

# STARTLING *stories*

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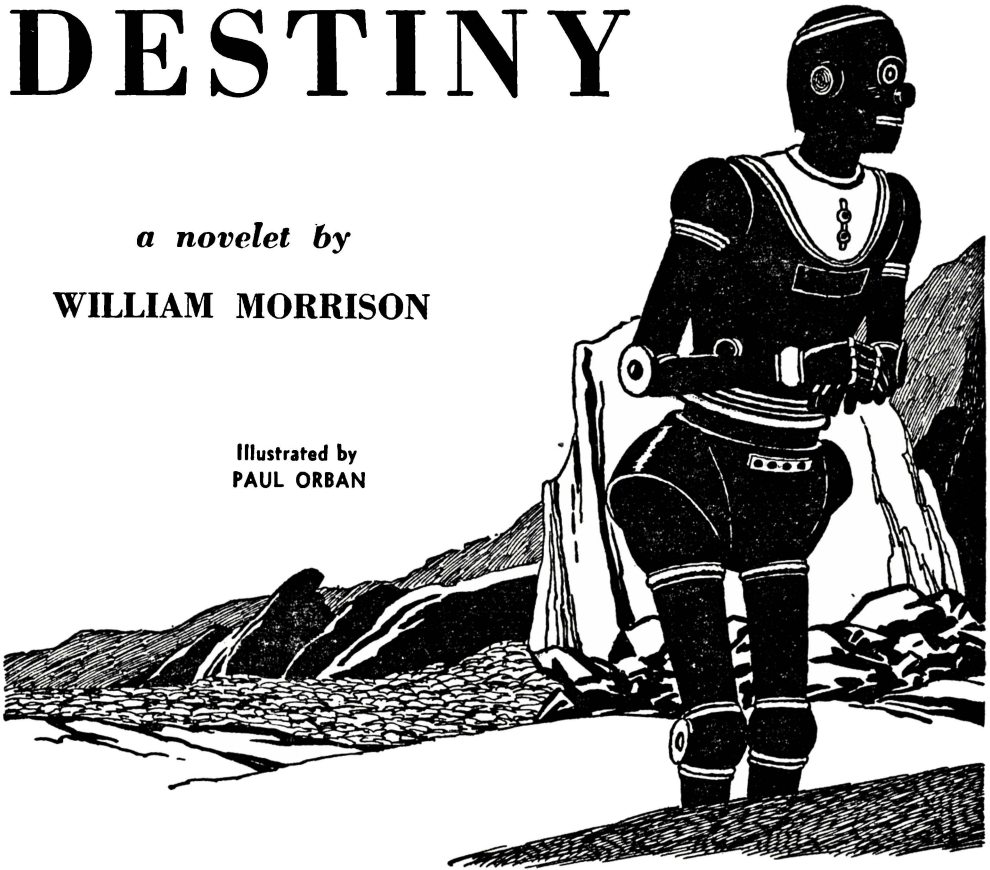
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# DARK DESTINY

*a novelet by*

**WILLIAM MORRISON**

Illustrated by  
**PAUL ORBAN**



## I

### *The Colonel Comes to Dinner*

**J**UST before she let go of the arrow, and the bowstring straightened with a twang, Susie Mae had a terrifying thought: "What if the sun were to explode and everything were to come to an end *this very moment*—before we could eat the beast?"

She needn't have worried. The arrow shot away too slowly, and the shadowy gnula was too quick. Besides, her aim

hadn't been accurate enough. The hunk of dark animated fur ducked behind a rock, and the shaft clanged harmlessly on one of the stones, the arrowhead drawing pretty sparks. The sun was still there, glaring down at her, and the beast wasn't going to be eaten at all.

"Oh, dear," said Susie Mae, "there goes the protein for today's dinner. If only we had good bowstrings."

**For ten years they'd been castaways in space, but**



The Colonel said, "How are you, Susie Mae?"

She trudged wearily over to the rocks and looked for the arrow. The arrow-head had been shattered as it sparked, and several hours would be needed to fit another one. All in all, a discouraging day.

The landscape was bare and rocky, not at all the kind of landscape she had known as a child. At its best, the sun was even hotter than the old sun, and

right now, in its Blue Period, it was intolerable. It was terribly strong in ultraviolet, and it could burn you in a minute if you weren't used to it and let your skin be exposed. And it was like a dagger in your eyes if you made the mistake of looking at it. A miserable place, a miserable existence, she thought.

It was made more miserable at the moment by a meeting with old Colonel

**the Colonel still kept dreaming of the Old South!**

Waters, who was out for a short walk with his black-faced robot Philip in attendance. In the old days, the Colonel's hat would have swept off his head almost of its own volition at the sight of a lady; even though the lady was his own adopted granddaughter, and wore a robe of ragged gnula skins. Other suns, however, other customs. The hat stayed on, but the Colonel said, "How are you, Susie Mae?"

"I'm fine, Colonel. I hope you're feeling well."

"I have no complaints," said the Colonel gravely. Actually he had dozens of them. But now was no time to express them. Not when greeting a lady. "We dwell in the shadow of a blue destiny, my dear. Is it any wonder that our lives are overcast?"

"No wonder at all," agreed Susie Mae.

"It is a sobering thought to realize that in the midst of life we are in death. What mortal can tell which moment will be our last? Just think of it, Susie Mae. In the twinkling of an eye, this most unfriendly sun of ours may display its full hostility—"

Susie Mae didn't want to think of it. For one thing, it made her sick, and for another, she knew that the Colonel was in that flowery mood of his which could make endless conversation. "You'll excuse me, I'm sure, Colonel," she said, and patted herself on the back for being so polite. "I have to get home and prepare dinner."

"Of course we'll excuse you, my dear. The demands of the inner man must be heeded, mustn't they, Philip?"

"Yassuh, Marse Henry, whatever you say, suh."

Susie Mae hurried on. The Colonel and his Philip were unique. Among the three hundred people in this colony you wouldn't find a duplicate of either of them. It's just as well, she thought. One of the Colonel's kind is all I can stand.

She reached the hut, and with a set of lenses began to build a broiler. Let us hope, she thought gloomily, that there

will be something to broil. I hate to see the kids go hungry. Rubio and I never should have had children. They're nice kids, lovable kids, but this is no place for them or anybody else to be born. This is a place where it's best to give up. So what if the race does die out here? There are other planets where human beings still live and have children.

**B**Y THE time the broiler was ready, she heard the pattering of skin-shod feet outside, and a moment later, Arturo, her oldest, raced into the hut, holding a small black animal up by the ears. A gnula! The same kind of animal she had missed.

"Where did you get it, Arturo?"

"Hit it with a rock." He grinned bashfully. "Guess I was lucky."

"You weren't lucky. You have a good aim."

"Guess Pop will be glad to see that."

"We'll all be glad."

She looked at her ten-year-old son, and felt a sudden glow of pride. He was small and skinny, but he was tough, and for his age remarkably resourceful. The other three, down to three and a half year old Ranse, were also growing up to be self-reliant and able to take care of themselves. They didn't worry about the sun, in its Red or Blue Periods. They never even thought of the possibility of their world exploding. Nor did they regard their existence as miserable. They simply enjoyed it. As much, she told herself, as she had enjoyed that long-gone sheltered childhood of hers.

She sighed and thought of how nice it might have been if they hadn't crashed. Or if Earth could possibly have learned where they were and renewed its contact with them. But Earth couldn't, of course. The shipload of colonists had been destined for a planet in the Sigma Alpha Sector of the Horsehead Nebula. How would any one back on Earth suspect that their instruments had gone wrong, and that they had blundered into Rho Beta Prime? In this glorious twenty-first century, instruments were never supposed to go wrong.

The trouble was, thought Susie Mae, that for every giant step forward there had been a step back. The achievement of interplanetary travel had aroused demands that science come to a halt altogether. And when a mere half century later Man had made the amazing leap from the planets to the stars, there had arisen a great cry: "We're going too fast, too far! Back to the good old days!" Each man had his own idea of the good old days. For Colonel Waters, her grandfather, they were symbolized by mint juleps and magnolias, and by horses, hounds, and historic ancestors—creatures he had never known except in an imagination which had transmuted them into synthetic memories. As a colonist, he hoped to have his own little preserve, modeled after the Old South.

Rubio was one of the few who had no use for good old days. He looked forward and worked only for the days to come. He and Susie Mae had been married on the ship itself—against the Colonel's wish—just before the crash, when the prospects for a long married life were highly unfavorable. Who'd ever have thought it would last through four children? If only Earth had learned where they were! If *only*—

**R**UBIO, she realized, was so preoccupied with his research that it made little difference to him what planet or satellite he lived on. And the children, poor things, knowing of nothing better, accepted what they had. But to an adult less detached than a scientist and who had known the comforts of civilization, this place was hell.

What, she asked herself, was there to hope for? She had looked around for her answer and the planet had been silent, or had answered in the wrong way. With wretchedness and discomfort, with broiling heat and stabbing light, with meager food and much discouragement. And with the ever-present threat of death from the variable sun.

As for that future that Rubio always talked about—she thought back to what she knew of the history of Earth, with

its endless wars and famines and epidemics, to the mass misery the human race had suffered, the scourges it had been forced to survive to reach its present state. And the idea that she and her children would have to go through all that again on this new planet frightened her. They were like that man in the old myth who had been condemned to push a stone up the side of hell. Every time he got near the top the stone slipped, and he had to begin all over again.

It was odd that the thought of beginning over again hadn't frightened Rubio. Her husband, poor fool, believed that the few human beings here would remember what the parent race had learned and wouldn't repeat the same mistakes. Assuming, that was, that they ever got a chance to make them. There had been little he could salvage in the lifeboat—neither the ship's library, nor chemicals, nor equipment. But in the moments of panic, by great luck, he had spared a thought from his new wife, and remembered to take with him the most precious objects he could think of—several handbooks containing lists of important constants.

The most valuable material of all, however, was that which remained in the human brain. The moment the shock of the crash was gone, the moment the survivors got it through their heads that the space ship itself had been burnt and all its equipment was lost to them, Rubio spurred them into action. He persuaded them, for fear of forgetting, to write down all the scientific information they had ever acquired. It turned out that men of his own kind had amazing amounts of knowledge in their heads, knowledge that formed the basis for a revival of science.

Given the knowledge, it wasn't so difficult to make new equipment to create new laboratory supplies from the rocks and soil, from the scattered plants that grew here, from the occasional animals they caught. Tedious work, wasteful certainly, and in many ways crude. Much of the old equipment wouldn't be duplicated for decades. But they could

make some of the things they needed to tackle the major problem that faced them—how to improve their lives.

HER thoughts were cut short by Colonel Waters, who entered the hut as if it were his own, caught sight of the dead gnula, and smiled. "I see, Susie Mae, that the traditions of our famous hospitality still hold sway in this happy household," he said. "That will make a fine addition to our evening meal."

"Arturo killed it with a rock."

"Ar—Arthur is a clever young lad."

"My name is Arturo," said her son.

"Arthur, in a more civilized manner of speaking," said the old man blandly. "Did I ever tell you, Susie Mae, that I was quite a hunter when I was a lad Arthur's age? Used an old-fashioned rifle, of course, but I could hit a possum with it at five hundred yards."

The old liar, she thought. The old fool. Or maybe we're the ones who are fools. He's the only one around here who doesn't lift his hand to do a stroke of useful work. He and his Philip, whom he keeps dancing attendance on him. Even Ranse puts him to shame. What do we feed him for? What's the sense of straining ourselves to keep a parasite like him alive?

The other kids came running in, yelling, and Susie Mae turned toward them to give brisk orders. "Ranse, you go get some of those big leaves for plates. Ella, you set the table. Dolores, you prepare the palay fruit, and make sure all the seeds are out. We don't want Ranse to swallow another one and get sick the way he did before. Arturo, you stay with me and give me a hand at skinning that gnula."

The hut became a beehive of activity. And at one side, sitting at his ease while the workers kept busy, the old drone, as she thought of him, beamed at every one and said, "This brings back pleasant memories, Susie Mae. I remember how we used to do things on the old plantation. Ah, that was the truly Golden Age. The age of the lady and the gentleman. A master and a mistress

who kept things in order, slaves and servants who knew their places—yes, we were all happy then. The world will never see such happiness again."

Susie Mae gave an unladylike snort, and ripped a stone blade down the side of the gnula. And the voice buzzed on.

The animal was broiled almost to a crisp by the time Rubio came in. Colonel Waters insisted on standing up and shaking his hand, just to show that he had no prejudices, Susie Mae supposed, and Rubio went through the ceremony without enthusiasm. He despises the old man, she thought. He despises him almost as much as I do. And besides, he's tired.

She went over to Rubio and kissed him. She noticed as she did so that the old man turned his face away in order not to see this disgraceful spectacle. He might greet Rubio with hypocritical cordiality, he might live on the backs of Rubio's family, but he still couldn't force himself to accept the fact that a granddaughter of his, a descendant (by adoption) of the Waterses of Virginia and the Davises of Georgia, had married a foreigner so far beneath her. A man whose very name betrayed the inferiority of his origin, a man who looked perpetually sunburnt. Although under this damnable sun, no more burnt than any one else.

"Have a good day at the laboratory, dear?" asked Susie Mae.

"We're getting along," said Rubio. "The one thing that's holding us up is a little matter of calculations."

"Those silly calculations are a waste of time! What good will it do us to *know*? What we need is better bows and arrows, and slingshots, and other weapons we could use against the animals."

Rubio said curtly, "We're not wasting our time. Don't you see, Susie Mae, this pulsating variable sun of ours is the most important factor in our lives. And there *is* the danger of its exploding."

"In the midst of life—" began the Colonel sonorously.

"Save it, Colonel. From our observa-

tions during the past few years on the Blue and Red Periods, we should have enough data to estimate solar stability. Once we knew that, we wouldn't have to worry whether every moment would be our last. We'd be able to consider things more calmly, to plan ahead. Unfortunately, each month's observations require about a year of calculation. Too bad we couldn't save the ship's automatic navigator."

"I don't see—" began Susie Mae.

"The ship's navigator was a vast calculating machine. Don't be so slow-witted," said Rubio irritably.

At this insult to his adopted granddaughter Colonel Waters looked grim. "Some people," he observed, "are no gentlemen. They are not gentlemen at all. They lack respect for womanhood."

"And for Colonelhood," said Rubio affably. "By the way, my dear, I see that we have a gnula for supper."

"Arturo caught it."

"Good boy, Arturo. A solid chip off the old block. I imagine you skinned the beast before broiling?"

"Of course."

"Don't. In future, broil in the skin. And don't get it too well done."

"But how will it taste with the fur on?"

"Remove the fur just before eating, and the meat will taste fine. We've tried it at the lab."

"Are there more vitamins that way?"

"Something like that."

"Well, if you say so," said Susie Mae. "Dolores is the palay fruit ready?"

"Yes, Mother."

"Then let's start eating. No, Colonel, my husband sits at the place with the biggest portion, if you don't mind. Or even if you do."

"But, my dear, courtesy demands—"

"Never mind courtesy, Colonel. He works hard, and he needs the food. Just do as I say. And don't grab, Colonel. If even one person tries to stuff himself, there won't be enough to go around."

"Anybody caught stuffing himself," said Arturo, "will get thrown out on his ear and miss meals for a week."

"Worse than that," said Rubio. "He'll get put to work. Colonel, I'm looking for a job for you. Something you'll be able to handle. What would you suggest?"

The Colonel, with a look of injured innocence, made no reply to this distasteful jest. He merely sat and began to eat.

## II

### *To Populate a Planet*

**W**HEN they had finished eating, the Colonel took himself off. They had once tried making him wash the dishes, but the breakage had been appalling. The Colonel, whether through an inborn lack of ability or a calculated shrewdness, managed to mess up everything he touched. He was definitely unemployable. And this made Rubio's remark about him seem all the more absurd.

Susie Mae did the few dishes herself, with Rubio helping. Near the end, he said, "I'm going to have a surprise for you in about a week."

"Something useful?"

"I think so."

"Well, don't keep me in suspense."

"Why not? A man should always keep his wife in suspense."

"Let me see," said Susie Mae reflectively. "What other women are there around here?"

"No one half as good-looking as you, dear," said Rubio tactfully. "Besides, they have nothing to do with the surprise. It will be something that will make a considerable difference in our way of living. In our moment-to-moment existence."

"Does it," she asked, "have anything to do with Jack Stevenson's experiments on ESP and TK? Telekinesis, or whatever it is?"

He smiled. "Not a thing, Jack's been sitting there in his place, trying to shift the spots from one card to another by the power of thought. He's seen plenty of spots moving around in front of his eyes, but not the right ones."



"You'll see stars in front of your eyes if you don't tell me what you're talking about."

He grinned at her, and then relented. "You're aware in a general way of the work I've been doing," he said. "Why don't you guess?"

"You know that I don't understand a thing about chemistry. And you're a— a physiological chemist."

"Right."

"How can that possibly help us? Wait a minute—I have it! Teleportation!"

"Come again?"

"You use some chemical and dissolve us up into little molecules or atoms, or something, and these combine again somewhere else. And there we are."

"Not quite. Ever hear of metabolism? That's what I'm working on. And those calculations about our sun. Once we finish those, we'll have a new life."

"A better one?"

"A much better one. What can be more important than new hope for the future?"

"Don't try to fool me. There isn't any hope, and we haven't any future."

He said sharply, "Stop pitying yourself. I can see a future that will put our past to shame."

"Are you building a magic crystal, dear?" And then she said, "I'm sorry, Rubio. I shouldn't try to be sarcastic. It makes me sound silly. It's only that after our experience on this God-forsaken place I feel so hopeless."

"It's been a tough experience, but not a dismal one. We're keeping up our numbers pretty well. We're even increasing."

"Our numbers—three hundred people against a planet! It's absurd."

Rubio said dreamily, "Have you ever seen those calculations of the number of progeny a single pair of animals can have? A pair of flies, fish, rabbits, or other animals could have covered the old Earth in a period of time ranging from a few months to a couple of hundred years. Human beings can be fairly prolific too. Say each couple has ten children. That isn't a tremendously big

number, and we know enough about medicine now, and have enough equipment, to keep both the children and their parents alive. That multiplies the population by a factor of five for each generation, assuming that the old generation no longer counts. Four generations, let us say, per century. At the end of two centuries we'll number over a hundred million. At the end of three we'll be taking steps to keep the population down. Don't worry, dear about being too few. Our real job is to find larger quarters."

"You have it all worked out, haven't you? Ten children per couple—what do you think a wife is?" asked Susie Mae indignantly.

"A very useful thing to have around the house."

"A *thing*? Useful, am I? Well, you're not getting any ten children out of me."

"Let's talk it over, sweetheart. The dishes are done, Ransie and Ella are asleep, and the other kids will be dozing off soon. It's rather crowded in here. Let's take a walk in the moonlight and apply our minds to the subject."

"Don't you go blarneying me," said Susie Mae. But she giggled. For the moment, at least, her mood was no longer dull and hopeless.

"Blarney is foreign to my frank and outspoken nature, even though I do have an Irish grandmother."

"I'm too tired to take a walk."

"Fatigue is only a state of mind."

"Well, my mind's made up. I'm not going to have ten children!"

"You'll feel differently later. Take a glance outside. All three moons are up casting a shimmering veil of—what kind of veil does a moon cast?"

Gossamer, I think."

"Whatever gossamer is, they're casting it."

"I think it's spider web."

"Spiders aren't romantic. Gossamer is. Let's agree then, that the moons are casting gossamer veils. When I see how beautiful nature is, I begin to wonder whether we should be satisfied with only ten children."



"Don't you go getting ambitious," said Susie Mae. "All right, maybe I will take a walk."

"Good girl. Get your genuine gnula-skin coat and put it on to impress the neighbors."

"Neighbors? Do you think we'll run into the Colonel?"

A frown shadowed Rubio's face. "Let's keep this conversation clean," he said. "Romantic, but clean. Have I ever told you my views about sex?"

"Hardly ever," said Susie Mae.

"Good. I have a surprise for you," said her husband.

THE next morning a pair of nesting kuru birds served as alarm clocks. Susie Mae got up, yawning with eyes only half opened, and began to prepare the skimpy breakfast. Rubio smiled at her sleepily. "That's what comes of keeping late hours," he said.

"Look who's talking!"

"I'd rather look at you. Arturo, I want you to come to the lab with me today."

"Sure, Pop. Want me to be your assistant?"

"Right."

"Pop, will you tell me what you're doing? Will you let me be a scientist too?"

"You have my permission to learn in ten easy lessons. Today's lesson will start with grinding up a big heap of marindo leaves."

"Gosh, those things are tough. They're even tough to pull off the bushes. How do you grind them?"

"I've made a gadget, and I'll show you how it works. There's a chemical I get out of those leaves. I'm going to need a fair amount of it before I'm through."

SUSIE MAE was left with the other three children. In order to keep them out of her hair, she set them to work. The hut was small, and their furnishings were few, but there was always something to clean or put in order, and then there was work to do in the garden.

Living these days was no occupation for loafers. Excepting, of course, the Colonel.

The Colonel came around while they were working in the garden, and stood there for a moment or two, watching them and beaming down at them. Philip was behind him, keeping at a respectful distance, as he was made to do.

"A pleasant sight to behold," said the Colonel. "Human beings in close communion with Nature. A most pleasant sight indeed. Ah, there were many such sights in the early half of the nineteenth century, the most civilized century known to Man. An era of gracious living, and the cultivation of the true qualities of the gentleman. Perhaps one did not live then oneself, but one can cultivate the same qualities that made the period so notable."

"What's a gentleman?" asked five-year old Ella.

"He's a man what loaf for a living," said Dolores, two years older, and much wiser.

"That about hits it off," said Susie Mae.

"You're facetious, my dear," said the Colonel. "Isn't she facetious, Philip?"

"Yassuh, Marse Henry, she sure am," agreed Philip.

"Why does he always say, 'Yassuh'?" demanded Ranse.

"'Cause he's a robot," said Dolores. "The Colonel got him made to say, 'Yassuh'."

"Why?" asked Ella.

"My dear child, I had Philip created in this fashion as a reminder of the old and happy days. He is the perfect servant, loyal to his master, and proud, in his humble way, of his position as devoted slave. Aren't you proud, Philip?"

"Yassuh, Marse Henry, Ah sure am."

"The human slaves were a surly and ungrateful lot. They didn't appreciate what was done for them. They wanted some absurd thing they called, 'Equality.' But Philip appreciates, don't you Philip?"

"Yassuh, Marse Henry, Ah sure do."

"Some people thought I was crazy, my dears, to have Philip made at all. He was quite an expensive job, and they told me I was stupidly squandering the money my dear mother left me on a piece of machinery incapable of doing useful work. They were outraged at the idea of my having a robot conditioned to speak as Philip speaks. And perhaps most of all, they were offended by my having Philip made with a black face. Such people, I must say, did not appreciate the feelings of a true gentleman."

Susie Mae ripped up a weed and tossed it aside, over her shoulder. It narrowly missed the Colonel. In fact, a stray lump of dirt from the roots did strike the Colonel's face.

He didn't notice. He said, "The old-fashioned virtues were gone. But here and there, in hearts like mine, faint sparks were kept alive. And now—perhaps the sparks will burst into flame again. For in the desperation of our sad way of life, it has become evident, my children, that to the gentleman it is only the eternal values that matter. To him who possesses true worth of soul, it is only the cause of the human spirit that counts. Of how little avail are material things! Yes, despite our vaunted progress, we are but helpless creatures in the hands of forces far higher and greater than our own."

He paused briefly, and Philip said, "Yassuh, we sure am, Marse Henry."

The Colonel said delicately, "You wouldn't happen, Susie Mae, to have a spare palay fruit?"

"I certainly wouldn't."

The Colonel's eyes wandered over the garden. Susie Mae said softly, "Don't get any ideas, Colonel. We watch this place. Don't try to steal anything."

"My dear, I do protest. You do me an injustice. It is true that the pangs of hunger gnaw my vitals, but nothing could be further from my mind than to do what you have so crudely suggested."

He paused proudly. Susie Mae said, "You just keep your hands off that fruit, that's all I'm asking."

"Granddaughter, I am disappointed

in you. You set too great store by trifles. Come along, Philip."

"Yassuh, Marse Henry."

Looking after them, Ranse asked, "How come, Mommy, Philip calls him, 'Marse Henry,' and not, 'Colonel'?"

"I know," said Dolores quickly. "Dad told me once. It's because he didn't become a Colonel until he got into space. And then he didn't know how to adjust Philip to say, 'Colonel Henry.' An' nobody else would adjust Philip for him."

"Never mind Philip," said Susie Mae absently. "Your father is talking of putting the Colonel to work. I wonder what he can possibly have in mind."

Nobody could venture a plausible guess. "I'll have to get it out of him," said Susie Mae.

As she did so often, she thought back to what Rubio had been talking about. The answer to one of their problems, he had said, lay in metabolism. She had no idea of what he meant by that. Metabolism, in the old days, was something that a doctor measured to find out what was wrong with you. It wasn't anything that could help you live better. It wasn't anything that could help you cope with that fiercely burning sun.

### III

#### *Where Is Philip?*

**T**HE day was long enough, but her thoughts made it even longer. And when evening finally came, Rubio didn't appear. Arturo came home alone. She could see him approaching over a hill, and she strained her eyes to catch sight of his father behind him, but there was no Rubio. And Arturo was carrying something. When he got closer, she saw what it was. A gnula.

She hugged him. "Have a good time, dear?"

"It was all right. Dad said I was a big help. Look what he gave me."

"You didn't hunt it down yourself?"

"Didn't have time. Dad had it at the lab, but he said he wouldn't need it any more."

"Did he say he was coming home soon?"

Arturo shook his head. "No, Mom. He said he wasn't coming home at all. Not for a few days."

"Not for a few days? But he can't stay away that long!"

"He says he got to, Mom. He says this experiment of his is important."

"Arturo, I think your father is out of his mind. That laboratory is no place to stay. Where can he sleep?"

"Guess he won't have much time to sleep, Mom."

"And eat? I'll have to bring him supper."

"He says not to worry about him."

"That's silly. Your father has a very good appetite. By tomorrow morning he'll be starved."

"He said they got plenty of gnulas. They can broil them there."

She opened her mouth to tell him what she thought of his father, but closed it again with the words unspoken. No use taking out her feelings on Arturo, she decided. He was only repeating what Rubio had told him. But wait till she saw that husband of hers. She'd give him a piece of her mind then.

Meanwhile there was supper to get ready for herself and the children. And for the Colonel, as his coming into sight reminded her. The Colonel never took a chance of any one's forgetting about his meal.

The Colonel's eyes brightened at sight of the gnula, and he made one of his courtly remarks about the good old days. Susie Mae was so little interested that she didn't even hear him.

The children chattered a little, but Susie Mae was silent, lost in thoughts of her husband. In fact, her vigilance relaxed so far that when the Colonel tried to grab an extra piece of roast gnula, he would have gotten away with it if not for Arturo, who jabbed a fork at his fingers so quickly that the Colonel narrowly escaped being stabbed.

The Colonel's complaints caused Susie Mae to look up, and she said, "Nice work, Arturo. I'm saving that

extra piece for your father."

"Ah—is there anything wrong with your dear husband?" asked the Colonel hopefully.

"Nothing at all," said Susie Mae. "He's just working a little late at the laboratory. He'll be home later."

"A fine man, a fine man. A very devoted husband, my dear. A living testimonial to the excellence of your choice."

"You don't have to tell me, Colonel. I've always known it, even if you haven't."

"But, my dear, I've always said so. Haven't I, Philip?"

There was no reply. Almost as startled as the Colonel, Susie Mae turned to look at the robot. But there was no robot.

"**PHILIP!**" cried Colonel Waters in anguish. "Philip, where are you?"

The lost expression on his face was pitiful to see. "He must have strayed, Colonel," Arturo said.

"He didn't stray. He was built not to stray." The old voice choked. "He was conditioned to remain within the sound of my voice. Philip, you scoundrel, where are you?"

"Somebody musta picked 'im up," Arturo said.

"But that's impossible! That would be theft, and there are no thieves—there are no thieves—" The Colonel's voice faltered again. "Do you think that the ungrateful wretch could possibly have decided to seek *freedom*? But freedom is only a word—to a robot, a meaningless word."

"I still think somebody picked 'im up," Arturo said.

"I shall investigate," said the Colonel, raising his head and looking sternly about him. "If I find that I am mistaken, and that there *are* thieves present among us—there will be grave consequences."

"Nobody wants a slave around here, Colonel," said Susie Mae. "And there are no thieves." Except you, she added mentally.

"I shall give the villain the thrashing

of his life," said the Colonel grimly. And he marched off, Susie Mae and the children staring after him.

The children started to help her clean up, but they were tired, and she sent them to bed before the dishes were done. Later, with no more work to keep her occupied, she felt restless. Outside, the moons were rising again, but a walk in the moonlight without Rubio along had no appeal. Damn him, she thought angrily, why did he have to do this to me? He should have known I wouldn't be able to sleep for worrying about him. The next time he starts talking about ten children, I'll show him.

She caught sight later of the Colonel wandering around and seeking his lost robot, and for a moment she wondered again what had happened to Philip. But in a way it was a relief not to see him. She had always hated his built-in demeanor of humble slave.

She went to sleep finally, and fell asleep more rapidly than she had thought possible. But in the morning, when the kuru birds began to croak and she turned around and found no Rubio at her side, she woke up at once.

After breakfast had been gotten out of the way, she started the children working in the garden, and said, "Arturo, you take charge. The rest of you do what he says until I come back."

"Where you goin', Mommie?" asked Ranse.

"To see your father. He must be as hungry as a horse." The expression had survived to puzzle the children, although horses themselves had not. "I'm going to bring him that piece of roast gnula."

They seemed a little uneasy as they watched her go, and she felt none too happy to leave them. But nothing would happen to them, she told herself. The kids were all as self-reliant as kids had to be nowadays, and Arturo had almost a grown head on his shoulders.

The laboratory was almost a mile away, and the path was steep and rocky. But she wasn't conscious of fatigue. She knew only that Rubio was doing something reckless and possibly foolish, and

that she had to take care of him.

When she reached the laboratory, she found Jack Stevenson, sitting in the outer office and staring at a pack of cards. She said, "Excuse me, Jack. I'm sorry to break your concentration—but have you seen Rubio?"

"What's that? Rubio? Has he gone away?"

"You don't understand. He didn't come home last night."

"He must still be here then," observed Jack brightly, still in a daze from his spell of concentration.

"That's what I figured," she said, and giving Jack up as hopeless, began to prowl through the laboratory. She had gone only a short distance down the corridor, however, when she came to a metal door with a "Do Not Disturb" sign across it.

"Rubio!" she called.

A voice growled, "Shut up out there. Can't you read?"

"I want to speak to my husband."

"He's busy. No interruptions."

"But—"

"He's all right, and he doesn't want you here. Go home and tend to your children."

**I**N A rage, Susie Mae turned and followed his advice. There was nothing else to do. But she began going over, in her mind, some of the things she would tell Rubio later, when he did get home. A fine husband he was, to put her in an embarrassing position like that.

When she reached the neighborhood of the hut, she heard voices raised. Arturo was saying, "You get out of here or I'll bring this rake down on your head. Go ahead now, get out. Beat it."

The children were grouped together, facing Colonel Waters. She realized at once what had happened. The Colonel, in his gentlemanly way, had tried to browbeat the kids and steal some palay fruit. And Arturo hadn't let himself be browbeaten.

The Colonel, who was facing in her direction, was the first to catch sight of her. "Good morning, Susie Mae," he

said. "These, ah, these are very fine children you have, splendid children. But somewhat excitable. They seem to be under a misapprehension."

"He tried to steal some palay fruit!" They all started to yell at her at once. "He's a crook, Mommy, a dirty crook!"

"In my day," said the Colonel acidly, "Children spoke to and about their elders with proper politeness and respect."

"He called us dirty little halfbreeds," said Dolores.

"And he said he'd sic Philip on us," added Arturo, "when he found him. Only he ain't found him yet, and besides, Philip ain't that kind of a robot, and he wouldn't hurt us. He'd just stand there and say, 'Yassuh, Marse Henry, yassuh.' But he wouldn't do anything to us."

"Yes, Philip was made to be honest," said Susie Mae. "The Colonel, I'm afraid, was not."

"My dear grandchild—"

"You can skip it, Colonel. I've stood a lot from you, but this is where I stop. When you try to rob and hurt my kids, that's a little too much. I'm afraid you won't be seeing us tonight."

The Colonel was aghast. "My dear child—my own dear granddaughter—"

"By adoption. And I've more than paid for the honor. Don't come around here again, Colonel. There'll be nothing more for you to eat in this hut. Find another soft-hearted fool to take care of you. Or better yet, learn to do some work and take care of yourself."

She tried to cut his protests short, but if there was one thing the Colonel could do, it was complain of the injustices of man and fate. He had his opportunity now, and it was not an opportunity to be lightly thrown away. It took her a good half hour to get rid of him.

After that they worked in the garden silently. When evening came, the Colonel showed up again, but she finally succeeded in turning him away, much as it hurt her to see a man go hungry. The Colonel was brave about it, taking her decision with a noble heroism that put her definitely in the wrong, and with a

glint in his eyes that made her sure he would be back later to rob the garden. She would let him, she decided, get away with a single palay fruit, no more. And she would not let him eat with them again.

She slept fitfully, and in the night, as she had suspected, the Colonel came softly into the garden. After he had grabbed his first palay fruit, she launched a stone at him, and he showed unexpected agility in getting away, not ceasing to complain with especial bitterness for lack of a Philip to follow him gravely with that sympathetic, "Yassuh." The moons were clustered together, not actually close to each other in space, but looking close, and gleaming with a brilliance they had never before shown. Or was it that they merely seemed brilliant because Rubio wasn't there, and she wanted him so desperately? Him and his talk of ten children!

#### IV

#### *The Color of Destiny*

**T**HE next five days dragged by in much the same way. The Colonel, still Philipless, had evidently had no success in finding others to feed him, and he obviously thought it beneath his dignity to try to feed himself. He was back several times every day as well as during the night, attempting rather unhelpfully to talk himself back into her good graces, and failing that, to steal some food.

The fifth night, as she lay tossing restlessly in her bed, which had always before seemed so narrow and now seemed so frighteningly wide, she heard the door creak. She sat up at once. The door opened, and then softly closed again. She whispered, "Rubio?"

"It's me." And the next moment his arms were around her, and he was hugging her tightly.

She half sobbed, as she said, "I thought you had forgotten all about me. Me and the ten children we were going to have."

He chuckled quietly. "I don't forget such things."

"What have you been doing?"

"Predicting our future."

"Predicting?"

"And shaping it. We're going to *have* a future. In other words, we're going to keep on living for a while."

"You mean the sun—" her voice rose in her excitement—"the sun isn't going to explode?"

"Quiet, or you'll wake the children. It won't explode for a good thousand years or so. By then our descendants will have space travel, and enough science to tackle the problem as it becomes acute."

"How do you know? Is it that metabolism you talked about?"

"That's something else again. I didn't tell you before because there was a chance that things wouldn't work out right. But they did, beautifully." He paused. "Suppose I start by putting it this way. What's been our biggest curse on this planet?"

She didn't have to think that over very long. "The sun," she said promptly. "Even if we forget about its exploding. In the Blue Period it broils us to death if we aren't careful. In the Red Period, the ultraviolet's almost as bad, and we come near freezing at the same time."

"Right. Have you ever stopped to think how the native plants and animals manage?"

"What difference does it make how they manage? We're not native."

"We're going to become native. Way back on Earth, plants learned how to cope with solar radiation. They absorb it, and convert it into useful energy."

"We're no plants," objected Susie Mae. "Although in the past you *have* said that I was like a flower."

"My little rambling rosebud, shut your pretty petals and listen. Ever hear of vitamin D? Given the right chemicals in your body, you can form it in your own skin on exposure to sunlight. And once formed, it helps your body function more efficiently. The animals on

this planet utilize not only vitamin D, but a series of other chemicals, all of them concentrated in the skin. Anti-radiation coenzymes, we call them. Why do you think I advised you to broil gnulas without removing the fur?"

"That's right, you did talk of something like vitamins," admitted Susie Mae.

"Something like. These anti-radiation coenzymes are going to absorb enough ultraviolet to take the curse off it. We'll be able to move in the light without this perpetual fear of being painfully sunburned, sunstruck, or blinded. And we'll absorb enough of the other wave-lengths to form substances that protect against cold."

"All we have to do is broil gnulas with the fur on?"

"For a while, anyway. The preenzyme—the stuff that turns into the coenzyme—comes from marindo leaves. But our bodies can't utilize it directly. The gnula has to eat it first and change it to the coenzyme before it can do us any good. Later on we may discover plants with materials we can absorb directly. Right now, we just have to eat more gnulas."

"Before we can eat them we have to shoot them."

"That will be taken care of too. And that, incidentally, solves another problem. What to do with our friend, Colonel Waters."

"You've found a job for him?"

"One that he'll love."

Susie Mae was silent. After a moment, she said slowly, "With no fear of the sun exploding, and no fear of the sun's rays—I suppose it does change things. It gives us that hope you talked about."

"You can bet your sweet little life it does. We'll work, build, have children—"

"I rather doubt that," said Susie Mae. "I doubt it very much. I can't imagine us having children if you go leaving me for a week at a time, like one of those ancient traveling salesmen."

"From now on we stick together,

through Blue Sun and Red." And he reached for her.

**T**HAT night, as she discovered that once after rising, the Colonel stole half a dozen palay fruit. Susie Mae didn't mind. Palay fruit were no longer going to play so great a role in their lives. But it was something of a nuisance to discover the bloated old gentleman himself, snoring in a primitive rhythm as he slept off his eating binge right in their own garden. His face looked as if he hadn't washed in a week, and Susie Mae began to doubt the possibility of his turning into a useful member of society.

The Colonel made a series of sounds in his sleep, half speech half grunts. The word "Philip" was distinguishable.

"I'm afraid that Philip is gone for good," said Susie Mae. "Rubio!"

Rubio had disappeared. He had got up and left even before she had heard the croaking of the birds.

The kids came running out into the garden. "Look, Mom," cried Dolores. "He stole a whole row of fruit!"

The Colonel roused himself and stood up. "Susie Mae, you must forgive the infirmities of an old and much-suffering gentleman. I had no intention of impinging upon your hospitality, had I, Philip?" It took him a few seconds to realize why there was no answer, and he said mournfully, "Dear me, I was forgetting that Philip is gone. The fact is, Susie Mae, that I had every intention of returning to my own house."

"Never mind, Colonel," said Susie Mae. "This time it's all right." She was feeling so happy at Rubio's return that she could be tolerant even of the Colonel. "But don't take any more today, or you'll have a stomach ache." She turned to the children. "We're all going to have a big breakfast today. Your father's back."

The Colonel said, "A fine man, your husband, a fine man—"

And then the words stuck in his throat. A figure rose over the crest of a hill, galloped forward; and came to a

stop before them. The Colonel stared, the children stared, Susie Mae stared.

"Are my poor old eyes deceiving me?" stammered the Colonel. "This resembles a steed of the days of chivalry."

"You can call it a horse if you wish," observed Rubio, dismounting from what seemed the section of a tree trunk on four curiously jointed legs. "Slightly mechanical, perhaps."

The children had clustered around and were demanding rides. Rånse was fascinated by the mechanical creature's short furry tail. "None of you will get rides," said Susie Mae firmly, "unless you quiet down. Now, Rånse is the youngest—"

"Hold it, my dear," said Rubio. "The Colonel is our guest. He comes first."

"I, Sir? This is indeed an honor, Sir—"

"No more than simple justice, Colonel," said Rubio smoothly. "As the living repository of the noblest traditions of an epochal era, you are the only one of us familiar with the customs of the chase."

"The chase? I hope I do not mistake you, Sir."

"You do not, Colonel. We are forming a Hunt Club, and it will be an honor to have you serve as Master of the at present non-existent Foxhounds. Of course we have no foxes either, but we do have gnulas."

The children's clamor for rides rose to a crescendo as Rubio helped the Colonel on to the mechanical horse, and showed him how to handle the reins. Then, with a loud and happy, "Yoicks!" the Colonel was off, galloping away in splendor to the sound of bugles which only his old ears could hear.

**S**SUSIE MAE stared after him and burst into laughter that had a touch of hysteria in it. "Oh, Rubio, how nicely you handled him. That's the work you found for him, isn't it?"

"Work? Do not mention that obscene word again in connection with the Colonel."

"Don't worry, dear, I won't. But as



Master of those non-existent Foxhounds, he'll be our chief hunter, won't he?"

Rubio grinned, and nodded. "All the youngsters will work under his direction. The Colonel will have people to order around. He will not be engaged in menial labor. He will be doing something a gentleman can lay his hand to."

"Rubio, you're so clever I could kiss you. And I would, too—if you'd wash your face."

"My face is no dirtier than yours," said Rubio. "Didn't you notice what's happened to the Colonel's complexion? Don't you see what's happening to the children's?"

"They seem to be getting darker!" cried Susie Mae.

"Naturally," said Rubio. "It's those coenzymes from the gnula skins. What do you think makes the animals black? Black is the color that absorbs radiation most efficiently."

"We're all going to turn black too?"

"All of us, including the Colonel. Wait till he finds out."

But the Colonel was too happy prancing back and forth on his new steed to think about his appearance. Susie Mae said, "Is that mechanical horse one of the important things you were working on all this time?"

"One of them," admitted Rubio. "Notice those jointed legs. They once formed the legs and arms of a robot called, 'Philip.'"

"So that's what happened to Philip! The Colonel wondered whether he had sought freedom."

"I don't know whether you could call Philip free or not. But, in the military sense of the word, he has been liberated. That is, separated from his former owner, and appropriated."

"Oh, Rubio, that's really stealing. For such an unimportant purpose, too!"

"It isn't stealing, my dear, because we

took Philip by a unanimous decision of the laboratory staff. And the laboratory staff is our government. Furthermore, the purpose was not trivial. How do you think we made those calculations I was telling you about last night? A dozen men with paper and pencil couldn't have completed them in a dozen years."

"You used Philip?"

"We used Philip. Do you realize that the robot had a first class electronic brain inside him, doing nothing more important than directing a set of artificial vocal cords to say, 'Yassuh' at appropriate intervals? We removed it and duplicated some of the simpler parts. There's a primitive electronic brain in the horse, to make it obey simple key commands like 'Yoicks,' and twelve other words. We adjusted the original brain to do difficult calculations. We really did set that brain free. From now on Philip directs the work of our colony."

**T**HE Colonel galloped up to them, and dismounted without audible creaks of his old bones. His face was flushed and happy, despite the increasing pigmentation of his skin. "I thank you, Sir," he said with a flourish, actually taking off his hat and bowing low in the depth of his emotion. "I thank you for one of the happiest moments of this worthless old life."

"Worthless, Colonel? Not at all. In future we shall esteem you at your true value."

The Colonel swept his hat back onto his head with a grand gesture. "And I had thought our destiny was a dark one," he said. "I was wrong, Sir, I do not mind confessing that I was wrong. Our destiny is bright, bright as this shining sun itself!"

"How right you are," said Susie Mae. And she went inside to prepare breakfast.