

ONE LOVE HAVE I

Robert F. Young

It had been one of those rural suppers, which were being revived at the time. Philip had just arrived in the little academic village that evening and he had just finished unpacking his clothes and his books. There had been nothing more for him to do till morning when he was due to report at the university, and feeling restless, and feeling a little lonely too (as he'd admitted to Miranda later), he had left the boarding house with the intention of wandering about the village till he was tired enough to sleep. He had hardly gone two blocks, however, before he had come to the brightly-lit community hall where the supper was in progress, and strangely intrigued, perhaps motivated by the stirring of some pleasant racial memory, he had paused before the entrance.

Through the wide-flung doors he had seen the long table in the middle of the floor, and the food-laden tables, each with a girl in blue behind it, lining the walls. He had seen the men and women passing the food tables, carrying trays, and he had heard the clatter of dishes and the reassuring sound of homely voices. He had noticed the sign above the entrance then, and the simplicity of it had touched him: 77c COMMUNITY SUPPER—SQUARE DANCE TO FOLLOW. It had touched him and filled him with a yearning he hadn't experienced since he was a boy, and he had climbed the wide steps that led to the open doors and stepped into the hall. It was a warm night in September and the curtains at the big windows were breathing in a gentle wind.

He saw her instantly. She was behind the ham sandwich table on the opposite side of the room, tall, dark-haired, her face a lovely flower above the blue petals of her collar. The moment he stepped through the doorway she became the cynosure of the scene, and everything else—tables, diners, walls, floor—became vague extraneous details which an artist adds to a picture to accentuate its central subject.

He was only dimly aware of the other people as he walked across the room. He was halfway to her table before she looked up and saw him. Their eyes touched then, her blue ones and his gray; touched and blended, achieved a moment apart from time. And he had fallen in love with her, and she with him, and it didn't matter what the Freudian psychologists said about that kind of love because the Freudian psychologists simply didn't know about that kind of love, about the way it was to walk into a room and see a girl and know instantly, without understanding how you knew—or caring even—that she, and she alone, was the girl for you, the girl you wanted and had always wanted, would want forever . . .

Forever and a day ...

His hands were shaking again and he made them place a cigarette between his lips and then he made them light it. But when they had finished the task and the first pale exhalation of smoke was hovering in the little compartment, they were still shaking, and he held them tightly together on his lap and forced his eyes to look out the window of the monorail car at the passing countryside.

The land was a tired green, a September green. There was goldenrod on hillsides, and the tips of sumac leaves were just beginning to redden. The car swayed as the overhead rail curved around a hill and spanned a valley. It was a lovely valley but it wasn't a familiar one. However, Philip wasn't perturbed; the car was still too far from Cedarville for him to be seeing familiar places. He'd never been much for traveling and it would be some time yet before he could start looking for remembered hills and forests, valleys, roads, houses—houses sometimes stood for a hundred years. Not very often, maybe, but once in a while. It wasn't too much to ask.

He lay his head back on the pneumatic headrest and tried to relax. That was what the Deep Freeze Rehabilitation Director had instructed him to do. "Relax. Keep your mind empty. Let things enter into your awareness gradually, and above all don't think of the past" Relax, Philip thought. Don't think of the past. The past is past, past, past . . .

The car swayed again and his head turned slightly. The monorail bordered a spaceport at this point, but he had never seen a spaceport before and for a moment he thought that the car was passing through

a vast man-made desert. Then he saw the lofty metallic towers pointing proudly into the afternoon sky, and presently he realized that they weren't towers at all, but ships instead.

He stared at them, half-frightened. They were one of the phenomena of the new era for which he was unprepared. There had been spaceships in his own era of course, but there hadn't been very many of them and they had been rather puny affairs, strictly limited to interplanetary travel. They bore no resemblance to the magnificent structures spread out before his eyes now.

The Sweike Drive hadn't been discovered till the year of his trial, and he began to realize the effect it had had on space travel during the ensuing century. In a way it was not surprising. Certainly the stars were a greater incentive to man than the lifeless planets of the home system ever could have been.

Alpha Centauri, Sirius, Altair, Vega—one of the ships had gone as far as Arcturus, the Rehabilitation Director had told him. It had returned scarcely six months ago after an absence of almost sixty-five years. Philip shook his head. It was data he could not accept, data too fantastic for him to accept.

He had always considered himself modern. He had always kept abreast of his age and accepted change as a part of the destiny of man. Scientific progress had never dismayed him; rather, it had stimulated him, and in his chosen field of political philosophy he had been far ahead of his contemporaries, both in vision and in practical application. He had been, in fact, the epitome of modern civilized man . . .

One hundred years ago . . .

Wearily he turned his eyes from the window and regarded the gray walls of the compartment. He remembered his cigarette when it nipped his fingers, and he dropped it into the disposal tray. He picked up the magazine he had been trying to read some time before and tried to read it again, but his mind stumbled over unfamiliar words, over outrageous idioms, faltered before undreamed-of concepts. The magazine slipped from his fingers to the seat again and he let it lie there.

He felt like an old, old man, yet, in a subjective sense he wasn't old at all. Despite the fact that he had been born one hundred and twenty-seven years ago, he was really only twenty-seven. For the years in the Deep Freeze didn't count—a hundred-year term in suspended animation was nothing more than a wink in subjective time.

He lay his head back on the headrest again. Relax, he told himself. Don't think of the past. The past is past past past . . . Tentatively he closed his eyes; The moment he did so he knew it had been a mistake, but it was too late then, for the time stream already had eddied back more than a hundred years to a swiftly flowing September current . . .

It had been a glorious day for a picnic and they had discovered a quiet place on a hill above the village. There was a cool spring not far away, and above their heads an enormous oak spread its branches against a lazy autumn sky. Miranda had packed liverwurst sandwiches in little pink bags and she had made potato salad. She spread a linen tablecloth on the grass, and they ate facing each other, looking into each other's eyes. A light wind gamboled about them, left ephemeral footprints on the hillside.

The potato salad had been rather flat, but he had eaten two helpings so that she wouldn't suspect that he didn't like it; and he'd also eaten two of the liverwurst sandwiches, though he didn't care for liverwurst at all. After they finished eating they drank coffee, Miranda pouring it from the large picnic thermos into paper cups. She had been very careful not to spill a drop, but she had spilt a whole cup instead, on his shirtsleeve. She had been contrite and on the verge of tears, but he had only loved her all the more; because her awkwardness was as much a part of her as her dark brown hair, as her blue eyes, as her dimples and her smile. It softened the firm maturity of her young woman's body, lent her movements a schoolgirlish charm; put him at ease in the aura of her beauty. For it was reassuring to know that so resplendent a goddess as Miranda had human frailties just as lesser creatures did.

After the coffee they had reclined in the shade, and Miranda had recited "Afternoon on a Hill" and Philip had remembered some of Rupert Brooke's "The Old Vicarage, Grantchester." Miranda was in her final year at the university—she was twenty-one—and she was majoring in English Literature. That had put them on common ground from the start, for Philip had loved literature since the moment he had

opened Huckleberry Finn as a boy, and during the ensuing years he had never lost contact with it.

He had been affecting a pipe at the time (a pipe lent you a deperately-needed dignity when you were only twenty-six and commencing your first semester of teaching), and Miranda had filled it for him, holding his lighter over the bowl while he puffed the tobacco into ruddy life . . . It had been such a splendid afternoon, such a glorious afternoon, filled with September wind and September sunshine, with soft words and quiet laughter. The sun was quite low when they prepared to leave, and Philip hadn't wanted to leave at all. Miranda had seemed reluctant too, folding the linen tablecloth slowly, being far more meticulous than she usually was when she folded things, and then picking up the bowl half-filled with potato salad, intending to set it in the picnic basket. She didn't quite make the basket, however, for the bowl was large and clumsy and she was using only one hand. It escaped her fingers somehow, and overturned, and his lap was just beneath. That had been the last time he had ever worn his Madagascar slacks.

Her eyes had become so big and so round with dismay that he would have laughed if they had been anyone else's eyes besides Miranda's. You could never laugh at Miranda's eyes; they were too deep and too blue. He had only smiled instead, and said it didn't matter, and wiped his slacks with his handkerchief. Then he had seen her tears, and he had seen her standing there helplessly, tall and gawky, a child really, a lovely child who had become a woman a little too soon, and a beautiful woman too. And something within him had collapsed and a softness had spread all through him, and he had taken her into his arms and said, "Miranda, Miranda. Will you marry me, Miranda?"

The spaceport was far behind and the car was twisting through hills, humming on its overhead rail. It skimmed the treetops of a forest and passed high above a river. Looking down at the river bank, Philip saw his first familiar landmark.

It was nothing more than a pile of crumbled masonry now, overgrown with river weeds and sumac, but once, he knew, yesterday or a hundred years ago, it had been a public villa, and he had spent an afternoon on one of its sun-splashed patios, sipping cocktails and idly watching the white flurries of sails on the blue water below. And thinking of nothing, absolutely nothing ...

Except Miranda.

Desperately he forced her out of his mind. It had been all right to think of her a century ago. It wasn't now. He couldn't think of her now because thinking of her tore him apart; because he had a reality to face and if he thought of her the way she had been a hundred years ago he wouldn't be able to face it—he wouldn't be able to search for her in the Cedarville cemetery and put flowers on her grave.

The Rehabilitation Director had told him that in a way his sentence had been merciful, merciful by accident of course, and not design. It would have been far worse, the Rehabilitation Director had said, for him to have been sentenced for only fifty years and then to have gone home, a man of twenty-seven, to a wife who had just passed seventy-two.

But it was naive to speak of mercy, even accidental mercy, in connection with the age of the Congressional Regime. An age that could condemn a man to suspended animation, tear him forcibly from the moment in time where he belonged, to be resurrected decades later into a moment in time where he did not belong—an age like that had no mercy, had no conception of the meaning of the word. Such an age was brutal, or more brutal, or less brutal; but it was never merciful.

And an age like the present one, while it had rediscovered mercy, was incapable of bestowing it upon a resurrected criminal. It could apologize to him for the cruelty of the preceding age, and it could remunerate him handsomely for the lost years, make him independent for life; but it could not give him back that moment in time that was uniquely his own, it could not bring back the soft smile and the unforgettable laughter of the woman he loved.

It could not obliterate a cemetery lot with a grave that had no right to be there, a grave that had not been there a subjective yesterday ago. It could not erase the words: Miranda Loring, b. 2024, d. 20—. Or was it 21—?—he couldn't know of course, not yet, but he hoped she'd lived long and happily, and that she'd remarried and had children. She had been meant to have children. She had been too full of love not to have had them.

But if she had remarried, then her name wouldn't be Miranda Loring. It would be Miranda something else, Miranda Green, perhaps, or Miranda Smith; and perhaps she had moved away from Cedarville, perhaps he was going home for nothing. No, not for nothing. He'd at least be able to trace her from Cedarville, trace her to wherever she'd gone to live, find her grave and cover it with forget-me-nots—forget-me-nots had been her favorite flower—and shed a tear on some quiet afternoon, her kiss of a hundred years ago a warm memory on his lips.

He got up in the gently swaying compartment and stepped over to the water cooler and dialed a drink. He had to do something, anything at all, to distract his mind. And the dial was so simple, so child-simple, requiring but the flick of his finger, and no thought, no attention. It could not interrupt the flow of his thoughts even briefly, and the cool taste of the water only gave the flow impetus, sent it churning through his mind, wildly, turning his knees weak, sending him staggering back to the seat, his grief a tight-packed lump swelling upward from his chest to his throat, and the memories, released, flowing freely now, catching him up and carrying him back to the light days, to the bright glorious days, back to his finest moment ...

It had been a simple wedding. Miranda had worn blue and Philip had worn his academic dacrons. The Cedarville justice of the peace had performed the ceremony, being very brusque about it, saying the words as fast as he could and even holding out his hand for the fee the moment he had finished. But Philip had not minded. Nothing seemed ugly to him that day, not even the November rain that began to fall when they left the justice's house, not even the fact that he had been unable to obtain leave of absence from the university. The wedding took place on Friday night and that gave them Saturday and Sunday; but two days weren't enough for a trip, and they decided to spend their honeymoon in the little house Philip had bought on Maple Street.

It was an adorable house, Miranda said for the hundredth time when they paused before it in the rain. Philip thought so too. It was set well back from the street and there were two catalpa trees in the front yard, one on either side of the little walk. There was a tiny porch, latticed on each side, and a twentieth-century paneled door.

He had carried her over the threshold, and set her down in the middle of the living room. All of his books were there, on built-in shelves on either side of the open fireplace, and Miranda's knickknacks covered the mantel. The new parlor suite matched the mauve-gray curtains.

She had been shy when he kissed her, and he hadn't known quite what to say. Being alone together in their own house involved an intimacy for which neither of them had been prepared, despite all the whispered phrases and stolen kisses, the looks passed in the university corridors, the afternoons shared, and the autumn evenings walking together along leaf-strewn streets. Finally she had said, "I'll make some coffee," and had gone into the kitchen. The first thing she had done was to drop the coffee canister, and there was the coffee, dark against the gleaming floor, and there was Miranda, her blue eyes misted, lovely in her blue dress, a goddess in the room, his goddess; and then a goddess in his arms, soft-lipped and pliant, then warm and suddenly tight-pressed against him, her arms about his neck and her dark hair soft against his face . . .

A village showed in the distance, between wooded hills. It was a deserted village and it had fallen into ruin, but there were remnants of remembered buildings still standing and Philip recognized it as a little town not far from Cedarville.

He had very few memories associated with it, so he experienced but little pain. He experienced fear instead, for he knew that very soon the car would be slowing, that shortly he would be stepping down to the rotting platform of the Cedarville station. And he knew that he would be seeing another deserted village, one with many memories, and he was afraid that he couldn't endure the sight of remembered streets choked with weeds, of beloved houses fallen into decay, of vacant staring windows that long ago had glowed with warmth and life.

The Rehabilitation Director had explained about the deserted villages, the emptying cities, the approaching desuetude of Earth. Interstellar Travel had given back the dream that Interplanetary Travel

had taken away. Arid Venus and bleak Mars were uninhabitable, and the ice-choked outer planets weren't planets at all, but wheeling glaciers glinting malevolently in pale sunlight. Alpha Centauri 4 was something else, however, and Sirius 41 was a dream come true.

The Sweike Drive had delivered Man from the dilemma in which his proclivity to overproduce himself had involved him, and Earth was losing its population as fast as ships could be built to transport colonists to the stars. There were colonies as far out as Vega and before long there would be one in the Arcturus system. Except for the crews who manned the ships, interstellar runs were a one-way proposition. People went out to distant suns and settled in spacious valleys, in virgin timberlands, at the feet of unexploited mountains. They did not return. And it was better that way, the Rehabilitation Director had said, for a one-way ticket resolved the otherwise irresolvable problem of the Lorentz transformation.

Philip looked out at the tumbled green hills through which the car was passing. It was late afternoon, and long shadows lay coolly in deep valleys. The sun was low in the sky, reddening, and around it cumulus clouds were becoming riotous with color. A wind wrinkled the foliage of new forests, bent the meadow grass on quiet hillsides.

He sighed. Earth was sufficient for him. The stars could give him nothing that he could not find here: a woodland to walk in, a stream to read by, a blue sky to soften his sorrow ...

The tumbled hills gave way to fields, and the fields ushered in a vaguely familiar stand of cedars. He became aware that the car was slowing, and glancing up at the station screen, he saw the nostalgic name spelled out in luminescent letters: CEDARVILLE. He got up numbly and pulled his slender valise from the overhead rack. His chest was tight and he could feel a throbbing in his temple.

Through the window he caught glimpses of outlying houses, of collapsed walls and sagging roofs, of moldering porches and overgrown yards. For a moment he thought that he couldn't go through with it, that he couldn't force himself to go through with it. Then he realized that the car had stopped, and he saw the compartment door slide open and the metallic steps leaf out. He descended the steps without thinking, down to the reinforced platform. His feet had hardly touched the ancient timbers before the car was in motion again, humming swiftly away on its overhead rail, losing itself in the haze of approaching evening.

He stood without moving for a long time. The utter silence that precedes evening in the country was all around him. In the west, the wake of the sun was deepening from orange to scarlet, and the first night shadows were creeping in from the east.

Presently he turned and started up the street that led to the center of the village. He walked slowly, avoiding the clumps of grass that had thrust up through the cracks and crevices in the old macadam, ducking beneath the low limbs of tangled maples. The first houses began to appear, standing forlornly in their jungles of yards. Philip looked at them and they looked back with their sunken staring eyes, and he looked quickly away.

When he reached the point where the street sloped down into the little valley where the village proper lay, he paused. The cemetery was on the opposite slope of the valley and to reach it he would have to pass Maple Street, the community hall, the university, and half a hundred other remembered places. No matter how much he steeled himself, he would experience the tug of a thousand associations, relive a thousand cherished moments.

Suddenly his strength drained from him and he sat down on his upended valise. What is hell? he asked himself. Hell, he answered himself, is the status reserved for the individuals of a totalitarian state who voice truths contrary to the rigid credo of that state; who write books criticizing the self-appointed guardians of mass man's intellectual boundaries.

Hell is what remains to a man when everything he loves has been taken away ...

It had been a modest book, rather thin, with an academic jacket done in quiet blue. It had been published during the fall of the same year he had married Miranda, and at first it had made no stir at all. The name of it had been The New Sanhedrin.

Then, during the winter, it had caught the collective eye of that subdivision of the Congressional State

known as the Subversive Literature Investigative Body, and almost immediately accusations had begun to darken the front pages of newspapers and to resound on the newscasts. The SUB had wasted no time. It set out to crucify Philip, the way the high priests of the Sanhedrin had set out to crucify Christ over two thousand years ago.

He had not believed they would go so far. In developing his analogy between the Congressional State and the Sanhedrin, demonstrating how both guarded their supreme power by eliminating everyone who deviated from the existent thought-world, he had anticipated publicity, perhaps even notoriety. He had never anticipated imprisonment, trial, and condemnation; he had never dreamed that a political crime could rate the supreme punishment of that new device of inhuman ingenuity which had supplanted the chair and the gas chamber and the gallows—the Suspended Animation Chambers popularly known as the Deep Freeze.

He had underestimated the power of his own prose and he had underestimated the power of the group his prose had censured. He had forgotten that totalitarian governments are always on the lookout for scapegoats; someone to make an example of, a person with few funds and with no political influence, and preferably a person engaged in one of the professions which the mass of men have always resented. Specifically, an obscure political philosopher.

He had forgotten, but he had remembered. He had remembered on that bleak morning in April, when he heard the puppet judge intone the sentence—"One hundred years suspended animation for subversive activities against the existent governing body, term to begin September 14, 2046 and to expire September 14, 2146. Gradien cell locks to be employed, so that any attempt by future governing authorities to alleviate said term shall result in the instant death of the prisoner . . ."

The months between April and September had fled like light. Miranda visited him every day, and the two of them tried to force the rest of their lives into fleeting seconds, into precious moments that kept slipping through their fingers. In May they celebrated Philip's birthday, and in July, Miranda's. The celebration in each case consisted of a "Happy Birthday, darling," and a kiss stolen behind the omnipresent guard's back.

And all the while he had seen the words in her eyes, the words she had wanted to say desperately and couldn't say, the words, "I'll wait for you, darling." And he knew that she would have waited if she only could have, that she would have waited gladly; but no woman could wait for you a hundred years, no matter how much she loved you, no matter how faithful she was.

He had seen the words in her eyes in the last moment, had seen them trembling on her lips; and he had known what not being able to say them had done to her. He had seen the pain in the soft lines of her childlike face, in the curve of her sensitive mouth, and he had felt it in her farewell kiss—the anguish, the despair, the hopelessness. And he had stood there woodenly before the elevator, between the guards, unable to cry because tears were inadequate, unable to smile because his lips were stiff, because his cheeks were stone, and his jaw granite.

She was the last thing he saw before the elevator door slid shut, and that was as it should have been. She was standing in front of the Deep Freeze window and behind her, behind the cruel interstices of wire mesh, the blue September sky showed, the exact hue of her eyes. That was the way he had remembered her during the descent to the underground units and along the clammy corridor to his refrigerated cell ...

The days of dictatorships, whether they be collective or individual, are numbered. The budding dictatorship of Philip's day was no more than an ugly memory now. The Sweike Drive had thwarted it, had prevented it from coming into flower. For man's frustrations faded, when he found that he could reach the stars; and without frustrations to exploit, no dictatorship can survive.

But the harm small men do outlives them, Philip thought. And if that axiom had been true before the advent of the Deep Freeze, it was doubly true now. With the Deep Freeze man had attained Greek tragedy.

He lit a cigarette and the bright flame of his lighter brought the deepening shadows of the street into bold relief. With a shock he realized that night had fallen, and looking up between the tangled trees, he saw the first star.

He stood up and started down the sloping street. As he progressed, more stars came out, bringing the ancient macadam into dim reality. A night wind came up and breathed in the trees, whispered in the wild timothy that had pre-empted tidy lawns, rattled rachitic shutters.

He knew that seeing the house would only cause him pain, but it was a pain he had to endure, for homecoming would not be complete until he had stepped upon his own doorstep. So when he came to Maple Street he turned down the overgrown sidewalk, making his way slowly between giant hedges and riotous saplings. For a moment he thought he saw the flicker of a light far down the street, but he could not be sure.

He knew of course that there was very little chance that the house would still be standing—a hundred years is a long time for a house to live—that if it were still standing it would probably be changed beyond recognition, decayed beyond recognition.

And yet, it was still standing and it had not changed at all. It was just the same as it had been when he had left it over a hundred years ago, and there was a light shining in the living-room window.

He stood very still in the shambles of the street. The house isn't real, he told himself. It can't be real. I won't believe that it's real until I touch it, until I feel its wood beneath my fingertips, its floor beneath my feet. He walked slowly up the little walk. The front lawn was neatly trimmed and there were two tiny catalpa trees standing in newly turned plots of ground. He mounted the steps to the latticed porch and the steps were solid beneath his feet and gave forth the sound of his footsteps.

He touched the print lock of the door with the tip of his ring finger and the door obediently opened. Diffidently he stepped over the threshold and the door swung gently to behind him.

There was a mauve-gray parlor suite in the living room and it matched the mauve-gray curtains on the windows. Pine knots were ruddy in the open fireplace and his books stood in stately rows on the banking built-in shelves. Miranda's knickknacks covered the mantel.

His easy chair was drawn up before the fire and his slippers were waiting on the floor beside it. His favorite pipe reposed on a nearby end table and a canister of his favorite tobacco stood beside it. On the arm of the chair was a brand new copy of *The New Sanhedrin*.

He stood immobile just within the door, trying hard to breathe. Then he superimposed a rigid objectivity upon the subjective chaos of his thoughts, and forced himself to see the room as it really was and not as he wished it to be.

The lamp in the window was like the lamp Miranda had kept in the window a hundred years ago, but it wasn't the same lamp. It was a duplication. And the parlor suite was much like the one that had been in the room a hundred years ago when he had carried Miranda over the threshold, and yet it wasn't quite the same, and neither were the curtains. There were differences in the material, in the design—slight differences, but apparent enough if you looked for them. And his easy chair—that was a duplication too, as were his slippers and his pipe; *The New Sanhedrin*.

The fireplace was the same, and yet not quite the same: the pattern of the bricks was different, the bricks themselves were different, the mantel was different. And the knickknacks on the mantel ...

He choked back a sob as he walked over to examine them more closely, for they were not duplications. They were originals and time had been unkind to them. Some of them were broken and a patina of the years covered all of them. They were like children's toys found in an attic on a rainy day ...

He bent over his books, and they were originals too. He pulled one from the shelf and opened it. The yellowed pages betrayed the passage of the years and he replaced it tenderly. Then he noticed the diary on the topmost shelf.

He took it down with trembling hands, opened and turned its pages. When he saw the familiar handwriting, he knew whose diary it was and suddenly his knees were weak and he could not stand, and he collapsed into the easy chair before the fire.

Numbly he turned the pages to the first entry. It was dated September 15, 2146 . . .

I walked down the steps, the stone slabs of steps that front the tomb in which men are buried alive, and I walked through the streets of the city.

I walked through the streets, the strange streets, past hordes of indifferent people. Gradually I

became aware of the passing hours, the fleeting minutes, the swift-flying seconds; and each second became an unbearable pain, each minute a dull agony, each hour a crushing eternity ...

I do not know how I came to the spaceport. Perhaps God directed my footsteps there. But the moment I saw the shimmering spires of the new ships pointing into the September sky, everything I had ever read concerning the Sweike Drive coalesced blindingly in my mind, and I knew what I had to do.

A clock which is in motion moves slower than a stationary clock. The difference is imperceptible at ordinary velocities, but when the speed of light is approached, the difference is enormous.

The Sweike Drive approaches the speed of light. It approaches the speed of light as closely as it can be approached, without both men and ship becoming pure energy.

A clock on a ship employing the Sweike Drive would barely move at all ...

Not daring to believe, he skipped a page ...

September 18, 2146—They tell me it will take two years! Two of my sweet, my precious years to become a space-line stewardess! But there's no other way, no other way at all, and my application is already in. I know they will accept it—with everyone clamoring for the stars the need for ship's personnel is ...

His hands were shaking uncontrollably and the pages escaped from his fingers, days, months, years fluttering wildly by. He halted them finally ...

June 3, 2072 (Sirius 41)—I have measured time by many moving clocks, and moving clocks are kind. But when planet-fall arrives, stationary clocks take over, and stationary clocks are not kind. You wait in some forsaken port for the return run and you count each minute and resent its passage bitterly. For over the decades, the minutes add together into months and years and you are afraid that despite the moving clocks, you will be too old after all ...

The pages escaped again and he stopped them at the final entry ...

February 9, 2081—Today I was officially notified that my application for the Arcturus run has been accepted! I have been in a kind of ecstatic trance ever since, dreaming and planning, because I can dream and plan now! Now I know that I shall see my beloved again, and I shall wear a white gardenia in my hair, and the perfume he likes the best, and I shall have our house rebuilt and everything in it restored—there'll be plenty of time if the 65-year estimate is correct; and when my beloved is released I shall be there waiting to take him in my arms, and though I shall not be as young as he remembers me, I shall not be old either. And the lonely years between the stars shall not have been in vain ...

For I have only one love. I shall never have another.

The words blurred on the page and Philip let the diary slip from his fingers to the arm of the chair. "Miranda," he whispered.

He stood up. "Miranda," he said.

The house was silent. "Miranda!" he called. "Miranda!"

There was no answer. He went from the living room to the bedroom. The bedroom was the way it had been a hundred years ago except that it was empty now. Empty of Miranda.

He returned to the living room and went into the kitchen. The kitchen was the same too, but there was no Miranda in it. He switched on the light and stared at the porcelain sink, the chrome stove, the white cupboards, the gleaming utility table ...

There was a hand mirror lying on the table, and beside it was a crumpled gardenia. He picked up the

gardenia and it was cool and soft in his hand. He held it to his nostrils and breathed its fresh scent. There was another scent mingled with it, a delicate fragrant scent. He recognized it immediately as Miranda's perfume.

Suddenly he could not breathe, and he ran out of the house and into the darkness. He saw the light flickering at the end of the street then, and he walked toward it with unbelieving steps. The community hall grew slowly out of the darkness and the light became many lights, became bright windows. From somewhere in the surrounding shadows he heard the humming of a portable generator.

When he climbed the steps a hundred years flew away. There was no 77c supper of course, and the hall showed unmistakable signs of age, despite the fact that it had been recently remodeled. But there was Miranda. Miranda standing by a lonely table. Miranda crying. A more mature Miranda, with lines showing on her face where no lines had showed before, but light lines, adorable lines ...

He realized why she had not met him at the Deep Freeze. She had been afraid, afraid that the moving clocks had not moved slowly enough after all; and she must have decided to meet him at the house instead, for she knew he would come home. She must have heard the monorail car pull in, must have known he was on his way ...

Suddenly he remembered the mirror and the crumpled gardenia.

Silly girl, lovely girl ... His eyes misted and he felt the tears run down his cheeks. He stumbled into the room, and she came hesitantly forward to meet him, her face beautiful with the new years. A goddess in the room, a mature goddess, the awkwardness gone forever, the schoolgirlish charm left somewhere in the abysses between the stars; his goddess —and then a goddess in his arms, warm and suddenly tight-pressed against him, her dark hair soft against his face, her voice whispering in his ear, across the years, across the timeless infinities, "Welcome home, darling. Welcome home."