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AN OLD NEPTUNIAN CUSTOM



By SCOTT MARINER



Sad was the fate of the fat little Neptunian prince, for now his days were numbered — the fatal news had come, that meant the crushing of all his hopes—he had just succeeded to the Neptunian throne!

ABOUT Kenneth Dodd there arose the majestic ribs of three half-finished liners of space. They were gaunt, gray structures full of the promise of interplanetary flight, splendidly impressive in the looming lowness of the shallow-ceilinged construction bay. You could see by their part-formed lines that

they were meant for speed, limitless speed in the reaches of distance where there was no air.

Kenneth Dodd looked at them carefully, then looked away, dumb resignation crinkling the sides of his eyes, for it seemed pretty certain now that their potentialities would never be realized. The shipyard workers were on strike.

Dodd winced as he thought of it. His specialty on Earth had been labor relations. It had been elementary, to him, to transform the most militant delegation of business agents into a calm, gentle gathering of mannerly arbitrators. Wages and hours, even under the complex labor laws of this Twenty-second Century, were problems that a determined man could resolve. The touchy questions of job seniority, union recognition, and the new device of the Sealed Shop were simple—though Dodd had never thought so when, as an Earthly rocket-construction official, he was obliged to deal with them.

But his four months on the icy planet of Neptune had given him a brand-new perspective. On Earth, strikes generally had some cause. Here, they never had.

Dodd wanted to stamp and swear, attack the ships' frames with his own bare hands. He wanted to ram the cubic miles of heavy-metal alloys they contained right down the throat of his dear friend Prince Fetzop of Neptune. If it hadn't been for Fetzop he would still be on Earth, where he belonged, where customs preserved a sort of uniformity, and the code of laws didn't come out of *Alice in Wonderland*.

"But no!" he snarled at himself. "You had to show His Highness the town! You had to let him sweet-talk you into founding a new interspace line for the outer planets!" He stared bitterly at the flaring gas-discharge sign that read, in malignant mockery of his sorrow, "Neptunian and Inner-Planet Rocket Transportation Company."

The prince had arranged a subsidy from

his father's government, had backed the new company both financially and morally. He had cushioned the way for his Earthly friend, so that the full impact of Neptunian custom and tradition hadn't hit the Terrestrial until construction was well under way.

Amazingly, the first real taste of Neptunian idiosyncrasies that Dodd had been forced to take had come not two hours before. That was when he had issued a routine order to one of the men whose work he had been overseeing. Instead of using the pneumatic riveter as Dodd had directed, the guinea-pig-like Neptunian had seemed about to hurl it at the man's head. After sizzling in unexplained wrath for a second, he had taken out his venom in screaming incomprehensible but obviously inflammatory phrases at the other workers.

It had looked like the beginning of a riot for a while. But reason had prevailed and the workers had walked out without actually committing mayhem on Dodd. Then Dodd had vidiphoned Prince Fetzop, who had shown vexation but had promised to straighten things out.

IT WAS a vast relief to Dodd when the rotund figure of the prince appeared in the dimness of Neptune's high noon. Dodd turned on the yard lights, flooding the vast chamber, and accusingly faced his benefactor.

"Now what did I do?" he demanded bitterly.

Fetzop shook hands seriously—though clumsily, for he had only the three fingers usual to his race—and his head drooped.

"I'm afraid, Kenneth," he said in slow English, "that this time you've hit the jackpot. Of all the customs to violate, you chose the most ticklish one."

"Explain," said Dodd in resignation. "I'll believe anything."

The prince looked up. "It's a bit complex, Kenneth," Fetzop sighed. "It has

to do with the recent death of my lamented royal father, King Ampoglat. He was a king, you see, and we here are very reverent toward our kings." He seemed to consider his own statement for a while, then added, with what Dodd took for bitterness, "At least, after they are dead. In fact, there is an immense network of custom surrounding the monarchy that even the most enlightened of us dare not offend. Now, when you spoke this morning of pneumatic riveters, or in our tongue *hopstans*, you made a veiv—"

"Hold on a second," broke in Dodd, feeling dizzy. "I admit I don't know much about your infuriating language, but I do know that the word for riveter is *oglat*. Don't try to tell me different."

Fetzop winced. His piglike ears quivered nervously. "That, Kenneth, is what I am driving at," he explained. "You used the old word. That is very bad; in fact, it cannot be endured. It is an insult to the late king, since his name becomes sacred and must never be referred to again."

"But that isn't his name!" yelled the Earthman. "It's only part of it. His name was Ampoglat."

"Quite as bad," nodded Fetzop. "No part of his name must ever occur in our speech again."

"That," said Dodd with deliberation, "is nuts. How can you run a planet like that? How do you have any words left?"

"People forget," shrugged the prince. "Since nobody can say it, it cannot last more than one generation. Unless, of course, someone treasonously hides a book in which the word is printed. But that is a severe crime against the state. The language does suffer, though," he admitted sadly. "For instance, I envy you Earthmen your poetry. We have none." He seemed to meditate on Terrestrial verse for a second, beaming as much as his fox-featured face would permit. Then: "But to get back to immediate issues, the new word is *hopstan*. Use it in the future."

"I will not," said Dodd with determination. "I'll have no use for any Neptunian patois back on Earth, where I'll be within four days. Unless, of course, the rocket liner in the city yards now suffers a breakdown en route." He looked carefully at Fetzop to observe the effect of his words. There was only a vague sorrow observable in the mild pink eyes of the prince.

Tentatively, Dodd took a few steps toward the door. But over his shoulder he heard the mournful voice of the prince saying, apparently to himself, "Neptune is still a sovereign state."

Dodd whirled. "Meaning what?" he snapped.

"Meaning only that a ship cannot leave our ports without an exit clearance."

"Ha!" Dodd snarled. "Threatening me! You mean if I try to leave on that ship you'll stop me?"

THE portly scion of Neptunian royalty was suddenly serious. "I don't want to force you to stay here," he said earnestly. "I think a good deal of you, Kenneth. You know I do. But very much depends on your remaining. Too much to jeopardize. You've offended our customs before, you know, and I've had to get you out of it."

"No I do not know. When?"

"Oh, many times. Your pernicious Earth habit of smoking, for instance. Every time you light a match you violate a basic taboo. Heat is precious here. Open flames are wasteful. I've explained to everyone that your body chemistry required it, so that was all right. My people do not know too much about you yet. Then again, you do not always eat all of your food. But the worst thing of all was your telling someone that you had studied biology in your Earthly college. Even I found it hard to forgive that."

"In heaven's name, why?" Dodd was exasperated. "You teach it in your schools too. You told me so."

"Yes," nodded Fetzop. "But not as you do. You experiment on—live guinea pigs." His voice dropped down to a horrified whisper as he finished. He carefully refrained from looking Dodd in the face.

"And you experiment on live *glunas*," Dodd accused. "What's the difference?"

Fetzop drew himself erect. "We do not look like *glunas*," he declared angrily. "Did you ever stop to consider, Kenneth, what Earthly creature we most resemble?"

Dodd got it—and coughed to hide a snicker. The Neptunians were proud of their porcine appearance. He could see clearly how, to their touchy temperament, the use of guinea pigs in laboratories would be a life-and-death offense.

"Of course," Fetzop went on, "I told them it was a lie—that you had been joking with them. It was the only way out."

Dodd eyed the Neptunian suspiciously. This sounded very fishy to him, for you could not describe the prince as modest.

"Why," he demanded forthrightly, "are you covering for me? And why haven't you told me about it?"

The prince squirmed in his tight romper-like clothes. "Well, Kenneth, you know that I've invested a good deal of money in the company. I can stand to lose it, of course, but I'd rather not. Without you, the company might as well close up shop. On the other hand, your violation of some of our most sacred customs makes it difficult for me if you stay around. The Koshcha—that was the Neptunian equivalent of the British House of Lords or the ancient Japanese Ronin—"will be electing the new king soon. I'm a potential candidate, of course, and I can't afford to be associated with a menace to Neptunian traditions. Too much depends on it. So much, in fact, that I'd rather not talk about it. It upsets me."

Aha! So that was it, mused Dodd tri-

umphantly. Fetzop was in trouble two ways. He had to keep Dodd around to protect his touchy bankroll. And again, he had to be circumspect about it so as not to queer his chances with the Koshcha.

"Okay," said Dodd finally, having reviewed everything to his satisfaction. "I'll stay—and I'll try to keep out of trouble. It might help, of course, if you were to write down a few of the most important rules for living around here; but I won't complain. Now, suppose we get down to this matter of the walk-out. . . ."

FETZOP FIXED UP the walk-out without too much trouble. Dodd didn't ask how he'd done it; it was enough that it had been accomplished. The Earthman made a mental vow to have as little to do with Neptunians as he could. He avoided them very thoroughly, conversing with them only to issue what orders were absolutely necessary. And to double-check his caution, he got Fetzop to rehire the Neptunian translator who had interpreted for Dodd during his first weeks on the planet.

The interpreter wasn't quite perfect, of course, but Dodd assured himself that nothing was ever perfect on this forsaken sphere. The Neptunian didn't know English any too well, though he'd spent several years on Earth. Most of it had been spent in space-port bars, Dodd guessed. That might explain how he'd lost the section of his lower lip which caused his lisp.

But he did speak English of a sort. And he knew Neptunian night life. When the quitting whistle sounded—an Earth innovation on which Dodd had insisted—the Terrestrial turned to his sharp-faced interpreter and regarded him without enthusiasm. "Suppose we can get a drink tonight?" he asked coldly.

The Neptunian looked shocked. "Alco-

hol?" he gaped. "Of courth not. It ith forbidden."

Dodd, who had expected it, nodded stoically. "Why this time? Another religious rite?"

"A very sacred one. They are holding the new electionth for the monarchy. All over Neptune it ith forbidden to—"

Dodd leaned over and sniffed. The fumes of alcohol that floated from the dog-faced one's lips brought a dour smile to his own. "Skip it," he advised. "I suppose it will cost us double rates to blaspheme a little."

The taut Neptunian face split into a snaggy grin. "That ith better," he commented. "Do you wish a floor show or jutht a bar?"

Dodd, remembering the chorus of Neptunian beauties he had seen the week before, shuddered and said, "Bar." He made a mental resolve to visit the Earth-rocket in port and see if he could horn-swoggle the steward into selling him a case or two of Terrestrial Scotch. The Neptunian firewater, apparently distilled from bat-blood and brimstone, let Dodd forget his troubles for a while. But it always doubled them the morning after.

THERE WAS A TERRIBLE rattle in the middle of the night. Dodd, who seldom had callers, didn't venture a guess as to who it might be. He rolled out of bed with a moan and just managed to catch his bursting head as it tumbled off his shoulders.

The clapper sounded again, like the clashing of dry mastodon bones. Dodd cursed and struggled into robe and slippers.

He opened the door and in staggered the prince. Dodd scarcely believed his eyes, for it was a totally changed Neptunian he saw—haggard, distrait, eyes rolling with terror.

"Hide me!" begged Fetzop, his chest heaving. "Get me out of sight. They'll

kill me—vivisect me—tear my limbs off one by one!"

"Why?" yelled Dodd. "What's the matter?"

Fetzop didn't answer directly. "Give me a drink," he implored. "I'm going to die so I might as well die in peace."

Dodd nutely mixed him a drink. He thought of making one for himself, but caught a whiff of the liquor, turned faint green, and refrained.

The Neptunian gulped it down, choked, and held out his glass for a refill. The alcohol seemed to calm him down. He slumped into a chair and wrung his three-digit hands. He stared with anguish at the Terrestrial.

"Kenneth," he said mournfully, "you've been a good friend to me. Do you know what has happened to me now?"

Dodd shook his head. "Something bad?" he ventured.

"Bad!" barked Fetzop. "The very worst. I've been elected king!" He began to sob piteously. The tragedy seemed too much for his morale.

Dodd reeled. "Why, congratulations!" he began automatically. "I'm very happy for Your Majesty. May you enjoy a long and—"

"Kenneth, stop mocking me!" howled the prince—the king, now. "Don't you understand? It is our custom that the king shall be a popular man. To make sure of that, he is compelled to go through a three-day period immediately after his election when any Neptunian may club, maim, shoot, or otherwise injure him without redress."

Dodd took only a second to answer. Danger was always a spur to him. "We'll see about that," he snapped vigorously. He slid open a drawer and drew out a young arsenal of handguns and charges, tried to pass a brace of them to the new king.

Fetzop recoiled in horror, his hands fluttering behind his back. "No!" he ex-

claimed. "I can't take those! I might lose my head and attempt to defend myself. That is punished very severely."

"God help us!" groaned Dodd, remembering a mild punishment Fetzop had once mentioned to him. It had involved boiling in molten tungsten, inch by inch. "What a race to be born into! What will we do?"

"That," said the king somberly, "is your problem. I am not allowed even to run away. No one within our dome-cities will hide me, and I may not go out of them. Even you will not be able to hide me. They will be here soon, seeking me."

Dodd thought it over, then shrugged. "Well," he said caustically, "if you can't stay and can't leave, maybe you'd just better take your medicine and get it over."

"I didn't say I had to remain in the city," Fetzop said carefully. "I said I could not go out. Now, if you were to pick me up by main force and drag me out, there is little I could do about it since you could overpower me."

Overpower him! Dodd looked at the Neptunian's seven-foot, three hundred pound frame and thought what a liar the man was. But he was a friend, so Dodd had to make sacrifices.

"Okay," he said. "Let's go." He looked surprised when the prince, looking worried, did not move.

"You'll have to carry me," he said gently.

THEY were practically at the edge of the city, skulking through its great dim basements, before the first sounds of pursuit became audible. At the noise of the approaching searchers, Fetzop leap off the improvised sledge on which Dodd had been straining to drag him along and rolled into action.

"May my ancestors forgive me for this!" he gasped. "Go up through there! Hurry!" He boosted Dodd through a ceiling trap, followed himself, and then rolled

it shut, closing out the sound of the followers. They were on a street near the edge of the city, next to one of the great heat-locks.

Fetzop looked worried. "Did I do wrong, Kenneth?" he implored. "I didn't actually run away from them; I merely came out of the basement to the ground level. That should be ethical, shouldn't it?"

"Sure. But what now?" panted Dodd.

The monarch sighed and a new expression came into his face.

"Kenneth," he explained painstakingly. "I'm not going to watch you for the next few minutes, but I earnestly caution you that honesty is the best policy and that it would be criminal and irreligious to break open a storehouse—should there be one around—and take out of it two heat-suits, concentrated food for three days, and a motor sled."

Deliberately he turned his back on the storehouse just across the way. Dodd stared at him in strange fascination, then bent to the lock on its door. He smashed it cleanly away, whirled as a voice spoke to him.

But it was only the king, his back still turned, who seemed to have forgotten something. "Don't steal any fuel either, Kenneth," he added.

AS THEY SPED across the frozen tundra of outer Neptune, Dodd monkeyed with the engine of the little streamlined sled. He finally got it running satisfactorily. He turned off the give-away running lights and turned up the rheostat of his heat-suit a trifle.

"What," he then demanded, settling back and staring reflectively at the brilliant stars in the night sky above, "is this all about?"

The King of Neptune seemed to have recovered some of his calm. "It is the custom," he said simply. "I do not know when it started or how, but I curse the day.

"As you know, the royal family is com-

plicated by polygamy. Commoners on Neptune are allowed only one wife, but the king may have as many as the Koshcha approves. My late father left some thirty sons by his twelve wives. The Koshcha, upon the death of a sovereign, elects the new king from the sons of the old.

"This time I was the unfortunate one. The theory is that they first choose the sons they like least. These are rapidly killed off within their respective three-day periods. Then, as they commence choosing more popular princes, and the real malignancy goes out of the hue and cry after the elected one, the people are assured of a well-loved king. If they didn't love him, they would kill him. What could be simpler?"

"Poisoning the drinking water system of Neptune," suggested Dodd, but His Majesty was not amused.

"I was," he went on sorrowfully, "thoroughly unpopular. And, I am sorry to say, that was largely because of you. If I—"

He choked off and pointed wordlessly upward, his piggy eyes bulging with terror. Above them Dodd saw the characteristic rocket-flare of a plane. It was low and circling.

Luckily, it was still dark—though even Neptunian daylight is a dim, dusky thing compared to the brilliant sunlight of Earth. They could not see the plane except by its flare; the plane, therefore, would also be unable to see them. As if to make a liar out of Dodd's thoughts, a slim finger of pinkish light reached down and touched the ground a hundred yards away. It flicked and darted about with grim determination. The chances were against its striking them, but .

"Fast, Kenneth," said the king softly. "Pour it on. If we make it to those overhanging cliffs ahead they'll never spot us."

The Earthman cursed the clumsy, cranky rocket-turbines, and tried to get

them to turn over a few extra revolutions. He had only pessimistic thoughts of the future, but he kept his fears to himself. Whatever kind of spot they were in, he was inviolable as an extraplanetarian under Solar Law. Of course, if the soarer above dropped a bomb, it wouldn't make any difference, but he got a sour kick out of knowing he was in the right, whatever might happen.

Ahead loomed a sort of mountain range of ice—low, of course, due to Neptunian gravity and windstorms, but providently carved into fantastic shapes.

"Fetzop!" Dodd sputtered suddenly. "What's that?"

The king looked, then turned and shook his head. "It can't be," he said flatly. "What would a cart be doing out here? And drawn by a *gluna*, at that."

"Is that a *gluna*?" asked Dodd, who had heard the things mentioned but never seen one before. He couldn't make out much detail but, in the light of the running lamps on the cart it drew, he saw a large, quadrupedal, shaggy beast.

As the sled hissed across the ice toward the crags, the other vehicle disappeared. "Could it be signaling to the planes?" worried Dodd.

"Certainly not," said the kingly one. "It can't see us—we've no lights. It must belong to some old crank. Nobody else would use a *gluna* for a draft animal. Though a lot of people keep them for pets in the cities."

There was a long silence. Dodd finally exploded.

"How far away are those damned mountains?" Distance was deceptive on this planet, with its hundred-mile horizon.

"Take it easy," advised the Neptunian. "We'll get there."

THEY WERE DRIVING along half asleep, when a resounding smash-up thoroughly awakened them in an instant.

"We've been bombed," yelled Dodd, drawing his guns.

Fetzop, eyes closed, had been catapulted to the ground where he remained. He was audibly praying in Neptunian, his face even paler than usual.

The Earthman looked up, then around. They were still a long way from the mountains, but there were no planes visible overhead.

A grayness on the horizon showed him that dawn was coming.

"What the—" he mumbled, scratching the helmet of his heat-suit. Then it occurred to him to look down at what he was sitting on.

One glance had him springing to his feet and bounding away. He had been sitting on a *gluna*, a beast that seemed principally composed of fur.

"Fetzop," he called cautiously, keeping his eyes on the animal. He picked his way over the wreckage of their own sled, tapped the Neptunian on the shoulder. "Fetzop!"

The King of Neptune quivered to his feet. Without opening his eyes he intoned bravely, "Greetings, my loyal subjects. I, your king, am ready. Shoot straight and spare not—"

"Shut up," said Dodd wearily. "There's nobody here but us fugitives."

The king opened his eyes. "Then for Pete's sake what happened? What did we run into?"

Dodd shrugged. "We seem to have met up with that cart we saw a while ago. Our sled's wrecked." He kicked bitterly at the rocket-turbine, which sighed convulsively and slumped into a tangle of metal and plastic.

"Where's the man who was driving?" asked the inquisitive Fetzop.

"How would I know? Scattered to the four winds, probably. Our prow must have hit him square, knocking out his animal and killing the driver."

A creaky old Neptunian voice gave him

the lie simultaneously with a hand-gun's discharge past his ear. Dodd dropped, drew, and fired in almost one smooth movement, cracking off a big chunk of boulder.

"Ow!" wailed the Neptunian voice. Dodd and the king ran behind the boulder to find a whiskery old miner pinned beneath several hundred pounds of rock. Luckily for him the rigid construction of his heat-suit had saved him from being crushed like a bug. Dodd thoughtfully kicked the newcomer's gun out of reach and pondered.

"Very good," he said slowly—and in Neptunian. "Very good indeed. You won't mind if we borrow your cart, will you?"

The miner raved elaborate curses at him and the king. Dodd laughed and rolled over a water flask and some tins of food to the old one's side. "That," he said, "should keep you going for a while. In about a day and a half Fetzop will be either dead or safe. If he's dead, you'll probably die too, because he won't be in any position to help you and I won't want to. If he lives, we'll send out a rescue party. Fair enough?"

They left the miner as his curses changed abruptly to fervent prayers for the safety and well-being of good King Fetzop.

"I don't know, Kenneth," said the king dubiously as he inspected their prize. "This is not a very good *gluna*. I think it is dead, for one thing. And we'll never make the mountains before daylight."

"Don't let it upset you," suggested Dodd, smiling. "It doesn't matter one way or another. I have a plan." The king listened as Dodd unfolded his brain-child; apathetically at first, then eagerly as hope began to appear on his ugly sharp face.

DODD WAS MUSHING along the icy plains behind the *gluna*. Every now and then he paused to loosen the wheel that kept screwing rigidly onto

the axle. To add to his distractions, he had to kick back into place the other wheel, which kept falling off. The animal drawing the car stopped patiently for these frequent interruptions, sometimes looking around with dumb misery in its fur-covered eyes. It had been very badly damaged in the crack-up of the cart and the power-sled.

Above, planes thickened and dipped, as though they couldn't believe what their telescopes showed them. One finally dropped low and came to a skidding halt on the ice.

Dodd reined up the animal and squatted patiently on the cart. Three bloodthirsty city-dwellers marched from the plane, their guns cocked.

Warily they approached the Earthman. "Where's King Fetzop?" demanded one in the language of the planet.

Dodd shrugged wearily. "No spik Neptunian," he said—or its equivalent.

Unfortunately, he spoke in English. "What did you say?" asked his interrogator.

Dodd shrugged again and repeated his shibboleth.

"Why don't you answer?" asked the Neptunian. "Has the *gluna* got your tongue?" His companions grinned at that—sinisterly, Dodd thought. He decided it would be best, on the whole, to explain to them that he never, so long as he lived, would speak a word of their language again. The pitfalls were too great. He essayed a few simple signs.

Commanding attention by clapping his hands, he first pointed to his lips and shook his head. Then, pointing to the Neptunians, he wagged his jaw to show that he meant their language. He shook his head again. Then he pointed to himself, wagged his jaw, and nodded brightly. At about that point, he himself became a little fuzzy as to what he meant. He stared around at the slack-jawed Neptunians and was unable to resist the temptation to

thumb his nose and wiggle his ears at them.

The Neptunians tore their eyes from him with effort and gaped at each other. "An aborigine," one explained, "probably praying to his savage gods."

Another one doubted that. "No," he declared. "Much more likely a form of spastic nerve disease." Before the opposing factions could come to blows, the planes began landing by the score. Finally they rustled up one Neptunian who could speak and understand English—he thought.

The expert, a teacher of languages, approached Dodd and said, bowing deeply. "Do does it how, kid?"

"Very well, thank you," answered the Earthman politely. There followed an urgent consultation between the linguist and the throng. Dodd tried to follow it but became suddenly conscious of overpowering weariness. He shifted to a more comfortable slouch on the *gluna*-cart and listened patiently as the linguist tried again:

"The keeng, he ees where ees he, good man?"

"That's it in a nutshell," agreed Dodd solemnly.

"He says," relayed the expert to the others, "that His Majesty is in a nutshell." The man from the city didn't believe him; they bunched angrily near the planes and went into a huddle.

Dodd heard such snatches of entertaining conversation as: "If he has killed the king, he is guilty of murder, because he is not a Neptunian." . . . "If he hid him we'll fry his ears." "It's too bad these foreigners have to come and spoil things for us Neptunians."

He shuddered and ignored as much as he could. One thing he had noticed about Neptunians: They talked a lot, but did little.

The linguist came back. "Ees king, in spot what, good man?" he essayed.

Dodd laughed sharply. "You can do better than that," he commented.

The translator shrugged. "He is crazy," he informed the others. Then, to Dodd again, "Come weeth hot speed, dear," he ordered sternly. "We go to ceety."

Dodd nodded and unhitched the *gluna*, tying a rope around its shaggy neck by way of a leash. "Yoicks and away," he remarked. "Please to remember the fifth of November. Let's start cooking with gas—dear." He scowled and rolled his eyes maniacally as he strode through the throng toward the planes, dragging the *gluna* behind him.

THE THRONG AT THE coronation hall was brilliant. The entire nobility was present in full uniform. A prominent part of the entertainment, of course, were the huge fighting *glunas*, a charming relic of Neptune's medieval culture. Dodd had to kick the fighters away more than once as they sniffed suspiciously at his own shaggy, utilitarian animal.

They hadn't murdered Dodd or even beaten him up, though it had looked like a close shave for a while. And now he was safer than ever, for the three days had nearly expired and his friend Fetzop was due to assume the throne.

Dodd himself—he had discovered through assiduous eavesdropping—had been the subject of much unfavorable comment. It seemed that he was committing an average of three unforgiveable blunders a minute, and was being thoroughly shunned.

Half a dozen uniformed heralds entered and sounded a fanfare on a battery of violin-like instruments. About Dodd there arose an excited buzzing. This was the big moment. He glanced cautiously at his watch and frowned.

A Neptunian who seemed to fill the function of a lord high chamberlain arose and declared dramatically, "Let His

Majesty, King Fetzop of Neptune, step forth and receive his kingdom!" Everyone in the hall began peering behind draperies and into urns, anxious to be the first to render homage to the new monarch.

"Let's not take chances," said Dodd aloud and in English. "My watch says this guy is three minutes ahead of time. It may be a trick." A couple of members of the Koshcha nearby looked over to see to whom he was talking; no one was visible.

The chamberlain spoke again, the strain of waiting telling on his face.

"Let His Majesty appear!" he cried desperately.

By now the throng was looking under the rugs and in the upholstery of the furniture, with one or two even tapping tentatively on the walls for hollow spots. Still no king. This was bad, very bad, both for morale and as a breach of tradition. The king was on the planet, had not been reported dead, yet had not showed up. The inference was that he didn't believe the monarchy worth accepting, thus violating Codes One to One Million in the Neptunian rule-book.

After an embarrassing ten minutes more of waiting, there came a report of street rioting outside. Several of the court ladies had swooned and been carried out feet first. The impromptu searching parties, now really desperate, were looking in their pockets and shoes for the fugitive royalty.

Suddenly Dodd gave a start and chuckled shamefacedly. "My watch was stopped," he announced. As the chamberlain was about to repeat his invocation, the Earthman led the shaggy, shambling brute of a *gluna* through the crowd and up the steps to the platform.

"Neptunians!" he cried. "Meet your king!" He plunged a knife into the hide of the beast and ripped down the skin. A gauntleted hand appeared and widened the slit, and was followed by the owner of the hand—King Fetzop, still wearing his heat-suit.

"I'm parboiled, Kenneth," he groaned in English. "Help me out of this damned thing." Free of the electric overalls, he stretched and bowed to the throng, which stared incredulously and then let out a mighty cheer.

"We've done it," whispered Fetzop to Dodd. "My people are good losers—it's an old Neptunian custom."

AFTER THE FORMALITIES of investiture were concluded, the coronation was to end, as usual, with a banquet. And after the half-thousand guests had plowed through the rare dishes—including such exotics as Martian prickly-apples and Earthly herring—the banquet ended with after-dinner speeches.

In the regular course of speakers Dodd fell asleep, for by Neptunian custom the least important spoke first and at greatest length. He awoke to find the king himself addressing the crowd.

"—For not without the daring and brilliance of my friend from Earth, Kenneth Dodd, would I be here today. Friends, this Kenneth Dodd is no ordinary man. It was from his mind that there sprung the idea of wrapping me, your sovereign, in the hide of that lowly beast which lies here before me, and which I shall ever keep by my side as a reminder that only through genius can hardships be defeated.

"I shall never forget the day on Earth when Kenneth Dodd saved my life at the extreme risk of his own, defending me against a drink-maddened woman whose fingers were already red with the blood of those she had clawed. I shall never forget the calm daring with which he struck her on the side of the head so that she was instantly rendered unconscious.

"And once again Kenneth Dodd saved my life—from you, my loyal subjects. It was the swiftness of his mind, the nimbleness of his hand that preserved me so that I address you now.

"What reward can I offer for the great

services he has rendered me? How can I repay this man who is not as other men? There is one reward, one boon within my power to bestow which goes beyond the gift of money, even beyond the highest honors of the State which I might bestow upon him by patent of nobility. This fullest reward I am prepared to give. Kenneth Dodd of Earth, rise and come to me!"

Dodd rose, wondering what might be coming.

"Kenneth Dodd," said the king, "you were my friend. You are my friend no more. Be now my son—legal, regal member of the Royal Family of Neptune!" He took Dodd by the left hand in a bone-crushing grip. The cheers of the crowd became hysterical.

The Earthman blushed, deeply honored. "Why, thanks," he said. "Thanks an awful lot, Your Majesty. I am more pleased than I can say. Why, just think, I may some day—awk!" He moaned in sheer horror as a thought suddenly struck him.

"How do you feel, Fetzop?" he demanded worriedly, extending his arm to brace his parent. "All right?"

"Thank you, Kenneth," said the ruler in surprise. "I'm fine. A little tired but fine—son!" He beamed on Dodd, whose face became very worried indeed as new possibilities began to suggest themselves.

DODD GREW TO BE quite a legend on the flight back to Earth.

"There's the man," passengers would whisper to each other, "who turned down a royal life. He left Neptune after being adopted by the king himself. He must be crazy. Do you suppose he'll go back after he's had a chance to think it over?"

Dodd sometimes overheard these remarks. When he did he smiled, because he knew he would never go back. There was a disadvantage to being a prince, he had found. If your father died, you were in grave danger of becoming king!