

SHE CAME off the Androids, Inc., production line in September, 2241. She was five feet, seven inches tall, weighed 135 pounds, had flaxen hair and pale blue eyes. Her built-in batteries were guaranteed for ten years, her tapes were authentic Kirsten Flagstad, and her name was Isolde,

She was shipped to New York via strata-freight, and late in October she opened the season at the Metropolitanette in what the hundred or so diehard enthusiasts still holding the Wagnerian fort, called the best Tristan ever. Afterwards, she was deactivated and stored away, along with Tristan, Brangane, Melot, King Marke, Kurvenal, the shepherd and the helmsman, and the various knights, soldiers, attendants, and sailors that constituted the rest of the *dramatis personae*.

At that time the black market in androids was relatively new, and only standard measures were taken to guard the Metropolitanette storeroom. Operatic androids were not exactly the kind of merchandise the average twenty-third century citizen liked most to find underneath his Christmas tree, and to a Wagnerian aficionado, the idea of the average music lover stealing one was as preposterous as the idea of a twentieth century bobby soxer stealing a Caruso original. But an operatic android was potentially capable of doing other things besides singing recitative and arias—as a number of twenty-third century operators had begun to realize some time before the beginning of this history. Hans Becker was one of them.

You've seen Hans. You've seen him in bars and on airbuses, in waiting rooms and in automats. He likes to sit in secluded corners and study people through his cigar smoke. He has a penchant for ostentatious blondes and dirty comic films. He has a passion for the quick credit.

You see him now. He is talking to a mousy little man in a decrepit bar off Fifth Avenue. The little man nods every now and then, smiles a satisfied smile every time Hans sets him up a beer. The little man is a night watchman. He is a night watchman in the very building where the Metropolitanette stores its deactivated androids. He is in his fifties, and he too likes ostentatious blondes. But on a night watchman's pay, the only ones he can afford are a little too ostentatious even for him. He would like them to be a little less ostentatious, and, if possible, a little younger. He smiles, nods his head again. He drinks the fresh beer the bartender sets before him. He licks the froth from his with the tip of his gray tongue. He pockets the sheaf of credits which Hans slips him. He nods again. "Tomorrow night, then," he says. "At the backdoor, I'll have her ready for you."

Isolde's first stop, after her abduction, was at the house of a converter Hans knew. The converter's name was Wisprey, and he was an artist in his own right. By the time he finished with Isolde, you never would have dreamed—unless you were a Wagnerian devotee—that once upon a time she had been a bona fide reproduction of an Irish heroine in a German opera. You would have sworn, instead, that she was a Swedish-type maid of the kind Androids, Inc., specialized in, and which retailed for 2500 credits. Her flaxen hair had been drawn back into a little chignon, her period costume had been exchanged for a modern servant's outfit, and her classic features had been subtly altered to suggest sycophancy. As though that were not enough, she could scrub floors, wash dishes, cook, and darn socks.

The only part of her the converter did not alter was the sealed-in unit containing her voice tapes. That, he told Hans, would have involved too intricate an operation. Besides, who cared if she sang instead of talked, anyway, as long as she could work?

"That's right," Hans said. "Who cares? When they see how strong she is, they'll buy her like sixty."

"Sure they will."

"And she's only the first. There's lots of other big ones where she came from and I'm going to grab them off, too."

He didn't grab them off, though. A week later, he fell into his blonde mistress' barbecue pit and was so drunk he couldn't get back out before he was barbecued to the bone. Before this lamentable occurrence, however he sold his pilfered princess to an interstellar trader, and thereby launched Isolde upon her odyssey.

The interstellar trader, whose name was Higgens, owned a Class B merchant ship of the old photon-ejection variety. He stored Isolde in the after-hold and left her there till his fourth planetfall—Sirius 21. Then he got her out, dusted her off, combed her hair and activated her. He led her down the gangplank and stood her on the collapsible auctioneer's block he'd set up at the ship's base. There were a number of colonists gathered around the block already, but he saved her till last, auctioning off the rest of his payload first. By the time he took her hand and led her to the center of the block, word of her presence had got around the nearby colony, and there was a near-maximum turnout.

"All right," Higgens said. "She's beautiful and she's strong and she's sturdy. I don't need to tell you those things because you can see them for yourself. I'm merely reminding you of them. But what you can't see are the things she can do. So here's the way we'll work it: you name something you'd like a servant of yours to be able to do, and I'll tell you whether she can do it or not. Who's first?"

"Can she cook?" a thin-faced woman wanted to know.

"I knew you'd ask that one first. The answer is yes. Next?"

"Can she milk a milch bront?" This time the asker was a middle-aged colonist of Dutch descent.

Higgens consulted a small notebook. "She can—if a milch bront is enough like a cow," he said presently.

There was the inevitable drunk in the crowd. "Can she keep a man's bed warm?"

Higgens played along. "She sure can, buddy, but you know the law as well as I do."

"Can she scrub floors, lift, carry, wash clothes, do dishes and wait on people?" It was the Dutch colonist again.

Higgens nodded. "Seems to me you've just about covered everything, friend. Want to make the first bid?"

"200 credits," the Dutch colonist said.

"I have 200 credits," Higgens intoned, "which, if I do say so, is about one tenth of what she's worth? Do I hear three?"

"300," the drunk said.

"350," the Dutch colonist said. "450."

The Dutch colonist could outbid anybody in the crowd, and everybody in the crowd knew it, including the drunk. But the drunk didn't give a damn, and he went along to the one thousand mark before dropping out.

The Dutch colonist got her for 1100 credits, and the first stage of Isolde's servitude began.

The Dutch colonist's name was Vanderzee. You've seen him, too. Forget about his race: his race has nothing to do with it. All races have their Vanderzees. This one was a bachelor, and made a prosperous living buying seconds in large lots and selling them for firsts. The business he happened to be in was the clothing business, but no matter what business he had been in, he would have conducted it in the same way. There were Vanderzees in the time of Gautama Siddhartha; there were Vanderzees in the time of Christ; there were Vanderzees in the time of FDR. There will always be Vanderzees.

This one took his purchase home in a ground skimmer. He looked at her sideways as they skimmed along, a little awed by her classic features, which even the converter's skill had been unable to destroy altogether. By the time they reached the apartment above his store, the first droppings of his sense of inferiority had already fertilized the ground where his latent hatred lay, and when he asked her a simple question, the hatred burst forth in twisted stems and ugly blossoms. For, instead of answering the question with the simple "yes sir" or "no sir" which was all it required, Isolde responded with the particular recitative it most closely provoked, and the windows rattled in the majestic blast from her Kirsten Flagstad tapes. Vanderzee, for all his shrewdness, had neglected to make the most obvious inquiry of all from Higgens, re his prospective purchase—i.e., *Can she talk?*

But Vanderzee didn't take her back. For one thing, he knew that Higgens had already closed his lock and would be blasting off any second. For another, taking her back would have been a tacit admission that he had been outwitted by a business man sharper than himself, and this he could not bear. No, Vanderzee had made a purchase, and he would stick with it: but he would get his money's worth out of it if it took him the rest of his life.

Isolde was put to work; with a vengeance. Each dawn she milked the mulch bront Vanderzee kept in the shed behind his store. Each day she washed dishes, cooked, scrubbed floors, waited on customers and unloaded supplies for Vanderzee. Each evening she washed dishes, cooked, scrubbed floors, waited on customers and unloaded supplies for Lanesce, the local tavern keeper to whom Vanderzee sublet her for part time work. But in this subsidiary attempt to get all he could out of her, and in the getting of it, obtain his revenge on her for having deceived him (by the end of the second week, Vanderzee actually had himself believing that it was she, and not Higgins, who had put one over on him), Vanderzee made a mistake.

It was a natural enough mistake. Who would have dreamed that an android who screamed or sang gibberish (German was a dead language by 2241 in any but the most esoteric sense, and Vanderzee was generations removed from his native tongue) could attain to any degree of popularity whatsoever in any kind of an establishment whatsoever. But taverns are not ordinary establishments, and frequently events come to pass in them that could never have come to pass elsewhere. Isolde became popular. She became so popular, in fact, that Lanesce's business doubled. Tripled.

There was nothing unprecedented about her popularity. Idiot waitresses have always enjoyed an exalted place in taverns. They make ideal patsies for jokes, for one thing, and are generally responsive to gooses, for another. While Isolde was neither an idiot nor responsive to gooses, the sounds she uttered whenever anyone said something to her, obscene or otherwise, were suggestive enough of idiot rantings to the ear of the average patron, for her to be classified as an idiot; and while she may not have been responsive to gooses, neither was she on her guard against them, taking them in her stride like everything else. None of which bears directly on the nature of Vanderzee's mistake. What does bear directly upon it is the fact that the variety of men who frequent bars, is infinite. Sooner or later someone had to come along who would recognize Isolde, either from her recitative or from her arias, or from her appearance, for what she was—or what she once had been. And presently someone did.

Enter, Elwood Parkhurst. You've seen him, too. In bars, mostly. But before he took exclusively to bars, you may have seen him in *avant-garde* ghettos where the philosophy of Rieder and Diems and Ghent lay thick in smoke-fogged atmospheres, or in offbeat book stores where the outre tomes of Cresniner and Hulp and Bredder pre-empted the shelves. And you may have seen him, too, if you happened along at the right time, standing impatiently in front of the Metropolitanette, smoking concatenations of cigarettes till the doors opened and egress to Verdi or Wagner could be obtained. And were you worldly enough, you may have seen him waiting outside the stage door behind the old Libido with a host of the macromammary Miranda's other pursuers, and you may even have read about the short-lived marriage he and she embarked on to the delight of the Sex Sheets and the Peeping Walters. After that, though, if you saw him at all, you saw him in bars—or staggering between them.

Parkhurst walked into Lanesce's, took one look at Isolde and knew her instantly.

He was sobering up at the time, having hit Sirius 21 a week ago, and the Spaceport Bar five minutes after arrival. Perhaps he would have acted as he did even if he hadn't been sobering up, but there is a certain kind of remorse contained in the sobering-up process that makes the sufferer more than normally susceptible to symbols of the higher planes of civilization. In Isolde, Parkhurst saw the strength he needed at the moment, and the *raison d'etre* he would need later on to straighten out permanently. Before he even heard her voice raised in resounding recitative, as he did shortly when one of the good fellows present, goosed her, he knew he had to have her.

He didn't have enough capital to buy her, but he did have enough to abscond with her to Procyon 16 where a boom was in progress and where you could practically name your job. As Vanderzee kept Isolde quartered in the shed with his milch bront, abduction proved to be no problem, and Parkhurst managed to smuggle her on board a Procyon-bound tramp ship without any trouble.

On Procyon 16, however, misfortune awaited him: the ulwano herds which the good colonists had been systematically slaughtering for years in order that wealthy women all over the civilized sector of the galaxy might know the secure feeling that accompanies owning an ulwano coat or stole, and in order that the good colonists themselves might know the secure feeling that accompanies owning acres of real estate

and scads of stock in interstellar banks, had perversely migrated into the inaccessible northern barrens, thereby precipitating a depression. Jobs were not merely scarce: they were non-existent. Even worse, Parkhurst didn't have enough money to buy passage back.

In common with most men of his kind, he could meet a crisis in one way, and in one way only. He had not taken a drink since Sirius 21, but as soon as the seriousness of his predicament got through to him, he headed straight for the Star and Traveler—a thriving little establishment convenient to the spaceport, dedicated to the enhancement of human relationships via the congenial consumption of cut-rate gin. The money he had left lasted him two days. His watch got him through two more. His extra clothing was going for three more. By that time, his physical thirst was sated; his emotional thirst, however, was merely stimulated. He had only one item left to sell, besides the clothes on his back, and so he sold Isolde—for one tenth of what she was worth, and without ever having heard her sing the aria which he loved above all others and which she had been created for most: the *Liebested*. Three days later, when he had sobered sufficiently to realize what he had done, he hanged himself.

Isolde's new owner was a missionary named Newell. He was dedicated to the task of bringing all the heathen in the known galaxy around to seeing things in their proper perspective, i.e., the way he saw them. He was a devout disciple of Neo-Christianity, popularly known as FDRism, which had begun late in the twentieth century and which proclaimed Franklin Delano Roosevelt as the real Christ. He owned his own ship—the NRA—and he carried a collapsible chapel in the hold. As he was unmarried and as most of the lands he visited turned out to be lonely as well as hostile, he bought Isolde to keep him company—and, of course, to keep the ship clean, do the cooking and darn his socks.

His first—and last—stop after leaving Procyon 16 was Idwandana, a primitive province on the southernmost continent of Gamma Bootis 4. The natives were a rusty brown in hue, stood on an average of five feet in height, used a glue-like mixture on their scarlet hair to make it stand up straight, and lived off the pweitl—a cow-like creature whose milk they drank, whose flesh they ate and whose hides they used for lap-laps, tepees and gourds. Occasionally, they varied their diet by eating each other.

The particular tribe Newell chose for his initial ministrations took a dim view of FDRism right from the start. Taking from the rich and giving to the poor was a practice they indulged in habitually, providing that the "rich" were their enemies and the "poor" were themselves; but they could see no religious connection in the matter. Old Age Security they considered impractical, and sick benefits for incapacitated members of the community, left them cold. When an Idwandanan grew too old, he or she was cooked and eaten. If he or she became a detriment to the tribe because of illness or accident, he or she was also cooked and eaten. So it always was, so should ever be. There was only one god, and he was Bruggil, the giant who lived in the fire mountain and whose fiery breath you could sometimes see when he went into a tantrum.

If the Reverend Newell had been a realistic person, he would have folded up his chapel then and there, and took off for home. But then, if he had been a realistic person, he wouldn't have been trying to shove his credo down the throats of a race of savages who would just as soon eat him as look at him.

He did not see the arrow till it was already protruding from his chest, and then he saw it only briefly. He fell, appropriately enough, in the doorway of the collapsible chapel he had come to love the way some men love women and the way other men love wine. But here the appropriateness ended: the Idwandanans streaked out of the surrounding forest and quartered him neatly, whereupon they swarmed up the ladder to the ship's lock in search of the creature whom they believed to be his mate. Isolde was in the galley, fixing breakfast, and it was no trick at all for the foremost Idwandanan to creep up behind her and plunge his knife between her shoulder blades. It was a long knife, and a sharp one—the best that the *beche-demer* trader who supplied the area, had in stock—and it went all the way through and came out between her synthetic breasts. The Idwandanan felt pretty proud of himself, till she turned around and confronted him, whereupon he ran screaming from the room.

He returned presently with several of his fellows, among them Skonsdoggugil, the chief. There was a

prolonged palaver, after which Isolde's would-be executioner approached her and withdrew the knife. It had done no damage whatsoever, even missing the small bellows that kept her chest rising and falling in a rhythmic and realistic imitation of human breathing. As for the holes it had made, her skin-plastic was of the self-sealing type, and grew together forthwith.

The bodice of the gingham dress Newell had outfitted her with, concealed this additional miracle from the eyes of the Idwandanans, but Skonsdoggugil had seen enough: here was Bruggil's Bride, sent down from the fire mountain by ways incomprehensible to man, to test the mettle of his children.

They built a temple for her deep in the forest, laboriously quarrying the stone and dragging it through underbrush and vine to the chosen site. Isolde watched, or seemed to be watching, and every now and then she gave forth with recitative or aria. The Idwandanans interpreted these outbursts as admonitions to hurry, and because of them, the temple was completed much sooner than it otherwise would have been. After a lengthy ceremony, officiated by Skonsdoggugil, Isolde was escorted inside and seated upon a crude throne, after which a guard of honor was installed without. By now, her goddesshood was unquestioned by even the most cynical. Was she not above such worldly necessities as eating and drinking? Had anyone ever seen her sleep? Oh, she was Bruggil's Bride all right, and woe to the Idwandanan male who failed to make his obeisance at her feet each time he slaughtered a pweitl, and woe to the Idwandanan female who failed to attend the fertility fete which was held each night in the courtyard!

Isolde reigned in the temple for five Earth-years, and she probably would have gone right on reigning there till her batteries gave out and her tapes went dead and the little inbuilt motor of her heart ceased to whirl if a certain native labor recruiter named Jose Swenson had not landed in the *Malaita* to pick up a payload of Idwandanans. As it was, her reign came to an abrupt end.

Jose Swenson was a far cry from the Reverend Newell: his business was selling souls, not saving them, and he knew his business well. He had not been in Idwandana a week before he had his hold jam-packed with "fire-heads," and he would have been away and gone an hour hence if, during one of his forays into the forest, he had not glimpsed the crude stone temple.

In Swenson's mind, temples, even crude stone ones, were always potential sources of treasure. After all, who really knew but what there were gold mines in Idwandana? Perhaps even diamond mines? And what more logical place was there for a race of superstitious savages to store the bounty gleaned therefrom than in their temple?

So instead of departing, he set forth once more into the forest, with six members of his crew, leaving the remaining three members to guard the *Malaita*. This was a tactical blunder, arising from his mistaken assumption that by now, all of the Idwandanans would be too terrified of stun grenades to cause any serious trouble. As a matter of fact, most of them were, but Skonsdoggugil wasn't, and reinforced by several tribal units from the north, with whom his own tribe claimed kinship, he attacked the *Malaita* as soon as Swenson and his party were out of earshot.

The attack went well, so well, in fact, that the three crew members were neatly quartered on the deck before any of them had a chance to radio Swenson of the disaster. Skonsdoggugil wasted no time: after freeing the prisoners in the hold and instructing them to guard the ship, he armed his warriors with stun grenades stolen from the arsenal, and set out in pursuit of Swenson.

Swenson had made good time, and was already within attacking distance of the temple. A stun grenade knocked out half the honor guard and sent the other half streaking for the forest. Swenson headed for the entrance. He could feel the diamonds trickling through his fingers. He could taste the rich wine they would buy, and the luscious lips of the lovely women they would give him access to. He burst into the throne room, hardly able to contain himself—

And saw Isolde.

The Idwandanans had clothed her in their choicest of pweitl hides, and she had gone back to combing her hair in its original style. Her pale blue eyes were clear and unwavering. The classic body with which Androids, Inc., had endowed her was unsullied by either time or the elements. Swenson had been born in space and had spent most of his life in space. He had never been to Earth, and he had never

seen an android. Consequently, he mistook Isolde for a real woman—a woman of heroic proportions, perhaps, but a woman radiant with the beauty he had looked for all his life and never found, till now.

Swenson forgot about the diamonds. He forgot about the gold. He stepped forward, touched Isolde's arm. The normal human temperature which her thermostat maintained, felt natural to his fingers. The softness of her synthetic skin made his flesh tingle. "A white goddess," he said. "A genuine honest-to-God white goddess!"

The burst of recitative which his remark provoked, disconcerted him for a moment. He had heard many languages in his day, but he had never heard one with such a violent intonation or such guttural syllables. Isolde, he concluded, must come from a world he had never touched upon in all his travels—a world remote from the ordinary pathways of man. And he was right, too, though in a way he did not dream.

At this point, a dull explosion sounded in the courtyard without, followed by another. Instantly alert, Swenson ran to the entrance—saw the six men who had accompanied him, lying stunned on the flagstones. Even as he looked, a horde of "fireheads" streamed out of the forest, long knives glittering. The quartering was accomplished in a matter of seconds.

Sickened, Swenson ran back into the temple. There was a wide aperture in the rear wall, and the better part of valor, he knew, would be to forget the white goddess, whom the natives would not harm anyway, and gain the forest. The Idwandanan's possession of stun grenades unmistakably indicated that they had taken the *Malaita*, but perhaps he could eke out an existence till another ship came. In any event, burdening himself with a woman, however robust she might be, would be detrimental to his success.

Thus he reasoned, but thus he did not act. When the first Idwandanans gained the temple, Bruggil's Bride was gone.

The heavy underbrush fought their footsteps, and Swenson had to keep a constant drag on Isolde's arm, else she would not have accompanied him at all. The shouts of their pursuers grew louder by the second. When they came to a river, he plunged into it unhesitatingly, pulling Isolde after him. She could not swim, of course, but he was an expert, and in a matter of minutes they were in midstream. If he had known that for all her "breathing", she could not drown, their progress would have been more rapid. Even so, they had nearly reached the opposite bank when the first of the Idwandanans emerged from the forest. By the time dugouts were brought up so that the chase could be resumed (the Idwandanans could not swim), Swenson had scrambled up the bank and pulled Isolde out of sight into the underbrush.

He ran straight ahead for about half a mile, clasping Isolde's hand in his urging her along beside him. Then he turned at right angles and ran for another half mile. Finally he headed back for the river, swam across with Isolde, and plunged into the forest again. He halted for a moment to get his breath, then went on. As nearly as he could figure out, his course of action had been the one they would have least expected him to take, and the fact that no further sounds of pursuit reached his ears indicated that he was right. Unless the Idwandanans were better trackers than he thought they were, he and Isolde now had a good chance of eluding them altogether.

They spent the night in a small clearing deep in the forest, sleeping upon the ground. Swenson was exhausted and he took it for granted—that Isolde was too. In the middle of the night he awoke and was surprised at how cold it was. Isolde lay motionless a few feet from him, starlight pale on her flaxen hair. He sat up, took off his coat and covered her arms and shoulders. He was startled to see that her blue eyes were open, and for a moment he had the impression that she had not slept at all. She looked up at him, as though trying to understand his presence, or perhaps his actions. Swenson did an unprecedented thing for him: he found her hand and pressed it in his. "Everything's going to be all right," he whispered, and lay down on the ground beside her and fell back to sleep.

In the morning they went on. Swenson was famished, but dared not eat any of the berries and fruits they came across occasionally. Isolde ignored them completely. In the afternoon they came to a large grassy clearing, and Swenson was astonished to see a New Deal chapel sitting in the middle of it. Beside the chapel stood a small but staunch spaceship. By squinting his eyes, he was able to make out its name:

the NRA.

He could hardly contain his excitement, and started running across the clearing, Isolde at his side. But Skonsdoggugil, remembering Bruggil's Bride's connection with the ship, had gambled that she and her captor would show up in its vicinity sooner or later, and his warriors were ready and waiting in the New Deal chapel. They came pouring out as soon as Swenson and Isolde reached the base of the ship, and charged, waving their razor-edged blades.

Swenson started Isolde up the ladder, then turned and drew his knife-ray. He cut furiously, and "fireheads" fell like flies. But one of them managed to get through, and when Swenson finally ascended the ladder, he was minus a forearm.

Half fainting, he activated the lock, which the Idwandanans had accidentally closed and had been unable to reopen, and pulled Isolde inside. At the forest's edge Skonsdoggugil was mustering another contingent of warriors. Swenson pulled Isolde into the ship proper, secured the outer and inner locks. With her help, he got a tourniquet on the stump of his arm. Everything was swimming before his eyes by then, but he managed to gain the control room and strap Isolde and himself onto the two acceleration couches. He had one chance, and one chance only: to reach civilization before he bled to death. Hastily he calculated the co-ordinates of the nearest civilized planet, and fed them into the automatic pilot. He activated the pilot just before he blacked out.

It was his haste that was his undoing. The planet he had wanted was Delta Bootis 11, and the NRA should have snapped out of transphotic within orbiting distance in less than three objective days. On the fourth day, however, they were still in f.t.l. drive.

Swenson knew by then that he was dying. What he did not know was that Isolde was dying, too. Constant usage had depleted her batteries long before their guarantee was due to run out, and there was very little life left in them. But she showed no signs of her approaching demise, preparing his meals in the galley each day and bringing them to the control room where he still lay upon the acceleration couch. She even fed him as he grew weaker, and once he roused briefly from a long stupor to find her darning his socks.

Co-ordinates, once fed into an automatic pilot, could not be cancelled; but automatic pilots were so constructed that whenever they received non-planetary co-ordinates, they altered them to the co-ordinates of the inhabitable planet which most closely corresponded to them. The NRA, therefore, could not end up in planet-less space.

As the days passed, Swenson began wondering what kind of a world they were approaching, and whether he would ever see it or not. On the sixth day, his questions were answered when the NRA emerged from transphotic in the midst of a multiple sun system, near a gray and foreboding sphere. He pretended as long as he could that there was life on it, but when the a.p. put the ship into orbit, he could pretend no longer. Inhabitable did not always mean inhabited, and those cold gray seas and barren continents drifting past the viewport had been dead for ages. Whoever had lived on this world had long since absconded to a warmer, less hostile, milieu.

The a.p. brought them down to a gentle landing on a rocky coast near one of the seas. It was night, but in the heavens the mother sun's three distant sisters blazed in blue and beautiful splendor, drenching the sea and the land, filtering through the viewport and filling the control room with cold, unwavering light. In its radiance, Isolde's face lost all of the sycophancy the converter had superimposed upon it and became once more the classic face of the Irish-German heroine it was meant to represent.

Looking at her, Swenson knew true beauty for the first and last time in his life. He tried to sit up on the couch, sank back. The blue light faded, and red light took its place. Gradually, that faded too, and lightlessness tiptoed around him on silent feet.

Isolde knelt beside him, looked down into his tired face. Slowly, she got up, and left the room. She touched the button that opened the locks and stepped out upon the little platform Newell once had used for a pulpit. She looked up at the stars.

Perhaps it was the expression that had come over Swenson's face just before he died; perhaps it was the way he lay upon the couch. Perhaps it was the kindnesses he had shown her, and the light that had come into his eyes whenever she had brought him food, or held his hand, or darned his socks. Perhaps it

was the sound of the surf upon the forlorn shore. Perhaps it was all of these things...

Tristan lies dead now, in his castle by the sea. Brangane has made her revelation. King Marke has cried out in anguish and despair. "*Todt denn Alles—Alles todt!*"

Isolde presses her hands together on her breast. She drops them slowly to her sides. The blue radiance of the distant suns has transformed her coarse garment of hides into a robe fit for the princess that she is. Her face, in her vast sorrow, has attained new pinnacles of beauty—

"*Tristan!*" The magnificent Flagstad voice rises into the radiance of the blue suns.

Slowly, brokenly, Isolde begins the *Liebestod*—

"*So might we die as ne'er to part...*"

She hears the orchestra take up the themes of bliss, of parting; of transfiguration. She blends her voice into the music. The poignant colonnades of sound rise higher and ever higher into the stars, and when the climax is reached on a heart-rending surge of sound, the blue suns tremble in the sky.

Slowly, Isolde turns and re-enters the ship. She sinks down upon Tristan's breast, just as the little armature in her heart makes one final revolution and lies still. In the background of her fading brain, the music returns briefly to the themes of her magic and of her yearnings, dies gently away...

The curtain falls.