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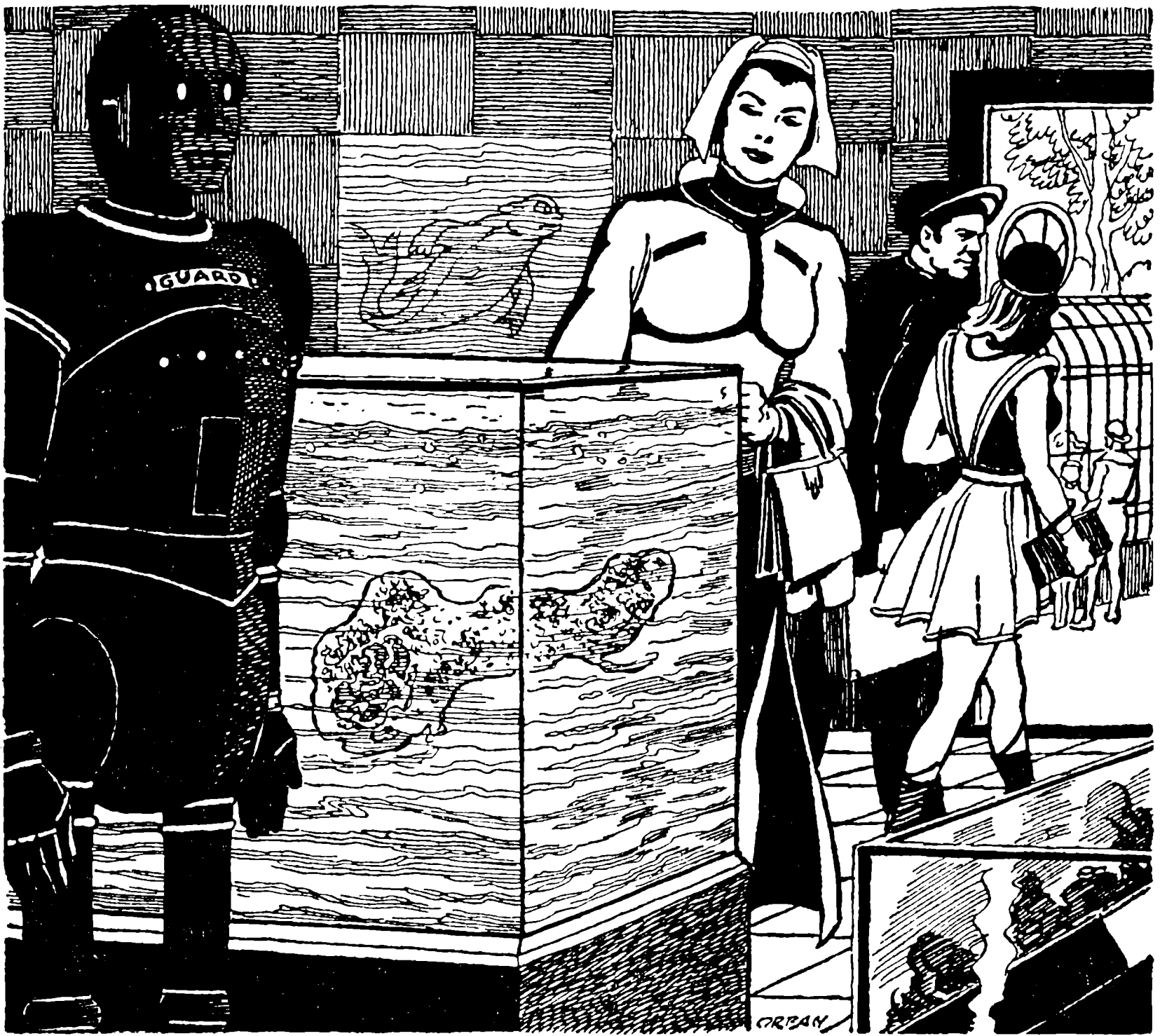
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*Being a world unto one's self is lonely. Even the
poor amoeba creature from Venus knew that . . .*

ESCAPE MECHANISM

BY CHARLES E. FRITCH

Illustrated by Paul Orban

SHE FOUND herself floating again in that strange half-familiar world of murky fluid where only she existed. The liquid was all around her, pressing gently on all sides with a force that cushioned but did not restrain. It was a pleasant sensation, a calming one; the cares of the outside world were non-existent and therefore meaningless.

She drifted, unhampered by the fluid. There seemed to be no direction but outward. Her thoughts went out and they returned with impressions.

This was her world and she was the center of it. It pleased her to think this. It was an alien pleasure that was mental and without physical counterpart.

There was quiet, stillness, a peace she had never known. The fluid flowed about her like a great silent sea that held no sound, no movement.

It seemed natural that she should be here.

She was content.

At the accustomed time, the auto-hypnotics in Miss Abby Martin's body forced her to the threshold of consciousness and cleared her brain of the fog of sleep. Slowly, she opened her eyes to the morning brightness of her bedroom and stared at the vacant skylight and the blue expanse of sky beyond it, not quite comprehending where she was. The cloudfoam cushions of her bed gave credence to the floating sensation she had had during her dream, and for a few seconds she lacked orientation.

Then her eyes wandered about the room, to the closed door of the

raybath stall, the retracted dressing table, the chronometer label that told her it was March 14, 2123 at thirty seconds past 0700 hours. The subtle intonation of her favorite music, Czerdon's "Maze of Crystal" murmured softly from the walls.

Awareness came then, and she lay back on the bed and tried to follow the intricate crystal melodies. But a frown ridged her brow, and she wondered at the strange dream instead. She had found it pleasant enough, for she rather enjoyed the languid floating sensation, the feeling of being self-sufficient, a world unto herself. Yet the very fact of the dream's existence in a world where such things were manufactured disturbed her, for she had taken no dreampills the night before, nor at any of the other times the dream had come. The incident made her almost wish that witchdoctor psychiatrics had not been outlawed twenty years ago, so she might get some inkling of the dream's meaning; but psychiatrists had been pulled forcibly from the web of society when mental derangements were put under the jurisdiction of the Somaticists.

Overhead, a rocket thundered, shaking the house with a gentle hand, and Abby turned her attention to the sound, momentarily forgetting the dream. Through the one-way skylight, she saw a speck of light accelerate beyond vision. She shook her head impatiently.

Rush, rush, rush—that was all people seemed to think about these days. Go to the Moon, go to Mars, go to Venus. In time they might go to the outer planets and perhaps even try to reach the stars. As though they didn't have enough

trouble right here on Earth! All they did, it seemed, was hunt down poor beasts from the various planets and bring them back to Earth to put in cages and tanks on display, ostensibly to "learn more of the planets by studying their inhabitants." To Abby, it seemed cruel and unnecessary.

Like that poor amoeba creature from Venus, she thought, remembering the day last week when she and her niece Linda had visited the zoo to see this latest acquisition. It was a creature captured from the giant oceans of the second planet, a giant amoeba encased in a large transparent tank of murky fluid for paying visitors to see. The creature was supposed to be primitively telepathic, but it seemed harmless enough. Abby found herself sympathizing with it, and it seemed to her at the time that the creature felt this sympathy and was grateful for it. For a brief moment she even had fancied that the Venusian's mind had reached out to her, probing with gentle fingers of thought.

She shook her head at that. Here in the calm clear light of day diffused through the one-way skylight, the anthropomorphic notion was ridiculous; and she mentally chided herself for contemplating such things.

"I must be getting old," she told herself aloud.

In the next thought, she reminded herself that thirty-nine years was not old at all, and in the thought that followed, scolded herself for bothering to defend a statement so obviously rhetorical.

The chronometer ticked silently to 0701, and sighing, Abby rose

from the bed and slipped from the translucent one-piece pajamas to stand nude in the center of the bedroom. At a sudden thought she glanced quickly about the room, for she had the strange uncomfortable feeling that someone was watching her. It was impossible, of course, but she felt ill-at-ease just the same, and a blush of embarrassment stole over her at the thought. The feeling of shameful nakedness persisted even in the raybath stall, and it was a relief to dress and hurry downstairs, routing the unaccountable ideas from her mind.

As usual, Gretchen had busily cleaned the house during the night, silently raying germs and dirt out of existence, and had a warm steaming breakfast-for-two ready by the time Abby had descended the escalator to the dining room.

"Good morning, Gretchen," Abby said.

"Good morning, Ma'm," Gretchen's mechanical voice agreed tonelessly. The robot-maid continued monotonously, "The day will be clear and sunny, with a high of 79 degrees Fahrenheit by 1300 hours—"

"That will be all, Gretchen," Abby interrupted sternly, not interested in facts of temperature and humidity given so mercilessly.

"Yes, Ma'm," Gretchen said obligingly. She turned and went to her closet until she would be needed again.

Abby watched her disappear around a corner and frowned. Sometimes, she thought, the mechanical age could be too mechanical. A simple good morning—

"Good morning, Aunt Abby," Linda said, bounding into sight.

"Good morning, Linda," Abby replied, smiling at the girl's energy. It reminded her of when she was seventeen. "Don't rush your breakfast, dear, you've plenty of time to get to school."

"Yes, Aunt Abby," Linda said, rushing her breakfast. "We're going on a field trip today," she volunteered between gulps of milk. "To the zoo to see the amoebaman from Venus."

Abby smiled. "Amoebaman?" she questioned. "Couldn't it just as easily be an amoebawoman?"

"Amoebas don't have sex differences," Linda said matter-of-factly. "We just call it an amoebaman as a sort of classification because it seems intelligent."

She finished her meal and dashed across the room. "See you later, Aunt Abby." The door whirred open and shut.

Abby went to the window to watch her, sorry she had brought up the subject of sex classification; yet the question had started out harmlessly enough. . . . Waiting outside, a boy stood on an island among moving metal sidewalks. Abby recognized him as one who had 'vised Linda very often on questions of homework. At Linda's approach his eyes took new life, and he laughed a greeting. Together, they stepped onto a sidewalk and slowly wound from sight, their hands interlocked. Abby shook her head disapprovingly; this would have to be discouraged. Linda was much too young to have boyfriends. She shook her head. The younger generation never seemed to move slowly—they rushed their lives away.

THAT afternoon, Abby sat at the broad one-way windows and watched the cars and aircabs zooming overhead like frightened hornets. Suddenly, she wondered where Dr. Gower was these days. Generally he televised her once in a while or dropped in to chat occasionally, and it pleased her that he did. He was her only male companion these days.

That's the way with men, she thought bitterly, nodding to herself, as you grow old, they lose interest in you. Love cannot be founded on a physical basis.

The thought of physical intimacy disturbed her, and she thrust it aside. One thing was certain, above all else: she was determined to protect Linda to the best of her ability, even as she had protected herself.

"Thank goodness for Linda," she thought. "If it weren't for her. . ."

She let the thought hang untemplated, for she *did* have Linda; and she had no wish to dwell upon the memory of her brother's accidental death in an aircab crash which had brought Linda into her custody.

She returned her attention to the world outside her window and found nothing there to interest her. Restlessly, she played with the button-controls on the chair's underarm, causing the walls to spring into the simulated life of a three-dimensional telecast. A program called "Old-Time Commercial" was in progress. Abby, like most people, enjoyed this one, laughing at the exaggerated claims and the tuneless melodies which had been foisted upon her ancestors during

the years before commercials had been outlawed, and she was disappointed to see it fade for channel identification. It was followed by a program of the latest fashions, some of which were much too brazen for Abby to contemplate without squirming, so she changed stations again with a flick of her forefinger beneath the armrest.

“. . . direct from the oceans of Venus,” a man’s voice announced enthusiastically, and Abby found herself staring at the amoeba-like creature she had seen a week earlier at the zoo.

“. . . believed to be directly related to our own Earth amoeba,” the man continued, “except, of course, this one is far from microscopic, being larger than a man. For communication purposes, these Venusian creatures seem to use a form of telepathy. . .”

Abby mused upon what Linda had said concerning the amoeba’s sex, or rather lack of it. She knew that the creatures reproduced by dividing themselves, but she wondered if reproduction came instinctively or by determination. Either way, the method was to be admired, she felt. It was a pity humans were so complicated. An image stirred deep within her, a fragment of some forgotten memory, but Abby did not notice it.

The creature from Venus moved restlessly across the three dimensional screen, extending itself. It seemed to be regarding her with an intense sort of curiosity, as though it were reaching out, enveloping her. . .

Sunlight spilling through the window, spread a warm languorous pool about her, and she felt pleas-

antly drowsy. She closed her eyes. After awhile, her head tilted, and the rushing world faded as though it had never been.

She floated, placidly content. She seemed, suddenly, to possess a million eyes that probed about in all directions at once. Her body stretched, elongating itself, and moved forward through a translucent fluid to an invisible wall, beyond which stood shadowy figures. She focused her mind upon these figures, and they became clear.

There was a little boy gazing at her in awe, his nose pressed against the glass in fascination, not certain if he should be frightened or not. Mentally, she smiled to herself and directed her thoughts to the boy, telling him not to be afraid. There were several children there, and Abby turned her attention to another.

It was Linda! Linda staring with wide, curious eyes. And next to her a man. Dr. Gower. Her heart leaped—

And she awoke with the warm sunlight streaming in upon her, her heart pounding unaccountably. She looked around. She was still in her front room before the windows. The television was going, presenting the newscast that followed the zoo program.

It was just a dream, but it had seemed so real that it still disturbed her minutes after she was fully awake. For awhile, she was not even certain that the dream had not been real and that this now was not really a dream, that reality and dreaming had not somehow suddenly changed places.

Abby was still sitting at the win-

dow when Linda came home from school. She watched as Linda and the boy came down the moving sidewalk and stepped off on the island before the house. They stood talking for a moment, then Linda rushed up the walk. The door whirred open and shut, and Linda instead of looking for Abby as was her habit, went straight to the escalator.

Abby called, "Linda!"

The girl paused. "I—I'll be back down."

"I'd like to see you right now, please," Abby's tone, though not hostile, was unrefusable.

Linda appeared hesitantly in the doorway, hands behind her.

Abby smiled pleasantly. "Who was that boy, dear? I don't think I know him."

"Jimmy Stone," Linda said, excitement creeping into her voice. "He lives over in Sector Five, and he's in my history class at school."

Abby recognized the symptoms and frowned mentally at the diagnosis. "He's probably a very nice young man, but—"

"He is, he's very nice," Linda agreed quickly. "He's going to be an astronautical engineer. Look what he made me in plastics class."

She drew her hands from behind her and held a scarlet rose cupped in them. It looked soft, as smooth as though it had been just plucked, as though it held a fragrance that was not artificial.

"It's very nice," Abby admitted, but she wondered how in this age of intense specialization a future astronautical engineer had managed to enroll in a plastics class to waste his time making pseudo-roses. Despite her wish to the con-

trary, she found herself briefly admiring the youngster, then told herself it was a case of puppy love that had inspired the frivolity. "But don't you think you're a little young to be thinking about boys?"

"No," Linda said defensively, pouting. "I like Jimmy and he likes me. I don't see why we shouldn't see each other."

"You're in the same class," Abby pointed out; "that should be enough. After all, you're only seventeen."

"Yes," Linda flared in annoyance, and rushed on in a sudden torrent, "then I'll be eighteen and then nineteen and then twenty and then thirty. If I wait long enough maybe I'll let life pass me by, like—" She paused, eyes wide and regretful at what she was about to say.

Abby smiled gently, but a cold chill gripped her. "Like me?" she said. "You're afraid of being an old maid like me, is that it?"

She hated to use the expression "old maid," but she knew that was what many people called her. She minded the name more than she admitted even to herself, for the words held an unpleasantness, a loneliness she didn't feel—very often anyway. But then she had Linda for company.

Linda's features softened. "I'm sorry, Aunt Abby," she said quietly.

"That's all right, child, I understand how you feel," Abby said. "Now, you go along up and take a shower and get yourself ready for supper, and maybe we'll talk about it later."

Linda nodded soberly and turned away.

Abby sat in the silence of the

room, listening to the soft whisper of the escalator. It hurt her to think that Linda wasn't going to show her the plastic rose at first. You had to be firm in these matters, though, to prevent worse trouble. If care weren't taken, Linda might rush off and be married before she was ready. This was a difficult time for the poor thing, that was certain, but she'd get over it. The little things in a child's life always seemed more important than they really were; that's why there were older people to guide them.

Her own mother had been very strict, and Abby saw no reason to regret it. If it hadn't been for that, she might have married the first boy she'd met. She tried to recall him, but somehow she couldn't, and only a vague image came to mind. It disturbed her to have that blank spot in her memory, but Somatic drugs had consistently failed to fill it in.

Linda came in a few minutes later, freshly scrubbed but not convinced.

"All ready, dear?" Abby said pleasantly.

She got up and put a consoling arm about the young girl. Together they went into the dining room, where Gretchen had silently placed the appropriate food a few minutes before.

THEY ATE in silence, with only the sounds of eating and an occasional whir from the robot-maid as she appeared and disappeared with dishes. Linda was moody, thoughtful.

"How was the field trip, dear?" Abby wondered.

"All right," Linda answered. "The Venusian amoeba is very much like our own, the man said. It even reproduces itself by division."

"Isn't that nice," Abby said, just a bit hesitantly, uncertain that reproduction by any means should be discussed. However, if they taught it in school—

"I feel sorry for it," Linda said.

Abby stared at her.

"Having no one to love," Linda went on, a faraway look on her face, "no one to love it. If it has any feelings, it must be very lonely."

Abby made an irritable stab at a piece of synthetic potato on her plate. "Nonsense," she snapped. "You're talking like a silly school-girl."

On second thought, she decided that Linda *was* a silly schoolgirl and would naturally talk like one; she was still a little girl, dependent for protection upon her Aunt Abby. That thought gave her some measure of comfort.

"I feel like an amoeba sometimes," Linda said, poking restlessly at a piece of meat on her plate.

"Sometimes I wish you were, dear," Abby said, feeling strangely annoyed by the statement. "Now, eat your steak before it gets cold."

"Don't you ever get lonely, Aunt Abby," Linda asked. "Suppose Dr. Gower went away, wouldn't you be lonely?"

"Dr. Gower is not going away," Abby pointed out.

"He might," Linda insisted. "You haven't seen him for three days now. He might be gone already."

Despite herself, Abby felt sudden panic. "He's probably busy. Doc-

tors are busy these days."

"He could have called."

"Linda, eat your supper," Abby said sternly, "and stop this nonsense. Besides, what difference would it make. One person doesn't make the world begin or end. Dr. Gower and I are good friends, but we must adjust to these things. If he is gone away, he's gone, and that's all there is to it!"

She tried to make her voice sound calm, but there was a sinking feeling in her stomach, and a small questioning voice in the back of her mind kept asking did he? did he? did he? Furiously, she thrust the thought aside.

"I saw him at the zoo today," Linda said.

"You did?" Abby said, relieved, and then she thought of her dream of the zoo and of Linda standing there and Dr. Gower beside the girl. Could she be psychic? No, there was a simpler explanation. "I saw you both there," she went on, smiling, "on television this afternoon."

Linda frowned. "But Dr. Gower didn't arrive until the program was over, Aunt Abby."

"I saw you," Abby insisted.

"But I'm certain of it."

"You must be mistaken, dear," Abby said in a tone of finality. And that settled that.

The doorbuzzer sounded, and Gretchen whirred to answer it. Abby pressed a button beneath the table, and the image of Dr. Gower appeared on a small screen set invisibly in the opposite wall. She could feel her blood accelerate at the sight of him, but she wondered why he looked disturbed.

She rose. "I'm going in to see Dr.

Gower, dear," she told Linda.

"Now, don't rush your food."

Linda nodded abstractedly. She wasn't in a rushing mood.

"Abby, how are you?" Dr. Gower said warmly, at her approach.

"Very well, thank you, Tom," Abby said. "I thought I might have to get sick to see you."

"I was busy," he explained. "The colonization of space brings up a great many new medical problems. How's Linda?"

"Fine. I'm afraid, she's beginning to have a slight case of puppy love; I'm sure it can be discouraged in time, though."

Dr. Gower hesitated. Then he said, "Linda's a normal young girl, Abby. You can't stifle her natural desires forever."

"I not only can, but I will." To cushion the harshness of the statement, she added, "At least until she's mature enough to decide these things for herself. She's still a child."

"A great many women get married at eighteen," Dr. Gower pointed out. "Physically, it's a good age for marriage, and a psychology going against the physical grain isn't going to help."

"There are such things in life, Dr. Gower," Abby said a bit coldly, "as moral considerations. We're not animals, you know."

"It might help sometimes," Dr. Gower mused, "if there were a little more animal in us and a little less so-called human."

Abby found her enthusiasm for seeing Dr. Gower ebbing, being replaced by what she considered a justified annoyance. Dr. Gower knew her feeling about Linda. Something seemed to have changed

his tactics. She did not like the change.

"If you don't mind," she said, "I'd like to bring up Linda in my own way. The courts made me legal guardian of Linda until she's twenty-one, and I intend to protect her until then to the best of my ability."

"By that time, you'll have her so confused about the world she'll be defenseless against it. I never said anything before, Abby—"

"And now is a poor time to start!" Abby's voice was like ice. "I'm sorry, Dr. Gower, but if you persist in talking this way, I'll have to ask you to leave. Linda is in my charge, and I won't stand for interference, even from you."

The doctor's shoulders slumped dejectedly. "Do you know why you were chosen guardian, Abby," he said slowly.

"Of course. I was the nearest relative. Why bring that up?"

Dr. Gower shook his head. "Nothing," he said, after awhile. "Nothing at all. I came around to say goodbye, Abby."

Abby wavered, the ice in her melting. "Goodbye?"

"I'm leaving for Venus," he said, "the day after tomorrow. They need doctors up there, and I can probably do more good there than here. Besides, I'd like to investigate these amoeba creatures; I suspect they have more intelligence than we give them credit for."

"I—I'll be sorry to see you leave, Tom."

"I came to ask you to go with me. You know how I feel about you, Abby; I thought I'd try just once more."

"I couldn't leave Linda," Abby

said.

"The standard excuse," he reminded her, his voice more weary than bitter. "What Linda has needed all these years was a father, Abby. You're giving her a warped viewpoint."

"The Somaticists don't think so," Abby flung at him.

He crimsoned. "Somatics aren't the answer. Our era has become so mechanical that people have come to think that pressing a button is going to cure the evils of the world. Pills and pushbuttons are fine in their place, Abby, but they're not the answer, not the complete one anyway. At one time, they thought psychiatry was the answer; they were wrong there, too. The answer's probably a combination of the two."

"I'm not looking for the answer to anything," Abby said wearily. "I just want to be let alone."

Dr. Gower nodded and turned to go.

"Have a nice trip," Abby said, trying to sound cheerful, "I'm sorry we had to argue like this." The thought of his leaving brought a sinking sensation which she tried to thrust off and couldn't. But there was Linda to think of; the girl couldn't go to Venus.

At the door, Dr. Gower hesitated. "I don't know if I should tell you this; it might help, and it might not." He paused again uncertainly and then went on in a decisive tone. "Linda's your own child, Abby."

She looked at him, puzzled. "Of course. The courts—"

Dr. Gower shook his head impatiently. "I don't mean that. I mean Linda was actually born to you."

The words sank in, but Abby found them meaningless. Two and two did not make five no matter how many times you added them. There was a tense silence, but she didn't know what to say to fill it.

"That's what happened in your blank spot, Abby," Dr. Gower went on. "You ran away from home when you were twenty-one, because your mother was too strict, because she acted just like you're acting with Linda. Before she could find you again, someone else had. You were pregnant."

Abby's brow furrowed. "You mean—" the thought completed itself, and a look of horror replaced the frown. "That's a horrible thing to say, even in a lie."

"I wish I were lying," Dr. Gower said earnestly. "You didn't remember anything that had happened, and were still dazed for nearly a year afterward. Your subconscious used amnesia as an escape mechanism, and you forgot the incident, repressed it without realizing it. An escape is sometimes possible only in the mind, where Somaticists are often helpless. I didn't say anything before, but now I'm afraid Linda may be made to suffer if I don't."

Abby stared at him in shocked silence. She said, after awhile. "It's not true, it can't be."

Dr. Gower shrugged. "I'm sorry, Abby, it is. It's not Linda you're worried about, it's yourself; you're afraid to face reality."

"Get out," Abby said slowly, hating him for that. Her voice rose the least bit. "I won't listen to these lies."

"I thought it might help. Say goodbye to Linda for me." The door closed behind him with a click.

Abby stared at the closed door, a small portion of her was calm, the rest chaotic. The calm portion wondered why she should be so disturbed by something so obviously impossible. All these years she'd been wrong about Dr. Gower, trusting him as a friend. For what he said was untrue, of course. It had to be. And yet why couldn't she remember things? It was only eighteen years ago and important things had happened in that year, but somehow her memory bypassed their happening. It was like reading a book with several pages blank; you knew from later pages what had happened, but the actual experience of the events was lost. Could it be—the thought came despite her—could it be that she'd had amnesia, that Dr. Gower had really told her the truth, that someone had actually—

"No. He was lying," she told the room.

"He never lied before," Linda said quietly from the doorway.

"You—heard?"

Linda nodded.

Abby tried to smile. "I'm afraid, dear, that Dr. Gower is like all men. When he couldn't have what he wanted—" her face clouded at the thought—"he tried to shock me, to hurt me, to make me ashamed . . ."

"Would it make you ashamed to have me for a daughter?"

Abby's heart beat quickly. "Of course not, Linda. But the circumstances—"

"I see," Linda said slowly. "They have a name for children like me; that's what you're ashamed of. Or maybe, as Dr. Gower said, you're afraid for yourself!"

"But it's not true, Linda, don't

you see?" Abby insisted.

She put her arm on the girl's shoulder. Linda shook it off; tears welling in her eyes.

"You don't even want to know," the girl accused. "You don't even care." And she turned and ran from the room.

The escalator whispered, and Abby stood in the center of the room looking at the empty doorway. She stood on the brink of a great precipice, balancing precariously, and for a brief moment she found herself believing what Dr. Gower had said. He was a fine man, and good, and he would not lie to her. Things her brother had said came to mind, once-harmless statements that seemed to take on new significance, as though he'd said them to prepare her for this moment. And suddenly, very suddenly, the world was tottering; dazedly, she made her way to a chair and sat limply in it.

Dr. Gower was gone now, and she would never see him again. She knew that, and she knew that despite the things she'd said, that it did matter that he was going. But then she had Linda to think of. Or was it really Linda that concerned her? She could take the girl along, certainly; that would even clear up the problem of Jimmy Stone. Was it really the marriage she feared, a fear based upon some secret mental block in her mind? The doubt returned then, and she wasn't sure. She wasn't sure of anything anymore. Abby had to think. She had to quiet her nerves and the frantic jumbled thoughts that had begun to race through her mind.

She felt dizzy and held a hand to one of the walls to steady herself

as she walked to her bedroom. From the dressing table drawer she took a bottle of dream-pills. The label was fuzzy to her eyes, but the word *Danger* stood out in bold letters. Abby swallowed three of the pills, which was two more than the safe dosage, and lay across the bed, eyes closed. The door to the room closed automatically.

"It's not true," she told herself again, a desperate urgency to her voice. "I've got to get away from these thoughts. Got to get away. Got—to—escape."

She felt drowsy, but the thought of what Dr. Gower had said persisted. It couldn't be true. It couldn't. And yet it might be; it was the possibility that disturbed her. That blank spot. Eighteen years ago. Eighteen years . . .

SHE DRIFTED into a restless sleep. Mentally, she traveled across the familiar plains of her past to that strange dark canyon she couldn't recall. Her mind hovered frightened above the depths, failing to see through its darkness; then she passed to the other side, to her childhood, to when she was a young girl and her mother was alive.

The scene burst upon her with vivid clarity, and she found herself reliving it. It was there, all of it. The home life, protecting and yet restraining. Her dissatisfaction. The secret determination. The running away in the dead of night. It was all there, just as Dr. Gower had said.

"But it's a dream," she murmured, "just a dream."

Yet it seemed a reality. She could

feel the cool night press upon her as she made her way slowly through the strange-familiar darkness and descended into the depths of the canyon. The feeling of having been here before was with her, and it brought terror with it. She walked on, looking to either side, listening fearfully. And then she stopped, her blood becoming ice.

There was a man before her. She could see only his eyes, but they were cruel eyes, savage and lustful.

Knowledge came then, bursting over her in a raging tide. She screamed and ran, her footsteps echoing frantically as she hurried through the darkness, looking for an opening for a protecting light. But no opening appeared, no light came. She ran until she was exhausted, and then she sank to the ground panting trying to still her spasms of breath. There was a small sound, as of the scraping of a shoe and she looked into the eyes again.

She screamed again and again and again not knowing where screams ended and echoes began. She put her hands over her ears and screamed into the darkness. She could feel hands reaching out for her and she shrank away from them.

Her mind was a playground for terror. She had to escape. She had to.

(But sometimes the only escape is in the mind!)

The hands reached out. She was suddenly falling, down, down, down. Calmness came, and a grateful thought appeared: she had escaped. Nothing else mattered; only that . . .

She stopped falling. The mist

grew thick, thicker; it became dense; it became liquid. She could not feel the beating of her heart, but her mind was calm and it looked about with a detachment that was intellectual.

She was floating again, floating silently through a world of murky fluid. The liquid was pressing with a force so gentle it almost did not exist. It enveloped her like a protecting shield.

She drifted. There seemed to be no direction but outward. Her thoughts went out and they returned with impressions. This was her world and she was the center of it. There were no problems here, no encroachments on existence or security. It was like a return to the womb. Womb? she thought. She turned the word over in her mind and found the concept alien. She regarded it intellectually, at leisure.

Time passed silently, without incident, without measurement. It had no meaning, no referent.

Curious after awhile, she went forward, her mind impinging upon shadowy figures behind the transparent barrier. She focussed her attention upon them, and the image cleared.

There was a man there, and a woman, and a girl. She could hear them as they spoke.

"I don't know why you wanted to come here, Abby," the man was saying. "You'll see enough of these creatures on Venus."

"This one is special," the woman said slowly, tasting the words like some unfamiliar food. "It's what made me change my mind about—things. It must be very lonely."

"Bosh," the man scoffed gently. "Intelligent or not, an amoeba

doesn't have feelings of loneliness."

"Doesn't it?" the woman wondered. "Perhaps not at first. But being able to probe the minds of humans and sympathize with them yet not contact them can . . ."

"We'll be late for the rocket, Mother," the girl said. "Jimmy promised he'd be down to see me off and let me know if he can go to the Venus Academy next year."

"All right, Linda, we're going now."

At the door, the woman turned for a last look; her thoughts were thoughts of sorrow, of pity, of—regret, perhaps.

"You'll learn much of the world this way," the thoughts came, "and you'll have time to readjust. Knowledge will pyramid gently, and with it will come wisdom. After awhile, escape won't be necessary. You'll want to return then and be a part of your world. Meanwhile, I must help my own people; this is the best way for both of us to escape."

The woman linked arms with the man and the girl then, and the three of them went out.

Silence returned, bringing with it a troubled wonderment. Then the murky fluid flowed past all vision, and the world returned, safe and familiar. The thoughts returned briefly, as echoes, but they were unfamiliar this time and meaningless.

But it was not always so, and it would not always be, for contemplation bred curiosity, and curiosity bred knowledge, and knowledge bred desire, and desire the ways and means of accomplishment.

Meanwhile, there was quiet, stillness, a peace she had never known. The fluid flowed about her in a silence that held no sound, no movement. It was womb-like, protective.

It seemed natural that she should be here.

For the moment, she was content. ● ● ●