod of concentrated griggoing by the seven of them. I could now give them much terminology that even my ancestor, nzred fanobrel, had not been able to use; unfor-tunately, a good deal of Shlestertrap's phrase-shadings remained as nothing but unguessable semantic goals, and when it came to many attitudes and implements used exclusively upon Earth—we could do nothing but throw up our tentacles and flippers, our vines and talons, in utter helplessness.

Some day, however—not us, but one of our conceivable descendants, perhaps—we will learn the exact constituents of a "thingumajig."

After learning the language, the other Plookhh were taken in charge by the ro-bots—the same friendly creatures who would leave the dome occasionally to forage the fresh pink weeds that were essential to our diet—and told to do many incompre-hensible things against backgrounds that varied from the artificially constructed to the projected stereo.

Frequently, Shlestertrap would halt the robots in their fluid activity with booms and cameras and lights, turn to me and demand a significant bit of information about our habits that usually required my remembering every page of all our Books of Numbers to give an adequate reply.

Before I could finish, however, he generally signaled to the robots to begin once more—muttering to himself something like: "Oh, well, we can fake up a fair copy with more process work. If it only looks good, who cares about realism?"

Then again, he would express annoyance over the fact that, while some of us had heads, the mlenbb and nzredd had torso-enclosed brains, and the guur were the proud possessors of what the first ship's biologists had called a "dissolved nervous system."

"How can you get intriguing close-ups," Shlestertrap wailed, "when you don't know what part of the animal you want in them? You'd think these characters would get together and decide what they want to look like, instead of shortening my life with complications!"

"These are the most thoroughly differentiated Plookhh," I reminded him proudly. "The beauty contest winners."

"Yeah. I'll bet the homely ones are a real old-fashioned treat."

Thus, gently and generously, did he toil on the process of civilizing us. May his name be revered by any Plookhh that survive!

My only real difficulty was in gaining more knowledge. The robots were rather uncommunicative (we have not yet resolved their exact place in human affairs) and Hogan Shlestertrap explained that a genius like himself could not be bothered with the minutiae of stereographical mechanics. That was left

entirely to his metallic assistants.

Nevertheless, I persisted. My hunted race, I felt, expected me to gather all knowledge to which I was exposed for the building of our own technology. I asked Shlestertrap detailed questions about the operations of the sound robot who deftly maneuvered the writhing, almost-live microphone booms above the actors and scenery; I pestered him for facts on the great smell-camera with its peculiar, shimmering olfactory lens and its dials calibrated pungently from rose-constants to hydrogen-sulphide-constants.

Once, after a particularly long session, I came upon him in a compartment composing the score for our stereo. I had always found this music vaguely stimulating if obscure of use, and I was very curious as to how it was made.

This, let me say to his glory, he explained very patiently. "See, here's a sound-track of a Beethoven symphony and there's one of a Gershwin medley. I run off bits of each alternately into the orchestrator and flip the switch like so. The box joggles and bangs it around for a while—it can make more combinations than there are inches between here and Earth! Finally, out comes the consolidated sound-track, and we have a brand-new score for our stereo. Remember the formula: a little Beethoven, a little Gershwin, and lots and lots of orchestration."

I told him I would never forget it. "But what kind of machine makes the original Gershwin and Beethoven strips? And can either of them be used in any way under water against the brinosaur? And exactly what is involved in the process of the orchestrator joggling and banging? And how would we go about making—"

"Here!" He plucked a book from a table behind him. "I meant to give you this yesterday when you asked me how we connect tactions to the manipulating antenna. You want to know all about culture and how humans operate with it, huh? You want to know how our culture fits in with nonhumans, don't you? Well, read this and don't bother me until you do. Just keep busy going over it until you have it cold. About the most basic book in the place. Now, maybe I can get some quiet drinking out of the way."

My thanks poured at his retreating back. I retired to a corner with my treasure. The title, how inspiring it looked! *Abridged Regulations of the Interplanetary Cultural Mission, Annotated, with an Appendix of Standard Office Procedures for Solarian Missions.*

Most unhappily, my intellectual powers were not yet sufficiently developed to extract much that was useful from this great human repository of knowledge. I was still groping slowly through Paragraph 5, Correction Circular 16, of the introduction (*Pseudo-Mammalian Carnivores, Permissible Approaches to and Placating of for the Purpose of Administering the Binet-plex*) when a robot summoned me to Shlestertrap's presence.

"It's finished," he told me, waving aside a question I began to ask regarding a particularly elusive footnote. "Here, let me put that book back in the storeroom. I just gave it to you to keep you out of my hair. It's done, boy!"

"The stereo?"

He nodded. "All wrapped up and ready to preview. I have your friends waiting in the projection room."

There was a pause while he rose and walked slowly around the compartment. I waited for his next words, hardly daring to savor the impact of the moment. Our culture had been started!

"Look, Plookh, I've given you guys a stereo that, in my opinion, positively smashes the gong. I've locked the budget out of sight, and I've worked from deep down in the middle of my mind. Now, do you think you might do a little favor for old Shlestertrap in return?"

"Anything," I throbbed. "We would do anything for the unselfish genius who—"

"Okey-dandy. A couple of busybodies on Earth are prancing around and making a fuss about my being assigned to this mission, on the grounds that I never even had a course in alien psych. They're

making me into a regular curse of labor, using my appointment and a bunch of others from show business as a means of attacking the present administration on grounds of corruption and incompetence. I never looked at this job as anything more than a stop-gap until Hollywood finds that it just can't do without the authentic Shlestertrap Odor in its stereos—still, the good old bank account on Earth is growing nicely and right now I don't have any better place to go. It would be kind of nice and appreciative of you to give me a testimonial in the form of a stereo record that I can beam back to Earth. Sort of show humanity that you're grateful for what we're doing."

"I would be grateful in turn to be given an opportunity to show my gratitude," I replied. "It will take a little time, however, for me to compose a proper speech. I will start immediately."

He reached for my long tentacles and pulled me back into the compartment. "Fine! Now, you don't want to make up a speech of your own and give out with all kinds of errors that would make humans think you aren't worth the money we're spending on you? Of course you don't! I have a honey of a speech all written—just the thing they'll want to hear you say back home. Greasejob! You and Dentface get that apparatus ready for recording."

Then, while the robots manipulated the stereo-record, I read aloud the speech Shlestertrap had written from a copy he held up just out of camera range. I stumbled a bit over unfamiliar concepts—for example, passages where I extolled The Great Civilizer for teaching us English and explaining our complicated biological functions to us—but generally, the speech was no more than the hymn of praise that the man deserved. When I finished, he yelled: "Cut! Good!"

Before I had time to ask him the reasons for the seeming inconsistencies in the speech—I knew that, since he was human, they could not be mere errors—he had pushed me into the projection room where the Plookh actors waited. I thought I heard him mumble something about "That should hold the Gogarty crowd till the next election," but I was so excited over the prospect of the first Plookhian cultural achievement that I did nothing more than scurry to my place as the projectors started. Now, sometimes, I think perhaps—No.

The first stereo with an all-Plookh cast! Already, it is a commonplace, with all Plookh seeing it for the first time before they are more than six days out of the egg. But that preview, as it was called, was a moment when everything seemed to pause and offer us sanctuary. Our civilization seemed assured.

I decided that its murky passages were the result of one viewing and would disappear in time as we expanded intellectually.

You know what I mean. The beginning is interesting and delightful as the various sexes meet in different ways and decide to become a family. The matrimonial convention, although somewhat unusual procedurally, is fairly close to the methods in use at that time. But why does the guur suddenly proclaim she is insulted and bolt the convention?

Of course, you all know—or should—that our reservation of the pronoun "she" for guur dates from the dialogue in this stereo?

Again, why, after the guur leaves, do the others pursue her—instead of finding and mating with a more reasonable specimen? And the great spotted snake that notices the guur—we had thought till then that the guur is the one form of Plookh safe from these dread creatures: evidently we were wrong. In her flight, she passes tricephalops and sucking ivy: these ignore her; yet the great spotted snake suddenly develops a perverted fancy for her vines and tendrils.

And the battle, where the other six Plookhh fall upon and destroy the snake! Even the srob crawls out of the stream and falls gasping into the fray! It continues for a long period—the snake seems to be triumphing, logically enough—suddenly, the snake is dead.

I am an old nzred. I have seen that stereo hundreds of times, and many the ferocious spotted snake from whose jaws I have leaped. On the basis of my experience, I can only agree with the other oldsters among the Plookhh that the snake seems to have been strangled to death. I know this is not much help

and I know what it means taken together with our other difficulties—but as the nzred nzredd announced at the first public showing of the stereo: "What Plookh has done, Plookh can do!"

The rest of the stereo is comprehensible enough. Which guur, no matter what her reasons for leaving the chain originally, would not joyfully return to a family power-ful enough to destroy a great spotted snake? And even now we all laugh (all except mlenbb, that is) at the final sequence where the mlenb-character crawls into his burrow backward and almost breaks a flipper.

"Terrific, huh?" Shlestertrap inquired, when we had returned to his compartment. "And that process-work—it was out of this system, wasn't it? Can I mastermind a masterpiece, or can't I?"

I considered. "You can," I told him at last. "This stereo will affect our way of life more than anything else in nine thousand years of Plookh history."

He slapped his sides. "This stereo, artistically, has everything. The way I handled that finale was positively reminiscent of Chaplin in his bamboo-cane period with just a touch of the Marx Brothers and De Ska."

After a spasm of bottle-conjugating, he suggested: "Guess you want to chase in and get those robots to teach you how to handle projectors. I'll give you three com-plete sets and a whole slew of copies; you show some of your friends in the back-woods how to turn them on and off—then you can come back here and write the next stereo."

"Write the *next* stereo? I am overwhelmed, O Shlestertrap, but I don't quite un-derstand what I could write about. Have you not said all in this one? If there is more, I am afraid my uncivilized person is not capable of conceiving and organizing it."

"Not a matter of civilization," he told me impatiently. "Just a matter of a twist. You saw how this stereo ran—now you simply apply The Old Switcheroo."

"The Old Switcheroo?"

"The new angle—the twist—the tangent. No sense in using a good plot just the once. I'll make an artist out of you yet! Look—on second thought, maybe you're too new at this racket to get it after all. Was sort of hoping you'd carry the load while I rested up. But I guess I can knock out another stereo fast to give you the idea. Mean-while, suppose you get started on that projection course so that your buddies in the jangle can see what the Interplanetary Cultural Mission is doing for them."

Shortly thereafter, I was deposited outside the dome with the three sets of projec-tors. Again, I was fortunate in making my escape from the creatures who swarmed at me. I returned to the spot with forty young Plookhh I gathered from the neighbor-hood and, with the expenditure of much labor and life, we divided the equipment into small, somewhat portable groups and removed it to another mountain.

As rapidly as possible, I taught them the intricacies of operation I had learned from the robots. I had tactlessly requested one or two of these creatures from Hogan Shlestertrap, by the way, to aid us in the difficult task of shifting the equipment. "Not on your materialization," he had roared. "Isn't it enough that I send them out of the dome to get those orange weeds you guys are so nuts about? Two of my best robots—Greasejob and Dentface—are walking around with cracked bodies because some overgrown cockroach mistook them for an order of. I made a stereo for you people: now you carry the ball for a while." Naturally, I apologized.

When my assistants could work the projectors to my satisfaction, I divided them into three groups and sent two of them off with sets and a supply of stereo-film. I kept one group and set with me, and had a tkan carry word to the chief of his sex that all was ready.

Meanwhile, the nzred nzredd and twelve specially trained helpers had been trav-eling everywhere, grigging English to all Plookhh they met and ordering them to go forth and griggo likewise. This was necessary because that had been the language of the stereo: as a result, English has completely replaced our native language.

One of the groups I sent out was stationed in a relatively sheltered cove to which srobb and mlenbb

could come in comparative safety. The other, in a distant valley, exhibited chiefly to guurr, flinn and nzredd; my crew, on a mountain, to blapp and tkann. By showing the stereo to audiences of approximately two hundred Plookhh at a time, we were reaching the maximum number at all compatible with safety. Even so, performances were frequently interrupted by a pack of strinth who paused to feed upon us, by an occasional swarm of gridniks who descended on our engrossed mul-titudes with delighted drones. We changed our projection spots after every performance; but I was twice forced to train new groups of young Plookhh to replace those projectionists casually annihilated when the stereo-exhibition attracted some car-nivore's attention.

Not a good system, admittedly; but none better has yet been devised. We all know how dangerous it is to congregate. To translate into inadequate English: *"Too many Plookhh make a broth."* Nonetheless, it was imperative that the message of civilization be spread as widely and as rapidly as possible.

The message was spread, received and acted upon.

However much it may be to my discredit, I must confess that I felt some small and definite joy at belonging to an already-organized family unit. Whenever there-after I saw a matrimonial convention breaking up, the guur moving as rapidly as she could through the forest until she came to a great spotted snake, the other six members of her family immediately throwing themselves in a sort of hopeless enthusiasm upon the reptile—whenever I saw that spectacle which now, of course, became so frequent, I could not help but rejoice ingloriously in having my family's convention cycles behind me. I was too old for civilization.

Once, I remember, four successive matrimonial conventions involved the same snake. He became so gorged with Plookhh that he could not move from the scene of the feeding. Possibly incidents of this sort gave rise to what is known as the nzred magandu system which is used, when possible, at present. As you know, under this system, six families hold their matrimonial conventions together and the six guur perform the traditional civilized bolt in unison. When they come across a great spotted snake, all the other members of the six families fall upon it and, under the weight of their numbers, the snake is very often smothered to death. There are usually enough survivors to make at least one full family after the battle, the only important difficulty here being that this system creates a surplus of guurr. The so-called blap vintorin system is very similar.

In any event, despite the great odds, we Plookhh had learned the lesson of the stereo well and were beginning to live (though usually we did the opposite) as civilized beings who are ready for technological knowledge. Then—Yes, then came The Old Switcheroo.

The Season of Early Floods was in full tide when a flin pushed out of his ground passage and up the mountain where we had recently set our projectors anew.

"Hail, transmitter of culture," he wheezed. "I bear a message from the flin flinn who had it from the nzred nzredd who had it from the Shlestertrap himself. He wishes you to come to his dome immediately."

I was busy helping to swing the ponderous machinery around, and therefore called over my tentacle-joint: "The area between here and the tenth highest mountain is under water. Find some srobb who will convey me there."

"No time," I heard him say. "There is no time to gather waterporters. You will have to make the circuitous trip by land, and soon! The Shlestertrap is—"

Then came a horribly familiar gurgle and his speech was cut off. I spun round as my assistants scattered in all directions. A full-grown brinosaur had sneaked up the mountain behind the flin and sucked the burrower into his throat while he was concentrating on giving me important information.

I suppressed every logical impulse that told me to flee; however frightened, I must act like a representative of the civilized race which we Plookhh were becoming. I stood before the brinosaur's idiotically gleeful face and inquired: "What about the Shlestertrap? For the sake of all Plookhh, already

eaten and as yet unhatched, answer me quickly, O flin!"

From somewhere within the immense throat, the flin's voice came painfully in-distinct through the saliva which blocked its path. "Shlestertrap is going back to Earth. He says you must—"

The monster gulped and the bulge that was once a flin slid down the great neck and into the body proper. Only then, when he had burped his enjoyment and the first faint slaver of expectancy began in regard to me—only then, did I use the power of my helical tentacle to leap to one side and into a small grove of trees.

After swinging his head in a lazy curve, the brinosaur, morosely certain that there were no other unalerted Plookhh in the vicinity, turned and flapped slowly down the mountain. The moment he entered the screaming floods, I was out of concealment and detailing a party of three nzredd to follow me to the dome.

We picked our way painfully across a string of rocks, in a direction which, while leading away from the tenth highest mountain, would form part of a great arc de-signed to lead us to the dome across dry land.

"Can it be," one of the youngsters asked, "that Shlestertrap, observing our careful obedience to the principles laid down in the stereo, has decided that we have irrevocably joined the chain that must produce civilization and that his work is therefore finished?"

"I hope not. If that were true," I replied, "it would mean, from the rate of development I have observed, that our civilization would not make itself felt for several life-times beyond mine. Possibly he is returning to Earth to acquire the necessary materials for our next stage, that of technology."

"Good! The cultural stage through which we pass, while obviously necessary, is extremely damaging to our population figures. I am continually forced to revise my Book of Sevens in unhappy decrease of Plookhh. Not that the prospect of civilization for our race is not well worth the passing misery I feel at attending my first matrimonial convention two days from now. I only hope that our guur finds a comparatively small great spotted snake!"

Thus, discoursing pleasantly of hopes almost as delightful as the Hope—of a time when the power of Plookh domination would shake the very soil of Venus—we rolled damply the long distance to the dome. I lost only one assistant before the robot picked us up with his beam, and scurried rapidly to Shlestertrap's interior compartment.

The place was almost bare: I deduced that most of the mission's equipment had already been carried to the flame ship. Our civilizer sat on a single chair surrounded by multitudes of bottles, all of whom had already been conjugated to the point of extinction.

"Well," he cried, "if it isn't little plookhiyaki and his wedded nzred! Didn't think I could say that, did you? Sit down and take a load off your nzred!" I was glad to observe that while his voice was somewhat thick, his attitude seemed to express a desire to be more communicative than usual.

"We hear that you return to Hollywood California U.S.A. Earth," I began.

"Wish it was that, laddie. Wish it was that little thing. Finest place in the universe—Hollywood Calif etcetera. Nope. I been recalled, that's what I been. The mission's closed."

"But *why*?"

"This thing—Economy. At least that's what they said in the bulletin they sent me. 'Due to necessary retrenchment in many government services—' Don't you believe it! It's those big busybodies! Gogarty's probably laughing his head off down in Sahara University: he's the guy started all that hullabubballoo about me in first place. And me, I gotta go back and start life all over again."

Here he put his head down between his arms and shook his shoulders. After a while, he rolled off the chair and onto the floor. A robot entered, carrying a packing box. He set Shlestertrap back in the chair and left, the heavy box still under his arm.

I could not help a slight feeling of pride at the sight of the awe with which the two young nzredd regarded my obvious intimacy with the human. They were more than a little confused by his alien communicative pattern; but they were as desperately determined as I to memorize every nuance of this portentous last conversation. This was fortunate: the fact that their versions of this affair agreed with mine helped to strengthen my position in the difficult days that lay ahead.

"And our civilizing process," I asked. "Is it to stop?"

"Huh? What civil—Oh, that! No, sir! Little old Shlesty's taken care of his friends. Always takes care. Got the new stereo ready. One fine job! Wait—I'll get it for you."

He rose slowly to his feet. "Where's a robot? Never one of 'em around when you want one of 'em around. Hey, Highsprockets!" he bellowed. "Get me the copies of the stereo in the next room or something. The *new* stereo.

"Got it all cut yesterday," he continued, when the robot had given him the pack-ages. "Didn't really finish it the way I wanted to; but when bulletin came, I just sent all your actor friends on home. I don't work for nothing, I don't. But I sat up and cut it into right length, and what do you know? It came out fine. Here."

I distributed the packages equally among the three of us. "And does it contain that wonderful device you mentioned—The Old Switcheroo?"

"Contains nothing else but. As neat a switcheroo on an original plot as Hogan Shlestertrap has ever turned. Yop. It's got all you need. You just notice the way I worked it and pretty soon you'll be making stereos in competition with Hollywood. Which is more than I'll be doing."

"We do not even faintly aspire to such heights," I told him humbly. "We will be sufficiently grateful for the gift of civilization."

"Thass all right," he waved a hand at us as he swayed. "Don't *thank* me. Thank *me*. In those two stereos you have two of the finest love stories ever told, and done by the latest Hollywood methods from one of its greatest directors in his grandest—What I mean to say is, they told me to mission you some culture and I missioned you culture and if they don't like it, they can—"

At this point, he crumpled suddenly into a huddle upon the chair. We waited patiently for any further disclosures, but, as he seemed preoccupied with a peculiarly human manifestation, we made our departures with no further formality.

Once safely away from the dome, I instructed my assistants to hurry to our two distant installations and prepare them for immediate projection of our new stereo.

"Remember," I called after them. "Any change the First Stereo has made in our way of life will be as nothing to what will be done by The Old Switcheroo."

And I was right. The introduction of The Old Switcheroo—

I saw it myself for the first time along with over a hundred other Plookhh upon our mountain. After it was over, I was as bereft of speech as the rest. After a long pause in which no one dared to comment, the nzred nzredd suggested I project the First Stereo again with The Old Switcheroo immediately following so that we could compare them more easily.

This was done, but it proved of little help.

The problem is for you to solve. May my recounting of the entire history of the relationship between Hogan Shlestertrap and myself be of some value in finding a solution! I am old, and, as I have said, ripe for the gullet; you have been hatched in the very midst of this preliminary period of our culture—it is for you to find the way, the way that *must* be there, out of this impasse in which we shuttle unproductively.

You are but a few days from the egg, but you have already seen both the First Stereo and The Old Switcheroo as many times as conditions permit. You should know that there is a single question common to both of them.

The one essential point of difference between the First Stereo and The Old Switcheroo is that, in the latter, the srob, mlenb, tkan, flin, blap and nzred bolt the matrimonial convention, leaving the guurr to pursue them affectionately and finally rescue them from the great spotted snake; while, in the former, the reverse occurs. The loving reunion at the end is the same in both, except that the mlenb, instead of backing into his muddy burrow in the final scene of The Old Switcheroo, slips and falls heavily across it.

After the preliminary exhibitions, the guurr began insisting loudly that the hu-mans could not have expected them—weak and slow-moving as they are—to de-stroy great spotted snakes. Confronted with the specific evidence, however, they fell back on the claim that the First Stereo depicted the civilized state; and the second, an alternative barbarity.

To this, the other six sexes replied that The Old Switcheroo was not an alternative, but the consummation of our cultural process. Also, as a result of the mores devel-oped with the First Stereo, there was now a disgusting and unprecedented surplus of guurr: what better way to dispose of them than in this extremely selective one? The snakes, when sufficiently irritated by attacking guurr, *will* swallow them it seems—

The mlenbb, of course, had their own difficulty: whether and how to enter their burrows immediately after the convention. But this was a minor matter.

Some of the new Plookh families attempted to follow the patterns indicated in the First Stereo; others, those in the second. A very few completely barbaric individuals, oblivious to the high destiny of their species, withdrew from the Plookh community and tried to return to the primitive methods of our ancestors; but since few high-variables cared to attach themselves to so atavistic a group, their offspring are being exterminated rapidly—and good riddance.

Most Plookhh remain in two great divisions: the guurr, who believe in the civiliz-ing logic of the First Stereo, and the other sexes who accept only the amendment of The Old Switcheroo. Then, of course, there are a few altruistic nzredd and flinn who agree with the guurr, and vice-versa...

We need the cooperation of all seven sexes for successful reproduction. But how can we achieve that, Plookhh argue, unless we know which is the stereo of civiliza-tion? To be so close to liberation from our gustatory bondage, and because of sheer intellectual inadequacy—For the past eleven cycles, not a single matrimonial con-vention has been celebrated.

As a member of a pre-Shlestertrap family, I take no sides. My convention is past: yours, my diversified nzreddi, lies ahead. I am certain of one thing.

The answer is to be found in neither one stereo nor the other. The answer involves unity of the two: a core of relationship which both must share and which, when dis-covered, will dissolve their apparent inconsistency. Remember, these stereos are the product of a highly civilized creature.

Where is that core of relationship to be found? In the original stereo? In The Old Switcheroo? Or in that book I never finished—*Abridged Regulations of the Interplanetary Cultural Mission, Annotated, with an Appendix of Stan-dard Office Procedure for Solarian Missions?*

Humanity has solved such problems, and today flicks stars from its path. We must solve it or die as a race, albeit a civilized race.

We will not solve it—and this is most important—we will not solve this problem by the disgusting, utterly futile expedient to which more and more of our young are daily resorting. I refer to the unmentionable and perverted six-sex families...

Afterword

For what the information may be worth, the original title was "The Old Switcheroo." The editor

purchasing the story changed the title, which, while not to my taste, is the one that has been used by anthologists.

In terms of sheer length, "Venus and the Seven Sexes" held the record for many years among my stories. I wrote it surrounded by thumb-tacked charts showing which sex did what and how and to whom. My brother, Morton, sat in a corner of my study through-out, feverishly working out the chromosome patterns. When I finished the story, we had a small ceremony, and Morton formally witnessed my oath: from that day on, I would avoid anything but human characters and the very simplest plots. Well, time passes and wounds heal. I have broken that oath many times—but never since have I been caught in coils of such intricacy.

The story drew my first memorable fan letter, a lovely and gracious comment from Robert Heinlein. I was a very new, very young science-fiction writer, and getting a tribute from one of the two men whose work had shaped mine (the other was Henry Kuttner) simply overwhelmed me. Even praise from a very famous geneticist didn't mean as much.

Three further notes: I'm not as fond of the piece as I was years ago (the Shlestertrap passages creak badly and are badly dated) but, as Aldous Huxley remarked in a similar context, the younger writer's self is entitled to have his own story stand—therefore, no late-date rewrite.

The Venus in the piece is the Venus we knew so little about in 1947. It's a jungle Venus used by many writers of the time, and it's one on which this story was then at least imag-inable.

Third. I once asked Heinlein if his use of *grok* in *Stranger in a Strange Land* had been influenced at all by my use of *griggo* in "Venus and the Seven Sexes." He looked startled, then thought about it for a long time. Finally, he shrugged. "It's possible, very possible," he said.

Do me something. I like that "very."

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