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RAIN CHECK

BY JUDITH MERRIL

She was beautiful and desirable and all the men liked her. She had her troubles though, she found it impossible to take her clothes off and she hated rain. . . .

It was raining when I got off the train.

If I had half the sense they seem to think I have, I'd have oozed back up the steps and gotten myself dried off and pulled together again in my bedroom before anybody even missed me.

Just let them handle things their own way: I'd have found out just as much, I guess, slower, but a lot easier.

Only I couldn't do it the easy way. I had to get out on my own, and have a look around, before I had any way of knowing how much of what they told me was on the level. I had no standards of comparison, after all; I couldn't tell whether Landrin was a particularly trustworthy human or not.

Now I'm afraid *he* doesn't trust *me*, and that's too bad, be-

cause at this point I have only admiration and respect for him. I think a lot of the trouble was that he kept overestimating my brain-power, and didn't really appreciate what I could do with my body.

Like getting out of that bedroom, and off the train. They were taking me from Project headquarters near the spaceport, where I'd had three weeks of asking and answering questions, to the Capitol, to meet the President, before they decided what to do with me. We had a super-secret private express, with a room specially built in for my "comfort." Meaning, they thought, for my confinement.

Actually, I could have gotten off any time. I waited for the train to stop just because I wanted to see a city. Even a Top Secret express has to stop occa-



sionally for fuel and such; just after midnight there was a half-hour halt in some semi-big city in what they call the "mid-west." I was off the train five minutes after it stopped, and would have been back *on* five minutes later if I knew what was good for me. Instead, I huddled into a shadow on the platform, damp and cold and unhappy, looking like a large package that I hoped nobody would decide to pick up and toss into a baggage car.

I had to stay there longer than I expected. A large package can't just walk out of the shadows while anybody is around to watch. I waited till there was a break in the freight traffic, and a passenger train on the next platform was discharging some people on the opposite side. Then I walked up the platform, and through the gates into the station.

Inside, the big waiting room was almost empty, and too quiet under the glaring overhead lights. The little restaurant, with its slow-moving, white-coated waiters, was silent and empty too. I felt too conspicuous; I wasn't too sure about how I looked, either. Through the plate-glass window, and through a haze of everlasting rain, I could see the lights of an all-night diner across the street, so

I braced myself, and ducked out into the wet.

It was too bright inside the diner, too. But at least it was full of people, truckdrivers and late-party couples and such, all talking at once, noisy and absorbed in each other. I could watch and listen, and they'd be less likely to notice me much.

I found a stool at the far end, and the counterman came right over to me. "Wet enough for you?" he asked jovially.

I choked back an impulse to tell him specifically and in detail just how much *too* wet it was. Instead, I smiled. He was trying to be friendly, after all.

"What'll you have?" he asked. I was concentrating on drying myself off, and I didn't answer right away. "Why don't you take the raincoat off, sister?" he said, leaning half-way across the counter, as if he was going to *take* it off me.

"Oh, that's all right," I said quickly. "It's . . . it's a new kind of plastic. Dried right away, see?" I showed him where the last few drops of moisture were still evaporating.

He shook his head admiringly. "Damnedest thing!" he said. "What won't they do next? Coffee?" I nodded. "Something with?"

"Just coffee right now."

He turned away to get it, and

I relaxed a little. He'd had me going for a minute there. Rain makes me nervous anyhow. I don't *like* wet weather. If I'd known it was going to be like this, I'd never have left home. I'll admit, I was looking forward to it beforehand; if the vapor content here on Earth was anything like what I found on the ship, I couldn't be happier. But it's been raining ever since I got here, and from the way the local yokels don't even seem to notice it, I wouldn't be surprised if that's all it ever does.

"Wet enough for you?" That's a *joke* around here!

Anyhow, by the time the counterman came back with my coffee, I'd had a chance to look around and check on what the other girls in the place were wearing. There was a big mirror on the wall too, and when I opened up the raincoat, my sweater and everything seemed to be all right, so I slipped out of the coat and sat on it.

Then I thought maybe I'd made a mistake after all. The man just wouldn't go away. Other people came in, and he'd wait on them as quick as he could, and then come loping back to where I was sitting, and strike up a new conversation each time.

Real bright, too. Like: "Well, how do you like the big city?"

Or, "You sure are a quiet one, aren't you?" Or he'd keep getting back to the raincoat, and shake his head and talk about how wonderful it was, the things they could do these days, even with a war on.

I just agreed with everything he said. I told him I'd just got into town, and I didn't know yet where I was going to stay. He suggested a couple of rooming houses; wrote down the addresses for me, too, and said to tell them, whichever one I went to, that I was a friend of Mike Bonito's.

"I sure will," I said. "Thanks a lot." I smiled again. I was beginning to realize that I didn't have to talk much if I smiled a lot.

"Say," he said, "you know, you're a real nice kid. I thought at first you were a showgirl or something. But you sound like you're really right off the farm."

I smiled.

"You're real cute, too," he said, only he wasn't looking at my face when he said it. By that time I'd realized there wasn't anything *wrong* with the way I looked. His interest in my sweater was something entirely different. I started to smile, and figured maybe I'd better not, this time.

"Well, thanks," I said.

He grinned. "I bet you are a

dancer, though. Or a model. Or that's what you come here for, anyhow."

"How did you know?" I murmured, and opened my eyes wide at him.

"How can you tell?"

"I know a lot of gals like that," he said. "I'm a Civil Defense warden, and I have to go around to everybody's house in my district and make sure their shelters are all set up right . . . you know? . . ."

I nodded.

"Lots of boarding houses around my way," he went on, now that he was assured of my interest. "That's how come I could help you out with a place to stay. They kind of have to be nice to any friend of mine. . . you know?"

"Mmmmm," I said understandingly.

"Well, you'll always find a lot of pretty gals in those places, trying to make time in the Big Town. Only I don't think there's any of 'em got as much on the ball as you have, kid." He leaned across the counter again. His breath smelled bad, but I didn't think I ought to lean back away from him too much.

I smiled. Then I figured it was about time for me to say something. "I'm a Civil Defense warden, too," I told him. "At least I was back home." That

was pretty much true, too. "But I bet it's a lot different here."

"You can bet it is, sister! Out in the sticks, you ain't got anything *like* the problems we got here. Can you imagine a *single block* with a hundred and more houses on it—and from ten to, say, fifty people, or maybe more, in every one of them houses? That's what *I* got to take care of?"

"My goodness!" I said, and meant it. Frankly the thought made me shudder. My opinion of the level of human civilization was going rapidly downhill. Fortunately, he leaned back right then, and I could breathe again, which helped some. He hadn't even noticed how I was holding my breath.

"That's right," he expanded, under my obvious admiration. "Thirty-five hundred people on that one block alone, and a lot of 'em dames that'll get hysterical and panicky the first minute anything happens. We get a lot of training for just that kind of thing—judo and all."

"You do?" I said.

"That's right." He nodded gravely. "Hate to have to think I'd ever have to muss up one of them gals, but you know how it is. . . ?" He pursed his lips over a grin, and wound up with a sort of hungry judicial look. "Can't let people get out of hand

at a time like that. Got to keep control of things. Matter of fact," he told me, lowering his voice a little, "lately it's got so they call on the C-D force for regular police work and that kind of thing. Maybe we're 4-F's, but that don't mean we're a bunch of pretty little flowers, like some people think. You'd know better anyhow, wouldn't you? I bet even out on the farm, a warden has to be able to get tough sometimes."

"Oh yes," I murmured. "Yes, indeed. But nothing like here in the city, I'm sure." I smiled, but this time I worked at it. I was getting interested. "What kind of— *police* work do you do? I mean, did you *personally* ever do anything like that? It must be exciting. . . ."

"Believe you me," he said, "I could tell you things, kid! Matter of fact. . . ." He paused and looked doubtful. I let my smile fade away and tried looking wistful. "I just might be able to let you in on a big thing," he said slowly, and I got the impression that his hesitation was genuine. "I dunno. . . . a lot of the other wardens are girls, though, and it's not supposed to be too dangerous for *them*. . . ." He looked me over again. "You don't seem like any weak sister, travelling around on your own this time of night. . . ."

I just sat there and stopped breathing again, waiting to see what would come next.

"I tell you what," he said. "You got your badge on you?"

"It's in my suitcase," I said quickly. "In the station. I left it in a locker."

"We-l-l-l-l. . . . you just sit tight a minute, kid. I got to wait on that guy. Just wait a minute and I'll be right back."

"All right," I said, and watched him go. He waited on the new customer, slower than usual, and looking worried. But he didn't get out of sight at all. Finally he came back, and began inspecting me carefully again, especially my sweater.

"Now I'll tell you what we'll do, kid. . . . say, what's your name, anyhow? You never said."

"Anita," I said. "At home they call me Annie." Then I was sorry I'd said it; too close to the truth. I had to watch out for that. It's hard to remember not to tell the truth.

"Pretty name like that," he said, "it's a shame to spoil it. I'll just call you Nita, okay?"

"Sure," I said. "I like that better too." He didn't know how much!

"Okay—Nita. Now listen. You can't go anywheres till it gets light out anyhow. I get off here around seven. Supposing you just settle down in a booth and

make yourself comfortable till I'm done. Then I can give you a hand with your bag, and see to it you get a decent place to stay, see?"

"That's very friendly of you," I said, and he chuckled.

"You're a real cute kid, you know that? *Real* cute!" He laughed again, and got that hungry look back. "Now you just find yourself a spot where you're nice and comfy. That corner booth's pretty good. You could even take a little nap if you wanted to. Then we can get you all set up later on."

"Thanks," I said. "Thanks a lot." I picked up my raincoat and slid off the stool and tried not to sound too interested: "Say, what was all that you were saying about some kind of excitement. . . . ?"

"Well, frankly, to tell you the truth, it's kind of Secret and Confidential. You know? I hate to be sort of sticking to the rules this way, but the fact is I got to see your badge first, before I could tell you any more. Not that I don't trust you," he added hastily. "It's just—well, I might as well admit, I take my responsibilities kind of seriously, and—I'll tell you all about it later, I promise you kid. After we get your stuff, and I see your badge, you know?"

"Sure," I said. "Sure, I know

how it is." I smiled at him again, and settled down where he showed me, in the corner booth. But I didn't go to sleep. I waited till he went in back, where the phone was, and then I slipped out quickly.

Out into the rain again. It just doesn't ever stop raining here.

I went back across the street to the station, and right near the storage lockers was the big sign I'd remembered seeing. It had the usual sort of stiff-looking man-and-woman picture on it. I wonder what it is about those poses that appeals to people. Anyway, it had a woman standing in an open doorway, with an apron over her dress to show she was a housewife, and silly-looking little curls all over her head. She was smiling, but she looked doubtful too. The man seemed to be trying to persuade her to let him into the house. He looked neat, and very respectable, and he was holding something out in his hand for her to see. Underneath, there was a facsimile of the C-D badge, and a warning about not admitting anyone who claimed to be a warden without seeing his badge first. The paragraph below that was all about the Impersonation Robberies that had been going on in the city.

I memorized the badge, and then looked at the picture again.

The man certainly didn't look much like my new friend over in the diner. No pimples; no protruding Adam's apple; none of the bones-sticking-out look the counterman had. Crisp, curly hair on this one, and a nice square face, and a straight, well-shaped nose. I had to laugh, the way people kid themselves on this planet.

There was a ladies' room downstairs where I could close a door, and make what I needed. I had a little trouble at first with the suitcase, but I found if I sort of rested it against my leg when I set it down, I could manage all right. I was tempted to make the thing look good inside as well as out—so it would open, and be full of different kinds of clothes. But that would have taken too much time, and it really wasn't necessary. It was much more important to make sure the badge was just right—and on account of having memorized it from the sign, instead of a real one, I kept getting the letters of F-A-C-S-I-M-I-L-E mixed up with my name.

When I had it looking right, I put it in my pocket, and then I took a good long look at myself in the mirror. My hair was messy, and my lips weren't quite the same kind of red as the other women I'd seen. I fixed that, and then remembered to

make a comb and a lipstick to account for it.

Finally, I went back upstairs and looked out across the street to the diner. But it was still raining—naturally—and I couldn't see anything through the droplets across that distance.

I thought it over and decided to go back. This counterman, Mike, seemed to be sincere in his interest. There was no reason, really, not to trust him. I had my identification now, so if he didn't trust *me*, that could be taken care of too. And at worst, if he was suspicious enough already so that he *had* phoned in about me. . . . I wasn't really worried about getting away whenever I wanted to.

He looked up when I came in, and seemed relieved and happy. Well, that could have meant anything.

"Hi, honey," he said. "I thought you'd run out on me."

"Oh, no! I just went over to get my bag. I wanted to—you know—comb my hair and everything."

"You look real good," he said appraisingly, and I was quite certain I'd been right about coming back.

"I got my badge, too," I told him when we got over to the corner booth, where the other customers couldn't hear us. "I

guess you got my curiosity all worked up. . . ."

"Ain't that just like a woman?" He burst out laughing, and I stopped worrying altogether. "Can't wait five minutes to hear something. Boy, I bet you're a great one over the back fence!"

I let that pass. Not good to ask too many questions. I smiled again, and pulled out the badge, and showed him my name and picture. He didn't even try to take it away from me. I just held it in my hand, the way the man in the poster did, and everything was just fine.

"I hate to be such a stickler," he said, "but you. . . ."

"Sure," I said. "I know. I mean—well, would you mind if I asked to see yours, too?"

He grinned and went back around the counter and fished in his jacket pocket, and came back with it. Just like mine. MIKE BONITO, it said in big letters, with his picture in the middle.

After that, of course, we were what you might call bosom buddies—fellow wardens in defense of our country, I mean, and all that sort of thing. Eventually, he even got around to telling me about the big excitement; he just wanted a little coaxing first.

It was exciting, all right; just how much Mike couldn't possibly know. Seems he'd had a phone

call about half an hour before I came in, giving him a description and hardly anything more:

"White, male, about thirty years of age in appearance, medium height, brown hair, blue eyes, clean-shaven when last seen. No distinguishing marks. Brown suit, brown shoes, tan trenchcoat. May be using any name. Known to be expert at disguises."

That last line threw me, when he showed me the message, scribbled on the back of a menu. I couldn't see why they'd bothered to hand out a description at all—but I guess they had to start somewhere.

I kept my giggles to myself, and showed Mike a straight face. "How do you find somebody like that?" I asked.

"Just run in anybody who answers the general description who doesn't have papers in good order," he said. "You stop and think about it a minute, you'll see it's not so tough, really. An average-looking young guy like that, out of uniform, isn't so hard to spot nowadays. And then he's either got a 4-F or a Sci-Class card. I happen to know this fellow hasn't got either one." he added mysteriously.

I nodded. I had given the matter more than just a minute's thought, after all, and I knew he was absolutely right. An aver-

age-looking man, sort of like the fellow on the C-D poster in the station, only not so handsome, was a fine thing to be when you were being politely kept under lock and key by a bunch of other average-looking guys you wanted to get along with. But if you wanted to get around on your own at a time like this, it wasn't the best possible shape to have. So I nodded, and expressed genuine agreement with Mike's reasoning.

That was almost all he knew, though. I smiled and nodded and agreed with him most of the time for half an hour, whenever he wasn't waiting on somebody, and the only other thing I could find out was that the order to find this man had come through C-D from some Top Classified scientific group, and that it had priority over just about anything and everything.

I'd just about decided that I could relax and start exploring this new world without worrying, when the phone rang in back, and Mike mumbled some apology and went to answer it.

He came back with a new gleam in his eye. "That was from H.Q.," he told me in a stage whisper nobody could have missed for a block around. "That business I told you about is getting hot now. There's a big meeting. . . . listen, it's quitting

time now. I'll tell you about it outside. Let's get out of here, kid."

Outside, in a cab on the way to the first address he'd given me, he told me there was going to be a meeting for all city wardens at noon that day, to give them more background on the manhunt, and that he'd gotten permission for me to come along. C-D is a Federal outfit, after all, and the local bunch was glad enough to get any extra help they could, with something big on their hands:

"Just so you're a qualified warden, they said they didn't care *where* you came from," Mike told me gleefully. Then he sprang his big surprise: "That is, as long as it wasn't Mars!"

"Huh?" He got the reaction he was looking for, whether he understood the reasons for it or not.

"That's what I said, kid. Now, look, I don't know for sure who this guy is they're looking for, but you put two and two together, see, and you'll get four every time. This Sci Project that put the priority through—the Chief just told me on the phone that it turns out to be the Mars-ship bunch. You know—the ones that were plastered all over the headlines a couple of weeks ago."

I nodded. I'd seen some of the newspapers after we landed. . . .

calling Landrin the "Pioneer of the Planets," and me. . . . what they didn't call *me* they missed up on just out of ignorance or lack of imagination. The most popular nickname seemed to be BEM, though. Short for Bug-eyed Monster. Landrin said it was a joke. Of course, the reporters didn't have much to go on; they never saw me or talked to me, because even before we touched Earth, I was classified as a military secret.

I tried to get some more information out of Mike, but I had to give up, finally, and decide that he just didn't know any more. "They'll give us all the rest of the dope at the meeting," he said. "That's what it's for." Then he looked very serious, and added: "Under oath of secrecy, of course." At which point his arm moved forward a little on the back of the seat, and he started to lean toward me. It had been bad enough across the counter; I just couldn't take his peculiar personal odor of dental decay any closer.

"My goodness," I said, stretching with both arms so he had to pull back to keep from getting a fist in the face. "I'm so sle-e-e-e-py."

I used the same basic defense pretty convincingly when he wanted to help me "get settled" in my room at the boarding

house. I *couldn't* let him help. I'd seen human reactions to suitcases that wouldn't open a couple of times on the train, and I wasn't having any of Mike Bonito and his enthusiasm kicking and picking at *me* that way!

"I'm not even going to unpack now," I told him. "Just get some sleep." He followed me in just the same, and I managed to dump my raincoat on a chair, put my suitcase down in front of it, and drop into it myself pretty convincingly, I think, without making it too noticeable that I never quite lost contact with either of my "possessions."

"Yeah," he said. "I guess you must be kind of knocked out." But he didn't leave. He just wandered around the room, opening and closing his mouth as if he was going to say something and then changed his mind each time. He'd stand over at the window looking out at the rain with that *hungry* expression again. Then when he turned toward me, he'd seem angry. But all he said, finally, was: "Okay, kid, have it your way. Tell you what—I'll pick you up a little early. Say, around eleven. Then we can have some time to get acquainted a little bit—you know?"

"Sure," I said. "That sounds just fine."

He started toward the door,

and he seemed to expect me to walk over with him. I couldn't do it, of course. I had to stick with the suitcase and raincoat. So I smiled and started muttering some kind of apology, but as soon as I did that, he switched directions, and began heading toward me again. I turned off the smile, and he turned back toward the door. Just as simple as that.

"I'll call on my way up," he said before he closed the door, and I thanked him, and heaved a sigh of relief as I heard it latch closed behind him. I'd gotten soaked through, those three hours on the station platform, and all the time in the diner, I hadn't been able to get dry much below the surface. Then, even the short trip across the sidewalk from the cab to the doorway had been enough to get me wet clear through the skin again.

I made sure the door was locked, and then spread out on the floor till I was properly dry again. When I pulled myself together, I felt better. I didn't really believe yet that the rain was just going to go on and on. And I still felt I'd been too sheltered by the government people: told only what they wanted me to know, and given an entirely too rosy picture of what this world was like. I didn't want to

go home with the wrong information. And I might as well admit that I was sort of intrigued by the developing situation: getting in on the hunt for myself, so to speak.

I had more than three hours right then to think and plan. Instead, I sat around resting, and examining myself in the mirror in different kinds of clothes, and speculating idly on what I'd already seen and heard, and on what might come next. If Landrin needs any further proof that I'm not the super-genius he seems to think I am, that ought to give it to him!

At eleven o'clock promptly, there was a tap on my door, and the landlady said I was wanted on the phone.

"Do you know who it is?" I called out. I had to change from a suit I'd been working on to something a person would sleep in before I could open the door. I remembered an outfit I'd seen on an advertising billboard, and got it about right, I think, before I opened up.

"Well, now, ordinarily I wouldn't ask," Mrs. Rayburn was saying. "I'm not the kind that pries, I want you to. . . ."

That was the point where she got her first look at me in my new negligee. She gasped, and her eyebrows arched suddenly into two high inverted V's. At

first, I thought I'd done something wrong. But I could see myself in a long mirror in the hall, it looked just like the illustration on the billboard. Then I realized what a sap I'd been. The difference between the man on the C-D poster in the station, and Mike Bonito in person, for instance. I wasn't dressed for sleeping, but for modeling an advertisement.

Mrs. Rayburn caught her breath again, but her voice was tight and cold now: "... I want you to know, but I know Mr. Bonito's voice when I hear it. He told me to tell you, in case you wasn't up yet, and I see you're not dressed to come downstairs, he's comin' right over, an' I don't mind telling you myself, even if it's Mr. Bonito, I'd rather not have my young ladies entertain gentlemen in their rooms when. . ." She looked me up and down again, and couldn't seem to find the right words. "There's a parlor downstairs!" she added, and turned on her heel, sniffing.

"Thank you," I called after her. "Just tell him I'll be ready, will you?"

She sniffed again, without turning around, and I closed the door, feeling relieved about that parlor. It would solve some problems—like what happened to my suitcase.

I was underestimating Mike, though. It took me about three minutes to change to a suit, with the raincoat draped over my arm again (it was *still* raining), and the reconstituted C-D badge in my pocket, along with lipstick and comb. This time I remembered that girls carry handkerchiefs too. I was just ready to go down when Mike knocked at the door.

I didn't let him in. Just stepped out, and smiled, and said I was starving, and couldn't face anything till I'd had a cup of coffee.

From the way his face fell, I realized I'd done something wrong; and then I remembered that men always have to pay for things when they're out with women. I felt kind of bad about that, but after all, a cup of coffee doesn't cost much.

We went on downstairs, and he stepped out, while I stood bracing myself for the plunge into the rain again.

"There's a pretty decent place right down here at the corner," he said.

"Let's run!" I started doing it, so he had to too. When we got in out of the wet, I told him, "I just *hate* rain!"

"Doesn't seem to hurt you any," he said, and then he decided to stop being irritated, and smiled. "Some girls come all

apart at the seams the minute they get a drop of water on 'em. You know— their hair comes down and everything I guess your hair is natural."

"Well-l-l-l. . ." I smiled again.

It took us long enough to eat so we had to take a cab downtown to the meeting, and that was perfectly all right with me. I didn't have any trouble keeping Mike from getting too close in the cab either. I was learning how to manage things like that more easily.

The meeting was held in the auditorium of a big building apparently used exclusively by the Civil Defense organization. There were about three hundred people there, mostly wardens, and mostly women. Everybody had to show his or her badge on the way in, and when Mike came up with me holding his arm, they asked a lot of questions, and wrote down the name and address I gave them, and called over a couple of people who were sitting up on the platform to find out if it was all right, before they'd let me in. Finally a big man with almost no hair and a quivering belly came over, and mumbled a few words, and nodded and smiled at Mike. Then they let us in. Mike told me the big man was the local Chief of C-D, and that he was the one who'd given permission for me

to come in the first place. We found a couple of seats together, a little too far front for my taste. But Mike seemed to enjoy the attention we got walking down the aisle. I don't know whether it was me they were staring at, or whether it was the special attention from the Chief that made us noteworthy.

Either way, I wasn't too happy about it.

We were almost the last ones to sit down. The Chief went back up on the platform, and began talking right away. We had been called together, it seemed, to assist in what was "perhaps the most important single effort being made in the country at this time, on behalf of the war effort."

He went on that way for a while, then announced that we had a *very* distinguished visitor, who would explain everything in just a few minutes—but first, the Chief just wanted to say how pleased he was at the response to a meeting-call issued on such short notice, and . . .

And he went on like that for the next twenty minutes. Apparently a public meeting was conducted according to the same set of misrepresentations as billboard advertising. People were not supposed to say exactly what they meant, or mean exactly what they said.

When the distinguished visitor finally came out onto the stage, it was all I could do not to slither down in my seat and trickle out the nearest exit . . . in spite of having been pretty sure who it would be. I knew that man entirely too well; it was almost impossible to believe that he had no sense organs with which to identify me. Just *looking* different was enough!

"Ladies and Gentlemen of Civil Defense," the Chief rumbled, "I want to introduce to you now our National Security Chief —Mr. Alan J. Landrin!"

An awed murmur ran around the room, and there was a scattering of hand-clapping before Landrin held up his hand for silence. By that time, everybody present realized that something important really was going to happen.

Landrin cleared his throat loudly, and started talking.

"Ladies and Gentlemen: I don't want to take up too much of your time or mine. There's a big job to be done, and it's got to be done fast. If we don't find our . . . our *man* . . . right away, there's a good chance we may never find him at all.

"And let me tell you all right now: *Finding the . . . person . . . we're looking for* may well be the key to victory in this war."

He paused to let that sink in,

and it was obvious he wasn't kidding.

"Now let me give you a little background," he said, and I only half listened while he explained to them how I was "captured" by the Mars expedition and brought back to Earth. Mostly, I was trying to figure out this "key to victory" business. At least it explained why they had been working so hard at convincing me how lovely everything was here. They wanted me to be on their side. But *what for?* That, I couldn't figure.

I started really listening again when he said, "I'd like to be able to tell you at this point just what a Martian really looks like, but I can't. Not from first-hand experience, anyhow. Because by the time I met him—or her, or it—when the ship landed, the Martian wasn't exactly a Martian any more . . ."

I won't try to remember the whole speech here. He wasn't nearly as quick about it as he'd said he would be. But he did get the basic information across—to me, as well as the others.

Martians, he explained to a hushed room full of people, were featureless, spongy-looking creatures, in their native habitat. Featureless, that is, until they needed some particular organ of perception or manipulation or protection—at which

point it would *appear*. A mature Martian, however, has about the same total mass as a human, and they—*we can change*.

Believe it or not, in all the time I'd been in contact with the scientists on the ship and in the labs, I'd never realized that was the thing about me that the Earthmen were most interested in! They had questioned me closely about practically everything else; in fact I'd almost gotten the notion that it was somehow *impolite* to discuss shape-adaptation. Seemed to fit with a lot of their notions of propriety anyhow.

I was wrong about this—As I soon found out.

"We don't honestly know whether our alien friend makes its body changes consciously or unconsciously," Landrin said. Well, they never asked! "However the changes occur, they are designed to provide the organism with a maximum of adaptability to, and control over, the surrounding environment. Including, of course, protection from any perceived dangers . . ."

If you reproduced battle conditions, for instance, around a Martian, it would change itself promptly to the best protective form. Then you could design equipment for human soldiers that give them the best chance for survival. He brought up that

example, along with a few others that gave me the damp shudders again.

And in between the things he said, there was a lot he left unsaid that I began to understand. Like why they had worked so hard at giving me a rosy picture of everything in this country. I guess Landrin thought that was too obvious even to mention; but he wound up his speech with some vague and threatening sentences about the dire possibilities if such a creature, because of "inadequate information," were to get loose without understanding the nature of the conflict in progress on Earth.

Suppose, he suggested, the Martian was somehow tempted over to the enemy? Or, even more vaguely frightening, suppose it took nobody's side but *its own*?

"We have absolutely no way of knowing," he finished grimly, "what further powers this creature may have, nor how much it might be able to accomplish single-handed."

I pulled out the handkerchief I'd so thoughtfully included in my "equipment," and covered my nose quickly to hide my grin. Landrin is a pretty smart guy, mostly: I wonder how he figured that I could get "captured" back home on my own terrain, and still worry about me being such

a menace here on this water-logged excuse for a planet?

Everybody else in the room was looking very impressed, though, so I decided the logical flaw was inherently human. People started moving around restlessly, as if the meeting were about over, but then the Chief stepped up again, and they all settled back, not too patiently, to listen some more.

He went off on a long rambling discourse about the procedures to be followed in hunting a Martian. Real silly stuff. If you're looking for somebody who might be any shape, size, or color, and you're not naturally equipped with—well, not having it, Earth doesn't have a word for it either—call it "personality perceptors," it's almost impossible to know where to start or what to do. And the more the Chief talked, the clearer that became.

People were moving around and whispering, not paying much attention.

"Could be a dog even," I pointed out to Mike. "Anything at all."

He furrowed his brow.

"I don't think so," he said slowly. He really *was* thinking, too. It was kind of interesting to watch; I hadn't known he could do it. "Nope. I just don't think so. This Martian, see, he

adapts to the best possible form for his environment. You know? Well, man is the best possible form for this environment here on Earth. You can start out with that much. So this Martian would be some kind of a man. That's how I see it." He nodded with satisfaction.

"I guess you're right," I murmured, and just then somebody came out on the stage with a slip of paper and handed it to the Chief. He stopped talking in the middle of a sentence, almost as if he'd just been keeping it up till he got the message, whatever it was. Then he said, speaking faster and louder and more purposefully:

"Meeting adjourned! If you will all please file out individually through the single door on the left-hand side of the auditorium, and display your badges again, you will receive individual assignments in the waiting room inside. Please have your badges ready, and form a single line." He stood there and watched as the rush for the door began. "Single line, please. Have your badges ready."

For a moment I was worried again, and then I noticed nobody seemed to consider this sort of amateur dramatics as at all unusual. Remembering the "oath of secrecy" and the "confidential express," I decided this was just

a typically human way of doing things.

Just the same I was relieved when nobody challenged my badge, or tried to take it away from me. They just checked my name off the list where they'd written it when we came in, and went on to the person in back of me.

Mike and I stepped forward to the next line, where people were waiting in front of a desk for folded slips of paper that must have been their "individual assignments." Frankly, at that point, I was getting a big kick out of the whole mystery-romance feeling of the thing. Maybe I was beginning to feel pretty important, too.

So was Mike, because while we were standing there, the Chief came over, looking friendly and jovial. All the other wardens were watching, and you could see Mike Bonito's social standing climb away *up*. It turned out, though, that he'd come over mostly to talk to me; to tell me that since I wasn't one of their regular wardens, they didn't have a special assignment for me. I was to just keep my eyes open, and tag along with Mike if I wanted to.

I stepped out of line, and the Chief took my arm, and nodded to Mike. "We'll meet you out at the front door," he said.

Mike said nothing, but I could see, as we walked away, that he was angry and pleased both.

We strolled out through the main hall in a leisurely fashion. The Chief introduced himself; his name was McKenney, but I was to call him Jack. He thought it might be nice if the three of us went out for a beer or something. I smiled and agreed. We got up to the front door, and it was *still* raining. Not hard, like it had been before. What they call drizzling.

I guess I should have tried harder to get used to the rain. But when you come right down to it, I didn't *want* to.

I stalled. I wasn't going out there any sooner than I had to. And from what I'd seen of men here, I figured what the Chief wanted was for us to get out quick, before Mike showed up. All I wanted was to stay inside as long as I could. McKenney kept edging me toward the door, and I ran out of little things to say, and then I started making a big production out of putting on my raincoat. I don't know; maybe I'd begun to believe in that raincoat myself; thinking somehow it would help keep me dry.

And McKenney, *naturally*, tried to take it away to help me put it on.

The trouble was I wasn't ex-

pecting that. I clutched at the sleeve, and he tugged at the rest, till the only part that was touching me anywhere was the sleeve in my hand.

Then he pulled harder, and I realized he wasn't just being polite.

Did you ever try to pull off a finger or a toe? It's not easy. But if you pull as hard as Chief McKenney was, it can *hurt*.

I couldn't help myself. Frankly, the answer to Landrin's question about whether adaptability is conscious or unconscious is: *maybe*. Or you might say: *sometimes*. If I get hurt, I react. Sometimes I stop to think it out; sometimes I don't.

He tugged just once too many, and my "raincoat" turned into blubbery goo, and slid right through his fingers back into me. McKenney went over backwards; there was a lot of him, and he fell hard.

I had plenty of time to get away before he got back on his feet. But all of a sudden, the lobby was full of people, running and shouting, and . . .

And in the other direction there was just the rain.

Then there were half a dozen people hanging onto parts of me, while my clothes went gooey and reassembled, and . . .

I'll never forget the look on one starched lady's face when

my sweater started dissolving!

Or the thoughtful look on Landrin's face when I finally got myself pulled together enough to be led back to the office where he was waiting for me. I got just annoyed enough, when I realized he'd planned the whole thing, so that I didn't tell him much. I just kept on being a girl. I still am. It's kind of fun, because they can't help treating me like a girl, even though they know what I really am.

Men on this planet certainly do treat their women well. Of course, I can only speak from personal experience, and I guess being blonde and what they call beautiful helps. The bosom shape seems to make a difference in the courtesy extended too.

Anyhow, Landrin gave me a big sales talk about how much better off I'd be sticking with the scientists and government people after this, and I just kept nodding and agreeing—and smiling, which seemed to bother him too.

After a while he realized I was just being polite, agreeing all the time like that. "All right," he said tiredly. "What do you want? Name your terms."

I told him. "I want to go home."

He didn't believe me. He's going to talk to me again tomorrow. Meanwhile, I'll bet he's

putting in a bad night worrying about whether I'll still *be* here tomorrow when he comes looking for me.

I will be.

Only I can't see how a man like Landrin, who was smart enough to catch on right away when he found out there was a girl in the audience who claimed to be a warden from another city (He wired to the town I claimed to be from, and made McKenney keep talking till they got a reply. He was the one who figured out the rigamarole that kept me from suspecting anything too; also, it was his idea that the raincoat was probably part of me.) I don't see how a man like that can be so dumb

he doesn't realize why I let him catch me at all.

Oh, he's got the idea by now about why I got captured the *first* time, back home. We really don't have enough water on Mars. It's getting sort of hard to get along; we have to have strict rules about population control, and things like that. We thought maybe we could *use* this planet. So I came along to have a look.

But nobody told me it was going to be raining *all* the time. I think maybe we'll wait a million years or so until the place dries up a little.

There's such a thing as having too damn much!

I want to go home.
