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Cover illustration by Chesley Bonestell

(Space ship in trouble with meteor swarm; Europa and Jupiter in background)

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In our last issue we were expatiating again on one of our editorial obsessions: the unlikelihood of humanoid robots. We have usually, we said, failed to see any functional reason why independent machines should be designed in the all-purpose form of Man when they could be so much more usefully constructed each for its given purpose. But we promised you a coming story which would, perhaps for the first time, fully justify the android; and here it is. You'll certainly remember Betsy Curtis' Divine Right; and you'll be as pleased as we are to learn that in the year since we published her first story she has definitely established herself as one of the leading new science fiction writers. We're happy to welcome her back with another example of her distinctive skill at blending ingenious future-fiction ideas with warmly human treatment, seeing broad social patterns in terms of their intimate and moving small-scale impact. And we think you'll want, as we do, to hear more about her strangely human humanoids.

A Peculiar People

by BETSY CURTIS

IN THE MOMENTARY PRIVACY of the gentlemen's room, Fedrik Spens loosened the neck cord of his heavy white toga and reached for the threadlike platinum chain of his tiny adjuster key. Pulling back the pale plastissue skin from the almost invisible slit at the center of his chest, he inserted the key in the orifice of the olfactory intensificator and gave it two full turns. Three full turns for the food receptacle grinder. These official banquets could be murder. Removing the key, he retied the cord and approached the mirror, as the ambassador had insisted in last minute instructions to the several robots on the embassy staff.

"Normal respiration, human body temperature—" Fedrik could still hear the stentorian tones of the ambassador—"as there may be dancing after dinner. Check appearance carefully with a mirror. Martian security demands Terran ignorance of your mechanical nature!" (As if all of them hadn't lived like humans all their lives. It might be true, as some of the boys said, that the ambassador was subconsciously prejudiced.)

Coming out of the gentlemen's room, Spens found the ceremonial dinner procession already forming. His searching eyes found the little knot of

attachés and he hurried to join his dinner partner, a statuesque blonde swathed in an ice-blue tissue tunic, and offered her his arm with appropriate compliments.

The great dinner was well under way when Fedrik, a little weary of small talk about Earth politics and fashions, let his gaze wander down and up the long resplendent table and saw the girl. Her head, demurely inclined to listen attentively to the man on her left, showed hair black and smooth as a Martian dove's wing, drawn softly back to a great Spanish knot. He stared at the gently rounded cheek and chin, proud neck and exquisitely modeled shoulders rising from folds of shiny deep green stuff — shoulders, neck, and face of the color and texture of the brown yornith blossom.

Trying to seem casual, he asked the blonde who she was, and received the noncommittal reply that she was probably the wife of one of the under-secretaries, who, she stated flatly before returning to the succulent *ambaut roatel*, were seldom invited to State Department functions.

Attaché Spens turned from his uninformative dinner partner to the imposing lady on his left and wondered at the towering mass of white hair piled on her head before he looked at her eyes and asked his question again.

"Who?" she replied. "The girl in bottle-green sataffa? Sitting this side of your Martian Emissary of Finance? Why she's Gordon Lowrie's daughter — the Minister of Terran Agriculture, you know. He's sitting down there between Alice Farwell and Teresita Morgan." The white tower nodded almost imperceptibly down and across the table to Fedrik's left.

Fedrik looked covertly down the table where she gestured and noticed for the first time Gordon Lowrie's ageless face, the keen dark eyes, the smooth skin so dark a brown that the white, close-cropped hair seemed assumed for dramatic contrast. But not so dramatic as the daughter, Spens thought, as he stole a glance at the other end of the table.

He smoothed the magenta ribbon that crossed the glistening white folds on his chest, the ribbon that marked him as an attaché of the Martian Embassy, and smiled at the grande dame of the white hair-do. "The men in our department were jealous as anything when they found out I was coming to Earth. You earthwomen certainly outdo any of the rumors that reach us on Mars."

The lady inclined her white tower graciously, pleased. "We do have some pretty girls. But I'm sure," she added deprecatingly, "that half the effect is just seeing them in a different setting."

"No, I hate to say it, but our girls are mostly homely, like me. Attractive as anything, but homely." He grinned as she looked appraisingly at his straight red hair, craggy red brows, hawk nose and wide mouth. "You

women all have a delicacy of feature that is a great pleasure to see."

White-tower's nose was tiny, straight, patrician. Spens looked down at his plate. "And the cooking. Is it always this good? I'm beginning to be sorry that I'm slated for only a year here."

"Randole is the treasure of the State Department," she informed him. "Good cooks are probably just as hard to come by here as on Mars. I hope some day you'll have a chance to eat with us at the Transport Hall. My husband, as you know, is Undersecretary Breton of Transport. We think our Ashil Blake as good as Randole, although Randole's *ambaut* . . ."

Fedrik stopped listening and began scheming.

Finding his quarry in the throng milling about the great silver ballroom was much easier than he had expected. His dinner partner had been claimed by her mustachioed husband as soon as they left the banquet hall; and as Spens circled the ballroom, he caught sight of Gordon Lowrie's white hair just beyond the shoulder of Bartok Borrl, the Martian finance chief. He joined the group casually, remarking deferentially to Borrl that the Terrans certainly put on a mighty splendid party and that "we'll have to work extra hard to give them a taste of Martian hospitality soon, won't we, sir?"

Borrl's eye searched the crowd for an instant, and it seemed to Fedrik that he performed the introductions with more than his usual enthusiasm. In fact, Fedrik had hardly begun to explain to Gordon Lowrie that he had wanted to meet him than his superior was excusing himself to the smiling girl and disappearing in the melee.

"My father," Fedrik continued, "was a tweedle and bradge farmer south of Jayfield and I grew up on the farm. He took his agricultural training here on Earth while the irrigation projects in his area were under construction; and I've always had a consuming curiosity about the Earth farms. Dad used to tell me and my brothers stories about cowboys and cattle ranching and miles of tall corn and plains of wheat rippling in the wind till we dreamt of it nights. We even used to have 'roundups' with bands of hoppy little tweedles and then throw them handfuls of bradoe and tell 'em to eat their corn and get fat now."

Anna Lowrie's laugh was a gay arpeggio.

"This part of the country is going to be a disappointment to you. Dad," she turned to Gordon, "has a few acres of choice tobacco and a prize dairy, but no prairies and no cowboys. When he's on the warpath, he insists he's part Indian, but he never gets very wild."

"We have garden corn, too, but it's Dwarf Pearl and we wouldn't think of casting it before swine," added Lowrie's rich baritone.

"Well anyhow, maybe you'll give me the address of a cow so I can tell

my brothers, Donnel and Rone, that I've really seen one when I get back," Fedrik requested.

"Anna," said Gordon, "I wonder if this poor, ignorant, earnest, young man . . ."

"This seeker for wider experience, Father?"

"Exactly! Isn't it our duty to broaden his knowledge as well as to behave toward the stranger in our midst with diplomatic hospitality?"

"Mr. Spens," Anna's smile was infectious, "Daddy would like to invite you to become personally acquainted with one or several of our cows. Klover Korzybski Kreamline Garth would be charmed to know you, though you may prefer Altamont Daybird Fennerhaven, she being the petite Jersey type."

Gordon Lowrie frowned thoughtfully. "Of course, you'll have to meet them at their hours. Early morning, that is. What time do you have to be at the office?"

Fedrik was suddenly aware of his internal food chopper grinding away at speed three. "Oh, not much before eleven," he said as nonchalantly as he could.

"Then you could come right home with us now and visit with their highnesses at crack of day tomorrow and still have plenty of time to get back to stern realities by eleven." Anna was persuasive.

Fedrik could feel something, his little plans jumping up and down in his head. "Oh but . . ." he gestured toward the great shining floor where couples were turning in the slow ellipses of the xerxia, "I couldn't think of taking you away from here so early. Wouldn't you really like to dance?" He could even sacrifice the pleasure of looking at her for the pleasure of hearing more of her delicate contralto voice.

"Not tonight," she responded at once. "And everybody's used to my leaving early. I'm a government sculptress and *my* studio opens at eight, not eleven."

"You mean you do busts for halls of fame and bas-reliefs for post-offices and things like that?"

"Well . . . that's close enough. Anyhow, do come. We practically promised Mother to bring home something or someone from the party, didn't we, Dad?"

"Solemn promise, Annie. You're trapped, Mr. Spens. Trapped by two fiendishly exacting women. We'll meet you up at the copter stage as soon as we can find our robes," and Lowrie took his daughter's hand to leave the room as if there were no more to be said.

Fedrik hurried to the gentlemen's room where he had left his downy

black fur robe. Fortunately the room was again empty, and he turned off the empty grinder with considerable relief. Then out and up the ramp to the copter stage.

The thirty-minute copter trip seemed like ten to the young Martian as Anna and Gordon drew out the story of his winters at Jayfield Union School and Donnel's phoenix fair and Rone and Betha's trip to deep space.

At the house, Anna and her father left him to find her mother. Fedrik had only a few moments to look about at the deep, walnut-paneled room and notice the many stringed instruments lying about on tables and the top of the great black piano, the books, looking in the glow of many lamps like jewels, ruby, ultramarine, garnet, in their cases set into the paneling, the sedate smile of an old portrait, and the high, many-arched window. Anna entered almost at once, followed by a wheel chair pushed by Gordon Lowrie, which contained, feather-wool afghan across her knees, a lady in a rose sataffa wrap. Gordon eased the chair down the two broad steps to the lower level and Fedrik approached the chair.

"Mother," Lowrie bent over the chair, "this is Fedrik Spens from the Martian Embassy." He straightened. "Fedrik, this is my wife, Janet Lowrie."

Spens looked down into the sweet dark face. "So very glad, Mrs. Lowrie . . ."

"My name is Janet." The fine lines of a smile spread to her thin dark cheeks from the corners of clear brown eyes as she held out her hand. Fedrik took it and found the gentle pressure drawing him down to a chair beside her. "I won't ask you for your first impressions of Earth or what you think of Terran Woman." Fedrik grinned. "Gordon tells me that your father was a farmer; and presently we should like to hear about the Martian farm, but first let's have some real Brazilian coffee. Gordon?"

"At once, dear." He went back up the steps and out through the wide doorway.

Anna came to the other side of the chair and took her mother's other hand. "Mother's a sculptress, too, Fedrik, not a chronic invalid. She had a little accident at the studio a few weeks ago, but she's almost through with the wheel chair."

"A dangerous profession?" he asked, grave-faced, looking at the perfect modeling of Anna's head and shoulders.

"Oh no," she answered quickly. "A beaker of . . . of . . . solution fell and broke on her foot and an infection set in. By the way," her free hand waved about the room, "do you like music, and do you play a viol by any strange chance?"

"I could probably wring a tune out of this one." He rose and crossed to lift a viola d'aubade from the top of the piano. "I was the star," he bowed to the ladies, "of our grade-school orchestra. Though I'm afraid I haven't played a note since."

"Daddy wrote a lovely xerxia for three viols the other day," Anna was setting up stands and handed Janet a tiny violette whose pale patina shone from use. "Let's surprise him with it."

The sweet sonority of the trio greeted Gordon's return. When the piece was finished, he set the tray before Anna and said, "Bravo, Fed. I like that even if I did write it myself. Do you know any of those rousing Martian frontier songs? *Out Along the Rim*, *In Ellberg Town*, or *Her Six-Ton Boots*?"

"Sure, but it's been so long since I held a viol that I don't think I could sing them and accompany at the same time."

Janet laughed. "Well, drink your coffee now and afterwards Anna can fake the harmony on the piano while you roar out those wonderful words."

Despite the cows and Anna's studio, it was one-thirty when Gordon showed Fedrik his room. An evening to remember for its fullness.

Skillfully as usual, Fedrik maneuvered the copter he had rented by the month, for the express purpose of bringing Anna home from the studio, down to the stage on the roof of the George Willis public school to pick up Bud and Sukie, Anna's young brother and sister.

Bud waved from the crowd of children at the top of the ramp and bounded over to the copter yelling, "Hi Fed, hi Annie," at the top of his seven-year-old lungs. Sukie, six, as tall as Bud, followed more demurely and had to be boosted in, clutching a coloring book in one hand and holding a bright splashy painting on newsprint in the other.

"Hi kids. Home James, huh?" greeted Fedrik.

"Give her fifty gees and slam for the ranch!" hooted Bud from the back seat, while Sukie cuddled down on Anna's lap in the front and began a long "D'ya know what . . ." description of her school day to her older sister, who sat smiling and listening carefully.

Fed was glad he did not have to make talk as the copter carried them swiftly toward the Lowries'. This was probably the last trip, though the kids didn't know it. Neither did Anna. Nobody but himself had heard his going-over from the ambassador only an hour before.

"The Lowrie girl, Mr. Spens," the ambassador always came straight to the point with his subordinates in spite of his reputation as an interplanetary diplomat, "you're seeing a great deal of her these days."

"Yes, indeed, sir."

"That's hardly fair, Spens. Not fair to her if she's a tenth as sweet and af-

fectionate as I imagine she is; not fair to us because there's an ever present danger that anyone who knows you too well will find out that we have robots on our staff and draw the obvious conclusion that there are many of your kind on Mars. It's only human nature, you know, to be afraid of machines, and what men fear they fight."

"Yes, sir, but . . ."

"Interplanetary suspicion isn't likely to be aroused by a girl's being jilted by a young man; but I don't want it to go even that far. Lowrie's an important man to us, you know. We're still importing more than a fifth of our food, thanks to the fact that Earth farmers feel they can trust him. He's got to trust us."

"But sir, Miss Lowrie's not in love with me. It's true of course that I've been going out there to see her, but I want to be with her family, too. It's a family, sir, and they do things together — sing and talk and plan things like . . . like a garden . . . or a new cow barn . . . it's so . . . well . . . unlonely. It's more like having a new father and mother. I'm sure they don't suspect anything." He hoped wildly that the ambassador couldn't suspect how much he needed Anna's incredibly friendly self.

The ambassador's face softened for a moment, his eyes looked far out the window. "Fathers and mothers have very sharp eyes, son. You love your Mars family too well to threaten their existence by a war, don't you? If I can't convince you that nobody on earth can hold your secret safely and that you must give up the Lowries, I'll have to ship you back home on the next flight. You'll have to get your music at concerts and your talk at receptions or not at all around here. That's all."

"Yes, sir. But may I take Miss Lowrie home this afternoon? She's expecting me."

"Of course. But make it brief. You can tell them that you've got a new assignment that's going to take a lot of time. Thank them nicely. Remember, we need Lowrie's good will."

Fedrik landed the copter gently in the plot by the house. The children dashed off into the interior and he followed Anna slowly into the paneled music room as usual. Anna slipped into her favorite chair and he brought her a frosty green glass of minth from the kulpour on a side-table.

Before he could get words in order, Sukie popped into the room around the corner of the door, barefooted in a tattered old red plaid dress. "Look at me quick," she giggled and danced and bobbed about, then back to the door. "Just wait a minute now. You don't have to shut your eyes." She popped out.

In a moment she was back, resplendent in a ballet frock of spangled net, a star in her ebony curls, shining silveglas slippers on her twinkling feet.

Bud followed her in reluctantly, swathed in a long mauve cape which did not entirely hide mauve knee-breeches. Sukie laughed at him gently, trillingly. "Daddy says I'm his queen of the starlings — and Bud and I are playing Cinderella. Do you like me?"

"I couldn't help myself, your majesty," Fedrik dropped gallantly to one knee and held out his hand as the little girl twirled about him.

Anna ran to the piano and added a few bars of the *Butterfly Étude* to the fun. Bud grinned condescendingly down at the kneeling Fedrik. Sukie stopped her whirling and laughed at Bud.

"You look so silly for a prince with all those teeth out," she said.

Fedrik got awkwardly to his feet. "Why Sukie, you'll look just as silly in a year or so when yours begin to drop," he observed.

"Oh no I shan't. Mine aren't going to drop," she stated saucily.

Anna got up. Her voice seemed cold. "Susan Lowrie, you know better than to say such things. Tell Bud you're sorry you teased him and then run along and play Cinderella in the nursery."

"I'm sorry, Bud," Sukie was half penitent. She followed him to the door, then turned back to Fedrik defiantly. "Just the same, I'm never going to look silly and my teeth aren't ever going to drop," and she was gone.

"Kids," Fedrik smiled, returning to the sofa, "always so jealous of their dignity."

Anna went back to her chair, stood behind it grasping the back. "Sukie mustn't learn to enjoy teasing Bud," she said quietly. "Everybody has some dignity. Bud's a right guy, but he can get perfectly miserable when he thinks he's not living up to what that little minx expects of him. Sue's got to learn to be fair."

That word *fair* again. Fed looked about the room and seemed to feel a wrench somewhere in the vicinity of his grinder. He searched his synapses for the thing to say and heard his voice, wistful, "You love children, don't you, Anna?"

Her face went blank. Her eyes stared at him. Her voice was empty. "Yes, Fedrik, I suppose I do." She walked around the tapestried chair and continued toward the steps and the door. "Please excuse me." Her voice seemed faint, confused. When she reached the door she was moving rapidly; and Fed imagined that she was running after she turned into the hall.

He had not had a chance to rise before she was gone; and he leaned forward to put his head in his hands, an unconscious imitation of Gerel Spens, who had sat like this when he was baffled.

His fingers had barely met at his temples when Janet Lowrie came through the door and down the steps, steadying herself on her husband's arm. Fedrik pulled himself off the sofa and stood up.

Gordon Lowrie assisted Janet to a tall carved chair and sat down on the arm of it. "Sit down, please, Fedrik."

Fedrik sat down.

"What was the matter with Anna, Fed? She came running out of here as if something were after her." Janet's voice was full of deep concern.

"Really, Janet, I don't know. We were talking about Bud and Sukie and suddenly she just said 'excuse me' and went out."

"Can you remember exactly what you said before she went?" asked Lowrie. "I have a particular reason for wanting to know."

"I . . . I . . . well, I guess I said she loved children, didn't she."

"Oh." Janet's dark face was full of pain and she reached for Gordon's hand where it lay on his knee.

Gordon took hers, clasped it. He looked at Fedrik. "I don't want to sound like the stern medieval father, Fedrik Spens, but I want to know if you are in love with Anna."

Here it was. There was no escape from finding words this time. Fed wondered what the ambassador would have said in his place. He tried to sit straight and matter of fact on the sofa, but it was too soft and he seemed to be wriggling deeper into the cushions.

"I'll tell you, Gordon, but it'll have to be in a sort of round-about way."

Gordon Lowrie's white head nodded, but otherwise he sat motionless.

"My father wanted to be an artist — a painter — but Mars needed farmers and his . . . his responsibilities combined with what amounted to orders from the government made him come here for training and then move out and start a family in the thick bradge country. When I used to go around with him he was always . . . exulting over colors and shadings and forms. He even used to bring home twigs of dry bradge and put them in bowls and sketch them; and when the brown and mauve yornith blossomed in the spring we used to have expeditions to the little valleys to bring home a few for a special celebration. Well, Gordon, Anna is lovely like all the things Dad showed me, and I wanted to make a special celebration for her."

Gordon glanced proudly down at Janet, who smiled up, then both turned back to Fed.

"And when I got to know her she was such a friendly encouraging sort of person and . . . and she had you. I don't know how to put it, but there's something about this house full of things you like to use and the children who don't look at you twice except as a welcome audience and ally . . . and . . . well . . . Anna is my friend. I guess that's not exactly love but there it is." He wondered how anybody could make such a lame speech as that.

Gordon's face was still serious, but he seemed somehow relieved. "It's

hard, son, but that's how we hoped it was. Not love yet. Because we're going to have to ask you to see very little of us for a while."

("For the love of . . ." thought Fed, "they're going to do the breaking off and it's out of my hands." His relief was followed by the thought of the utter absence of Anna.) "Of course, if you say so, but I don't understand . . ."

"We want you to understand," Gordon said kindly, "and we want you to know because you're like one of the family and we don't want you to feel that we've cast you out. But the story of the reason is what all our government offices call a *sécurity* risk; and once you know it, we could hardly let you go back to Mars." He looked hopefully at the young Martian.

"I'm afraid you'd better not tell me, Gordon," Fedrik replied regretfully, firmly. "The ambassador told me today that I was slated for a special mission back any day. I only came this afternoon to break the news and say goodbye."

"Would you like to stay, Fed?" Janet asked sympathetically. "Even if it meant not coming here for a while . . . that is, until Anna's married or living somewhere else?"

A soft, low voice broke in. "What about Anna, Mother? Are you planning to get rid of me?" No one had noticed her come so slowly through the door and down the two shallow carpeted steps.

Fedrik jumped and turned his head. Janet raised a beckoning hand and Anna went to sit on the other arm of her mother's chair. "What about Anna?"

"Wait a bit, dear," said Janet.

Gordon addressed Fedrik again. "I have papers in my study, Fed, that need only my signature to declare you a security risk for Earth and require that you stay here. And we really need men like you. There are a dozen excellent jobs. You can have your pick. And when you understand about us you'll probably find you want to stay and help anyway."

Fedrik sat motionless for a moment, flooded with a thought of gruesome humor . . . a security risk to both sides would be . . . well . . . too great a risk. He could imagine the interminable delicate argument between the ambassador and the President of Earth as to who was to conduct the disassembly, which side have the doubtful privilege of short-circuiting his synapses.

Gordon seemed to interpret Fedrik's silence as indecision. "There's Earth security, Fedrik, and Mars security; and then there's human security. I guess that really comes first; and that's why we need to tell you and have you understand."

Fed's memory cells flashed him a sudden picture of his father and of

Betha, his father's only human child; and a feeling of affection and pity for their weakness, their kindness and their vast lovely dreams seemed mixed with the very metal of his bones. "Human security. Yes."

"So as one human being to another, I must tell you of your duties as a man as well as your privileges."

(His father had explained duty to him and Donnel and Rone so they'd understand about Betha.)

"You see, Susan and Anna here are — are our daughters, but they're not human like Bud. They're what you Martians would think of as robots. Please don't interrupt me yet," as he saw Fed's mouth open.

"Because of the emigrations to other planets and an inexplicably declining birth rate, we came to depend more and more on intelligent machines in almost all kinds of work. And as we began to depend on them we began to be afraid — afraid of their alienness — afraid that they wouldn't always see things our way — afraid that some day we should have to choose between giving them up entirely, destroying them, or having them give us up entirely as poor, weak, selfish things who didn't deserve to clutter up their earth. We found out that we'd have to make friends of them, sons and daughters as well as bridge partners and copter mechanics . . . personalities that had to develop slowly like us, who understood and sympathized with us, no matter how much easier and more interesting and productive physical existence might be for them than for us. They had to love humanness. That's one reason why they look like humans. Both Janet and Anna," he smiled down, "are body sculptors. Janet made Anna almost as truly as if she were her real flesh-and-blood offspring.

"You're probably wondering now where the human security comes into the picture, what you and I are bound to do. Well . . . humans are a peculiar people with peculiarly human capabilities. We're bound to be fathers if we can — fathers of human children and mechanical, to grow up together under the most intelligent and loving care we can give them. Robots may be parents of robots here, but it's not the same. That's why you have a great duty that is not to Anna."

Anna added earnestly, "That's why I scolded Sukie, you see, Fed. She mustn't ever make Bud feel inferior — a feeling he might take out on his mechanical children some day. Of course Sukie's teeth won't ever drop out, although she will change her body every year for the next ten or eleven. We have our responsibilities too, in understanding you and in doing well the things we are made so well to do."

Fed traced the pattern in the wine carpet to the wall and back with his eyes as Gordon finished his revelation.

"And last of all comes interplanetary security," Gordon concluded firmly,

sadly. "Your young cultures are still expanding and you rely on men still, not machines. As you can all too easily see, Mars would fear, and, when her economy is more self-sustaining, she would fight what she would think of as the alien invasion of Earth. She might try to rescue a few Janets, a few Gordons, from what she would consider the domination of unhuman interests; but most Earth humans as well as our dear foster children would be doomed. Because we humans have learned not to be type-gregarious. There are no associations here whose membership is more than about a quarter human. Janet and I have had two earlier families: this makes four children of our bodies, fifteen children given to us by the government. You must stay with us, Fedrik Spens, because you understand from knowing Anna what we can do here and why it must not be destroyed."

Martian stood up to face Earthman. He spoke deliberately but without feeling. "Settling the interplanetary angle will be even harder than you think . . . although I'm glad you told me. I imagine with care we can keep it between a few men at the top and me."

Gordon's dark face took on a shade of gray, not brown. "You don't mean that you're going to tell your ambassador?"

"It may be the best thing to do," was the reply, as Fedrik opened the neck of his conservative dark green toga and exposed the pale skin of his chest. He fumbled for the slit and pulled the edges back to show the adjustor orifices, the silver plate bearing his name and serial number. "I represent more than one security risk."

He retied the neck cord and smiled a little at last. "If I'm not officially disassembled, I might even marry Anna. That is, if she'll have me."

Anna rose and held out her hand, which he grasped as if never to let go.

Gordon began to laugh, convulsively, until he saw that Janet was weeping. He tightened his arm around her shoulders.

"I wouldn't worry about disassembly," he said. "I think your ambassador and I can make plans to write you into the charter at last without having anything to hide. And do you really want to get married?"

Two human-type mechanical faces looked only at each other.

"Then Annie, you bring me home a parentage application form from the studio tomorrow. I'll qualify you as parents first class."

"Anna," Fedrik asked, "will you make all our kids look just like you?"

"Personally, I rather fancy craggy red-haired people."

"'People' . . ." Gordon Lowrie murmured to his wife. There were tenderness and wonder and amusement in the quotation marks with which he enclosed the word.

Janet smiled up at him. "Well?" she asked.