

# Galaxy

## SCIENCE FICTION

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Cover by MEL HUNTER showing A URANIUM STRIKE

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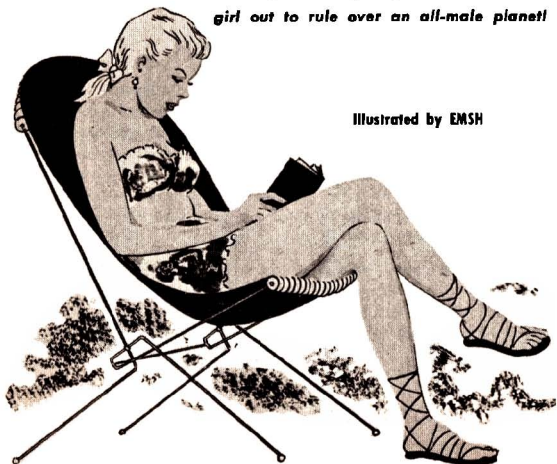
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# FIRST LADY

By J. T. M'INTOSH

*Terran Control specialized in nasty jobs,  
but the nastiest was taking a dazed young  
girl out to rule over an all-male planet!*

Illustrated by EMSH





**W**E were just a few hours from Lotrin, and I looked at Shirley and Ellen and wondered how we were going to settle the problem in time. It wasn't a life-and-death matter; probably none of us was going to die, whatever happened. It would be one way out, of course, for us all to commit suicide. But I couldn't see any of us doing that, including Shirley, even if she knew what we knew. Suicide is never the answer to a problem, it's only at best a compromise with it.

We weren't just looking at each other. We were talking, arguing, ranting, dramatizing. Ellen was doing the talking, arguing, ranting and dramatizing, now that she had to take an interest again in what was going on. Shirley was never a talker, and I'm a good listener. Besides, the problem was less Ellen's than it was Shirley's and mine, and often the people who talk most are those who are least involved.

I'm one of those people who always have an unconcerned, mildly interested alter ego, observing what's going on, sifting it, hauling up memories and comparing the present with the past. I found it quite easy, while Ellen talked, to run rapidly through our whole association with Shirley, right from the beginning back on Earth.

**S**HE was expecting us, actually waiting for us, so there wasn't much chance of our getting an informal look at her. On the way, Ellen was irritated, as usual. Being Ellen, she was keeping me informed on her view of the situation. She drove, keeping her eyes on the road, but throwing out occasional asides.

"We aren't just messengers," she muttered.

"Anyone at all would have done," she grumbled.

"We've never had to do anything I liked less," she complained.

Silently, I agreed with that, at least.

We were Terran Control agents and we were doing a job that someone had to do. In itself, it was simple and rather boring, which was behind Ellen's complaint that we weren't just messengers. But there was more than simplicity and boredom in it. Much more. The trouble was that we knew exactly what was in it. Sometimes we had been sent out, blind, to do very different jobs for TC, and we hadn't liked that. This time we knew what we were doing and, if anything, we liked it less.

"There are more important things we might be doing than escorting an overgrown schoolgirl to Lotrin," Ellen beefed.

I quoted ironically from the

newscasts. "But what a girl," I said nasally. "What a history she's going to have. What a life story she will one day be able to write."

"Save that for the great galactic public," Ellen snapped. "Anyway, this girl is ordinary. Picked out because she's ordinary, normal, average, typical."

She drew up outside the small-town maisonette where the future First Lady of Lotrin lived. She stopped in her usual way, with a furious jerk of four locked wheels. She didn't wait for me, but was out and crunching up the gravel path while the car was still rocking.

We thought at first there was nobody home, and Ellen sneered something about cold feet. But when we went around the back, there was the girl, pretending not to see us. She was draped on a garden seat, wearing a playsuit and reading a book.

"Just to show she doesn't care," said Ellen.

Ellen, this once, was dead right. Shirley Judson—we'd seen pictures of her, and this was the girl, all right—was good-looking. Where she was just attractive, not beautiful, was where current standards of beauty deviated from the norm. Make no mistake about it, there was nothing in Shirley's looks to stop a million men from falling in love with her.

Yet Ellen muttered: "Not chosen for her looks, anyway."

I threw an expressive glance at her. Why will women insist on giving their worthless opinions of other women's attractiveness or homeliness? It wasn't a million women who were supposed to fall in love with Shirley.

WE moved over to her and introduced ourselves. Shirley didn't notice exactly when it became impossible to pretend any more that she hadn't seen us, and give up the pretense, so I suppose technically it's still going on yet.

There was casual, pointless conversation—not about Lotrin. We didn't bow and express our pleasure to meet the First Lady of Lotrin. In fact, just to make sure there was no misunderstanding, we put her very much in her place. At any rate, Ellen did. At first.

Ellen always looks like something straight out of *Vogue*, and in all modesty I can say I have seen worse-looking men of thirty-five than me. Shirley was a very young twenty-one, and her playsuit, as Ellen soon demonstrated to her without saying a word, was two mistakes. Wearing a playsuit was wrong, and wearing that particular playsuit was wronger.

Shirley was keyed up almost

to breaking-point, naturally enough. Her nostrils were white, she was breathing quickly and shallowly, and somehow one knew her voice was coming out two tones higher than usual. But that couldn't be helped; the playsuit could. It had been meant to show she was completely at her ease, unimpressed by the solemnity of the occasion, and not in the least scared of us. It did pretty much the opposite.

Instead of seeing the nervousness of her hands and face, four curious eyes noted the nervousness of her whole body. And the white frilly rompers suggested child when she wanted to be mature and at no disadvantage with us. And if we wanted to be nasty, which Ellen nearly always does with other women, it was only necessary to look at Shirley's legs or shoulders and then away, with faint distaste, to make it obvious that there was something wrong with the legs, or the display of them, without giving the girl anything she could answer.

I haven't covered everything, but you can imagine the general lines of the situation. Anyway, Ellen made the most of it. I tried to counteract the effect a little, but no one has ever been able to counteract Ellen.

Then suddenly, just as the girl was about to cry, Ellen said, "Joe, take a walk," in an unexpectedly

brisk tone, and jerked her head.

Meekly, I went up the garden.

I stopped where I could still see them, but not hear what they said. The funny thing about Ellen is that people don't hate her the way they should. Other people strive hard for affection and don't get it; Ellen seems to put in a lot of good solid work to be hated, only it doesn't turn out that way.

She was very careful with Shirley, I saw, not even touching her at first. Then they were all over each other in that curious way women have. Shirley was crying by this time, of course. Her white shoulders and chestnut hair were mixed up with Ellen's blue frock, and there was a tangle of bare arms and chic elbow-length gloves.

And for some reason I had a lump in my throat.

**I** WASN'T in the next part much. I wasn't around because Shirley spent most of the next two months in bra and panties or less, being poked and tapped by doctors, getting massages, doing violent exercises and being checked and doublechecked, slipping in and out of dresses, blouses, skirts, slacks and almost every other form of feminine attire.

One might have thought that clothes wouldn't matter much to the First Lady of Lotrin, who

would be literally the first woman to set foot on the planet, certainly the last for a long time, and possibly the last ever. But Shirley was going to represent her whole sex on Lotrin. She would have to be supremely feminine, and a few crates of clothes, even if they had to be transported hundreds of light-years at fabulous cost, as these would be, were not regarded by Terran Control as a luxury. They really weren't for Shirley. They were for Lotrin.

I wasn't there, but Ellen was, so I naturally heard all about it. I heard the story of every examination, every test, every check-up, every experiment; the details of Shirley's trousseau were inflicted on me, down to the last clip and lace curlicue. Ellen was bored with the whole business and she didn't see why my being a man should excuse me from being bored with them, too.

So if anyone wants to know anything at all about what happens to a First Lady—any First Lady—before she leaves the New York TC center, just ask me. Nothing too minute, too intimate. The story of the testing and preparation and coaching and beautifying and swearing in and final passing of a First Lady is yours for the asking.

Of course it isn't very interesting.

I haven't said much about Ter-

ran Control. First of all, the name—it means control of everything from and by Earth. Some say it's a clumsy and unworkable system, bound to fall apart eventually. Maybe it is, but it won't collapse during this generation or the next. Meantime, what TC says goes. And as far as Shirley was concerned, Ellen and I were TC; we represented it.

I always say as little for or against TC as possible. This isn't because my job depends on keeping my mouth shut. TC is an autocracy, but not that kind.

When you've got a big job in hand, like, say, colonizing a galaxy, there's only one good way of doing it. Before you start, there may be plenty of ways. Again, if you start and fail, you may try another way. But, if you start and don't fail, you have to keep on the way you began. I'm not going to argue about it; I'm just saying what I believe.

**O**NE of the points of TC's way was this: the human race must stay human. There have been enough civil wars without creating new races so that there can be new race wars. The Martian War showed what can happen when men become not-men and somewhere else men stay men. As it happened, the men won—there are no Martians left. There never will be Martians

again while TC rules colonization. Humans can't live on Mars and stay human. Mars is a plague spot, and the ruins of human habitation on the red planet crumble to dust.

Venus is another matter. So are the Aldebaran worlds, and the other scattered worlds named for themselves, not their suns—Jenta, Smith, Babylon, Eyrie, Nostral, Hover, Gluckstein, Fortan, Jissel, Maple. Others, like Mars—Robinson, Dahlia, Mantor, Arka—are crossed out, forgotten names. Just plague spots. Dead, most of them. Some, unfortunately, are only dying.

Others still—Civnet, Lotrin, Martin, Beckland, Everest, Red Dawn—have question marks after them. It takes a long time to remove a question mark. But, broadly, the query begins to fade at a set point. After that a world may still turn out to be a plague spot, but that's liable to be a gradual business. People can be taken out and settled elsewhere. Their strain will be watched, they may even be sterilized, but they will still be regarded as men.

The set point is the birth of the first child conceived and delivered on the world under study. Scientists and doctors do everything but take the poor kid to pieces. Then they deliver their verdict. They say go ahead, or go ahead cautiously, or wait a while,

or hold everything, or stop, or . . .

But no one likes to examine that end of the scale too closely.

And that's the main reason why the First Lady is so important. She's the chosen mother of that first child. The father is chosen, too, of course.

TC is matchmaker as well as godfather.

Shirley and some Lotrin settler whose name I didn't know were the future of Lotrin. The shape of Shirley's life, and the destiny of a whole world, depended on a child she would have by a man she was going out to marry, but had never met.

It was a queer situation, though not new any longer. The First Lady of Jenta was dead a long while; so was the First Lady of Smith. The First Lady of Babylon was over a hundred, and still, it was said, went for a swim in a mountain stream every morning. Eyrie's First Lady was ninety-three. Nostral's was not only First Lady, but President of Nostral as well. So on down to Maple's First Lady, who could still wear a playsuit like Shirley's, and to better effect, from what I'd been told.

I'm not, if I can help it, going to say anything about the First Ladies of Robinson, Dahlia, Mantor or Arka.

I told you those places are plague spots.

**I**T must have been that curious power of divination they call feminine intuition that made Ellen call Shirley an overgrown schoolgirl before she had even met her, when she had only seen a photograph or two of the girl. For that's what Shirley was. I don't know whether TC has a definite pattern for the choice of First Ladies which includes an emotional maturity index; I haven't met many First Ladies. But if there is a pattern, and Shirley fitted it, a First Lady must be rather shy, quiet, inexperienced, above all virginal—an overgrown schoolgirl, as a matter of fact.

One might have thought a First Lady should be dynamic, reckless, or a hundred per cent glamor. TC apparently didn't agree. I don't mean that Shirley was timid, incapable of recklessness, and sexless. She was—homy. One could see her as somebody's sister, somebody's girl friend, somebody's wife. Not as an official, a TC agent like Ellen and me, a dancehall girl, an athlete. Not as anything that needed drive or responsibility or amorality.

It's difficult to describe Shirley at all, because anything you say about her, you have to qualify. If you say she was shy, you have to add that she wasn't very shy. And if she wasn't brilliant,



you couldn't describe her as stupid.

Likewise, when she insisted on traveling incognito to avoid a great sendoff at New York, she could have been persuaded, and when the time came, I think she wished we hadn't given in so easily. She would never seek the limelight, but when she found herself in it, she would be capable of enjoying it.

There were no cheering crowds and reporters and photographers when we left from New York spaceport. Shirley was traveling as Ellen's sister. She seemed to like the part. She had a crush on Ellen good and hard.

TC was used to misleading the press. One might have thought some smart newsman would put two and two together and work out that since Lotrin's First Lady was about due to go out, and since this ship, in the course of its four-month tour, was going to touch Lotrin, and since Shirley had most of the hallmarks of a First Lady, it might be worth investigating her a little. But TC announced officially that the First Lady wasn't chosen yet, and circulated privately a rumor that she was chosen and would go on the next ship.

The newspapermen rejected the statement and accepted the rumor. And if anyone checked over the passenger list of the

*Sardonian*, he would have seen that we were going out to settle the Aldebaran section.

SHIRLEY looked around with interest. "It's a wonderful ship," she said, gazing up at the smooth hull.

"Is it?" murmured Ellen, obviously surprised that anyone should think it was wonderful. "Just wait till you get inside. You'll find that every foot has only nine inches. You'll get used to that, but when you reach the Moon, you'll discover the foot has shrunk to seven inches. On the next tender it'll be five, and when you're on the liner it'll come down to four."

Shirley stared at her. "Isn't this the *Sardonian*?"

"Sometimes I wonder where you've been living these last twenty-one years. Tell her, Joe."

Pencil skirts were in again; Ellen hobbled toward the tender. She could talk like that to Shirley. If I tried it, the tears would come. I wondered how many gallons Shirley had wept since TC first found her. Most of them, according to Ellen, were about her mother, and they were usually down Ellen's dress.

"This is only a tender to take us to the Moon, Shirley," I said. "Curiously, its power-to-weight ratio is much higher than that of the ship that will take us all those

light-years. On the Moon there'll be another check and another tender will take us to the *Sardonia*, which by that time will be orbiting around the Moon."

I took Shirley's arm and steered her after Ellen. No one had any time for us; spaceships have no room for flunkys.

"The starships never land anywhere," I went on. "They're assembled in space, and when, despite all the safeguards, they're eventually saturated with radiation leakage, they're destroyed in space."

"I can't make you and Ellen out," said Shirley suddenly, showing how much good my lecture for children had done. "Do you love her, Joe?"

I grinned wryly. "Shirley, sometimes you're too shy to say perfectly ordinary things, and other times you're a little too frank. Outside of novels, people don't go around asking people if they love other people."

"But do you," she insisted, "since I've asked it?"

"First define love," I said.

When you've done that to my satisfaction, ask me again. Then if you get an answer in the morning, see if it's the same answer in the afternoon, and the next day, and next week."

"You're married, I suppose?"

"Why should you suppose that?"

She seemed taken back. "You are living together," she said. "Aren't you?"

"We certainly work together, but that doesn't mean we're married."

SHE was silent while we climbed to the airlock and began to sidle along the narrow passage.

"I think I know what you are," she said. "You're secret agents. The way you don't answer questions shows you're used to it."

"That's a point," I said agreeably.

A few minutes later—it was a slow business moving along that passage—Shirley stated emphatically from behind me: "You're Joe Dell and she's Ellen Dell."

"That settles it, then," I observed. "We must be married."

"Don't you ever give a fact away, free?"

I half turned and looked down at her reprovingly. "Weren't you listening? I told you about the tenders and the *Sardonia*—"

"Which I could have got from the steward. He can't tell me if you love Ellen."

"Well, that makes two of us," I said easily. "Neither can I."

"You won't, anyway."

We had almost caught up with Ellen, and she stopped at that and waited.

"He won't what?" she asked.

I was between them, so they

could hardly see each other at all. Corridors on spaceships have to be seen to be believed. Ellen and Shirley might have passed each other, but only at the cost of buttons and tears and bruises, and that's no exaggeration. If I had to pass anyone, we could only do it by climbing over each other.

Shirley was silent. She was ready to ask questions of me, but not of Ellen. Not that kind of question.

"It doesn't matter," I said, "since it's settled that I won't."

Ellen accepted that, for the moment. She had found our room.

"Yours is around the corner, Shirley," she said. "Come and I'll show you how things work."

I backed into the cabin to get out of the way, and they went past. Shirley gave me a last searching, puzzled glance.

**F**ITTING into the routine of space travel again is always pretty much the same. Ellen made the same grumbles, phrased differently. This time she wondered ironically why they didn't feed us on condensed milk and shortbread and make sure we starved. Remarked that you rubbed your head before you got up in anticipation of the bump. Said she realized at last why space-girls on magazine covers wore tight — they couldn't squeeze

through spaceship doors wearing anything else. Suggested we come to some arrangement whereby I breathed out when she breathed in.

Shirley, to whom it was all new, took it very much for granted. That is, she noticed with surprise how little room there was, adjusted herself to the new conditions and forgot the whole thing.

When we were on the second tender, taking us out to the *Sardoria*, I asked Ellen: "How much does Shirley know?"

She didn't feel like being sarcastic, for once, so she cut out everything but what I wanted to know.

"Not much," she said. "Shirley doesn't know she's got to marry this character—let's call him Bill. She thinks she does, but she doesn't realize how absolutely inescapable it is that she must marry him and no one else. She doesn't know that she must be kind—but not too kind—to the million others. No doubt she has her own ideas on that. What she doesn't realize is that she must be the perfect, flawless figurehead, the dreamgirl, the model for all women, at once the vestal virgin, the perfect wife, everybody's sister, everybody's sweetheart and everybody's mother."

"I know what you mean," I said. "Not everyone would."

"One thing," Ellen observed,

"she probably does realize. She knows about the baby."

I pressed my foot urgently against hers.

"I suppose she knows," Ellen went on reflectively, "that if it's a monster, her whole future and Bill's and Lotrin's collapses. And not only collapses, but into a rather nasty little puddle. Yes, she probably knows that. I don't think she's really faced it, but who could? Certainly not me. I'll stay in TC and be asked to do the impossible and get shot at and maybe beaten up occasionally. But I'm glad I'm a few years too old to be asked to be a First Lady."

Shirley came right into the room. It had been a good touch on Ellen's part to drop these hints about our normal employment. Since neither of us had done anything of the sort before, it would convince Shirley that Ellen didn't know she was there.

Shirley was white, but strictly under control.

"So you're taking me to Lotrin" she said clearly, "to do something you wouldn't do yourself?"

Ellen turned and met her gaze. She didn't look startled that Shirley had heard her; it would have been out of character, anyway.

"That's right, Shirley," she said quietly.

I REALLY thought there was going to be a scene. It was all between Ellen and Shirley. It was Ellen whom Shirley worshiped, not me. I could see Shirley deciding that Ellen was false and everything was, too, and you couldn't trust anyone or anything. I saw her being ashamed of all the times she had cried before Ellen, who all the while had been thinking she was mad and a fool to be doing what she was doing.

Then Shirley whirled and went out.

"Better go after her, hadn't you?" I said.

"I've gone after her often enough."

"But she may . . ."

"She may do what?"

"Anything. Kill herself."

"If she's going to kill herself, she'd better do it now, not when she's reached Lotrin and has actually been installed."

I was silent, thinking. Shirley wouldn't kill herself, of course. Girls as delicately balanced as that would never be chosen as First Ladies. She would have much worse things to face than Ellen's defection.

I knew why Ellen had spoken as she had. Ellen was no part of Shirley's life on Lotrin. If Shirley was pinning a lot on Ellen and Ellen's opinion of her and First Ladies in general, the sooner it was unpinned, the better. So

Ellen tore it off.

Besides, of course, Ellen was fed up playing nursemaid.

"Just for curiosity," I said, "when were you shot at in the line of duty?"

"On Maple, fool. Don't you remember?"

"Oh, that. But the shot was meant for me."

"A lot of difference that would have made to me if it killed me."

"And when were you last beaten up?"

"Nostral. When you were looking for the house."

I didn't pursue that. On that occasion, Ellen certainly ran into my arms as she had never done before or since, and had stayed in bed for days afterward alleging nervous exhaustion. The thing about Ellen is that if she was nearly beaten up, she would talk about it at every opportunity, with all the details of what did happen and what might have happened, but if she was beaten up, she would shut up like a clam.

I filed away the conclusion that she had probably had a tough time on Nostral, and I hadn't known about it before—it had happened two years ago—meant nothing. Not when you know the first thing about Ellen.

I came back to what I thought was safer ground: "A few years too old?"

"I'm twenty-five," Ellen re-

marked calmly.

It wasn't impossible, though that meant she was only eighteen when I first met her. Just unlikely. So I left it at that. It was unlikely Ellen to give away even that much. Twenty years hence, I could say that according to her own figures she was now forty-five.

But this isn't the story of Ellen. Not directly, at any rate.

WE hardly saw Shirley when we were changing over to the *Sardonia*. Ellen's attitude was that she had seen Shirley through the first part, and it was my turn now. She might have to take over again just before we reached Lotrin and clear up the mess I had made, but meantime she was going to have a rest from Shirley Judson.

That's Ellen.

If anything was to be done about Shirley, I would have to do it. I waited until the ship was well clear of the Moon and then went to look for Shirley, whom we had only seen at mealtimes.

The *Sardonia* was nosing about, stopping and darting like a fish. Passengers weren't supposed to walk about at this stage. They were told to lie down or at least sit down. For the effect of the ship's motion was that, one moment, "down" was the floor, the next the left-hand wall, then the



wall in front, then the wall behind. Of course it was never a full gravity; if you liked to take a chance, you could drop lightly on your feet on floor, walls and ceiling. The beds all swiveled with the changes in equilibrium.

Apparently Shirley was taking her chance with the gravity, because she wasn't in her cabin.

There was no room for social life on the *Sardonia*. The only place that held a fair number of people was the dining room, and, as the ship carried four hundred people, the dining room was on shift duty twenty-four hours a day. So, if Shirley wasn't in her own room, she was in someone else's.

I considered the matter. Shirley had had a shock. Torn from the life she had grown used to in twenty-one years, she had set up Ellen as her model and guide. Ellen had allowed this until we were irrevocably on our way, then abdicated. What she had said was nothing; she could have won back Shirley's adoration any time she cared, but she hadn't bothered.

What would Shirley do? She would feel nothing mattered. Nobody cared. She might as well enjoy herself—show Ellen she didn't care, either. In the limited field offered by the *Sardonia*, there was only one thing she could do.

I considered some more. If

Shirley was going to throw herself at some man's head, the likelihood was that it would be someone on the same meal shift, someone she had at least seen and talked to. I picked Glen Mavor. Mavor was a shy youngster going out to Civnet to settle. Civnet, right on the outposts of Terran settlement, wasn't near the First Lady stage yet.

I sought out Mavor. I tapped on his door, but walked right in. I was right. Shirley was there, lounging against a wall. Mavor was sitting on the bed. When I came in, the place was crowded.

"Hallo, Shirley," I said. "I thought you might be here."

**T**HE SHIP made one of its sudden darts and Shirley and I somersaulted and landed on the ceiling, Shirley in a swirl of legs and skirt. She laughed. Mavor didn't have to move, because the bed kept its equilibrium.

I saw the situation. Shirley was unconcerned, happy in a reckless way. Mavor was interested, excited, but very nervous. He might not know the intricacies of the situation, but he knew he was going to a world which wouldn't see a woman for a long time, and that Shirley was ready and willing to offer consolation in advance.

This wasn't the Shirley Judson we had met in the garden. This

Shirley was more vital, and about twenty times as attractive, because now she was trying to be attractive.

Innocence is an attitude of mind, not mere absence of experience. Shirley now, arms behind her and head thrown back against the wall, was far from innocent. Nothing much had happened to her experience, but a lot to her attitude of mind. She had chosen a thin canary-yellow blouse for two obvious reasons, and her scarlet skirt hugged her waist and hips and then flared carelessly, its work done.

Shirley couldn't go around like that for long looking for trouble without finding it. Something had to be done.

"Mavor," I said quietly, "I'm going to tell you a secret."

Mavor, a good-looking young fellow, glanced at Shirley, but she only smiled and surveyed her ankles. He turned back to me.

"I don't know if I want to hear any secrets," he said.

"This one you hear all the same. And you keep it. It doesn't really matter now whether you keep it or not, but it would be more convenient if everyone on the ship didn't know it just yet. Shirley, you see, is the First Lady of Lotrin."

I knew I had been right to tell him when I saw his expression.

"I only mention it," I said casually, "because when people are playing with dynamite, they at least ought to know it's dynamite. Coming, Shirley?"

There was another upheaval. This time Shirley landed on top of Mavor, her arms round his neck. It might have been an accident, but it was no accident when she pulled his face to hers and kissed him. That wasn't for Mavor's benefit at all, but for mine.

She disentangled herself at her leisure and followed me. I took her to her own room.

"Why did you tell him that?" she asked. She didn't mind—she was just curious.

"To keep him out of your way," I said grimly. "He won't touch you with a grappling pole now. He's scared."

"Why?"

"You don't know much about TC, do you? It carries a lot of guns of different calibers. No one twists TC's tail for fun."

"You mean Terran Control would victimize Glen?"

"What for?"

**I**T was a good question. It upset even the new, more confident Shirley. "I mean if . . ."

"If what?" I demanded.

"Why shouldn't I have a good time while I can, before I get to my prison?"



"Nothing against having a good time. Unless the form it takes might have an adverse effect on the future."

"I don't care about the future. There may be no future."

We had reached her room. I passed it, pushed her inside and followed her in. We sat on the bed, where we could watch the gyrations of the walls with indifference.

"What's the ship doing?" she abruptly wanted to know.

"Looking for the rails," I told her. I didn't want to talk about the ship, but I was ready to play along with Shirley to a certain extent.

"The rails?"

"Sure. You know space travel is composed of two very different parts. Hoisting yourself free of a planet and then of a satellite of some kind, and then maneuvering about clumsily like this. The other part is as slick and wonderful as this is primitive and slow. At this rate, you'd take twenty thousand years to reach Aldebaran, let alone Lotrin."

"But it only takes a few weeks!"

"That's what I'm telling you," I said patiently. "It's slick and wonderful. There aren't really any rails, of course, but it's something like that. We're looking for a field that starts about here and stretches all the way to

Aldebaran. A beam. The Catterick Field, they call it. We've passed through it several times already—why we keep nosing about like this is that we have to be fair and square in the middle of it, and it's pretty tight. Only a few miles across."

"The ship isn't a mile wide."

"No. But if there was the slightest error, how many million miles would be needed to show it up? Ever hear of inertia, Shirley?"

"That's laziness."

"You can put it that way. The laziness of matter. When it's still, matter can't be bothered to move, and it's a devil of a job to make it. And, when it's moving, it can't be bothered to make any effort to stop, and you have the same job all over again stopping it.

"Now the *Sardonia's* engines generate enough power to take us to Lotrin in a few weeks without the Catterick Field—only the ship wouldn't go with the engines at that acceleration. It would disintegrate. And at a fraction of that speed, we'd all be crushed to pulp. Just now, no acceleration of more than ten feet a second is being put on."

**F**OR demonstration purposes, I caught her by the waist, raised her against about a third Earth gravity and pushed her

into the center of the room just as the ship shot one way and then another.

"And that can be quite hectic," I remarked, as Shirley bounced and somersaulted to the opposite wall.

She had dressed for this sort of thing, I observed, with canary lingerie which was meant to make an interesting flurry as her legs thrashed about. I caught her unceremoniously by the waistband and hauled her back on the bed beside me.

"Imagine what it would be like if the acceleration were ten *miles* a second," I went on. "Or a thousand miles. Or ten thousand."

"I can't," she said truthfully.

"Obviously, if you're going to travel hundreds of light-years at a time, you've got to do something about inertia. Suppose there were no inertia on Earth. That's impossible actually, because the field only operates in a vacuum. But if it wasn't, and gravity and air resistance remained the same, you could run at top speed from a standing start. If you wanted to turn and go back, you'd do it in one stride."

"Nonsense," said Shirley, "you would strain a muscle or something."

"No. That's inertia. If you're running at fifteen miles an hour and try to make your muscles stop you dead, certainly you'll

tear something. But if there's no inertia, you could turn with one toe and be running the other way. Gravity and air resistance would not matter much. It's inertia you've got to counter."

Shirley was tired of the whole subject and showed it.

I went on grimly: "When we're firmly in the center of this field, which is maintained from the Moon, by the way, we'll start off with the Catterick Field energized. Then there won't be any gravity. No inertia. Only a trickle let through so that we can still walk about, not a millionth of the real force. The ship will be able to start and stop in a split second. It won't do more than a few hundred miles an hour at first, because we may still not be properly on the rails. When the captain's satisfied we are, we'll be off at the speed of light. Then bigger and bigger multiples of that till we reach Aldebaran. Then dead stop. We—"

"I'm going to have a shower," Shirley announced.

"You mean you want me to leave?"

"Stay if you like, as long as you don't go on gabbing about the Cat-whatever-it-is Field."

The shower was a minute cubicle in the opposite wall. There was no sink; if you wanted to wash, you had to take a whole shower.

I might have told Shirley that I had seen and read and done a lot more than she had, and that if she really wanted to shock or upset me, she would have to go much further than she was ready to do—go around shooting people, for instance, or tampering with the engines, or trying to climb out into space.

But that might give her ideas, and anyway she wanted me to protest. So I hoisted myself up and made for the door, knowing she didn't really want to be left alone, with Glen Mavor almost certainly crossed off from now on.

"See you later," I said.

**S**HIRLEY'S reckless phase fizzled out. Glen Mavor was crossed off and she wasn't really sorry. She was fundamentally level-headed. She started speaking to Ellen again instead of ignoring her when we ate. Ellen took her tentative advances as she had taken her resentment, calmly and without reference to the past. But the old adoration was gone. It was me Shirley addressed most of her attention to, not Ellen.

Time passes quickly when every day is the same, even more quickly when there is no day. We all slept about twelve hours out of twenty-four. Sustained exercise was almost impossible, and

Ellen again had her usual worry about putting on weight. She did the usual thing about it—shut me out of the cabin and exercised grimly, deliberately, systematically. She wouldn't let anyone see her swinging her arms and pedaling on her back. Shirley was politely shown out, too, once or twice.

"She saw me doing that sort of thing often enough," Shirley objected once. "Is she made differently from other women, or what?"

This was a far cry from her earlier worship of Ellen, which I thought was not a bad thing.

"Oh, no," I said.

"She couldn't have knock knees or a pot belly or anything?"

"Nothing like that. She'll sunbathe in a swimsuit in the right surroundings, but only when she can be perfect. Ellen is the one perfect thing in a lot of imperfect worlds."

"Do you think she's perfect?"

"What I think doesn't count. I meant can you imagine seeing Ellen touching her toes and swinging over to try to do it backward? You may know she's doing it, but can you imagine seeing it?"

She couldn't.

Shirley and I were thus thrown in each other's company a lot. But we discovered a certain similarity in temperament with re-

gard to passing time together which Ellen would never have understood. We would lounge comfortably in Shirley's room reading or considering life or even dozing, without saying a word. We each had company, but we didn't have to talk.

And then Shirley finished that phase, too. I was reading a novel when she put her head between me and the book and kissed me.

It may sound like a confession, but that really did startle me. Because when she did that, a lot of other things slipped into place.

She had wanted to know, when we were just on our way, whether I loved Ellen. Whether we were married. She had quarreled with Ellen. She had let me stop an affair with Glen Mavor, and hadn't seemed to care. She had tried to upset me, put me off stroke. She became catty about Ellen. She spent nearly all her waking hours in my company.

**J**UST when my brain was about to take over once more, it was sent reeling again by the realization that Shirley wasn't any more ready for this clinch than I was.

That's what they mean when they talk about love as a little-understood though prevalent disease. I had no possible reason or excuse for falling for Shirley, I hadn't meant to do it, it had never occurred to me that I *could*

do it. And here we were. With Shirley in my arms, I wasn't going to move or think, if I could help it, because, once the moment ended, I was going to have to face a lot of things I didn't want to face. Shirley probably felt exactly the same. So we clung and felt our hearts beating together and tried to stop time.

We succeeded no better than anyone ever has. I felt I was hurting Shirley and released my grip slightly. In turn, she took one arm from my neck and dropped it to my side. So, a little at a time, we broke it up.

We pretended it was just one of those things that happen when you don't actually take steps to prevent it, meaning little or nothing. We didn't talk about it at all, and went on acting exactly as before.

Except — perhaps I'm biased, but Shirley really seemed to become a hundred per cent prettier. I don't think that's bias, for Ellen remarked one day that she didn't know why she'd once said Shirley wasn't chosen for her looks, anyway. But it must have been bias that made me think Shirley was really quite intelligent and had good taste and could make a good TC agent.

Still Shirley and I never talked about Lotrin. Until the very last day when the bubble burst.

We were still untold light-years

from Lotrin, but only a few hours. We had not, of course, landed anywhere; we stopped several times and tenders came out to the *Sardonia*, but that affected us not at all except that there were different faces at mealtimes.

Someone once said that the poor have large families because, cooped up in a small space, they haven't much else to do. But Shirley and I, despite that one lapse, were so sure of ourselves that we spent nearly all our time together in a space no larger than a big cupboard. There was nothing of sex in our talk, and, though we couldn't avoid touching each other accidentally, there was never a hint of sensuality in the

contact between Shirley and me.

**T**HAT day, Shirley was reading and I was sitting on the floor wondering what assignment Ellen and I would be given next—still in the determined pretense that this was just a job which would be over and all but forgotten very soon. I wondered again why TC had given us the job of taking Shirley out to Lotrin. But that was a train of thought that led in a direction I didn't like, and I jerked my head as one does when in search of distraction—any distraction.

Shirley's red slipper caught my eye, which then drifted up her legs. Shirley had good legs, but



her skirt was tucked modestly under her and I couldn't even see to the knee. I was unreasonably irritated. Why did she have to pull her skirt about her like that? It was like shielding a letter from you as you passed, as if you were trying to read it. Uncalled for. I wasn't sitting on the floor so that I could see her legs. I hadn't even thought of her legs until I saw she was hiding them primly like a spinster.

I reached out and touched Shirley's ankle, but, at the touch, anything I'd had in mind went away abruptly. She threw aside her book and slid down into my arms.

We petted like teen-age lovers, just as nervous and excited. Suddenly Shirley threw herself back, eyes closed, waiting.

And it had exactly the opposite effect on me of what it was supposed to have.

"Look, Shirley," I said harshly. "This is an impossible situation."

She sat up, her back against the bed.

"Don't you know what a First Lady is?" I demanded. "She's a symbol. A goddess. A whole new world depends on her, loves her and would die for her. She's more of a sovereign than any queen in history."

"Lotrin can have another First Lady," said Shirley sharply. "I'm

going to abdicate right away."

"You can't. Weeks ago, it was disclosed on Earth that the First Lady of Lotrin was Shirley Judson, who was on her way there. It hasn't anything like the importance to Earth that it has to Lotrin, but it's known. It can't be hushed up. Suppose you go back. Lotrin will hear the story eventually. Some other girl goes—a second-best, not the real First Lady, a substitute for a failure or a coward. What chance will she have? Suppose TC covers up and sends out another girl as Shirley Judson with some story to explain the delay. *She'll* know. She'd have to be the best actress in the Galaxy to keep up the pretense all the rest of her life."

"Why didn't you think of that before?"

"I knew it all along."

"Nobody can make me be a good First Lady. I can ruin Lotrin. I would."

"Ruin a world because you didn't get your own way? Because you went back on your word?"

**W**E were both being unfair, of course. We went around in circles for a while longer, blaming everything on each other, but not in hot anger—rather with a sort of hopeless knowledge that what I had said was true.

The TC colonization system is all built into a solid pyramid. At

the bottom are the real pioneers, the men who take a chance on death or glory, poverty or fabulous wealth. They go to a world and shape it into a place for men to live. As time goes by and they prosper, there are more and more of them. A hundred men, a thousand, a hundred thousand. But no women. Everybody knows that. It's accepted.

Every new world may be life-blood or canker. If the canker ever has to be cut out, it must be possible to do it cleanly and completely. No women. The world settled, examined, explored, tested, tried out in every way. Early diseases and allergies and maladies conquered. Five hundred thousand men, a million.

And no women. TC controls all space travel, not only interstellar travel. No woman can possibly reach a virgin world.

Then the First Lady. The real beginning. Recognition. Reward. Promise. Hope.

That's one side.

The other side is that if the world turns out to be canker, the First Lady can easily be sterilized, along with the unfortunate child, if it happens to be female. That's the end. The world must die, for there are no more women. Everybody knows and accepts that, too.

It's a crazy structure of luck and fear and wild hope, but a

solid structure. I could no more buck it than Shirley could. She was Lotrin's First Lady and there was no escape.

But Shirley and I weren't really considering the issues, only toying with them. When I saw that, I said: "Let's get Ellen in on this."

Shirley jumped. "Are you mad?"

When we had been pretending to ourselves and to each other that we had merely been carried away once by the heat of the moment, we had naturally pretended very hard to Ellen that not even that had ever happened.

"She's got to come into this," I said, "unless we can decide here and now that you and I are finished with each other."

I hoped Shirley would say we could. I was afraid she might say it. She said nothing.

So I said, "Stay here," and went for Ellen.

**I** DIDN'T even knock. Ellen's arms were above her head, swinging one way and then the other. She dropped her arms and looked at me in fury.

"It's important," I said. "Shirley and I need your help. Never mind making yourself smart. Just come."

I didn't tell her anything until we were wedged in Shirley's room. Then I told her that Shir-

ey and I were in love. Ellen's frown cleared away as if by magic. This was interesting. It was a break in routine. It was a problem, a challenge.

But she couldn't help sighing and saying: "I knew something would happen when I stopped running the show. I didn't know it would be this. I don't know everything."

"You think you do," Shirley flashed.

Ellen turned a cold eye on her. "Is that attitude going to help?" she asked. "Aren't you just putting it on to show you've outgrown your childish crush on me?"

That was meant to make Shirley about two inches high. It failed because Shirley knew she was somebody. Merely being a First Lady was nothing, but now she had someone in love with her.

"I'm not ashamed that I once thought you were wonderful," she retorted. "You're a great actress. You can even act the part of a decent human being."

Ellen smiled. That smile showed Ellen's real talent. Come to think of it, Shirley was right. That's what Ellen is above all else—an actress—the kind I'd been talking about.

"That's not hard," she said quietly. "Honestly, Shirley, have you ever met anyone who wasn't basically a decent human being?"

Shirley hadn't. That was her good luck; it was like Ellen to play on it.

"Now let's get the position clear," Ellen went on. "Is it settled that Shirley isn't going to be Lotrin's First Lady, and what we're looking for is some way out of it?"

**N**OBODY spoke. "Well, let's make up our minds," Ellen insisted pleasantly, after a long pause. "Shirley, think about your mother."

"That's you all over!" Shirley burst out. "Any weapon—anything's fair to you! It's not safe for anyone to have feelings, because you'll twist them and use them against them—"

"All right, don't think about your mother. Count her out of it. You've already made up your mind that you'll probably never see her again, anyway."

There was another long silence. Then Shirley said: "Suppose I think about her. What am I supposed to think?"

"You were an ordinary girl, quite happy on Earth, content to stay there. Some TC men came along and talked to you, persuaded you to take a few tests, and then threw their bombshell. You could be important. You could rule a whole planet of men. Only it meant leaving Earth, leaving your mother, and the



answer had to be yes or no, not maybe."

"They made me go!"

"They would be persistent, I admit. First Ladies don't grow on trees. But did you really believe you couldn't say no?"

No answer.

"Well, you could be somebody," Ellen continued reflectively, "or you could give up the chance. You love your mother. You didn't want to leave her. You thought of giving it up. You didn't, as history will bear out, really care about space and progress and mankind and all the big things like that. People don't, though it makes a good story. The real question was, could you give up an opportunity like that?"

In case by any chance I haven't said so before—Ellen has personality. She had both of us hanging on her words. Me a little less than Shirley, of course, but still enough.

"You couldn't," said Ellen, "There were things you had to give up, a lot of things. Things I don't know about. Things no one but you will ever know about."

I saw what was coming. I had been long enough seeing it; but, then, I had been pretty unreasonable in a lot of ways lately.

"Never mind whether it's possible or not," said Ellen.

"The question's still the same. Are you going to give up the things you have to give up to be a First Lady? Or are you going to give up being a First Lady?"

"I'm not going to give up Joe," declared Shirley defiantly.

Ellen nodded as if that was perfectly reasonable. "All right. The question is, then, have you got Joe?" She looked at me.

I avoided her eye. "You won't understand this," I said, "but I have really fallen for Shirley."

"Oh, I understand that, all right. Do you see any future in it?"

"I've already told Shirley that I don't."

"I've tried to be fair to Shirley," Ellen said, "but I can be a lot tougher with you and still be fair. You know better."

I might have known that when I went to Ellen with a problem, she would throw it right back in my lap.

**T**HE real difference between Shirley and me wasn't age or sex, but the fact that I knew TC. I wanted Shirley and I'd have moved Heaven and Earth for her. But I knew I couldn't move TC.

I had one last doomed try. "You talk about Shirley giving up a chance, Ellen. A chance to be a tragic queen? Suppose Lotrin won't support human life and let it stay human. Wouldn't she

be better off—if she—”

“Cut it out,” retorted Ellen. She turned to Shirley. “Listen, Shirley, Joe’s doing this because he’s a fool. He can’t help that. It’s too late to do anything about Joe. But you’re doing it because you’re afraid. At the last moment, only a few hours from Lotrin, you suspect you can’t face what may happen there.”

“You admitted you couldn’t either,” said Shirley.

“I didn’t say I could. You did, so leave me out of it. Knowing you’re alone, you turned to Joe, who’s a fool, and made your problem his. I’m a woman, too, remember—I know the technique. You were afraid and Joe was around and, after all, you were picked out for a whole world to fall in love with—not only Joe, who’s a fool. I don’t blame you. You did a good job, helped by the fact that I was too busy with something else to have any time for either of you. And it was left to Joe, who’s a fool, to find a way out for both of you. Joe—”

“Who’s a fool,” I supplied.

Ellen made an impatient gesture. “Joe should have told you something. TC should have told you. But now I’ll tell you.

“Shirley, TC has the best brains of all humanity. Not running things, but finding out facts. The best scientific brains.

“Listen, Shirley, this is impor-

tant. In a sense, nearly every First Lady is a sham. Yes, you’re meant to go to Lotrin and have a baby, and doctors and scientists and psychologists will very honestly and thoroughly test it for any deviation from the human norm. But do you really think TC needs that?”

This, as they say, was the pay-off. At the back of my mind, I had known when I went for Ellen that she would tell Shirley at least some of the truth. But I had hoped that the thing could be worked out some other way.

Ellen didn’t need to play for effect now. Shirley was rigid with attention.

Ellen shook her head. “No, Shirley, the people who examine the world before it’s colonized may not be sure what it will do to men, but after a few thousand have lived on a world for a year, and a hundred thousand or so for years, and a million are finally settled there, the scientists know a lot more about the place and its effect on human physical structure than any single experiment can tell them. You know a First Lady is a symbol. Well, that also applies to the test. The first birth.

“TC knows already what it’s going to show. TC always knows. But, so long as people are unreasonable and superstitious and unscientific and emotionally immature, this symbolic test will

be needed. The proof that a world is safe or unsafe.

"But it isn't proof to TC. It's confirmation of more than a ninety per cent probability, which is reasonable certainty in your language and mine. You can see that, can't you? Doesn't it make sense?"

"Yes," Shirley grudgingly admitted.

"And you want to know about Lotrin. Well, even you couldn't be told. And, now that I'm telling you, listen and keep it to yourself. The whole TC system is built on the First Ladies. Don't even tell Bill, or whatever his name turns out to be. He doesn't know. Nobody knows but TC.

"You were never in any danger, Shirley. Lotrin is safe. Your child will be like any other woman's child on any human world. I tell you TC *knows*. Now are you going to cling to Joe?"

**I** actually landed with Shirley. Ellen couldn't because the First Lady regulations were inflexible. No woman could even visit a world like Lotrin for as much as five minutes, except the First Lady.

I saw what Shirley's arrival did to the place. Alextown was the main population center of Lotrin, and literally every inhabitant was there to welcome her. I can't describe the scene — you would

think I was mad.

Have you ever seen or heard what a flag or a cross or just a sign can do to people living in the valley between life and death?

Well, imagine the symbol isn't a flag or a cross or just a sign, but a living, breathing, beautiful girl in a world which no woman has ever trod.

And still you won't be within light-years of the reality.

When I said good-bye to her, she had to make an obvious effort to bring her attention back to me. It wasn't that her thinking herself in love with me had been as light and casual and false as all that. I was already just an episode in an entirely irrelevant past, and it didn't matter in the least how important an episode I had been.

Ellen was waiting when I got back to the *Sardonla* — waiting, apparently, to look into my eyes.

"I don't know how I got through it," I said dully.

"I don't know, either," Ellen confessed with that incredible sympathy of hers which had won Shirley twice. "Let me say it first, Joe. This is the last time we ever do anything like this."

"It's the last time for everyone. That's why we got the job, because no one will ever do it twice. And there can only be a few human beings in any generation foul enough to do it once."

All of what Ellen had told

Shirley was true except the end.

TC naturally did know what was going to happen before the First Lady went out. Not long before—not until the world was pretty fully colonized and there was a lot of data to work on. We knew before we saw Shirley. We hadn't like the job, but we agreed it was necessary. Lotrin still had to have a First Lady. Colonists who had worked and sweated and slaved to build a new world wouldn't believe a test tube. They wouldn't listen calmly when they were told there could be no more colonists and their world was condemned without the real test.

But they would believe their own eyes when they saw Shirley's child. Ellen had told it the wrong way around.

**S**HIRLEY had believed I had fallen in love with her because a woman is always ready to believe that of any man. She couldn't guess that the real reason was that I couldn't go on spending so much time with her and getting to know her without being so damn sorry for her that—

No, Ellen was no worse than me. She told the lie, but I acted it.

"It isn't ninety per cent, of course," Ellen reminded me. "Only about seventy-five. There is a chance . . ."

I nearly demanded, "Would you take it?" But I didn't. She would. Yes, Ellen would take one chance in four, for a world. It had been another lie when she told Shirley she wouldn't — a devious lie to rid Ellen of Shirley's affection before Ellen had to return it.

So it wasn't too bad really, I tried to convince myself. Ellen would do it. Ellen, my wife.

I also tried to interest myself again in the fact that Ellen was one of the most beautiful women ever born. That was why people loved her against all reason, I told myself. I didn't often admit it, but Ellen was . . .

When I looked at Ellen, though, gazing silently at me, all I could see was Shirley's face.

—J. T. M'INTOSH