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## MAGAZINE

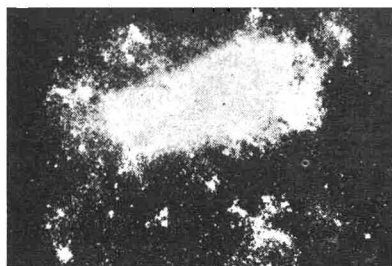
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Cover by VIRGIL FINLAY from **THE BALLAD OF LOST C'MELL**

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The Large Magellanic Cloud, an irregularly shaped galaxy which is a satellite of our own. The Cloud contains the star S Doradus, some 500,000 times brighter than the Sun, the hottest star known.

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*Robert was always there.  
He had to be. He didn't  
have anywhere else to go.*

By MARGARET ST. CLAIR

Illustrated by RITTER



# ROBERTA

**R**OBERT leaned on one of the clouds and said, reproachfully, "You're far too aggressive, dear."

"I know," Roberta answered in a small voice.

"It shows in everything you do," Robert continued. "Your voice, the way you walk, everything. You'd better watch out for it. It will get you in trouble some day . . . besides spoiling the illusion."

Roberta drew breath in a little gasp. Robert smiled. "What's the matter, anyhow?" he asked. "Are you still envious of other women, Roberta? You oughtn't to be. Now that we're, well, married. And everything."

"Are we really married?" Ro-

berta wanted to know. "It seems to me . . . sometimes . . . that I used to be happier."

"Hush. Be quiet." Robert seemed about to chin himself on a cloud and then thought better of it. "Of course you're happy."

He leaned his elbows on the pinkest of the cloud bands and smiled at Roberta benevolently. He looked, Roberta thought, like a picture Roberta had had taken when Roberta was little, as a little Roberta cherub. Ever so pretty. (Are cherubs boys or girls?)

The buzzer on the vizi-screen at the foot of the big sunken tub (Robert always seemed to show up when Roberta was taking a bath) rang harshly. Roberta clam-

bered out of the tub, picked up a towel with one hand, and with the other pressed a switch. The face of the receptionist on duty at the desk in the lobby became visible.

"A Mr. Rodvorello Dlag to see you, Miss Prentice," said the receptionist. "R-o-d-v-o-r-e-l-l-o D-l-a-g. He says he knows you. Shall I send him up?"

Roberta's eyebrows arched doubtfully. "Rov—? Rob—?" But a glance at the ceiling showed that Robert had gone. He might have gone into one of the closets, which was a good place for a skeleton to hide itself. More likely he had pulled a cloud in after him. Cuckoo Robert. Like a cuckoo in a clock.

"Oh, have him come on up," Roberta told the image of the receptionist's face. "In about twenty minutes. Even if I don't remember him."

**R**OBERT and Roberta were waltzing around and around, with Roberta's long pink tulle skirt whirling out behind, when Mr. Dlag knocked.

Robert went away. Roberta went to the door.

Mr. Dlag was an extraordinary looking man. Roberta, peering at him, tried to remember where people who looked like that came from. He was wearing a button-hole flower made of brown feath-

ers, extremely large synthetic opal cufflinks, and a suit of unusually garish iridi-tweed. His manners, though, were excellent.

"And how are you now, ah, Miss Prentice?" he asked when they were both seated. "Quite recovered from your operation? Well and happy, I trust?"

"Yes, I'm feeling well," Roberta admitted.

"Good! I'm glad to hear it," Mr. Dlag declared. His eyes, coal-black against the deep whiteness of his skin, twinkled. "It wasn't any trouble for me. Just a question of exerting a little influence in the right quarters. And if it made you happy—well! Any time I'm too busy to help out a friend, I'll leave Earth."

"Awfully good of you," murmured Roberta, who hadn't the foggiest idea what he was talking about.

Mr. Dlag nodded. "I came to bring you your ticket," he said. "You remember our little agreement, of course. Here it is." He extended an envelope.

Roberta opened it. Inside there was a very long ticket for Vega. One way, on the S.S. *Thor*, Amsonia Star Lines.

Vega. So that was where Mr. Dlag was from. Vega. Why hadn't Roberta realized it before? And was he, like other Vegans, a passionate collector? Was his collection what he went on living for?

"How's your collection, Mr. Dlag?" Roberta asked brightly.

Mr. Dlag frowned. "Dear Miss Prentice," he said, "I thought you understood. You won't be subject to annoyance in any way. You're to stay on Needr—that's the Vegan planet—only a couple of months. You *will* be a part of my collection, of course. But you won't be aware of it."

"You must have a very unusual collection, Mr. Dlag," Roberta said.

Mr. Dlag seemed to expand with pleasure. "I flatter myself, it is an unusual idea," he cried. "Other Vegans collect postage stamps, or coins, or obsolete radio sets. I collect imitation things.

"That was what interested me most, you know, when I came to Earth—realizing how many Earth things were imitations. Insects that imitate other insects. Plants that imitate other plants. Animals that imitate plants. Plants that imitate rocks. And half your artifacts imitate other things. It's amazing. There are almost no imitation things on Needr, my home."

**R**OBERTA had folded up the ticket and was putting it away in a handbag. At the bottom of the handbag there was a little gun. It had been Robert's birthday gift. (How had he got it? Sliver guns were strictly illegal. But

Robert could do all sorts of things.)

"That's very interesting," Roberta murmured. "I'm not quite clear, though, Mr. Rov—Rob—Mr. Dlag, how I fit into your collection."

Once more Mr. Dlag frowned. "I thought you understood. Well —" he smiled deprecatingly—"you see, Miss Prentice, you're by way of being an imitation yourself."

"An imitation?" Roberta echoed. It was odd, at that word, how much Mr. Dlag had begun to resemble Robert. Robert, who usually sat in the sky on a pink cloud.

"Yes. Because of your operation, you know. You're an imitation woman now, Miss Prentice. That's why I helped you with getting it."

Roberta pulled the sliver gun out of the handbag and shot Vegan-Robert in the forehead with it.

Since the forehead is in close proximity to the brain, Robert died almost immediately. Roberta's mouth could not help coming open.

Oh, dear.

Oh, dear indeed. For killing Robert was about as naughty a thing as it was possible to do. Naughty, naughty. Naughty. Left Roberta hand slapped right Roberta hand—the one with the

sliver gun—hard and repeatedly. Naughty hand. It deserved to be hurt.

But now what was to be done? The big mahogany chest in the bedroom was empty, except for the plasti-mink coat Roberta had been planning to wear when the weather got cold. Roberta took the coat out and hung it on a hanger in the closet. Then, catching Vegan-Robert by the back of the jacket collar and the seat of his synthi-tweed pants, Roberta tugged him over to the chest and tumbled him in. The lid closed down on him with a neat bang.

There.

Having killed Robert was very naughty, certainly. But now that he was dead—well, it was rather nice to have him gone permanently.

Something seemed to have happened to time. It alternately caught and then went forward in big jerks, like a tape that sticks in the machine. Roberta put on makeup; it took hours, though it was only five minutes by the clock. Then it was after eleven, with nothing happening in between at all, and time for the injection. And bed.

**R**OBERTA sterilized the syringe in alcohol; it was easier than boiling it in water. The needle went into the tip of the sterile ampoule and sucked up

fluid. Cotton scoured a spot on one plump thigh.

"Theelin," Robert said from a purplish cloud bank. "An extract of the female hormones. Your regular glandular therapy, designed to make you a little more . . . what you're trying to be."

Roberta's heart gave a terrific bound. "Go away. Go away. You're in the chest. You can't be here. You're dead."

"There's somebody in the chest, certainly," Robert said with a judicial air. "Who it is is another matter. I rather doubt it's me."

"You may be able to get away with it. Lewd Vegan, corruptor of innocent terrestrial youth, slain by heartbroken victim—that sort of thing. 'M, yes. But for God's sake, Roberta, don't kill anybody else. Mind, now." He disappeared.

Time gave another jerk and it was morning. Roberta couldn't be said not to have slept, since there had been no time to sleep in. But what had been on the agenda at midnight was still there now that it was morning—how to make Robert go away and stay away.

Well. If there weren't any Robert, there wouldn't be any Roberta. Would there, now?

Sleeping pills? There weren't nearly enough of them. There wasn't any gas in the kitchenette. The bridges were a long way off to jump from. And a hanging



weight would break down the chandelier. But in the drawer in the kitchen there was a knife.

Roberta drew the paring knife lightly over one wrist. It hurt. It would hurt an awful lot, really. But it might hurt . . . somebody else worse.

Roberta was making a second attempt when the buzzer on the vizi-screen rang. The noise was startlingly loud and harsh. Roberta jumped so hard that the paring knife shot out of the inflicting hand, into the sink and down into the garbage reduction unit, which happened—but how odd!—which somehow happened to be turned on.

The knife was chewed up almost immediately. The buzzer went on ringing.

**I**T was the clerk at the desk in the lobby again, and she had another caller for Miss Prentice.

Clement Thomas was a small, slight man, quite ordinary except for his eyes, which were green, bright and *interesting*. He said he wanted to see Miss Prentice for a few moments about a personal matter.

They talked about the weather for a while, and then Mr. Thomas (like what's-his-name yesterday) said he hoped Miss Prentice was feeling well and happy.

"Yes," said Roberta.

"That's good news," said Mr.

Thomas. He cleared his throat. "You know, Miss Prentice, there's been a recession—depression—whatever they're calling it now. Times have been rather bad for me professionally."

"Bad for other people too," said Roberta, thinking of Mr. Dlag in the chest.

"Yes, I suppose." Once more Mr. Thomas cleared his throat. "And of course I've been somewhat distressed by thinking about our professional, hum, association. As you know, the operation I performed on you was strictly illegal, though it was performed at your urgent request. If I were to go to the authorities, I could clear my conscience . . . and no doubt get off with a light sentence. But that would mean trouble for *you*." Mr. Thomas cocked his head and simpered engagingly.

Oper—? "There's nothing so terrible about an abortion," Roberta answered.

"Abortions?" Mr. Thomas seemed startled. His simper disappeared. It looked, Roberta thought, as if the mask he had on over his face was getting thin. He laughed. "An abortion, my dear, is something you'll never need. Never in this world."

He started to laugh again, and checked himself. "*Don't* you remember?" he said to Roberta, who was fidgeting with the clasp of the handbag and wondering who Mr.

Thomas really was, under his mask. "Honestly, don't you remember? You came to me six months or so ago, recommended by a certain, hum, alien, and asked for my professional services. Your name was Robert Bayliss then. You had me perform a sex-reversal op—"

This time there was no possible doubt. He wasn't Clement Thomas, he was Robert. The person sitting opposite surgeon-Robert shot him in the throat.

Since the throat is further from the brain than the forehead is, it took Robert No. 2 quite a lot longer to die than it had taken Mr. Dlag, yesterday. Sliver-gun darts act directly on the nervous system. Robert tied himself up in convulsion after convulsion, horrid masculine knots, before he relaxed finally. But there. He was dead.

Roberta put Robert in the chest beside yesterday's Robert. It was a tight fit. There was trouble with the lid.

The bodies were still being wrestled with when, on a bank of black clouds very low down on the ceiling, Robert appeared. He looked angry. "I told you not to," he said.

Roberta, trying yet again to make Mr. Dlag's left arm bend backwards, made no reply. Robert, chewing on his lower lip, ascended slowly to the zenith of

the ceiling. "Don't waste time with that," he said at last. "You can't possibly get away with it. Get your suitcases, Roberta, and start packing. Hurry up."

"But, Robert—"

"Yes?"

"Why do I have to go away? I like this place."

"What are you using for a brain? If we want to go on living even a little longer, we're going to have to run. And run."

He disappeared, drawing the black cloud in after him. Roberta remained staring up at the ceiling, head thrown back, Adam's apple prominent.

**W**HAT was the use of hoping any longer? No matter where they went—Venus, Vega, Arcturus, even M 31—it would be the same. Robert would go along with Roberta.

Roberta's jaw set. No, that wasn't quite true. After Mr. Dlag had died, Robert had been dead for a little while. It might be a matter of keeping on trying.

If you killed people enough, you would—it was reasonable, wasn't it?—you would get through all the masks they wore to the person behind them. At last. To the one you had always tried to destroy. To *him*.

"I'll kill you yet, Robert," Roberta said between his teeth.

—MARGARET ST. CLAIR