

FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

APRIL, 1956
Vol. 5 No. 3

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meet
miss
solar
system

by . . . Milton Lesser

Like everything else in the star-studded universe beauty can be a flaming question mark. But not when real wisdom takes command.

THE SUB-COMMITTEE for the Selection of a Chairman of the Board of Judges for the First Annual (Earth Reckoning) Interplanetary Beauty Contest ran the gamut from the Director Emeritus of the Anthropology Chair, Solar University, to the Under Secretary of the Department of Extra-terrestrial Conditioning (Female Division), to the President of the Board of New Hollywood Five Senses Productions, until it finally settled, as a last resort, on me.

"Mr. Juniper," a member of the Sub-Committee had told me moments after I'd disembarked on Earth as the first and only returnee from the Alpha Centauri expedition, "Mr. Juniper, you're probably the only objective male in the Solar System today regarding feminine pulchritude."

Growing up on the twenty year journey across some twenty-six trillion miles to Alpha Centauri I'd been called a lot of things, but this was a new one. On the Centauri planet they'd shaken their heads sadly at me, said it was all a mistake and dropped me into suspended animation for the return trip,

Some months ago Jack Vance thrilled us by making us an arbiter in an interstellar beauty contest. We watched the contestants parade in scintillating cosmic attire, and, as you may remember, we cast our vote for a very unusual girl. Now Milton Lesser delights us anew with a startlingly novel variation on what may well be the theme of the century—beauty that outshines the sun.

figuring twenty years wasted out of a man's life was enough, even if I were just a plain, ordinary, unconditioned, un-specialized human being.

I remember them huddled there at the makeshift spaceport before all the lights went out for a couple of decades, their rich blue pelts screening the impurities from the Centaurian air while I was bundled in every protective garment ever devised by man. Something about plain old epidermis being unable to cope with the n factor in the atmosphere.

Anyway, back to Earth I came, dreaming away twenty years. Elapsed subjective time, of course: a little over two years. But here I was, a non-freak who'd gotten on the Centauri ship by mistake, because of a mixup at the hospital where I was born, undiscovered until it was too late. You see, conditioned characteristics don't become manifest for six months and now I was back on Earth without too many ideas and no prospects for a bright future.

I later learned the Beauty Contest Sub-Committee was quite prepared to bat me over the head and shanghai me out to the asteroid Eros where the contest would be held, as unpretty a coffin-shaped slab of rock as ever you laid eyes on. It was far from necessary. My answer was one word, affirmative, no-string-attached.

I'd never earned a penny in my life, and when they mentioned the

salary I popped out from under the devirus spray, dusted the white powder off my bare shoulders, covered my nakedness there in the anti-contamination room of the Earth spaceport with a big grin, shook hands all around and said, "Yes."

A week later I was saying, "So this is Eros." Another Sub-Committee had selected the site for the Beauty Contest, I'm told. Eros, the junior-sized god of love. It certainly was appropriate.

They'd rigged up a force-field on Eros, holding out the black cold of interplanetary space and holding in Earth-normal atmosphere and artificial gravity for the benefit of the Chairman of the Board of Judges. It was to create quite a stink later, but by then I was to be called Jack the Ripper, Lord High Executioner—a miserably un-specialized terrestrial human who almost wished he'd never been sent back from Alpha Centauri.

I don't remember which reporter called me Ripper first, but it stuck. Not Jack the Ripper, not right away, but Ripper, short for Rip van Winkle, who'd also slept for twenty years, more centuries ago than I can remember. Unfortunately, my name is Jack, and from Ripper, short for Rip van Winkle, to Jack the Ripper is not a very long step, especially in view of the circumstances.

So, they set me up in my office and started parading in the associate judges to get acquainted. I couldn't get chummy with Mr. Fairview

of Venus, since he came floating in, his gills flapping up oxygen, in a water bubble. His radio squawked something about the unearthly grace of the Venusian girls and the way they're seen to best advantage in a phosphorescent sea at midnight with a trident-shaped tiara in their hair and would I somehow arrange it. As a judge, he'd be about as objective and honest as a salesman trying to sell refrigerators on Pluto.

Half an hour later, I began to understand why the Sub-Committee had selected me. It was out of sheer desperation. Mr. Jekyl of Mars pointed out that the Martian mamzells looked good with their water sacs distended and rouged. Mr. Cantrell of Titan went into a song-and-dance about the red crystals of the Titan misses. Mrs. Maybanks of Jupiter nearly scared me out of my wits.

"So you're Juniper," she boomed, storming into my trim office and nearly upending the chrome-steel desk in her eagerness to lean across it and shake her spaceboat fist in my face. "I smelled a rat all along, Juniper. Always can. You look exactly like an Earthman."

"Well," I assured her, "I am. Have a seat."

I should have thought the matter over more carefully. There was no chair which would fit Mrs. Maybanks' posterior, ample even by Jovian standards. She was seven and a half feet tall and so broad across the shoulders she had to come in

through the door sideways. At first I thought she was wearing a leathery garment, but it turned out to be her skin, fairly rippling with muscle.

She wore a transparent spherical breather—three feet in diameter—about her head, seamed and hinged from pole to pole since she never could have squeezed her skull through the neckpiece.

She settled her bulk on the desk, which sagged visibly. She said, "Earthman, huh? You wouldn't recognize real beauty if you saw it. What do you know about the out-worlds, anyway?"

"Not a thing," I admitted. "But I don't know anything about Earth, either. I spent my whole life on a ship en route to Alpha Centauri, with conditioned, specialized people half my size, complete with blue, fuzzy fur, double-lidded eyes and nostril plugs."

"They were even smaller than you are, Mr. Juniper?"

"Decidedly," I said.

"Well, then tell me this: how can you be expected to realize the essence of beauty is size—" she stood up, and expanded her chest which, I noticed, was clearly devoid of mammaries—"and brute, animal strength, not to mention the ability to adapt to your particular environment?"

"I can't. You see, I have been selected because mine is the fresh approach with no preconceived notions." I was reciting what the Sub-Committee had told me. "No fixed

ideas, no stereotypes, no cliché standards."

"And no sense, if you ask me. The whole contest is a waste of time anyway. I say."

"Far from it," I said, still reciting. "The first wave of conditioned colonization has passed into the pages of history. Social and economic intercourse between the new, mutated human races is the next logical phase. That was the purpose of the whole gigantic undertaking, in the first place. Specialization, colonization, a better standard of living for everyone, relief for overpopulation, and so on. But—"

"But," broke in Mrs. Maybanks, leaning over and staring down at me, "what has that got to do with a beauty contest? If Miss Southern Jupiter doesn't win, the whole thing is obviously rigged."

"Now, just a minute," I bristled. "You're supposed to be a judge, remember? You're not here to promote Miss Southern Whatzis, you're here as an objective critic of feminine pulchritude. And I'll tell you what it has to do with a beauty contest. The government wants the citizenry of each world to become familiar with the citizenry of all the other worlds. Take yourself, Mrs. Maybanks. Would you consider yourself a freak?"

"How—dare—you!" she cried.

It was a tense moment. I found myself confronted by a great fist, unmoving, inches from my face.

I hastened to say, "That's pre-

cisely it. You're self-conscious about your size, your girth, about the very characteristics, thick skin and tremendous muscle power, which make it possible for you to cope with your environment. You'll get an inferiority complex unless something is done about it. Think of how the poor Venusians feel."

"Those fish."

"Right. Those fish. But they're human fish."

"Or the Martian camels."

"They're not camels. They don't even look like camels. They're people, just like you."

"Just like us? With those water sacs? Really, Mr. Juniper."

"Just like you because they've been adapted to withstand the Martian environment—to find it pleasant, in fact—like you've been adapted to withstand the Jovian environment. See what I mean?"

"What are your own particular standards of beauty, Mr. Juniper?"

I considered the question. It was a good one. The Sub-Committee had been so content with itself for apparently finding an objective judge, they hadn't bothered to ask me.

"My standards," I said, "are purely intuitive. Besides, I am a *tabula rasa* regarding female beauty, since the only females I have known were small, blue fuzz—"

"I know. Alpha Centaurians. Midgets. That sort of eliminates us, doesn't it? We're giants, you know."

One of the thin, looped legs of

my desk had been set a fraction of a degree off the perpendicular, I discovered at that moment. It gave a little, carving a furrow in the plastic floor. Suddenly it collapsed entirely, depositing Mrs. Maybanks on two dozen foot-square plastic tiles.

"You see?" she wailed. "This place isn't even made to meet Jovian requirements. We won't have a chance in that contest, and you know it. Well, Miss Southern Jupiter will get at least one vote, let me tell you."

I let her tell me, then disqualified her as a judge. I also disqualified Mr. Fairview, Mr. Cantrell and the others. That left Jack Juniper of Alpha Centauri and deep space. I wasn't feeling cocky about it, either. Only determined—mildly at the time—to conduct a fair contest. With the judging only a week off, I hoped there wouldn't be any time for repercussions. I hoped in vain. Chalk it up to inexperience.

When Lamar Hoague, an Earthman and the Secretary of Interplanetary Commerce, visited me a couple of hours later he made up in pure fury for what he lacked in size. A small man, balding, deceptively mild, he said, "See here, Juniper. What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Getting ready to run a contest," I said. "Why?"

"You call firing all the other judges running a contest?"

"If they're not impartial, yes."

"You can't be the sole judge!"

I shrugged. "Find me some impartial people, then."

"I—can't. We tried. We did the best we could. I'll admit some of our people may have been mildly prejudiced, but that's to be expected. Just what kind of an egomaniac are you, anyhow?"

"All kinds, if you say so," I said. "I'm sorry if you don't like it. I guess you can fire me. I guess—"

"Stop guessing. Re-hire them."

I could do it, and conduct as cockeyed a contest as ever hit the pier at Coney Island or Atlantic City or wherever they used to run them. Or I could refuse and wait for the ax to fall. Either way public opinion would probably condemn me, but my way I had a fighting chance.

"Uh-uh," I said. "They're through. Couldn't you get some kind of judging machine?"

"To measure what, you clown? Bust size? The Jovians don't suckle their young. They can't. Something about the atmosphere. Shape of legs? The Venusians only have one, not two, and it ends in a finny tail. Water sac capacity? Miss Syrtis Major is your winner, hands down."

"Then I guess you're stuck with me."

"I'm not happy about it, Juniper."

"So be it," I said, shrugging again. "Am I through?"

"Hell, no," Hoague squeaked. "You're our boy. The videocasters are having a field day with you. You don't know Solar System

women, any of 'em. You're unique. You're the one possible Chairman of the Board of Judges out of five billion eligible males. Now," he moaned, "you're the whole board. We're stuck with you."

"I hope you won't regret it."

"We'd better not. Just what are your criteria, anyway?"

"You know, this is the second time I've been asked that question today. I don't know. It'll come to me. Aesthetically, of course, one is conditioned to accept standards of beauty with which one is familiar. Since I'm familiar with none of these—"

"It will be entirely hit or miss!"

"—I'll probably disclose completely objective standards for the contest."

"That's what our press release said. Don't quote it to me."

"There's nothing else I can quote. Well, Mr. Hoague, I'll see you at the contest."

I was beginning to like the situation. For twenty years on the Alpha Centauri ship I was the misfit, the throwback, the poor, helpless, pampered un-freak. Maybe I'd developed some mighty nasty neuroses as a result. Not that I was going to stare with a jaundiced eye at all the strange, specialized features of all my cousins, nor squeeze a water sac or two, nor tickle a Venusian's sensitive tail the way the Centaureans had stroked my bare, fuzzless skin and laughed.

I would try to be objective. How, I didn't know.

"There's one other thing, Mr. Juniper," Hoague told me. "I hope you're pretty good at getting around in weightlessness."

"The best," I said. "Twenty years of it. I was being conditioned for gravity while I slept on the way back, so I suppose I'm the guy in the middle now. Gravity bothers me. No gravity also bothers me. Why?"

"There have been too many complaints about Eros being Earth-normal in gravity and atmosphere. Favoritism toward the Earth entry, they say. Maybe they're right."

"So?"

"So we're moving the contest out to a bubble in space, as soon as it can be built. It's close by Eros, but a completely weightless, climateless vacuum. They'll all be wearing spacesuits. Uh, transparent spacesuits, I might add. Good luck, Juniper. You'll need it."

Did I ever? The videocasters were having another kind of field day as soon as word got around about the wholesale firing of the judges. Did they interview me? Absolutely not. Did they jump to all sorts of conclusions? You bet they did.

Juniper (said the Martian videocaster) fired Rodney Jekyl of Syrtis Major today as a judge in the First Annual Beauty Contest because Mr. Jekyl, according to a usually reliable source close to the Secretary of Interplanetary Commerce, refused to accept Earth standards of beauty as his guide. Will the undifferentiated

prototype of Earth therefore be a shoo-in? We think so.

Juniper of Earth (said the Jovian videocaster, a strapping male behemoth who would make Mrs. Maybanks look like a guppy), complete with phoney story about a make-believe trip to Alpha Centauri, has in his first day on Eros stripped the coming Beauty Pageant of all elements except the formality of naming the straw-thin contestant from Earth as winner. In a sweeping move, Juniper today wiped the slate clean of all judges . . . etc., etc.

Jack the Ripper (said the Earth videocaster) has slashed his way into the public eye today by apparently rigging the Beauty Contest in favor of the Earth girl, Dawne Flaim of Richmond, Virginia, then declaring Earth-like Eros out of bounds for the contest, putting Miss Flaim at a terrible disadvantage in competing with the artificially evolved denizens of the outworlds.

This caster considers the move an adroit—if diabolical—maneuver by the Ripper, who, incidentally, hails from an outworld further than all the others, to discredit Miss Flaim and remove her from serious consideration as a possible Miss Solar System. We hereby cast one vote for Jack the Ripper as Lord High Executioner of Interplanetary relations . . .

The next time I saw Mrs. Maybanks, she was Chairman of the Public Relations Committee in Behalf of Miss Southern Jupiter. She entered my office bearing a photo-

graph of her entry and a card giving vital statistics.

"If this is still a contest," she boomed, "I thought you'd like to see this."

She left before I could say yes or no. The answer would have been yes, of course, although by then I was so mixed up over all the things I was supposed to have done and the reasons involved that I wasn't even sure. I read the card.

MISS MIDGE TURNER of SOUTHERN JUPITER.

Age: 20 (Earth reckoning)

Height: 7'1". Weight: 438 lbs.
V.S.: 63, 58, 76

Eccentricity of Planetary Orbit: .0484.

Inclination to Ecliptic: 2° 29' 29"

Gravity at Surface: 2.64XE

Period of Rotation: 9h 55m (Earth)

Diameter (miles): 86,703

Albedo: 44%

I read it again and then got Lamar Hoague on the vidiphone. He was busy a few thousand miles out in space from Eros, watching them construct the space bubble, and by the time I got through his executive secretary to his First Assistant to his Girl Friday to the man himself, I was boiling mad.

"Are we running an extero-graphy lesson or a beauty contest?" I snapped. "Listen to this." And I read it.

He waved a hand deprecatingly. "So what? They're interesting facts, aren't they?"

"Maybe, but only in their place. Tell me this, if you can: what has the albedo of Jupiter got to do with Miss Turner's pulchritude or lack of same? So Jupiter has a short day. So I should care. Don't you see what they're doing? They're pointing out differences instead of showing how we're all cousins, brothers under the skin, bosom com—"

"Keep your shirt on, Rip—I mean, Juniper." Solar interference did things with his face. I twisted dials and got a reasonable facsimile back on my screen. "Then out-worlds are just apologizing for their girls, that's all. Sure, they're not as pretty as Miss Dawne Flaim, but they're under a disadvantage. They want you to take that into account."

"I'm going to try and be objective," I said for the hundred and twenty-third time.

"Then Miss Flaim is the winner."

"I wouldn't say that," I stormed. "I wouldn't say that at all. She probably looks like a walking twig to the Jovians, like a—"

"I haven't got the time for any of your observations," said the Secretary of Interplanetary Commerce, and cut the connection before I could tell him I was going to strip the I.D. cards down to vital statistics, which I did, anyway.

Then I really became the Lord High Executioner. Mars and Venus said I wasn't even interested in out-world differences, let alone out-world beauty. Jupiter maintained

an ominous silence after simply stating the size of Jupiter was apparently unimportant to me. Titan, Callisto and Ganymede formed the Satellite Society for the Prevention of Lack of Dissemination of Extraterrestrial Culture. Earth said Jack the Ripper, in discounting planetary differences, was clearly embarking on a policy of favoritism toward the adapted sisters of lovely Dawne Flaim.

I couldn't argue with that last point, for Dawne Flaim—fantastic name or not—*was* lovely.

Under the rules of the contest, I wasn't allowed to see the entrants until the day of judgment arrived. According to the various videocasters it was Jack (the Ripper) Juniper who was going to be judged, and probably burned in effigy on half a dozen worlds.

When the day finally arrived I was beginning to wish they hadn't bothered to stir me from my twenty year snooze. I was ferried from my office on Eros, complete with judge's robes underneath my transparent spacesuit, if you please, to Lamar Hoague's bubble in space. It had been a quick job but a good one, a half mile in diameter globe reflecting sunlight brilliantly from one side and myriad-gleaming starlight from the other.

Unfortunately, it reminded me too much of the golden apple which Eris, Eros' aunt on his father's side, tossed into the middle of another beauty contest a long time before history began, starting, among other

things, the Trojan War. Jack Juniper, I told myself, you are looking at the bleak side of things. But then, so was everyone else after Eris threw her apple.

So, in through the bubble-lock I went, firing my hand-jets and getting the lay of the land. There wasn't much to see. Colorlessly opaque, the inner surface of Lamar Hoague's bubble could not be accused of favoritism. There was a long ramp floating weightlessly in the center of the sphere, down which the contestants would parade. There were floating benches, complete with handholds, for the gentlemen of video and various visiting firemen. And there was a long judge's bench which Hoague had probably provided out of spite.

I'd certainly look conspicuous holding down it's center.

Pretty soon the videocasters and others began to file in through half a dozen locks, each in transparent spacesuit, each floating and jetting awkwardly toward his own rooting section. I said rooting section. And that meant cheerleaders, too, although, thank you, Mother Nature, for the vacuum of space, there would be no brass bands.

The contest was rigged, all right. It was rigged in favor of chauvenism, narrow-mindedness and bigotry. And it was rigged to condemn one Jack Juniper who, until this moment, had not figured out on what basis he would judge the contestants. This moment came and passed. And he still hadn't figured.

He thought he would have a slight headstart before the wolves came in pursuit because of his familiarity with weightlessness, but he wasn't sure.

Five minutes after the last local partisan had taken his seat, the contestants—there were seven of them—entered the space bubble. In the last few days, mostly spent staving off assault in my office on Eros, I'd heard so much about the various charms of the various planetary females that I'd developed the natural red-blooded interest, especially since, according to the way fate had spun her web, I might have been a suitable mate for any one of the girls.

As it turned out, I would have to wait before I was vouchsafed a vision of anything. The seven girls entered the bubble, all right, but each one sealed tight in a square little space ferry without windows of any kind. The seven ferries reached the head of the ramp, balanced their forward motion with braking rockets and remained suspended there.

Angry Jovian giant partisans stared across space at angry Venusian mermen partisans, the latter eschewing spacesuits and benches in favor of water tanks. Earthmen exchanged baleful glances with their one-time friends from Mars. No one even looked at me.

Lamar Hoague rendered a rhetorically passable opening address about how we were all brothers under the skin and should make the

most—from the viewpoint of collective co-operation—of our differences.

"Earth," he finished, "is the womb from which all human life springs. It is thus with a sense of racial paternity that I welcome you all here to this First Annual Interplanetary Beauty Contest."

Radios squawked and buzzed with hostile excitement. There were hoots and catcalls when one of the Venusian tanks employed one of Newton's laws of motion much to the dismay of its occupant, who had merely turned over and lashed out in playful boredom with his tail. The tank floated with no great haste toward the Jovian section, where two or three of the giants batted it around for a while between them while the tumbling merman began to pound frantically on the inside of his glassite prison.

A possible riot was averted when the Venusian thought to turn on his tank-rockets and so soar away intact but minus some of his dignity. Fortunately the Jovians could withstand temperatures in a range as wide as the day-night variation on Earth's moon, so the backlash didn't particularly bother them.

The noise bothered me. There were jeers and cheers, depending on whether you liked the Venusian or the Jovians. I suddenly wished we hadn't supplied each observer with a radio transmitter. Space vacuum sometimes can come in mighty handy.

"For heaven's sake," Lamar

Hoague hissed into his transmitter, forgetting he was broadcasting on my private wave-length and somehow thinking whispering would help, "get this show underway. There's no telling what they'll do, in the mood they're in. We have you to thank for this, Juniper. I hope you're satisfied."

"Me? What did I do?"

"Never mind. Forget about all the preliminaries, Parade around the girl and those creatures—"

"They're all girls!"

"Parade them around and make your decision."

"Just like that?"

"It better be just like that. Look at all those people."

I looked. He was right. Mind you, I don't think people are essentially ornery. I like people. Even fuzzy blue ones. But this whole thing had got off on the wrong foot. Hell, the new adapted races of man were all pretty young, all more than a little doubtful of their own specialized traits, all still battling tooth, nail, water sac and finny tail against still hostile environments.

Right now, a good substantial push in the wrong direction might write finis to the adaptability experiment and might—just might, but there it was—be the end of man's attempt to prove he wasn't earthbound. Don't try to tell me something as inconsequential as a beauty contest could not supply that push. Look at Eris and her

apple and remember there's a whole lot of truth in those old myths.

I looked—and cleared my throat. I said, "Will the ferrymen please prepare their vessels for disembarking? Will the contestants prepare to come out?"

"Who says so?" The voice, arrogant and surly, was anonymous.

"I do. Jack Juniper, Chairman of the Board of Judges."

"The whole kit and kaboodle, you mean! Jack the Ripper."

"Are you afraid your contestant won't win?" I snapped back at my nameless foe. "Why don't you give her a chance?"

"Why don't *you*?"

"I will, if you all will let me. Will the first contestant move down the ramp, please? The girl from Venus, since we'll work our way outward from the sun?"

The first ferry, as it turned out, had no door. The boxlike craft simply split in two, revealing a Venusian water-tank. The tank rolled serenely down the ramp, housing as pretty a little mermaid as ever you laid eyes on. I jetted closer for a good look and by then all the ferries had split like suddenly ripened fruit, their cargoes parading down the ramp.

Miss Venus had the nicest blue eyes, deep and clear and all the clichés about mountain lakes and everything. Her flawless skin was a pale green through the water, the darker green gills pulsing with delicate rhythm, almost timorously. The skin merged gradually with deepest

aqua scales, with the supple, vibrant smoothness of her tail structure. But it was the eyes mostly, the way they looked at me. Not pleading, but hopeful. Not arrogant, but expectant.

Miss Earth—Miss Dawne Flaim of Richmond, Virginia—was next. Subjectively, she could kindle the fires in me, I guess, because a misplaced Alpha Centaurian becomes, of necessity, an Earthman. But she wasn't consciously kindling anything. She just walked down the ramp.

How she did it in weightlessness, I'll never know. But she did it. She walked in one beautiful liquid motion from crown of wheat-gold hair to trim loveliness of high-arched feet, and mentally at least I had to withdraw my tongue and shut my mouth. She had the same eyes, by the way. Expectant, hopeful. Just a couple of nice kids—not like the Fairviews or Hoagues or Maybanks at all.

I had to squeeze Miss Mars' water-sac after all. It was expected of me. Well, damn it, if you had to have a water sac on a parched desert of a planet—and you certainly did—that Martian miss had a pretty one, rouged a vivid scarlet for the occasion.

Miss Jupiter displayed her muscles which, when you got right down to it, did ripple with a pleasing smoothness under her sleek leathery skin, and with all her 438 pounds she still could carry herself with admirable grace. Who am I,

who lacked the blue fuzz and other items of a bonafide Alpha Centaurian, to complain about a couple of hundred pounds of muscle which could be put to good use on a planet with more than twice Earth's gravity?

And so it went. And so I looked and made brief, intelligent remarks. They finished their parade down the ramp. I had them go to the top and start all over again. And again. Mrs. Maybanks started yelling for Miss Southern Jupiter to use her muscles. I think she meant on me.

I had a quick conference with Hoague, who was desperate. The Martians were furious. Their contestant, dry of skin and small of stature but with a lovely water sac, really lovely, didn't have a chance. They were threatening to break out of the Interplanetary Commerce Ring altogether.

The Humanitarian League on Earth had radioed a message to Eros, saying that they had voted unanimously to condemn any further adaptability experiments in the light of the shady doings out here. They challenged us to make them change their minds.

Mrs. Maybanks was threatening to take matters into her own chaotically capable hands.

Lamar Hoague grabbed my arm from behind and said, "It's all yours, Juniper. Start deciding."

Every time I went near the Venusian girl's tank, there were roars of approval from the Venusian rooting section, although said roars

sounded bubbly. Propinquity to the Earth contestant brought cries of, "Flaim, Flaim! Win the Game!" For good measure, someone added: "You all."

The Martians wanted me to squeeze Miss Syrtis Major's water sac again. The Jovians were even suggesting I try a waltz-around with Miss Southern Jupiter.

They all looked at me. They all said, without speaking: This is far more important than any beauty contest, Jack the Ripper Juniper.

I thought and I thought and I thought. The contestants were letting slip their wooden smiles. The hope and expectancy was being replaced by fatigue. All except Miss Venus who, in that respect, was lucky. The videocasters glared ominously and partisanly every time my eyes left their chosen woman.

Well, what did they expect? Each girl, in her way, had something to offer. Each was, in all probability, the loveliest example of her own species. Who was I, a Nietzschean superman or someone?

I was Jack the Ripper, that's who.

And they were all looking at me.

I said, "Ladies and gentlemen, the Board of Judges—" that was a mistake and I suffered in silence through the cat-calls—"the Board of Judges has finally, uh, reached a decision."

Purely by accident, I had been standing in proximity to Miss Southern Jupiter, who wrapped her arms around me and squeezed in delight until I was blue in the face,

then white. The Jovians were whooping and hollering. Dawne Flaim looked quite downcast, albeit demure.

"Ladies and gentlemen," I said, picking myself off the floor of the ramp and jetting some safe distance away from Miss Southern Jupiter, "you're looking at Miss Solar System right now. She has Miss Jupiter's ability to meet a hostile environment with strength." I took a deep breath. The Jovians went wild.

"She has Miss Mars' capacity to get along without water if that's what we find necessary on certain of the outworlds.

"She can swim like Miss Venus, and learn, through adaptive mutations, to extract oxygen from water or anything else. Where necessary, she has a beautiful aqua tail.

"She's frosted crystal like Miss Titan, who has to live on a cold world, and can hibernate in deep caves when she has to, like Miss Ganymede. She even—" I gulped, because they were listening, without a sound. Calm before the storm? "She even has hearing organs in the soles of her feet, like Miss Callisto.

"And," I went on, looking straight ahead and wishing the walls of the bubble weren't so opaque, "she has that ageless, timeless femininity which has survived all changes, all environments, all wars and famines and long journeys

and hardships. She has that quality, call it what you want, which was born in the women of Earth.

"Ladies and gentlemen, meet Miss Solar System. *She's all of them.*"

I looked at Lamar Hoague. Hoague couldn't decide whether to shake his fist at me or thump me soundly on the back and congratulate me.

There was this silence. I wondered which was the nearest spacelock.

Someone shouted, "Hooray for Miss Solar System!"

And someone else, "Hooray for Jack the Ripper!"

Hoague figured he'd better thump my back.

Well, that's the story. Interplanetary Commerce liked it so much, they have me touring the Solar System with my seven-girl composite. My future's assured, so I guess I can recommend a twenty year snooze to anyone.

Great fun, too. I take an occasional swim with Miss Venus, and dry out in the sun with Miss Mars, and try to copy the delicate crystal patterns off Miss Titan's back, and swap long sleep stories with Miss Ganymede, and learn how to pick up dance rhythms with my feet with Miss Callisto, and take a waltz-around or two with Miss Jupiter who always promises to take it easy but sometimes forgets.

But I'm going to marry—Dawne Flaim—Miss Earth.