

THRILLING

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STORIES

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There was a scream of terror and

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CHIEF THIEF!

PREAMBLE

The S. S. Terra, a League-freighter of the A class, was two light years off Arcturus II. She was loaded with Martian yellowwood and Vegan textiles, and her vaults contained a shipment from the Interplanetary Diamond Trust.

Two slim black cruisers, their slender thrusting lines alien to the League space lanes, came sweeping up behind the freighter. Despite her steady speed of one parsec an hour, the cruisers overtook her in a matter of seconds. There were strange energy coils around the pointed nose of each cruiser, and the

Assignment to ALDEBARAN

a novelet by KENDELL FOSTER CROSSEN



pain as one of the Aldebarans fell

freighter's radar screen continued to prove there was 'nothing nearer than Arcturus II.

The cruisers came up under the belly of the freighter and magnetic plates clamped them to the big ship, one on each side of the air-lock. Two helmeted, suited figures emerged from the cruisers and clung to the freighter. One of them probed with an instrument and the outer door slid open. They stepped inside and closed it. When the pressure had adjusted, the same instrument opened the inner door. A handful of bright capsules were tossed through it.

After a time the big freighter slowed down and swung around until she was traveling in a great circle. Thirty minutes later the two figures reappeared. They closed the air-lock door and climbed back into their cruisers.

The S. S. Terra circled aimlessly in space, only one short light year from her destination. . . .

I

DR. LAERTES KWANG SOLOMON was in a foul humor. He tramped along the corridor of the 170th floor of

the new Interplanetary Rest Hotel ("Overlooking Beautiful Saranac Lake") and grumbled to himself.

He was a big man, weighing well over two hundred pounds. His face was round and pinkly-innocent. Bright, almost childish eyes peered at the world from beneath bushy brows. His gray hair was tousled and always needed trimming. Although everyone wore bright clothes, none were brighter, nor more ill-matched, than Dr. Solomon's. His coat was like a canary yellow tent. His slacks, baggy at the knees, were magenta. His shirt was a two-tone red. The overall effect was that of a rumpled rainbow.

During eight months of the year, Dr. Solomon was the head of the Department of Impossible Events—sometimes known as the If-History—at Solar University on Mars. His lectures on "What would have happened if the wheel had never been invented" and "What would have happened if Cleopatra had been frigid" as well as "What would have happened if Mars had gotten the space drive before Terra," were justly famous. During the remainder of each year, Dr. Solomon was in the habit of going to some relatively quiet resort hotel and pursuing his hobby. This year he had chosen the Interplanetary Rest Hotel, only to find himself in the midst of a political convention. And if there was any one thing which Laertes Solomon detested above all others, it was a political convention.

Having just escaped from the atmosphere of a convention luncheon, Dr. Solomon was busily outlining a future lecture as he strode along. The theme, he'd decided, would be "What would have happened if every single delegate to the first convention ever held had dropped dead of bubonic plague." The possibilities inherent in this theme had restored his good humor by the time he reached the door to his room. He pressed his hand against the palm-lock and entered.

The room was a model of chaos.

Books, magazines, newspapers, manuscripts and scraps of paper bearing notes were piled high on chairs, dressers, bed, video set, and in odd spots all over the room. The automatic dusters had long since stripped their gears in the face of the impossible, and the Service Supervisor had refused to enter the room since the second day of his visit. Which was exactly the way Dr. Solomon liked it.

IN THE midst of this apparent confusion there was a large desk on which there stood a strange-looking contraption. Historians would have recognized it as a typewriter, but to the average citizen of the League it would have been a mystery. Laertes Solomon refused to have anything to do with the modern Gybernetic-Scribes and insisted on sitting in front of the old machine, personally attacking each letter as though it were a deadly enemy.

The ancient writing machine was of a piece with the doctor's hobby. The last crime in the Solar System—in fact, in any of the nine systems that made up the Galactic League of Planets—had been committed in 2231, more than five hundred years earlier. The Dvoskin Morality Rating Computer could spot the slightest tendency to deviation from the social norm and the treatment was always successful. With the end of crime, interest in crime literature rapidly waned. For four hundred years no one had read mystery stories and most people had even forgotten there had ever been such a form of literature. The one exception was Laertes Solomon.

His room was filled with books that were five hundred, or more, years old. Their bindings were cracked and curling, the leaves brown with age. If it hadn't been for modern preservatives, they would have crumbled to dust long before. The names of the authors—the once magic names of John Dickson Carr, Ellery Queen, Anthony Boucher, Erle Stanley Gardner, Agatha Christie, M. E. Chaber, and many others—had long been forgotten by all but Dr. Solomon

and two or three custodians of dusty museums.

It had taken Laertes Solomon a lifetime, and most of his income, to collect the mystery novels and crime stories in the room. He was especially proud of the fact that he had deftly borrowed one of the mystery novels from the Museum of Ancient Terran History. It was a definite accomplishment in an age when crime was guaranteed to be impossible.

As soon as he entered his room, Laertes seated himself in front of the writing machine and scowled at it. He was in the middle of preparing a monograph on

Laertes chuckled as he thought of the repercussions that would follow the appearance of his monograph.

He had pounded out only a few sentences when there was a purr from the announcer. He glared at the door for a full minute before he decided to admit he was there.

"Come in," he growled. His voice activated the relays which simultaneously unlocked the door and issued an invitation for the visitor to enter.

The man who entered brought with him an air of authority. It wasn't only that he wore the severe white shirt which

Utopia Achieved!

IF MAN is an utterly selfish animal, his sole objection to murder would seem to lie in a personal aversion to being murdered. Yet things do not seem quite so black, for Man continues to dream of Utopia, where all evils including Crime are eliminated, so perhaps there is something of the ultimate good in Man's grubby little soul.

The theme which here engages the interest of our Mr. Crossen is the one of Utopia achieved. Crime has been eliminated. Does this then leave Mankind helpless if some atavistic criminal culture suddenly pops over the horizon? Will Man have lost his faculty for dealing ruthlessly with those who threaten him? Probably we don't have to worry about that for a long time. But in the realm of speculation, here it is.

—The Editor

The Influence of Mystery Novels on the Sex Life of Ancient Terrans. He had recently uncovered, while searching for lecture material, the microfilm of a 20th Century newspaper. It had contained the story of a man who divorced his wife because she read mystery novels in bed.

The monograph would connect the ancient news story with the drastic drop in the birth rate that had occurred around the beginning of the Twenty-first Century, in order to prove that the ancient Terrans had found mystery novels more exciting than procreative activity. Then it would suggest that the League Government revive mystery novels as an alternative to the monthly Sterility Board visits.

was the emblem of a League official; many a White Shirt failed to give an impression of power. This man, however, carried himself as one who was accustomed to being obeyed. It was in the expression of his well-pampered face, in the carriage of his amply-fed body.

He glanced around at the cluttered room, mingled curiosity and distaste on his face.

Laertes looked at his visitor with suspicion. There was something familiar about him, but it stopped short of recognition. Laertes cared little for visicasts and less for politicians.

"Well," growled Laertes, "did you want something, or did you merely drop around to admire the well-ordered beau-

ty of my existence?"

The man's gaze left the clutter and fixed on Laertes' face. "I beg your pardon," he said. "I wanted to see you. I presume you must be Dr. Solomon?"

"I am. Who are you?"

AN EXPRESSION of surprise was quickly masked. "I am Nicholas Samoti. I have the honor of being the President of the Galactic League of Planets."

"Honor," snorted Laertes. His suspicion deepened. The head of the Galactic League did not usually drop in on ordinary citizens; if he had something to say to them they were summoned into his presence. "What do you want?"

"As you probably know," the President said smoothly, "there is a political convention being held in this hotel. A meeting of the Solarist Party, of which I am the titular head. This explains my presence in the hotel. Hearing that one of our most distinguished citizens was also in the hotel, I took the liberty of calling upon you."

"Bosh," Laertes said. "You want something or you wouldn't be here. What is it?"

"May I sit down?" the President asked.

Laertes reluctantly removed the books from the chair beside his desk. "You're interrupting me," he said pointedly. Only his curiosity prompted him to be this civil. "I'll listen, but not to any of your jet-blown political speeches. Say what you've got to say and then get out."

"Man to man," the President agreed. He visibly restrained himself from dusting off the chair before sitting down. "I imagine that you are familiar with our present political situation?"

"I'm familiar with its stench," Laertes said. He gave the President a wolfish grin. "I know that the League was formed through conquest by the Solar System. I know that Rigil Kentaurus, Sirius, Procyon, Altair, Fomalhaut, Vega, Pollux and Arcturus are *privileged*

to elect forty-nine per cent of the Galactic Congress, while Sol elects the remaining fifty-one per cent. I know that the Solarist Party has elected every president and dominated every congress since the formation of the League. I know that the business trusts of the Solar System own the Solarist Party—of which you have the *honor* of being the head—and that they finance the Universalist Party to furnish a token opposition."

"Crudely put," the President said amiably, "but essentially correct."

"You admit it then?"

"Just between the two of us—yes. But I think you might have mentioned some of the assets derived from our rule."

"I didn't know there were any," Laertes said.

"We have abolished crime."

"Crimes of individual against individual, or of individual against business—but not those of business against the individual."

The President smiled. "Since we define crime, those are perfectly legal. And since we have also provided a minimum security for every citizen of nine sun systems, I doubt if our actions could be called crimes under any definition."

"Minimum security in regard to food and shelter," Laertes said, "but none for personal freedom."

"The slogan of mountebanks," the President said. "We've had no crime in five hundred years; no war in four hundred years."

"I seem to recall," Laertes said sweetly, "that Sol declared war against Procyon two years ago. And wasn't it three years ago that we declared war against Pollux?"

"Declaration of war, yes," said the President, "but no war. In each case, peace was immediately negotiated through Congress."

"I remember," Laertes said dryly. "In each case, war was declared shortly after it was discovered the other system held valuable patents which they refused to sell to the Solarian Trusts. In

each case, war was declared, our fleet of oxygen-bomb ships appeared over the planets of the system, and their patents were grabbed under the laws governing the state of war. By the time the peace was negotiated, our Trusts had examined the patents and, of course, there was no way of returning knowledge—although the patents were always returned."

"It was just good business. The point is, Dr. Solomon, that we're not a warring system. We have a fleet of O-bomb ships, but that is all. We have no light bombers and practically no fighting ships. We have not lived by war for four hundred years. As a result we are not prepared for war."

"You keep harping on this," Laertes said. He looked shrewdly at the President. "Does that mean someone is about to declare war against us?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes."

"Who?"

"I'm coming to that," President Samoti said smoothly. "You know about the Abrams Space Drive?"

Laertes nodded.

"Until it was built last year, our space flights were limited to approximately twenty light years. The League itself was developed through a series of such short hops. But with the Abrams Drive all of this was changed. We immediately began exploring beyond the borders of the League. Most of the inhabited planets we are discovering will, of course, be permitted to join the League."

"Decent of you," muttered Laertes.

THE President ignored his sarcasm. "One of the first systems we approached was the Aldebaran. Five planets in the orbit. The first two are too near their sun to support life. Planets four and five are inhabited by primitive forms of non-human intelligent life. The third planet is another matter. It possesses two dominant races, one human and the other non-human."

"They're resisting permission to join the League, eh?"

"Aldebaran Three," continued President Samoti, "has a criminal culture. They live by theft and fraud.—We sent two observers to the planet. They hadn't been there five minutes before their pockets were picked clean. A handful of Aldebarans were starting to unbolt the ship engine, so they decided to return."

Laertes Solomon laughed until the tears ran down his face. The President waited patiently until the laughter faded to a rumbling chuckle.

"For a century the Aldebarans have raided other planets and practiced space piracy. Fortunately for us, they operated in the other end of the Galaxy.—Until recently. Apparently they have turned their attention in this direction. They must have thoroughly scouted us, for they speak our language and seem familiar with our customs. Last week they struck for the first time."

"A raid?"

"On a League freighter bound for Arcturus. It was loaded with wood from the Building Trust—but it also carried a fortune in gems from the Diamond Trust. The Aldebarans entered the ship while it was in flight from the outside—which our engineers say is impossible. Before or after entering, they drugged the entire crew. They ignored the shipment of wood, but they took the diamonds from a vault. The vault is one which our engineers also swear cannot be opened except by the electronic key which has never left the possession of the Diamond Trust."

Laertes grunted with disdain: "I never saw a lock, electronic or not, that couldn't be opened," he said. "How do you know it was Aldebarans and not some of the crew?"

"The crew was Dwoskin rated immediately and the computer cleared them." If he saw the smile on Laertes' face, he ignored it. "The vault contained a camera which automatically photographed anyone opening the door. There were two Aldebarans involved. One human, one not."

"If you're that positive," Laertes said sourly, "why tell me about it? Why haven't you just sent your bombing fleet over Aldebaran and demanded the return of the diamonds?"

"We have," President Samoti said dryly.

"Oh-ho," Laertes said. The interest in his eyes sharpened. "I gather they refused?"

"They did." The President's smile was bleak. "One of our largest space bombers was over the planet. The commander warned the Aldebarans that unless they agreed to surrender the diamonds at once, he would drop a planet buster—that's a Class-A oxygen bomb. The Aldebaran's return message, expressed in the crudest possible language, told the commander what he could do with the bomb."

"Did they now?" Laertes exclaimed in obvious delight.

"The commander ordered the bomb dropped. It had barely left the bay when it was detonated. I hardly need to add that the ship and all personnel were completely destroyed."

"What happened?"

"We can only conclude that the Aldebarans possess a means of setting off a bomb the minute it's released fifty miles above their planet. Obviously, in terms of their culture, they have advanced as far as we have in terms of our culture. But since they are oriented to theft and fraud and fighting, it puts us at a distinct disadvantage."

There was no indication that Laertes Solomon found this an unpleasant prospect.

"We have three choices," the President continued. "We can let them continue to commit acts of piracy, which is unthinkable. We can declare war against them and because it would be nine sun systems against one planet we would win eventually, but it would be a long and costly war. Or we can find some method which will permit us to live with the Aldebarans without being molested."

"Why come to me about it?" Laertes

demanded again. "You've run the League all these years without consulting a mere university professor. Why bother now?"

"We," the President admitted frankly, "are not equipped to deal with a criminal culture. Five centuries with no crime has left us unable to understand it. Even the literature on crime has mostly disappeared." His eyes flicked about the room. "You will be interested to know, Dr. Solomon, that we set up the problem on a giant computer and then ran the personality cards of every citizen in the nine systems of the League. Out of all these billions, the computer picked out only one card as containing the proper qualifications. That card was yours."

That computer's more intelligent than I would have thought," Laertes said with his usual modesty.

"Dr. Solomon, we want you to go to Aldebaran Three and try to come to some understanding with them. Secretly we will give you the rank of a full League ambassador. You will have a free hand in any negotiations with the Aldebarans, subject only to the final approval of Congress."

"Why should I go?" Laertes Solomon asked. "I have no interest in you, your political party or the Trusts. I'd be just as happy to see all of you flat on your backsides. Why should I lift a finger to help you?"

The President smiled. "Have you ever heard of a story of the ancients called *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* by Edgar Allan Poe?"

Laertes sat upright. "The first detective story ever written," he exclaimed. "First published nine hundred years ago. You know where there is a copy of it?"

AT THAT the President nodded. "The government owns a copy. Not a first edition, of course, but probably the only copy in existence. When you have concluded this mission, that copy will belong to you."

Laertes struggled with temptation.

"We plan," the President continued smoothly, watching Laertes, "on sending you in a small ship, with only one companion. He will be subject to your orders. We had thought that as soon as you were outside the League limits we would announce that we have discovered a crime for the first time in five hundred years. The two escaping criminals will be thoroughly described. Thus you will arrive on Aldebaran in the guise of fugitives from justice."

The thought of the Poe story plus the opportunity to play the role of an undercover agent was too much for Laertes Kwang Solomon. He continued to struggle with the temptation, but it was a shabby effort and he soon capitulated.

"All right," he said gruffly.

"Good." President Samoti rose from his chair. "The young man who will accompany you has been waiting outside in the corridor. I will call him in." He strode across to the door and swung it open. "Come in, Jon," he said.

Although the man who entered the room wore green sport clothes, the set of his shoulders revealed that he hadn't long been out of uniform.

"Doctor," the President said, "this is Jon Gaynor, a Sergeant in the Solar System Police Force, on leave of absence. I think you will find him to be a very capable young man."

"How do you do, sir," the young man said. He shook hands with an eagerness that made Laertes feel better about not having had any choice in the selection of his companion.

The President left soon afterward. Laertes Solomon made arrangements with the hotel to send his things back to Mars, then he and Jon Gaynor went up to the space cruiser parked on top of the hotel.

They stopped briefly on Mars where Laertes packed a portable trunk which was equipped with a special lock. When it was packed there was a brief argument as to whether Laertes should or should not don a disguise of his own invention, which included a drooping false

mustache. Jon Gaynor finally prevailed and Laertes climbed back in the cruiser unadorned.

As they crossed the imaginary space line that marked the boundary of the League, they sat, Laertes beaming, listening to a League newscaster describe them as dangerous criminals.

II

ALDEBARAN THREE was a lazy green ball beneath them. Laertes Solomon wore the expression of a small boy about to make his first rocket flight. His multicolored clothes were more mussed than usual and his hair had been ruffled until it resembled a tangled halo. He suppressed the grin that persisted in spreading over his face and glanced at his companion. Jon Gaynor, S. S. Sergeant on leave, looked the part. His face was grim as he looked at the planet dead ahead.

"What's the matter, boy?" Laertes demanded. "You look like you'd just been caught in the midst of an adolescent fling at sex. We're about to make history, son. At least, get a glint in your eye."

"Yes, sir," Jon said, but the expression on his face didn't change.

"What's the matter, son?" Laertes asked.

"I know that this is an important assignment," the young man said, "and I'm glad that it gives me a chance to work with you. But I'm not looking forward to Aldebaran. According to what President Samoti said, those people are completely immoral. Not only do they live by stealing, but they—that is, they generally conduct themselves in an indecent manner."

Laertes Solomon peered at his young companion. "Are you, by any chance, making some sort of skittish reference to the sex lives of the Aldebarans?"

Jon Gaynor nodded, his face flushed.

"Well, bless me," Laertes exclaimed.

"What is happening to the younger generation? I must have been even younger

than you when the university president's daughter and I—" He broke off at the sight of Jon's face and chuckled. "Well, perhaps I'd better save that story until you're a bit more sophisticated. By the way, I hope you've taken precautions to protect your wallet."

"It's in my pocket," Jon said, "but nearly everything of value is in a money belt which I'm wearing beneath my clothes."

Laertes grunted and turned back to watch the planet rapidly expanding beneath them.

As they dropped through the atmosphere, Laertes contacted the Aldebaran spaceport and received permission to land. A few minutes later, the cruiser settled to the ground. Jon Gaynor cut the power and stood up.

"Well," he said glumly, "I guess this is it."

"In a minute it is," Laertes said cryptically. He went forward and bent over the control panel, his heavy body masking his actions.

"What are you doing?" Jon asked.

"Indulging in an old man's whim," Laertes said, straightening up. "Let us not keep our hosts waiting, son." His voice held a suggestion of a smile.

Jon Gaynor opened the inner door and they stepped into the air-lock. He threw open the outer door and at the same time pressed the delayed-closing key. They descended to the ground and the outer door closed after them as they went down.

There were about a dozen Aldebarans on hand to meet them and for a minute the two groups stared at each other. Four of the Aldebarans were non-human, although they stood erect and wore the same brief white tunics the others did. They had long necks and low, flat heads. Their features were sufficiently reptilian to suggest that they were evolved from a lizard race. Their bodies were covered with bright green scales. What had once been front feet had developed into three-fingered hands with pointed nails.

IN A WAY, the human Aldebarans were almost as startling as the others. In form and features, they were almost the duplicates of Terrans. But their skins were uniformly blue—a very light blue like a Terran sky on an exceptionally clear day. Their hair was either white or a russet red. As they drew nearer, Laertes noticed that the outer parts of their eyes were the same light blue, while the iris was a wispy white, looking not unlike a tiny cloud against a minute sky.

One of the group, a girl, stepped forward. Her brief tunic gave ample evidence that she was formed like Terran girls—only more so. She glanced at Laertes, then looked to Jon. A glint of interest came into her eyes.

"You are the men from Terra?" she asked. There were bird-like trills in her voice.

"I am Laertes Solomon and my companion is Jon Gaynor," Laertes said. "We are, as you have inferred, from Terra. We are here seeking sanctuary.

"Welcome to Yllia," the girl said. "I am Lemora Yno: I have been appointed to act as your guide." She spoke to both of them but her eyes remained on Jon.

"Yllia?" asked Laertes. "Is that the name of your city?" He nodded in the direction where the city could be seen beyond the limits of the spaceport.

"No. Yllia is the name of our planet, that which you call Aldebaran Three. This city is Yma Dor, named after the two peoples of Yllia. We are the Yma and they—" she indicated the non-humans—"are the Dors. Come. I will introduce you."

She led them to the others and introduced them. The names followed so fast upon one another that Laertes caught none of them. He was vaguely aware that there was a slight difference in the names of the humans and the non-humans, the latter's last names being monosyllabic. He was more aware of the fingers brushing lightly at his pockets as the Aldebarans, or Yllians, crowded around to greet them, but he only smiled

the broader.

"Now," said Lemora Yno, "I will escort you into the city. It will be necessary for you to be tested by the Trumachine, but then you may relax and enjoy yourselves. Unless there is a negative report . . ." Her voice trailed off.

"What is the Trumachine?" Laertes asked.

"It is a machine which detects any illegal traits of honesty which may be in you," she said. "Of course, as celebrated criminals from Terra you will have no trouble getting a positive report."

"But—" Jon Gaynor began in a worried voice.

"We welcome the opportunity," Laertes interrupted, "to prove our dishonesty. Are all of your friends also escorting us into the city?"

"Oh, no, they will stay to guard your cruiser."

Laertes only smiled. He saw that Jon was on the point of saying something so he jabbed his elbow in the young man's ribs. Jon grunted and was silent.

The three of them had walked only a few hundred yards when there was a scream of sheer terror and pain from behind them. They looked around to see one of the Aldebarans rolling on the ground near their cruiser.

"What the—" began Jon.

"I took the liberty," Laertes said blandly, "of using a small invention of mine which connected the surface of our ship directly with the storage battery. It was careless of me, Miss Yno, not to warn your friends about trying to dismantle it. I'm afraid one of them has had a rather shocking experience."

The girl looked at him with something like respect in her face. Jon also looked at him. Although he was glad to learn that their cruiser wouldn't be stolen, he seemed a little shocked to learn that Laertes was capable of protecting it so well.

THEY approached a long slim vehicle, rather resembling the air-cars in the League. A Dor sat in the front seat.

Laertes, Jon and the girl got into the rear. The vehicle started, but instead of rising into the air it ran smoothly along the ground.

"A surface-car," Jon exclaimed.

"Yes," said Lemora Yno. "We have both air-cars and surface-cars, but we usually prefer these when we're in the city. If you are interested in our city, there on the right—that large building—is where our *Cheelom* meets to pass laws."

She continued to point out various buildings as they sped along, until she was interrupted by an exclamation from Jon Gaynor. She stopped and she and Laertes looked at him.

"Sorry," he said sheepishly. "I just discovered that my wallet is missing."

"Oh, yes," Laertes said. "I should have mentioned it before, son. Miss Yno conveniently lifted it while we were still on the field. I took the liberty of retrieving it for you." As he passed the wallet over to Jon, he noticed the girl make a small gesture at her tunic. "It was under the edge of her tunic," Laertes continued, "where there seems to be a clever arrangement of hooks and clasps for just such uses."

"You are clever," the girl admitted.

Laertes beamed at her like a small boy being handed a report card with straight A's. "I was a little pressed for time," he said, "but I did manage to pick up one or two things." He began to unload objects from the pockets of his lemon yellow coat. Soon there were nine wallets and various strange trinkets in his lap. Laertes beamed at his two companions.

"You are truly remarkable," Lemora Yno said. "If your friend is as good as you are, the two of you will have no trouble fitting into our way of life."

"He is," Laertes assured her.

"But—" Jon Gaynor started to protest.

"He is merely more modest than I am," Laertes interrupted. He kicked Jon on the shin to emphasize the point. "Oh, yes, I did manage one other thing. I'm not sure that it should be called a

wallet, although it does contain valuables." He removed a final object from his pocket. It resembled a small life preserver.

Lemora Yno clutched at the upper part of her tunic and smiled in defeat. "It's called a breast-purse," she said. "You are cleverer than I thought, Laertes Solomon."

Jon Gaynor looked from one to the other. "You mean you—" He gestured in the direction of the girl and was unable to finish. His face was red.

Laertes chuckled. "Reminded me of the days when I was young," he said. "The motivation was somewhat different but the result was about the same."

Jon Gaynor looked his disapproval. "At least," he said, "you should return Miss Yno's purse to her."

The girl looked horrified. "That would be illegal. You mustn't do anything like that. If I want it back I shall have to steal it."

"I should say so," Laertes said piously. He put the wallets back in his pocket, on the far side from Lemora.

AFTER a short ride, the vehicle came to a stop in front of a large, square building. As they climbed out, Laertes caught sight of a man in a peculiar, crouched position on the sidewalk. As they drew nearer, he saw that the man's hands and feet were imprisoned through four holes in a heavy board so that his legs and arms were held rigidly at right angles to his body. Instead of crouching, as Laertes had thought, he was seated on a small stool. A number of young, both Ymas and Dors, stood around him in an attitude of waiting.

"What's that?" Laertes asked.

"A convict," the girl explained. "He has been convicted of honesty and is now serving his sentence."

Even as she spoke, they saw a man, the cut and color of his tunic suggesting a uniform, approach. The youngsters made way for him and watched eagerly as he began stuffing something into the pockets of the prisoner.

"A bailiff," Lemora said in answer to Laertes' questioning look. "He is empowered by the court to attach all of the convict's wealth. Any property is converted into money and valuables stones. As you can see, the man's pockets are filled and then the children practice picking his pockets."

"Excellent training," Laertes agreed. "How long does this go on?"

"Until the man's wealth is gone. Then he is released."

"I should think he'd have to be pretty wealthy to stay there long. Those kids ought to be able to empty his pockets in about two minutes."

"It's not that simple," Lemora said. "Each child must take his turn. If the others see him picking a pocket, he must put back whatever he got and try again."

They started to edge past the crowd of young Aldebarans. Laertes, still interested in the spectacle, noticed that a small board was hung around the man's neck. On it was some lettering in some strange language. He asked the girl about it.

"It's an old Yllian proverb," she said. "It says: Honesty pays."

"Honesty pays?" exclaimed Jon Gaynor. "But that's wrong, isn't it? It should be honesty doesn't pay. You've arrested him for being honest."

"And he's paying," Lemora said, gesturing to where the first small boy was approaching the prisoner. "He'll go on paying until he has nothing left. Then he'll have to go crooked or starve."

While Jon was digesting this, and finding it pretty indigestible, they turned and mounted the short span of steps leading into the building.

INSIDE, they soon entered a large room almost entirely filled with machinery. One wall was given over to dozens of dials and in the center there was a large square of graph paper. A mechanical arm, holding a pen, rested at one end of it.

There were shuffling footsteps and one of the Dors appeared. His scales were a

darker green and Laertes guessed that this indicated that he was old. He bent his neck and peered at them from bright eyes.

"Greetings, Pleenoo," the girl said. "We have two visitors claiming dishonorable intentions. You are to test them."

"Pinks," the Dod said. "I don't recall ever seeing any Yma-shaped beings with pink skins before. Are they intelligent?"

"Oh, yes. The large one has displayed great cleverness, but of course it might be assumed."

"How are they identified?" the Dor asked.

"They have names. The large one is called Laertes Solomon. The pretty one is Jon Gaynor."

Laertes chuckled as Jon blushed. "Don't you think," he said to the girl, "you might complete the introduction and tell us the name of your long-necked friend?"

"I'm sorry," she said. "He is called Pleenoo Sa."

"Greetings, Pleenoo," Laertes said amiably. "I presume you are the custodian of this contraption which you claim will locate any hidden honesty in a man?"

"Yes," the Dor said. He was still examining the two of them with curiosity. "It does detect honesty. In the fifty years I have operated it, it has not failed once. Do you find this a miracle? Perhaps you think it is done with magic?"

"How does it work?" Laertes asked, ignoring the fact that the Dor seemed to think that they came from some primitive society where machines were unknown.

"I will explain it simply so that you may understand," Pleenoo Sa said. He indicated a sort of reclining chair. "The one to be tested is placed here. We attach to him at various points small instruments which are very sensitive. These take notice of the heart beat, the blood pressure, body temperature, amount of perspiration on the skin, as well as the chemical balances in the body. We have prepared certain questions for the subject to answer and cer-

tain situations which we ask him to visualize. The man who is not contaminated by honesty reacts to everything with excitement, a zest for living, which will be properly registered. Honesty does not stir the blood, so the honest man is revealed by the negative responses. You understand this?"

Laertes nodded amiably. "It is quite similar to a number of testing machines in use on our planet. The principle, in fact, has been known to our people for almost a thousand years. The original was a rather simple device used to detect lies."

"A thousand years?" exclaimed Pleenoo Sa. "Is it possible?"

Before Laertes could answer, there was a startled exclamation from Jon Gaynor. He swung around to face Laertes, rubbing his hip.

"You jabbed me with something," he said accusingly.

"My dear boy," Laertes said in outraged innocence, spreading his hands to show that they were empty, "that is an absurd thought. I possess a strong paternal feeling for you. I wouldn't think of jabbing you. Do I understand that you experienced a sharp pain in your posterior?"

"I did," Jon said, his voice still heavy with suspicion.

"Ah," Laertes said with a knowing air. "I fear you're in for another one of your attacks. Come, my boy, you must sit down before it strikes."

"What the hell are you talking—" began Jon.

"Now, now," Laertes interrupted. He took Jon by the arm and steered him to a chair, meanwhile talking rapidly. "You mustn't get excited, my boy. You've had these attacks before and every time they've been preceded by a pain in the gluteal region. Relax, son. You're among friends. Just take it easy and everything will soon be right." He maneuvered the young man into a chair as carefully as if he were somebody's grandmother. He stepped back and looked down at him. "How do you feel

now, son?"

"I feel fine," Jon insisted. There was a glazed look in his eyes. "But what the devil's the matter with you, Laertes? Are you pulling something? I've never had—never had—I—" He slumped forward and would have fallen to the floor if Laertes hadn't caught him.

"Poor boy," Laertes murmured.

"What is it?" Lemora Yno asked.

"A seizure," Laertes said. "The poor lad has been subject to them since the age of ten. Excitement brings them on. It must have been our escape from Terra."

"What can be done?"

"The seizure must run its course," Laertes explained. "He'll recover in about three hours. Perhaps there is a couch where we can make him comfortable while I'm being tested?"

"In the next room," Lemora said. She threw open the door. Pleen Sa helped Laertes to carry the unconscious Jon into the next room and stretch him out on the couch.

"I am most sorry," Laertes said as they returned to the testing lab, "that my friend's unfortunate attack has interfered with his test. Perhaps an appointment can be made for him tomorrow or the following day."

"Certainly," the Dor said politely. "Whenever the lad is feeling better."

"Better make it the day after tomorrow," Laertes said. "He's usually a little weak the first day after an attack. Now then, my dear sir, I am at your service."

Within a few minutes, Laertes Solomon was stretched out on the testing chair, with wires attached to every part of his anatomy.

III

SOME three hours later, Laertes Solomon was making himself comfortable in the best suite of rooms in the Yllian Palace Hotel. Lemora Yno had escorted Laertes and Jon, the latter carried by two Yllians, there immediately after Laertes was tested. She'd left, promis-

ing to return in a few hours and show them the city.

Laertes had just taken a shower and trussed himself in a mauve robe. His clothes were draped over another chair. On top of the dresser he had dumped the wallets he had gathered since landing on the planet. Near them was a hypodermic needle, small enough to fit easily into the palm of the hand.

After a glance at Jon, stretched out on the bed and still unconscious, Laertes turned to a local magazine which he had deftly slid into his pocket as they were registering. With the aid of an Yllian-Terran dictionary, which he'd talked the clerk into loaning him, he began laboriously to read. The title he translated as *The Yllian Interplanetary Digest*. He soon discovered that the contents—used without benefit of copyright payment, he was sure—came from all over the universe. Many were from cultures in the other extreme of the galaxy, cultures that were not even known in the League, and all of the articles dealt with aspects of planetary wealth. Obviously it was meant to be of assistance to any Yllians who intended taking their talents to other climes. Laertes found them all highly interesting and by the time he'd finished, he had also learned considerable about the Yllian language.

There was a groan from the direction of the bed and Jon Gaynor struggled up on one elbow. His gaze went uncertainly around the room, stopped for a moment on the hypodermic needle on the dresser, then moved on to rest accusingly on Laertes.

"You drugged me," he said.

Laertes nodded. "I'm afraid I did, son."

"Why?"

"That test to detect honesty. If they'd ever strapped you down to that machine, our little scheme would have been blown higher than a runaway space ship. I like you, son, but you're as innocent as a babe. One look at your chart and that old boy would have stopped puttering

around his infernal machine and yelled cops. Lemora, even though she likes you, would have joined in the yelling. It was the only thing to do."

"Where is she?" Jon asked, looking around the room.

"She toddled off somewhere, but she's due back soon to show us around the town."

"Won't they still want to test me?"

"Day after tomorrow," Laertes said. "By that time I'll think of something else." He pushed himself out of his chair and went into the bathroom. He came back holding a glass of water and a small white pill. "Take this, son. It'll make you feel better."

Jon obediently sat up and took the pill. He washed it down with the water.

"That'll take the cobwebs out of your head within a few minutes," Laertes said. "Then you'd better take a shower and get dressed in your finest. Lemora will soon be here to pick us up. She's quite a girl."

"She's beautiful," Jon said. His face clouded. "It's difficult to look at her and realize that she's so completely dishonest and immoral."

"When you're in love with a girl, a lack of morals makes it more enjoyable. If I were thirty years younger, lad, I'd give you some competition."

"You're welcome to," Jon said shortly, but his tone belied the words. "I prefer my women to be as respectable and as moral as they are in the League."

Laertes chuckled and said nothing.

After a while, Jon Gaynor raised his head to look at the older man. "What about you?" he asked. "How did you get out of being tested?"

"I didn't."

"What happened?"

"I passed," Laertes said with pride. "Not only that, but I'm told that I rang up the most impressive display of dishonesty in the history of the planet. I think I'm on my way to becoming a bit of a celebrity."

"I don't understand," Jon said. "Surely you must be Dwooskin rated at

the regular intervals."

"Oh, yes," Laertes said. He chuckled. "In fact, I have a very high morality rating in the League. It always seems to surprise the officials. I've often thought they snoop around their machine afterwards to be sure there are no blown fuses."

"Then how did you manage?"

"I'm not sure it was necessary, but I confess I cheated a bit."

"Cheated a machine?"

LAERTES SOLOMON looked not unlike an overgrown cat at the moment. He smiled and seemed on the point of licking an invisible feather from his lips. "Machines, my boy, can be outwitted. Don't ever spread the information carelessly when you get back to the League. It might destroy our whole civilization to know that a mere professor can get the best of a machine."

"How?"

"It has been rumored," said Laertes in his best lecture manner, "that Laertes Kwang Solomon is a hopeless old fogey because he insists on reading a type of primitive literature known as mysteries. But that's where I learned the trick. A writer named Erle Stanley Gardner used it in one of his novels way back in the Twentieth Century. He used it in reference to the simple lie detector, but the principle is the same as the Yllians use—or that we use on the Dwooskin Computer, for that matter. It is based on the idea that a lie, or anything that's dishonest or immoral causes a chemical change in the body."

"Spare me the lecture," Jon said. "Just tell me how you did it. Maybe I can use the same method when they test me."

"You can, but will you?" Laertes said with a grin. "All I did was to remember with considerable detail an incident of some twenty years ago. We had a professor of deductive logic at the university—a stuffy old duffer—who was married to a red-headed wench half his age. She was from Procyon. She'd al-

ready learned how to conceal her real feelings in the tests; if she hadn't she would have sent the Dwoskin Computer right off its trolley. I may be an old man, lad; but I've got my memories. She had skin like milk and honey and her breasts were like priceless wine goblets—"

He broke off with a chuckle. Jon Gaynor was already heading for the bathroom. The back of his neck was fiery red.

Lemora Yno arrived only a few seconds before Jon reappeared. She immediately broke off the routine remarks she was making to Laertes to greet him. Laertes smiled, but made no comment, when he noticed that Jon had taken special pains with his clothes.

They had dinner at a restaurant that was in general appearance not unlike those on Terra. The food, however, was all strange and exotic, but the two Terrans enjoyed it. Twice during the meal Laertes gravely reached across the table and returned Jon's wallet to him after Lemora had taken it. Each time the girl laughed and Jon was embarrassed.

When they were through dinner, Laertes insisted on paying. He gave the cashier a large Yllian bill and immediately spotted it when he tried a folded-bill trick which made half his right change seem to be the full amount. In the argument that followed, Laertes managed to sneak two large bills and a valuable electronic-pen from the till. The cashier followed them to the sidewalk to congratulate Laertes. When he finally retreated to the restaurant, he carried along an empty wallet that Laertes had left in his pocket for just such an occasion. And Laertes was admiring the stone in the new shirt-pin he'd just acquired.

AT SUPERFICIAL glance the city of Yma Dor resembled many another galactic city, but when one looked closer there were small differences. The buildings were as beautifully modern as any in the League, but windows and

doors were all well recessed and protected by intricate grilled work. The sidewalks on each side of the street were each almost as broad as the street itself. Now that dark had fallen, the walks were brilliantly lighted. Not only were there lights overhead, but bright spotlights were recessed into the sides of buildings and along the curb. Laertes was curious enough to ask the girl about it.

"It makes it more difficult to pick a person's pockets," she explained. "A narrow walk and dim lights such as are found in many cities throughout the galaxy make it top easy. Here, at least, enjoyment is more important than profit, so we make it difficult. Now then, where would you like to go your first evening here?"

"What choice do we have?" Laertes asked.

"We have few of the stadium entertainments I'm told you Terrans like," she said. "We have many very fine dramas and art shows, but those are available only on the vistascreen and broadcasts are available only on sets in the privacy of individual rooms. Thus the enjoyment of them is not subject to interruptions. I'm afraid that leaves us only two choices. We can go to a Coliseum of Sex or to a Gambling Palace."

"Coliseum of Sex?" Jon asked. "What is that?"

"You don't have them on Terra?" she asked. Her tone indicated that it was a pity. "We have hundreds of them. They are large, luxurious buildings with many, many rooms. There is a set fee for entering, which covers everything. They are owned by the government. For a long time they represented a problem, since you might describe them as an honest business, but it was finally solved by having the government pass a law making them illegal."

"The government owns them, but it also passed a law against them?" Jon asked. He sounded a little dazed.

"Oh, yes."

"Are they ever raided?"

"Of course not," she said. "The government bribes the officials—not to raid them."

Laertes—noticed the expression on Jon's face and stepped into the breach. "It sounds like a very tidy arrangement," he said, "but you haven't yet told Jon what goes on there."

"As soon as you enter," Lemora said, "you place all of your clothes and valuables in a special safe with as many combinations as there are customers. Your combination opens only the section in which your things are stored. Then you just wander around. There's always plenty to drink and eat, if you like, and every room is filled with music. Some of the rooms also have special music patterns displayed over the ceiling. As soon as a man and woman are attracted to one another, they go to one of the mating rooms. Would you like to go?"

"I'm an old man," Laertes Solomon said, but there was a twinkle in his eyes. "I'd better try the gambling palace. You two kids run along to the Coliseum."

"We wouldn't think of leaving you," said Jon hurriedly. His voice was a little too loud. "Let's all go to the gambling palace."

Lemora Yno was looking at Laertes with curiosity. "How old are you?" she asked.

"Sixty-two," he said.

"That's not old. And you have a fine robust figure. I'm sure that you would have no trouble finding favor in many a woman's eye—or of giving a good accounting of yourself." She hesitated, glancing merrily at Jon. "Is the pretty one jealous? If not, I—"

"Let's all go to the Gambling Palace," Jon said a little louder.

Laertes chuckled. "I like you, wench," he said. "Perhaps later I'll take a look at one of your Coliseums. You've made me feel younger already. Why, I remember the time when—"

"Let's all go to the Gambling Palace," Jon said again. This time his voice was definitely too loud. A number of Yllians

stopped on the street to stare at him.

"That's right, boy, speak up when you want to be heard," Laertes said. "All right, let's go gamble before junior here ruptures himself."

They walked on down the brightly-lighted street until Lemora indicated a doorway opposite them. They turned and went in.

THEY found themselves in a huge room, fully the size of a galactic block. Everywhere there were clusters of Yllians, both Ymas and Dors. Their voices produced a steady hum of sound. Laertes sniffed the air with the attitude of the confirmed gambler.

"The games are crooked?" he asked.

"Of course," Lemora said. "The object is to try to overcome their control of the games."

They approached the first game. It consisted of a round pool of water. A counter ran around the edge of the pool and on this there were large squares in color. Every shade of the spectrum was represented. The players put their money on the colored squares. The operator sat high above the game. Innumerable small colored balls floated on the surface of the water, one for each color represented on the counter. When all the bets were down, the operator would press a button in front of him, creating a miniature geyser in the pool. The thin waterspout would shoot three feet above the surface of the pool, carrying one of the colored balls with it. It determined the winning color.

Lemora made a few small bets, but Laertes only watched. Although the operator seemed to have only the one button that created the geyser, Laertes noticed that his other hand went to the edge of his chair each time. If all of the colored squares were covered, the one with the smallest bet invariably won; if the bets were fewer, an uncovered color won.

Laertes finally grunted in disgust and moved on. There were a great variety of games, some of them apparently re-

lated to games once played on Terra before gambling had ceased to exist. Others were completely alien to anything Laertes had seen. Most of the games were powered in some fashion, although there were a few manual games where skill seemed to be the important factor.

Laertes kept looking over the games without placing a bet. He seemed to be looking for something. Finally, he came to another powered game. It consisted of a huge circular table. Around the outer rim there were small pockets with a number corresponding to each pocket. There was a larger, unnumbered pocket in the exact center of the table. In the area between the center and the rim pockets a single white ball whirled madly. Bets were made on the numbered pockets and if the ball finally spun into one of them the bettor won. If it spun into the center pocket, the house won.

As Laertes watched, he saw an occasional player win. But none won a second time. He could almost feel the struggle between the players and the operator, in which an individual would now and then gain an advantage only to lose it. On the next play, the spinning ball would approach the winning pocket only to veer away at the last moment and plop into the center pocket.

Leaning heavily against the table, Laertes placed a bet. The white ball spun madly, then, slowing down, suddenly darted into the pocket in front of him. The operator's gaze flicked over Laertes with mild interest.

Laertes tugged at the top of his pants and left his winnings on the number. The white ball spun again. When it slowed down, it seemed to hesitate briefly, then it slowly rolled across the table to drop into the pocket in front of Laertes. This time he won, along with considerable money, a longer stare from the operator. Laertes blandly returned the stare, once more tugging at his pants.

On the third spin, the ball, seemed headed for the center pocket only to regain a lost momentum and dart back into

the same pocket. Laertes assumed his most innocent expression as he became the center of attention.

OTHERS drifted over from other tables to watch as Laertes continued to win. Ostensibly oblivious to the individuals crowding around him, Laertes repeatedly stuffed his winnings into the side pocket of his jacket. It was that which attracted the Yllians almost as much as the fact that he was winning.

He had just raked in his eighth win when there was a startled exclamation from beside him. An Yllian hurriedly withdrew his hand from Laertes' pocket. A large rat-trap dangled from his fingers.

"My most prized possession," Laertes murmured. "It was clever of you to obtain it."

The other Yllians roared their appreciation of the joke.

Laertes continued to play for another hour, winning every time. Finally, he himself grew tired of it and walked away from the table. Lemora Yno and Jon Gaynor followed him out to the street. There was a puzzled expression on the girl's face.

"The finger-trap in your pocket was a very clever idea," she said, "but there is something I do not understand, Laertes. You clearly put all the money you won into that same pocket yet, after the finger-trap was removed, there were several who tried to obtain the money. I did myself and the pocket was empty."

Laertes chuckled. He swung open his coat and showed where he'd cut a slit through the coat near the top of the pocket. The mouth of a small bag protruded from the top of his trousers near the slit in his coat.

"But you didn't know we were going to gamble when you got dressed," Jon said.

"I came prepared for a number of eventualities," Laertes said modestly. "It had occurred to me that this would be an excellent arrangement for carrying various articles without the need for

being constantly on guard. I merely adapted it to the present needs."

"So that's why you dress the way you do," Lemora said. "Does the costume also conceal the method you used to win on the table—or is that a secret formula?"

Laertes chuckled again. He patted himself on the stomach. "I belted on a magnet-power pack," he said, "thinking it might be handy in picking up a few objects. When we entered the gambling palace, the problem became one of looking for a spot where a magnet might be used. As you know, I finally found it. The ball had a steel core and the operator was using a magnet to pull it into the house-pocket."

"I knew that," said Lemora, frowning. "So did others. In fact, a number of players have tried using magnets against the game but have never won more than once."

"Of course. I noticed that. When a player had a magnet, which was more powerful than the one the operator was using, he'd win that once. But on the next play, the operator would either switch to a more powerful magnet, or he was using one that could be stepped up. I merely stepped up the power of my own after each play, so that I was always using just a bit more magnetic pull than he was."

"You will become an important man in our world," Lemora predicted.

THEY walked slowly back toward the hotel, the girl pointing out various sights as they went. There were safety walks at every corner, and one pedestrian walk constructed a level above the street, where one could stroll and no one was allowed to rob him. They were, she explained, for the use of lovers and philosophers. As they went along, Laertes noticed that Jon and the girl were holding hands. He not only approved of their interest in each other; he took advantage of it to relieve Lemora of a few things she carried in the usual place under the edge of her tunic.

When they arrived back at the hotel,

Laertes went straight up to their suite. Lemora murmured something about showing him the four moons of Yllia and dragged Jon in the direction of the hotel roof.

When Jon finally entered their rooms an hour or so later, Laertes was in bed with the lights out, but he was still awake.

"Got your wallet?" Laertes asked.

"Yes, I have," Jon said. His voice was still faintly stiff with disapproval. "She never even tried to get it once I explained that I found thievery a very unattractive trait in a girl."

"Oh, you explained that, did you?" Laertes asked. "And she didn't yell for the cops to have you locked up for honesty?"

"She did not. Miss Yno is a very nice girl. It's just that she's been raised under bad influences."

"I suppose you explained that to her?"

"Naturally. She understood at once. After all, she's a very bright girl."

"She's a bright one, I'll grant you," Laertes said. "While you were explaining everything, did you happen to tell her the real reason why we're here?"

"Of course not. I merely told her the traits I admired in a woman and she began changing at once. For the rest, we merely talked. Partly about the Yllian moons, which are beautiful."

"No hanky-panky in the moonlight?"

"No," Jon said stiffly.

"Sissy," scoffed Laertes. "Four moons and you only talk. When I was a lad your age, one moon was enough excuse for me to—"

"I don't want to hear about it," Jon interrupted. "I've always had great respect for you, Dr. Solomon, but I'm rapidly losing it. I don't understand how you've managed to fool the authorities all these years. You should have been jailed years ago as a Dwoskin Negative. But Miss Yno and —" He broke off with a startled exclamation.

"What's wrong?" Laertes asked sourly. "Stab yourself with one of your wings?"

"My money belt," Jon exclaimed a little wildly. "The one I was wearing underneath my clothes. It—it's gone."

Laertes Solomon's booming laughter filled the room.

IV

WHEN Jon Gaynor awakened the following morning, Laertes was already up and dressed. Using his dictionary, he was reading what appeared to be some sort of newspaper. Jon had never seen a newspaper, but he had seen pictures of them. On the dresser near Laertes there was also a fresh pile of wallets, several of them breast-purses, indicating that Laertes had already been out making new social contacts.

"Good morning," Laertes said when he saw that Jon was awake.

"Good morning," Jon mumbled.

"What's the matter, son?" Laertes asked. "Still being upset about your money belt?"

"No," said Jon, not entirely truthfully. "I wouldn't mind this whole set-up if I thought it would do some good. I was pretty tickled to get this assignment because I thought we were going to serve the Galactic League. Now, I discover that you've been able to conceal certain tendencies all these years, and I feel that you're just enjoying yourself here and have no intention of carrying out the project for which we were sent. And I don't know where to start on it myself. I suppose we can't arrest a whole planet."

"Especially," Laertes said dryly, "when that's already been tried, only the arresting officer—in this case a League battleship—found his club blowing up in his own face. Sure, I'm having fun. I'm having a hell of a time, son. I haven't had so much fun since the time when I was a boy and got trapped in an old rocket ship with three girls. And one of them was the daughter of the Minister of Morals, too."

"That's what I mean," Jon muttered darkly.

"Relax, son. The old man isn't finished yet. I grant you I wouldn't want to live in a culture like this all my life. I grant you that I am also in favor of absence of crime. It is important for the Yllians, or Aldebarans, to grow up and become a more useful part of the galaxy. But it's partly because we need them. There's something vital about them, whereas we in the League have begun to dry up. Sure, you can do away with crime—but you can't do away with all human passions. The Dwoskin Morality Ratings are just as much hogwash as that honesty detector they use here."

Jon Gaynor stared sullenly at him, without saying anything.

"It's pretty tough," Laertes said gently, "if you've been raised to believe say, that everybody who doesn't part his hair on the right side is an untouchable and then suddenly you meet a beautiful girl who makes all your nerve ends stand at attention—only she parts her hair on the left side."

"It's not quite that simple," Jon said.

"Almost, son. Anyway, to come back to your original thought, while you've been getting your beauty sleep, I've been out working on the League problem. Only I prefer to think of it as the problem of the League and of Yllia."

"You mean you've already started something that'll straighten this planet out?"

"I've taken the first step. I've been out learning how things run here: It's a very interesting set-up."

"Interesting? It's a planet of thieves and immoral degenerates."

"A man," Laertes said mildly, "is not degenerate because he wants to roll a pretty girl in the hay. Nor is she because she wants him to. As you will learn, my boy. Now, as to the Yllian government . . ."

"Do they have one?"

"Oh, yes. The planet is ruled by an Yllone—in powers not too different from our League president. There is an election every two years. Everyone turns out to vote with great enthusiasm, even

though they know that the elected candidate will be the one who has most successfully stuffed the ballot boxes. Upon assuming office, the Yllone appoints one hundred Ymas and Dors as members of the Cheelom. This body, while somewhat like our Congress, simultaneously serves as assistants to the executive, the legislature and the judiciary. They pass all the laws and are permitted any graft they can think of, although they are forced to give half of all graft to the Yllone. Special elections may be held any time a charge of honesty can be proved against the Yllone."

"They probably never have any special elections then."

LAERTES shook his head. "Occasionally," he said. "There is an underworld syndicate of honest men on Yllia. I am told the most successful ones manage to get away with it by posing as dishonest citizens. They make a big display of robbing one another, then secretly settle accounts with each other later. This syndicate has occasionally reached political figures. And there seems to be some record of politicians who were framed on honesty charges by opponents."

"Framed on honesty charges," said Jon with a laugh. "That's a good one."

"I agree," Laertes said gravely. "I believe I forgot to mention that one can only become a candidate for office here by proving that he has committed a minimum of fifteen thefts in the past week. Actually, most of the theft and fraud practiced here is done for sheer fun and to sort of keep the hand in. The more serious work is reserved for their visits to other planets. But even there, it is interesting to note that their crimes are of an individual, and therefore petty, nature."

"I suppose you'd prefer that they found some way of bankrupting a whole system?" Jon said.

"It isn't a question of my preference," Laertes said. "I was thinking in terms of their cultural advance. I also find it

highly interesting that although they have known nothing of our end of the galaxy until fairly recently, the patterns of their crimes are very similar to that of early Terran crime. For example, the Yllians have done a brisk trade all over the galaxy with a little machine which is guaranteed to manufacture money for the buyer. As long as an Yllian operates it, it does turn out reams of whatever local currency is in demand. Thereafter, it turns out only blank paper."

"So what does that prove?" Jon said. "Except, perhaps, that a crook is a crook no matter where he lives."

Laertes sighed. "It often seems to me," he said, "that the education of our young is sadly neglected. This trip, my boy, will be the making of you. By the way, I believe Miss Yno will be showing up shortly to give us another guided tour. I fear that she will have to be content with your company. I am going to see the Yllone."

"The president? To negotiate?"

"Not exactly to negotiate," Laertes said carefully. "You see, after last night, I seem to be becoming a celebrity of sorts here. It seems only right that I should give the higher officials the opportunity of meeting me. I believe in starting my adult education program at the top. Keep your pockets zippered, my boy. I'll be seeing you." He sailed out of the room before Jon could think of a rejoinder.

The office of the Yllone of Yllia was in a large, impressive building, constructed from some sort of porous stone. It was light blue in color, about the same shade as the skins of the Yllian humans. After being interviewed by a number of minor officials, in the process of which he enriched himself by three wallets, a bag of diamonds, and an electronic pencil, he was finally shown into the office of the Yllone.

THE chief executive of Yllia was a Dor. When he stood up, his flat-topped head towered several inches above Laertes. He wore a yellow tunic,

the color indicating his office. It was obvious that he'd just had a scale-manicure for his scaly hide fairly glistened.

"My dear Dr. Solomon," he said, coming to greet Laertes, "I have been hearing impressive things about you since you landed on our planet. It is an honor to have such a distinguished visitor among us. I am, of course, Chenar Xe, Yllone of Yllia, and in the fair name of the Ymas and the Dors I bid you welcome."

He grasped Laertes' right hand with both hands and pumped it vigorously. Laertes gave no indication that he was aware that the Yllone was simultaneously removing his wrist chronometer.

"Thank you," he said gravely. "It's an honor to be here. Naturally, I could hardly wait to meet one of such superior ability that he holds the highest office in the land."

"You are too kind," the Yllone murmured. He steered Laertes to a chair in front of his desk, taking advantage of the opportunity to remove the objects Laertes had gathered on his way in. Then he moved quickly away, his fingers checking on his own valuables. Finding them all intact, he grinned broadly as he sat behind his desk.

"Your visit is especially a pleasant surprise," he continued, "since we were unaware that any of you people were adept in the finer arts of living. Of course our surveys of your planets have been very superficial."

"Mine is a small talent," Laertes replied modestly. "If I seem superior to my countrymen it is because they have forgotten the minor talents."

"Really?" The Yllone was staring greedily at Laertes' lemon yellow jacket. "You know, my first impression is that your method of clothing yourself is rather cumbersome, but I do find your upper covering rather attractive. It is the Ylloneal color, too."

"I hadn't been aware of that. I shall be careful not to wear it in public again."

The Yllone was still staring at the

jacket. Laertes was certain that he had determined to have it and was only pondering the best way to obtain it. A look of sudden decision came into his lidless eyes. He leaned forward and pressed a button on his desk.

"We must," he said, "show proper honor to your visit. You will join me in a drink."

The door opened and an Yma entered. He wore a conventional tunic with the exception of a diagonal yellow stripe which indicated that he was in the service of the Yllone.

"Bring us two *Sittas*," the Yllone ordered. "Then see that I am not disturbed. This is a special occasion."

The Yma nodded and left.

"*Sittas*?" Laertes asked. "A local drink?"

"You haven't tried it?" the Yllone asked. "It is one of the glories of our planet. A *Sitta* is made from the freshly ripened berries of the *Sitta* tree. The berries must be picked early in the morning while the dew is still on them. It is mildly narcotic, but is not habit-forming. I must confess that I don't feel right myself until I've had my morning *Sitta*."

The door opened and the Yma appeared. He carried two tall glasses filled with a jade green fluid. There was a pleasant tinkle to the glasses as he set them down, indicating the presence of ice. The Yma placed a glass in front of each of them and departed.

There was an eagerness in the Yllone's face that made Laertes suspicious. He shifted his gaze to the wall back of the Yllone's head. There was a framed picture there, showing what was apparently a complicated piece of machinery. It looked almost like a blueprint, except that it was done in pastels.

"Is that a sample of your art?" Laertes asked.

The Yllone twisted his head to look at the picture. Laertes reached over and deftly switched the glasses.

"In a way," the Yllone said, smiling. "That is an artist's impression of a small thing I invented. It was presented to me

after the first successful operation of the invention. You might call it the world's-smallest robot." and sealed it. He stamped it with the official seal of the Yllone of Yllia.

"Oh?"

The Yllone's pleasure in himself had temporarily eclipsed his desire for the yellow coat. "It is small enough to fit into the palm of the hand," he said, "yet it will open any lock in the galaxy. All that is needed is to press it against the lock. It will then read the combinations, memorizing the reading and the location of any alarms or built-in weapons, then adjust itself to the requirements to open the lock. It cannot fail."

"Then," said Laertes, "you must have had the honor of at least being responsible for the recent robbery of that Terzan freighter in mid-flight."

"And the honor of being present and demonstrating my invention. That was its first use—but not its last." His gaze fell on the lemon yellow coat and the look of greed returned. "But we must drink, Dr. Solomon. To a long life and nimble fingers." He raised his glass.

Laertes lifted his own glass. "To full pockets," he responded.

They drank. The *Sitta* had a cool, tangy flavor that was rather pleasant. Almost immediately Laertes felt a slight exhilaration.

"Ahhhhh," the Yllone said with satisfaction. He stared intently at Laertes. "Do you find our *Sitta* pleasant? We believe it to be one of our most cherished possessions. We have often—" A startled look came into his eyes, then he slumped over on his desk. He began snoring loudly at once.

"History and Mickey Finns repeat themselves," Laertes said softly. He got up and began to examine the contents of the desk. When he sat down again, a number of articles were piled in front of him. Among them was his watch. He'd also found several samples of the Yllone's writing and he practiced a few moments on a blank sheet of paper. Then he selected an official letterhead and carefully wrote a short note. He placed the note and his watch in an envelope

and sealed it. He stamped it with the official seal of the Yllone of Yllia. As he had hoped, there was a backdoor and he sighed gratefully as he stepped through it.

V

BY THE time he reached the hotel, Laertes Solomon was in a fine humor. It was only partly due to the drink he'd had. He chuckled wheezily to himself as he went upstairs to the suite he shared with Jon Gaynor. He was wondering how to take the next step when to his surprise he found Jon and the Yllian girl in the suite. He was slightly disappointed that they were sitting so far apart, but he'd already reached the conclusion that patience was needed with his young Terran friend.

"Well?" Jon demanded as he entered.

"Quite well," Laertes said. "I have just returned from a very pleasant visit with Yllone Chenar Xe."

"Isn't he wonderful?" Lemora said. "He's the most active Yllone we've had in years. Did he tell you about his invention?"

"Oh, yes. I was quite impressed by his courage in personally demonstrating it on the League freighter."

"He's the one?" Jon exclaimed. "Then may we can—*Oh!*" The rather explosive quality to the sentence was caused by the fact that Laertes had just stepped on his foot.

"So sorry," Laertes said with a mock sweetness. He turned to Lemora. "The Yllone also introduced me to *Sitta*. I was so taken with it I'd like to throw a small *Sitta* party right now. Do you suppose you might invite some of your friends?"

"Of course," she said with enthusiasm. "Anyone special or just friends?"

"Just friends," he said blandly. "Although it might be interesting if some of them are inclined towards politics. I'm thinking of a political career for myself."

Within the hour, the suite was filled with assorted Ymas and Dors of both

sexes summoned by Lemora Yno. The waiters were busily bringing in tall frosted glasses of Sitta and the party was getting high. Although it had been his idea, Laertes seemed to lose interest in the party as soon as it was under-way. He drank sparingly and watched the door.

Jon Gaynor sipped suspiciously at the drink, but apparently was reassured by the taste. He drained one glass and reached for another. Some of the disapproval faded from his face.

Finally there came a heavy knock on the door. With an agility all out of contrast with his bulk, Laertes leaped for the door. The Yma who stood there wore a conventional tunic with a very narrow yellow stripe around the bottom. He carried a bulky envelope in his hand.

"Laertes Solomon?" he asked.

"That's me," Laertes said jovially. His fingers twitched but he refrained from grabbing for the package.

"Executive mail," the Yma said and extended the envelope. Laertes took it and closed the door. He held the envelope up, examining it until a number of his guests noticed and crowded around:

"I seem to have some executive mail," he observed, peering at it as if he were near-sighted.

"It's from the Yllone," someone said.

"Whatever can he want?" Laertes said innocently. "I was just with him a couple of hours ago." He looked around until he spotted Lemora. "My dear girl," he said, "would you mind reading it for me? I seem to have misplaced my reading glasses." He extended the envelope.

LEMORA YNO took it and ripped it open. She pulled out the wrist chronometer and held it up. By this time everyone in the suite was looking. Then she removed the sheet of paper and unfolded it. Her face turned a paler blue.

"Dear Dr. Solomon," she read, "I enjoyed your visit so much that I would like to return this bit of jewelry which I removed from your wrist when we

shook hands. This is merely a small way of showing my appreciation. Inasmuch as such returns are frowned upon in Yllia, I trust you will keep this gesture confidential." She paused and looked at the others. "It's signed Chenar Xe, Yllone of Yllia."

"Dear me," said Laertes in the silence that followed. "I seem to have been indiscreet."

"Let me see the letter," one of the Dors said. He took the sheet and stared at it. "It's Chenar's writing all right. I'd recognize it any time."

"Something must be done," another one said. "This calls for immediate action."

The room was in an uproar. Jon Gaynor sidled up to Laertes. "You," he said accusingly, "are up to something. You never use reading glasses, so how could you have misplaced them?"

"My boy, you wound me deeply," Laertes said sadly. "But let it pass. This seems to be a matter of some import; we must not intrude with our personal squabbles."

"All right," Lemora Yno said, her voice cutting above the others. They fell silent. "Polon and Rabusa will arouse the city and see to it that the news is sent all over the planet. Rona will summon the Supreme Reviewer. The rest of us will go to the Palace of Reviews and wait for Chenar Xe to be brought in."

"What is going to happen?" Laertes asked the girl as two Ymas and a Dor left.

"Chenar Xe will be tried before the Supreme Reviewer on a charge of honesty," she said. "He will be removed from office and tomorrow there will be a special election. If you'd rather not be involved in this, Laertes—after all, Chenar will probably be unpleasant about it—you don't have to go. This letter and the chronometer are all we need to convict him."

"No," Laertes said, shaking his head. "Although I did this innocently, I did start it and I'll see it through."

"Jon?" the girl asked.

"I want to go along and watch Laertes' innocence at work," said Jon Gaynor. Laertes made a mental note, as they all crowded out of the room, that a small amount of *Silla* seemed to make a great improvement in his companion.

Downstairs, they all got into a number of surface vehicles and drove off. After a short ride, they pulled up in front of a huge square building and went in.

It was all one room. In the front was a raised section on which there were a number of seats to one side and a single seat on the other side. Not far from the single seat, there was a draped box, not essentially different from theatre boxes on Terra. The rest of the room was given over to tiers of seats. There was room for hundreds of spectators.

Lemora Yno led the way up to the raised platform. "We will sit up here," she said, "since we are all complaining witnesses."

AFTER a while, Yllians began to troop into the building in small groups. Within a short time, the hall was almost filled. Then a man, wearing a gold robe over his tunic, entered the box.

"It'll soon start," Lemora said to Laertes. "Tell me, Laertes, did you frame the Yllone?"

"Me?" Laertes said.

"If you did," she said, "it was very clever of you. Dozens have tried to frame Chenar Xe without ever succeeding."

"Mmmm," Laertes said and left it at that.

There was a murmur of sound from the crowd and then Chenar Xe appeared. He was escorted by a number of Yllians whose tunics bore alternate red and yellow stripes.

Chenar Xe, Yllone of Yllia, walked a bit unsteadily. That, plus his bloodshot eyes, indicated to Laertes that the chief executive was suffering from that Terran anachronism, the hangover. But more than that was bothering him, for anger twisted his features. At the moment he looked more like a dragon, who

might at any moment spit fire, than a highly-evolved lizard. His anger did not lessen as he caught sight of Laertes.

As soon as the Yllone was seated in the single chair, the Yllian in the gold robe rose and started to speak. His language was a mere gibberish to Laertes and Jon. But he had spoken only a few words when someone approached the box and said something to him. He broke off, glanced briefly in the direction of Laertes and began again, this time speaking the language of the League.

"I, Krishna Ydon, Supreme Reviewer for all the Ymas and the Dors of Yllia," he said, "do now declare that a Supreme Review is about to be held in reference to the planet of Yllia versus Chenar Xe, the duly elected Yllone of Yllia, who stands before us charged with honesty. The charge may be witnessed."

Lemora Yno stood up. First she exhibited the chronometer, then she read the letter which had accompanied it.

"She witnesses truly," cried the others who sat beside Laertes and Jon.

"She has witnessed truly," declared the Supreme Reviewer. "How speaks the Yllone?"

"That Terran," the Yllone shouted angrily, Jerking his hand in the direction of Laertes, "has falsely placed the curse of honesty on me. He visited me today in the guise of a friend. Since he seemed not overly observant, I promptly relieved him of a few trifling baubles. Then, noticing that he wore a garment of Ylloneal yellow, I determined that I should have it. Not wanting to wait until he went to his rooms and removed it, I invited him to drink with me and placed in his drink a traditional sleep-maker. In some unpleasant fashion, he exchanged drinks with me so that I went to sleep. Then he must have written in my hand and mailed the letter and the jewel to himself by executive order. It is admitted that he acted properly, but this does not make me guilty of honesty."

"How speaks the Terran?" asked the

Supreme Reviewer. "Or does he choose not to speak?"

Laertes Solomon stood up, an imposing figure of a man in his multicolored clothes. "It is difficult," he said, "for one who is so new to your planet to be sure of the finer legal points. It seems to me, however, that a rather intricate problem has been brought into being. If, let us say, I did frame the Yllone as he asserts, were I to admit having done so I would then be guilty of an act of honesty myself. Were I to deny having done so—a properly dishonest stand—I would thereby rob myself of credit for a dishonest act and run the risk of being judged as having acted honestly."

HE PAUSED and there were nods of appreciation from the audience and the Supreme Reviewer. "On the other hand," continued Laertes, "if I did not frame the Yllone and I should so testify, then again I would place myself in the position of being charged with honesty. But should I admit it—the proper course in this case—then I would create a situation in which the Yllone would go unpunished for honesty and the Supreme Reviewer, in clearing the Yllone, would in turn be open to a charge of honesty. Truly a situation fraught with peril. Under the circumstances, I believe I shall content myself with the following observation upon the statement by the Yllone: There is much to what he says, but—"

There was laughter and applause as Laertes sat down.

"The deponent sayeth not," the Supreme Reviewer said with a broad grin. "The Supreme Reviewer, therefore, finds that the Yllone of Yllia, one Chenar Xe, is guilty of acting in an honest and inexcusable manner and hereby declares the office of Yllone of Yllia to be vacant. It is hereby decreed that tomorrow will be an official election day and that all candidates for the office of Yllone must file their intent, with proof of qualifications, within two hours following sunrise. Chenar Xe, the former Yllone of

Yllia, is hereby sentenced to twenty-four hours in the public stocks. Would anyone speak before sentence is executed?"

Laertes was on his feet again. "I should like to take advantage of this opportunity," he said, "to announce that I shall be a candidate for the recently vacated office. Having had some small experience in the matter, I shall endeavor to prove to you before the day is over that all of my opponents, whoever they may be, are honest men. I shall run on a platform of equal losses for all and I promise you that the Stacked Deal of Laertes Kwang Solomon will go down in League history."

There was more applause and laughter as he sat down. Chenar Xe was escorted from the building and the meeting was over.

Laertes Solomon was out early the following morning. On the way to file as a candidate for the Yllonecy; he picked the pockets of fifteen persons and then took them along as witnesses to his qualifications. As a non-citizen—a status that did not interfere with his chances of becoming the next Yllone—he was permitted to examine the ballot boxes, rather simple metal affairs: some six inches square and between two and three feet long, and a sample ballot. He was then told that each candidate could request and receive one special privilege, the only reservation being that it must not be directly connected with balloting or the counting of votes. Laertes asked for the right to be the last candidate to examine the ballot boxes.

His request was immediately granted. It was considered a minor one, since all candidates had the right to examine every ballot box sometime during the day and there would be a whole stream of candidates following the sun across the planet. The other candidates were amused by Laertes' request since they knew from experience that the last one to examine the boxes was at a disadvantage. By that time they were usually so stuffed that there was little room for

additional ballots. And the only purpose of ballot box examinations was to enable the candidate to cram in ballots marked in favor of himself.

AFTER filing, Laertes rushed back to the hotel. He planned on doing something to get a postponement of Jon's honesty test, but discovered it wasn't necessary. Lemora Yno explained that election day was a complete holiday and all other matters were forgotten until it was over.

"There's nothing more fun than elections," Lemora exclaimed. "I've spent all morning working out my guess for the pool."

"The pool?" Laertes asked.

She nodded. "Everyone guesses on the amount of votes."

"What is the population of Yllia?"

"One billion, five hundred and six million, seven hundred and twenty-three thousand, four hundred and fifty-two—but that has nothing to do with it."

"Why not?" Jon Gaynor asked in amazement.

"Everyone votes," Lemora said, "and then each candidate stuffs the boxes with votes for himself. At the last election there were twenty billion votes counted."

Jon Gaynor turned away in disgust and Laertes chuckled. "Personally," he said, "I predict a light vote." He refused to explain his cryptic pronouncement and shortly thereafter he vanished.

It was early afternoon before Laertes appeared again. He seemed to be in fine humor. When he arrived at the hotel, he was carrying a long box something like a violin case. He produced from it an Yllian musical instrument. It was four-sided, with strings on all sides, and the player had to revolve it to desired positions, meanwhile scraping a bow across the strings.

To the amusement of Lemora and Jon, Laertes insisted on going out and playing the instrument upon street corners as a prelude to making a political speech. It was only occasionally that he acci-

dentally hit upon anything even remotely resembling a tune, but he kept at it with a dogged persistence. The Yllians found his antics highly amusing and before long the political commentators were telling the planet about it. Soon thereafter vistascreens all over the planet were showing the flamboyant figure of Laertes Kwang Solomon sawing away on the strings of the *trotone* or trotting along with the case swinging in his hand.

This continued until it was time for Laertes to begin his examination of the precincts. Jon Gaynor had taken it for granted that he would pilot Laertes over the planet, but when the time came Laertes announced loftily that he had already made other plans. He refused to let either Jon or Lemora accompany him. He waved to them and left, jauntily swinging his *trotone* case.

As had the other candidates earlier, Laertes flew madly from Yllian city to Yllian city, examining the ballot boxes in every precinct. Watching the vista-screen, Jon and Lemora caught several glimpses of him as he hurried in and out of precincts, the *trotone* case still clutched in his hand.

As the sun once more rose to shine on the city of Yma Dor, Laertes returned to the spot from which he'd started. Like everyone else on Yllia, Jon Gaynor and Lemora Yno had stayed up to watch the election returns, so they were in the suite to welcome Laertes.

"You're so far ahead," Lemora cried, "I'm sure that you will be the next Yllone."

"In fact, you're the only one in the running," Jon said.

"Thank you, children," Laertes said benevolently. "I hate to sound stuffy, but I knew it all the time."

Lemora frowned. "I don't understand it, Laertes. The other candidates were all around putting their votes for themselves in the ballot boxes before you got there. How were you able to get their votes out and your own in?"

"For the record, I shall insist that my

opponents obviously recognized that I was the better man." Laertes chuckled. "But just between us girls I'll admit that I owe it all to my belated interest in Yllian music."

"Music?" exclaimed Jon.

"You mean the *trotoone*?" Lemora asked.

LAERTES nodded. "The idea of stuffing ballot boxes also occurred to the people of Terra many centuries ago. I've always thought it a rather inefficient method, but this was my first chance to try out a variation. You see I didn't bother to stuff any boxes. Instead, I found a clever craftsman who made me duplicates of the ballot boxes. On my inspections, I merely switched the boxes."

"But what did the music have to do with it?" Jon asked.

"It helped everyone to get used to the idea of the crazy Terran who insisted on playing a *trotoone*," Laertes said with a grin. "Then I threw the *trotoone* away and used the case to switch the boxes. A ballot box just fits into a *trotoone* case."

"And now," said a voice from the vistascreen, "we will show you the final tabulation on the Yllian special election."

The three of them moved around to where they could see the screen. In a moment the figures were flashed on it.

FINAL RESULTS OF THE SPECIAL ELECTION

Laertes Kwang Solomon.....	1,506,723,452
Nicholas Samoti.....	1
Other candidates.....	0

"There are several unusual features about this election," continued the voice from the screen, "but perhaps one of the most baffling is the one vote for a Nicholas Samoti. Not only was there no candidate by that name, but the name is completely unknown on Yllia...."

Laertes chuckled as he switched off the vistascreen.

"The number of your votes," Jon Gaylor said accusingly, "is exactly the same

as the population of Yllia. So what was the idea of one vote, which doesn't exist, for President Samoti, of the League?"

Laertes chuckled again. "I thought it might be wise to show at least one vote more than exists on the planet so no one could claim it was an honest election and maybe throw the results out. And since Yllian elections are openly crooked, it seemed only fitting that Samoti ought to get at least one vote."

With that, the new chief executive of Yllia went into the next room and fell asleep.

VI

SHORTLY after lunch, Laertes Kwang Solomon, newly elected Yllone of Yllia, awakened. Having already anticipated his election, he had obtained a selection of yellow tunics. After his shower he put one on and viewed himself in a mirror. The result was a little like a tent in a high wind, but Laertes beamed with approval at his image.

Downtown, in the executive offices, Yllone Solomon's first act was to appoint a new Cheelom. He appointed the craftsman who'd made the ballot boxes, the Yllian who had flown him and his ballot boxes around the planet, and Lemora Yno. After that, he leafed through an Yllian registry book and picked ninety-seven more at random. Then he issued an order for an immediate meeting of the Cheelom.

By the time the freshly-appointed Cheelomy arrived in the conference hall, Laertes was already waiting for them. He was seated in the Yllone-chair, holding a legal-looking paper in duplicate.

"I have called you together," he said when they were all gathered, "in order that we might get acquainted, but also in order that you may pass the first law under the new regime. I have the new law here, in duplicate. I will give you the general idea of it, but you may each read it more thoroughly when I pass among you to have you sign it. As you

know, in the past, the Yllone has always forced the members of the Cheelom to share all graft they collect. The first law under the new regime is one which states that in the future any graft you get is entirely your own." He paused and looked at the faces before him. It was easy to tell what most of them were thinking. They were torn between the thought of getting to keep all their graft and the idea that this might be construed as an act of honesty, thereby making another special election possible.

He went gravely down among them, carefully holding the paper while each of them read it and then signed both copies. He happily ignored the fact that what few valuables he was carrying were soon lifted.

When the last of the hundred members had signed, Laertes returned to the front of the room. There was just a touch of the wolfish in the smile he turned upon them.

"As Yllone of Yllia," he said, "I hereby declare that which you signed to be legally incorporated into the Yllian laws. Anyone want to say anything?"

Lemora Yno stood up, indecision on her face. "I should have said this before, but it is possible that someone might interpret that as an honest move on your part."

Laertes beamed at her. "Bless you, girl," he said. "I was expecting one of these other characters to get up and fling the charge in my face. But it won't hold water." He separated the two sheets of paper and threw the carbon on the floor. "The first paper you all signed was the law exactly as I explained it and read it. The one which appeared to be the carbon, however, is actually a revised edition of the law. In the later, and important, version, in return for this consideration each of you have agreed to pay me seventy-five per cent of your accumulated wealth of the moment, and seventy-five per cent of everything you make in the future aside from the graft of your office."

There was a moment of stunned si-

lence. When it finally was digested, their appreciation of his cleverness was tempered by a certain reluctance.

"It also states," Laertes said, "that the first installment is to be paid to me within one hour after the passage of the law. Which means one hour from now. If you'd care to stop by on your way out and examine the document, it will be quite all right."

ONE by one, they trooped past him, looked at the paper and went on their way. Many a face was slightly paler than normal.

Laertes returned to his office. When he entered, it was to find Jon Gaynor pacing up and down in front of his desk.

"Well, Jon," he said, "this is a pleasant surprise. What can I do for you?"

"What I want to know," Jon said, "is what you're going to do?"

"Well, let me see," Laertes said reflectively. "I had thought to spend the next hour checking the general situation. At that time I expect to meet with my Cheelom to accept certain tributes from them. After that—"

"I mean," Jon interrupted, "what are you going to do about the Galactic League?"

"I'll probably get around to them soon. First, I have to mend my political fences—I believe that's the proper expression."

"That's what I thought," Jon said grimly. "You have no intention of carrying out the instructions of the League. You've gotten yourself a lot of power and the chance to steal and carry on in the immoral fashion of a barbarian. Now that you've been elected president of this planet, you could use your power to force it into a friendly relationship with the League. You could make them return the diamonds they stole. You could change the ridiculous laws they have now and turn them into a law-abiding, respectable people. I demand that you do it."

"Look, son," Laertes said, "you can't legislate a new pattern of behavior into existence. The history of the League and

of Terra is filled with unsuccessful attempts to do that. I haven't forgotten the League, but this has to be worked out in the proper way. Now, you stop getting yourself in an uproar and leave everything to the old professor."

"I consider," Jon Gaynor said stiffly, "that your actions have released me from the obligation to obey your commands. I shall now report to my proper superiors and act according to their instructions. Good day, sir." He turned and marched out of the office, slamming the door behind him.

Laertes sighed heavily and reached for the button on his desk. "Tell me, son," he said to the young Yma who answered the ring, "do we have any cops around?"

"Cops?"

"Yeah. Do we have a police force—you know, somebody we can send out to arrest somebody?"

The Yma's face cleared with understanding. "Oh, yes. They are called the *Ganavim*. If you wish to be certain that they will bring in the prisoner, it is best to offer them a substantial bribe since the prisoner is apt to buy his freedom."

"Tell them we'll double any offer they get," Laertes said. "The young man who just left here is undoubtedly headed for the spaceport with the idea of communicating with the Galactic League. Have him arrested on a charge of honesty and held for a personal executive examination."

THE YMA nodded and left. During the next hour, Laertes busied himself with drawing a crude blueprint and writing out detailed instructions. The final results were turned over to a local craftsman he summoned. Then he went back to the meeting room.

The members of the Cheelom trooped in and each deposited his assessed wealth before Laertes. It was mostly in the form of cash or gems. The pile grew steadily and impressively. Laertes picked up a handful of diamonds.

"Do any of these stones come from

Yllia?" he asked. "Or are they all part of loot from somewhere else?"

"They are not of here," one of the men said. "We do not know if there are any stones here, since we have no machinery to find them. It is easier to take them from others."

Laertes nodded. "This," he said, indicating the money and stones they had brought, "is the first step in what might be called the Solomon Adult Education Project. Tell me, aside from this picking of each other's pockets, what is the most profitable racket you've worked on the outside?"

After some hesitation, an old Dor rose. "I believe the money making boxes have done the best. We've sold them throughout the galaxy. Wherever there is a culture sufficiently advanced to use a medium of exchange, we've been able to sell those."

"What's the most profitable fraud you can remember?"

The old Dor thought a moment. "We sold a money-making box to the *Barjon* of Blayt—what you'd call Polaris—for a *tremon* of stones. By your reckoning that would be the equivalent of one million credits."

"I presume," Laertes said, "that this was considered very clever?"

"We have defrauded a thousand star systems," the Dor boasted. "There are none in the universe who are more clever than we are."

"I've got news for you," Laertes said. He glared at them. "You're a bunch of pikers. The best that any of you can do is maybe steal a few units from a blind man. Compared with some other cultures, or with what you could do, you're such a bunch of pikers that you're practically honest."

There was a moment of stunned silence. "You have no right to talk to us that way," the old Dor said angrily.

"I have every right," snarled Laertes. "You're a pack of petty pilferers who couldn't steal your grandmother's hearing aid unless she was asleep. But from now on things are going to be different.

I want six volunteers to make a trip with me. But they've got to agree not to pick a single pocket, or even to so much as blink, unless I tell them it's all right. Now, who wants to smarten up?"

"What is the plan?" one of them asked.

"We're going to the city of New Europa on Procyon," Laertes said. "That's all you need to know. You'll learn the rest as we go along."

Two days later, Laertes Solomon, accompanied by three Ymas and three Dors, landed in New Europa. Laertes, in keeping with the idea that he was a fugitive from the League, wore a flowing false mustache and a pair of huge gold ear-rings. He wore his Yllian tunic and the overall affect was awe-inspiring. He was having the time of his life.

They took over the largest suite in the Solarian Hotel. Under the guidance of Laertes, they began a flurry of activity. They registered themselves as the Aldebaran Trust, permitted to do business subject to the restrictions imposed on unaffiliated systems. They leased a large factory on the third level of New Europa, placed large orders for various League metals, and discussed the terms of a labor contract.

At first, the Yllians were nervous, but Laertes assured them that only a few top officials knew about the robbery of the League freighter and the disastrous display of force by the League warship. Since this was unknown to even the majority of business men, they would be regarded as any other visiting entrepreneurs. He was sure that the government would have a wary eye out, but it would make no move except as indicated by the Trusts as long as their activity was confined to commerce.

ON THE fourth day, Laertes signed a contract with the Captive Audience Trust for a series of visiards giving advance publicity to the Handy Little Pocket Diamond Maker. The ads were to start that same day. Then Laertes sat back to wait.

He didn't have to wait long. The following day, there was a knock on the door of the suite. When Laertes opened it, there were three Terran men standing outside. They looked prosperous and assured.

"We," said one of them, "would like to see the head of the Aldebaran Trust. I am Winston Valencia, of the League Diamond Trust. This is José Murphy, our Public Relations Counselor, and Franklin Nedici, our Trusts Relations Counselor."

"I am the Yllone of the Aldebaran System," Laertes said. He was using what he fondly hoped was an other-worldly accent, but in reality sounded the way the popular visicomedies stars imagined aliens talked. "What you would call the President. You may address me as Your Excellency." He held the door open and bowed them in.

"Your Excellency," said Winston Valencia, "we understand that you are about to start marketing something which you call the Handy Little Pocket Diamond Maker. Right, men?"

"Right," the two men with him echoed.

"That is correct," Laertes said. "At this moment, you understand, we have only the model and our blue prints, but we expect to start production as soon as our labor contracts are signed. We also expect to put out a Large Economy Size Diamond Maker."

"We would like to see a demonstration of your product," Winston Valencia said. "Being in the diamond business, we are naturally interested in your product."

"Very interested," chorused Murphy and Nedici.

"I believe it might be arranged," Laertes said. He retired to another room in the suite and soon returned with two objects. One vaguely resembled a jet-gun in its general outlines. The other was a small black box. Laertes extended the box.

"You will please to examine the allotropic chamber," he said.

The three men took the box and ex-

amined it carefully. They peered into the empty interior, they tapped the thin wooden walls, they pulled and prodded. They pried at the small hole in one end.

"Looks like a plain wooden box to me," said Valencia.

"Exactly," said Murphy and Nedici.

"It is," Laertes said cheerfully. "The wood has, however, been treated with a special formula known only in our system." He took the box and set it on the table in front of them. He extended the gun-like object. "The carbon-deringer," he said.

They took it and once more went through their intensive examination.

"A complex mechanism," Valencia said cautiously.

"Intricate," agreed Murphy and Nedici.

"Leaving out the patented aspects," Laertes said, "the Handy Little Pocket Diamond Maker—no home is complete without one—operates on what might be called a reverse of Carnot's Cycle, the four steps in the cycle being null-isothermal, null-adiabatic, null-isothermal compression, and null-adiabatic compression." He picked up the gun and inserted the nose into the hole in the end of the box. As he pulled the trigger, a series of soft explosions could be heard within the box. "This operation extracts carbon from the air about us and converts it to its natural crystalline allotropic form and the final product possesses the highest possible refractive index and dispersive power. It is, in other words, what you prefer to call diamonds."

HE REMOVED the gun and gestured toward the box. Valencia picked it up and flipped open the lid. He tilted the box and a dozen large diamonds rolled out into his hand. Even to the naked eye, they were finer than any stones to be found within the League.

"You may keep those," Laertes said generously. "As you can see, the cost of producing them is negligible."

"Would you mind demonstrating it

once more?" Valencia asked.

"Once more," Murphy and Nedici agreed.

"Not at all," Laertes said politely. He picked up the now-empty box and again inserted the gun. This time he depressed the trigger for only a moment. Then he removed the gun and handed the box to the Terran. Three more large diamonds rolled into his hand from the box.

The three men exchanged glances. Valencia cleared his throat. "Your Excellency," he said, "we realize that you are a stranger to the Galactic League—although you yourself look very much like a Terran—and are therefore unfamiliar with our business practices. We are very much afraid that your contemplated enterprise constitutes a definite infringement on the rights of the Diamond Trust."

"A clear cut case of *ad valorem*, *arcana imperii*, *casus belli*, *cave canem*, *cui bono*, and *de facto est disputandum*," said Murphy.

"Not to mention *ex pede Herculem*, *facile princeps*, and *facilis est descensus Averni*," Nedici contributed eagerly.

"Sounds more like *anguis in herba* to me," Laertes muttered under his breath.

"Your Excellency said something?" Valencia asked.

"Merely recalling an old Aldebaran proverb about the type of life in our native grass," Laertes said politely. "What means this learned talk? Does it have reference to our business?"

"I'm afraid so," Valencia said. "We could, of course, immediately charge infringement before the League Congress and I have no doubt they would uphold us. Or we could take other steps to stop you."

"The public would never buy un-Galactic products, chief," Murphy said.

"The Interlocking Boards of Trusts see eye-to-eye with us, chief," said Nedici.

"We'll appeal this outrage," Laertes said angrily. "We'll sue. We'll declare war. We'll—"

"Now, now," Valencia interrupted

soothingly. "Let's not go off half-jetted, Your Excellency. Perhaps we could settle this by the Diamond Trust, merely taking over your models and blueprints for a token sum. Say, perhaps, one million credits."

"Ten million credits," Laertes said promptly.

Valencia frowned. "One million, five. That's my final offer."

"Not a credit more," chorused Murphy and Nedici.

"Nine million, nine," countered Laertes.

They haggled for another few minutes and finally agreed upon a payment of five million credits. Winston Valencia wrote out a sight draft for that amount and Laertes handed over the gun, the box, and an impressive roll of blueprints. He showed the three men to the door and bid them a fond goodbye.

The six Yllians were grinning broadly as Laertes turned back to them. "You are a rare Yllone," one of them said. "Five million Galactic credits on one trip. Never have we had an Yllone capable of so bold a stroke."

"It was nothing," grunted Laertes. "This was merely another version of your money-making box."

"But how did the diamonds get in the box?" one of them asked. "I failed to detect anything."

"On the first one, I switched boxes while they were examining the gun. For the second production, I palmed the diamonds into the box as I picked it up. Now, I want one of you to run out and cash this sight draft. Senula Di."

The Dor stepped up and took the draft. "Then we will leave quickly?" he asked.

"Leave?" Laertes said. "Not at all."

"Not leave?" exclaimed one of the Yma. "But they will soon discover that they can't make diamonds and they will return demanding their money."

"Exactly," Laertes said. "I told you that all of you were a bunch of pikers. You watch the old professor and you'll learn a thing or two."

He would tell them no more. Senula Di returned with the cash from the draft and Laertes tucked it away. Then he permitted them to open a few bottles of the *Sitta* they'd brought with them and the evening quickly passed.

IT WAS about noon the following day when again there was a knock on the door. Laertes opened it. The three men were once more there. They all looked a bit surprised to see Laertes.

"Come in," Laertes exclaimed, holding the door open. "It's always a pleasure to see men of such sound business judgment."

The three trooped in, all of them looking grim.

"We are men of few words," Valencia said. "We will come to the point. We used the Diamond Maker exactly as you demonstrated yesterday but when we opened the box it contained nothing but water. Right, men?"

"Right, chief," Murphy and Nedici said.

"Watered stock, eh?" Laertes said jovially. "You must have jarred the gun in moving it so that it extracted hydrogen from the air instead of carbon. A slip of the elements, as it were, I expect."

"Your Excellency," Valencia said firmly, "we believe that it was never meant to work. We believe that you deliberately defrauded us of five million credits. This is a serious matter."

"Very grave," agreed Murphy and Nedici.

"Unless," continued Valencia, "you are prepared to immediately return our five million credits, we shall have you arrested."

"Immediately," said Murphy and Nedici.

Laertes Solomon grinned his most raffish grin. "I believe," he said, "that this is the first crime—if it can be called that—in the Galactic League in more than five hundred years. Is that correct?"

Winston Valencia nodded. "And

you'll pay for it," he said.

"I doubt it very much," Laertes said gently. "I believe you may have overlooked one or two matters. I'm afraid it would do your public reputation considerable damage if the story of this got out. People would laugh at the way the great Diamond Trust was taken. They might even begin to feel that it's a mistake to rely on the judgment of men who can be fooled into buying a diamond making machine."

Winston Valencia glanced at his Public Relations Counselor.

"There is no precedent, chief," José Murphy said, uncomfortable at being called upon to contribute more than an assent. "But it might cause some ill-will at that. Hard to say how the public will act where there's been no conditioning."

"Furthermore," Laertes said sweetly, "should this story get about, the other Trusts might get the idea you're slipping. If that should happen, they'd surely decide to take you over."

"Nedici," barked Valencia.

The Trusts Relations Counselor was equally ill at ease. "They might at that, chief," he mumbled. "They could interpret it that way. And you remember last month Van Daavers jokingly said he didn't see why the Chemical Trust didn't take us over. Maybe he wasn't joking."

Winston Valencia glared at Laertes.

"And," said the latter, "there is the fact that you also still possess a number of diamonds of mine. Since they are much finer than any stones in the League, and as you've undoubtedly noticed, perfectly matched, they are easily worth more than five million credits. So we cannot be accused of taking financial advantage of you. On the contrary."

Winston Valencia struggled with himself and apparently reached a decision. His face contorted painfully and a sound issued. It was weak, but it was obviously meant to be a laugh. "Suppose we just call the whole family a

pleasant little joke among friends and forget it," he said hopefully. "In fact, I'll return your diamonds and let you keep the five million credits—if you'll tell me where these diamonds came from."

"I brought them here from the third planet in Aldebaran," Laertes said truthfully, neglecting to add that before that they had come from some far-flung section of the galaxy. He reached out his hand. "Give."

Winston Valencia reluctantly produced the diamonds and handed them over. "Then we'll forget about the other matter?" he asked.

"Maybe," Laertes said. "We are also prepared, for the consideration of twenty million credits, to grant you exclusive foreign rights to diamond mining on the five planets in the Aldebaran system. It is to be understood, however, that you will also recognize the rights of the Aldebaran Trust to dispose of its exports throughout the League in keeping with fair trade practices."

"Both rights to be subject to the standard business practices established by the League?" Valencia asked. He was obviously interested, even eager.

"Yes," said Laertes. "We are applying for admission to the League, but until we are admitted you understand that there will be a special tax of twenty-five per cent assessed on our planet. Once we are admitted to the League, the tax will be cancelled."

Winston Valencia put in a hurried call to his offices and within a few minutes a dozen more of his bright young men were there. They drew up an agreement which Valencia and Laertes signed. Then Valencia gave Laertes a sight draft for twenty million credits and sailed happily out.

"Just remember," Laertes told the happy Yllians, "that this money belongs to the government of Yllia and the five million credits belong to me since they were realized from my diamonds."

Within the next two weeks, using almost identical methods, Laertes ar-

rived at trade agreements with the Food Trust, the Textile & Plastic Trust, the Toy Trust, the Building Trust, the Cosmetic Trust, the Space Flight Trust, the Chemical Trust, the Synthetics Trust and the Anti-Fertility Trust.

The following day, Laertes, still resplendent in false mustache, gold earrings and yellow tunic, held a conference with the New Planets Sub-Committee of the Galactic League of Planets Congress. Inasmuch as every member of the sub-committee owed his political life to one or more of the Trusts, there was little trouble concerning the possible admission of Aldebaran as the tenth system in the League. True, there was some resistance from the Solar representatives when Laertes demanded proportional representation, but it didn't last long. The representatives from the other eight systems finally saw their chance and threw their weight behind Laertes.

The matter was finally debated a full day in Congress. The Trusts were eager to avoid a twenty-five per cent taxation, so Sol finally capitulated, banking on their control of committees to make up for the loss of power in the general membership of Congress.

It was agreed that Aldebaran would be admitted, subject only to a committee review of the Aldebaran constitution and laws.

Just three weeks from the day he'd left, Laertes Kwang Solomon, Yllone of Yllia, led his six-Yllian crew back to the planet in triumph.

VII

BACK in the city of Yma Dor, Laertes went immediately to the executive building and issued an order for a meeting of the Cheelom. When Lemora Yno arrived, he drew her to one side and talked quietly to her for a good ten minutes. Half way through, she began smiling happily and she left as soon as he'd finished.

When the Cheelom was gathered,

Laertes called on the six who had gone with him to report. They each gave a glowing account of Laertes' efforts and at the end of their talks, the two hundred million credits were displayed. The ovation lasted a full thirty minutes.

"The first lesson," Laertes said, when he finally got up to speak, "is never to steal a wallet when you can steal two hundred million credits. The second part of it is never to break the laws of another country in order to steal, when you can get just as much without breaking any law."

The sight of the two hundred million credits, more by far than any raiding party had ever brought back before, was enough to make them give him wide-eyed attention.

"The trusts of the Galactic League," said Laertes, "will rake in as much in a day as you can in a year. Even what we've taken is nothing to them. So the second lesson is to make yourselves over in the image of the Galactic League. We've already set up the Aldebaran Trust to operate there. You can next set up a number of smaller Trusts here to operate through that one. If you must, you can even use them to cheat yourselves in a big way—but if you're smart you'll work together."

"But what will we trade through the Aldebaran Trust?" someone asked. "According to the agreements you made, they will have the right to do everything. Besides we have no tools."

Laertes grinned. "You'll build up the same way they did. Within a few weeks, the League Trusts will be arriving here. They'll bring in all their modern machinery. By that time, this system will be admitted to the League, so they will have to file patents for everything here. Then you'll find some reason to declare war against the home planets of the Trusts. As soon as the State of War is declared, you can rightfully grab all patents. But you don't have to worry about fighting. The war will be settled by negotiation in Congress, but by that time you will have examined all the

patents. Then you build your own machinery.

"By the way, shortly after you're admitted to the League, somebody will be nosing around to find out how you touched off the bomb just after it left a League warship. How was it done?"

It was Senula Di who answered. "As soon as we knew they were there, we merely sent up a small one man ship to hover directly beneath the bomb bay. The bomb dropped a few feet and struck the ship and that was all."

Laertes chuckled. "Never tell them that. Pretend that there must have been a flaw in the bomb. Insist enough and you'll nartly convince them, but they'll never be able to be sure you don't have a secret weapon and it'll be that much extra insurance."

"I'll give you a number of briefings on other business practices before I leave, but now a few words on the political aspect. Before we leave here today, we must draft a new constitution and a whole new set of laws. Hereafter, honesty is the best policy and dishonesty is illegal, just like in the League. If some of you still want to pick a few pockets for fun, go ahead but remember that it's illegal."

"No more stuffing of ballot boxes. It isn't even necessary. Best have two political parties. That's what the League has and they'll think you're pretty smart to have thought of the same thing. You've got the perfect set-up anyway. One party can be the Yma and the other the Dor. The Yma will contend that the Dor Party is inhuman and bestial. The Dor will claim that the Yma Party is un-lizardlike and overly refined. Except for those two points, both parties will stand for the same thing, so it makes no difference who is elected. Got all that?"

Ninety-nine voices shouted that they did.

"Now, let's get to work," Laertes said.

The Cheelomyl filed out of the meeting talking animatedly.

SOME two hours later, they had finished drafting the new laws. One of the first laws incorporated the other four planets into the Yllian government; thereafter everything applied to the entire system. Laertes gave orders for it to be properly printed and for one copy to be flown to New Europa, Procyon, Galactic League of Planets.

"Now," he said, "I think a small celebration might be in order. I believe that all of us can get into my suite at the hotel. I suggest that we go there and relax over a few cases of Sitta."

No one seemed to have any objections to this.

"This is a moment of some sentimental importance to me," Laertes said, dabbing at an imaginary tear. "I should like to have a souvenir of the occasion. I realize that you use cameras for your vistascreens, but I wonder if you have a photographer who might take a picture of our little gathering?"

"My second cousin's nephew," said Senula Di, "is one of the finest four-sense photographers in Yllia."

"Four-sense photographer?" Laertes asked.

"Not only are the pictures three dimensional to sight and touch, but they give off appropriate subtle perfumes, and the sounds are recorded on the frame."

"Excellent," said Laertes. "We will pick up your cousin's nephew on the way to the hotel."

Not much later, one hundred Yllians and one Terran stopped in front of the best suite of the Yllian Palace Hotel. The photographer was in the lead with Laertes.

"My companion and friend," said Laertes, poised with key in hand, "will be here awaiting my arrival. I have not seen him since my return to Yllia, so he will be overjoyed to see me. I wonder if you might be ready to take a picture the minute I open the door?"

The photographer nodded and quickly set up his rather elaborate equipment. When he was finally ready, he signaled

Laertes. The latter quietly unlocked the door and threw it open. The photographer took the picture before any of them quite realized what they saw.

Laertes Solomon did a double-take and realized that things had worked out even better than he planned. Inside the room, there was a soft feminine giggle. Then Jon Gaynor shouted.

"Get the hell out of here," he said.

Laertes closed the door gently. "It reminds me of the time the dean's daughter stayed after class to ask me some trivial question," he said. "But perhaps we should retire to some spot where I can tell you the story over a glass of *Sitta*." He sighed as he turned away from the door. "I've often wondered what she had intended asking me."

VIII

THE NIGHT before had been a rugged one. Laertes Solomon had imbibed his full share of *Sitta* and sometime shortly before dawn he had staggered back to the hotel, in the company of two Yllians, singing, "She was only a Spaceman's daughter, but she knew her Fitzgerald-Lorentz." He had fumbled his way through the darkened suite to the far room where he had fallen asleep without even removing his tunic.

Manfully trying to ignore his hang-over, Laertes got up and took a quick shower. He put on a fresh tunic and transferred his few properties from the other, finding a small bottle of *Sitta* in so doing. Holding his breath, he managed a drink from the bottle and felt somewhat better. He went into the next room where he found Jon Gaynor. Alone.

"You should know better," Jon said. "At your age."

Laertes was on the point of a sharp rejoinder when he noticed the ice pack which the young Terran was holding to his brow.

"You, too?" he asked.

"Me, too," Jon said. He didn't even sound sheepish.

"Try this," Laertes said, holding out the bottle.

Jon took the bottle and emptied it. In a few seconds, a little color returned to his cheeks.

"I hate to say this," Laertes said, "when you're obviously at low ebb, but I'm afraid you're in a bad way, son. I take it you broke out of jail last night. Possibly with the aid of Lemora Yno."

"I did," Jon Gaynor said calmly. "But I thought that was the accepted thing on Yllia."

"Times have changed," Laertes said. "By the time you broke out last night, it was as illegal as if you had done it on Terra. Then there is the matter of last night."

"What of it?"

"I am in sympathy with the situation myself," Laertes said. "But it involved a type of activity which is frowned upon back in the League except under certain rather restricted circumstances. I'm afraid you may have to do the right thing by the girl."

"Lemora and I intend to be married as soon as we can reach Terra," Jon said.

Laertes lifted an eyebrow. "Interesting. Still there is the question of the picture which was taken last night. The photographer was all for using it to blackmail you, but I convinced him that it wasn't quite the right thing. Still, as long as that negative is in existence, you won't be exactly safe even though married."

"You mean this negative?" Jon asked, holding it up.

"Where the hell did you get that?" roared Laertes.

Jon grinned. "I lifted it from you last night as you staggered through on your way to bed."

Laertes glared at him for a moment, then began to chuckle. Jon Gaynor's voice joined it and the two sat there laughing at each other.

To weeks later, Laertes Kwang Solomon, Yllone of Yllia, Retired, once more attired in his rainbow-hued suit, stood stiffly at attention to witness the formal

marriage between Sergeant Jon Gaynor and Lemora Yno, of-Yllia. It was taking place on Terra and there was a large crowd, mostly lured by the beauty of the bride. Under the circumstances, Laertes thought that Jon was not giving quite enough attention to the ceremony. Instead, he seemed to be twisting and contorting as though he'd suddenly developed a case of Mercurian hives. Laertes cleared his throat a number of times, but Jon paid no attention.

Only when the ceremony was over, and the bride and groom were about to step into Jon's waiting ship, did Laertes learn the reason for the peculiar contortions. The bridegroom, with a triumphant leer, suddenly waved to Laertes. The object in his hand was definitely an intimate garment but recently detached from the bride. At the same moment that young lady clutched with sudden awareness at her middle and blushed a beautiful aquamarine.

Laertes was still chuckling a couple of hours later when he arrived back on Mars. Taking the air-shuttle to his home, he was put in further good humor by the visinews. "Aldebaran," announced the commentator, "has declared war on Sol, Procyon, Altair and Vega."

WHEN Laertes arrived home he found a visitor waiting to see him. It was Nicholas Samoti, President of the Galactic League, holding a worn book.

"Good afternoon, Dr. Solomon," he said. He extended the book. "I believe that this takes care of certain matters between us."

Laertes took the book and glanced at it eagerly. "This is it," he said. "I trust you were satisfied."

"Satisfied is hardly the word," President Samoti said dryly. "If I were to make a comment, it would be that you did your job too well."

"Too well," snorted Laertes.

"Yes. True, we did want some sort of peaceful settlement, but the loss of Sol's majority in Congress and the nature of the trade agreements were a little more

than we bargained for. I might add that the recent declaration of war by Aldebaran smacks of an unusual precocity—or perhaps of unusual guidance."

Laertes chuckled.

"The matter did get out of hand, however," President Samoti said, "and since we couldn't stop it, there is no point in complaining. I notice, however, that you are still an officer and a stockholder in the Aldebaran Trust."

"That's right," Laertes said.

"We would like you to resign your position and give up your stock."

"Why?" demanded Laertes. A sly look came into his eyes. "I can't expect the university to keep me on forever. That is merely a little insurance against the advancing years. You wouldn't ask an old man to give up his security?"

President Samoti sighed heavily. "We feel," he said, "that the Aldebarans will make enough inroads against our Trusts without your assistance. And we feel that giving such assistance would take you from other more valuable duties."

"What other duties?"

The League President had the air of a man who knew when he was licked and would always make the best of it. "In the expanding galaxy which we will face in the future," he said, "we realize that there will be many problems which on the face of it seem impossible, but can be resolved by the proper man. We have just established a new League department to be known as the Bureau of Impossible Events. We want you to head it—with a life-time contract, of course, and, I might say, a handsome stipend."

Laertes struggled slightly. He'd been entranced by the idea of being a thorn in the side of the Trusts, but it was a vision which didn't have a chance beside the new offering.

"I'll accept," he said with dignity. "Now, get the hell out. I have important work to do." He opened the first few yellowed pages and began to read.

"The mental features discoursed of as the analytical, are, in themselves, but little susceptible of analysis. . ."