

THRILLING

# wonder

STORIES

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Cover Painting by JACK COGGINS

N. L. PINES, Publisher  
EDWARD R. ROFHEART, Art Director

FANNY ELLSWORTH, Managing Editor  
SAMUEL MINES, Editor

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"Guided robots!" Fred cried in recognition



# DARK NUPTIAL

By **ROBERT DONALD LOCKE**

*The second honeymoon was even happier than  
the first but they had to die to enjoy it.*

**T**HE rocket from Tycho crashed at seven A.M. near Radium Hot Springs in the Arizona desert, the survivors and the dead being whisked off to Yuma shortly after.

Despite the best of automatic steering and pinpoint astrogation, the craft had missed the Phoenix spaceport by more

than a hundred and twenty miles, and the resulting clamor just about finished the slow-moving passenger transport between the inner planets.

The beam transmission stations were riding a high tide of business. Following the crash, their public relations staff played up the accident until the stock of

those space vessel corporations which did not handle freight—exclusively reached a new low on the boards at the New York Stock Exchange.

But all the sound and fury did nothing to assuage the grief and sorrow of Fred Jenkins, citizen of Strabo, when he awoke in the white aseptic hospital cell and faced a grim bevy of doctors and nurses, whose anxious faces told him what their lips hesitated to voice.

"Where's Iris!" Jenkins demanded to know. "What happened to my wife? She was with me on the rocket—I remember a sheet of blinding flame! Then, we began to fall! The desert rushed toward us like a gulping-whirlpool—"

"Your wife is dead," announced the spokesman for the assembled staff. The strain on his face reflected the conflict between the man's obvious desire to soften the blow and his decision to deliver it straightforward, letting his patient roll with the punch.

"Iris was—?"

"—killed instantly in the crash. A merciful death."

"Oh, dear God," cried Fred Jenkins, turning his face to the wall in agony. "Let me die, too!"

But, science, antibiotics and the will of healthy protoplasm to survive pulled Jenkins enough out of his grief-provoked mental slump that his medical attendants were able in a few days to predict his complete physical recovery.

As to a possible spiritual recuperation, they could not say. Too many emotion factors were present, and doctoring the injured psyche did not fall in their province.

By the third week following the disaster, Jenkins had achieved ambulatory status as a patient; by the fifth week, he was undergoing plastic surgery to repair minor damage to his face, and his sixth and seventh weeks were spent in final therapy, lapping up heavy doses of the southwestern sun.

UPON discharge, Fred Jenkins' incipient loneliness became actual.

Dread assailed him at thought of returning to Strabo without Iris to share with him the rigors and wonder of Lunar life.

He boarded a tube car to Phoenix, where he arranged for the sale of his ranch on Luna, and then bought a small cottage on Encanto Boulevard, spending most of his quiet afternoons poking around the site of the old Fair Grounds.

The lovely image of his lost wife continued to haunt his every waking moment. As a golden-haired, blue-eyed representative of the vanishing Nordic race, she had been a much sought-after prize when he won her.

Perhaps that was why, during all the fragile hours of their too-short marriage, he had been tormented with a morbid premonition. Jenkins felt that their marriage was doomed to end too soon, much as the brief existence of the splendid Monarch butterfly passes with the summer.

Now, the uneasy prophecy had turned into a dreadfully real nightmare, and he could not bear to look at the silver-specked Moon in the cloudless desert sky above him.

The three-dimensional video shows failed to entertain him, even though full color telecasts were reported to be just around the corner. Book tapes and music reels had also lost their flavor.

He was like a sleep-walker, living yet dead; an exile from the rest of the human race.

Occasionally, he would rent a helicopter and make pleasure jaunts over McDowell Peak and the Roosevelt Reservoir, until one day the jagged terrain below him commenced to resemble some of the less rugged Lunar areas. Then, he gave up even these flights.

ONE afternoon, some six months after the crash of the Tycho rocket and three months after the reorganization of several space transport firms into even stronger competition to the newer but more expensive matter transmitters, Fred Jenkins was seated in his garden of

cholla flowers and yucca when a caller appeared at his gate.

"Mr. Jenkins?" the newcomer inquired, threading his way across the sandy soil.

Fred Jenkins surveyed his caller. He saw a young man approximately his own age, attired in the conservative style of the East with a lavender shirt and red-striped shin-length trousers.

His face was thin and a slight ripple at the hairline revealed his toupee. Under his arm he carried a light briefcase.

"Mr. Jenkins, I'm Joe Farley," the newcomer said, with outstretched hand. "Inner World Beam Transmission Company. Just tubed into Phoenix a few minutes ago. First thing I wanted to do was see you."

Fred Jenkins eyed him suspiciously, but accepted the handshake.

"You're wondering why I'd look you up," Farley went on. "Well, to me, Fred Jenkins is a very important man. Very important. This is going to be quite a shock to you."

"What is it?"

"The proposition I'm about to make. How would you like your wife back?"

Jenkins' mouth gaped open. Then, a long bitter line replaced his slack-jawed astonishment. "Maybe, you've got the wrong Jenkins," he said, coldly. "My wife is dead."

Dead legally, perhaps," said Farley. But not for keeps. And you're the right Jenkins, all right."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Give me a few minutes of your time, Mr. Jenkins. I'll explain everything. And I think you'll like what I've got to say."

Fred Jenkins thoughtfully watched the progress of a horned toad across a row of leaves. He tugged at his left ear. Finally, he looked up. "All right, I'll listen," he said. "Let's go in the house."

**I**NSIDE, the two men relaxed before a broad paneled electronic fireplace, whose chill screen reflected a landscape of cascading falls and green mosses on

Venus. Jenkins signaled to the wall and a robot drink dispenser placed two highballs at their disposal.

Joe Farley sipped briefly, then set aside his frosted glass. Unbuckling his briefcase, he said, "Might as well be frank about this. I'm public relations counsel for Inner World. Which is just a high class word for space grabber. Supposed to get my firm's name in all the facsimile sheets and telecasts. Needless to say, my ulcers require excising every spring."

"You mentioned my wife," Jenkins gestured, impatiently.

"Getting to that. Getting to that. Beam transmission's new; but its popular. You made a beam trip once, didn't you?"

"Yes. About a year ago."

"Mars to Earth, wasn't it?"

Jenkins looked surprised. "Our third anniversary, last summer. But how did you know?"

"I checked on the records. Fred and Iris Jenkins, bound for Terra. Transmission 6B-18180. You were in a hurry to get home. Space ship transport too slow for once, eh?"

"That one time, yes. We had the chance to enlarge our holdings at Strabo and make a real ranch of it. So, we cut short our vacation."

"Did the trip bother you?" Farley asked.

"Not too much. As I recall, I had no sense of time interval whatsoever. Iris said she developed a rather tickling sensation afterwards. Used to tease her about not getting assembled quite right."

"Think you'd ever want to make such a trip again?"

Fred Jenkins shook his head. "I'll never leave Earth again. Not for any reason."

Farley sampled some more of his drink. His face lost its taut lines. "Don't know how much you know about matter transmission, but I'd like to review it a little for you."

"Go ahead — not too technical, mind you."

Farley smiled. "My technical knowledge wouldn't qualify me for third engineer. The beam involves tricky math, even trickier gadgetry. Germanium elements replace the traditional vacuum tubes, or a city block couldn't house the station. A scanning device, sort of a three-dimensional ortho-iconoscope, compiles in matrix form the entire molecular structure of the object to be transmitted."

"You, Mr. Jenkins, at one point in the process, are nothing but a mathematical memory."

"Go on," directed Fred. "I'm listening."

"The information on the matrix is transmitted over tight sub-etheric waves to a receiving station at a velocity equal to that of gravitation. Which has thus far proved to be virtually instantaneous."

"Hey, wait a second!" Jenkins interrupted. "Seems to me it took us forty-five minutes to get from Mars last summer."

**F**ARLEY held up a finger in mock irony. "That's our bottleneck you bumped up against. Not enough transmitters."

"Build some more."

"Can't. Scarce materials right now. So what happens? Patrons get stacked up. The same way a local skyport will have to stack up jets to wait their turn at landing. On a busy day, thirty or forty matrices at a time may be waiting for a ride on the beam. You were one of them that day. And so was your wife."

"That accounts for the delay, huh?"

"Very much so. Here's a secret Inner World's never yet divulged. These matrices, following transmission, are not destroyed but *filed*. Thus, should a receiving station fail to operate—" Here, Farley raised his right hand solemnly, "—and I swear one never has failed yet, we would be prepared to re-transmit. In some one hundred thousand transmissions the past year, we have yet to lose a passenger."

"That's a good record," Jenkins admitted.

"Good? It's perfect. Space vessels—by way of contrast—have suffered losses amounting to two per cent. An outrageous figure, when you consider how many backward people are still using that old-fashioned method of transport. Getting back to the matrices—"

"Iris—my wife—!" Fred Jenkins gripped his own trembling hands and stood up on wobbly legs. "You mean, she's—?"

"Still in our files? Yes. Still in matrix form."

"Tell me again. What are you saying—?"

"I'm saying that an actual mathematical duplicate of Mrs. Jenkins, molecule for molecule, is available to you by the magic of beam transmission. Minus, of course, the memories of those months that have passed since the day of your arrival from Mars."

"I don't care," cried Jenkins. "As long as there's a way to get my wife back, that's all that matters! If I've got to have her without any memories at all, I still want her. She's mine. With Iris, I'd be like a resurrected man, myself."

"That's better than ever. Two people would come to life."

Joe Farley, brash in manner as he was, appeared visibly shaken by this display of overwrought emotion he had provoked. His arm slid around Jenkins, supporting the hysterical widower as he helped him back to his seat. It was disturbing to see a grown man weep, especially when his tears were mixed with equal spasms of joy.

But, Farley had not forgotten the purpose of his mission. From his briefcase, he brought out a paper and handed it to his host, together with permo-pen. "Then, Inner World's got your permission to re-transmit Mrs. Jenkins' matrix?"

"Yes, yes. By all means." Jenkins hurriedly scratched his signature.

"Very well, then," said Farley. "You'll have your wife in three days, Fred. Inner

World wants no money. But we'd like permission to see the event gets full coverage in press and video."

"Anything. Anything you say," Jenkins told him, without raising his cupped head from between his hands.

"Great," said Farley, picking up his modest three-toned hat. He paused at the door, to add, "Thanks for the drink. We'll be seeing you."

**ORDINARILY**, the video reels of the resurrection would have created journalistic history. But in this case a cabinet crisis on Venus and a threat of civil war devoured all the terrestrial headlines.

Enough of a splash accompanied the presentation, so that despite the newsworthy competition on the next planet, Joe Farley later felt justified in accepting the "Hannegan" statuette awarded him for the best flack job of the year.

To publicize the event called for a party, heavy on canapés and caviar. Thus it was that a somewhat terrified Fred Jenkins, bearing little resemblance to the rancher who had jeered rough-tired over Lunar landscapes only twelve months before, was deprived of the supreme joy of meeting his re-created wife in privacy.

Instead, the reunion took place in Inner World's luxurious board room, where Jenkins found himself surrounded by pompous directors of the company, assiduous vice-presidents, photogenic models in gorgeous Venusian silks paid for by the vice-presidents, and two relatively unobtrusive bartenders who poured out exotic, semi-poisonous cocktails from recipes popular on all the lesser planets.

After the major guests had arrived, a process requiring an hour or more of raucous laughter, smoke-crammed air, and bad jokes about the un-spaceworthy-ness of interplanetary vessels, Fred Jenkins saw Joe Farley raise a jeweled cuff to cue the video scanner operators.

A small band in the corner produced a blast of fanfare.

"Ladies and gentlemen, bosses and honored guests," Farley announced in the silence that followed, "we're here to witness something unique in the annals of science. A development totally unparalleled in the history of mankind. But one that may herald a new age of the human race."

Polite cheers and huzzahs were voiced by the beaming vice-presidents and the silk-clad models.

"There is a man among us, a victim of carelessness and inefficiency in transport," Farley continued, "who is about to be rescued from his long and unnecessary mourning."

"Through the foresight of Inner World in preserving the matrices of all human beam transmissions, Fred Jenkins is being united with a person he had thought lost to him forever."

"Will somebody please ask Mrs. Jenkins to step in?"

**T**HE two faced each other across the hushed room; lovers once separated by death, but now brought together as if their grim enemy had never existed.

She was lovelier than ever, lovelier than the image in any of the agonizing dreams he had experienced during his lonely nights of torture after the rocket crash.

"Iris!"

"Fred, my darling!"

"You're real. I can't believe it."

"Of course, I'm real. Kiss me, Fred."

"My wonderful wife, I never dreamed — never thought I'd ever have you again."

Their lips met. Their bodies clung. The cameras ground away, but they were totally unaware of anyone else in the room.

"It's been so long, Iris."

"So long?"

"Since it happened. Since I lost you."

"Yes, it has. We got separated somehow. What happened, Fred?"

"They haven't told you?"

"I've been so confused, recently. They said I couldn't see you for awhile. I said

I had to. We had a chance to buy more land on Strabo. You needed my name on the papers. They said it could wait."

"Then, what?"

"Then they kept me in a hotel room. Two or three days, I think. I was treated very nicely. New clothes, delightful meals. But, I wanted you, Fred. Only you."

"They didn't tell you about the accident?"

"Accident? What accident?"

"Coming in from the Moon. The rocket turning into a sheet of flame the desert whirling about over our heads."

"But, we didn't take a space ship, Fred. We took the beam. And we came from Mars. Home from our vacation. We haven't returned to Luna, yet."

Fred Jenkins attempted to control the tremor launched by his nerves. This was Iris' soft flesh he held in his arms. Iris' lips that brushed against his, Iris' guileless blue eyes that met his own.

But something was missing—and Joe Farley had predicted it.

Iris had no memory of any events past the time when the beam station had recorded the matrix of her corporal form.

HE BROUGHT her home to the little cottage on Encanto, taking care to destroy all the news accounts he had preserved concerning the crash, the photographs he had made of the grave in Yuma, the letters from both sides of the family consoling him on his loss.

He wanted to avoid shocking her.

Then, in his own quiet way, he related to her what had happened in the months following their return from Mars, culminating with the disastrous voyage from Strabo and the subsequent offer of Inner World Beam Transmission to make the amazing restitution.

Iris listened to all he had to say, but it was clear she understood little of it.

"But, it can't be," she protested, puzzlement marking her pretty features. "I'm not dead. I'm very much

alive. Pinch me. Don't I feel like a living person?—I've never been dead."

A vague uneasiness coursed through Fred.

"I know it's hard to believe," he said. "Perhaps, it's better if we don't think about it too much."

He showed her the facsimile sheets that clearly indicated the year and the date.

She still refused to believe.

It was then he regretted tearing up the other evidence.

He tuned in on the telecasts which still occasionally mentioned the miraculous resurrection.

Iris declared the publicity was faked.

"Don't you see?" she said. "I was never released from the matter transmitter, like you were. I've got it! They kept me confined—under drugs perhaps—until they were ready to spring their coup. Or perhaps, I had amnesia? Oh Fred, you've been the victim of a horrible plot."

"No, Iris." He shook his head, grave eyes mirroring his concern. "I'm afraid you're wrong. You must face the truth, darling."

"But, what is the truth?"

"What I have told you. I lived with you several more months, following that beam trip. A beautiful, idyllic existence—as was all our life together."

"With me?"

"With Iris. An Iris, maybe. The one who is dead, now. But what does it matter? You share her thoughts, her memories. You are her. She was you."

"I hate her. She stole part of your life from me."

"Not her, you. Only you don't remember. Why can't you pretend it was amnesia, like you said? Then, everything would adjust of its own accord."

The vague uneasiness in Fred kept growing.

ANOTHER day. They had checked out a helicopter and were flying over the Great Meteor Crater near Winslow.

"I think it's about time we moved back

to Strabo," Fred said.

"Our old place?" asked Iris.

"No. I sold it. Don't you remember?"

"How could I?"

"I'm sorry. I forgot. We would have to start over. But, it would be a good life."

"I couldn't bear it. I couldn't bear to see a place where you had spent months with some one else."

"But those months were spent with you."

"Not with me. With her."

"Her. You. Don't you understand? You're the only Iris I know."

But she wasn't, he reminded himself. He was lying.

"No, I don't understand that," she said. "I understand you're the only Fred Jenkins in my life. But this other thing, Fred. It's beyond me. Please help me grasp it. Maybe the beam transmission did something to my brain cells."

"Nonsense!"

But finally he began believing it himself. Well, almost.

He became unhappy. Life palled, as it had for him in the days following the burial of the first Iris. Finally, he took a tube to New York and sought out Joe Farley in the great offices of Inner World.

There he told Farley, "Something is wrong."

Farley only grinned, but there was apprehension in his face. This was one stunt he couldn't afford to have backfire.

"Something's wrong? What?"

"You haven't given me my wife back. You've given me a stranger."

"That," said Farley, "is simply not true."

"I've got Iris' body," said Jenkins.

"But, not her soul."

"Have you been talking to a preacher?"

"No. It's my own feeling."

"Fred, believe me. Your wife has as much soul as any person who's ever been transmitted by beam. If she doesn't, then I hate to think of the thousands of

poor humans we've de-souled in the past year. Now, what's really wrong?"

Fred Jenkins sat down and told him.

When he was through, Farley said, "I'll arrange to have a psychiatrist examine her. There may be something actually off-base. But my opinion is that it's all in your own head. Meanwhile, I'd appreciate it if you'd keep this from the press. Whatever we do, we can't let Inner World get involved in religious speculation."

He shook hands and sped his departing caller. "Don't worry, Fred. Everything's going to be all atomic. Keep your chin up."

THE psychiatrist who tubed to Phoenix a day later was a world expert on aberrations. He examined Iris from cranium to phalanges, gave her Rorschach and other mental tests, took a brain-wave reading, and concluded, "She's sound as a gold-piece, Jenkins. Mind's okay, too. Little depression, but that's only natural—considering the notoriety you two've been through."

"But, I tell you, Doc, she's not the same woman as my own Iris."

The specialist smiled. "Got you convinced of that, has she? Well, in a way, it's true. Statistically, she's not the woman you buried—but that's only to be expected. After all, virtually every atom of her body is different. But that's got nothing to do with what ticks inside."

"What am I going to do?"

"Adjust to the situation."

"But, I can't."

"Of course, you can. Don't be medieval. Because she lacks certain memories you think she ought to have, she makes errors. You accumulate them, sort them in your mind, come to the conclusion you've been saddled with a different person. Her own confusion and bewilderment add to the impression. She thinks she's different—that she's the only Iris Jenkins that ever existed. Convinced of it as she is, naturally she helps strengthen the vague suspicion in your own mind that she's a different



woman from the wife who died."

"That's exactly it."

"You've got to fight it. Don't you see that every human being changes into a totally different person from minute to minute, throughout all his life? Each new experience contributes to personal-ity change."

"Granted."

"Well, if you had continued to be the same Fred Jenkins you were the day your transmission matrix was formed, this Iris Jenkins would seem the same Iris to you that you had always known. But now she's acquired a complex that causes her to doubt her own existence, a complex she fights by asserting that the other Iris, the buried one, was unreal. Her mind is undergoing a stress which threatens to destroy it."

"Can't we eliminate that stress?"

"It'll vanish eventually of its own accord—I assure you. But in the meanwhile, in an effort to get out from under it, your wife has transferred part of her reaction to the situation to your shoulders. You're just as sick as she is."

"But—how?"

"Because she's got you believing she's a different Iris Jenkins, too—when she's not."

"What's my solution?"

"Let time ride it out, I'd say. But you might do this. Why don't you just imagine you've been away from Iris since the day you arrived on Earth from your Martian vacation? If that were true, she'd seem like the same wife to you. Do your best, my boy, to blot out the image of the woman you actually lived with those following months."

"I'll try, Doctor."

FRED and Iris worked very hard to create a new life together. Fred agreed never to mention the months he had lived between the making of the matrix and the creation of the new Iris.

During the summer they went to Strabo but were unable to capture the magic of their idyllic past. After a fretful fortnight, they rocketed back to Ty-

cho, pleasure capital of the satellite. There they plunged into a vicious cycle of night clubbing and thrill-hunting.

It was Iris who tired first of their new futile existence.

"We've got to stop this," she said one morning, as both awoke to splitting *narcoma* hangovers. "I begin to see now, what your psychiatrist meant about *running away from reality*. That's just what I've done, and just what you're doing, Fred."

"Don't lecture to me," he groaned.

"But, I must. I see now, there really is only one Iris. What body I occupy makes no difference. If I inhabited a hundred, I would still be me. It's like discovering immortality."

"That's not so," shouted Fred. "You change."

"But, darling—"

"You're a fraud," he charged. "You're not my Iris. All these months, I've been fooled. I've lived with a manufactured imitation—"

"You don't know what you're saying!"

"Don't I? Now, I understand why you weren't the same—"

"Fred!"

"You have no soul," he declared triumphantly. "That's what's wrong! No soul!"

Her tear-spattered face stared at him in enlightened horror.

When Joe Farley met them at the Phoenix spaceport, he was gesturing frantically at a facsimile sheet he carried.

"Tell me it's not so!" he said.

Fred and Iris Jenkins cast a short meaningful glance at each other, then nodded dolefully.

"And the damndest grounds," continued Joe. "*Wife is soulless duplicate, husband accuses. Husband refuses to recognize mate's identity, says wife. What kind of gag is this?*"

"We've made up our minds. Our marriage can't go on."

"But you'll ruin our entire campaign. Inner World's been authorized materials to branch out to Ganymede and Callisto.

If people get a libelous impression of the transmitters, oh brother—!"

"Can't be helped," said Fred disconsolately.

"Look," said Joe Farley. "Inner World's very much interested in your case. Prestige of the company's at stake, you might say. Isn't there something we can do?"

"Not a thing."

"Iris?" Farley turned to Mrs. Jenkins.

Her blue eyes gave him the same answer.

"I don't like it," said Farley, nervously. "Don't like it at all."

HE STOOD his ground a moment; then his face broke into a wreath of smiles like Edison discovering the incandescent filament.

"I've got it. Where'd you folks spend your honeymoon?"

"Venus," Fred Jenkins admitted, nervously.

"Sure. On Lake Heisenberg, wasn't it? Beautiful spot. Know it myself."

"Not Heisenberg," said Fred. "It was Lake Smyth."

"I remember you telling me about it, now. How's this for a deal? I believe I can talk Inner World into giving you a free beam trip to Venus and back—for a second honeymoon. That strike you?"

Both members of the Jenkins family looked slightly doubtful.

"All expenses paid. And no newshounds plaguing you, after you get there. I promise it. You folks can start a new life, like you'd never been married before. Get acquainted all over again. And if you still don't like each other, you can get a separation on Venus in twenty-four hours. Lot faster than Terra."

Iris turned to Fred, her eyes pleading.

"We ought to give ourselves one more chance," she told him. "I accepted you when I was re-duplicated. Maybe, in different surroundings, you could learn to feel the same about me. Even if we don't get any further than the way you felt about me when you first brought me

home to the cottage on Encanto. I'd be satisfied with just that again."

"You hear her talking," interposed Joe Farley. "C'mon, Fred. Be a sport."

"All right," said Fred. "We go to Venus. But it's the last beam trip I'll ever take—if things don't work out."

"Fair enough," said Joe Farley.

Rubbing his hands contentedly, he started to leave.

"One more thing," Fred called after him, his brow wrinkled. "Isn't a rebellion about to bust out on Venus?"

"An uprising? Not that I know of."

"The video channels keep mentioning something along that line. I thought . . ."

"Forget it," said Joe. "I'm a newspaperman, myself. You can discount two-thirds of every telecast you see."

"All right, if you're sure . . ."

Thirty-six hours later, Fred and Iris Jenkins stepped out of the beam receiving chamber at Lake Smyth, Venus.

Greeting their eyes was a foggy green world of immense volcanic mountains and vast rolling seas, matted with floating weed islands, that stretched to the horizon's edge from the rim of the plateau on which stood the resort town of Smyth.

Overhead, a mile above the ground, darted green swallow-like creatures, one of the many forms of aerial life on the planet.

The high oxygen content of the atmosphere proved exhilarating to the new arrivals. Fred Jenkins filled up his lungs and said, "I'd forgotten how this climate stirs you up."

"I feel it, too," Iris whispered softly, at his side. "Let's not go sight-seeing the first night. Let's just—"

A heavily-tanned official of the port, his military uniform half-buttoned, broke in on them at that moment.

He glanced at a sheaf of papers he held. "Are you Mr. and Mrs. Jenkins?"

"Something the matter?"

"Plenty. You shouldn't be here, at all. You were supposed to be re-routed to Lake Heisenberg. In about ten min-

tes, this resort's going to be the hot pot of a damned serious war."

"Then, there is a rebellion?" Iris put n.

"In progress, madam," the official replied, fastening the remainder of his douse buttons. "We'll get you re-transnitted soon as we can. But right now, we'd better take cover."

"It looks so peaceful . . ." Fred Jenkins commented.

AS IF to hand the lie to his words, the darting swallows assembled into a V-shaped formation and plummeted from the sky. As they dived closer, the metallic luster of their greenish bodies became clearly visible. Suddenly, the creatures' rigid heads spurted flame.

"Guided robots!" Fred cried.

The official broke away from their side and ran towards a tunnel-like opening at the lake shore.

Fiery bullets chattered across the field, plowing a furrow of destruction through a group of buildings to their right.

Fred and Iris plunged across the pla-

teau, close on the heels of the fleeing official. But they had hardly reached the mid-way point to the shelter, when Fred felt Iris' hand slip from his grasp. She pitched, half-fainting, to the ground.

"I've turned my ankle," she moaned. "Go on, darling. You can make it."

"No, we'll both get there." Fred stooped to pick her up, then stumbled forward, holding her weight in both his arms. Iris slung her wrists about his neck in support. "It's only a little farther," Fred told her.

The air was rent with the din of explosions everywhere. Heavy smoke billowed forth from burning structures. Screams of dying humans added to the confusion.

But the cave-like opening of the tunnel was almost at hand.

"Set me down," said Iris. "I believe I can hobble, now."

A few feet past the cave's entrance, they could see the official who had fled and other refugees, all gesturing and offering encouragement.

"A few more steps," said Iris, "and we're safe."

[Turn page]

"I'm winded," Fred groaned. Every muscle in his body ached in spent agony.

A long descending scream suddenly whistled through the atmosphere, high above them. "Look out!" shouted Iris.

Fred pushed her ahead of him, saw her tumble into the safety of the tunnel. In the next blinding moment, the missile struck.

GOOD morning, Mr. Jenkins," said the white-smocked young man in front of him. "I've been detailed to indoctrinate you."

"Indoctrinate me? About what?"  
"Several things. Brace yourself for a shock, sir."

"I don't understand. Isn't this Lake Smyth on Venus? I just stepped into a matter transmitter, operating from Earth. Where's my wife?"

"One question at a time, please," the young man said. "About that beam trip to Lake Smyth, I'm afraid you made that several days ago. You see, Mr. Jenkins, you're not the same Mr. Jenkins who actually did make that trip. That Fred Jenkins is dead. He was killed in a rebel raid shortly after arrival."

"Then I—?" Jenkins' senses began to reel.

"—you are a duplicate, yes. We re-created you from the most recent matrix on file. You have suffered very little loss of memory. Actually, you are only missing recollection of those events which caused your death."

"But, I'm real. I couldn't be dead. Look here, I'm just as alive as you are."

"Of course you are," the young man smiled.

"But—but I always thought a person re-created would lose his soul?"

"That's still a touchy point. You, Mr. Jenkins, may be able to help clear us up on that matter, sometime—if you'd be so willing."

"What is this place?"

"The beam station at Lake Heisenberg. If you still don't believe me, I'd be quite happy to show you your old

body. It's rather mangled, but still recognizable."

"I've got to know for sure," said Fred. "If this is a joke—"

He followed the young man to the far end of the room, where a flowered basket rested on metal supports. The lid was shoved back.

The palms of his hands crawling with sweat, Fred bent over and gazed at the form inside. Suddenly, he felt sick—violently sick to the remotest cell of his body.

Summoning all his strength, he stood erect. "I'm still me," he announced. "Whatever has happened, I'm still me."

"Is there anything more I can do for you?" his attendant asked.

"No, thank you. Where's Iris, my wife?"

"Outside, I believe. Waiting for you—"

Fred Jenkins emitted a vigorous whoop, rushed through the pair of swinging doors indicated, and found himself at the head of a long corridor. His vision quickly swung to a tired huddled figure, seated on a nearby bench— Iris, her golden curls in disarray, but faithful and waiting. "Darling, you know, don't you?" he said.

"Yes," she nodded, as her slim form met his embrace.

He pressed her tight. "I've been mistaken about a planet-ful of things. Now, I'm beginning to get wise. Will you forgive me?"

"There's nothing to forgive," she said, between smiling tears. "Let's just enjoy and make use of the extra life we've both been granted."

"Every minute of it."

"Whenever you want to go back to Luna—" Iris' eyes glanced shyly towards the floor. "—I'm ready, Fred."

"Great. But, we've still got a second honeymoon to spend. I've a hunch it'll take us a long time."

"Wouldn't be surprised at all," Iris affirmed. And this time the shyness could be seen slowly departing from her unflinching blue eyes.