



Frost got out a sliver gun from a locker and pointed it at Thor-na'thor.

## PIETY

By MARGARET ST. CLAIR

*No one ever dies in Vardia— at least, not according to the standard that's been adopted by the vardians!*

FROST tossed an avenil wrapper in the space erviser's part reducer.

"These people have found the secret of immortality," he said.

"What a romantic temperament you have," Scott replied softly. "'The secret of immortality,' it sounds as dated as the philosopher's stone."

"What do you mean? We're not immortal."

"No, we're not—though you may not have noticed that the last report of the

committee for India gives the life expectancy there now as seventy years. And because of consistently good medical care, you and I both look a good ten years younger than our actual chronological age."

Scott was in his early thirties: he had the trim body and resilient skin of first maturity.

"That's not immortality."

"No, of course not. That's what I'm driving at. How do we arrest aging and

prolong life? With some mysterious serum, by some dark business with a fantastic ray? Hocus-pocus of a sort which would be the equivalent of the philosopher's stone I mentioned?

"We've increased our temporal range to the point where it's not at all unusual to meet active and alert people who've passed the century mark. Society has done that by a system of care which is pre-prenatal, by seeing to it that every human being grows up in the best possible environment and receives the best possible nutrition, and by prophylactic measures of all possible sorts. In a word, we've eliminated from human life all the stresses and strains which can be eliminated. And that's the nearest to immortality we'll ever get."

FROST raised his eyebrows. "You heard what Thor-na'thor said. How do you account for it?"

Scott went over to the viewing plates and turned them to low power. The mass of buildings that was Tarthal leaped into visibility. "I don't account for it," he said, with his back to Frost. "We don't speak his language very well yet; we may have misunderstood. Or he may have been speaking metaphorically."

"Nonsense! You heard him say, 'And you let him die?' when we were telling him about Kynaston's burial. That wasn't metaphor. He sounded deeply and genuinely shocked. In my opinion, Thor-na'thor was shocked because, here on Vardia, among his own people, no one ever dies."

Scott shrugged and did not answer for a moment. "I might believe," he went on after a pause, "that they'd worked out therapeutic techniques which are more successful than ours in prolonging life, if the Vardians weren't obviously at a low level of scientific progress. Their vehicles

are steam-powered, and they light their buildings with carbon-filament electric lights. Their young men and women dabble in science, yes, but for exactly the same reason that they take an interest in music and painting and the dramatic arts—because it's cultural."

"Got you there!" Frost said in some triumph. He got up and began to pace the cabin's length. "You're assuming that scientific advances occur evenly and are distributed, so to speak, on a plane. Didn't you take any courses in the history of science?"

"One of the most striking features of terrestrial science has been its uneven development. Man knew the diameter of the earth before he was aware of the circulation of the blood, and it was more than two hundred years after the laws of moving bodies were formulated before the science of psychology was born. First the physical sciences, then biology, and at last sociology and the psychology of the depths.

"What reason is there to think that Thor-na'thor's people haven't reversed the progression and developed the life sciences first?"

"The order of development on earth wasn't accidental, but dictated by the nature of things; physics is an easier science than psychology. And leaving that aside, why is Thor-na'thor so reticent about it, assuming you're right? You've tried to pump him a dozen times since he made that remark about Kynaston, and all he does is look embarrassed and change the subject. Supposing he's understood you, and you him, his attitude is more appropriate to a religious matter than a scientific one."

"I've got a theory about that." Frost ruffled up his hair. "I suppose you mean the way he's so careful to keep us away from that building in the north of the city.

"Would it be the first time a scientific discovery has been taken over by religion? Remember those steam engines and assorted gadgets the Alexandrians invented, and how they were used to produce miracles for the devout? Or there may have been a gradual decadence with religion moving slowly in on science. That might explain the general quietism in the atmosphere, though I admit the Vardians don't seem decadent."

"Um."

"You don't believe me?" Frost said.

"Not a bit of it. Nope."

"Will you help me?"

"... Yes."

THOR-NA'THOR was a good dinner guest. He held his liquor well, he laughed in the places where laughter was appropriate, he even essayed a mild jest or two of his own. He was genuinely friendly and amiable.

Nevertheless, Frost and Scott were not pleased. They were too tense and excited to enjoy their guest's social qualities, and his ability to soak up liquor without being affected by it was nothing less than catastrophic. They were both a good deal drunker than Thor-na'thor was, and it was not their tongues the evening had been designed to loosen.

Scott twitched an eyelid in signal to Frost. "Got a Venusian liquor," the latter said feebly to Thor-na'thor. "Like your opinion on it." He got a bottle from the buffet.

"Certainly," Thor-na'thor replied, smiling and holding out his glass. "Delighted, my boy. What generous hosts you terrestrials are!"

"Thanks." With inebriated precision, Frost poured a huge snort of phyteumah into the Vardian's glass, and portions as much smaller as was

consistent with decency into Scott's and his own.

"I especially appreciate your invitation," Thor-na'thor went on, sipping at his drink, "since I have been distressed—absurdly, I suppose, but there it is—over the death a few days ago of a pet of mine. This evening has been a welcome distraction for me." He sipped again.

Frost and Scott exchanged quick glances. Was this going to be easier than they had thought?

"That's too bad," Scott said. "What was it, a dog?"

"An animal very similar to a dog. I had reared Lilil from shortly after her birth. One grows attached to them."

Still sipping, Thor-na'thor launched on an anecdote designed to illustrate Lilil's cleverness and quasi-human abilities. It grew into a biography, and still he sipped phyteumah from his glass. When the glass was empty, Frost poured more in it unobtrusively while Thor-na'thor talked on. The glass was refilled twice before the Vardian paused. "I regret her death," he finished.

Scott decided to plunge. "How fortunate you are spared such losses with your own people!" he said, tripping over the consonants. "You Vardians don't die, do you?"

"No." The answer was immediate.

Frost cast a glance of triumph at Scott. The latter scarcely perceived it; Thor-na'thor's open admission had nonplussed him. He halted and tried to cudgel his foggy mind into deciding what to say next.

"What is the cause of that?" he got out at last; he had had too much to drink.

"What boys you terrestrials are!" the Vardian answered, smilingly. He got to his feet. "Thank you for a delightful evening. Good night." He halted at the top

of the companionway. "I believe we shall have rain before morning," he said, and was gone.

"The blamed old buzzard!" Scott said. He took a sip of water and another Sobrior pill. "Leading us on, guzzling our food, guzzling our drink, and finally laughing at us! He told us that yarn about that dog of his just so we'd bite and ask him if the Vardians were immortal! The blamed old ape!"

"Yes, but never mind that," Frost replied. He had taken two Sobrior pills and was quite himself again. "The important thing is that he admitted it."

"He only said that to make us look like fools."

"What does he care whether we're fools or not? There's really something there, or he wouldn't be so coy about it!"

"I'll find out what he's up to if it's the last thing I do!"

"Listen, let's try—"

THOR-NA'THOR said, "Yes, this machine would be most useful to my people. We have dramatic entertainments, but nothing like that." He indicated the tiny stereo projector Scott was holding out to him. "We Vardians are a happy folk, but I believe your machine would make us a little happier."

"You could make a lot of money with it," Scott said.

Thor-na'thor gave a slight shrug. "Money—that is not so important on Vardia. But it is true that I should be the object of a great deal of gratitude from my people if I introduced it to them."

"You'd like that?" Scott asked. "You Vardians value that?"

"We value it greatly. I should like it very much."

"It's yours," Scott said, holding out the stereo projector.

An expression of extreme pleasure came over Thor-na'thor's face. "Thank you!" he said, extending his hand. "You are very generous."

"If," Scott hurried on, "you'll tell us why the Vardians don't die."

Thor-na'thor pulled his hand back. "I beg your pardon," he said quietly. "I had thought it was a gift."

Scott's cheeks began to burn. "Oh, heck," he said brusksly, "take the th—" "Shut up, Scott," Frost broke in. And then, to Thor-na'thor, "We'll give it to you, and gladly—and a lot of other stuff, too—if you'll do what Scott said. How can it hurt you to tell us? Why don't you want us to know?"

"You are joking. You terrestrials are always joking. There are things of which one does not speak."

"Then take us to the building we've never been allowed inside."

"You mean the library? No, it would do you no good. I am sorry, my boy." Thor-na'thor always addressed the two earth-men as "my boy" though only heaven knew what the temporal relationship between them was. "It is impossible."

"You can have this too if you'll only tell us the secret," Frost said. He brought out a power generator, a model of compactness, less than thirty centimeters on a side, with a sealed-in permanent power source, and added it to the stereo projector.

Thor-na'thor listened politely while Frost explained the generator's working and use, and at the end shook his head once more. "No. I am sorry, there is no secret. No." He nodded good-by to both of them, and started toward the airlock.

"Hey!" Scott shouted after him. And then, when he turned, "take the projector with you!"

"But—"

"It's okay. We want you to have it. It's a gift."

When Thor-na'thor, holding the projector carefully between his hands, had departed, Frost turned on Scott.

"What the heck did you do that for?" he demanded. "Are you crazy? He wanted that projector; it's possible we might have been able to make a deal with him after all."

"You know we wouldn't. And—oh, he made me feel so cussed small when he said that about having thought it was a gift. I could've hidden underneath one of those little blue Martian geckos. And besides, the old buzzard's pretty decent. Likeable."

"Hunh! You'd better get into a different frame of mind before tonight, then. Maybe I'd better try it by myself."

"No. I'll back you up."

SCOTT whispered to Frost, "Funny sort of library. People go in and people come out, but none of them is carrying anything. Of course, it could be the books don't circulate."

"It could be Thor-na'thor was lying, you mean." Frost whispered back. "It's not a library, it's the place where the Vardians go for their shots or what. Thor-na'thor must think we're awful fools."

Scott made no reply. He was shivering. The nights on Vardia in this latitude had a penetrating chill, and they had been waiting behind the gelid marble of the monument for Thor-na'thor for several hours. The Vardians were addicted to routine, but Scott was beginning to wonder if something had prevented their official host from taking his regular evening stroll. Scott wished he had worn a heated suit.

"I think—" Frost said at last. "Yes, here he comes. And he's by himself."

As the Vardian moved past the base of the monument to Trj Doteon, the two earth-men fell in on either side of him.

"We've got you centered," Frost said into the Vardian's ear.

"What do you want me to do?" Thor-na'thor answered placidly.

"Go with us to the ship."

When they were inside the *Alceste's* cabin again, Frost said, "You forced this on us. I hope you'll decide to be reasonable. Do you know what a sliver gun is?"

"I have not that honor," Thor-na'thor replied. His expression was peculiar; whatever it expressed, he did not appear to be alarmed.

Still centering the Vardian in his bolter, Frost got out a sliver gun from a locker and pointed it at the Vardian.

"Little but mighty," he said. "Thor-na'thor, this is it. Being shot by a sliver gun is rarely fatal, unless you're hit in a nerve center. But a wound from it produces tonic spasms of all the voluntary muscles. I was shot by one once; I'd rather have a major burn without anesthesia.

"Scott, hold out his hand."

Scott locked the Vardian's wrist in a tight grip and held the member out to Frost.

"Now," Frost said. "Why don't you Vardians die?"

Thor-na'thor laughed. "Torture, my boy?" he said. "It is too bad, I am afraid I shall look ridiculous. But there is no secret. You are too young to understand."

Frost drew a deep breath. His finger wavered on the lever of the sliver gun. Then he tossed the gun down on the cover of the locker and turned bitterly on his heel.

Scott released the Vardian's wrist. "As I thought," he said. "You'd better go,

Thor-na'thor. I imagine we'll be starting back to Terra in a few hours."

"So soon?" the Vardian asked courteously. "We Vardians should like an opportunity to say farewell properly to our guests."

"I'm afraid so. I wish—"

"Would you like me to give you the projector back? You do not need to be ashamed; it is a very valuable thing."

"No, not that. I was wishing that the all-earth Central Committee would decide to send a commission to Vardia to investigate this business about Vardians never dying. But it's impossible; the committee has a great respect for local autonomy."

Handshakes, at Thor-na'thor's request, were exchanged. Their parting was friendly. As the *Alceste* took off on the first leg of the long return, Frost said: "I wonder what it was?"

Scott shook his head. "There might have been something. But we'll never know."

THOR-NA'THOR walked up the broad low steps of the library. He tipped back his head to look at the inscription over the big door; it was in the long-obsolete non-phonetic Vardian script, but he knew what it said.

At the threshold an attendant smiled at him and held out a basin for him to wash his hands. The attendants knew him well by sight, since his visits to the library always exceeded the daily minimum prescribed by law; Thor-na'thor was a pious man.

When he was clean, he passed into the enormous adytum. He paused at the entrance to enjoy the deep pleasure which the sight of the vast room always roused in him.

From ceiling to floor it was lined with books; the biographies, lovingly,

piously compiled, of every man, woman and child who had ever lived on Vardia since the enormously distant time when the art of writing had come to the race. Two balconies zoned the room, and everywhere were reading desks.

Thor-na'thor approached one of the librarians. He walked slowly, for he was thinking of what he had read above the door, "No one who ever lived deserves to die," and feeling for the thousandth time its deep truth.

The librarian greeted him courteously. "Will you have one of your friends," she asked, "or shall it be a stranger?"

"A stranger," Thor-na'thor replied without hesitation. It was considered far more pious to peruse a stranger's life than that of one of one's friends.

She went to a shelf, handed him a book. "No one has had this for a long time."

Thor-na'thor went over with it to a reading desk. He opened it, savoring to the full his grateful task of rescuing from oblivion one of the honored Vardian dead.

"Habor-binhabor," he read in the second chapter, "was inordinately fond of the old-fashioned game of matzor. On the ninth of Satatius, 20034, he stayed up until after midnight playing it, and on another occasion."

Thor-na'thor closed the volume over his forefinger. How strange the earth people were, he thought, how violent, how crude, how young! Heartless, too—witness how they had let their comrade Kynaston die utterly. There had been not the slightest attempt to write his biography. Perhaps, as their race grew older, they would learn that the whole purpose of man on earth is to keep alive the memory of the honored dead. Perhaps they would learn then that no one who is remembered ever dies.