

Astounding SCIENCE FICTION

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SKIN DEEP

BY FORD McCORMACK

Their captive was a very important individual on the planet. But not for political position, intellectual achievement, or any reason they might have guessed with their quick-skimming logic!

Illustrated by Cartier

"I didn't have time for more than a casual inspection, of course," said Aspic, "but the planet is reminiscent of Earth as it was two of your centuries ago. There are a number of major political divisions, a great deal of armament, but no large-scale hostilities just now."

I glanced at the screen, which was centered on the planet's twilight zone. At our distance of a thousand miles, few topographical details were visible, but on the night side, there were faint patches of light indicating sizable cities.

"What do the natives look like?" I asked.

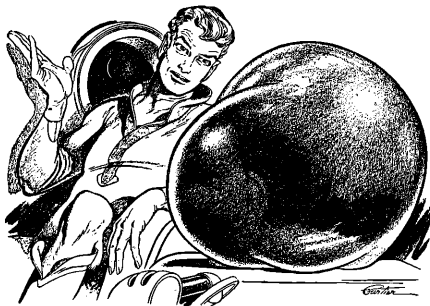
Instead of attempting a verbal description, Aspic resorted to his convenient device of activating the video to reproduce an image from memory.

Its screen showed a bulbous, grayish tripod creature, with half a dozen hairy tentacles of different

lengths, protruding from what looked like holes in its skin, which elsewhere appeared to be peeling badly. Two tentacles were wrapped around a bundle of sticks which did not seem to be part of its anatomy. The torso, if it could be called that, was surmounted by a mottled, glistening lump which could have been a cranium. The lump had three pendulous, purplish sacs that could have been eyes.

I winced. "And they told me exploring would be fun! Meet lots of fascinating creatures! Most of those we've seen are fascinating in the same way as a two-headed calf! I think I prefer them without any definite shape at all—like you, for instance."

It was true. Aspic was an Ulvakan, and appeared only as a pinky gelatinous blob partially obscuring the linguostat. The machine was an advanced type, capable of producing



most of the sounds possible for the human voice, and Aspic had acquired considerable virtuosity in operating it during these few months in space, despite the fact that verbalizing was an alien process. Ulvakians communicate with each other by a means akin to telepathy.

They likewise have no use for personal names. "Aspic" was a monicker attached for convenience by a crew member to our amorphous guest, who did not seem to mind.

"Your race is comparatively new to space," said Aspic, "and your viewpoint is residually provincial. Physiological structure is, of course, important only in relation to environment. My own, for example, had the proper degree of survival value on the aqueous planet of my

origin. Yours had a desirable ambivalence in a world extensively arboreal. These creatures are undoubtedly as well adapted in their way. In fact, certain general conclusions can be made regarding them on the basis of what we already know.

"The surface of their planet is cold, because of the distance from its sun, and the atmosphere is very thin. The smoothness of the topography, and the small inclination to the ecliptic make for little variation in the weather. The amount of heat received during their rather short day is only sufficient to melt the surface of the ice with which the planet is incrustated. As a result, the planet's albedo is very high and its radiation low. Therefore it has retained much of its internal heat, as

indicated by considerable low-order volcanic disturbance and almost continual local tremors—”

“Like a skating rink with the hiccups,” I put in. “It’s easy to see how three splay feet would have come in handy.”

“Handy? Oh, yes—another of your idioms. Their feet also have quite a number of extremely hard spicules on the under side, for traction.”

“You found out quite a bit for a casual inspection,” I remarked. “Did you leave your ship, then?”

“Yes, on the night side, in one of their cities. I found I could blend very well with the icy surfaces which occur everywhere. And their air has so little oxygen that I found it considerably less caustic than yours. However, I maintained my usual protective film because of the congealing effect of the cold on my surface tissue.

“The air is so thin that sound conduction is poor, and it may well be that these beings have no sense of hearing at all. The compensating advantage of three-hundred-and-sixty degree vision is obvious. Yet there is some evidence that they are color blind—which is no handicap at all in their drab environment. Their visual acuity, however, must be very high, since even direct intercommunication seems to be based on it.

“And so it goes. From the functional point of view, ugliness is only an indication of emotional ignorance on the part of the observer.”

“I’ll concede the argument,” I

said, “which, however, doesn’t seem to have dented my emotional ignorance. They still look ugly. Where is the functional utility, for instance, in having a semidetached skin? Or is it the molting season?”

The linguostat emitted a gobbling sound, indicating a surprise reaction which had caused Aspic to jangle the controls. There was a pause, then:

“Anthropocentricity!” said the colloid, to show its mastery of the instrument. “Those happened to be clothes!”

I blinked. “No!” In my mind’s eye, I recalled how the creature had looked, and promptly saw that Aspic was right. Suddenly, the whole thing seemed so ludicrous that I chuckled.

“Are there no limits to your conceit?” Aspic managed to impart an exasperated inflection to the machine. “Now you are amused at the idea of clothes simply because the anatomical parts emerging from them are nonhuman! This race has about as much need for covering as yours, even though their skin is considerably thicker. And they have undoubtedly developed the highly artificial *mores* characteristic of clothes-wearing races everywhere—including Earth. The individual whose image I transmitted was, in fact, more simply dressed than most, being younger and of lower social status. Some of them dress quite elaborately, though, of course, with no regard for color.”

I subsided. “What was the bundle of sticks for?”

"They were composed of silicates, I believe—organic material is scarce—and inscribed with innumerable fine lines which you could not even see without magnification and whose length and spacing seem to be their equivalent of a printed language. I believe they can produce similar patterns of lines, somewhat larger, in the delicately muscled skin of the head, for direct communication. A rare, if not unique, system. The sticks, I think, bore accounts of current happenings, which the individual was offering in exchange for a small unit of the credit medium—"

"Don't tell me!" I chuckled again, in spite of myself. "A newsboy! I suppose you would find nothing humorous in the mere parallelism, but the type fairly symbolized a considerable period of our recent history."

"At least," said Aspic, after a pause, "your unfounded revulsion for this type should make it easier for you to take the sensible course, when we have finished our business here."

"You mean silently steal away? I'm ready to do that right now. The thought of taking one of those monstrosities aboard for examination is less than appealing to me."

"Nevertheless, it must be done, to complete your report." The linguostat seemed to convey a genuine tone of reproof. "Although I know your basic judgment to be fairly objective, I continue to wonder that your government saw fit to place such an

emotional personality in charge of this important expedition."

"They had to," I said. "Everybody else had so much pull, a compromise was necessary. I was the dark horse."

"For the peace of the galaxy," Aspic returned, "I trust that is an exaggeration. But I'm glad I came along, otherwise I'm not at all sure that you wouldn't still be on that planet with the humanoid matriarchy, teaching them the secrets of space travel. In that case, as an example of your restricted orientation, it was the *lack* of clothing that seemed remarkable to you—despite the uniform, tropical climate."

I closed my eyes dreamily. "Now, there was a race that would have had a stimulating effect anywhere—at least on other humanoids. A little warlike, perhaps, but a gorgeous bunch of hussies! Of course, that wouldn't mean anything to a jelly . . . to a collaid like yourself. But seriously, it does seem a shame that a civilization almost within reach of the stars can't be helped along a little. And there seem to be so many of them at that particular stage."

"Including," said Aspic, somewhat dryly, I fancied, "this one."

I frowned in spite of myself. "Yes, for that matter, including this one! Millions of little excrescences still unborn, who will be chained to a planet from which we could so easily free them." I shuddered.

"Or, perhaps, loose them," said the Ulvakian. "You know the reason there are so many civilizations

'almost' within reach of the stars. It is because, technologically, the means of escaping from a planet are invariably concomitant with the means of virtual self-extermination. These are the crossroads at which most civilizations eventually arrive—and an alarming percentage of them make the fatal choice, or rather become the victims of one or more of their own minorities.

"A thousand years ago our civilization adopted the strict policy of noninterference, and it has been a wise one. A people which has to be helped into space has to be policed to insure its good behavior—which inevitably deteriorates under policing. No, we are content merely to observe such internal struggles, and to keep ourselves well-posted regarding our own vicinity.

"We were pleased when your representatives came to us and signified the same kind of interest in your neighboring systems. We cheerfully supplied you with complete information about that part of your proposed zone which overlaps ours, and I was sent to lend our experience in the task of exploring the rest of it. We were glad to assist in such a far-sighted enterprise. But do you think it would have been wise of us, two centuries ago, to have given our knowledge to your socially unstable, short-lived forebears?"

I considered. "That would have been about the middle of the twentieth century. I believe the average life span then was less than a hun-

dred years. Of course, we're still not up to you by a long way."

"No, but you have made great strides—enough to dull the edge of a sort of envy that can be very dangerous. Genelectic science, now well-known to your race, was of no benefit to its discoverers, for example, nor to anyone then living. It can only be applied preconceptively. The psychosomatic factor of longevity, which is next in importance, cannot be taught an adult without great difficulty, and cannot help him much in any case. The result of introducing such principles suddenly is likely to be an unmanageable mass of frustrated individuals who cannot be taught anything except hate.

"In general, any great advance must come from within the race as a normal development in order to become a stable attribute, and we were very glad that yours achieved substantial longevity before it was able to leave your own system. But you know all that. I merely repeat it to emphasize that on the galactic scale altruism is usually thankless and can be downright disastrous. In your position, you must fully understand that."

"Look," I said, "you were able to convince me that we should fade away, dissolve, but not quite forget those comely females, so why would you expect me to give you an argument here? I bow to your superior sociology. We will not fraternize with these quaint folk longer than necessary, much as I'd love to! In the meantime, are you coming with

us for the snatch?"

"No," said Aspic, "I'm sure you will handle it quite adequately. But I am going to the planet by myself to investigate the matter of their peculiar language, which interests me greatly."

"If you get over on the day side, be careful," I said. "Somebody might see you."

"As long as one avoids centers of population, it's nothing to worry about," said Aspic. "Who on Earth would believe it, two centuries ago?"

A few minutes later, the screen showed his odd personal craft, a silvery, disk-shaped affair, wheeling off into the distance on its faint jets, like a ghostly pinwheel. Its basic principle, while ingenious, is not efficient for human transport, because of the inflexibility of the proportions involved. The size of the central passenger compartment, which must be spherical for stability, determines the diameter of the craft. A fifty-foot disk would be required to carry one of us in reasonable comfort; Aspic's was less than a third of that.

The Ulvakian, although of about the same volume and weight as a human being, was quite at ease in his sixteen-inch capsule.

The business of kidnaping had become fairly routine by this time. As nominal director of the expedition, I was not, strictly speaking, supposed to go along. But as the only nonspecialist aboard a ship complete with its own crew and a competent captain, I nurtured no illusions re-

garding my own expendability. And the long confinement was tedious.

There were eight of us, mostly crew men, in the ship's dinghy. We dropped down on the night side, toward one of the cities to be sure of encountering some residents, but avoided its center of population. A great outdoor amphitheater on the outskirts, well filled with unhumanity, seemed a likely spot. We came in low, cut the jets to a whisper, and landed largely with the antigrav in the concealment of some scrub trees about a hundred yards from the big bowl. Nothing stirred within our range of vision—we were on the side away from the several-acre parking lot, containing hundreds of vehicles which from the air had appeared to be motor sleds. We had seen no roads at all; on this nearly featureless countryside, they were probably needless.

A party of four, including myself, left the dinghy, having already donned spacesuits. As the man before me stepped to the ground, his feet shot out from under him and he fell heavily. His curses reverberated in my head globe, via radio, as he slowly picked himself up. Thereafter, we proceeded with gingerly tread over the ice-incrusted ground.

A row of small buildings, some with lights showing, became dimly visible, shadowed from the sickly glow of a pint-sized moon by the jutting superstructure of the arena. As we entered the shadow, a door opened in one of the buildings not fifty feet from us, and a grotesque

figure was silhouetted by the light beyond. It bore an unmistakable resemblance to Aspic's video reproduction, and I was just as glad the dimness precluded a clear view.

The creature proceeded directly toward us, seeming to roll along as if on wheels. As it came closer, however, the fluttering motion of its three almost legless, ducklike feet was discernible, the two nearer ones working rapidly in opposition to the third.

We had all stood motionless since the opening of the door, yet with its acute eyesight, the being must have been very preoccupied not to have noticed us sooner.

It stopped suddenly, momentarily resembling an overgrown, petrified penguin, then began back-pedaling with every appearance of frantic haste. It did not occur to me until later that the tri-symmetrical creature had nothing to gain by turning around.

With a restraining gesture to the others, I raised my shock pistol and pulled the lever all the way back. The cone of vibration produced was guaranteed to paralyze anything in the galaxy with a central nervous system at close range, and to keep it that way for hours. Sure enough, the creature went down, looking so much like a monstrous roly-poly toy that I half-expected it to bounce back up again.

But it remained unmoving as we gathered around, though the two baleful, winkless eye-sacs that we could see were disconcerting. There

was now the unpleasant chore of transporting at least two hundred pounds of slightly nauseous specimen to the dinghy. And there was no time to be lost, with so many of its own kind so close.

I resisted an impulse to suggest simply dragging it over the slick ground. Its skin seemed adequately tough for the purpose, but such a procedure would have conflicted with our strict policy of gentility. So two of us grabbed a splay foot each and the other two, including myself, reluctantly laid hold of a pair of the stouter-looking hairy tentacles. Slipping and stumbling, we lugged our burden through the wan moonlight toward the dinghy. We were half-way there, when all four of us lost our footing at the same instant. And what was worse, our efforts to avoid dropping our captive too hard caused us to sprawl all over it and each other. I managed to get myself entangled in the foul embrace of several tentacles, and for a time, the tough fabric of my spacesuit seemed pitifully thin and porous. I could feel stiff hairs and squishy anatomy right through it.

It may have been that each of us thought at least two of the others had been inexcusably clumsy; at any rate, my own grunts of dismay were interspersed with lurid mouthings from the others. I personally made three attempts to get up before I became aware that the ground itself was shaking.

Into my mind flashed the phrase

Aspic had used a few hours before: "almost continual local tremors." We had been betrayed by a moderately stiff earthquake.

Having made the discovery, I contrived simply to roll myself clear of the monster, and wait for the terrain and my queasy stomach to subside, which they presently did. A look about showed no hysterical mob squeezing itself from the gates of the arena, as would surely have been the case on Earth. I wondered if the quake had even interrupted the show.

Our glum and battered group completed the portage to the dinghy without further mishap. Those aboard emerged from the lock with the "cage" as we approached.

The "cage" had been developed and constructed since leaving Earth for the general purpose we were engaged in at the moment—kidnaping. It was a three by four by six, partly transparent tank, capable of maintaining a considerable range of pressures and temperatures, and a variety of gaseous mixtures. Its gauges had already been set to duplicate this planet's surface conditions. We popped our captive into it like an octopus into an aquarium, closed the hatch and sealed it. All eight of us were wrestling it into the air lock, when one of the men spoke sharply:

"Look out!"

I whirled, as did the others. Twenty feet away stood two of the local denizens. Though it was impossible to tell which way they had been going, they had apparently

emerged from behind a nearby hillcock only a moment before, and so had just spotted us.

They suddenly came to life and began scuttling away, with surprising speed. We had no choice as to our course of action. Four shock pistols were activated at almost the same instant, bowling them over like tenpins. And, like tenpins, they rolled a bit before their rotund carcasses came to rest.

"Let's get out of here!" I said. The cage was inside the air lock in half a minute, but after closing the outer hatch, we took another full minute to irradiate the lock and everything in it before opening the inner one. Thousands of alien beings, generally speaking, were less dangerous than millions of alien germs.

Back aboard the main ship, we transferred our dubious prize from the portable chamber to a roomier one in the laboratories, irradiated ourselves once more, shucked our spacesuits and turned in for a needed rest.

On awaking, some eight hours later, I found a message from Aspic, dated within the last hour.

It seems that I was optimistic in believing, on the basis of my first inspection, that international friction is at a minimum on this world. War sentiment would appear to be running high in at least one of the more powerful countries, although, of course, the language handicap imposes limits on such inferences.

It may well be that we have chanced upon a major crisis of this civilization, and

Mr. Lambert agrees, as I am sure you will, that no time should be lost in acquiring the means of understanding it more clearly. To this end, he will accompany me—in a life shell—to the planet where we can combine our analysis with discreet observation. We shall, of course, report as soon as we learn anything of interest.

I frowned. Lambert was our linguistics expert, and although he could probably add little to Aspic's ponderous knowledge of the subject, I did not doubt he would be an asset. But for the two of them to expose themselves jointly to the risks of a strange planet was unsound policy.

Discipline was scarcely more than an abstraction aboard this ship. The scientists and technicians quite generally knew so much more about what should be done than I did, that I had preserved a modicum of good will by limiting interference to cases where scientific zeal tended to scoff at safety regulations. And here, it struck me, was a borderline case.

Well, it was too late to do anything about it now. At least, they had not taken the dinghy, the loss of which would inconvenience everybody.

As to the impending strife, and whatever ultimatum or incident might have provoked the crisis, I could not muster any real interest. The fault was undoubtedly mine. I both admired and lacked the scientific imagination which enabled Aspic to associate these alien creatures with intelligent beings elsewhere, and to regard their problems

as relatively important.

When I returned to the labs, with my stomach securely anchored by a hearty breakfast, I was able to view our captive with greater equanimity. It had regained consciousness a few hours previously, and had already been put through most of the preliminary routine by our efficient team of specialists.

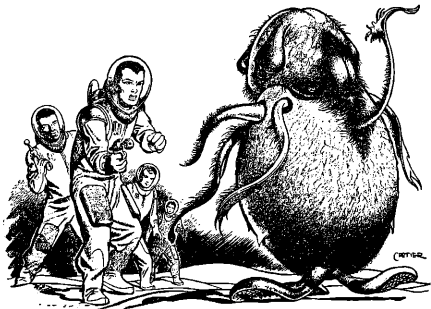
Later, the creature would be anaesthetized and exposed to as thoroughgoing a physiological and biochemical analysis as could be conducted without harming the subject. A major purpose of our interstellar tour, in addition to gaining strategic knowledge of our zone, was to compile a master biological category of living races within it.

The present part of the examination was conducted solely by means of instruments operated outside the observation chamber.

"How are things going?" I asked Berne, the psychologist.

His paraphernalia included a projector for presenting various images to the subject and an array of ultrasensitive recorders for registering the reactions. The technique had been evolved to determine many factors of basic psychology, intelligence and so forth, without the need for linguistic communication.

"Passably well," said Berne, with a dubious expression on his saturnine face. "The subject has done nothing to interfere with the tests. On the other hand, there is a persistent fear-reaction which is not contributing to the accuracy of mine.



It is not even—relatively speaking—normal.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Well—for example, the simple idea that we are visitors from another planet. As you know, we have a presentation technique guaranteed to transmit this idea to any individual even unconsciously aware of the most rudimentary facts of astronomy. But it has failed in this case, even with several repetitions. There are other indications that the subject, while no genius, has a basic intelligence equal to the task. But somehow it just doesn't register. You understand, this is not a case of the mere rejection of the notion as a hoax—a not uncommon reaction. It is simply a complete failure to grasp the idea itself.”

“Aspic says they have terrific eye-

sight,” I remarked. “It should be able to see us better than we can see it, and can surely tell that we are neither puppets nor robots. I wonder what it thinks we are?”

“That's just the point,” said Berne. “It probably doesn't think about that at all. Fear seems to have blocked all thought-processes other than those concerned with immediate causation. In other words, it feels no obligation whatever to speculate regarding our nature, as would a normally curious individual.

“But it is true that its eyesight is remarkable. Apparently, the visual center of the brain receives a large number of varying image-patterns from the multifaceted eyes, and tests show that it does a marvelous job of selection and interpretation. The result seems to be a composite pano-

ramic field of a clarity which would probably make the terrestrial eagle appear myopic.

"Here is one instance where advancing civilization, because of a peculiar demand for nonauditory intercommunication, has sharpened the visual faculty to its limit, instead of dulling it. However, there is some evidence to indicate that eyesight which functions in this manner might be more confused by completely unfamiliar objects than ours. This may account in part for our subject's unreasoning terror."

I studied the creature through the glass, not without a slight revulsion at recalling our inadvertent intimacies of the night before.

It stood in the exact center of the chamber, swaying slightly on its three broad feet, which suggested small doormats woven of coarse rope. Its general structure had an oddly synthetic appearance, as if Miss Muffet's spider, grown huge, had been grafted on to Humpty Dumpty.

Its clothing was distinguishable as many yards of drab, badly frayed cloth running in ragged folds every which-way among the tentacles and about the globular torso. Here and there, a loose end drooped in an unscheduled manner which I could not recall noticing the last time I had seen the creature erect, before the earthquake and the ensuing tussle.

And then, as I looked, my stomach once more shifted its moorings slightly. For the creature had lifted

a flap of gray flesh around the base of its cranial bump, exposing a bilious, brownish-green layer of pulpy tissue underneath, and was causing it to writhe in a positively gruesome manner.

"Why is it doing that?" I asked Berne. "It looks like it might be trying to yodel."

"No chance of that," said Berne, "having no vocal chords. As a matter of fact, we've all wondered about that odious little trick. It seems to occur whenever one looks at the creature steadily for a few moments. Probably only a nervous habit, like biting fingernails."

"Wonder what its function is in its own society?" I mused. "In its present state of agitation, I suppose that would be hard to determine. It's at least as ragged in appearance as a newsboy that Aspic portrayed for me, and is very likely of about the same social status. Judging by the circumstances in which we encountered it, I've been thinking it might be a janitor or the like."

"Its general intelligence, so far, as I can tell, is commensurate," said Berne. "Though there seems to be traces of a certain egotism ill-befitting such an occupation. However, maladjustment is apparently widespread in races at this stage of social development. Incidentally, the term would be 'janitress'—this subject is a female."

For some illogical reason, I found the pronouncement difficult to believe, and for no better reason, the creature looked about fifty percent

uglier, if possible, when I glanced at it again. My attitude at the moment would have elicited a pungent scolding from Aspic, I could well imagine.

"How can you tell?" I asked curiously.

"Well—actually there is far less external distinction than between human sexes, although these beings' super-eyesight seems to restore the equivalence fully. Aspic left us a variety of images of both sexes, which we have shown to the subject. As revealed by different patterns of reaction, sex-identification is definite and immediate.

"Generally speaking, of course, one can be misled by the terms 'male' and 'female' themselves. The lists of factors which constitute their terrestrial denotations often become so interchanged when applied to other-world species as to lose all meaning. On this very trip, you will recall, we encountered one race of clearly marked bisexuality—yet each sex gestated its own. But here, the parallelism is sufficiently close to justify the human designation. It is even closer than in the case of Aspic, whom we regard as a male."

I shook my head slowly. "I still can't think of 'it' as a 'her'. Perhaps a name would help, since the creature lacks a verbal one. 'Ermintrude' is the most uneuphonious feminine name that comes to mind. How does it strike you?"

Berne grinned. "'Ermintrude' it shall be. Do you want it inscribed in our records?"

"Well, no," I said. "I'm afraid our sponsors have no official sense of humor. To them, in fact, Aspic is still Ulvakian 2837."

"Speaking of whom," said Berne, "I suppose he told you about the rumblings of war?"

"He left a note. He and Lambert went off to the planet, apparently burning with curiosity as to what brought on the situation."

Berne shrugged. "I can't see that it matters much. Earth history shows that when nations are so disposed, they are about as likely to go to war for a bad reason as a good one."

Berne's final remark came sharply to mind, some three hours later, as I stared in disbelief at a message handed me by the communications operator. It, too, was from Aspic:

It is imperative that you release the captive at once. The explanation is too involved to present here, but there is a definite connection with the critical state of affairs on this planet. I must ask you to accept my considered opinion that the matter is urgent, and to return the captive forthwith to the original locality, which is now entering the twilight zone. Mr. Lambert and I will remain here to observe the result and will thereafter report to you in full.

A little dazedly, I started toward the labs, message in hand. All I could think of at the moment was how supremely silly it would be for a world to take up arms over the kidnaping of a janitress. Then a more rational notion occurred. Perhaps Ermintrude had just committed some crime—had even murdered

someone of importance—before the capture. It was plausible enough that we could have been mistaken for agents of another government, in our alien craft, particularly after the testimony of the two bystanders had been bandied around a bit. The other government might thus be blamed for Ermintrude's crime.

As it turned out eventually, some parts of that hasty theory were close to the truth. And in a way, the truth made far less sense.

Three of the scientists, wearing special, light-weight pressure suits, were working directly on Ermintrude, who was stretched out unconscious on a table in the observation chamber. I spoke to them through the intercom:

"Well, gentlemen, it looks like you'll have to pump the blood back into the subject. Aspic says we must send her back pronto. Take a look at this." I held the message up to the glass.

Nobody seemed amused at my flippancy. Two of them stepped over immediately, read the message and frowned in puzzlement. After completing some manipulation or other, the third, our neurologist, did likewise and looked downright annoyed.

"I would very much like to—" He broke off with a shrug. "But go ahead. We have enough for the report."

Fortunately, Ermintrude had proved susceptible to narco-hypnosis, and was under it at the moment. I called in Berne, who took care of the final conditioning. This in-

cluded full amnesia regarding the entire experience, so that Ermintrude's friends—and possibly Ermintrude herself—wouldn't think she was nuts.

Inducing it was a relatively difficult procedure, being nonverbal, but Berne accomplished it in short order. Within two hours of receiving Aspic's message, we had deposited Ermintrude, safe, sound and semi-conscious, within half a mile of the spot where we had found her, which was as close as we thought prudent. Before taking off, we gave the creature an injection which would revive her in a few minutes, so that she would not catch her death of whatever virus preyed on overexposure in that world.

We saw nothing of Aspic and Lambert in the vicinity, yet we had scarcely returned to the ship when they sent word that Ermintrude had been found. I wondered what vantage-point had enabled them to learn of the event so quickly. Later, I discovered they had boldly encamped, after dark, on the rooftop of the building which housed the largest newspaper—or perhaps the term would be "news stick"—in the region. From there, it was a comparatively simple matter to pilfer a copy of each edition hot off the presses.

But I didn't find that out until many hours later, and in the meantime, all our communications operator could extract from the errant linguist was an occasional, annoyingly unspecific report. After one which said merely: "Situation still

unsettled," I gave up in disgust and went to bed.

The next "morning" I found Aspic dolloped on the linguostat in my office, awaiting me. They had come back only a short while before, and I surmised that Lambert was catching up on his sleep. Aspic, whose nodular nervous system enabled him to restore his tissues in a piecemeal fashion, had no need of such a time-consuming practice.

I swallowed a caustic comment that occurred to me, along with a caffeine tablet from my desk. I was too curious to engage in recrimination, and for the same reason I had not taken time for my usual coffee, without which I felt a little dull.

"Well, I'm fortified," I said. "Now for that involved explanation. But not too fast, please."

"The explanation is not involved at all," said Aspic bluntly. "It is, in fact, quite simple. I must apologize for having misled you, but I considered it necessary."

I blinked. "What do you mean?"

"I mean there was good evidence for believing that you might have found the explanation so incredible as to be rendered indecisive by it. And it was important that the captive be released promptly. Since then, we have obtained substantial documentation, in the form of translated news accounts, which ought to convince you. Perhaps if I were to quote one or two excerpts—"

"Wait a minute," I said. "How about giving me your own explanation first? Could you possibly state

it in one sentence?" I popped another caffeine tablet into my mouth. The first one hadn't helped, as yet.

"I think so," said Aspic, "at least by implication. In terrestrial idiom, it is simply this: The specimen you chose is regarded by her own race as a queen of beauty."

I promptly discovered that the maximum stimulation obtainable from a caffeine tablet is at the entrance to the windpipe. When I recovered somewhat from my paroxysm, Aspic continued academically:

"The throng at the outdoor theater had come primarily to see her. I believe she was going to dance, as the climax of the performance, but that point was never made clear. Apparently, her enormous popularity is not based on any particular talent, but merely on a high degree of conformance with current standards of anatomical perfection. I think you will concede that your own history contains many parallels.

"You kidnaped this individual shortly before she was scheduled to appear. This was not so much of a coincidence as it might seem at a glance, if you stop to consider that of all the thousands present at such gatherings, the only ones who are really free to wander about until called for are the principal participants.

"Because of these circumstances, at any rate, the affair created a sensation overnight—and it was impossible to suppress the eyewitness accounts which naturally suggested the complicity of foreign agents.

"Among an emotional people with an irrational ideology of sex, the significance of the incident could hardly be overestimated. You had figuratively invaded the libidinous seraglios of several million males and carried off the favorite concubine from each."

I recall having the whimsical notion that Aspic was really an ectoplasmic manifestation of Baron Munchausen and would presently tell me how he won the war single-handed.

"What finally happened?" I asked weakly.

"I think a quotation from the last news account we saw will answer that question," said Aspic. "But remember, it is what you might call a highly poetic, or subjective, language, and no meaningful translation is possible for many terms. The gist of the account in your tongue, with the substitution of numerous rough equivalents, is as follows:

"This galvanic female, who by the tantalizing twitch of a single tentacular bristle, or by the demure and appealing undulation of her masticatory fringe, can make a thousand proud males yearn to throw themselves at her delicately gnarled feet—"

"Undulation?" I exclaimed. "That sounds like a passable description of a peculiarly revolting habit the creature had. We put it down to mere hysteria. Do you mean to say—"

"Self-preservation," said Aspic,

"combined with ignorance of your intentions, must have called forth the one resource which had never failed her previously. In short, she was exercising her personal charm, in the instinctive hope that you would find her too lovely to kill."

"Charm . . . too lovely—" My voice dissolved into something resembling a gargle.

"I hope," Aspic commented, "this development will have a wholesomely disturbing effect on your provincial attitude, so that the next time—"

"All right, all right!" I returned. "You might even say the princess was carried off by the goblins—it's all a matter of viewpoint. But at the moment, you could knock me over with a tentacular bristle."

Aspic continued with the translation:

" . . . had fully recovered from her terrifying ordeal and was her gracious, glibbously beautiful self again. Yet when she was questioned regarding the heinous kidnaping, whose perpetrators are known to the police and will surely be arrested within twelve—there follows the untranslatable designation for twelfth-parts of a day—this scribe beheld those celestial eye-sacs droop about a millimeter in frightened recollection. There was a definite agitated curvature in her cultured pate-lines as she told of her harsh treatment at the hands of the brutally efficient thugs who spirited her away two nights ago, and who released her early this morning, after their de-

mand for a fabulous ransom was met by a wealthy sponsor whose name is withheld. She expressed typically feminine concern over the ruination of the intricately gorgeous costume she was wearing, the creation of perhaps the greatest weaver of our—"

"What a shame!" I broke in. "And to our unrefined eyesight it just looked tattered! But what's all this talk of a ransom? As you know, that galvanic female was given the full amnesic conditioning before we released her. Why would she dream up some wild yarn about criminals of her own race making off with her?"

"I doubt if the story is her own invention," said Aspic. "It seems evident that some representative of her own country's diplomatic service reached her in time to guide her public utterance. And you will notice that even in this somewhat extravagant account there is no mention of international complications."

"But why? From the evidence of the two creatures who saw us, and discounting the part of their story which would have been unbelievable, the culpability of some unfriendly nation would seem to be an easy theory to arrive at, even for the government authorities."

"Very easy," Aspic agreed. "And they probably did. But this particular nation happened to be one which was neither anxious nor ready to go to war. The suspected government, on the other hand, is attempting to bolster its shaky tyranny by foment-

ing hatred toward others. It would willingly go to war—providing the blame could be placed elsewhere. In this case, they were forced to deny the accusations, which they did as insultingly as possible.

"If matters had worked out the other way around, which they just as easily could have, that nation would have made the most of it. We might have plunged this civilization into the worst—and perhaps the last—war of its history."

"Henceforth," I declared, "we'll recruit our examinees from the slums. But I'm afraid I interrupted your recitation—although I have a strong feeling I've heard everything!"

"The rest of the account is uninformative," said Aspic, "except to show that in spite of hyperacute vision, these people, like emotional races everywhere, see very much what they want to see. It is even likely that their superior faculty is a grave sociological disadvantage. Think how much more opportunity there is for the establishment of minority and pseudo-racial prejudices, when the slightest variation of structure or contour is apparent to everyone. In fact, on the basis of what I have seen here and of five hundred years' previous experience, my prognosis for this civilization inclines toward the negative."

For me, the last traces of ludicrous humor faded from the situation. I suddenly felt very sorry for Ermintrude and her ill-fated kind.

THE END