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SHAMAR'S WAR THE STAR KING OH, TO BE A BLOBEL

by

KRIS NEVILLE

by

JACK VANCE

by

PHILIP K. DICK

A New Complete
Novelette

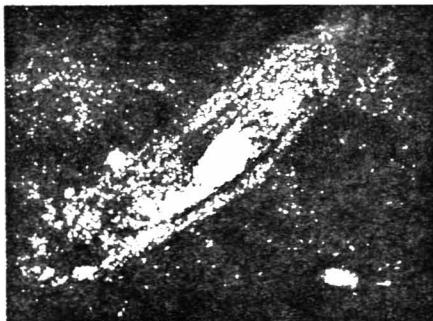
GRANDMOTHER EARTH
by J. T. MCINTOSH



ALL STORIES NEW

Galaxy

MAGAZINE



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GRANDMOTHER EARTH

BY J. T. McINTOSH

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***Old Earth was dying, and neither
courage nor strength could save
it . . . but perhaps vanity could!***

I

One after another the girls in bikinis and stripsuits on the beach at Cannes raised their heads and preened themselves as the tall, bronzed stranger strode past along the waterline. They could have saved themselves the trouble. He didn't even glance at them.

That he should be a stranger

was in itself intriguing. There were scarcely any strangers any more. There were so few people left that everybody knew nearly everybody else.

The Americas, Asia, Australia and Africa were all empty, save for a few determined hermits. The Pyramids, Sydney Bridge, the Grand Canyon and Red Square no longer drew throngs of gaping, camera-clicking tour-

ists — although they were all still there, only Sydney Bridge and Red Square showing signs of neglect. (The Grand Canyon and the Pyramids were neglected too, but they didn't show it.)

The Riviera being as good a place as any for a few score of thousands of people to live, winter and summer, with minimum effort and least danger from flood, fire, drought, pestilence, famine and wild animals, the population of Grandmother Earth had gradually collected there. California, Miami, Sydney, Biarritz and Algiers had held out for a while in the hope of winning the battle to be the last resort of a race dying of lethargy and apathy. One by one, however, they had put up the shutters.

Cannes beach, although undeniably part of a reservation for the aged, equally undeniably didn't look it. The really old couldn't summon up enough energy to go out any more. Only teens and twenties, and the few children, went to the immense trouble of prettying themselves and walking to the beach to sunbathe. And 'most of these were women.

When a race is dying, the average woman holds out longer than the average man.

When a man comes to the conclusion that there is no longer

anything worth doing, he's dead. A woman lasts longer because to the end a certain desire for admiration remains. She keeps herself clean and firm and attractive after her male counterpart has surrendered to dirt and idleness and silent solitude. She seeks the company of her own sex, and at least the acknowledgement of the other sex, when a man can't be bothered going out. So she remains half alive when he is three-quarters dead.

Marcel was unaware of the interest he was kindling in a hundred golden-brown, scarcely covered breasts. He would not have cared had noticed it. He had other things on his mind.

Marcel was one of the last rebels. True, if he had lived a few centuries earlier, temperament unchanged, he would have been regarded as the most timid, indolent conformist. But in his world, in his time, he was a rebel. He wanted to live, when nearly everyone else was content to die.

He was in Cannes for a Council meeting that afternoon. He had cycled from San Remo, stopping overnight at Nice, for the distance was all of fifty miles. It was a long journey, but he preferred to cycle. Cars were becoming increasingly unreliable and there were no spares any



GRANDMOTHER EARTH

more. Marcel had left one car in Genoa and another in Frejus, the two limits of present-day human habitation. Either might have been repaired in Nice or San Remo, but in Genoa and Frejus, the withering outposts of a shrinking community, they were so far from real civilization that they might as well have been in dead, empty Chicago.

Not many delegates would take the trouble to come, he reflected as he walked along the golden sand, the tideless Mediterranean throwing up wavelets at his feet. Of the Council of 100 he doubted if more than thirty would be present. Perhaps only twenty-five.

Well, the fewer there were, the fewer he'd have to convince. Something had to be done, and Marcel thought he knew what. Even if only twenty-five delegates turned up, the Council retained all its powers. Quorum provisions had gone long ago—it was seldom that any meeting of any committee achieved this technical competence.

In his mind he examined his proposal for flaws. He found none. It would work. And it was perhaps the only thing which would work. There was no point in thinking about it any more.

Released at last from his mood concentration, Marcel took notice of one of the girls sleepily

sunbathing up by the promenade wall. She was a pretty blonde of perhaps fourteen, her brown body lightly censored by a blue stripsuit.

She smiled at him, frankly inviting, promising all there was to promise.

He crossed the ten yards of sand that separated them and sat beside her.

"Hi," she said. "I'm Roya. How come I've never seen you before?"

"I'm from San Remo. Marcel is the name."

"I've been in San Remo often, and I never saw you there." She seemed unable to get past the astonishment that such a man could exist, could have existed for all her life and perhaps seven or eight years more, quite unknown to her.

"I'm not often on the beach. I'm a carpenter. I make chairs, tables, cabinets, things like that."

"I guess somebody has to make them," she admitted. "But you must be on the beach sometimes. Where else did you get that tan?"

"The sun shines," Marcel retorted, "not only on the beach, not only on the seventy by two mile strip we live in, but over the mountains, across the sea and on other continents. I could acquire a tan eleven thousand miles from San Remo beach."

She stared. "You talk funny."

"I suppose I do. Perhaps it comes of occasionally reading a book."

"You read books too? Looking like you do? You make tables and chairs and read books?"

He looked at her thoughtfully, wondering if behind her pretty face there was a mind capable of understanding important things, wondering whether she was trivial because she had never encountered anything but triviality.

"What would you expect me to do?" he asked quietly.

"I thought you were a lover."

"You flatter me not."

His tone was cold, but it failed to repress her. She giggled.

Even sex was too much trouble for a race which had lost its vitality. In the early stages of the decline, a century or two back, when it was steep but not precipitous, promiscuity such as Babylon and the French court had never dreamed of became the rule. It did not last. Conquests in which there was no contest ceased to divert. It became necessary to search for and invent new sensations, and soon there were none left.

Now the jaded survivors languorously chased not sex but pleasure in sex, some ghost of meaning in sex. Sex with issue was of course rare. Few women

wanted children, few who wanted them were capable of bearing them, and few men could give them all the necessary assistance. Marriage was as dead as witchcraft. All that was left was a lazy longing in both sexes to be stirred, however briefly and unproductively, into a semblance of passion. Nobody expected it to happen often, or for long.

Certain comparatively lusty individuals of both sexes were much in demand as kindlers of passion. They could be amateurs, subtle or crude, powerful or frail, but they all had this in common: they offered life. Never had public opinion changed as drastically as in the way lovers were regarded. Once lovers would have been called gigolos, courtesans and worse. Now only odd people like Marcel were irritated to be thought to be no more than a lover.

"I want to be a lover," Roya said.

"You would."

She started telling him frankly about her qualifications. Although she did not claim to have had the great complete experience yet, she had come close, she said. It was the fault of the males that she had not done better. With Marcel she thought she...

"How old are you?" he asked abruptly.

"Fourteen."

"You've plenty of time."

If you could achieve passion at twelve or with a partner of twelve, good luck to you. By the time you were fifteen that compartment of your life might be closed for ever.

Briefly interested in Roya, Marcel looked her over. Her blue stripsuit was a long ribbon which went round behind her neck, crossed her breasts and ran down in a narrow V to go up behind her and curve back round the hips to her abdomen again. It covered as much flesh as a bikini, but not the same flesh. Young girls wore stripsuits to show that they didn't sag—if they didn't sag.

"Want me to go home with you now?" he asked ungraciously.

"Why not? It's only half a mile."

He stood up. "In that case, let's forget it," he said. "I have to come back here anyway."

He strode on, unconscious of the fact that he, the rebel, the fighter, the energetic champion of lost causes, had just proved that he was very nearly as indolent as everybody else.

II

The Council meeting was held in the Majestic, on the promenade, formerly one of the lead-

ing hotels of Cannes. Marcel, a white coat over his trunks, arrived precisely as the meeting was due to start.

His eyes widened incredulously. There were not twenty-five delegates present. Not fifteen. Not even ten.

Apart from himself, one man and one woman were present.

They waited for five minutes, but no one else turned up. Then Dion, the senior member present, declared the Council in session.

The subject was the moribund state of human society on Earth (it usually was), and the purpose of the meeting was to consider ways and means of improving the situation.

Earth was dying, and knew it, but didn't like it.

Not unnaturally, the three delegates who had taken the trouble to come (Marcel from San Remo, Selba from Nice and Dion from half a block away) were the three who were not only the most concerned about the situation, but also the readiest to produce possible counter-measures.

Dion spoke first. An elderly, silver-haired man, just on the point of turning querulous, he addressed the meeting over the heads of Marcel and Selba as if the hall, formerly a ballroom, were packed with eager, attentive listeners.

"The situation is grave," he said, as if they didn't know it. "The present population is roughly sixty thousand. But of this number, ten thousand are over seventy. In twenty years, if the present trend continues, the population will be fifty thousand. In another twenty, less than forty. I say again, the situation is grave. Extremely grave..."

Nobody argued with him.

He came presently to his main point "Yet we peopled the galaxy," he declared. "We blazed the way to the stars. On scores of far-off worlds, human settlements are thriving, growing, prospering. It is our sons and daughters who gave the galaxy life. Now Mother Earth has become Grandmother Earth. Our colonies are spawning new colonies, ever further out, further from home."

He suddenly looked directly at Marcel and Selba. "It is up to our children to help us," he said. "We gave of our best. It was our strongest, bravest, most eager men and women who voyaged on the starships. We have heard how they prospered. Now we need the help of our strong, lusty children. We need..."

He went on in this strain for some time. What started as an impassioned ringing appeal slowly dissolved into the hurt bitterness of an old man aban-

doned by his children, of Lear betrayed by his daughters. He had no positive suggestion. How the far-distant Terran colonies were to be told of Earth's need of their strength and lust for life was not mentioned. What exactly they were to do was not mentioned either. (Come back and recolonize the planet which had given them all birth? Or send some mystic talisman which would miraculously restore life to a dying world?)

In conclusion he held out his hands in pitiful appeal, and then sat down.

Selba, next in seniority, spoke next. She referred acidly to Naro, the President, who had not bothered to come and preside, although he lived only a mile or two away in Golfe Juan. Then she demolished Dion's vague complaints in a couple of sentences.

"The nearest colony is twenty-two years away," she said. "If Dion wants to go there and bring back a restoration team, I suggest he will have to spend the next forty-four years of his life doing it."

She paused significantly. Dion's age was uncertain; what was certain, however, was that he didn't have another forty-four years to live.

Selba was a tall, straight wom-

an, once beautiful and still regally handsome. Now nearly fifty, she had grown out of the hot-headed certainty of youth into the cool, inflexible certainty of age. She had everything tamed.

"If we go to the colonies," she said firmly, "it must be to join them, not beg from them."

Having made this brief opening statement she stood back, so to speak, to admire it.

"Women hold the key," she declared. "In every really important situation, women always hold the key. Now, most of us are sterile or barren — most of us of both sexes. There is no real reason for this, except that as a race we have lost the will to live. Yet if those of us who could have children had children, the population level would stabilize and even increase.

"Why don't women who could have children bear them? Partly because they fear childbirth. Partly because they shrink from the responsibility and sheer hard work of bringing up children. We must overcome both these things.

"As a closed community, we cannot do this. There is no competition. Women who refuse to face the responsibility of being women are permitted to persist in their refusal. What we need is a parallel community — a

rival community, in which more blunt, brutal, vital rules of conduct apply. Where can we find such a community? Only in the colonies."

So her solution was for the Earth survivors to uproot themselves, every last one of them, and join one of the colonies. There was a three-quarters-finished ship, she said, somewhere in America. She understood it was near Philadelphia. It would be a small matter to finish it and evacuate Earth...

Marcel's turn came. Like Selba, he began by demolishing the previous speaker.

"Do you know what is done last on any huge technical project like building a starship?" he asked her directly.

She admitted she did not, contriving to suggest that the knowledge was not important.

"I'll tell you," Marcel said. "All the most difficult and complicated things. The things which demand the greatest skill and the greatest scientific knowledge. It would be easier by far to build a starship to 75 per cent completion than to do the rest."

Without a pause he demanded: "Do you know how many passengers such a ship could carry?"

"I imagine a great many —"

"Yes. A vast complement. Two

hundred and eighty, plus crew. Three hundred twenty in all. And we have 60,000."

He waited. Selba waited too, hostilely.

"We can forget the colonies," Marcel said at last, "as they have forgotten us. We'll see colonists only if some settlement decides to send a ship here. And why should they? Nobody pays social calls that take forty-five to seventy years to complete. That's why we haven't seen a ship from and of the colonies since before the last outward-bound starship left here a hundred and fifty years ago—carrying the last of our adventurers. One day, when some of the colonies have finished building and have time to waste on things that don't matter very much, a shipload of archaeologists and anthropologists will arrive—but, the way things look now, by the time they do there will only be remains for them to argue over."

"It's not *right*," said Dion, almost to himself. "They should come and see us. We gave them birth."

"Sentimentality," said Selba coldly. "Why should they care? It's us that's in a desperate situation, not them."

"That's just it," Marcel observed. "We're *not* in a desperate situation. We couldn't be in an easier situation. We've picked

one of the best all-the-year-round climates in the world. Fruit and crops grow so easily we scarcely have to do more than collect them, there's unlimited pasture for our cattle, and we have vast stocks of the things we can no longer be bothered to make, like textiles, ballpoint pens and plastic toilet-paper dispensers. Far from being desperate, we're in such an easy situation that we're all dying of sheer boredom."

There was sufficient truth in this for the others to let it pass, although they would have expressed it differently.

Marcel made his suggestion without hedging. "There used to be a border at Menton, between France and Italy. Let's close it! Let's create difference, hostility and distrust. It's our only way to survive."

Selba forgot for a moment to be acidly polite. She crowed with triumph.

"Marcel is young," she said. "Too young to remember that the plan he suggests was tried forty years ago—and was a miserable failure. Naturally! Because the solution is an artificial one. The conflict he wants is artificial. When the border was closed, people sailed past it in boats. They swam round the barriers. Seeing no sense in artificial, unnecessary prohibitions, they ignored them."

There was silence. Marcel, disappointed, had to admit to himself that if the Council adopted his plan, the general public would probably do once more exactly what they had done forty years ago—ignore the closure. They wouldn't storm the barriers. That would be too much trouble, and somebody might get hurt. They would simply sail or swim past the barrier when they felt like it. That was no trouble at all.

There was still sense in his idea, but as Selba bluntly said, it was an artificial solution. Almost anything which might be tried suffered from the same flaw. There was no question of boredom when an individual or a community had to struggle desperately for survival. But it was no use *pretending* that a desperate situation existed when everyone could plainly see it did not.

In the silence they heard a strange but not quite unknown sound—the sound of aero engines.

III

The black raider swept in from across the Mediterranean, towing a large anti-gravity barge. Linked together by a steel tow-wire, the two vessels circled Cannes and then dropped rap-

idly to hover near the harbor.

Indolent as they were, the local inhabitants flocked to the spot. This was an incident completely out of the ordinary: although there were planes at Nice airport still allegedly capable of flight, only a few old men had ever piloted an aircraft and no younger people showed any particular inclination to learn.

The black plane must be from some other, unknown community. That such a group existed was not surprising. Tiny pockets of humanity were known to exist, or to have existed, in many places. That it should be at a level of achievement capable of operating planes was a surprise, and by no means an unpleasant one—

Until the machine-guns opened up.

No one was hit. The bursts of fire were evidently meant to contain the crowd which had already gathered. Isolated from the rest of the town by a fusillade, they crowded together fearfully with screams of horror, and no one who was not already there made any attempt to join them.

Marcel was among the hundreds who, on their way to join the crowd on the promenade, saw and heard what was going on and crept under cover.

The plane landed, the barge settling slowly behind it. Scores

of black-suited men emerged. They spoke little. Their long black guns did all their talking for them.

Blind panic made some of the trapped herd try to run to safety. The black raiders shot over their heads. The warning was enough.

Silence fell again. The black raiders no longer had to shoot. The two or three hundred men and women huddled together in horrified apprehension had learned their lesson.

The raiders all wore black pants, black sweaters and grotesque gas masks. Those among the hundreds of prisoners who kept their heads saw the implications of the masks: The raiders were prepared to release tear or poison gas if they had to.

The anti-gravity barge reached the ground. Another dozen black-suited men jumped down.

And then the purpose of the raid emerged. The raiders went among their prisoners, threatening all of them but otherwise ignoring most of them.

Those they did not ignore were the youngest and prettiest women. These were sent to the barge.

There were more screams and several people fainted. Oddly enough, they saved themselves by fainting. The black raiders contemptuously ignored anyone who lapsed into unconsciousness.

The crowd consisted of those who were quickest on their feet and had been on the beach or promenade when the plans appeared. They were therefore the youngest inhabitants of the town, more than half of them children.

The raiders ignored girls who had not reached maturity. Those who had were chosen if they were attractive enough, no matter how young they were.

When they had screened the whole group, the raiders had forty-nine girls between twelve and twenty-five. All of them were in the barge and the doors were shut. But they could still be seen through the glass cover which enclosed the vessel, crying, beating the glass.

There was no move to rescue them. The people of Cannes, whether in the crowd on the promenade or watching from the surrounding buildings, had not forgotten the lesson of the machine-guns or the significance of the gas masks.

The raiders went back to the grounded plane and the door in its shiny black side slammed behind them.

None were in the barge with the women prisoners. None were needed, apparently. When the plane rose vertically into the air, the barge rose with it, operated by remote control.

Those who remained on the promenade cowered as if expecting a blow. Many of them were. It seemed not unlikely that the black raiders, their booty safe, would now open up with murderous guns or drop lethal gas.

However, they did not. The black plane suddenly darted eastwards along the coast and was soon out of sight.

The people of Cannes, on the promenade or in the buildings overlooking it, blinked and frowned in surprise. The barge with the forty-nine girls in it had been left sixty feet up, motionless over the promenade.

Marcel emerged from cover and ran to the beach. All around him people were shouting, talking excitedly, looking up at the barge. He ignored them. The raiders would be back. Contemptuously they had left their booty in plain sight, out of reach.

Obviously the girls must be rescued. But how? Marcel gauged the distance — sixty feet, with black asphalt below. Jumping was out of the question.

The girls had a door open and were crowded behind it, looking down fearfully. There must be some way to rescue them...

The barge would stay at sixty feet, resisting any effort to pull it down. Could it be towed? Many of the buildings only a few hundred yards away had

windows high enough for the girls to climb through, if the barge could be moved against them. But how to get a rope to the barge?

Marcel remembered having seen pictures of people jumping from burning buildings into sheets held by a dozen men. Would it work, without practice? Could the girls be persuaded to jump?

Easier still, surely much easier, was to get a rope to the barge. A rope could haul up a rope ladder. Failing that, surely the girls were desperate enough to climb down a rope?

A thin cord could haul up a rope. Was it possible to throw a weight attached to a cord sixty feet in the air? It ought to be — and yet, judging the distance again, he knew he couldn't do it himself. Sixty feet was only an estimate. It might be more. And the girls couldn't lean more than a foot or so beyond the door. It would be necessary for the thrower to stand back and throw the weight into the doorway. That would entail a throw of more like a hundred and twenty feet.

Some of the men standing around were already trying experimental casts with small objects they had in their pockets. None of them managed to reach the barge.

But there had to be a way. Haul a cart with a bale of hay below the barge? That might work, but the raiders would not be gone long. Contemptuous as they might be of the courage and resource of the people of Cannes, they must be aware that in a couple of hours, even an hour, some way of rescuing the women must be found. Whatever they had to do, whatever sent them racing along the coast toward Nice and Monte, would not occupy them more than half an hour at most.

Ordinary ladders were useless. You couldn't jump from or to the top of a ladder. And from the top of a swaying ladder it wasn't easy to throw a rope hard and accurately.

Marcel thought of harpoons and spring guns, only to abandon the line of thought. You might unearth a harpoon in working condition in a couple of days. Not in ten minutes.

Couldn't the girls make a rope out of their clothes? After another glance up at them he abandoned that idea too. Most of them wore bikinis and stripsuits. The skirts, shorts and blouses which a few of them wore were too brief and fragile to supply more than a few feet of rope ladder in total. And the raiders would not have left anything useful in the barge.

"The fire station!" he suddenly shouted. "Where's the fire station?"

Most of the people around him stared blankly, but some caught on at once. A dozen men started to run up into the town. Marcel went with them.

The fire station was closed, derelict. Nobody still alive had any fire-fighting training. The ordinary citizen knew better than to start fires and let them get out of hand — there would be no organized rescue work, and everybody knew it. Such fires as did occur were left to burn themselves out. They were rare, for no building had been built for centuries of materials which would burn easily.

In the first bay stood two dead fire engines, rusting and rotten. They had ladders which would still reach sixty feet and more, and although the motors would never run again, the vehicles could be pushed.

But the ladders were power-operated and there was no way to raise them by hand.

As Marcel was examining the fire engines, a shout came from deeper in the station. Someone had found an older fire engine, even rustier and more rotten, but with a ladder which could be raised by hand.

It took twenty of them to push it out. The steering wheel was

jammed, but the front wheels could be kicked into position when the fire-wagon had to be turned.

They manhandled it under the barge and turned the handles.

The metal ladder was rusted into a short, solid mass. One of the handles broke under the strain six men were putting on it.

Marcel seized an ancient axe and jumped up on the engine. He tapped the ladder and the rust gave, inch by inch. Others were smearing butter on the moving parts. The ladder crept upwards.

When it reached the door in the side of the barge a cheer went up. Then there was sudden silence. The onlookers, hundreds of them now, were drawing breath for the next cheer, the one that would greet the sight of the first girl climbing down the ladder.

It didn't come. The girls crowded in the doorway sixty feet up were looking at the ancient, black, swaying ladder with distrust. They were less scared to remain where they were than to entrust themselves to the ladder.

"Look—they're coming back!" Marcel shouted.

The girls didn't look to check. A fifteen-year-old girl in a white bikini was first on the ladder. That was enough to start the

rush. The women in the barge who ten seconds before had been hanging back doubtfully were fighting to be next to descend.

Quick as they were, it took a surprisingly long time for forty-nine women to climb down a sixty-foot ladder. Many anxious glances were cast along the coast before the last girl reached the promenade.

The last girl was Roya. Marcel pulled her off the fire escape and dragged her away from the promenade. Now that the girls were safe, no one was anxious to remain. They all knew the black raiders would be back.

The ancient fire engine was left where it stood.

When the plane came back ten minutes later there wasn't a living creature to be seen in any street in Cannes.

The plane buzzed angrily round the empty barge. Then it started machine-gunning the streets. Hundreds of windows were broken and a few small fires were started. Several people who had stood too close to a window were injured by flying glass.

The raiders did not, however, land again. They knew that this time they would be met by no welcoming crowd. To rout out the women they had lost they would have to search every building in Cannes, risking any

counter-measures that might have been taken against them.

At last they turned and flew out over the Mediterranean, taking the empty barge with them.

IV

“It was terrible,” Roya said. “I’ve never been so terrified in my life.”

“Of what, precisely?” Marcel enquired curiously.

Apparently Roya didn’t know, and that made it worse.

“You’re not very sympathetic,” she protested.

“Oh, but I am,” said Marcel. “If I seem to be smiling, it’s just a trick of the sun and the peculiar shape of my face.”

“There’s nothing to smile about!” Roya said warmly. “The raiders machine-gunned half a dozen places and dropped tear gas in Monte. What’s funny about that? It’s a wonder nobody was killed.”

“Nevertheless,” Marcel said comfortably, “nobody was.”

Privately he was convinced that the raiders’ object had been to frighten the Rivierans, not to murder them. They had shown themselves all along the inhabited coast, not relying on telephone communication to spread the word of their coming. Yet at each place they had fired wide first, shooting up the streets only

when they had given the local populace plenty of time to get under cover.

This was no more than the first act of a long play, and the tension would rise. What the climax would be Marcel had no idea, but he was sure there was much more to come before a crisis was reached.

And he was secretly delighted. Although he had helped to frustrate the black raiders, wasn’t their sudden appearance exactly what he and Selba and even Dion wanted? The Council of 100, differing on details, had agreed for a long time that what was needed to infuse life into the dying community was conflict, different aims and interests strongly and stubbornly held. The mere existence of the black raiders might be exactly what was required to galvanize the Rivierans into new life.

“You seem to be taking it very calmly,” Roya complained.

“Inwardly I’m shaking,” Marcel assured her.

The black raiders would be back. The Riviera community must take defense measures. Before returning to the Majestic, Marcel wanted to have some ideas to put before the Council.

“What’s that shouting?” Roya said suddenly.

They were both instantly alert. An hour before, there had been

nothing to fear. Now everyone held himself ready for instant flight.

The crowd gathering near the harbor, however, seemed to see no reason for flight. Since the crowd was forming just outside the harbormaster's office, it was more than likely that the stir was caused by some fresh item of news that had come in by telephone. Whatever had happened had happened somewhere else.

"I'll go and find out what it's all about," said Roya, jumping up. Marcel was content to let her. The Council, still in session, might at that moment be discussing the raiders, and Marcel still had no contribution to make.

Guns. They'd have to look for guns, ammunition, bombs. When the raiders came back there would have to be some kind of resistance. At least enough to make them cautious.

Suppose there really was fighting, what would it be like? What was war like? Marcel had read books and seen old movies. But he couldn't imagine scores, perhaps hundreds of people implacably determined to kill or be killed.

He experienced strange sensations in his body. His chest was tight, his belly uneasy. There was a rushing sound in his ears. He recognized excitement and wel-

comed it. He even welcomed fear. When fear was present there was no boredom, no apathy.

That day marked a turning-point in human history. Things would never be the same again!

Roya came running back. "It was all a game," she said, laughing in breathless relief.

"A game?"

"A trick, a stunt. The black plane just landed at Alassio. The engine failed out at sea and it had to limp back to the coast."

"But . . ." Marcel's thoughts were chaotic. A trick? A game?

"Naro was behind it. Imagine it, Naro, the President of the Council! It was just a trick to make us think we had enemies."

"Naro?" said Marcel blankly.

"Yes, Naro. The real reason the raiders wore gas masks was so that we wouldn't recognize them. When they left us in the barge, you were meant to get us out. Imagine that! Of course, when the engine failed—"

"Where did Naro get the plane?" Marcel demanded.

"In a shed near Genoa. As I was saying, when the engine failed over the sea they had no choice but to land where they could. And they had to admit the whole thing. They had to surrender and explain who they were."

Roya had more to say, much more. For her the news was un-

alloyed relief. She wasn't angry over what had happened, she was merely glad that the black raiders didn't represent a danger after all. That nothing represented a danger. That the world (or at least the narrow strip of coast she knew) was as safe a place as she had believed for all of her fourteen years.

The general reaction would be very like Roya's. No great harm had been done. The whole black raider affair had been a stunt, no more. It would be too much trouble to figure out a just and fitting punishment for the raiders. The easiest thing to do would be to laugh the incident off, treat it as a joke.

And the easiest thing to do was always the thing that was done.

Marcel heard no more. He forgot Roya and wandered blindly away, bitterly disappointed.

Selba was right, damn her. Artificial solutions were no use. Pretense was no use. A threat might save the Rivierans — but it had to be a *real* threat.

The trouble was, whatever was done had to be done from outside the small community that was Earth's last civilization. And there was nobody outside to do it.

It was because of the abortive incident of the black raiders that when the *Mercury* arrived over Cannes the next day, nobody be-

lieved her arrival represented anything very important, but nobody took any chances. Almost certainly this was another trick, another fake, another stunt. Nevertheless, real shells had peppered Cannes the previous day, and somebody might have died.

From under cover, the population of Cannes waited cautiously to see what happened.

V

Tom Piggott turned the wheel of the magnifying screen to its fullest extent. The docks of Marseilles rushed up at him. Then, as he cut in the power-operated fix mechanism, he was able to scan parks and sidewalks from an apparent height of twenty feet, the viewer swiveling to keep a succession of fixed points on the screen although the ship was making five hundred knots at fifteen thousand feet.

The view was good, there being little or no haze and no cloud. But there was nothing much to see, certainly nothing that Piggott was looking for. Here and there buildings had collapsed, blocking streets from side to side. Parks and green spaces had become jungle. In some places the jungle pockets were driving salients into the dead concrete world that tried to contain them.

"Want me to ease up so you can take a closer look?" the pilot said. "Want me to drop to a few hundred feet?"

"You needn't bother," Tom said. "There's nobody there."

"But you still think there are people left somewhere? Though we've checked Lisbon, Madrid, Barcelona and not seen as much as a dead body?"

"That's just it," Tom said. "There's no bodies in the streets and no sign of destruction, except through the natural erosion of time. So we can take it there's been no pestilence and no war. The people of these cities haven't been struck down suddenly. They've migrated."

"Where to?"

"Well, on this continent they'd go to the Riviera or Southern Italy or Greece, I'd say. Warm but not too hot. It's not surprising there aren't many of them left. A hundred and fifty years ago the population was already drawing into pockets in the best climates — New Zealand, California, Miami, the Riviera."

"The names mean nothing to me," said the pilot.

"You should read." He sighed and spun the wheel back, switching off the fix mechanism. The screen now showed a moving picture shot from five hundred feet up. Tom did not watch it continuously; the rapid move-

ment would give him eyestrain.

"Hurry on to Cannes and I'll take another look," he said.

"Sure, boss," said the pilot.

"I guess it would make sense to recolonize Earth," Tom mused. "It needs it. It needs it so bad I can't see the Terrans raising any objections... assuming there still are any left to object to the idea."

Although he was merely thinking aloud, the pilot elected to answer. "You're forgetting the eighth settlement law. Nobody can move in once a planet's on the 'developed' list."

"But that law was intended to protect expanding settlements," Tom objected. "It's taken for granted that any colony past the initial hardships will be growing like a forest fire. It wasn't meant to apply to worlds where the population is dwindling."

"It's still the law. And by the time it's changed and colonists can come here, another century will have passed."

There was no need to comment on this. If there were Terrans left, there couldn't be many. Could they last another century? Could they wait a hundred years for a blood transfusion?

Tom spun the wheel and cut in the fix mechanism again. Almost at once he let out a yell: "This is it! There's people down therel!"

Less than ten minutes later the news ship *Mercury* landed beside Cannes harbor.

Tom came out alone, looking around him in surprise. From the air he had seen scores, perhaps hundreds of people. Now there were none. Cannes looked as empty and deserted as Lisbon and Madrid and Barcelona.

But it wasn't. One or two bicycles stood around, clean and obviously in current use. The boats in the harbor were seaworthy, riding high. The litter lying around was new litter. Most significant of all, a paper cup full of ice cream, dropped on its side on the hot asphalt, was only beginning to disgorged its contents in a slow, creamy stream.

Tom faced the blank windows. "Come on out!" he shouted, feel-foolish. "We're friends. Anyway, there's only two of us."

Nothing happened, though now he caught glimpses of faces in upstairs windows. When he stared at any particular window, the faces disappeared.

Fear of infection — that might be it. They were afraid that he had brought with him some plague harmless to him but deadly to them. They needn't worry. He told them so, feeling even more foolish, shouting explanations at silent buildings.

The hell with it, he said to

himself, spinning on his heels. The pilot looked up sardonically as he entered the *Mercury*'s control room. "White man speak with lungs of brass. Indians wait in bullrushes, laughing selves silly."

"Okay, so now you can see what you can do," Tom retorted. "They're timid, that's all. But they'd hardly be scared of you."

The pilot stood up. "You don't think so?"

"No. But if you go the way you are, the point may be lost."

The pilot looked down at her shapeless overalls and evidently saw what he meant, for she unzipped them and stripped them off. Then she took off her cap and shook out her hair.

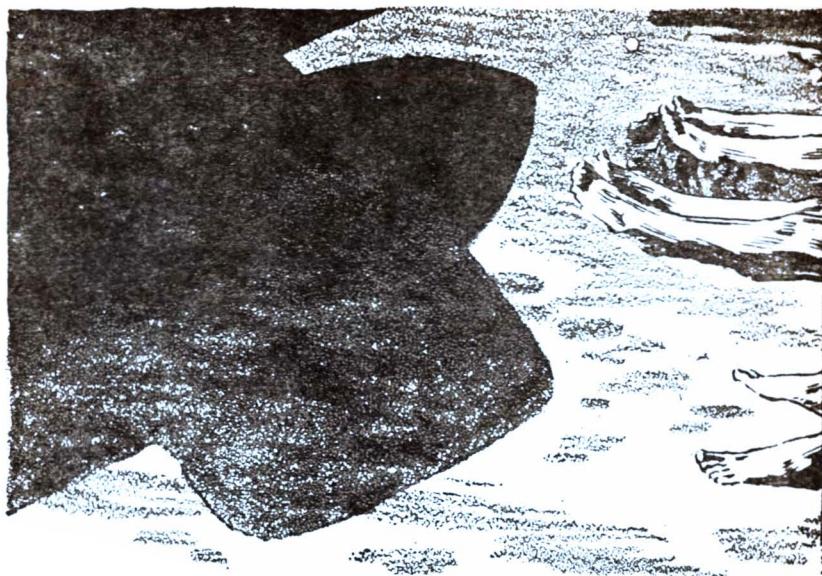
The point was no longer in any danger of being lost. Her sweater and shorts were utilitarian, not primarily decorative. However, there was no doubt that she was a girl and unarmed.

"I go," she announced, "bravely and without complaint. Have my medal sent to my mother."

"There's no danger. They're scared of us, I tell you."

When Stella emerged into the sunshine, the Terrans remained hidden. However, Tom's reasoning was sound. A lone girl obviously unarmed represented no great danger.

After Stella had wandered a couple of hundred yards from



the ship, Marcel, who had been watching cautiously from the shadows between two buildings, stepped out and faced her.

"Hello," he said, and then with more enthusiasm as he got a good look at her, "hello!"

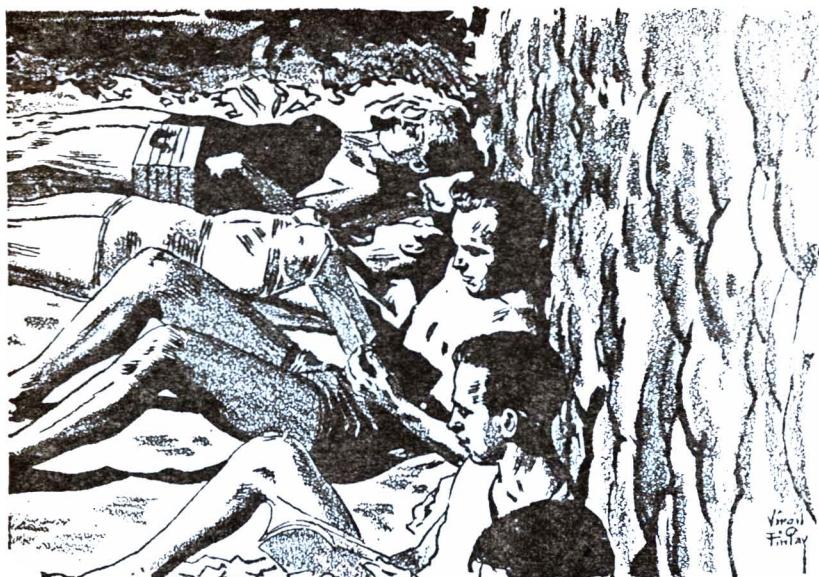
This time there were over ninety members present. There hadn't been such a turnout at a Council meeting for over a century. Dion presided; Naro thought it prudent to stay quietly at home for the time being. On Dion's left was Stella, on his right Tom.

Tom had the floor. He was explaining what the *Mercury* was, who he and Stella were and what

they were doing on Earth.

And already the Council was bitterly disappointed. From the very beginning Tom made it clear that his visit was unofficial and not the forerunner of a larger-scale colonial expedition to Earth, that its object was not in any sense to render assistance to the Terrans, that Earth was only one of twenty worlds to be visited and that he and Stella would remain for only three days.

Most of the Council members were old. Many of them, like Dion, felt that the colonies ought to be far more interested in the world which had given them birth, ought to visit Earth far



more frequently, and ought to be gravely concerned over Earth's problems. Briefly excited when they learned the *Mercury* was from the colonies, these members now slumped into gloom, scarcely listening.

Others, like Marcel and Selba, were still listening intently, alert for anything that could be turned to account. The *Mercury*, was, after all, from the colonies. More than that, it would be back there within a few weeks, if what Tom Piggott was saying could be believed.

What message was the *Mercury* going to take back? What message did the Terrans want her to take back?

"Some of you will be wondering how we managed to come here at all," Tom was saying. "As you can see we're both in our twenties. And we've already traveled over eighty light-years..."

Nobody was particularly interested in his description of the principle of the *Mercury*. Technical matters had long ago become too much trouble to try to understand. Keeping the water and electricity supplies going was about the limit of present-day technical achievement.

Marcel gathered vaguely that the ship was a time machine and suspended animation tank as well as a vehicle. The ship itself

had to go every inch of the way, taking many years to do so. But it was possible to play tricks with time if not with distance, provided the crew did not consist of more than two or three people. (Another disappointment. A twenty-five-year journey still took twenty-five years if more than three people had to travel.) The *Mercury* and her crew, the latter in suspended animation, took many years over the various hops — but since the journey was accomplished in a kind of time vacuum, a hundred-year round trip could be completed in an apparent period of weeks.

"No mission like ours would ever be possible without such a technique," Tom said. "Radio's no good in the galaxy. Until now, space travel was too slow to be used for anything less than settlement. It's not worth spending fifty years in space, even in suspended animation, merely to find something out. So there's been little or no communication between distant settlements. But this way, some of our big news agencies figured it was worth financing a galactic news round-up. Stella and I are visiting Sherbourne, Centauri, Sirius, Medoc and Sol, catching up on the news of the last century or so."

So it was just another stunt. Well, what else? The *Mercury*

would take back to the colonies the interesting information that Earth was nearly dead. And that was all it would be, interesting information.

Marcel ceased listening to Tom, as many of the others had done already. He looked instead at Stella.

Stella had hit Marcel like a thunderbolt. Tom was energetic, efficient, businesslike; Stella was all these things and something more. Tom's vitality did not startle Marcel. Stella's did.

Stella, Marcel had decided in that first moment, represented his personal future. What he wanted of her was more than sex, more than marriage, more than children. He needed her as a man dying of thirst needs water. He needed her and his race needed her.

(In the next few days, Tom was saying, he and Stella and the Terrans would exchange information. Stella would take a record of all the events of the last century and a half on Earth, while he brought the Terrans up to date on what had happened in the galaxy in that time.)

Marcel, and through him his people, needed Stella so desperately that she could not be allowed, could not be given any opportunity to refuse. You don't ask for what you need. You take it.

Quietly, unobtrusively, Marcel slipped out of the ballroom.

VI

Stella had wanted to sleep on the ship, but Tom said that was no way to win the confidence of the Rivierans. So they had two rooms in one of the ex-hotels near the harbor. Two rooms, and not adjoining at that.

It wasn't very late when Stella got to her room. The Terrans seemed to need, or fancied they needed, twelve hours' sleep at nights. And they didn't get up with the dawn.

"Good night," Stella said firmly outside her room.

Tom grinned. "On several other worlds I would have argued," he observed. "On several other worlds I *have* argued. On this one, the state of your virtue doesn't interest me."

"In other words," said Stella, "the natives are friendly. Got one waiting for you now?"

"Yes. Roya."

"Thought she was Marcel's girl friend?"

"She wanted to be before I turned up."

"Don't you find her too insipid for words?"

"There aren't going to be any words."

"Good night, then," said Stella tolerantly.

"Don't worry," Tom said. "It will be."

Entering her room, Stella switched on the light. She was not greatly surprised when nothing happened. In the few hours she had been with the Rivierans she had formed a fair idea of the situation on Earth, and she already knew that though the electricity supply was good and reasonably reliable, all electrical fittings were over fifty years old and it was common to have to test one component after another before light or heat could be obtained.

Since she was tired and the moonlight from the uncurtained window was adequate, she didn't propose to bother. She moved to the bed, unclasping her belt.

From behind, an arm went round her. A soft pad was held over her mouth.

She struggled violently, but in the first moment of shock she had drawn a deep breath through the cloth. Her movements, despite herself, became slower and feebler and more purposeless.

When she awoke she was in a vehicle of some sort, roaring and bumping over a rough road. She sat up at once.

"What the devil is going on?" she demanded.

Marcel stopped the car and switched off the engine. "We'd better do some talking," he said.

He switched off the lights too to save the battery.

"Oh, it's you." She recognized him easily enough. They were on an open road in bright moonlight. There was no sign or sound of the sea.

"Yes. We're about fifty miles from Cannes — that's forty miles from the nearest human habitation."

"And what," she demanded hotly, "is the idea?"

"I just want to make sure that when the *Mercury* leaves, you won't be on it. I think I've made sure of that already, for the car's practically out of gas and it won't be easy to find any more. I'm sorry I had to kidnap you, but I had to be certain—"

Before he could stop her she was out of the car and running back the way they had come.

Marcel, taken aback, did nothing at all for several seconds. He had assumed that there would be a great deal more discussion before any action was taken — possibly acrimonious discussion, but still discussion. The way Stella made up her mind and acted took him by surprise. She had heard him say that they were forty miles from the nearest habitation. She didn't intend to attempt forty miles on foot, did she?

Presently he turned the car and drove back. Within a few

minutes he caught up with Stella, who had stopped running. When he drew in beside her, however, she took to the wasteland at the side of the road, running once more.

"Stop!" Marcel shouted. "Stop and we'll talk it over."

Already the girl was almost out of sight.

Marcel got out of the car and ran after her. He was angry and baffled. She hadn't even tried to discuss the matter with him, hadn't bothered to ask him to drive her back to Cannes. It was as if she regarded him as insane — not dangerous, not important, just a harmless, slightly irritating lunatic.

Well, he'd catch her and *make* her discuss the matter.

Catching her wasn't so easy. Once or twice he came close, and then she pulled away from him again. Soon he realized that he had already lost his chance of catching her. In the first few minutes he might have done so by expending all his energy. But Stella's stamina was greater than his.

She might let him come close, seeing no need to waste her energy. She had no intention of letting him catch her.

The next time he came close enough, Marcel gasped: "All right, I'll take you back."

She stopped and turned, watching him warily from fifteen yards' distance.

"If," Marcel went on, "you talk things over first."

"There's nothing to talk over," she retorted. "I'm going back to Cannes. Don't think I can't find it. I'll find the sea and work my way along it. Tom will wait for me, even if it takes me a year. He has to."

"Has to?"

"What sort of reception do you think he'd get if he went home without me?"

Marcel hadn't considered that. Now that she mentioned it, it was obviously something he should have considered. His plan had been based on Tom's firm declaration that the *Mercury* would remain only three days on Earth. Marcel had thought, rather ingenuously, that if he kept Stella out of the way for three days Tom would leave without her.

"All right," he sighed. "We'll go back."

She came a little nearer. "I don't blame you for trying," she said, not unkindly, "even though it lets me in for a long walk. What is it, do I inflame you with passion or something?"

"That too," he sighed. "But it's more than that, and I wasn't just thinking of myself. We need your spirit."

She looked at him with pity. "I know you do. But you can't get it by taking it — any more than a cannibal can acquire bravery by eating his enemy's heart. You can only get it by having it."

"With you, I'd be a different man."

"Don't delude yourself. Tom's having a party right now with Roya. He's satisfied. If a man really is a man, he doesn't need a woman to give him backbone. If he isn't, she can't anyway."

Marcel tried not to be convinced, but the fact that Tom was satisfied with Roya was hard to get around.

Stella came closer still. "Don't try anything else," she warned. "Anyway, you were wasting your time."

"What do you mean?"

"That if it came to a fight, I'd win."

"I'm stronger than you."

She shrugged. "Want a demonstration? We both know what you want. Take it."

When he touched her, she caught his wrist and the next moment he found himself on his back.

"Try again," she invited coolly.

He said, "No, I'm convinced." He was more than convinced. He was hurt.

They didn't have to walk after all. The car took them to the

nearest village before running out of gas, and there Stella, not Marcel, found more. He would have been content to sniff around a filling-station and give up if no fuel was readily obtainable. She found her way down to the underground tanks and bored a hole in the bottom of one of them.

Marcel didn't try anything else. The fact that Tom spent all his spare time with Roya filled Marcel with gloom, not because he was jealous but because this seemed to prove that the fault lay in him, not Roya, that Stella was right when she said that no woman could give a man backbone.

Just before they left for the next world on their list, Tom and Stella talked to Dion, Marcel, Selba and Roya in the ship.

"You've certainly got some kind of a fixation, you people," Tom said. "I've only seen one worse case."

"Fixation?" Marcel queried.

"About being old and finished. About being the cradle of the galaxy and being abandoned by your ungrateful children and all that."

"That's not a fixation," said Dion sadly. "It's true."

"Nuts," said Tom rudely. "Didn't we tell you about Aidan? Maybe we didn't, at that."

"What's Aidan?" Marcel asked.

"A planet. Not an important world. Like Earth, only more so. All anybody can say about Aidan is 'Who cares?'"

They didn't know what he meant, and said so.

"Well, what does it matter where people come from, anyway? I was born on a world called Pradis, and because it's cold I like hot worlds. I like this one. At least, I like this bit of this one. I don't owe Pradis any debt. Who cares whether I ever go back there or not? You people have some cockeyed ideas... Why should anyone come back here, anyway?"

"Because this is the mother world," said Dion patiently.

"Didn't I tell you about Aidan?"

"No, you didn't," said Stella, taking a hand. "Aidan's a world just like this. The few thousand people there think the whole galaxy should honor her because the human race evolved there."

"But they didn't," Selba said coldly. "Earth is the mother world."

"Can't be," Tom said definitely. "Your history only goes back about twenty thousand years. Aidan's creative period was about ninety thousand years ago. I don't know whether Aidan colonized this world directly or indirectly, but there's no doubt

at all that they're older than you."

"And they show it," Stella remarked. "You're old, but the people of Aidan are senile."

"Older than us?" said Dion, puzzled.

"Much older. They keep threatening to die out, as if the whole galaxy would collapse if they did. But they don't manage to die out, because every few centuries they become too lazy to practice birth control any more."

"This is a lie," said Selba icily. "For reasons of your own, you've invented a world called Aidan."

"To justify yourselves in refusing to help us," said Dion. "It's only to be expected. Young worlds have no time for the old."

Tom protested laughingly. "Give me one good reason why we should invent a planet that doesn't exist."

"I've given you it," Dion retorted. "To justify yourselves in refusing to help us."

"What justifies you in refusing to help Aidan?"

They blinked at him. "We can't," Selba said, "and anyway..."

She stopped.

"And anyway, why should you?" Tom said easily. "Of course. Who cares about Aidan anyway?"

"It's a lie," Selba said. "All a lie."

"Wait a minute," Marcel said slowly. "Aidan. We've never heard of it, have we? What about Eden? Maybe there's something in this story after all."

VII

When the *Mercury* had left, the Rivierans found some further information about Aidan, but not much, among the data Tom Piggott had left.

Apparently there was such a world. And it claimed to be the cradle of the human race. And nobody cared...

At the next Council meeting a new rule was passed — any member who missed three meetings running without an excuse would be suspended.

A labor force was organized to renovate the public service undertakings like electricity, water and sewage. First in Cannes, then San Remo, then Monte, then Nice.

The first issue for five years of the *Riviera Times* came out. This one was made necessary by the quantity and vehemence of things which had to be said about the visit of the *Mercury* and all that came out of it.

The sober editorial simply pointed out that if the rest of the galaxy believed Aidan was the birthplace of the human race, and didn't care, Earth

could not expect much attention now or in the future.

And already there were many signs that Earth might not need charity after all. Well, it was a bit ridiculous, wasn't it, to be complaining of your age when your mother was still alive. Especially when she spent so much time complaining...

Naro's son set up a still and began making whisky. Some said this was a retrograde step. But as the alcohol consumption went up, so did the number of births. The two things might not, of course, be connected.

Crime went up, and this was certainly a retrograde step. However, it could no longer be said that nobody cared about anything. People cared a great deal about a great many things. Marcel nearly landed in serious trouble himself after a fight over Roya. The child she was going to have was *his*, not Tom Pig-gott's. The man who said otherwise very nearly died for saying it.

A scheme was afoot to sail across the Atlantic and colonize the New World. While this was agreed to be a trifle ambitious as yet, the plan found general favor. There was an urge in all communities to colonize... Earth

might not be ready yet to rejoin the mad rush to colonize the galaxy; but at least she could colonize Earth.

Just after the *Mercury* was clear of Earth's atmosphere and before they took to the suspended-animation tanks, Stella said: "I don't think it's going to work."

"Sure it's going to work," said Tom confidently. "Leave it to your Uncle Tom. I may as well be your uncle — there doesn't seem much chance of any other relationship."

"You should worry. After practically a honeymoon with your Terran popsy."

"Anyway, it's certainly going to work. You can't wallow in your great age if you know there's someone older than you."

"But there isn't. We invented Aidan. It's another artificial solution to their self-imposed problem. Just another, like the scores of others they've been trying unsuccessfully for years."

"Artificial maybe," said Tom complacently, "but the point is it's an *outside* solution. You can't raise yourself by your own bootstraps — *but somebody else can!*"

— J. T. McINTQSH

