

He wanted to look at his wife again.

To do so, he went to the edge of the galaxy. But it wasn't his fault that she was jealous of his ...

Seeing Eye

By A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

ILLUSTRATOR BERNICLAU

HE DID not need the Skipper's voice, blaring through the speaker on the bulkhead of his cabin, to tell him what was happening. He knew it all so well; the slow descent through the atmosphere, the controlled slide down the long, telescoping column of incandescent gases, the occasional brief bursts from the steering jets to correct pitch and yaw. He could hear it all, could feel it all—the thunder of the rockets, the high whine of the gyroscopes, the sobbing of the pumps. He could hear it all and could feel it all; in his mind's eye he could see it all—the great, gleaming needle that was the ship, the huddle of buildings in the desert, directly beneath her, that was the spaceport, the officers at their stations in control room and engine room, the passengers in their cabins, strapped in their acceleration couches.

Abruptly, the bellowing voice of the rockets was stilled and, less than a second later, there was the slight jar of landing. The ship rocked slightly, her structure complaining as the three vanes that were also her landing gear took the weight of her. "You may leave your couches," said the voice from the speaker. "You may leave your couches. The vessel is now berthed at Port Woomera. Passengers will muster in the Main Lounge, to pass Immigration and Customs, in ten minutes."

Home is the spaceman, he thought, home from the stars. But I'm a passenger now. I'm not a spaceman any longer . . .

He heard the door of his cabin open. He smelled the faint odor of Vegan tobacco. He knew that only one of the ship's officers—Carter, the Third Mate—smoked cigarettes made from that overly pungent, by Terran tastes, leaf.

He said, "Thanks, Carter, but I can manage the safety belts."

"How did you know it was me, Willis?" asked the Third, frankly curious.

"It's obvious. If somebody comes in smelling of smouldering old socks—who else can it be?"

"I came to tell you," said the Third, "that the Customs and Immigration wallahs are going to push you through first. They'll be along to your cabin very shortly."

I can manage to get to the Lounge under my own steam."

"Of course you can. But you're one of the family. There's no reason why you shouldn't get preferential treatment."

"I was one of the family," said Willis.

"You still are. Once a spaceman, always a spaceman. Besides, Mrs. Willis is waiting for you. As soon as the Immigration people have decided that you're a fit and proper person to be allowed to mingle with Earth's millions, she'll be right with you. She's aboard now, as a matter of fact, in the Old Man's room."

Sudden fear was a queasy emptiness in Willis' stomach. He ran his hands over his face. His sensitive fingertips told him that the plastic surgeons in Port Southern, on Austral, had made a good job, told him that his features were as they always had been. But he couldn't be sure. Never, in the old days, had there been any occasion for him to familiarize himself with the feel of his face. Any necessary inspection had been accomplished with the aid of a mirror.

"Mr. Willis?" asked a vaguely familiar voice.

"Gavagan," said Willis, after a pause. "Chief of Customs . . ."

"That's right. You're looking well, Willis."

And why did he have to ask my name? wondered Willis. Am I changed so much? He shrugged mentally, thinking, It was probably no more than a conversational gambit.

"Let's have a look at you,

Willis." That was Hall, the Port Doctor. "You're sound enough in wind and limb, anyhow. If you can satisfy friend Gavagan that you haven't a trunkful of narcotics you can rush off home as soon as you like."

"I've already chalked his baggage," said Gavagan.

"Dr. Hall," Willis said, "I know you're busy, but I'd like another opinion . . ."

"I'm not a specialist, Willis."

"But you know of specialists. You might be able to recommend one. They told me on Austral that there was no hope at all, that too much had been destroyed for a graft to be successful. They did a graft, of course, but it was only for cosmetic purposes ... But there's not the medical science on Austral that there is on Earth . . ."

"I'm sorry," said Hall, meaning it. "I'm sorry. I've read the reports on your case—and the only way to give you your sight back would be to graft on a complete new head. There was too much damage. You're lucky to be as fit as you are now."

"So it's quite hopeless?" asked Willis.

"Quite hopeless."

"As long as I know," said the blind man.

Anne came in. The light footsteps along the alleyway had been unmistakably hers, and the rustle of her summery garments, and the subtle suggestion of perfume. Willis tried to picture the grace that was peculiarly hers as she moved, almost succeeded. Almost. He tried to visualize the fine features under the bronze sheen of her hair, the wide mouth. The harder he tried, the more blurred the picture became.

"Johnnie," she said.

"Anne," he said.

It was easier to see her, in his mind's eyes, when she was in his arms. His mouth was on hers. He felt the wetness of her face, on his face, and wondered which of them it was that was crying. He thought bitterly, They can give me back my tear ducts, but not my sight.

She pulled away from him at last.

"Let me look at you," she said.

"I wish I could look at you."

"I'm sorry, darling. That was thoughtless of me."

"Please," he told her, "don't try to be thoughtful. Please just say and do all the things you always said and did."

"All right. But you look good, darling. I was rather frightened, you know . . ."

"What of? Johnnie Willis, the human hamburger? All the same, I'm glad to hear that the quacks made a good job."

"A very good job. If anything, they've rather improved upon the original."

"Except in one very important respect."

"Bitterness won't help, Johnnie. You—we—have to live with this. We have to accept it. And it could have been so very much worse in so many ways."

He put out his hand, gently stroked her face. He could almost see her as she stood there before him. Almost. But the gulf between almost and entirely is deeper than that between the island universes.

"I'll say my goodbyes," he told her, "and then we'll get the hell off this rustbucket. It's time I was home."

"It's time we were home," she said.

Home, after the swift passage in the chartered stratojet, was a queer combination of the achingly familiar and the horribly unfamiliar. There was the breeze through the open window of the apartment, the summer breeze that carried the scent of parkland and sea, the sounds of the traffic in the harbor. There were all the familiar scents and sounds—but to Willis the window was no more, and no less, than a square of darkness set in all-pervading darkness. There were the bookshelves and the big,

all-purpose TV—but surely, in the old days, they had not possessed the malicious ability to project painfully hard and sharp edges in the way of the passerby. There were the pictures on the walls that he could feel any time that he cared to extend his hands—but it was useless, He pined for the oddly four dimensional quality of the two Lindemann abstracts, for the bleak beauty of the Lunar landscape by Buring.

There was the meal that Anne prepared for him. It was good, flavorsome after the monotony of hospital and ship's cooking, but it was not as good as it should have been. "Make food look appetizing," Anne had always said, "and it is appetizing." Not being able to see what he was eating, not being able to appreciate the gleam and glitter of silver and china and crystal, the dark glow of the wine in the goblets, robbed the repast of much of its savor.

Then, afterwards, there was love in the dark—and that was the worst of all. Anne was beautiful, and he had always enjoyed her beauty, had always enjoyed visual satisfaction as well as physical release. Breasts and shoulders and thighs, the satin smoothness of a woman's skin, were there still—but he wanted to see them and knew that he would never see them again. Much of the life and color had gone out of their lovemaking, and both of them knew it.

Even so, he told himself, he was lucky. He could easily have been dead. He could have been maimed in some way beyond the skill of the plastic surgeons to repair. He was lucky to have been deprived of only one of his senses—but why did it have to be the most important one of all? There was no answer.

He was, he often told himself, lucky.

He was alive, he was healthy, he was not alone. He and Anne, although far from rich, were far from being poor. She worked—as did most spacemen's wives—holding a junior editorship in one of the women's magazines. Then there was the not ungenerous pension from the Interstellar Transport Commission. In addition, Willis cultivated his talent as a story teller. Anne was able to obtain for him one of the expensive speakwriters at trade price and so, every day after she had left for the office, he would sit on the balcony in the sunshine, dictating into the machine. He drew heavily upon his own experience, of course, but his stories were none the worse for that. Once he had succeeded in convincing himself that astronomical technicalities must not be allowed to get in the way of the plot, they started to sell. The planetbound—and they, after all, are the majority of mankind—are always willing to read of adventures among the stars.

For the first few weeks after his homecoming he and Anne did not entertain, neither did they accept invitations. He had to become used, he told her, to the strange world of which he was now a citizen. He had to be sure that he would not disgrace himself by some clumsiness, spilled food or upset liquor. He had to be able to accept his disability to such an extent that he could bear the commiserations of the tactless.

Gradually he came out of his shell. He met all the old friends and made new ones—although most of these latter were old friends of his wife. He

prided himself on being able to pour a round of drinks for the guests without spilling a drop, of being able to load tapes into the all-purpose TV without fumbling. He developed a sixth sense that told him when ashtrays were required. He played the part of the host, Anne told him more than once, far better than he had done before his affliction.

Some of the new friends he liked, some he did not. Regarding one of them he was unable to make up his mind. Anne called him one afternoon, interrupting him at his work, in mid-sentence. "Johnnie," she said, "I'll be bringing a friend home for drinks and dinner. Bill Travers. He's on the staff of the Galactic Geographic Magazine."

"Yes," said Willis unenthusiastically.

"Bill may be able to help you," Anne told him.

"I can't write articles," said Willis. "Straight fiction is my line."

"I didn't mean it that way." "Then what way did you mean it?"

"You'll find out. See that the flat's more or less tidy by the time I get home. Make sure that there's some beer in the fridge. See you."

"See you," replied Willis.

He went back to the speak-writer, completed his quota of words for the day, then put the cover on the machine and stacked the pages of manuscript in the top drawer of his desk. He then emptied ashtrays and tidied up in general, after which he had a shower and changed into the lemon yellow shirt and dark gray shorts that he knew Anne liked. He made sure that there was ample beer in the refrigerator. He was sorry that he was not able to relax with a book after the completion of the chores, but he was making slow progress in the learning of the Braille alphabet. Not that it would be of much value to him when he had mastered it, he thought sadly. Cases of total blindness were so rare these days that most of the books printed in Braille were at least a century old.

He heard the approaching drone of Anne's aircar, heard and felt the slight shock as she set the machine down on the flat roof of the apartment house. He heard her coming down the stairs from the roof—the apartment was on the top floor and it was quicker to use the stairway than to wait for the elevator—and heard the footsteps of the stranger who accompanied her. He had the door open for them just as Anne was reaching into her purse for the key. He stood aside for them, then followed them into the sitting room.

"John," said Anne, "this is Bill Travers."

"It's good to meet you, John," said Travers. His handclasp was firm, perhaps a little too firm. His voice was like his handclasp. He exuded an air of rugged masculinity that was just a little phoney.

"Take the weight off your feet," Willis told him. "Drink?"

"Beer if I may. Cold."

"And for me," said Anne. "And then you two can talk while I have my shower."

Willis brought in the glasses and the bottles, poured. While Anne was there the talk was commonplace; after she had gone Travers said, "You manage well, John."

Tactless man, thought Willis. He said, "I'm glad you think so."

"How did it happen?" asked the other.

"What's the big idea?" flared the ex-spaceman. "Am I supposed to be providing material for an article in your magazine? If so—I'm not."

Travers chuckled, a sympathetic chuckle. "No, Johnnie. It's just that I think I may be able to help you. I'd like to know more about the accident first."

"I've been to the best specialists on Earth," Willis told him. "They say that it's hopeless. I'm resigned to that now. Let's drop the subject, shall we?"

"Not yet. How did it happen?"

"Surely Anne told you."

"She did—but it's a rare woman who can get astronomical technicalities correct. Even spacemen—pursers and catering officers and such. The Galactic Geographic, as you know, prints a large number of firsthand accounts of this, that and the other—and any contributed by the fair sex have to be very carefully edited."

"I still don't see what concern my trouble is of yours."

"But it is of yours, John."

"All right," said Willis abruptly. "I was Chief Officer of Alpha Scorpii. We were coming in towards Austral—still a fair way off, but close enough in to demand the presence of a senior officer in Control at all times. Usual drill inside a planetary system—Mannschenn Drive off, approach under reaction drive. Radar showed meteorites on a reciprocal trajectory—as usual it was too late to do anything about it. Not that it worried me much—the meteor shield had been renewed last time at Port Woomera. The trouble was that the meteorites were contraterrene matter . . . \*"

"And then?"

"It should be obvious. Have you ever had your head pushed into an atomic furnace? No? Well, I have."

"I understand," said Travers carefully, "that a portion of the brain itself was destroyed . . ."

"Yes. Had there been no damage to the brain these fine new eyes out of the bank of the Port Southern Hospital would be useful as well as ornamental. As it is . . ."

"How about the psi center?"

"That, they tell me, is intact. It has to be. A blind man needs a certain amount of ESP to get around. For example, you're jst getting ready to rattle your glass to tell me that it's empty."

"Convincing enough." There was a pause. "Did you ever hear of a world called Bronsonia?"

"No."

"I didn't think that you would have. It's one of the Lost Colonies. Originally discovered by Captain Bronson of the Lode-runner, one of the many gauss-jammers that got themselves lost in the bad old days of the Ehrenhaft Drive. Rediscovered a month or so back by Commodore Dalzell of the Survey Service."

"Interesting. What did he find? Savages living in mud huts, or a technological civilization?"

"Neither. Just a nice, stable, agricultural economy. Science, including the medical sciences, almost dead. Such refinements as plastic surgery a lost art. And yet, if one ignores the cosmetic aspects, in quite a few cases no need for plastic surgery."

"What do you mean?"

"Blindness is very common among the Bronsonians; for some reason they are prone to cataract. But they don't run screaming to the nearest hospital to have the defective organs renewed; there aren't any hospitals to run screaming to, anyhow. But they get by ..."

"How?"

"Bronsonia boasts some rather odd indigenous life forms. There is the marsh lion, for example. It's not very like a lion, but those first colonists had to call it something. The male of the species is quite a hefty brute, as its name implies. The female is not. It's about the size of a Terran cat, or even smaller . . ."

"Odd, all right. But you find the same set-up on Earth, as well as on plenty of other planets. There are some varieties of fish, the males of which are mere parasites upon the females . . ." Willis paused. "Even so, to have the female smaller than the male, much smaller than the male, is odd . . ."

"They manage. In any case, even though they are mammals of sorts, they lay eggs, which are hatched in a special pouch in the male's body. It's the male who suckles the young, too ..."

"As you say, odd."

"The oddest part is yet to come. The male is blind, and deaf. For all I know, it has no sense of smell, either. The female is its eyes, its ears. There's a telepathic hook-up between male and female . . ." Willis heard the faint sound as Travers sipped his drink before breaking off at what seemed to be a tangent. "You've heard, of course, of the seeing eye dogs that blind people used to use years ago ..."

"I have. And of late I've been very sorry that the larger, more intelligent breeds of dog were ever allowed to die out on Earth."

"You needn't be any longer. A female marsh lion—one can hardly call so small a creature a lioness—is far better."

"Perhaps it would be," said Willis, "if I could ever afford to have one shipped to Earth. But freight rates are prohibitive, especially to and from planets off the regular routes."

"It wouldn't be any use having one shipped to Earth," Travers told him. "You must go to Bronsonia. You will have to find the marsh cat—I think that's what they call them—that will be yours. As I understand it, there has to be empathy between master and . . . and servant? I suppose that's as good a way of putting it as any?"

"You're sure of all this?" demanded Willis sharply.

"Of course, I'm sure. We've had access to Commodore Dalzell's reports. Most of what I've told you will be coming out in next month's issue of the magazine, anyhow?"

Willis listened to the shower that was still running in the bathroom. The sound reminded him of all that he was not seeing, of all that he would never see again, unless . . .

He said, "If I double my output, if I continue to sell in the same markets that I'm selling in now . . . In a year we should have enough saved ..."

Travers laughed. He said, "Oh, you'll pay for your passage to Bronsonia, Willis, make no mistake about that. But as far as the actual financial side of it is concerned, Galactic Geographic will foot the bill. You'll write a series of articles for us when you get back—we've already thought of the title. Through Alien Eyes. How does that sound?"

"And you're serious?"

"Of course, I'm serious. We do you a good turn. 'You do us one. It's as simple as that."

"You've told Anne all this?"

"Yes."

Willis was sorry. He would have liked to have been able to tell her himself.

The voyage out to Bronsonia was long and not particularly pleasant. Willis said good-bye to Anne at Port Woomera, then boarded the Commission's Beta Ursae Majoris, Earth to Caribbea direct. It was some years since he had served in a Beta Class vessel and it was not until the ship was only a week out from her destination that he was able to find his way around without assistance. There was a week's wait on Cari'bbea—during which time Willis tried to construct visual pictures from the sounds and smells of that exotic planet—and then passage to Nova Caledon in Creole Queen. Creole Queen had been, before the change of ownership, a Delta Class tramp. Willis knew very little of the Delta Class ships and, in any case,



internal lay-out had been altered by her new owners. He stayed in his cabin most of the way to Elsinore, in the Shakespearian Sector.

He spent two days on Elsinore, hardly setting foot outside the Spacemen's Hostel at Fort Fortinbras. On the second day he was introduced to the Captain of the Survey Ship Quest and walked with him, with an assurance that he did not feel, over the blast scarred concrete of the apron to the little vessel. Once in the airlock he had to abandon his false air of assurance. This class of ship was completely strange to him.

He slept for most of the trip to Bronsonia. Looking back on it all, he realized that this was a device to make time pass faster. Deprived of the blessing of sight and with all the Survey Service officers fully occupied with their duties, it was all that he could do.

He was awake, however, when the landing was made. His ears told him what was happening; his ears and every vibration-sensitive nerve of his body. And yet there were gaps in his knowledge. He did not know what sort of world it was toward which Quest was falling. He could not visualize the spaceport—if there was a spaceport—or its surroundings. It was a fall into the utterly unknown—and for the first time since his almost fatal accident he felt the beginnings of panic. He sighed loudly with relief when, shortly after the abrupt cessation of the noise and vibration of the rocket drive, there was the familiar jar that told of a safe landing.

An officer came to his cabin, helped him with the rather unfamiliar buckles of the Survey Service pattern safety belts, guided him along the short alleyway to the axial shaft, into the little elevator cage. In the after airlock another officer, introducing himself as one of the medical officers attached to Base, was waiting for him.

He walked with the doctor over a springy surface. Grass, he thought, grass, or something like it. The acrid scent of charred vegetation confirmed his first opinion. And then there was the smell of cooking, the smell of men living together in a confined space, the bustle of an orderly encampment.

"Here we are," said his guide. "This hut is yours for your stay here."

"Thanks."

"Are you sure you can manage?"

"Of course." Willis paced slowly and carefully over the wooden floor. "Bunk . . . Chair . . . Table . . . And behind this door?"

"Your own toilet facilities."

"You're doing me proud. Yes, I'll manage all right. Don't worry."

"You'll be managing better in a few weeks."

"A few weeks?"

"Weren't you told? First of all you have to find just the marsh cat for your requirements. There has to be empathy between master and servant. Then there is a training period, so that the two of you can work together. It's all

very well owning a detached pair of eyes as long as those eyes are obedient to your command; if they go running off by themselves it can be awkward."

"So I should imagine. But what's the drill?"

"The marsh cats are captured when young. So, for that matter, are their twin brothers—but they finish up in the cooking pot. The marsh cats are kept in captivity, but they are not ill-treated. If anything, they're pampered. Then anybody in need of a pair of eyes, or a pair of ears, goes into the enclosure. He knows when he's found the right cat."

"How does he know?"

"If you're blind, you handle the things. I've tried to get the Bronsonians to tell me what happens then, but it seems to be a subject that they aren't keen on talking about. They're a rather puritanical people . . ."

"How does that come into it?"

"I don't know. I'm relying on you to tell us."

"I'll do that," promised Willis.

He kept his promise, but felt absurdly embarrassed while he was doing so.

The next morning he rode in one of the Survey Service air-cars to the nearest town. He was mystified by the uneven surface over which he and the young doctor walked after the machine had landed. "Cobblestones," explained his guide. "They're very primitive here."

"And that squeaking sound?"

"A four-wheeled cart, drawn by an animal that looks rather like a small Terran elephant."

"I'd say that the standard of sanitation isn't very high here."

"It's not," agreed the doctor.

"Funny sort of English the Bronsonians speak . . ."

"They think the same about us. After all, they've been out of touch for generations and have evolved their own dialect. Here we are."

"Here" was a doorway through which they passed into a big room. Willis could feel that the walls were distant, that the ceiling was high. "Here" was a place alive with soft, rustling movement, a place with straw underfoot through which things scampered and crept. "Here" was a place that smelled of cat, although not unpleasantly so.

"Be this the blind man?" asked a harsh voice.

"Yes," said the doctor.

"He do not look blind."

"He is. He was badly burned, but the plastic surgeons made a good job of his face."

"And he still be blind . . . Be you sure he be blind?"

"Of course."

There was some sort of scuffle, the noise of which puzzled Willis. He heard the doctor snarl, "Put that knife away, you fool!" He heard the other chuckle, "Aye, he be blind. Be you ready to pay?"

"Of course. Here's the warrant. Present it to our PX and they'll give you goods to the value of five hundred dollars."

Willis heard paper rustle, then he heard the keeper of the cats whistle softly. He heard the scurryings and scamperings as the little animals ran towards them. Suddenly, without warning, something was thrust into his hands, something alive, something disgustingly naked that wriggled.

"Be this the one?" demanded the keeper.

"No," gasped Willis, almost retching.

The thing in his hands was cold, slimy, repulsive. It was snatched from him before he could drop it and another was given to him to handle. "Be this the one?"

It wasn't, although it was not as bad as the first had been. The texture of its skin was rough and it was unpleasantly hot.

"Be this the one?"

Willis lost count of the number of marsh cats that he handled. And then . . . . And then there was the rightness. It was then he realized that the empathy of which the doctor had talked was of a sexual nature. The little creature between his hands seemed to glow under his touch, and its skin was the skin of a woman, a beloved woman, cool and yet warm, satin-smooth, enticing . . . .

"I think this one is right," he said shakily.

"How do you know?" demanded the doctor eagerly.

"I . . . I'll tell you later . . ." Then, suddenly and for seconds only, there was vision. It was his own face, but subtly distorted, idealized and yet with an odd suggestion of the animal. It was his own face, filling almost all the field of view, and behind it a suggestion of rough wooden walls.

"I honestly believe that the damn' thing's fallen in love with you," said the doctor, "the way that it's looking at you! It certainly looks that way."

"I can see," murmured Willis. "I can see ..." Then— "But it's dark again."

"It be light very soon," promised the keeper.

Willis left Bronsonia before he had attained complete mastery of his seeing eye. To have waited would have meant missing the next sailing of Quest

and a delay of several months before her return. Even so, he now had sight, erratic though it was at first.

It was all a question of control. The marsh cat had to become accustomed to the telepathic commands of her master, had to accept the fact that Men use their eyes for other purposes than to lead them to food and water, away from danger. The marsh cat had to become used to riding on his shoulder and staying there until released. Hardest of all, perhaps, was training it in the visual mechanics of reading and writing.

Had it been less intelligent it would have been easier. The unthinking dog is far easier to train than the cat, which not only thinks but which asks itself, Why the hell should I do thus and so and so? Willis thought that the intelligence of his seeing eye approximated that of the Terran cat. (In that he was wrong.)

Willis left Bronsonia in Quest and by the time that the Survey Ship berthed at Port Fortinbras his symbiotic relationship was progressing well. He had become used to the slightly odd color scheme of the Universe as seen through his servant's eyes, to the subtly queer perspective. He had fallen into the routine necessary to the well-being of the little creature—the feeding (it was omniverous) the daily bath, the at least once daily caress. He was rather embarrassed when he realized that this part of it gave pleasure to both the beings concerned.

He became accustomed to the appearance of the animal; he saw it now and again in mirrors. It was more like a plump, hairless cat than anything else, but it was not repulsive, any more than a woman is repulsive when divested of her clothing.

During his week's stay on Elsinore he hired an aircar, was pleased to discover that although the proprietor of the agency looked with curiosity at his strange pet he did not guess that his customer was blind. Of course, Willis told himself, he was not blind. Not any longer.

By day he occupied himself flying about the planet with which, in the past, he had formed only a nodding acquaintance. By night —the Spacemen's Hostel boasted a first-class library—he read, and read. There was so much catching up to do. (Perhaps all this reading was a mistake.)

He was lucky enough to obtain a direct passage from Elsinore to Earth—one of the Trans-Galactic Clippers, inbound from a tour of the Rim Worlds, put into Fort Fortinbras and had a few vacant cabins offering. Willis, who had always enjoyed his service in passenger vessels, was rather looking forward to the voyage. It was so long since he had seen any really chic women; those on Bronsonia had been little better than savages, the female population of Elsinore seemed to be composed of suburban housewives.

And yet ...

They'll look better when we're a week out, he told himself. They always do.

This time they didn't.

But there's Anne to look forward to, he consoled himself.

Anne met him at Port Woomera.

Anne was . . . Anne.

Or was she?

Was there ever, in the past, that suggestion of . . . of tartiness in her dress, her make-up? Were her legs really too thin, her bust too obtrusive? And the expression of distaste when she withdrew from his ardent embrace at the foot of the ramp...had that ever happened?

"Anne!" he said, hurt.

"What is that thing?" she demanded.

"Anne—meet Angeline. That's what I call her. She's my new eyes."

"I'm glad," she said, without enthusiasm.

"I haven't kissed you for a long time," he said, his hands on her shoulders.

"I'm afraid it will have to wait. I'm not doing it with that animal watching."

"But it's what she's for, darling. I want to see you when I kiss you."

"It's out of the question," she said. Then— "Hadn't you better see about getting your baggage on the stratojet for Sydney?"

"I'd rather hoped that the Galactic Geographic would be laying on a chartered job."

"Fancy yourself, don't you? After all, they paid your fares out to Bronsonia and back. Come to that, they're taking a rather dim view of your booking passage with TG; they had everything organized for you to travel in the Commission's ships. You get a reduction there, as an ex-officer of the concern."

"That would have meant at least six weeks' delay," he said stiffly.

"What of it? There are the 'W's coming down the chute now; you'd better do something about your bits and pieces."

Rather resentfully, Willis did. Stiffly he escorted his wife aboard the waiting stratojet. Sulkily, the swift flight east across the continent was accomplished. Still more sulkily—Anne refused to let him touch the controls—was the short flight from the airport, across the city, made in Anne's aircar.

It would be better back in the apartment, thought Willis. He enjoyed the first few minutes of being home, the sight of the familiar lares et penates that he had thought that he would never see again. They looked a little different, subtly distorted, but he would get used to that in time. He could see them, that was all that really mattered to him.

Later, he followed Anne into the bedroom.

"That thing is not coming in here," she said.

"But, darling, I want to see . . ."

"I'm sorry. I'm broadminded, but I've no intention either of undressing or making love in public."

"But . . ."

"You heard me."

The worst of it was that Angeline, shut out of the bedroom, for some reason stared throughout at the bleakly cold Lunar landscape. It rather spoiled things.

The next morning Anne had to go to work.

"I'd rather hoped . . ." said Willis.

"Somebody in this house has to earn a living," she told him. "Oh, well, I can get back into harness myself. I'd better ring that friend of yours, Bill Travers. I want to thank him, and I want to find out what Galactic Geographic wants in the way of an article."

"You'll have to wait," she said. "Bill's on Venus just now, covering the Liberation Festival." She went on, "I should have been there myself. My own rag was sending me. When I got your spacegram from Elsinore I had to cancel the arrangements."

"I'm sorry," he said, not altogether sincerely.

"See you," she said.

"See you," he said.

"Keep away from me!" she flared. "I'll not kiss you while you have that thing on your shoulder."

Willis thought, hard, Angeline, go into the other room.

He gave Anne her morning good-bye kiss—and he saw, once again, the bleakness of the Buring moonscape.

When she was gone he called Angeline back again. He went on to the balcony, took the cover off the speakwriter. He thought, I'll be able to trade this in now, for a typewriter and some extra beer money. On the other hand, he'd gotten into the way of using it . . . He found paper and carbons. He sat in his chair, looked at the blank sheet in the machine. He thought, My Eyes Have Four Legs ... Seeing Life With Angeline .. .

Both titles were too cute. He needed a smoke while he thought of something better. He felt in the pockets of shirt and shorts, remembered that he had left his cigarettes in the bedroom. He half got up, then decided to be lazy.

Angeline, he commanded, fetch my cigarettes from the bedroom.

It was a weird sensation. It was as though he was skimming along almost at floor level—and then, when Angeline jumped on to the bed, there was a

brief sensation of flying. He saw the cigarettes on the bedside table, saw the packet grasped in the two little paws.

"Thank you," he said aloud when it was put into his hands. Then, as Angeline clambered back on to his shoulder, he remembered that she did not like tobacco smoke. All right, he thought, I can manage without you for a while, You can explore.

At first he was not distracted by the scenes that flashed before his vision as Angeline scurried from room to room. The elusive title for the article was still elusive. And then he began to pay attention. Angeline had pulled a magazine from the rack in the lounge, was turning over the pages. He thought, She's looking at the pictures . . . But it was not an illustrated magazine. He wondered, Just how intelligent is she? And how much has she learned? He laughed aloud. She had dropped the magazine, had scurried once again into the bedroom.

Hell! he thought. I'll have to tell her to keep out of Anne's private drawers! He watched, not without appreciation, the spectacle of flimsy underwear being held up and examined. He saw the Space Letter that had been hidden by the undergarments being opened by the tiny paws.

He read: "Anne, darling, what a pity that your old man had to come home so soon—especially after I'd pulled so many strings to get him put of the way on Bronsonia! Things were really far better for us when he was a spaceman... And we were both of us looking forward to this holiday together on Venus . . . I quite realize, darling, your feelings in the matter, that you cannot desert a blind man. But, after all, he's not blind any longer—and who has he to thank for that?"

Willis stumbled to his feet, groped his way into the bedroom. That letter would not be real until he held it in his hands—and, perversely, he wanted to hold it in his hands. The letter? No. Angeline. He wanted to hold the little devil from an alien world in his hands, wanted to choke the life from her.

He staggered as the walls and floor swung and shifted rapidly before his vision, realized that Angeline had run past him, had scurried into the kitchen. He felt some of her terror, the terror of somebody who had gone too far and knows it.

He realized that she had jumped on to the sink, was fumbling with the little hatch of the garbage disposal chute. It was a way of escape. She did not know that the escape would be permanent and irrevocable.

"Stop!" he shouted. "Stop!"

She had the metal door open, and she was through. He saw, with her, the blackness of the sides of the chute as she fell. He saw—and it was the last that either of them saw—the searing flames into which she plunged.

THE END