

FUTURE SCIENCE FICTION

No. 32

35¢

● NOVEL

MADE TO ORDER *Frank Belknap Long* 67
John Tabor had desirable traits, according to the Big Brain, only there were already too many like him. So...his application for marriage permission was denied. But there was an alternative...

● SHORT STORIES

SOLITARY (illustrated on cover) *Robert Silverberg* 4
All the logical answers to Charcot's escape and disappearances had come up...but why should an escaped convict be logical?

THE IN-BETWEENS *Richard Wilson* 22
Robert Blane became the most ubiquitous of man ever...

SINFUL CITY *Christopher Anvil* 52
An edifying and unlifting tale of vice defeated and iniquity crushed.

THE MILE *John Tara* 110
Now if unborn children were capable of reflection on the human lot...

NIGHTMARE CALL *Carol Emshwiller* 121
A strange and unusual story, by the author of "Bingo and Bongo".

● FEATURES

THE EDITOR'S PAGE *Robert A. W. Lowndes* 19
Actually, just what is "Destructive Criticism"?

MORE MAD MEN OF SCIENCE (article)
..... *L. Sprague de Camp* 40
They weren't "mad" in the "mad monster" sense — just plain batty!

READIN' AND WRITHIN' *Book Reviews* 113
L. Sprague de Camp looks over recent scientific non-fiction.

DOWN TO EARTH (department) *The Readers* 127
Letters from readers, plus editorial comment.

Editor: ROBERT A. W. LOWNDES DOROTHY B. SEADOR, Asso. Ed.
COVER BY EMSH Illustrations by Emsh, Freas, and Orban

FUTURE SCIENCE FICTION, Number 32, Spring 1957. Published quarterly by COLUMBIA PUBLICATIONS, INC., 1 Appleton Street, Holyoke, Mass. Editorial and executive offices at 241 Church Street, New York 13, New York. Application for second class entry pending at the Post Office, Holyoke, Mass. Single copies 35¢; yearly subscription \$1.40. Entire contents copyright 1957 by Columbia Publications, Inc. Printed in U. S. A.

Made To Order

NOVEL by Frank Belknap Long



Illustrated by Murphy

Society could not let him marry, or become a father; but for men like him, there was a sort of happiness . . .

AGNES AND Claire. I'll say it again. Agnes—Claire. How could both be so much a part of my life, and so different; and how could I have taken Agnes into my arms before I even knew her name?

Perhaps it wasn't so strange. How could I have known the name of the girl who stood beside me?

You stand before the humming computers and you fight off terror. You feel a more-than-human wisdom crushing you, denying you the right to think for yourself. You know that your future should be in your own hands, but you can't wring that much independence from the master controls.

The Big Brain can't know what a man is thinking, but the feeling is there—the guilt feeling. You want to escape, and can't. You look around you, and you see your own face mirrored back. You see on gleaming metal the haggard eyes, and tight, despairing lips of a total stranger.

The girl who stood beside me was trembling violently. She'd punched her identity number, and the Big Brain's answer had struck her like a hard-knuckled hand in the dark.

I could see the punched metal tape gleaming on her palm,

four inches of tape. I could see the torment in her eyes, the film of moisture she was furiously trying to blink away. She was staring straight at me, but I knew my face meant nothing to her. It could only have seemed the cold face of a stranger, trapped like herself.

THE REALIZATION of her torment gave a sharp, heady quality to my anger. The guilt feeling dissolved and I felt only anger. She was so very beautiful that I succumbed to the universal human fantasy. I saw her as an outcast girl in a freedom ruin, and there was the tang of death in the air, the rich, heavy perfume which outcast women wore.

She was standing against a crumbling stone wall, her large dark eyes wide with desperation, her unbound hair falling to her shoulders. She was a hostage to desperation, appealing to the primitive in man in the pitiful hope of awakening love that might know reverence and respect. I had come upon her suddenly, and I was fighting for her in a canyon of crumbling steel against men lost to all honor.

Then I saw the light of the dome glowing on her hair, and the bright, dangerous vision was gone. I wanted to whisper

to her: "A computation denying you the right to marry is a crime against beauty such as yours. Don't accept it. Insist on a more rigorous check on every phase of your ancestry." But I didn't say it. How could a man and a woman reach each other with sympathy and warmth when a terrifying weight of non-human wisdom denied them the right to courtship.

A glance is a beginning courtship, a word spoken in a certain way, the briefest of handclasps in a shadowed room. Even that was denied us; we were strangers. There could be no hands stretched forth in friendship or reassurance. If you listened carefully you could hear the humming computers. You could hear the click of the metaltapes being punched, being cut off sharply. You could hear a lifetime of misery being punched out in exactly ten seconds.

Marriage Privilege Permitted Marriage Privilege Denied

The vault was like a prison, harsh with artificial sunlight, each of the twenty computation units guarded by heavy bars. You could look up at the glittering tears of memory banks and stimulus-response circuits and tell yourself that

the Big Brain was society's only bulwark against decay from within. But if the unit before which you stood flashed its cold light upon you, the dryness in your throat wouldn't be from pride.

TO THE simple fellow yonder, the humming meant that the Big Brain was taking a personal interest in every man and woman in the vault. To the junior coordinator, whose lips had gone suddenly white, it was quite otherwise. He was an educated man; he was waiting for the Giant Computer to make an impersonal analysis of data as unalterable as the stars in their courses. It was the Giant Computer in the eyes of Society, and the technicians who had designed and constructed it. But to me "Big Brain" cut closer to the truth.

Popular names have a way of doing that. Whatever the pros and cons of logic and science, a machine that can destroy your happiness takes an interest in you.

Marriage Privilege Permitted Marriage Privilege Denied

There is more to it than that, of course; but you had to have good eyesight to read the micro-lettering, which told you

exactly why you'd made a tragic mistake in allowing yourself to be born.

Biogenetic advances in electron-microscopic Rontgen-ray analysis having made possible the exact determination of the genes of human inheritance in the human adult, the individual's blindly instinctive urge to marry and have children can now for the first time be successfully controlled. Experience has shown that it is to society's best interest to maintain at all times a perfect balance of the more desirable genetic types. It thus becomes obvious that curtailment of the marriage privilege must, of necessity, be directed solely to that end.

It was as simple as that. I looked down at my own tape, at the cruel words punched into the metal.

John Tabor... Marriage Denied

Ironically, I wasn't even an undesirable type; I was perfectly healthy mentally and physically. In a few years my type could marry again. But

right at that moment there were too many of *me*.

IF I MARRIED now, I would be destroying the beautiful socio-biogenetic balance which had to be preserved—even if it meant enforced celibacy, or a freedom ruin, for a man who had thought to find his greatest happiness in marriage and a home.

The girl next to me hadn't turned. She was still staring at me, and her eyes were clear now—clear and fearless. I hadn't intended to speak to her. I had fought that impulse, knowing what it could lead to. I thought of the vigilance against unlawful love-making, save in the uncontrolled freedom of one's rooms, how every instrument of technology was arrayed against it. It could not fail to be detected and the penalty—death. Otherwise, banishment for evermore to a hunted existence in the primitive, decadent ruins of Nuork.

The desires of youth have no beginning, no end. It wasn't sympathy alone which made me ask: "How bad is it?"

"My classical Mendelian ratio is too low," she said. "Too low, that is, for anyone of the pooled offspring of a series of families where the parental mating types are identical."

She laughed a little hysteri-

cally. "I seem to have memorized it word for word. It's funny how you'll do that when everything stops for you, and you want to die."

"If it ties in that closely with multiple-family data you can ask for another analysis," I said. "Computations based on more than fifty predicable ratios are often in error."

I showed her my tape. "This is my third computation. I received my first two years ago."

SHE SEEMED not to hear me. She was looking at me with a new interest, as if my sympathy had brought her new hope and courage. She drew nearer to me and suddenly there was a flame of yearning between us. Her femininity became so overwhelming it frightened me. I looked around the vault.

A security guard stood by the door, but he wasn't watching us. His eyes were on another girl, halfway down the vault—a wholly unattractive girl who stood with her head held high, as if defying the humming computers to deny her happiness. Spots of color burned in her cheeks, and in her eagerness to become a wife and mother she seemed suddenly almost beautiful. I looked away quickly, feeling I had no right to stare.

My temples were throbbing, but I refused to admit that I could be in danger. If a woman I did not know was weak, and wanted to touch me, I could be strong. Her hand was suddenly warm in mine. "Tell me about yourself," she whispered. Realization came with a numbing suddenness. She could have asked anything of me, and I could not have refused her.

I told her my name, my occupation. I told her I'd just come from Venus Base, and I told her why I was going back. "Hard work is the only real compensation," I said. "When you're headed for a construction job on the planets, you don't have time to think much. It's better than staying on Earth, and seeking a substitute for happiness."

I told her of the planet's savage beauty, and there was only one thing I kept back—how different I was from most of the men who sought escape on Venus Base. I didn't tell her how great and unusual were my telepathic powers. It was far too dangerous a secret to entrust to a woman. When a child has been born abnormally telepathic, he learns caution at an early age—even though he cannot hope to conceal his secret from the Big Brain.

“THERE ARE no women on Venus?” she whispered. She was standing very close to me, and suddenly her hair brushed my cheek. I told her about the construction work.

“Men who can’t marry on Earth will have their chance,” I said. “Women will be sent out. There are restrictions you can’t impose on pioneers and builders.”

“Women will be sent out when you are dust,” she whispered.

I pretended I hadn’t heard her. I held on to Venus as a child will hold on its most treasured toy, pretending it has found a way to make it yield adult pleasures.

“The restrictions will be gradually relaxed,” I said. “Even now it is a free and easy world. You can travel from construction camp to construction camp, whenever the urge to roam takes hold of you. To quiet that urge, women will be sent out.”

“They will let you die first. The Brain has not yet made its power felt on Venus. It knows that when men have tasted freedom, society must move with caution.” Her fingers tightened on my arm. “Society needs men like you for construction work, but those

who come after you will be a more docile breed. Society will never reward men whom it dares not trust.”

“I’ll have to risk that,” I said.

She gave me an odd look. “I suppose it is better than sitting under a psycho-helmet dreaming about a woman who exists only in your mind.”

“Emotional Illusion Therapy can be a satisfying experience,” I told her. “You can have beautiful experiences in dreams. Sometimes it’s so real you never want to wake up.”

“But when you do wake up?”

“I went to Venus Base because I preferred to stay awake,” I said. “Does that answer you?”

Her eyes searched my face. “Did you ever go to a freedom ruin?”

I shook my head.

I WOULD have gone to the freedom ruins, if the stakes had been clear cut. In the ruins it was kill, or be killed. The women who went expected to be fought over, and the men—

You found a woman you could love and you courted her until tenderness and desire flamed in her eyes. Then, unless you were completely a beast, she became your woman

for as long as you could hold her. No society can exist without its safety valves. By computation, a certain percentage of the denied would find their way to the ruins. A certain percentage would die. Whenever I thought about the ruins I could almost hear the Big Brain whispering: "*Society has taken certain regions, and about them it has erected barriers of self-loathing. Beyond the barriers there is no law but the law of the jungle. Beyond the barriers my wisdom has no meaning. But it is well that some should go; it is necessary.*"

If the stakes had been clear cut—a choice between living and dying—I'd have accepted them gladly. It was kill or be killed, for in the ruins men outnumbered women, five to one.

The eyes of the girl at my side burned into mine. Large eyes she had, a deep lustrous violet which looked black until you discovered that they could glow for you alone. "Do you know why women who can never have love here go to the ruins?"

"This is why!" she said. Her arms went around my shoulder, and she crushed her lips to mine, so hard I couldn't breathe for an instant.

Then she stepped back

quickly, her eyes shining. "Call it anything you wish."

"There's a name for it you don't often hear in the ruins," I said.

She came into my arms again; it was a madness we couldn't control, and there was a terrible danger in it.

WE WERE saved from disaster by the utterly unexpected.

Far down the vault a man was screaming. His fists were tightly clenched, and he was screaming out imprecations against the humming computers. There was a hopeless rage in his eyes—rage, and bitter, savage defiance. Even as he screamed, he began to slouch forward with a terrible weariness of a man trapped beyond all hope of rescue.

I had no right to interfere; it was a problem for the Security Guard. The Guard was just starting to turn, the electro-sap at his wrist glittering in the harsh light.

The thought of what might happen made me almost physically ill. I had no right to interfere, but I did. I crossed the vault in five long strides, and I grasped the screaming man by the shoulder. I swung him about, and I started slapping his face. First his right cheek, then his left. It may have been

bad psychology, but I had to chance it. I'd seen men killed or crippled for life by electroshaps. The guards weren't deliberately brutal, but sometimes they didn't know their own strength.

Between slaps I spoke to the poor devil in a whisper, deliberately keeping my voice low, knowing that you can't reason with a sick man by shouting at him.

"C a r e f u l—the guard's watching you! Don't force him to use his sap! Do you hear? You won't walk out of here alive!"

Abruptly the poor devil stopped screaming, sagged forward, and would have collapsed if I hadn't caught him.

THE GUARD was instantly at my side. "Just what did you say to him, friend? Don't you know that helping the wrong people can get you into trouble?"

I didn't answer; I just waited, hoping he'd let my interference pass.

He glared at me, then said, "Get his arm around my shoulder. I want to find out if he can walk."

I stood watching the Guard assisting the poor devil out of the vault.

It's funny how tension will

distort reality. I watched the Guard pass from the vault, then turn back to reassure the girl I'd taken so impetuously into my arms.

She was gone.

For a moment I stood staring around the vault, shaken, despairing. Then slowly balance and sanity returned to my mind. I realized with a shudder of relief by what a narrow margin I'd been saved from utter disaster. Unlike that poor devil, I could face the future with confidence. I was a potential "marriage privilege permitted" type, and I knew that hopes temporarily dashed wouldn't stay buried. I knew that when I left the vault and emerged into the clear, bright sunlight it would light up the world for me.

My heart was singing when I turned, and walked out into the corridor, and descended to the street.

II

I WOULDN'T be lonely any more! She'd be slender and gay, with tumbled red-gold hair; and when she came forward to greet me for the first time, her smile would warm me as I'd never been warmed before.

I'd spoken to the man, and it was all arranged; I was on my way to pick her up. My

beetle purred as it sped swiftly down the shop level driveway, red sunlight gleaming on its fused tungsten hood. The air was crisp, cool and invigorating, and the future looked bright.

All I had to do now was conquer a tendency towards fuzzy thinking, and face up to the facts. It was as if I could hear the computers humming, giving it to me straight. All right, the computers couldn't talk. You fed them your identity data, and answers came out punched into a metal tape. But it was as if I could hear the Big Brain itself whispering to me.

"Not for you a quiet fire-side, and a cloak around your shoulders when you're too old to dream, boy! You'll die on Venus Base.

"Take your happiness while you can. Make the best of it. You've got strength and you've got courage far beyond the average—so take it in your stride. This is the year 2486! There are gadgets, a million satisfying gadgets—glittering, and beautiful, and new. Gadgets to make up for everything nature, or society, or the perversity of fate denies us.

"There are compensations for every bitter frustration, every handicap of body and mind, every tragic lack of the raw materials of happiness. Wade

in, and wise up. Take a substitute for what doesn't come naturally. Drive down to the shop level arcades, and buy yourself a wig with synthetic nerve roots which will grow into your scalp. Buy yourself a bone ear, a musical or art appreciation grove-in, a money-sense illusion, a n y t h i n g you'd care to name."

"**Y**OU DON'T have to be reminded that there are some men who might say: 'There is no substitute for the real thing. You'll never get around it and you may as well stop lying to yourself.'

"But not you, boy! You'd never say that because you don't give up as easily as that. Naturally they've been keeping it quiet. You have to dial the right shop. You've got to speak in a persuasive whisper to the right people. You've got to mention just how many trips you've made to Venus Base.

"Buy yourself a beautiful Android. Naturally it's labelled: *For Spacemen Only!* If you've got something new and tremendous to sell you'd be crazy to offer it on the open market, wouldn't you? Mass production takes years to build up. Until the mass production stage is reached, high profits can only be made without State Bureau interference.

"Why not sell your products directly to men whose need is so great and urgent—they'll pay specialty prices? Pay eagerly and disappear into space?"

"It's the only policy that makes sense and you've no quarrel with it, have you, boy? You've spoken to the man, and you know exactly what you want, and you've the money to pay for it."

THE BIG BRAIN, of course, wouldn't speak quite so frankly. The Big Brain wouldn't conspire with an out-lay firm to deceive the State Bureaus, much as it might want me to accept a substitute for the wife I couldn't have.

I was really listening to a separate rebellious part of myself arguing with my more cautious self. My reckless self was now completely in the saddle. It pleased me to listen to that inner voice hammering home the facts, garnished up a bit by the Big Brain's authority.

We'd better get it straight right at the start that artificial women are as old as the human race. There are Aurignacian Venuses from rock caverns in the Pyrenees you could date in your dreams with no effort at all. A bit on the plump side perhaps, but what of that?

What is a statue really? Hasn't a statue a definite me-

chanical function to perform? Isn't the statue of a beautiful woman a kind of android designed to delight the eye and the brain?

Remember, an object doesn't have to move at all to be mechanically functional. If a certain arrangement of lines and curves and dimples can evoke a biogenetic response in a man you've got a mechanical prime mover, and if that object happens to be a statue you've got an android in a strict sense. You can do without the photo-electric brain cells and the Cybernetic memory banks.

THE PYGMALION fantasy is the key. Every man carries about with him a subconscious image of the one perfect woman. There's a biological norm, and that norm constitutes the ultimate in desirability. Every individual woman departs from the norm to a greater or a lesser degree. Nature is constantly attempting to create new species, and that tendency towards mutational variation keeps altering the norm, throwing it off center.

Features too large or too small will distort or completely shatter the norm. A woman with a too large mouth, for instance, may have other features so perfect she will still be beautiful. But her beauty won't be perfect if a single one of

her features departs from the norm. The closer women approach the norm in all respects, the more beautiful they are.

Unfortunately a woman who seems beautiful to a Hottentot may not seem beautiful to you. You've got to go back to your ancestry for the key; you've got to find out precisely the kind of norm woman your ancestors mated with for hundreds of thousands of years.

You could marry any one of ten thousand woman picked at random, and be reasonably happy. But to be perfectly content, you have to have a perfect biogenetic mate.

Now for the first time you could get your norm girl. Your biogenetic tape recordings supplied the key. You gave the man your biogenetic tape number, all the data available to the Big Brain, and the firm did the rest.

Waiting for me was an android female with a living colloidal brain. The human brain is a colloid with a billion teeming memory cells, made up of molecular aggregates just large enough to be visible in a powerful ultra-microscope.

Just large enough to be visible. Visibility was the key, for a visible structure could be studied and duplicated. Not exactly perhaps; we'd get that in another century or so. But

enough of the structure could be duplicated to yield results.

I HAD BEEN warned that there would be no emotional overtones in the woman who was waiting for me. A seven-year-old level of intelligence perhaps, no more. Curiously enough the limitation did not depress me too much. When beauty becomes overwhelming, you can think of nothing else.

The shop-level arcades were a purple and gold glimmer for ten thousand feet. At night, the lights are so dazzling that you can't see the individual beetle; but in broad daylight every window stands out, and the level becomes a tunnel of weaving lights and shadows.

It's like plunging into a revolving kaleidoscope to pluck out a rare and glittering prize. Come early, take your pick.

I knew that the shop where I'd left my order would be using some kind of false front; but I wasn't prepared for the beauty of the display which filled the window: a terraced garden with a fountain gushing silver spray, a breathtaking Watteau-gambol of fauns and satyrs in a twilight nymph pursuit.

In the window a little square sign read:

*Enjoy Yourself Without
Breaking The Law
Which Shall It Be?*

*Ten Minutes of Emotion-
al Illusion Therapy Or
Ten Months Of Freud?*

FOR AN instant, I was tempted to go inside, and forget to mention my name. I knew the routine of the illusion therapy shops backward. If the human brain is paralyzed in certain centers, and stimulated abnormally in others, you get an illusion which can only be compared to sheet lightning.

When I closed my eyes, I was inside the shop, relaxing in the scented darkness. I could feel the incredible lightness of the big impulse-transmitting helmet resting on my head. I could hear the therapist saying in a cool, soothing voice: "The women whom you are about to see are incredibly beautiful. Not one woman, but twenty. Now if you'll just relax—"

It's a swift, effective way to cure frustration. But when you wake up, the savor of living is dulled for you, just as heavy smoking often dulls the pleasures of the palate. I told myself I'd be crazy to pay that kind of penalty when I could have the real thing.

The man was expecting me. He was tall, quiet and soft-spoken; but I never really got a good look at his face.

You know how it is when you whisper over a wire.

Someone has to be at the other end to take down your message. He may be young or old, an executive of the firm, or just a front man, a go-between. Instinctively, you know you're not going to like him. When you actually meet him, you see no reason for studying him closely. If he has authority, you simply accept him as a vital link in the arrangement. He becomes a person with no real identity—a figurehead, a mummer. He b e c o m e s—the man.

He looked me over carefully. It takes skilled training to judge a man's occupation at a glance. Often as not it's a hit-or-miss task—but if you're really good at it there is always a high-salaried undercover job waiting for you.

He was good at it. You spend two years at Venus Base and it shows in your eyes, the way you carry your shoulders when you walk, the very rhythms of your speech. Spend a lifetime hoeing a field in blazing sunlight, or pacing the deck of a ship at sea and you'll get deep creases in the back of your neck, crow's feet about your eyes and a leathery texture of skin such as you can't possibly get if you're a sedentary worker under glass. Two years at Venus Base can't quite do that to you, but a

really good occupation-guesser can tag you every time.

THE MAN said: "I think you'll be satisfied, sir. But you've got to remember that a woman can be made for just one man alone, and not quite satisfy him at first glance."

I wasn't sure I liked the way he smiled when he said that—as if he knew a great deal about women himself, and was treating the matter as an amusing episode in the course of his philanderings. As if he'd discovered a girl that suited him fine, and was trying to palm off an old flame on the first gullible guy to walk into the trap. Some girl he'd decided not to like for no particular reason.

"I guess you know that caution is our stock-in-trade," he said. "We have to be careful right from the start. You've got to forgive me if I seem a little ill at ease. I'll be frank with you. I would have preferred to be a creative artist, a painter, or a musician, or something of the sort. But I guess we all get sidetracked. You're sidetracked in a bad way."

His eyes grew suddenly sympathetic and for a moment I found myself actually liking the guy.

"I've been married ten years myself," he said. "It's a head-

ache at times, but I wouldn't want to be alone on Venus Base without a woman. No, sir; that's one thing I don't envy you lads."

HE'D HAVE gone right on talking if I hadn't reminded him that I was very eager to complete my purchase and be on my way. There was a hammering at my temples, and my heart was pounding like a bass drum.

He seemed to sense what was passing through my mind. He nudged my arm and said, quite simply: "Follow me."

I accompanied him along a narrow, dimly-lighted corridor and down a short flight of stairs to another corridor with three branching offshoots. We turned right, then left, then right again.

The room was huge and blank-walled. It didn't look like a laboratory and until the lights came on my thoughts were in a turmoil. Would she be as beautiful as I had allowed myself to believe?

I could see vague objects towering in the shadows. One caught and held my attention. It looked in the gloom like an enormous stationary globe with shining crystal tubes branching off from it.

The lights came on with a startling abruptness, flooding

every corner of the room with a dazzling radiance.

She was lying motionless beneath the globe in a transparent tank filled with shifting lights and shadows, her long, unbound hair descending to her shoulders in a tumbled, red-gold mass that caught and held the radiance.

Her eyes were closed, her pale, beautiful face turned a little sideways.

She was as I had imagined she would be.

Her face I had always known. In youth's awakening dreams, she had smiled and beckoned to me; the magic of her features was a wondrously changing thing, like flickering of tall candles on a shrine, or the sunglow on strange, jungle-shadowed beaches in the morning of the world.

I shut my eyes, and we were walking together by the sea, her bronzed loveliness etched against the dawn glow, a miracle time itself could not tarnish.

I OPENED my eyes, but for a moment the room seemed remote, unreal. Only the woman in the tank existed for me. She wore a simple white garment, belted in at the waist. Her arms and shoulders were bare, and her skin had the ruddy glow of perfect health—the natural bronze which only

a warm tropical sun can impart to the skin of northern women who have long embraced its warmth. Her cheeks were shadowed by long, dark lashes, and her mouth was a curving rosebud, and beneath the smooth-textured cloth of her belted tunic her young breasts rose firmly, twin bright mounds in a sea of billowy whiteness.

The sound was faint at first, a barely audible hum. I didn't know it was an alarm at first. It sounded for an instant like the drowsy murmur of bees in a noonday glade. But swiftly it grew in volume, turning into a steady drone, filling me with a sudden uneasiness.

The man turned abruptly, and gripped my arm. "It's a Security Police raid!" he whispered, alarm in his eyes. "We've got to get her out of here, and upstairs fast!"

I stared at him in consternation. "But why should they raid this shop?" I asked. "Do they know about her?"

"Of course not," he said. "But there's a law against concealment in an emotional therapy shop—any kind of concealment. We're not supposed to have underground rooms."

I'd forgotten about that. Emotional illusion therapy could break down all barriers and lead to actual physical or-

gies. The police had to keep a careful check.

"We've got to get her upstairs!" the man insisted, his fingers tightening on my arm; "we've got to convince the police there's nothing wrong. She's simply your wife, understand? She came to the shop with you for therapy."

I STARED at him, aghast. "But she hasn't said a word to me! She's lying there in a deep sleep. She *is* asleep, isn't she? Speak up, man! What do you want me to do?"

"I'll wake her up," he said. "I'm going to attach an electric-stimulator to her right temple, and wake her up right now. Then you've got to help me lift her out of the tank. We haven't a moment to lose."

He did what he said he'd do. I watched him, a dull pounding at my temples, resenting the fact that she could not awaken to me alone. The presence of an outsider seemed like a desecration. He'd become an outsider the instant I'd set eyes on her, and I regretted that she could not awaken to me in a moonlit garden in the first bright flush of dawn.

We had no chance at all to be alone. The instant she opened her eyes, he removed the electric stimulator from her right temple, and turned to me in urgent appeal.

"Come on, we've got to hurry," he urged. "Help me lift her out. She isn't heavy."

I had an impulse to knock him down. If there was any lifting to be done I wanted to do it alone. Then I remembered that you can't walk into a shop and make a purchase of any kind without assistance.

In another twenty minutes the man would be an ugly, receding memory—nothing more.

Another thought struck me, incredible at such a time. I hadn't even asked her name. "I don't know her name," I protested, my voice suddenly out of control. "Tell me her name—then I'll help you."

He seemed startled and taken aback by my sudden vehemence. "You can give her any name that suits your fancy."

HE LOST his temper then, for the first time. "Do you want me to give you a catalogue of women's names? Gloria, Anne, Helen—the face that launched a thousand ships—Barbara, Janice—pick one quickly, and let's get on with this!"

His features hardened. "The police won't be interested in your romantic ideas. They'll put you through a grilling. You'll have to know something about her, not just her name alone."

The shock of the sudden raid must have thrown me off

my rocker. I still felt that she ought to have a name.

I knew that if I named her under pressure I might regret it later. But I had no choice. *Claire*, I thought. *Claire will do for now.*

I stepped quickly to the man's side, and together we lifted Claire out of the tank, and set her on her feet.

In the tank, with her eyes closed, her beauty had seemed breathtaking. But the instant she was on her feet facing me, the instant she opened her eyes and looked straight at me I couldn't speak at all.

"Say something to her!" the man urged. "You've got to get acquainted fast. Speak up—she'll answer you!"

I cleared my throat. "I'm John, Claire," I said. "Look at me, Claire. Don't be afraid."

She had never seen me before, of course, but I knew that an artificial memory picture of my general aspect had been skillfully stippled into her mind.

Her voice was low and musical, and it matched in all respects the wondrous beauty of her features. "John," Claire said.

I KNEW THAT a bond of sympathy and understanding could only be established between us if I talked to her at first about simple things—the

few simple things a man and a woman meeting under stress and, sharing certain basic memory patterns, would have in common.

"Yes, I'm John, Claire," I reiterated. "Do you like me?"

She stared at me as if puzzled. Her words came slowly. "I like you," she said.

I leaned forward, and put my arm about her shoulder. "I am taking you away with me, Claire," I told her. "You have never seen the city with your own eyes. There are memories of the city in your mind, but they are not living memories. You will like the city, Claire."

"I will like the city."

I took her hand. It was warm and soft, and the fingers closed quickly on mine.

A torturing doubt had crept into my mind. So far her words had merely parroted my own. I had dangled a promise before her, had opened a gate on shining adventure that would have delighted a child. Would not a child have asked: "Will it be fun?" Or "Have you a beetle? Will we go riding?"

The man was becoming impatient. "We've got to hurry," he warned. "If the police find this room I can't answer for the consequences."

He looked steadily at me. "You've put her at her ease; she's not as startled as I was

afraid she might be. Be satisfied with that, can't you? Do you have to make love to her?"

His eyes flashed angrily when I didn't say a word. "We made her especially for you, and you're not satisfied," he complained. "You have to start playing all the stops immediately. You wouldn't do that with a new musical instrument. You'd have more sense."

HE HAD A point there, all right. But how wise had been my decision not to study him too closely. I knew that the memory of that moment would always hold emotional overtones of ugliness for me. It would always make the illusion a little less than perfect, a sordid reminder that I had not met her in a moonlit garden at the home of an old and trusted friend.

He had nothing further to say, and neither did I. I followed his advice, and together we walked Claire out of the vault, and along a corridor thronged with flickering shadows and up a narrow flight of stairs to the shop.

There were two police officers waiting for us in the shop, close to the big metal helmet which gave the customers the kind of illusions that could shut out the law completely. For us the policemen were

real, and they were earnest.

The instant they saw us they did a slow take. One was burly, with muscular shoulders, and a florid, granite-firm face. The other was a skinny bantam-weight.

The burly cop did all of the talking. The instant he saw us he asked: "You two together?"

The man answered for me. "Mr. Tabor is one of our regular customers," he said quickly. "This is his wife."

The officer planted his hands on his hips, and looked Claire up and down. "Married folk, eh? Did you put on the helmets together?"

I knew that I had to think fast. The question was a deliberately insulting one, obviously designed to trap us.

"I just dropped in to make an appointment for next week," I said. "Mrs. Tabor doesn't take emotional illusion therapy."

The officer grinned. "No repressions, eh?"

IF CLAIRE had really been my wife, the question would have infuriated me. I became angry anyway. The cop saw the flushed look come into my face, and it aroused his suspicions.

He moved closer to Claire and studied her face. "Been married long?"

Claire shook her head. Such reticence wasn't natural in a woman, and I could see that the officer felt that he had scored a triumph.

"I shouldn't think your husband would need emotional illusion therapy if you've just been married," he said. "I'm curious to know just how long you've been married. Seven months? A year?"

Claire didn't say a word.

The officer looked at her. "It's none of my business, I suppose," he said. "But it makes a difference. If you were married recently, you shouldn't need emotional illusion therapy at all—and neither should your husband.

"It's an important thing to get straight. In fact, there are laws against illusion therapy for the newly-married. There's a waiting list, you know; and if a lot of honeymooners crowd in when there's no real reason for them to compensate for anything, the State suffers in the end."

He looked at Claire again, even more steadily. "Now suppose you answer my question. Just how long have you been married?"

Claire said: "John is my husband. I like John. John likes me."

That did it. The officer swung on me. "Can't she answer simple questions?" he de-

manded. "What is she—a moron?"

"Wait a minute now—" I protested.

He didn't give me a chance to calm down. He beckoned to Skin-and-Bones, and the little bantamweight grabbed my arm from behind. "We'll have to take you both in for questioning! She must have something to conceal—or she'd speak up."

I LOST MY head completely then; I saw red. I straightened my shoulders, wrenched my arm free and gave Skin-and-Bones a violent shove. Then, without turning, I grabbed Claire by the wrist, and we started for the door.

Instantly the burly cop stepped in front of us, and barred our path. "Now you're really in trouble! You've attacked an officer in the performance of his duty."

There was only one thing to do. I took a slow step backward, and sent my right fist crashing against his jaw. I put all of my strength into the blow, counting on the advantage of surprise. I followed through with a hard left to the stomach, the kind of jab that had served me well on Venus Base on a good many occasions.

He let out a yell, staggered back, and collapsed with a

dizzy swaying of his entire bulk.

I gripped Claire's wrist again. "Trust me, and don't look back," I whispered urgently. "We've got to keep moving!"

We were out of the shop before the big cop could flatten out on the floor. We ran swiftly across the pavement outside, and climbed into my beetle.

"You made him sit down!" Claire gasped.

"For a minute," I whispered. "I took the bark out of him, but not the bite. When he gets up a general alarm will go out, and then we'll be in the deadliest kind of danger."

Swiftly the beetle picked up speed, sweeping up the driveway with a dull roar. I looked at Claire, sitting straight and still at my side. I felt a fierce surge of exaltation. I'd broken the law for a beautiful woman for the first time in my life.

We were getting acquainted fast.

PERHAPS it was the heady wine of exhilaration which made me reckless. But I said something to her that I had wanted to say in the shop, in defiance of the man's presence.

"Claire," I whispered.

She looked at me as if startled. "Claire is my name."

"Sure, I know," I said. "You just said you liked me.

Could you say, 'I love you!'"

"I love you," Claire said. Her voice was strangely toneless, automatic.

"Say it again," I urged.

"I love you," Claire said.

There it was; but it just didn't mean anything to her. I could tell by the way she said it.

Would it mean anything later? Whether it would or not, right at the moment I knew I'd have to think and move fast. When a general alarm goes out every traffic tower becomes a scanning trap. With luck, you can outwit a Security Police network on the human level; the law isn't infallible, and never was. But when invisible beams fasten on you, and start working you over, the odds against you really start mounting.

Put a frog in a glass of water—any ordinary bullfrog, mottled green and brown—and it will start shedding skin cells at a prodigious rate. No two frogs are exactly alike, and a frog in a glass would have little chance of keeping its identity a secret from a determined biologist.

We were in the same kind of trap. I knew that before we could travel a mile, identity-ray projectors would scan my skin, hair and optic disks. They would scan me from head to toe, with scant regard

for my modesty. They wouldn't miss a square inch, and the whorl-findings would be flashed to Central Identification; and at Central my name disk would slide from the big general file, and go clicking into an emergency alarm slot.

They'd have me tabbed in nothing flat.

I REACHED over, and gripped Claire's arm. "When we get out—keep close to me," I warned. "We've got to make a dash for it."

I halted the beetle in the middle of the block, flush with the curb.

The old subway entrance was fifty feet away. I knew we'd have to reach it in a quick sprint. As we turned from the car a siren started screaming, and out of the corner of my eye I could see that a police beetle was heading straight toward us from a distance of perhaps two hundred feet.

Directly ahead the level was blocked. I reached for Claire's hand and we started off.

"Don't look back!" I warned.

Surprisingly, Claire was good at running. She ran swiftly at my side, her feet clattering on the hard pavement. The siren sound rose higher, became a shrill, terrifying drone. Half way down the block three

Security Police officers descended from a careening beetle, and raced toward us, letting the car plunge on under automatic controls.

It was then that Claire made her first serious mistake. My advice must have made a deep impression on her, for she kept close to me as I ran; too close. Thinking she was at least two feet from me I swerved sharply, and collided with her, hurling her violently back against a traffic guidepost.

The post was magnetically energized. It caught and held her firmly, and a chill struck at my heart. I grasped her by both shoulders and stared at her in alarm. "Hold perfectly still!" I warned. "One wrench will free you, but you've got to stand firm!"

OBVIOUSLY, there was a band of metal under her dress. It shocked me to realize that I hadn't even had time to ask the man about that. Just how much metal had been used to manufacture Claire?

When I had helped the man lift her from the tank, her body had seemed soft and yielding enough. But just how much metal had been used? A band less than six inches wide would have held her fast to a magnetized traffic post. But what if Claire was more of an

artificial woman than I had dreamed?

It was one hell of a time to have such thoughts. Grimly I told myself that metal magnetized to only a moderate extent wouldn't hold fast if I gave it a really violent wrench.

I exerted all my strength, and Claire swung clear. As she lurched forward into my arms one of the running officers opened fire on us. The bullet went wild, splintering the traffic post at its base. I grabbed Claire's wrist and we started running again.

She was still good at it. It seemed only an instant before we reached the subway entrance and were swept into its dark, protective embrace.

As the clamor from outside fell away our feet set up a hollow echoing that resounded through the darkness until even the terrifying siren wail dwindled to a far-off, ghostly mockery of sound.

Then we stopped for breath, and Claire swayed toward me. I caught her in my arms and held her tightly, whispering words of reassurance to her until her trembling ceased.

III

CLAIRE continued to keep close to me as we moved forward through the echoing darkness, her face

mirroring a strange, new wonder. The blue steel tracks seemed to fascinate her. She kept stopping to stare at them; once she bent and ran her fingers over a gleaming rail, back and forth, as if the coolness of the metal surprised and delighted her.

There was one rail I was careful not to touch, even with my feet, as I ran. It was known as the third rail, and touching it was supposed to bring bad luck; the superstition was as ancient as the tracks themselves.

How it originated nobody knew. Maybe when people rode on the trains centuries ago young daredevils descended into the tunnel and ran recklessly along the third rail until a train came roaring toward them. It would have been a game—wild, reckless and fearfully dangerous—quite as mentally intoxicating as filling the chambers of a primitive handgun with six bullets, pressing the gun to a vital center, and letting your life or death be decided by a single, quick turn of the revolving cylinder.

How many of the young daredevils had leapt aside in time? How many had died hideously beneath grinding wheels, their bodies crushed and mutilated without reason, primitive victims of the old Freudian "death-wish"?

It's curious how the human mind will seize on strange ancient rites and customs in moments of great peril, as if there was something in human nature which made the dangers and follies of the remote past seem an audacious pathway by which modern man could escape to a more primitive level of consciousness. When men lived with their whole bodies, and not just with their minds alone, danger took on an intoxicating, heady quality which our own age has lost.

"Why do we walk here?" Claire asked.

"Don't be frightened," I said. "We'll come to an exit soon."

Her next question startled me by its childlike innocence. "Will it stay dark?"

"No," I assured her. "We'll go up out of the darkness into light."

I KEPT looking at her face. She wasn't a child in her beauty, her strange and vibrant warmth. Why did I keep forgetting that I had what few men before me had ever possessed—the rare grace and loveliness of a perfect illusion?

Her perfection was absolute. Could any man with the blood warm in his veins have asked for more? There was something eerily poetic about her speech. She spoke of darkness,

light, fire, walking, running, as if each new experience was the personification of some elemental force, much as a child looking up at the new moon might croon with pleasure, and ask to be taken for a ride through the night sky in a chariot of fire.

What right had I to feel disappointed? I told myself that I ought to feel grateful and very humble in the presence of that kind of thinking, imagining.

But what I told myself, and what I wanted with every mad impulse of my heart and brain, were two different things. A man wants to be able to swing an adored woman around impulsively, and whisper: "Darling, remember that tune? Remember the last time we heard it? Remember how funny you looked with your strawberry curls whipped by the wind? Remember how rough the sea looked, with the whitecaps dancing up and down? Remember the fishermen coming in from the beach, and how their nets caught and held the sunlight?"

"Remember, darling? Remember, remember? The balcony was just like this one, but you look even more beautiful by moonlight. What are we waiting for? Come on, let's dance!"

She saw it before I did, the

light flooding down over the tracks a hundred feet ahead. She gasped with delight, and broke into a run.

I STARED at her, startled. It was her first completely impulsive act, breaking away from me like that without a word. Maybe she had a better brain than I had dreamed.

When I caught up with her, she was out of breath from running and my hope leapt high. But then she spoke, and something went dead inside of me. "I did not want the light to go away."

I looked at her. "Is that why you ran so fast—to catch the light?"

She nodded, obviously pleased by my quick understanding. A child mind, poetic and strange.

I stared up at the platform looming darkly through the shadows. Very carefully I measured the distance with my eyes. "I'm going to put my arm around your waist and lift you up," I told her. "Do you understand?"

"No," she said.

I stared at her in dismay. "Well—hold still, anyway," I pleaded.

For the first time I put both my arms around her, and held her tight. I was aware of her breathing, the rise and fall of her bosom.

A line from a half-forgotten poet flashed through my mind: *Man begins by loving love and ends by loving a woman, but a woman begins by loving a man and ends by loving love.*

I TOLD MYSELF angrily that such a thought at such a moment was absurd, and I forced myself to counter-balance it by repeating to myself another line: *Love is a conflict between reflexes and reflections.*

I could feel her trembling as I tightened my hold on her waist. "Up we go!" I whispered.

She wasn't very heavy. It's curious how, when you get started on quotations, you can't easily stop. Another line came to me, urging me to make haste. *Dost thou love life? Then do not squander time, for that is the stuff that life is made of.*

She wasn't heavy, but lifting her to the edge of the platform nearly wrenched my arms from their sockets. The platform was three feet above my head, even when I stood on tiptoe, and Claire let me do all of the hoisting.

I lifted her over the edge and waited until she started crawling away from me on her hands and knees. Then I climbed up beside her and helped her to her feet.

We went up the crumbling stone steps into the sunlight.

For how many generations had the abandoned subway entrances loomed as symbols of escape to a freedom and security beyond Society's control? Tradition had left them standing for a purpose, surely, for each one led to the same central wasteland of crumbling stone and steel.

When you enter the ruins, with no intention of turning back, resolute of mind and will, the first half hour is the worst. You're without firm anchorage of any sort. You know that eventually you'll find a place to live, you'll make friends. But until you do your life hangs by a thread.

No man or woman can go it alone in the ruins. You've got to take root fast. You've got to send sturdy roots deep into the strange new soil before a bullet crashes into your spine, or a knife buries itself between your shoulder blades.

I TIGHTENED my hold on Claire's hand, and we moved along the ancient streets in complete silence. We walked past rubble-choked intersections which had once pulsed with light and traffic. The buildings were dark with age, their walls rusted and overgrown with climbing vines. The doors swung idly on their

hinges, and there were ominous, blood-hued shadows and sagging signs everywhere.

Bakery. Tilson's Gas Station. Cut Rate Drugs.

So far not even a shadow had crossed our path.

Was the ruin deserted? I'd heard of ruins abandoned in superstitious fear, ruins where women—made desperate by loneliness—had refused to be fought over. They'd done their own choosing, picking one man and killing four, laughing as they discouraged all further pursuit.

Outcast girls were often crack marksmen. I pictured myself crushing such a woman in my arms, a man of her own choosing, crushing her and holding her while I watched the fury and contempt in her eyes turn to an unfamiliar warmth which startled her, and widened her eyes, and brought her lips tight against mine.

There were depths in human psychology I could never hope to fathom.

I saw a door standing half-open, and on impulse kicked it wide. With my arm about Claire's waist, I pushed forward into the shadows.

The music was a wild, frenzied burst of sound. It came from a towering, rainbow-colored shape of metal and glass which stood against a crum-

bling wall spattered over with dark stains.

There were several tables standing about, and at one of them sat a girl with jet-black hair, and wide, startled eyes. She was staring straight at me in the gloom.

Quickly my eyes passed over her, lingering on the one-piece, silvery-textured suit, and the bared right leg with the small stocking knife held well in place. There was mud on her ankles, and her shoes were worn down from running on pavements of crumbling stone and gravel like a hunted creature of the night.

"Come in, and shut the door!" she pleaded.

THE DOOR seemed to come loose in my hands. It closed with a frightful rasp, and a chink of light came through from outside, spilling across the floor and pointing directly at me like an accusing finger.

I said automatically: "Were you waiting for someone?"

Her eyes bored into mine in a level, challenging stare. "For you."

I recognized her then. She had gone out of my life fast, and returned fast. Only, this time, there was no punched metal tape gleaming on her palm, no Security Guard watching us from the shadows.

Poetry again, a crazy line flashing through my mind. *Her young breasts brightening into sighs.* The fantasy I'd succumbed to in the vault had come true; I could only stare, moisten my lips, and wonder if I had gone quite mad.

I looked at Claire, standing straight and still at my side. She was staring at the outcast girl with friendly interest, as a child might stare at a performing bear in a carnival of animals.

How close can a man feel to two women at the same time? If you hold one in your arms, and she's tender and yielding, and her lips are fire, can you look over her shoulder at another woman with a childlike stare who speaks in monosyllables, and whispers: "You'll never know how much you mean to me, my darling!"

IN SOME ways Claire was closer to me than the girl at the table. I had held her in my arms too; I knew her name—and how could I fail to be stirred by her trust and utter dependency?

Don't be a fool, a voice whispered deep inside me. You're drawn to both women. It's as natural as breathing for a man to be drawn to two women—a dozen. It can happen at any time.

Surprisingly, Claire's hand

had crept into mine. Her fingers tightened and relaxed, then tightened again.

I tried to keep my voice calm. "How did you know I was coming here? You couldn't have followed me when I left the vault. I had my own beetle, and I drove fast."

"And looked behind to make sure?" she inquired, mockingly.

She laughed at my sudden alarm.

The police raid *had* puzzled me. Emotional illusion therapy shops are seldom raided before noon. Treatments do not, as a rule, take place in the early hours of the morning, and what herdsman would send beaters across an entire mountainside to capture one goat?

Had she actually followed me from the brain vault to the therapy shop, and notified the police? The thought seemed incredible; I rejected it, even before she said: "When I left the vault I knew we'd meet again. Your need was as desperate as mine."

Her eyes brightened with a sudden, wild yearning, with a hint of voluptuousness startling in its candor.

"Your need was as desperate as mine, and I knew we'd meet in the ruins. I knew you'd come in search of me, with the memory of my lips burning yours. I knew it would be only

a matter of hours until you found me."

SUDDENLY, she seemed to see Claire for the first time, to realize the significance of Claire. Her eyes narrowed, and her voice became less assured. "You did not come alone," she said. "Where did you find this girl? Who is she?"

"Her name is Claire," I said. "I did not meet her here, and I did not come here in search of you."

Her eyes widened in swift amazement, then narrowed again, fastening on Claire in angry disbelief. She half rose from the table, the quickness of her breathing revealing how deeply she had been hurt.

To appease her I said quickly, "We had some trouble with the police. I could have identified myself and straightened it out, but Claire needed my help desperately. They could have held her on a technical charge, just out of spite. A minor infraction, of no importance, but you know how the police can be when they're envious of another man's interest in a beautiful woman."

"You're interested in her, are you?"

"I've known Claire for a long time," I lied. "She's younger than you'd suspect—just turned eighteen. You ought to realize it's natural

enough for a man my age to take a fatherly interest in a second cousin as young and inexperienced as Claire. There's nothing serious between us, if that's what you've been thinking."

"That's exactly what I've been thinking," the girl from the vault said.

For a moment I was afraid that her anger would continue to mount. But after what must have been for her a bad moment, she resumed her original position at the table, making no effort to conceal the shape-ly grace of her bared right knee.

"That was cattish of me," she said. "Why shouldn't I believe you? You are not the kind of man who would allow himself to be trapped in a lie—even to a woman so foolishly and recklessly emotional that she would hold you quite blameless."

SHE CAST down her eyes suddenly, allowing her fingers to stray for an instant to the securely-sheathed stocking knife.

"It is easy enough to say that jealousy is for children. It is easy enough to say that a man or a woman in love should be completely an adult. But we know better—you and I. You have been to Venus Base, and

I have been denied a woman's right to happiness."

She raised her eyes and looked directly at Claire, her lips curving in a smile. "Hello, Claire!" she said. "I'm Agnes."

She motioned to a chair. "Sit down, Claire. You look tired."

Claire sat down quietly and folded her hands in her lap. She looked at me, as if to make sure I did not disapprove.

"Tell me about yourself, Claire," Agnes urged. "Just how did you get in trouble with the police?"

I started to intervene, but was stopped by a sudden change in Agnes' expression. Her eyes had widened in alarm; she was leaning sharply forward, gripping the table with both hands.

IV

I SWUNG about. Three men had entered the tavern and seated themselves at tables near the door. They were surly-looking ruffians, heavy of muscle and bone, and they sat watching us with a stillness that was ominous.

The one nearest to me was big—really big. I could see at a glance that he had been in a good many fights, and that each fight had left its mark on him. His nose was badly battered, crooked and flattened at

the tip. His ears were misshapen, mere fleshy lobes flattened grotesquely, so that they spread out over his cheeks like crushed cauliflowers. His right cheek was further defaced by a livid scar, and there was something about the scar which made me see him in another situation—facing three or four men trying with insane rage to cripple him for life.

It was a mind's-eye vision, but it was so vivid I could see the flash of the knife as it grazed his cheek; I could see him backing away without a sound, a faint smile of contempt curling his lip.

He certainly wasn't a very handsome-looking baby, but all of my instincts warned me that what he lacked in looks he could make up for in other ways.

He was staring at Claire. Not at Agnes, but at Claire, with a curious intent look, his eyebrows arched as if in amazement.

His attitude did not surprise me. Girls like Claire were not often seen in the ruins. In the ruins, striking beauty really stood out. Put a flaming orchid in a rock garden overgrown with weeds, and that one solitary bloom will create a world of its own, so dazzling that the wrong kind of man will kill to possess it.

It didn't take Ugly Face

long to recover from his surprise. When I saw his eyes leave Claire's face and pass down over her, I had a pretty good idea how long it would take him to whip out a knife.

WHAT I did was the logical outgrowth of what I was—a telepath, a man who could read the mind of an adversary in a moment of deadly danger.

There was one table between us. The instant he started to rise I leapt toward it, gripped it firmly and raised it high. The speed with which I moved seemed to cast a spell upon him. He froze facing me, his hand arrested half way to his hip.

Before the spell could snap I hurled the table straight at him.

This is Ugly Face, and you've hit him with a table smack on the chest! Try it sometime. Shudder to the impact of solid wood cracking against muscle and bone. It will make you want to cry out with the torturing uncertainty of it. Something will tighten inside you, you'll have a wild impulse to follow up the assault with flailing fists, a bellow of rage.

But if you're wise, you won't move in too quickly.

The table spun Ugly Face around, sent him staggering back against the wall. First

one knee gave way, then the other. He went down in a lopsided kind of sprawl, and that was the moment I picked to hurl myself upon him.

He let out a yell, and drew a knife from his hip with a swiftness which said the play had been rehearsed and put into actual practice a thousand times, with a trip-hammer efficiency. But it couldn't have been too perfect a play, for the instant I planted a blow right under his chin his neck stretched out a foot and the knife went clattering.

To make sure he'd had enough, I knelt beside him, raised up his head, and asked him pointblank. He didn't answer me, and I saw that there was no recognition at all in his eyes. I decided that it would be safe to let him sag back, and go to sleep.

THE INSTANT I arose, the tallest of Ugly Face's two friends was right over me with a drawn gun. I'll say this for Number Two. Despite the massiveness of his shoulders, and his ill-proportioned wrestler's look he had a refined face.

Mild, almost baby-blue eyes he had, and a mouth that was smiling almost gently at me as he took careful aim.

"I saw what you did to my friend," he said. "I can't let that happen to me, can I?"

He might have added, "It's a nice evening for dying, isn't it?", but I moved quickly to forestall him. I jack-knifed upward, and caught him in the stomach with one sharply bent elbow, and the top of my skull.

He went down like a segmented plastic dummy, dropped from a cut wire in a garment display case. His knees folded, and he toppled forward and then back, as I lashed at his jaw with a sharp right, and delivered a left-handed blow to his solar plexus that almost broke my wrist.

He flattened out at my feet.

Number Three was still seated. I looked up quickly and saw that he was watching me, his expression strangely impassive. He was sturdily-built, but far less formidable-looking than Ugly Face; I wasn't too worried about what might happen if he came at me with a knife.

I need not have worried at all. He either saw the gun lying at my feet, and decided to play safe—or he just had no stomach for a stand-up, and drag-out fight. But whatever he decided or thought, his behavior was incredible. He simply rose quietly from the table, nodded at me, and walked out of the tavern without a backward glance.

I swung about to face the two women. Agnes had leapt to

her feet, and was staring at me with shining eyes. I looked at Claire, and was amazed to discover that her eyes were more puzzled than alarmed. There was no warmth in them; if she was relieved to see the two ruffians lying limp and unmoving on the floor, she gave no sign.

I FELT suddenly closer to Agnes. She, at least, could share my alarm; I could reach her more quickly with an appeal based on simple common sense.

"We've got to find a safer place to stay," I said. "This was an ancient entertainment center. It still is—to men who think of women in only one frame of reference. You must have known that when you came here."

She nodded, her eyes searching my face. "Yes, I did. Does it disturb you so much?"

"Why do you ask me a question like that?" I flared. "If one of those brutes had started to paw you—"

A mocking look came into her eyes. "There was no danger of that. They had eyes only for Claire. I suppose I should feel insulted, but I happen to be a realist. If a man is primitive enough, a girl with Claire's kind of beauty will drag him down very quickly to the level of a savage with a bow and

arrow, mounted on a wild stallion."

The mockery in her eyes grew more pronounced. "A woman must come to a place like this if she doesn't wish to be claimed too quickly. Few men would have the courage to come here alone, and for a woman there is safety in numbers. I knew you'd never find me if I hid myself away in an upstairs room, in one of the safer places."

"We've got to find a safe place," I said. "Immediately."

I turned to Claire. "When we leave here, we're going to walk very fast until we come to a place that looks safe," I said. "Do you understand?"

Agnes laughed. "You can tell, I suppose."

"It may sound crazy to you, but I can tell if a building *isn't* safe. Do you want to come with us?"

She looked at me steadily, the mockery gone from her eyes. "Just try and lose me."

Holding Claire's hand firmly, I walked to the door and kicked it open. It rasped on rusty hinges; for an instant, I feared that it might collapse. But then, slowly, it swung shut behind us.

I WENT out into the street again, with Agnes on my right, and Claire on my left, and no man ever had two more

physically disturbing companions.

Of one thing I was convinced. Agnes couldn't know how I felt about Claire. Physically, Claire was the more perfect of the two; but there was that strange child-look in her eyes, the complete lack of adult understanding which chilled and disturbed me every time I glanced at her.

Agnes, at least, would have understood my desperation. She would have understood why I had turned to an android for warmth and sympathy—if I had chosen to tell her.

Did she suspect the truth already? I tried to read her expression for the answer as we moved along, hugging the dark, ancient buildings. But she hardly glanced at Claire, and her mind told me nothing. That, too, puzzled me. I had never before met a woman whose mind I could not penetrate at all.

Had she told me the truth about herself? Had she really come to the ruins in search of me? Was I that important to her?

In spite of Claire, in spite of myself, Agnes' intoxicating nearness overcame me for an instant, as it had in the vault. I had an impulse to stop, take her violently into my arms

again, and tell her how glad I was that I had found her.

The building was gray and towering, with at least twenty vacantly staring windows and a great door. The feeling of security as we came abreast of it was strong in me, overpowering. I knew that it would be a safe sanctuary.

The power was so strong in me that I knew instantly that it was a building of numerous empty rooms. I knew that the rooms were huge, and littered with rubbish.

I HAD NEVER been to the ruins before, but I knew that the building would remain safe for as long as our luck held. In the ruins, as elsewhere, men and women preferred a few, well-beaten trails. Ninetenths of the buildings remained unoccupied simply because they were too bleak and forbidding to appeal to the human herd-instinct for proximity in danger.

I turned, and spoke to Agnes. "We'll never find a safer building than this. We were lucky to have found it so soon."

I tightened my hold on Claire's hand, and we passed into a dark interior; we climbed a flight of narrow stairs to a double row of rooms which ran along both

sides of a dismal, refuse-littered corridor.

With the two women at my side I went into one of the rooms and shut the door.

It was huge and completely unfurnished, with cracked walls and a high, sagging ceiling festooned with cobwebs. Through the two dust-smudged windows we could see a patch of sunset sky.

There was an empty crate standing in one corner, still bearing a faded label: *California Figs*.

Claire sat down on it and looked at me. "Is this our new home?"

It was the most intelligent question she had ever asked.

I took her hand and pressed it gently. "Yes, Claire."

"She's taking too much for granted," Agnes said. "But we should be here long enough to get acquainted and reach a real understanding. There are a good many things I'd like to ask Claire."

She turned to me with the mocking look in her eyes again. "You won't mind, will you, if I share this room with Claire? You can sleep in one of the rooms across the corridor."

THE REQUEST took me by complete surprise. It was a direct frontal attack which I

hadn't anticipated—more against Claire than against myself.

I was tempted to put up a furious argument, then thought better of it.

Sleep across the corridor! In the ruins, that sort of thing was ridiculous on the face of it. If a woman couldn't trust a man that far, under circumstances so desperate, her presence in the ruins at all was a mockery and a sham.

But what could I say? How could I tell her that Claire needed looking after? Could I say; I don't want you to give Claire any ideas she can't assimilate without advice from me! I don't want you to confuse and frighten Claire with jealous-woman talk. She's just a sweet, innocent child, Claire is, and if you're going to start being cattish, you may inflict a grievous mental wound on her."

How could I tell Agnes that? If I encouraged her to start thinking of Claire as a rival, how could I know where it would end? How much would she find out about Claire if I left them alone together? Could she be trusted to look after Claire? The thought that the night might end in a violent quarrel, with Claire distraught and abandoned, was appalling to me.

But I decided that I'd be risking too much to make an issue of it then and there.

Could she be trusted not to harm Claire in any way? I decided to take the risk. I'd go across the corridor and leave the door of my room ajar. I was a light sleeper, and if anyone came into the building during the night I'd surely know, and wake up in time.

It was better than risking a jealousy flareup immediately. I needed sleep if only as a safety precaution, to keep my nerves alert.

I PRESSED Claire's hand again, looking defiantly at Agnes.

"I'll see you in the morning, Claire," I promised. "I'll be very near you. Do you understand? Agnes will see that no harm comes to you."

I whispered it, so that Agnes wouldn't hear. Then I turned back to Agnes. "There are a good many things I'd like to discuss with you," I said. "But they can wait until morning."

She smiled, and put both her hands on my shoulder. Before I could stop her she kissed me, so hard her teeth bruised my lips.

She stood back abruptly, triumphant mockery in her eyes. "Good night, John," she whispered.

Claire was staring at us both, her face strangely flushed. For the first time a curious, pained look had come into her eyes.

I went up to her again, and patted her shoulder.

"Don't be disturbed, Claire. That was just Agnes' way of saying 'Good night!'"

I turned then, and walked out of the room, Agnes' lips still burning mine. She had deliberately hurt Claire, derided her, and I hated myself for allowing it to pass.

The room across the corridor was as big, empty and dismal as the room I had left. It contained a broken-down chair, a small table, and a chest of drawers dark with mildew. The windows were shut tight; and the ventilation was so bad that it hardly seemed a fit habitation for the rats which I could hear scurrying through the walls.

I tried to open one of the windows, and gave it up as a bad job. I was too tired to care. I lay down on the floor, and almost immediately fell into a deep sleep.

CHAPTER V

HOW LONG I slept I had no way of knowing. A vision of Venus

Base was before me. I had my arm about the slim waist of a girl, and she was pressing close to me, and I could hear her excited breathing.

"Look down there, John," she whispered. "Kiss me first—then look."

A vision of Venus Base, and a woman's lips on mine. "Look down there, John. The men have courage, I'll grant you that; and the women are very beautiful. But they are traitors to society, and must be punished."

I saw her arm go out, white and slim. She was pointing downward, but I had eyes only for the whiteness of her flesh. I wanted to tell her how beautiful she was, and I was angry because she kept insisting that I concern myself with other matters.

"John, look down," she pleaded. "There are at least five thousand conspirators. Each must be identified and brought to justice. Tell me. Do you recognize any of the men below? Any of the women?"

I lowered my eyes at last to her bidding. Eight or ten couples were threading a narrow pass at the base of a cliff. The men wore Venus Base uniforms; the women were slender and very beautiful, with whitely-gleaming shoulders and lustrous dark hair whipped by the wind.

They were heading for a rock cavern on the far side of the lake, and one man and a girl had run on ahead and were almost at the entrance.

CLOSE TO my ear a soft voice was whispering: "They are defying society, John, setting up a new society of their own where men will be free to choose their own mates in completely primitive fashion.

"Surely there is no greater crime against future generations!" The voice grew tender and cajoling. "We must fight them, John—you and I together. It was arranged that we should meet in the Computation Vault, and you have been watched ever since.

"Listen carefully, John: You were denied the right to marry so that you might become desperate enough to help Society fight this conspiracy. The raid on the illusion therapy shop was arranged so that you would bring Claire here and I could talk to you as I am doing now.

"There is a thought bond between us, John. It is a gentle thing and not compulsive. But you must hear me out, and I have come to you between sleeping and waking, brought your mind close to mine so that there will be no barriers of mistrust between us.

I groaned and turned on my side, fighting the voice as a beguiling false thing that made no sense. But it did not pause. "You are under the hypnosis of love, John. Your need for me will make you forget Claire. When I kissed you just now I knew, I could tell.

"You will be permitted to marry, but I will be the woman you select. We will go to Venus Base together and fight this conspiracy. We will fight it with the aid of your extra-sensory faculties. Society needs telepaths desperately."

I could feel her hands on my face, and the yielding pressure of her body against mine became startlingly real again.

"John," came in an insistent whisper. "John, listen to me. *Do you really think that Claire is an android?*"

THERE WAS a sudden stillness between, as if the words themselves had a fateful quality and she dared not go on too quickly.

I tried to rise, to free myself from her clinging embrace, but somehow I couldn't.

"Oh, it is all so clever, John, so carefully planned. The conspirators select reckless young spacemen, cut off from life and fulfillment by what they shrewdly and falsely call the tyranny of the Giant Comput-

er. They appeal to them through the android shop scheme. Don't you see, John? The rebel women pretend to be androids.

"They *pretend* to be androids, John. The biogenetic norm data of each pilot is carefully examined in advance, and women who conform to the data of individual pilots are sold to that pilot in the shop. The women have to keep up a skillful pretense of having child minds.

"Until they are in space, John, and the pretense can be thrown aside. Then the pilot is told. Since the woman conforms in all respects to what he has always sought in a woman, he is not likely to turn back. If he is human, he is not likely to regret having thrown in his lot with her. If a woman is beautiful enough there is no folly a man will not commit for her sake."

HER WORDS seemed to fade, and the scene at the base of the cliff dissolved. I was inside a cave, vast shadowy and filled with smoke. Human figures moved waveringly through the gloom. I saw a man with his head bandaged, a woman supporting him. There were crimson stains on the bandage, and his hair was a solid mass of clotted blood.

Some of the men were seat-

ed; others stood straight and resolute in shafts of reddening sunlight. But each was accompanied by a woman, and each had the look of a seasoned fighter struggling against desperate odds to preserve his independence and self-respect.

"Society is keeping the struggle secret. John. It has just begun, but it is spreading fast. So far, we have contained the rebels, have driven them from the central camps to solitary outposts. But reinforcements keep pouring in. The android shop scheme is working dangerously well.

"A hundred spacemen arrive daily, and the women inspire them in the struggle, stand by their sides through bloodshed and despair. Eventually, we will have a formidable army to repel."

I awoke completely then. The cave vanished, and was replaced by the firm contours of reality. At first I saw only the dim oval of Agnes' face, a white and moving blur. Early morning sunlight was streaming into the room through the dust-smudged windowpanes, but it took me an instant to realize that she was kneeling by my side and bending close above me.

Her face grew clear suddenly. "You must listen to me, John," she pleaded; "you must believe me. I, too, have un-

sual extra-sensory faculties. When I shut my eyes, scenes not present to the senses present themselves to me with a startling clearness. I can see scenes on Venus Base now, just as you have seen them. Our thoughts, our inmost thoughts, have been joined by that bright inner vision, by the clairvoyance which is our strength.

"I will be your woman, John Tabor—and together we will fight this conspiracy and destroy it. We will share other visions on Venus, and every move that the conspirators make will be known to us. We'll inform Society of their every maneuver, and we will not rest until they have been brought to justice."

I STRUGGLED to rise, but she clung to me with a desperate urgency. "You are really awake, John. Did you think that you were dreaming?"

She seemed to sense my confusion, the tormenting questions that had come unbidden into my mind. "Really awake," she insisted. "Do you need proof? Shall I give you proof?"

Before I could reply she put her arms around me and her face against my neck. She kissed me, hard.

"Get up, Agnes," a cold voice said.

The sound of Claire's dress was no more than a rustle, but I knew she was standing very close to us, that I had only to look up quickly to catch her eye.

Agnes stiffened in my arms, but I did not look up until Claire spoke again. "I told you to get up, Agnes; I'll not warn you again."

I had been right about Claire's nearness. She was standing almost directly over us, and her eyes locked with mine the instant I pushed Agnes away from me and rose to my knees. Claire had reached down, and drawn the stocking knife from Agnes' ankle; it glittered in her hand.

There are revelations so staggering that your mind goes off on a tangent. There is a moment of shock, of stunned disbelief, when you just can't get a firm grip on reality.

She was a changed Claire. Her eyes were shining and determined—clear and intelligent. "You are awake, John," Claire said. "She has opened your eyes more widely than you think. She is a very clever woman. Society trusts her, and is unwilling to believe that—with her great beauty and clever tongue—she will fail in her mission."

I GOT TO my feet, untangling Agnes' arms as I rose,

pushing her almost roughly aside.

I went up to Claire. "You can't be—"

"I am," Claire said.

"A real woman."

"Look at me, John. Can you doubt it?"

"The most beautiful woman I ever held in my arms," I said. "And real!"

"Yes, John."

"I was in love with you from the first instant I saw you," I said. "Did you know that?"

"I was sure of it, John. They studied your biogenetic norm data very carefully. I was the only woman they could find who is just right for you. It works both ways, John. You are just right for me."

Agnes cried: "That's a lie!"

"I think not," Claire said. "He was fascinated by you but he loves me. He loves me enough to fight for a new life of freedom and independence on Venus."

Her eyes narrowed, and she added with a candor that startled me. "Elementary sexuality can be a powerful driving force in all men—and in most women. But it doesn't become really glorious until something more imperishable enters into it. The undying love of one man for one woman—his love for her as a *person*."

AGNES' EYES narrowed and she advanced on Claire with a cold fury in her stare. "Neither of you will live to join the conspirators," she warned. "In a few minutes you will be prisoners. You will be bound and thrown into prison. Your trial and punishment will be swift, I promise you."

I knew instantly that she could make good her threat. As an agent of society, she would not have made a single warning move against us without complete assurance. I was sure that somewhere on her person a tiny signaling device had either started to operate or would do so within a matter of seconds.

I could have found and destroyed it quickly enough by disrobing her. But I knew that if she struggled furiously precious time would be lost, our peril dangerously increased.

I stared at her for an instant in stunned incredulity. She was superb and resourceful, even in her desperation; Claire seemed to have sensed that resourcefulness instinctively, and was girding herself for a physical struggle that could have resulted in disaster for us both.

I leapt forward and seized Agnes about the waist. I clamped my hand over her mouth and shouted to Claire. "Get out! I'll join you down

below. Hurry, darling—there's no time to be lost."

Agnes fought like a wild-cat, bit, clawed and scratched. I saw Claire turn and run through the door, and I heard her footsteps descending the stairs to the street.

"You'll never get away!" Agnes' voice was choked with a despairing hatred.

"We can try," I said, almost whispering it. I tightened my grip on her waist; then with a violent wrench I freed my left arm, and sent her spinning back against the wall.

I SWUNG about and headed for the door. I heard her cry out, but I did not turn. I leapt out into the corridor, and slammed the door shut behind me. There was a rusty key in the lock.

I locked the door from the outside, and headed straight down the stairs to the street. Claire was waiting for me at the foot of the stairs, standing white and motionless with one hand pressed to her throat.

"Come on," I urged; "we've got to keep moving. They'll be after us any minute now."

We joined hands and ran together out into the street. We kept close to the buildings as we ran, our shadows lengthening grotesquely before us on the deserted pavement. We skirted walls crumbling and

time-eroded, ducked in and out of refuse-littered alleyways and ran for a short distance in the open, the early-morning sunlight beating unmercifully down upon us.

We were in the open when we heard the first chill far-off drone of the sirens.

I tightened my hold on Claire's hand and whispered urgently: "We won't have time to reach a subway entrance. We'll be hemmed in from all sides. We've got to hide out while the search is on."

"Where?" Claire breathed.

A HEAD OF us was a towering structure of crumbling gray-yellow stone. I gestured toward it and we headed for the darkly yawning entrance.

We passed together in a vast, dimly-illuminated hall. On all sides of us towered incredible instruments of science crumbling into rust. We fled straight down the hall and climbed up behind a gigantic, dynamo-shaped object that vibrated hollowly as we jarred it with our bodies.

Suddenly out of the darkness a voice droned: "This is Occupational Advisory Unit 34 GH. Pick your pattern for work and living. We want you to relax fully and completely while you observe the future, as we have planned it for you.

You must have mechanical aptitude of a high order or you would not have come to this Unit.

"Take your time in choosing a profession. Wander about the hall at leisure and observe the many fascinating three-dimensional cinemascopic recordings. Study steel-welding, tool-making, metal-craft designing in all their intricate ramifications. It is *your* future you are planning here. Remember—*your* future.

"The choice you make now will influence your entire future. Remember. If you make a wise choice now half of the battle will be won."

I tightened my hold on Claire's hand. "This was an ancient occupational advisory unit building," I whispered. "What you just heard was the last gasp of an expiring free society. That metal tape recording pretends to offer a choice of occupation to the poor dupes who found their way here. But even then there was an ominous undertone: *observe the future as we have planned it for you.*"

"I know," Claire whispered. "In daring to plan our own future we may well have chosen a design for dying. But the choice had to be made; I am glad we had the courage to dare greatly."

I HAD LEARNED the trick, years ago, of keeping a warty-tight compartment of my mind alert to danger. In one little portion of my mind a whisper in the dark, an approaching faint footstep, or dark undercurrents of hostile thoughts beating in upon me, could put me instantly on the defensive.

I suddenly knew that we were not alone in the building. I gripped Claire's wrist and drew her back into the shadows. Then I leaned cautiously forward and stared down.

There was a flickering on the stone floor far below, a faint shifting of light and shadow between the projection instruments and the cinematic recording screens. I realized abruptly that someone was climbing up toward us. When I strained my ears I could hear the "someone's" faint breathing.

I should have taken the initiative then and there. I should have leapt out, carried the battle to the unseen climber. I could have quickly discovered him, and his position directly beneath me would have placed him at a disadvantage. But I waited too long, and the ugly bulk of him came suddenly into view and before I could leap to my feet he covered the distance between

us in a powerful but well-timed rush.

I only just ducked in time as he swung at me, both of his fists flailing. He was a security guard, and heavy; at his wrist was an electro-sap that could have cracked my skull like a mace described a flashing arc with his lunge, and I could hear the deadly swish of it.

He went spinning past me, shifting his weight as he went to preserve his balance. He almost thudded into the wall behind me, so great and furious had been his initial onslaught. But when he pivoted about on his heels and came swinging back toward me I was ready for him.

I HIT HIM in the stomach with a slashing right uppercut, and brought my left fist flush with his jaw with all the violence I could muster. He groaned and reeled back, and I kicked at his Achilles' tendon with the tip of my boot. The kick seemed to hurt him more than the blows; he let out a yell, ducked low, and weaved back toward me.

For a moment we traded blows, fierce and heavy; and I had to keep jabbing at him with both my fists to keep him from opening a twelve-inch gash in my chest with the electro-sap.

I floored him with one very heavy blow delivered with desperate calculation.

I'd been so busy taking care of him that it wasn't until he lay sprawled out at my feet with a little ribbon of crimson trickling from his mouth that I realized that another struggle was going on in the shadows.

I turned just in time to see Claire standing with a knife in her clasp in complete isolation from Agnes. If I'd turned a moment sooner, I might have seen Agnes emerge into view between the projection instruments, and rush straight at Claire as the guard had rushed at me. I might have seen Claire draw the knife in self-defense.

But at least I had turned in time to witness the crucial stage of the struggle, and for that I was grateful.

Agnes' eyes were narrowed and she was advancing on Claire with a cold fury in her stare. "Give me that knife!" she warned. "Give it to me, or I'll take it from you!"

"Just try!" Claire said.

Agnes grabbed Claire's wrist and swung her about. Before I could get between them they started struggling.

WHAT HAPPENED then was like a scene in a dream, fantastic, wildly terri-

ble. Agnes backed Claire against the wall and twisted her wrist cruelly. Claire resisted and fought back, but Agnes got the knife.

She let Claire break free, and then started for her. She went for Claire with the knife upraised, a killing rage in her eyes.

She went for Claire fast—too fast. Her foot slipped, and she went down face forwards; and as she fell the knife twisted in her clasp.

A look of almost childlike astonishment came into her eyes.

For one awful moment she writhed about on the floor, her fingers still clasping the knife. Then a convulsive shudder shook her. Her face twisted in agony, and a dull glaze overspread her pupils. Slowly, horribly, her eyes lidded themselves and her breathing became less harsh, finally subsiding entirely. She lay still.

If you've ever seen it happen, you'll want to forget it as quickly as possible. You won't want to be tortured by it as I was, even though for one merciful instant my mind became a recording instrument solely, a gray film which registered only that quick and involuntary act of self-destruction. I felt no horror, no shock.

I was standing motionless, staring at Claire, when four

men and four women emerged from the shadows. The men wore Venus Base uniforms; the women were all very beautiful, with skins like rose petals and large dark eyes that searched my face in eager curiosity.

A TALL, red-haired girl with sympathetic eyes went up to the limp form on the floor, knelt and made a hasty examination. After a moment she raised her eyes, and spoke to Claire. "Does he know?"

Claire shook her head.

"You'd better tell him," the girl advised.

Claire looked at me, her eyes compassionate. "Agnes was an android, John," she said. "Agnes was the most successful of a hundred android robots made and trained by

Society in strict secrecy to spy on our activities."

The red-haired girl said, "Usually our chosen mates are not told the full truth until they are safely on Venus. But when you brought Claire here, you made a dangerous situation more complicated. Our task now is to get you both to the spaceport as quickly as possible."

She smiled, "You're as good as there already, for you'll be guarded every foot of the way by members of our organization."

I looked at Claire.

She looked at me.

I thought of Venus Base, and I thought of Claire lying in my arms, her face hidden.

Just how lucky can a man be?"

