

BALLANTINE
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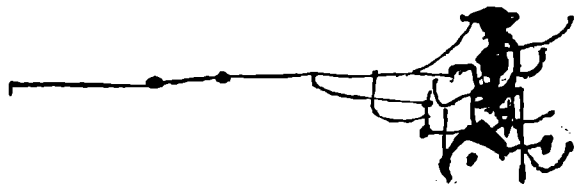
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A Novelette

it
walks in beauty

CHAN DAVIS

HARRIET waved to Max from the end of its row, but Max's thoughts were far away. He wandered back down the line, half his mind on his job, the other half on

the woman he loved.

Jim called to him, "Hey, Max! Wake up. Didn't you see Harriet?"

Max shook himself and glanced toward it, but it was

it walks in beauty

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busy with its own jobs. He leaned against the ladder that ran up the towering vat of Number 73. "Jim," he confided dreamily, "I love Luana."

Jim came over. "I love Luana too," he said.

Max looked up, delighted. "You too?" Jim nodded. If Jim had disagreed with him, Max would have cheerfully defended Luana all day, but it was even more fun for his friend to understand already. "That Luana," said Max, shaking his head in wonder at the strength of his own devotion.

"She's some kid," Jim seconded, shaking his head the same way. "That kid was made for loving, and does she know it!"

"That's the most important thing about a woman," Max assured him seriously. "She should want to be loved. With all her being she should welcome all the passion a man has to give." Max had never understood this before, because Luana was his first real love.

"That's right," said Jim, "and Luana fills that bill with plenty to spare."

They both chuckled gloatingly. Max hooked an elbow over a ladder rung, Jim sat on the bench in front of the indicator strip, and they got

comfortable for a thorough listing of Luana's attractions. Luana's little scarlet mouth, Luana's mincing shoulders, Luana's little stretch and yawn, presenting her breasts—oh, yes, Luana's breasts, very important! They went through all these features, stopping to appreciate each one in detail, shaking their heads, grinning, and grunting: "Mm, mm."

They had got to Luana's snake-hips walk when the alarm had to go off on Number 71. Loud, unmusical, quickly-damped *bink bink bink*. Jim shrugged to his feet and walked down to 71, turning off the alarm. Max looked over his shoulder.

THERE were 144 tiny strands of synthetic protein fiber being extruded from jets at the bottom of each vat, solidifying as they hit the salt bath. While they shot fiber downward, the jets circled horizontally, twisting strands in sixes, then six sixes together, so that altogether from 144 strands came four ropes—threads, rather, of lanon, humming away down through the floor, driven by the friction of a series of delicate little rollers at the highest speed and tension they were likely to be able to take.

At Number 71 one of them had failed to take it. It had broken. A delicate little roller had sprung up a few millimeters with the release of tension, and before the upswing was completed electronic relays had triggered emergency measures: one circle of jets had stopped circling or extruding, so that now only 108 strands streamed from Number 71; wheels driving the snapped thread through tank after tank below them had adjusted their tension to guide the tag end through; the alarm bell had rung for Jim.

Jim checked the indicator strip. It showed nothing, so the trouble must be in the jets themselves. Jim drained off the bath around the stopped circle, and reached in with a pair of needle-nosed tongs and a brilliant flashlight pointing at a 45° mirror, to find which of the jets had failed.

Max left. He was embarrassed about showing unnecessary interest in the lanon spinners in front of Jim.

He strolled down to Number 78, the end of their row, checking indicator strips. At the end of the row he looked both ways. Again Harriet happened to be doing the same at the end of the row

next to his; they waved casually.

Max sat down in front of Number 73. He wanted Jim to finish with Number 71 so they could go on talking about Luana. It was the next best thing to seeing Luana herself. Jim was older than he was, two pay classifications higher, and a lot more experienced. Talking to Jim strengthened his confidence that Luana was the sexiest woman in the world, and that what he felt was genuine adult love.

WHEN 71 was going again, Max asked first, "What was wrong?"

Of course Jim didn't answer, just pretended to spit behind him. He sat in the same place he'd been in before and squinted at Max. "So, young Max has started seeing Luana's show, has he?"

Max was stung. "Started? I've been there every night for a long time."

"I haven't seen you there."

"Say, that's right—I haven't seen *you* there more than twice. How long have *you* been going?"

"Off and on for——"

"Off and on!" exclaimed Max. "I don't go *off* and *on*! I go every night. I don't see how you can stand to go to

any other dancer when you could be seeing Luana. For five weeks I've even been sitting up front. Man, I'm really hooked."

"I sat up front there for the first time last night," Jim admitted. "But I always enjoyed Luana. I've been seeing her off and on for longer than you've been at Lanon."

Max was not impressed. He kept his scorn to himself. Imagine seeing Luana for over a year before you fell in love with her! It had taken *him* only a few weeks before he was sure, and since then his loyalty had been absolute. He just said, "Anyway, you're going tonight, huh?"

"And how. Like to go down together? I'll meet you after dinner."

Max was flattered. "Sure enough." But he should tell Jim about his other plan. That wouldn't be easy. He might not even have made the other plan if he'd known Jim loved Luana. He hesitated.

Jim went on, "Am I going tonight, he asks. I'm just as hooked as you are, now. I'm not going to miss any chances to see that kid. Boy, would I like to——" He said what he'd like to do to Luana.

Max said that he would like to, too.

JIM began whistling. Max couldn't hear the tune above the hum of the spinners, neither could Jim; but it broke up the talk.

Max checked the indicator strips again. He stopped at Number 77.

The smooth column called simply "vat" concealed a continuous-flow protein-synthesis process, in complex convolutions of tubing. The contents were sampled and analyzed continuously and automatically; the results were transmitted to the indicator strips, but also called for their own corrections at the reagent input valves. So the readings weren't supposed to vary much. The indicator also showed the rate of input of reagents; *that* sometimes did vary a good deal. As now on Number 77.

It was the hydroxyl input at Level 8. Normally this was a small rate, sometimes zero; now a good deal of dilute base was pumping in up there. Max pulled the chain which slid the hanging ladder to him, and went up. At Level 7 he passed the transparent deck known as the Supers' Walk. He pressed the button to signal the lab, then climbed up to Level 8 and opened a port in the side of the vat, revealing a tangle of tubing. . . .

No, there was nothing wrong mechanically with the input valve.

Paula appeared just below him. Paula wasn't a superintendent, just an analyst, but its lab was right next to the office, and analysts as well as supers had the run of the Supers' Walk.

"Hi," said Max. He was glad Paula had come out, instead of just talking into a mike, the usual way.

"Hi, Max, what's the trouble?"

"Hydroxyl input up to two point. Nothing else showing yet."

"Which analyzer is calling for more hydroxyl?"

"The pH at the same level. That's what I'm looking at now." He poked through a new port.

"Listen," Paula pointed to the tiny pipes running from Jim and Max's row to the lab. "Send us some of your input solution in line A, and some from the chamber in B." Paula smiled. "You're getting sharp, Max, to spot this thing so early."

"Oh, I'm doing okay." He smiled back. Jim would never have praised him, and Paula knew this stuff as well as Jim did.

He flipped the toggles that would send the samples Paula

wanted to the lab, then closed up the port. "Shall I stay up here?"

"Suit yourself." Another smile over Paula's departing shoulder. Max wasn't allowed above Level 6 unless something was wrong or he had explicit permission. Now he had permission.

He watched the little figure walking in a businesslike way back to the lab. Paula wore a man's short haircut and a man's pants, like any career girl. It was a little ridiculous, like a man yet not quite a man; Max had to admit it. But he didn't really feel it. Everybody respected Paula as a worker. In Max's case the word was *liked*. Paula had been his *friend*, almost from the first day he'd worked at Lanon, and he didn't care who knew it.

SINCE he had permission to stay up here, he looked around. He opened up the ports on Levels 7 and 8 and traced the connections without touching them. He could imagine the comment he'd get if Jim saw him: "Hey, youngster, don't you know your job yet? If you've still got valves to memorize I guess I didn't drive you hard enough in your apprenticeship." But Max was just interested. He

liked to go over things again. Paula understood.

He would have liked even better to follow Paula into the lab. He'd never been in there; to him it was only a wide, whitely lighted room whose door always closed before he saw more.

Partly to look busy in case Jim was watching him from below, he picked up tools and tested some of the analyzers at Level 8. He didn't find anything, of course.

Then he tested viscosity at a couple of points. He wouldn't find anything there either, of course. But he did! In the tank where the benzene solution of peptide derivatives sprayed in tiny bubbles into a water phase, the mixture acted wrong. Likely the bubbles were too big, giving too small a total benzene-water surface, and throwing everything off from Level 9 down. This must have been the trouble all along, though he couldn't have guessed it.

He signaled the lab again, shut off the inputs, and went to work on the spray nozzles. For this job he should have called Jim. But Paula came out again, and this time Max was complimented even more, and Max was glad he had tackled the job himself.

The heck with Jim! Max

felt good enough to go through with his plan for tonight, and never mind Jim. As he finished the job, he hung up his tools and said, "Say, Paula, would you like to go down to Luana's together? I'll meet you at your dormitory after dinner."

No answer. Paula's face was very serious and almost soft in an unfamiliar way.

To make it clear that this was an invitation to something that was very important to him, Max explained, "I love Luana."

Still no answer. Was seeing a dancer too unfamiliar a suggestion? Max couldn't remember seeing very many career girls in Luana's audience, as a matter of fact, and those hadn't come with men. He asked, "Have you ever been to a dancer's house before?"

"Oh, yes, I've seen dancers before." Now Paula smiled, and decided. "Max, it was nice of you to ask me. I'd like to go to Luana's with you. I'll meet you after dinner."

"Swell," said Max, and retreated down the ladder. But it hadn't been swell; it had been a disappointment, compared with the way any man would have reacted to the invitation, even if he'd turned it down.

Well, naturally, it wouldn't

be the same as a man. But why had Paula hesitated that way?

II

“**H**OW have things been going, Jim?”

“All quiet. You sure took a long time up there.”

“Yeah, the stream into the tank on Level 9 wasn't getting broken up. That doesn't happen too often, huh?”

Jim grunted.

This was a good enough explanation for Max's having taken so long. Max could have added that the only reason he'd found what the trouble was so early was curiosity, but it didn't even occur to him to do it. Some difficulties you avoid automatically, by habit.

But Max plunged right into another difficulty. “Say, Jim, how about Paula coming with us tonight?”

He was expecting Jim to look surprised, but not to look the way he did! Max had already begun to wince when Jim started: “Why not invite Harriet too and make it a *family party*?”

Max didn't say anything. It was true Harriet was a friend of Paula's, but he understood Jim's sarcasm.

Jim showed no mercy.

“‘How about Paula coming with us,’ huh? What's *it* going to see in Luana?”

“Okay, Paula's not the same as you or me, obviously, okay; but it's a nice guy just the same.”

“It's a nice guy at work,” Jim said slowly and emphatically, “and at Luana's it is not a nice guy, it's a fifth wheel. Pants don't make a man.”

Max shrugged his shoulders, even though he was suffering. He wasn't prepared to quarrel with Jim or anybody else on the subject. Without thinking about it he knew it was absolutely necessary to him that Paula's coming along should not be made a big issue.

And equally necessary to him that it should come.

What could he do? He thought of making a joke to calm Jim down, but that's all he thought, he didn't think of the joke.

He just said bluntly, “Calm down. It's not its fault it's not a man.”

“No,” Jim agreed in the same exaggerated tone, “that is true; I'm sorry for it, and all that; but at Luana's it's a fifth wheel.”

Max shrugged his shoulders again and turned away. “I don't know,” he said,

wishing he could be casual. "Paula's always been very decent to me, and I think it's a nice girl, that's all."

Something else for Jim to pounce on. " 'Nice *girl*'? It's grown up now! It's not a little girl any more, it's a full-grown career."

Max knew the career girls themselves didn't like to be called simply "careers," but he accommodated. He went back to, "It's a nice guy."

With the heaviest sarcasm yet, Jim said, "A *personal friend* of yours, no doubt." That was his clincher.

Max stopped breathing. How could he handle *that* one casually? He couldn't. "All I said was, it's a nice guy." He didn't look at Jim. He meant it when he said, "Unfortunately I already asked it, and I can't just back out."

"Did you tell it I was coming?"

"No."

"Well, that's good at least. Listen, why don't you tell it you're sick?" Suddenly Jim was making helpful suggestions to a friend in a jam.

"I can't stay at the dormitory tonight, I have to see Luana."

"Come along and see Luana, Paula won't know."

"It might find out, it might even come and see me there."

"Not likely, and if it does, so what?"

But that was going too far for Max. "Paula's a nice guy," he repeated stubbornly.

With a sudden snort, Jim said, "Go with Paula, then, but not me." Subject closed.

MAX made another routine check of the row, then sat down a couple of spinners away from Jim. He was confused. If he'd known this was going to happen, he wouldn't have—what wouldn't he have done?

Why did Jim have to be so intolerant, anyway?

He wished he was talking to Jim about Luana again, but he knew he couldn't now.

Jim strolled over and said charitably, "You'll change your mind." Then he strolled away again. Obviously that was as far as *he* was going to go.

Max sat thinking unhappily. Maybe he *would* change his mind and tell Paula he was sick—maybe.

Remembering Paula's efficient walk and the brave self-respect with which it looked up at men, he felt a sudden strong stab of affection. He excused the emotion to himself. After all, it was a very nice guy.

Someone was on the Supers'

Walk in their row. An analyst? He looked up. No, it was gray-haired Superintendent Kees himself. Without seeming to hurry, Max got to his feet and started pacing the row, checking every spinner. Jim caught on too, and did the same.

Mr. Kees didn't pay any attention to them. He was looking over Number 77, where Max had just done the job on the nozzles. When Max met Jim at the middle of their row he crossed his fingers and Jim repeated the sign—both of them surreptitiously, as if Mr. Kees could see crossed fingers from almost thirty meters above them. As if Mr. Kees would be surprised if he did!

After five minutes or so the superintendent left, without having looked down.

Max breathed easier, and Jim grinned at his relief. "We're glad to see you go," Jim muttered toward the Supers' Walk, and added in falsetto, "old Husband Kees."

"Huh? Since when is Kees married?"

"A couple of weeks ago."

Max thought Jim might be inventing this for his sake, to build him up after being nervous about Mr. Kees. "Honest?" he said.

"Yep. Just got the word from Roland this morning."

"He's jaypeed, you mean."

"Nope." Jim made a mock-solemn long face. "This is no jaypee fling, this is a real old-fashioned *family* marriage."

"No kidding! I never would have thought it. With all the money he's got, he could keep playing the field till almost any age. Who did he marry?" Max expected to hear the name of some famous dancer. Now if it was a question of settling down with somebody like Luana, Max could see something in marriage, no matter what Jim might say.

"*Hah.* You know *who* he married?" Jim, in his glee, was having trouble keeping his voice low. "Remember Frederika?"

"Sure. It used to be one of the office secretaries, left about a year ago."

"Less than a year."

"Yeah. So who did Kees marry?"

"Frederika," Jim exulted, "changed its name, let its hair grow, took one or two dancing lessons, and opened a house."

"And Kees married *it.*" Max was stunned.

"Her, now. Kees married her almost the minute it became legal. Bought out her contract and married her."

MAX wondered if maybe Roland had made the story up. Even if this thing had actually happened at Lannon, Max felt vaguely that it'd be better not to talk about it. But curiosity was overriding. "How old is it—how old is she, anyway? Must be thirty at least."

"Thirty-five, I bet."

"Imagine a woman not getting the urge until she was thirty-five," Max marveled.

Jim pretended to spit behind him. "Obviously if a girl hasn't felt the urge by thirty-five, it's going to be a career. It's not cut out for anything else, period."

"You mean Frederika never really had a woman's instincts at all?"

"Obviously. Frederika became a dancer just so she could get married! How much of an audience do you think she ever got at her house? Who beside Kees?" Jim's eyes were bright with suppressed laughter and his voice was a jeer. "I bet she couldn't even get a promoter. I bet behind the scenes Kees financed the whole thing himself. It must have cost plenty."

Max still felt the conversation was indecent, but—"Why did he do it? Why would he even go to see her?" It was hard to understand.

"He went to see her dance because he loved her."

This, at least, was a joke, Max knew. "Oh, go on. How could he love her when he could see real women, like Luana, or even Marta? It isn't *natural* to love anybody except the most beautiful woman you've seen, obviously."

"You don't have to tell me." Jim whispered, winking, "confidentially, Kees wanted to get married from the beginning. He likes children!" And Jim's derision overflowed in violent laughter, loud and long. It was okay, if the super heard he wouldn't know what the joke was. Max joined in, laughing at old Husband Kees.

Jim was still his friend after all.

III

IT WASN'T only loyalty to Paula that made Max go through with taking it to Luana's, it was partly loyalty to the way he'd felt about the idea in the morning. He was too stubborn to give it up so far as to lie to Paula.

As he and Paula went down the plush winding stair into Luana's, Max heard the audio inside, beat, beat, beat, and a rolling melody. It was playing Luana's theme, though, so he knew the evening was just be-

ginning in there. The familiar excitement made him feel like running down those last few steps. As soon as they were at the bottom he turned toward Luana.

Luana was gorgeous tonight. (Luana was always gorgeous!) Her head was raised as she faced the audience, her heavily shadowed eyes were closed, her scarlet mouth pouted, glittering jewels swung on her waist-length braids. Luana was gorgeous.

Luana gave a little stretch and yawn, presenting her breasts. Max tingled all over. What a body!

It was easy to see why so few girls became dancers. How many of them had bodies like Luana's? How many of them had bodies even approaching Luana's?

Tonight Luana was wearing practically nothing above the waist, and you could appreciate her to the fullest. Below the waist, she was covered, the same as always, by a loose ankle-length skirt which swirled excitingly whenever she turned. (Max had been trying to decide the last few nights whether Luana was pregnant again yet. He hoped not, of course.)

Mabel came up to Max and Paula as they stood at the bottom of the stairs, to take their

admission fees. Max was returned abruptly to his problem. Would Mabel notice in the dimness the slight extra length of Paula's jacket that signified it was not a man? Would she let them in if she did know Paula's sex? To be sure, Paula had said it had seen dancers before, so maybe it was okay.

Max paid his own admission. Mabel said, "Good evening, Max," and turned to Paula. "Are you with him?"

"We're together," said Paula calmly.

Mabel took its money too. She said, "You'll have to sit in the back."

"Certainly," said Paula.

They took their seats—in the back.

This was terrible! Max had been up front for five weeks without missing a night, and he was sure Luana must have been stirred by his constancy. She must have begun to realize he was not just an adolescent fooling around. What would she think now when she didn't see him?

It was possible she might notice him even back here. But if she did, what would she think? That he had decided he didn't *want* to stay up front.

This was all a big mistake! Here was Max in the back with the mere spectators, and

up there, separated from him by a wide aisle, sitting right at the edge of the lighted area where Luana danced, were a dozen other guys. Tonight, as far as Luana was concerned, they were the devoted lovers. Max was sick with envy.

He recognized most of them. There was Jim, with Roland, the other Luana follower from Lanon. Most outstanding, there was Dan Sellars. Two weeks ago Luana, late in the evening, while dancing around the stage with Dan Sellars, had led him off-stage to be jaypeed, ending the show for the night. Max's throat choked up just remembering it, thinking of the sudden rush of delicious passion that must have filled Luana's lovely body, imagining himself in Dan Sellars's place!

But it had not been Max, it had been Dan Sellars, and he and Luana had stayed that way for two whole weeks—not bad! And here was Max, in the back rows. Tonight would not be the night Luana would jaypee with him; or even have her first dance with him; or even lean invitingly over his chair in passing, as she had done twice this week.

BEAT, beat, beat, and the melody rolled languidly.

Max told himself that he

couldn't stay bitter while he was at Luana's.

Luana spread her slender arms wide, and clasped her hands behind her head. Leaning her head way back, she slunk back and forth in front of the audience, panting audibly. Back and forth, over and over.

Max knew this was irresistible. He knew the effect that would hit him now, and he waited for it impatiently, like a man who has just chug-a-lugged two double whiskeys.

It hit. It rocked him. He kept his eyes on Luana, feeding the flame. . . . He still loved that Luana, all right. Oh, it had hit!

But maybe not quite so strong as usual?

Of course he was farther away from her now. He wasn't up front.

The audio changed tunes, and Luana changed moods. She swung gaily up to Dan Sellars and danced him around and around the floor. He was certainly a good man for her when it came to dancing. Luana looked so graceful and loving when he held her. In some ways it was even better than watching Luana alone.

Without warning Luana danced him through the curtains out of the room. The audio was hushed. Nobody

moved from his seat, it was too early for Luana's evening shift to be over, but there was a little rustle of whispering, speculating. It died to total silence as the curtain stirred.

It was Dan Sellars, alone. Luana was unattached again! She had renoed him!

Dan Sellars walked deadpan to his seat; he was still going to sit up front at Luana's, then. Max approved.

The audio blared and Luana skipped through the curtains, her scarlet lips laughing unrestrainedly. She was wearing a new skirt, flaming red, and her shoulders were spread with tiny spangles.

Swinging the red skirt merrily, Luana began to sing. How many dancers could sing too?—let alone sing like Luana.

It was *The Call of My House*, a fairly new song. Max was disappointed. He loyally enjoyed it, but really he thought most of the new songs, even the serious ones like this, sounded inadequate for the emotions he felt for Luana. They sounded insincere. Now the old songs—the *really* old songs that were revived every so often—had the directness of true art. The words were usually inappropriate for a dancer to be singing to her audience, but he

could allow for that. The sentiments might be from another time, but they were sincere. Songs like *Rosalie*, *Kalamazoo*, or *I Wanna Love You*.

AFTER the song Luana began dancing with one after another of the men up front. Everybody was unusually excited tonight, because of Luana's having renoed—Luana herself most of all. It had a stimulating effect. She danced with Roland and even with Dan Sellars, more gracefully, more yieldingly than she had the last few nights. It was something to watch. But the more Max enjoyed it the more he longed to be up front.

Luana sang again. Just as if she had heard Max's wish, it was one of the old favorites. He even thought she seemed to be singing toward the one empty seat Mabel had left up front. And after the song was over she'd be dancing again! If it wasn't for Paula—

Paula. He'd actually forgotten it was because of Paula that he was back here.

Remembering startled him, he turned to face Paula. It met his eyes.

It said conversationally, "Max, you're pretty devoted

to Luana, aren't you?" How could it be so calm?

Well, naturally, it wouldn't be the same as a man.

He said intensely, "I'd do absolutely anything for her—anything at all."

Paula stared at him thoughtfully. He didn't have anything to say to it, or any real purpose in having turned in the first place. He was even a little embarrassed. And Luana's voice caressing him.

Paula said quietly, "I have to stay in the back section, but you can go up alone if you want to and sit in your usual chair."

"That's right!" he said. "Why didn't *I* think of that?"

IN THE front row you heard Luana's voice much more intimately.

Luana must have noticed him taking his seat in the middle of a number, but she would know it was just from impatience to be near her. What would she think of his being so late, though? Had he ruined his chances?

When she had finished the song Luana stood at one end of the row of seats. The audio was off, everything was quiet. She yawned and stretched tantalizingly. Then she walked slowly from one follower

to the next, the length of the row. She was deciding which one to dance with next; but she was considering her decision a lot more carefully than usual, it must be an important one.

Nobody moved. Max had to restrain himself consciously from squirming with suspense. Luana started back along the row, hesitating at each chair. She was in front of Max! She stayed there—longer than she ever had before!

And moved on.

And danced with Jim!

Jim, who had been up front only one night before! There was no justice in it. Max just couldn't understand women at all. Jim was a nice guy, but after all!

Then came the catastrophe. Luana and Jim danced two or three times around the floor—gracefully, Max had to admit, they danced well together—and through the curtains.

The evening was over, in an explosion of applause from the audience. Luana had jaypeed Jim. Jim!

Max got up blindly and left, ignoring Paula's hand in his, ignoring the cool night air, walking without a thought in his head that he could bear.

IV

HE NOTICED where he was when Paula took away its hand and sat down on the floor, smiling up at him.

Max was confused, as if he was waking up from a long sleep. He sat down beside Paula.

They were in a familiar enough place, the entry to the Spinning Department at Lannon. Max clocked in here every morning when he came to work. Every time he clocked in he looked at the time. Automatically he looked at the time now: 23:25.

"Why'd we come here?"

"I asked Antonina at dinner tonight if it wanted me to take its shift for it. I go on at midnight. I thought you wouldn't mind if we walked over here early."

"Do you buy other girls' shifts often?" he asked without much interest. "How much do you get for them?"

"I didn't buy the shift."

"Oh, you're just taking it as a favor."

"That's right. I knew I'd be up tonight anyway, and Antonina always has a hard time with the first shift."

They sat in silence. Paula's regular chewing became audible, and simultaneously Paula

said, "I've got chocolate mints. Want one?"

For the first time tonight Max realized that Paula was a remarkable girl. Mints, at this point—remarkable. He thanked it and chewed contentedly.

They were silent again. Max turned back to troubled thoughts of Luana. After a while he couldn't keep from saying it any longer: "I can't understand her."

Paula answered, "Stop thinking she's a mystery, Max, and you can understand her as well as you understand most people."

This time Max turned to it in astonishment. It still sat relaxed, leaning against the wall, one arm around a knee. It didn't even look at him.

Max was going to say, "What could you know about the subject?" but he toned it down to, "How do you know?" He waited, watching Paula.

It chewed away at the chocolate mint, but it seemed less relaxed. "True of everybody. People are funny, but they're all just people—if you see what I mean." It was definitely a little flustered now. "Anyhow, I know Luana."

"What?"

"Sure. Now, why should that surprise you? We went to school together. Of course

her name wasn't Luana then." Max did not ask to hear her former name. "She was my best friend—one of my best friends."

WHY was Max surprised? Mostly because it had never occurred to him that he would ever have a *friend* who was a *friend of Luana's*. Even in his daydreams he had never thought about being close to Luana in that way. It was hard to get used to. There was something else, though.

It was the ages. Luana seemed so magic and unattainable it was hard to think of her childhood's being with-in memory. But when he considered—Luana had been sixteen when she got her first contract, that he knew, and he knew she had had three pregnancies. She must be about twenty. That was just her chronological age, and it seemed like a terrible liar. Why, *he* was twenty, and it seemed as if Luana must have been Luana long before he was born . . . yet must have been under twenty-five the whole time.

"How old are you?"

"Just turned twenty-two."

"You were older than Luana!"

"A little."

"Gee, I wonder what Luana

was like as a girl?" He didn't really want to know, it was just an idea that was new and curious. He always mentioned new and curious ideas to Paula.

"What was she like? Well—" Paula thought. "You couldn't have told her from anybody else. She went to the same classes and played the same games. Slept in the same dormitory." Paula laughed tolerantly, and Max remembered how adolescent his question must have sounded: curiosity about life at a girls' school!

Still it was fascinating, and he was talking to Paula so it was okay. "You knew her. All through school?"

"From the time she entered till the time she left. I knew Marta too, her name used to be Henrietta. And a couple of dozen other dancers. You see, I just can't think of them as particularly mysterious—any more than I could think of you as mysterious when I work with you every day. But then—" Paula blurted out, "You're a man, after all. Sometimes I think career girls are the only ones who can understand people!"

"What do you mean?"

"For instance—who else reads? Can you imagine anybody reading because it want-

ed to, except a career girl? Well, that's not fair, *you* read. You're unusual. You haven't had much time for it recently, though, have you?"

"No." For a man there were more important things. To most people Max wouldn't admit that he had read at all since leaving school.

"But the main thing is, you cut yourself off from too many people. Career girls are the only ones who don't lie to themselves, so they're the only ones who can understand people."

Max didn't follow this at all.

Paula mused, "Here I go, though, lying to *myself*. We're cut off from people too. . . . We don't get to take care of children, the way the women do."

It sounded actually unhappy! This stopped Max with surprise for a moment; but he went ahead and retorted, "Well, if you understand people so much better than I do, tell me: How does Luana choose who to dance with? Or . . . who to jaypee?" Explain *that* if you can. He felt downright resentful. Of Paula or Luana?

PAULA stood up and paced back and forth a couple of times; its face was worried.

It spread its hands. "I think I understand, Max, but it's not simple."

"Well, just tell me this: What possible reason could she have for jaypeeing a guy who's been a follower only one night? If she wanted to choose him, at least she could have waited till he'd been up front a decent period—a couple of weeks anyway."

"Oh, Jim was a newcomer, was he?" She smiled faintly. "And you've been pretty devoted to Luana, haven't you?"

"You asked me that before. Answer my question."

"All dancers choose newcomers sometimes, Max. If they didn't, there'd be no excitement for men who had just started sitting up front. They'd know they wouldn't be noticed till they'd waited out a couple of weeks—at least with a popular dancer like Luana. They might even stop coming before the couple of weeks were up. A dancer has to keep attendance up, or the promoter will complain."

"But—tell me how could Luana——"

"How could she be so calculating? She should choose by the passion of the moment, is that it? I thought you wanted to understand why she chooses who she does; now you want a reason you *can't*

understand." Paula sat down again and added less combatively, "I don't know. Probably whim comes in too. I wouldn't be surprised." It gave itself another mint.

Max was still arguing. "Have you ever seen Luana since she became a dancer?"

"Yes, once."

"When?"

"Three years ago."

"So she'd only started then. You're not such a friend of hers. If you went down there to talk over old times I bet she'd have Mabel throw you out."

"Hm. As a matter of fact, she might. Luana didn't follow my advice. Maybe she feels bad about it, one way or the other."

Luana, follow Paula's advice? Naturally not. Max didn't even interrupt his argument. "So you've hardly seen her since she was a girl, and you couldn't even talk to her now—how do you know so much about how she thinks? After all, Paula, there's a whole area of experience that you don't have anything to do with, that's very important to Luana." Not to mention Max.

"That's true," said Paula in a very small voice.

"All right, then how can you say——" He looked at

Paula's soft face and stopped.

"In a way, what you say is very true. A whole area of experience that's very important—that's true, Max."

He looked at Paula and couldn't speak.

Paula said, "Have another mint, Max," and sat chewing quietly.

Max sat looking at the quiet, efficient, self-respecting, unhappy face, with growing sympathy. Poor girl! He hadn't been fair to Paula. When he'd learned that Luana had once been just another girl like Paula, and Paula's friend, he'd learned only half. Paula had once been like Luana, too, and Luana's friend.

That was a hard thought, too.

Paula must have dreamed of womanhood then, the same as Luana. But some girls—most girls—didn't have what it took.

IT WAS really terrifying. What must it be like to be a schoolgirl? Always wishing your complexion would clear up, wishing your breasts would grow rounder, waiting to feel that uncontrollable desire that would tell you you were a woman. He hadn't thought about such things since he was in school, and of course he hadn't been old

enough then to understand.

What must it be like to be a grown career girl!

"I guess career girls must feel sort of—" he hesitated a little—"envious of dancers."

"That is the usual attitude, I believe," Paula stated tonelessly.

There was a lot he hadn't understood, all right, Max conceded. How could he have considered himself Paula's friend before? Now he felt so much closer to it.

"It"—even the pronoun was a continual reminder of Paula's failure. In every sentence he spoke about the career girls he was pointing out that they were the ones who didn't make it. He could imagine how Paula must feel about that. Used to it, maybe, but surely not happy about it.

Max made a resolution. Maybe he was a little peculiar, but he didn't think so. After all, the elderly women who had been his school teachers had always been "her." Paula was his friend. Max resolved always to refer to any career girl as "her," from now on.

At least when he was alone with Paula.

He resolved even to *think* of Paula as "her." It wouldn't come naturally to use that pronoun for a modified man's

name like "Paula," when he was used to using "her" only for real women's names like "Luana" or "Clarissa." He'd do it, just the same. The way he'd been talking up to now sounded cruel.

He smiled happily and started to tell Paula his resolution. The words wouldn't come. He didn't know how to say it without sounding ridiculous.

Why? Because his resolution was a bad idea? No, not a bad idea; just pitifully inadequate. How much difference would a pronoun make to—her? If he talked as if it was saving her life, he'd sound very very silly, and just as cruel as if he'd done nothing.

If only there was some way to tell Paula that (at last) he sympathized.

Paula glanced at the clock. 23:49. The first shift would start showing up about now.

Paula stood up without looking at him. It—she—yawned and stretched. Max felt let down: apparently she didn't have anything more to say to him and was going to leave him ten minutes early, and he hadn't communicated to her yet.

Instead, she said, "Tired?"
"No."

"Why don't you come on with me? The super won't be around this shift, or any of the office staff. Don't even bother clocking in."

V

PAULA went straight to the lab but Max loafed on the Supers' Walk.

It was the Spinning Department in a different hour from the Spinning Department he saw daily, yet it might as well have been in a different year, or country. The rows of vats were the same, exactly the same, but strolling around the Supers' Walk gave a new and godlike perspective; they had changed. The row where he worked in the midday shift was superficially the same; he could recognize it without looking at the numbers, by the drooling discoloration on Number 74, the same as in the day; but instead of looking *up* at Mr. Kees he was looking *down* at somebody or other. To find out whether it was Max or not he'd have to check the personnel records. Who was he? *He* had changed.

He had an anything-could-happen feeling that he hadn't had since he was a kid, except maybe at Luana's.

Luana—she seemed distant

now. Time heals sorrows, and to Max there was a lot of time between an hour ago and now. He was still a Luana follower, certainly; his memory did not show the conspicuous event which stopping loving Luana would have made. He didn't worry quite as much about love, though. Love and curiosity didn't mix. Tonight Max was curious.

Which adventure should he choose?

This afternoon if he'd had an invitation to drop into the lab any time, with nobody to object, he'd have run all the way. Tonight it was hard to choose. Paula had changed everything: Luana, the Spinning Department, Paula herself. Max was itching to understand them all.

He chose the lab, though, partly because Paula would be there. For any adventure Paula should be there. Paula and curiosity went together.

MAX pushed open the door to the wide, whitely lighted room.

It wasn't quite as wide as he'd thought, and part of it wasn't lighted. That was the row of four desks along the left that were more likely computers. Accounting didn't work the night shifts. The rest of the room was a daz-

zling array of valves and tubes. Max threw his mind open to see what they could tell him. He let his eye wander over the maze, guided by hunches drawn from his apprenticeship outside there. Apprenticeship—that's what *this* was. Everything was new tonight. Tonight should have come after his first day at work, or his first week perhaps. But if it had he wouldn't have had a friend, Paula, who could show him around the lab.

He didn't see Paula. There was only one person in the lab, working in the far right corner, ignoring him. He recognized the person. "Harriet!"

"Hi, Max."

"I didn't know you knew this job."

"I've qualified for assistant, not for analyst."

"You taking somebody else's shift, just for tonight?"

"That's right. How about you?"

"Paula just asked me if I wanted to stick around. Where is Paula, anyway?"

"Out on one of the vats, Number 58 I think."

"She'll be right back, won't she? I was hoping——"

Uh-oh. *She*.

Harriet smiled at his faux pas; but not too jeeringly, if

at all. Max felt his face getting entirely red—all over—maximum. He hadn't blushed since he was in school.

Harriet said, "Paula should be back pretty soon. Would you like to sit down in the office? I'm pretty busy here."

"The office!"

"The Superintendent's Office, in there." The door on the dark side of the room. "The guys always use it on this shift. There usually isn't anybody around to check, and I'll be able to tip you off in time if there is."

Max pushed open the door and went through.

He wouldn't have been surprised to see a tropic garden.

IT WAS dark. He ricocheted off a hard desk into a soft chair. Keeping one hand on the chair for a base, he groped across the desk till he found a switch.

The switch only turned on a desk lamp. The little light fell concentrated on the desk top and scattered vaguely about the room. Desks, chairs, and cabinets were irresponsibly acute-angled. Max could have turned on more lights and reduced them to normality, but he preferred not to. He relaxed, getting used to novelty.

In the direction he was

facing, he couldn't see to the end of the office. Maybe the office extended farther than he'd assumed. He sat staring into the darkness there.

For a while he saw only darkness. Then a new, dim light went on and something moved. Max sat staring.

If what he saw might just as well have been a dream, why should he complain?

He thought he saw Luana.

Luana couldn't be in this office, but then neither could Max, and nevertheless here was Max, all alone, and, all for Max, here was Luana! Dancing! Why should he ask questions?

Luana danced for him.

Her hands clasped behind her head, that snake-hips walk. The same as this evening.

But the evening had ended wrong, so Max didn't let himself compare now to the evening. Everything was new this midnight. No music, she didn't need any! No crowded house, all the better!

He tried the experiment of watching the dance as if he had never seen it before. That wriggling walk was new. He could feel the burning passion that drove those hips. Then she stopped—stretched, lithely turning her body to right

and left—and yawned. What a body!

Max almost groaned aloud. Why didn't she come closer? How was he supposed to stand it this long? Still he was the audience, he didn't get out of his chair.

Gradually she came closer, and each step she took toward him was an act of surrender. Max couldn't stand it. He jumped from his chair. This was the love of his life!

She began to sing, a husky wordless croon that made him shiver and want to cry. This was the love of his life! And all for him!

But it wasn't Luana. He had never heard the voice before. He had to admit to himself now that it wasn't Luana.

He didn't care! Everything was new tonight. He could see and hear, couldn't he? Couldn't he tell that this was love? How could he think of Luana after this? This was true love! That husky voice said, "Dance with me," and the unbearably beautiful face turned up toward him.

The light rested on her soft cheek and Max adored her. He put his arm around her and his hand touched her back. "Oh, my darling!"

The beautiful face frowned,

and said, "Now do you see, Max?"

The voice was Paula's voice.

MAX didn't move. Warmth still throbbed through him like echoes after thunder. . . .

What had happened?

Eventually he had to know. It had not been a dream. His hand was still touching her back—Paula's back. He removed it; then he stood absolutely still again, trying to think.

The face was still close to his, Paula's pitiful, pleading face. He had to remember that even with the mouth painted over scarlet, even wearing the grotesque jeweled wig, even obscenely dressed in woman's clothes, this was his friend, Paula.

He whispered, "*Don't worry, Paula, I won't tell anybody.*"

She gasped.

Her frown dissolved.

Her face went soft again; for a moment he thought she had fainted. But she had sprung back away from him three or four steps, as graceful as a dancer. She said, in the husky, unreal voice:

"You can see and hear, can't you? *Can't you tell I'm a woman?*"

Max could hardly control

his embarrassment for her. Sure he could see and hear. She was dancing again, and crooning; and it was embarrassing. He could see and hear his friend Paula bouncing around—in a preposterous costume—with a faked voice. It embarrassed him!

"Max, please." The faked voice was begging now.

Max didn't know which way to look. He was enormously sorry for his friend Paula, but what could he do? Women were women and careers were—well, careers. It was a sticky, crawly feeling; it was almost as though Jim or one of the other men had made some revolting suggestion. It was not possible for Max to think in those terms; it wasn't part of his nature.

But Paula was his friend.

Max swallowed.

He tried hard. Pretend, he thought. Pretend you don't know it's Paula. He conjured up another emotional kick for the sake of the kick. Don't look underneath, he thought, just look at the body and listen to the voice. Woman? Think of it as woman.

The body was gorgeous. The voice made him shiver. The face was unbearably beautiful. He felt passion rising in him, he felt the drive for possession, he felt—

He felt corrupt and befouled. Instantly the passion was wrung off in a surge of icy fear and guilt. Too late, too late! He was betraying the love of his life, he was lowering himself! What would Luana think?

"Stop it!" he shouted. "Paula, for God's sake!"

SHE stopped. Her white shoulders drooped, her husky voice broke. Paula fell across the desk, crying. *Crying.*

Max couldn't help her and couldn't ignore her. He listened inertly, feeling shocked and disappointed in her.

She wept: "Oh, Max, I don't get it. I just don't get it!"

"Paula," he said, trying to be reasonable, "it's perfectly all right. It's just that I don't, well, enjoy that sort of thing."

She blazed: "What sort of thing is that?"

He cleared his throat. "You know. I mean, those clothes and all. That's not hair, it's just a wig. It isn't *real*. And I can't——" He hesitated, grasping for a way to express himself; and ended miserably: "Paula, you should get help."

"Max!" He shrugged and turned away, offended. She said, "Max, I'm not blaming

you. I'm as messed up as you are."

"Messed up! Me?"

She said, despairing, "Oh, what was I trying to do anyway? The whole thing's hopeless. But I don't get it. The wig?" She wrenched it off her head and dropped it on the floor; beneath it Paula's short, neat hair was still there. "If I were a dancer I'd wear a wig, you know. Luana wears one!"

"But Luana is—Luana," Max protested.

"I could go out and open a house tomorrow! You wouldn't see anything wrong with me then!"

"You?" Max shook his head, awakened from paralysis. How well had he ever understood Paula? Once more it was as though she had removed a disguise.

"Me!" She took a deep breath, then spoke wearily. "I tried out once. At Clarissa's house—the same time Luana did."

"You? But—oh, I see." Max nodded.

"No, you don't see! I went over—very well, in fact! Better than Luana did."

"Now, Paula——"

"It's true, Max. I could find a promoter tomorrow and open a house." She sat up on the desk, looking at him.

"You know, my fifth night at Clarissa's, I got unusually strong audience reaction—from practically everybody, even Clarissa's front row. My fifth night!" Well, that was astonishing, Max admitted to himself. But she wasn't talking about it with pride. She said: "You know what happened when I came offstage? Clarissa went on. And she said: 'We'll have to put that juicy morsel in a package all her own.' You understand? She meant I should have my own house. And the applause was tremendous."

She was too weary, too discouraged to lie; but it was beginning to strain Max's belief. "Why didn't you do it?" he asked doubtfully.

"I peeked through the curtain! I knew that if I did it I'd have to sign a five-year contract—I didn't have any money of my own. So I peeked at all those popeyed, yelling faces, and I thought, '*Five years.*'"

What any unwomanly reaction! Max couldn't help it, he edged away from her a little. "What's wrong with five years of life like Luana's?"

She said hopelessly, "If you can't understand it, I can't explain. Everything those men wanted from me they could have got from a hypo-

dermic needle. Juicy morsel! I couldn't stand five years of that kind of—of contempt!"

"Now, Paula!" Max was shocked. Contempt! To call love and—and *desire*, and—— To call those things contempt! But she was saying:

"I tried to talk Luana out of it too. She may regret that she didn't listen to me."

WELL, that did it. Max stood up, able to smile. She'd had him going for a while, but—well, imagine Luana *regretting* her life and all her loves! The thing was preposterous.

"Max?" Paula was questioning.

"I have to go," he said.

"Oh, no, Max. Look—I'm sorry."

He punched her shoulder lightly. "Nothing to worry about," he said. "I'll see you tomorrow."

She stood up. "No, please, Max! I'll get my obscene men's clothes on, and we'll have a cup of coffee. What about it? Then you can stick around the lab afterward and watch us work. How about that? And——"

"Thanks, friend," he said, grinning. "I'll take you up on that sometime. But I've really got to get along." And he really had to, it was true; be-

cause it had just occurred to him that the evening didn't have to be entirely a loss. There was a place near Luana's house where you could wait. And sometimes, maybe, there would be a light in her window—perhaps even a shadow on the shade! Perhaps—

Well, it didn't matter; all

that mattered, of course, was being near to the one you love. "So long, Paula," he said. "And look, don't worry."

She said, in a voice barely loud enough to hear, "I won't." But it didn't matter, because Max wasn't listening. He was already gone. He was on his way to Luana!

