

# THRILLING WONDER STORIES

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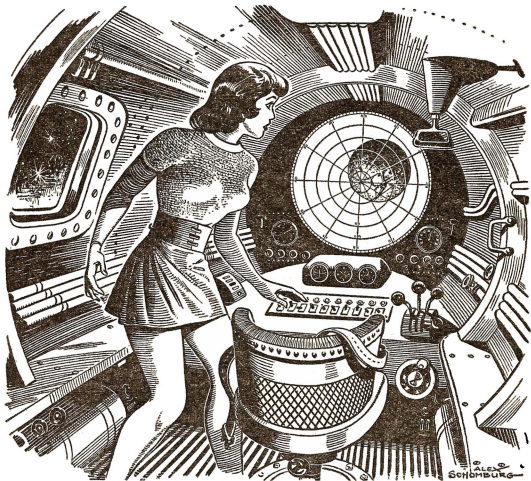
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SAM MERWIN, JR., Editor

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Directly ahead, Marcia saw a planet on the screen



# At Your Service

By CLEVE CARTMILL

*Marcia knew she should get back to Earth and warn humanity of the perfection of the unknown planet—but there was always tomorrow!*

**P**RESENTLY she found herself alone in limitless space and headed for death from starvation. The ship's boat had provisions for about three days, and the nearest star which might have planets was several light years away.

It had been a hard decision—to die quickly and alone or slowly and in the company of monsters. Yes, monsters, even if they were human. She could gorge herself on powdered fried chicken and concentrated vitamins for three days—and die.

The ship itself—*Arcturus IV*—was a remembered outline, far behind on her

port quarter. The mutineers, together with acquiescent passengers, were headed directly away from her, also toward some unknown destination.

She wished them luck. She examined the thought and reiterated it. She *did* wish them luck but she wanted no part of it.

She did not care to remember the captain's slashed throat and she did not wish to speculate on the kind of life the passengers would lead under the first mate, provided they found some place to lead a life.

That was why she had stolen the one-man life-boat and why she had taken off in the opposite direction—to nowhere.

She set the controls and went back to the tiny galley.

She picked a concentrate which recommended the addition of water. She added this and set it on the stove to boil. While she waited she reviewed her situation.

She had been Marcia Weller, Doctor Triumvirate of Psychometrics, en route to the sixth planet of Arcturus. She had been eagerly anticipating an interesting job, the cornerstone of a carefully planned career.

And now she was in Space with automatic controls guiding her to the ultimate nowhere.

She went into the boat's tiny bathroom. She looked at herself. Her dark image returned the look. Dark eyes, dark hair—verging on black—dark circles under the eyes. Those came from the last few sleepless days and nights and she presumed they would go away. Not that anybody would care.

But still she fixed her lips and covered the circles with powder and fluffed her hair with a comb. Might as well look her best, she thought—just in case. A bath, she thought, and clean underthings, a fresh make-up job—she suited action to the thought.

Reaction set in. She felt like a million. Hope raised its ever-new head. Could she get out of this? Could that planet, directly ahead . . . ?

**D**IRECTLY ahead—there *was* a planet on the screen. A planet where there should be nothing and lots of it. A planet with mountains and lakes and rivers and—and—and no vegetation.

No trees bowed over the rivers and streams. No snow capped the mountains. The planet was bare and dark but it was a landing place. She changed course. She would land on this desolate place. It was better than space.

But wait a minute, she thought. A planet with rivers and without vegetation? It didn't make sense. Still, that was what she had expected, a desert planet. This was made to specifications.

For Marcia had been thinking, she realized now, of a possible landing, bleak, deserted, but with plenty of water. You could survive longer without food than without water.

She pushed buttons, she covered glowing studs—and the ship obeyed as if she had it on a leash. It headed down, it plunged toward a river, it flattened out, it came to rest on a level spot, it sank to surface.

Marcia climbed out on the airless plain. Airless, she knew, because her analyzers had told her so. She retained her helmet and looked around.

Except for directly in front of her, where a river bubbled, there was nothing but bare rock. Nothing green waved anywhere, no birds sang. But the river rolled, the river bubbled and she knew she couldn't take off her helmet for a drink.

She wanted a drink. She could get one on the boat but she wanted one from the river. She wanted to lie down on her stomach and sink her face in the flowing wetness and . . .

\* \* \* \* \*

She didn't know how much time had passed but she found herself flat and drinking from the stream—in the shade of hanging trees. And birds sang! And the air was sweet!

She got to her hands and knees and

swiveled her dark head, taking in the scenery, the greenery, where all had been bare and bleak before. This might be madness but surely madness had blurred edges, created as it was by a blurred mind. And there were no blurred edges anywhere.

This tree almost within reach was certainly not only a tree but a weeping willow tree. Its limbs drooped wistfully over the burbling water and a bird up among the small branches made answer.

She didn't need to see that plain gray bird, with its flat head and bright eyes, to know it for a mockingbird. But—a mockingbird here, just as at home . . .

And where was *here*? She had an odd thought—if she could go home, she'd be famous for discovering a new world with beautiful shade trees.

Shade trees—she examined the thought. She had seen this planet dark and bleak, without sunlight, without anything but water. But light from an unseen source now dappled the carpet of grass with moving shadows of the trees.

She wasn't ready yet to ask herself any basic questions. She wanted to look first. It occurred to her that she must resemble a curious dog, twisting her head from hands-and-knees position. She sprang lightly to her feet.

She touched the tree, just to make sure, then pinched herself to clinch the matter. The bark of the tree was solid and rough and the pinched spot on her shapely thigh turned red.

She walked out into the light and discovered that it came from a nearby star. There it was, blazing just like Sol, too bright for direct observation. She walked to the top of a grassy knoll and looked at the far mountains. They were stark and jagged no longer but softened and colored with trees and grass. The tallest wore a rakish tam of glistening white.

On all sides the fields rolled away, green and undulant, patched brightly here and there with red, blue and yellow flowers, clumped with stately oaks be-

hung with parasitic moss, just as at home.

The mockingbird continued to praise the beautiful day, the light breeze murmured endearments to the trees, the river frisked and yodeled past.

THE time has come, Marcia told herself firmly, to think. She turned and walked to her space-boat, and absently picked up her helmet en route. She wanted the familiar insides of the boat about her when she considered the situation rather than this strange and changing world.

She sat in the pilot's chair, strapped in, and took the ship aloft. She climbed to 10,000 feet and hovered there in brilliant sunlight, which poured in a golden flood on the lush rich land below.

She had failed to look at the star-ometer when she had landed on the bare rock and had no way of telling how much time had passed since then. She had a great deal of difficulty in persuading herself that she had seen the planet in bleak stone and darkness until she looked at the deactivated analyzers.

There was the record, each needle questioning the presence of gas, beneficent or harmful, dead on zero. She pushed the analyzer handle and the dials came to life, recording oxygen, nitrogen, hydrogen, traces of argon, neon, helium and others, just as at home.

She backtracked along her trail of memory to the moment when she wished she could take off her helmet and drink from the stream. She remembered nothing between then and the time she was actually drinking the cool sweet water. Surely some time must have passed. A land cannot go through such a change in an instant. It would take years and years . . .

Years—hmm. She put the ship on automatic and went to the bathroom mirror. She frowned, then smiled at her image. Years hadn't gone by. If anything, she looked younger than when she had last examined herself.



How then had it happened—and when? Had this planet, deserted apparently except for herself, slipped into another variant of the time stream she had known? Had this deserted world evolved into . . .

Deserted? Strange, she thought, that she had seen no evidence anywhere of intelligent life. All that growth—and the birds—bespoke millennia. It seemed odd that the human race had not discovered it or that its own race had not evolved.

She went back to the pilot's chair and frowned at the screen. All that world, she thought in a sudden rush of loneliness, and nobody on it but her.

The frown gave way to popping eyes. Far off, almost on the horizon, a non-natural shape stood against its background in sharp symmetry. It looked like a tower.

Even as her thoughts formed she set the boat racing forward. The silhouette became a three-dimensional tower of lacy metal. At its widespread base nestled a house, an honest-to-gosh bungalow, complete with green trim.

She zoomed down to a manicured lawn and leaped out. She ran up the flagstone walk, flanked by low hedges, to the spotless porch and punched the pearly button. Chimes inside went up the scale in thirds and back again. The door opened graciously, almost with a bow, she thought with an inward giggle.

A deep voice like remembered cathedral music said, "Please to enter."

She stepped into a room of more generous proportions than the exterior of the cottage had indicated and saw that the sense of spaciousness came from bareness. Bare walls and bare floor. Not even light fixtures. How had the doorbell worked?

The rich and bell-like voice said, "This is your house," and she whirled toward its source.

This was a brown ovoid object that stood three feet tall in the kitchen doorway. At least she supposed it was the kitchen—she could see the end of a tile

sink over the Something's head. Well, not head exactly, as she knew heads—but the term would have to do.

"I am Voul," it said. "As you see I am a robot. I am completely at your service, now and always."

"Ulp!" Marcia said.

She stared at Voul for a few moments, wondering if it could move or if it were always going to be in the kitchen doorway to step over or around. It might be awkward when guests . . . *Guests!* She snorted to herself.

"Some house," she said involuntarily.

The organ tone murmured, "It displeases you?"

"Oh, no," Marcia said hastily. "Don't misunderstand me. I'm grateful, believe me, to whoever gave it—or told you to . . . Oh, I'm all mixed up! But there's no furniture! It's just a barn!"

Voul regarded her studiously for several minutes. Voul had nothing that could pass for eyes or a face either, for that matter, but it seemed to be studying her. Finally it moved with a rolling method of propulsion to a closed door in the wall opposite Marcia and opened it with what is best described as a tentacle.

"Please to look into your bedroom," Voul said in that voice of rich beauty.

MARCIA went hesitantly across the room, her steps echoing from the bare floor, and looked across Voul. She gasped with delight.

It was a dream room. A thick deep-green carpet lay from wall to wall, all four of which were a rich cream color. Bright curtains of green and yellow hung at the windows between dull maroon drapes.

The bed was so graceful and beautifully made that it looked as if it could sing you to sleep. The spread matched the yellow in the curtains, embroidered with tiny flying birds. Two chairs, one big and comfortable for reading, one to look pretty in a corner, were set at tasteful angles.

The mirror was a tinted floor-to-ceil-

ing panel that reflected without distortion. On each side of it were the halves of a dressing table that could be pushed together if desired.

"Why," Marcia said. "Why, it's beautiful! Utterly lovely! I don't care if there isn't anything in the rest of the house for the time being."

She fell silent, again feeling that she was being studied. The robot remained perfectly immobile but she had the almost undefinable impression that her mind was being inspected. The sensation was too fleeting to come into conscious focus for Voul spoke after a couple of seconds.

"You will see the remainder of your house?"

"My house?"

"Yours," Voul said and pointed behind her. "See."

Marcia turned and caught her breath, more because of the chuckling little blaze in the corner fireplace than at the completely furnished room, which now looked as comfortable as an old shoe and as neat and polished as a new one. It was perfect to the last detail but a touch too bright, she thought.

She stifled her exclamations of pleasure and regarded the room under a thoughtful frown. It was possible that the bedroom had been as it was now when she had entered the house. But not this room—she had seen *this* room. It had been bare when she came in. There had been no fireplace, much less a fire. There had been no furniture, no bouquets on tables, no tables.

She absently crossed to the control panel and set the polarizer between medium and low, darkening the room cozily. She set the fireplace control at ember level and went, still frowning, to the kitchen.

She would have liked to enter the kitchen in an Exposition, for it had everything for push-button cooking ever devised by the mind of man. The other three rooms were in the same class—bathroom, guest room and library. This was the home supreme.

She went back to the living room after her tour, automatically took a lighted cigarette from the mantel dispenser and stared at the rosy bed of coals.

The main thing, she thought, was not to lose her head. When every possibility was eliminated as false, what remained was true even if it were impossible. On the face of it, this situation was false. What, then, was true?

She went back to the mutiny and the death of the captain. She firmly believed that to be a matter of actual experience. Her memory recalled sense experiences of her flight from the mutineers and she believed these to be true. She had landed on this—this?—on a planet. She had wished for a drink of fresh running water.

Up to that point everything was solid. But from then on conditions did not conform to past or extensionalized experience. Something outside experience must have transpired then.

The interval between wishing for a drink and having it was a blank. That interval needed filling with remembered experience. Several possibilities occurred. Perhaps she had re-entered the life-boat and moved on till she found another planet—this one.

**B**UT that was impossible. She remembered gravity—her weight had seemed about as it was at home. The life-boat would not pull out of the atmosphere of such a planet. No, once exposed to the full gravitational pull of such a planet the life-boat was good only for near-surface travel and that for limited distances.

It remained then that she was still on the original planet.

A dream—a wish-fulfillment dream? She considered this as a possibility for some time, then discarded it. All the dreams she remembered were full of non-sequiturs, abrupt changes in scene and personnel and moved in a time stream that had little to do with waking reality.

But from the time she had realized

she was drinking under the willow tree until she entered this cottage events had followed in leisurely if illogical succession. Once she was inside nothing made sense even though she had a compelling feeling that all this was real, was happening.

And hadn't she felt the tree and pinched herself?

Dead then—or dying? She could not entertain this thought. It was a simply ridiculous premise.

She tried to think of some other explanation and found none. So far as she could tell what seemed to be true *was* true. She could see Voul, standing beside the bedroom door, motionless, featureless. She could feel warmth from the glowing source in the fireplace. A long ash dropped from her cigarette to the hearth. She smelled the flowers, tasted the final puff from her cigarette, heard the tiny thump of the butt as she dropped it into an extinguisher.

The questions now were why and how?

She half turned to face the bedroom door. "Voul."

"At your service," the brown ovoid replied.

"Where did you come from?"

The silence lasted until she was about to repeat the question sharply. Then Voul said, "Here."

"Here? Where is—no, never mind that yet. Who made you?"

"Made?" Voul repeated. "Nobody. I—exist."

"But you say you're a robot. That means some higher intelligence conceived you, created you."

"There is no higher intelligence," Voul said in his deep rich voice and a chill prickled Marcia's spine.

"How long have you been—here?" she persisted.

"Forever."

"I see." She marshalled the statements but could make no complete pattern. "Where is here?" she asked. "What planet is this?"

Again the silent study. "Earth," Voul

said unexpectedly.

"But it can't be," Marcia said.

Voul waved a tentacle. "See. Look outside. What else?"

Marcia had to admit this was true on the face of it. But so many questions remained unanswered. Perhaps she could get an inkling of the answers by regimented study, as she had been trained to do. Well, she would save that until after lunch.

Lunch, she thought. That raised a problem. She had a certain amount of food in the ship's boat but after it was gone, what then? The ground here was obviously rich and productive and she could live off the land if she had seed to plant.

She probably couldn't exist until any edible crop matured, anyway, she thought, and dismissed the matter. She was hungry now and supposed she would have to bring in the supplies from the boat and do the best she could.

But though she was hungry she had no appetite for the standard concentrates. She knew intellectually, of course, that they would supply all her bodily needs but the picture of a steak arose in her mind and would not be put aside.

A thick steak, one you could almost milk, flanked by small browned potatoes, smothered in butter-sautéed mushrooms, Romaine leaves drenched in a pungent garlic dressing—since she was alone here—followed by a slab of crunchy apple pie and heavy black coffee, lightly laced with brandy.

She sighed, her mouth awash in gastric juices. A muted noise from the kitchen made her aware that she had been staring into the fireplace in a welter of escoffier nostalgia. She turned away to see Voul entering the room laden with a steaming tray. She gave a soft cry of pleasure as she recognized his burden.

"Luncheon is served," Voul said.

And *how* it was served! It occurred to Marcia that a fortune could be made in the restaurant business if one had serv-

ants like Voul.

The meal was exactly what she wanted and she cleaned up every scrap. She felt like purring over her café royale. She'd get fat, she reflected, if she continued to eat like this. She must take a long walk after awhile and remove the slight bulge raised by this meal alone.

But she felt drowsy and decided to take a short nap, leaving the walking and the thinking until later.

She wasn't surprised to find the bed turned down, and silk pajamas of her favorite color laid out.

THE loneliness hit her two weeks later in the afternoon of the third dull gray day of rain. She tired of watching the rivulets wriggle down the pane and set the polarizer at maximum. She push-buttoned the walls to radiance and was inclosed in a small cozy private world.

Private, she thought, was no name for it. She wished passionately for company, for Voul was less than nothing as far as stimulating conversation was concerned.

Voul had one purpose, which was to serve. This, she admitted with boredom, it did perfectly.

The trouble was it left her with nothing to do. Nothing to do but eat, sleep and exercise. She had found a few books in the library but she had read the fiction before and the textbooks were oddly incomplete.

The textbooks she had studied before, including the sections which had interested her, were all there just as she remembered. But here and there were whole groups of pages completely bare or with part of a sentence or paragraph standing alone on an otherwise empty page. Not that she minded—these were parts of the books she had skimmed or skipped entirely. But it seemed curious.

She had spent the first few days of this new life in furious concentration, trying to make sense out of the situation. But Voul, her only possible source of information, remembered nothing be-

fore her advent here. She had gone walking in the vicinity, seeking some clue. She had explored miles in each direction in the ship's boat.

But there was only an endless and empty perfection aside from the towering lacy metal framework nearby and the cottage. Green fields splashed with flowers, birds, a few scattered cattle—which accounted for the steaks—an occasional rabbit, far-off mountains. That was all.

These trips, short and long, had offered some variety but even so she had become bored. And now, shut up for three days by rain . . .

Of course the land needed rain. She had thought this on her last walk, seeing yellow blades in the grass, flower petals curling along browning edges. Ordinarily she would have enjoyed the rain but cooped up for three days with nobody to talk to . . .

Her doorbell rang.

Even as she rose, fluffed her hair and wondered if her face was clean, Voul was at the door.

"Please to enter."

Marcia had difficulty in not gasping with joy and throwing herself in the arms of the man who entered. He was tall, broad-shouldered, lean-hipped, with a craggy face slightly off center. His eyes were a frosty blue and his smile a thing of beauty. His hair was crisp and blondish like ripe wheat. His gaily-colored garments accentuated his magnificent frame. In Marcia's enraptured eyes he could pass for a god.

"Why, he could be—" she thought and he finished the thought.

"I am Lars Jensen," he said. "How do you do?"

She didn't say, "Thank God, you've come," or, "I could have searched a thousand years and never found anybody like you," but her tone did when she said, "Do come in!"

She introduced herself, told Voul to bring refreshments, restrained herself from trying to carry him to a chair and tuck him in and excused herself for a

few moments. She went into the bedroom to make herself look as well as possible, wishing she had a hot job of a hostess gown like one she had longed for from afar once.

She raced through a bath and make-up job and went rather forlornly to the closet for fresh shorts and a clean blouse. And there was the hostess gown

She didn't even think twice about it but sheathed herself in it and thought, "That gorgeous hunk of man!" She realized she should feel some shame or guilt because of her thoughts but she did a little dance instead and exulted at her mirror image. When he saw her in this outfit, she thought, he'd *never* go away.

Her visitor leaped to his feet as she came through the bedroom door. She paused and he gave her the long breathless look she had always wished some man would give her.

"You were beautiful before," he said in a deep soft voice, "but now—" He made a helpless gesture that said she was beyond description or compare.

Marcia almost squealed with pleasure. But she gave him a nod of thanks and a little aloof smile and walked with slow dignity to a chair opposite his. A gentleman, too. He didn't rush over and grab her hand and he remained standing until she was seated.

SHE poured tea for herself, scotch and a little soda for him and smiled across the small table. Yes, just as she had thought, there were lines in his face, distinguishing lines. Though he was young you could see that he had lived. A captain, maybe, or a Space Patrol secret agent. There were far away spaces reflected in his frosty eyes. Oh, lucky, lucky, she thought, but . . .

"How did you get here?" she asked and waited for what she knew would be a thrilling tale.

He waved toward the rainy outdoors. "In the ship's boat," he said. "I was lucky. I escaped."

"Pirates?" she breathed.

"Pirates."

"Tell me, tell me!"

"Nothing much to tell," he said with becoming modesty. "We were captured, I managed to kill a few and took off. I found this place and"—he hesitated, his eyes softened and his voice was encyclopedic with meaning—"and you, Miss Weller."

"Under the circumstances," Marcia said gaily, "I think we can drop the formalities, Lars. You see," she went on with some difficulty, trying to maintain the exact, correct attitude, "we are the only living persons on this planet."

He gave her a long look that was carefully expressionless. "I see," he said non-committally and Marcia's heart churned all the more for it.

"Fortunately," she said, "I have a spare room. You will stay here, of course, until you can build you a place of your own. It has been—very lonely here," she finished in a small voice.

"I trust you will not have that complaint again," he said gallantly.

"I'm sure I won't. But you must be hungry. *Voul!*" she called.

Voul appeared, she gave orders and then devoted herself to her visitor. "Tell me all about yourself, Lars."

It developed that he had been born on Earth about the same time as she and, wonder of wonders, his experiences almost paralleled hers. They remembered the same things about the same places. Being a man he had been and seen certain places she had only wondered about but he was properly reticent about such experiences.

She passed the most delightful hour of her life before Voul announced the splendid dinner it had prepared. The meal was served perfectly, as usual, and Marcia soon wanted to be alone and hug herself and think about her wonderful visitor and herself and their future together.

She excused herself and Lars Jensen bade her a formal if meaningful good-night. Marcia luxuriated in bed, plan-

ning tomorrow and tomorrow, and tried to remember when the moon was full next.

She admitted to herself that she was dreadfully in love. Not that she would let him know it right away, of course. A decent interval must pass, even if there was no public to form an opinion. But she would contrive to let him know her regard—though if the expression in his eyes meant anything it would come as no surprise.

She found herself too keyed up to sleep. She turned this way and that, tried to relax. But it was no good. She decided to get a drink of cold water and smoke a cigaret.

She got into a dressing gown and slippers, wondered if Lars were still up, and went toward the kitchen. Apparently he had retired. The living room was empty.

As she walked into the kitchen her thoughts were in such a whirl that she really had nothing on her mind. She had no conscious desire, having decided on a drink and a smoke. Perhaps that was how and why she took Voul unaware for the first time.

As she entered the kitchen she glanced casually toward the door of the guest room. It was open. Voul was turning down the bed. Lars was standing in the corner . . . Lars was standing in the corner. Her mind said it over and over and her skin crawled.

Lars was standing in the corner as if some other hand had stood him there out of the way, as you might stand a broom or a mop.

He leaned stiffly at an angle, supported by the corner, and his face was empty. His eyes were blue but glassy, inanimate. The splendid mouth was neither slack nor tense, it was nothing. He wasn't a man at all. He wasn't alive

...  
"Oh, no!" Marcia moaned.

Almost instantly the figure was animated. But there was no smile, no frost in the eyes, no gallantry. It was just an animated figure. Animated, not alive.

Marcia whirled and fled to her room.

MARCIA never again set eyes on the thing that had called itself Lars Jensen. Voul could give no explanation other than that it had been "provided" for her pleasure, that when it ceased to perform its function it had been "removed." Where it came from, who "provided" and "removed" it, remained unknown.

She went through several phases in the next few weeks. One was a kind of horror at her own conduct and thoughts concerning "Lars Jensen" when she had believed it to be a real man. She recovered from this with a few spiritual scars and tried to think objectively about the whole picture.

Wherever her thoughts led her they came back to one point—whatever she wished for she got. This had happened continually since taking her first drink from the boisterous river. Food, clothes, shelter—even that abortive attempt to provide companionship.

This indicated some power subject to her will but Marcia stubbornly refused to assign intelligence to this power. All her training and conditioning rebelled at belief in anything supernatural. She felt that a physical explanation of the observed phenomena was possible.

But as to how to get this explanation she admitted defeat. She was certain that the agency, whatever it was, operated through Voul, but that creature's answers were confusingly unhelpful.

"I have been here forever . . . I am here to serve you . . . There was no time before this . . . These things are provided in answer to your wish."

And so on. It was so easy to drift with the tide of service. If she wished for something it was "provided." She noted the peculiarities in these provisions for awhile but since she couldn't explain them she soon ignored them.

That matter of books, for example. Only the parts she had read were complete. She had also asked for the latest Earth magazines and they were repli-

cas of what the ship had carried. Some were merely covers with blank insides. Others had stories complete or nearly so. Authors' names were in some cases garbled or missing. But the parts that were complete were parts which had held her interest.

And "Lars Jensen." He hadn't been able to talk about anything she hadn't known by experience or by an extension of experience. He had treated her with the gallantry she had wished for. He had been simply her own opposite number.

There was nothing new then in life here under these conditions. She could live that life out, exquisitely served with anything she could remember, but could never have any new experience.

She loathed for a time this monotonous picture of the future but gradually fell into the routine of doing nothing save getting what she wanted. She began to regard herself as fortunate above all others, those poor grubs who sweated for their daily bread and shelter, who had no time for long hours of meditation on the past.

Her life, pleasant at all times, became luxurious. She acquired jewels, furs, exotic clothes. She dressed like a princess of old, she dawdled, she grew plump and comfortable. Her appetite, always good, she satisfied in ways that had been beyond her means at home.

One day she idly asked Voul a question. "Where do you get the power that operates you?"

"From the tower, of course," Voul replied.

Marcia lazily considered this. "And does the tower 'provide' all this?" She waved expansively.

"Yes."

Marcia was stimulated to a slight degree. Here was something new to think about. That gigantic filigreed tower, with queer masses here and there, must be the power she had pictured.

But the tower hadn't built itself, she reflected. Not if the natural laws here conformed to those of home. This argued the existence, at some time or other, of

a race capable of building such a machine.

"I want a history of the race that built the tower," she told Voul.

SHE got it, a compact series of photo-recordings and a machine to project them. She spent two days studying these in leisurely fashion.

The members of the vanished race, though not formed exactly along Earth lines, were nonetheless pleasing to the eye and at one time had reached a high point of scientific development. The highest, they thought, was when the tower was conceived and built.

They constructed robots, which they designed to be perfect servants. In addition to building these robots so that they translated into reality the very thoughts of their masters—through the agency of the tower, of course—they implanted the quality of forgetfulness.

If the master of one robot died the robot promptly forgot everything connected with that master when it was assigned to a new one. Odious comparisons with its former state were thus eliminated. Each robot thus existed with one purpose only, to serve perfectly its present master. It had no sense of past or future.

The race, of course, died out, the inevitable result of having perfect servants.

For one had only to wish for a delicacy. This delicacy was pictured in thought waves in the machinery of the robot and transferred to the machinery of the tower. It then became a simple problem in atomic structure, almost instantaneously performed. The tower worked with atoms as a mason with bricks, taking energy from the atmosphere and assembling or disassembling on order.

If no intelligence existed to give orders conditions reverted to the primordial. This accounted, Marcia could see, for the bleak and stony aspect of the planet when she first saw it and for all that had happened since.

"But this is monstrous!" she said aloud, thinking of the future.

It was inevitable in the course of time that other human beings would find this planet, settle here. And word would go back that the perfect life had been found. No work, no money, no ingenuity, was necessary for luxurious existence. People would flock here by millions, billions—and eventually die.

She wanted her race to survive and it was up to her to get back to Earth somehow and warn its people to shun this planet, police it, to prevent landings. It was up to her.

But what could she do? The little ship's boat could never pull free from this planet and even if it could it would never make the trip to Earth.

There was the tower, of course, able perhaps to provide a space-ship that could make the trip. She acted on this thought at once and went to the window to watch.

The object that took shape there was at first a formless swirling mist. Then, before her placid gaze, it became a ship

standing on its tail and reaching higher than she could see through the window.

Marcia tired quickly and went to the big chair. She must reach some decision. The ship was there and she could possibly pilot it. But she had had no training in astrogation. She could never find Earth or its Sun.

There would be charts, of course, but the only charts with which she was familiar were encephalographic. She might be able to work out a course but she wouldn't be able to land the ship even if she reached her destination.

And the thought of long days and weeks alone in the ship, of doing herself all the things that needed doing, of preparing food for herself, of keeping an eye on gauges and meters—that thought filled her with weariness. She sighed.

Voul appeared. "Luncheon is served."

Marcia rose languidly. Yes, it was up to her. After lunch—or perhaps tomorrow—sometime. She was looking forward to lunch for she had wished for roast breast of quail on toast with a white wine sauce only this morning. . . .