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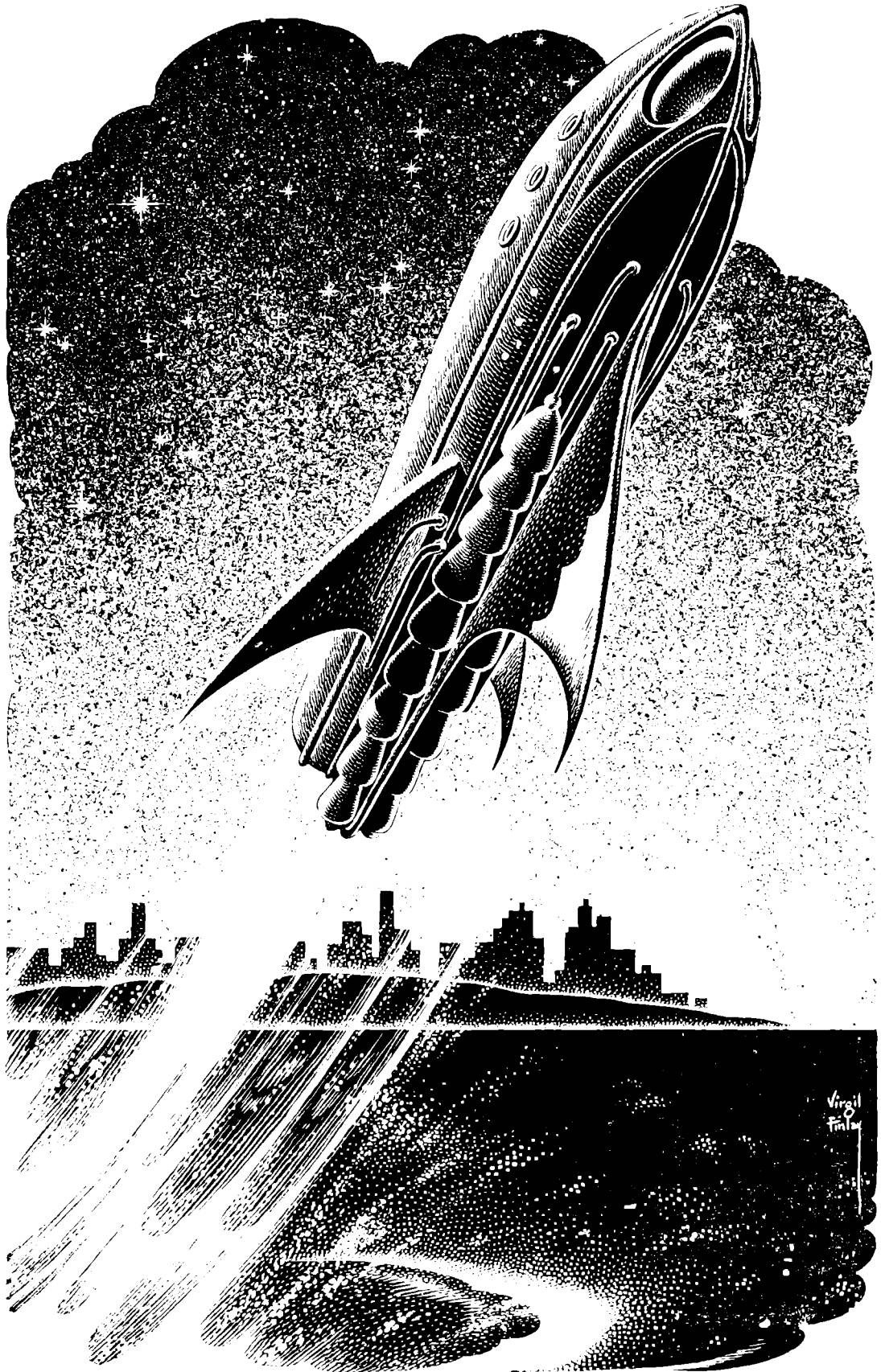
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PICKUP

BY AIDAN VAN ALM

BUSTER and I always keep our eyes on the sidewalks as we drive through a city or even a small country town. You never know, even in rich, flat states like Indiana, there are a few pretty girls, and it cheers one up to see a decent pair of legs or a genuine pair of the other things—you can tell by their motion.

There's nothing nasty about this. Why shouldn't one look? And if the looked-at sees you looking, ten times out of ten it makes her feel better, and it certainly cheers you up in this gray world of attempted order. Besides, sometimes one can exchange a grin at a traffic light, and that ain't against the law. It's plain common courtesy and good-neighborliness, of which there isn't enough left.

And it was at a traffic light in Vancouver, B.C. that I saw this pair of legs—the top of our car is rather low. We were wandering downtown looking for a Polynesian restaurant we'd heard about. I always want Polynesian food. Vancouver is a lovely city

even when it rains, and its people are really cosmopolitan. They come in all shapes and sizes, and vary in color between three poles—black, white, and yellow—but they all talk with southern Scots accents. It's most intriguing, especially to me who was born in Edinburgh, but it jolts Buster every time because he's a Colorado rancher where the only real oddity, apart from the ubiquitous Texans, is lots of Italians on horseback. But about these legs.

I started at the bottom, naturally, and, leaning down, worked upwards, fully expecting the rest to go to pieces as Canadian girls so often do I have found; it's something to do with the way their hips are slung: if the bottom half is good, the top's usually a washout just like their mountain roads. But if the bottom half looks like the Arc de Triomphe seen from the Place de la Concorde, be prepared. But this was different. By the time I got to the bust-line—which took about nine milliseconds—I was

convinced that I was dealing with something exceptional. Nothing purebred could be built that way and still stand up. Then, I hit the crown, but then the light turned red and I had a moment to take it in. It was fantastic, but I didn't have time to go into that as I was on my way, and otherwise occupied.

Usually, being no first-year rooster, I simply grin admiringly and, if the object doesn't frost up, I throw over some real friendly remark like "Excuse me, no offense, but they simply don't have girls as beautiful as you in California" or something to that quaint effect. As I say, it does no harm, I mean no harm, and it usually turns on good cheer: and then, when the light changes, Buster and I drive on into the great brown yonder, feeling better and, I hope, leaving a little bit of good old-fashioned courtesy behind us. Of course, sometimes the lights take a long time to change and we spend an enchanting if not enchanted evening but that's usually a matter of cash and tact.

On this occasion I neither grinned nor could I say a word. I suppose I must have drooled, which is a disgusting idea and must look horrid. But I got a smile or something that almost put my sacroiliac out again, and then this *Thing* said "Hi! Could you tell me, please, what the name of this city is?"

I stared and started to open my mouth when Buster must needs duck down, so that his eight-gallon hat filled the middle front seat, to get a look. He's a calm, gentlemanly soul with a great sense of humour. He flipped back like a cobra stung by a hornet on its prying snozzle. Somehow I murmured "Vancouver."

"Oh dear!" said the *Thing*. "What country's it in?"

"If you'll tell me the day of the week and the date, which we lost about two weeks ago," I said, "I'll tell you."

"That's time, isn't it?" the *Thing* said.

"Whoops, there goes the light," said Buster.

"Stop! I mean, don't move." I yelled, and Buster stalled her—the car, I mean, not the *Thing*.

Then I leaned almost halfway out of the window and noticed something. In the open air, the *Thing's* voice was . . . well . . . just everything. It sent all kinds of unmentionable sensations rippling through me. I can only describe it as sounding like *Sleepy Lagoon* played on a Wurlitzer by the late Fats Waller on green chartreuse, in Paris, France. The really funny thing, though, was that the enormous rectangular gash of a deep, flame-colored mouth did not move at all.

"Where do you come from?" I asked innocently.

"I haven't a clue," the *Thing* said.

Now how does she know that expression, I mused with the speed of an IBM machine. She must be British.

"No, I'm not," came the immediate reply.

Oh, My God, I thought, here we go again; men from Mars, gals from Venus, flying-saucers, and every four-bit circuit mind-reader getting in the act.

"I'm not sure that I understand what you're thinking about," the *Thing* said, "but the planets you call Venus and Mars are not inhabited by boys and girls but by rather dreary and nasty things. I'm not a 'circuit mind-reader', whatever that is, but I must say I'm damned confused. You can have whatever you want if you'll give me a hand." Now I ask you!

By this time some guys behind were blowing their horns and Buster was getting nervous and looking like he was getting ready to go back to Colorado. I got out of the car, made a lordly sign to the idiot in the car behind, and helped the *Thing* into the middle seat—so as to have her boxed in. I am not in the least afraid of crooks or consters or even insanes, but I do ob-

ject to pick-ups getting out at the next stop light.

"Onward to Polynesia!" I roared, waving my hand straight ahead. Buster got moving.

"Would you care to take dinner with us?" I asked.

"Delighted," the *Thing* replied. . . . at least, so Buster tells me, for I had caught sight of those legs spread out and had really for the first time in years gone to pieces. I haven't time to go into all that stuff but, you know, there are a few times in life when you see a member of the opposite sex that is really so, you just give up. The amazing thing was that this one was a Doll besides. You can feel these things.

Well, we had a wonderful dinner with all kinds of things I'd never eaten before. The doll was a riot and vague as hell. She came from some planet not at all like ours but about the same temperature and having an oxygenous atmosphere. It was inhabited by what we call—she was able to prove to me categorically—humans; they're a bit more advanced than us but not much and in a proportionately greater mess, with all the usual wars and nonsense. One thing they have found out though, and this, she told us, was how to devote most of one's energy to doing what one wants. They have religions and things but these tell you what to do; never what *not* to do. It helps medicine, and the entertainment business, and birth control but it does not stop wars. It was all very interesting.

Buster was great; talking about horses, and good food, and art which he knows about; and the Doll was fascinated. Then I made the mistake of taking a close look at her again and fainted. It was purely practical; not emotional or anything. She was just too much; even imagining it laid me out. I came-to sitting upright but in the Doll's arms. I went out again. Buster got quite annoyed and the

manager, who was Hawaiian-Chinese, quite excited. We got the bill and the Doll grabbed it. I was too limp to protest. Buster made quite a fuss. The Doll hauled up her skirt and produced what proved to be some 180,000 dollars in used notes of large orders, and threw them on the table. I came-to again as she was saying ". . . . don't be silly, Dad's got millions, and I've had so much fun". Buster gathered up a few notes with gentlemanly thanks. We got up to leave. Buster gave the manager a bill he had saved for the next crisis. The man dropped dead, I think. We came out into the sunset and climbed into the car.

"Drive me down to the dock," the Doll said.

"What dock?" we inquired in unison.

"Is there more than one?" she asked.

"We don't know," we said, "we've only been here a day."

"It's where they have little, bright, floating things," she said.

I was driving this time and saw a cop. I stopped and asked him about yacht basins. We got into a friendly tassel about the half dozen that were available; then he happened to look down under the roof. Those damned legs were out again. He literally reeled back and we drove away.

It was the fifth dock before the Doll gave a squeal of delight. "That's it," she chimed. "There's the *Nymph-otantra*." We looked.

And there, parked neatly and serenely between the floating cocktail-shakers was the darnedest, prettiest, little item I'd ever seen. It looked a bit like two huge speed-boats stuck deck to deck one on top of the other. In fact, it was exactly what all large speed-boats should be, so that it cannot take seas aboard, or swamp, or turn-turtle, or, if it does, it doesn't matter. It was painted—or something—a new color. It's not in the spectrum. We drew up at the dock.

"Hi! Miss," said the mariner, real polite. "Not taking her out tonight, are you?" he added.

And that's when I used my brains for the first time.

"Say! You got plenty of cigarettes aboard?" I said, sort of leaning back into the car real casual-like.

"My God! No," the Doll said.

"You smoke Cameos too, don't you?" I asked.

"Sure," she said.

"Say, Buster!" I called, "we're out, too. Be a good fellow and get a few packs from the cafe up there, will you; then we'll lock at the boat." I know he loves boats.

He shoved off with measured tread and I helped the Doll aboard. She gave the mariner a lot of money and he started glowing.

"Thanks, Lady!" he said. "Be sure to fly right if you're going out tonight," he added.

"Sure will," the Doll ululated, and the man nearly passed out.

I took a firm grip on the little wire of the gangplank.

"Hurry!" I said.

"Sure," she threw over her shoulder, "and don't worry, I've got plenty of cigarettes."

We jumped down through a sort of hole which immediately closed. There were all sorts of lovely tropical plants growing inside, and there was subdued music with a panting rhythm coming from somewhere. The mariner cranked the plank ashore; there was a low murmur below my feet; and we glided—or is it glid?—smoothly backwards out into the basin.

"Get going," I yelled, for I saw Buster through the forward window—thing heading down the pier.

"Like this?" she asked; and, without any apparent effort, we were airborne and high over the Pacific fog.

Then remorse hit me. After all, Buster has been my closest friend now for quite a number of years, though I never did find out where he

really came from. He just turned up one day, and everybody fell for him with a bang and I felt as if that little brother who hadn't made the grade a few years after I was born had done so. We've had a lot of fun together and got a lot of work done too. I was really sorry to leave him, though I don't believe in all this friendship nonsense, especially in such circumstances. I must have looked bad, too, because the Doll winked at me and said, "Cheer up, slob; it serves him right. He stole my boat a few years back; parked it here somewhere, got drunk, and couldn't find it again. Took me . . . let me see . . . ten of your days to find it. So I left his back on the lake at his ranch, took all the cigarettes and liquor and started back here. Then I realized I'd forgotten to ask the name of this place. T-porting is so confusing in this mess."

I began to bubble inside.

"Ha-ha!" I thought. "He's sure to forget cigarettes and rum and get halfway home before he finds out." Then, I took a look at the Doll. It was warm in the skitterboat or whatever you'd call it, and she'd shed. And I must have passed out again.

I'm posting this from some place with a name I can't pronounce but Nona—that's her real name—tells me the mails are pretty good from here, and that you ought to get this in a couple of days. They put the out-of-planet stuff directly in the chute at the central Post Office in your city—shades of the Federal Government! Be a real friend and give Buster a ring long distance, will you? And if he hasn't left yet, tell him to go take a look at the lake and not to forget cigarettes, etc. I'm really contrite. Tell him to hurry because Nga'a is still waiting for him—the nincompoop—and, anyhow, we miss him. If he baulks, tell him I promise I'll drive through the towns for a spell. So long.

Among Our Contributors

FORREST J. ACKERMAN —

should need no introduction to anyone interested in Science Fiction, identified with the field, as he has been, for so many years.

POUL ANDERSON —

guest of honor at the recent Detroit World Science Fiction Convention and author of several SF novels, has been making an enviable name for himself, in recent years, in both this and the Mystery field. His *PERISH BY THE SWORD*, winner of Macmillan's "Cock Robin" Award, has been widely praised.

BELLE C. DIETZ —

active in New York fandom, one of the founders of the Lunarians, is President of the Eastern Science Fiction Association.

LESTER DEL REY —

active in the field, professionally, for the past twenty years, is the author of *ROCKETS THROUGH SPACE*, *ROBOTS AND CHANGELINGS*, *NERVES*, etc. etc.

GEORGE FIELDING ELIOT —

prominent military analyst and historian, makes his first appearance (we believe) in this field with the present story.

JOHN MAGNUS —

fanzine editor and active with the Washington Science Fiction Association.

KIT REED —

New Haven newspaper woman, in her mid twenties, who has just become a mother, has attracted wide attention in the field for the sensitivity of her stories.

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