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# THE ORIGINAL SCIENCE FICTION STORIES

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Editor: ROBERT W. LOWNDES                      MARIE A. PARK, Asso. Ed.  
Art Director: WILL LUTON                      DOROTHY B. SEADOR, Asso. Ed.  
COVER BY EMSH      Illustrations by Emsh, Freas, Garrett and Orban

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*If one life-form—or better still, one single entity—is indifferent to the continued existence of another, is, as a matter of fact, quite willing to end it without adequate motivation, then you have a psychopathic society. And all over Earth, people were obtaining legal permits to kill others for the sole purpose of advancing an artificial social status!*

# SOCIAL CLIMBER

NOVELET

by MILTON LESSER

(author of "Through  
A Glass Darkly")

illustrated by KELLY FREAS

**T**HE MAN said suddenly, accusingly, "Snoop."

"Snoop I am, of course," admitted the thing which had just entered Robert Holland's mind. Whole books had been written about Snoops, but no one knew what they really were. "You'll get used to me," the Snoop predicted.

"Please." Robert Holland pleaded. "Come back some other time; this is important to me."

"That's why I'm here."

"But you'll ruin everything."

"Not necessarily; its all up to you. For example, you needn't address me vocally. People will hear you talking to yourself. I'm not talking vocally, am I?"

"You couldn't," said Robert Holland, who had once read a book about Snoops. It was called *It May Happen To You*, but Robert Holland had never believed it.

"That's better. I can understand you if you merely think the words. I could, though."

"You could what?"

"Talk vocally. You see?" It was the Snoop talking, using Hollands' vocal chords. "I could use your speech apparatus."

"All right; all right—don't."

"I just wanted to show you."



"Why did you have to pick me? There are more interesting subjects around. Aren't there?"

"Your brain," said the Snoop, "was radiating theta waves at a furious rate."

"Theta?"

"Anxiety; it attracted me. Go about your business, and the symbiotic relationship will work itself out automatically."

"Symbiotic, like hell," Holland said. "You get a charge out of strong emotions. That's why you're here, isn't it?"

"Not at all," answered the Snoop. Holland could sense it sitting—sitting was the only word he could think of—comfortably in his mind, waiting for the emotional feast to begin.

"Snoop?" he said, tentatively.

**T**HE SNOOP was there, but did not respond. Holland shrugged. There was no known way to exercise a Snoop; when it found a more suitable host, a Snoop departed. In the interval, it feasted. Unfortunately, according to the case histories in *It May Happen to You*, the relationship was quite parasitic. A host became nervous, edgy, eventually incapable of the proper response to environmental challenge. Naturally,

though, Holland thought, beginning to feel better about things, those were the case histories of confessed Snoop hosts. What percentage of the whole they represented would never be known; but it could be assumed that those hosts who withstood the Snoops successfully never bothered to confess at all.

Holland squared his shoulders and sprinted for the elevator at the end of the corridor, where a crowd was waiting. The small elevator would never accommodate them all, Holland realized. He hit the crowd on the run, jabbing expertly with his elbows. Something gave before a rapier-thrust of his left elbow. He saw an old man staggering back, holding his face. A woman grabbed the tails of Holland's jacket, so he would run her interference into the elevator car. He spun quickly in a full circle, crouching and jarring her chin back with his shoulder. She whimpered and fell back into the pushing, shoving crowd.

**W**ITH A quick, blurring motion, the elevator door slid shut, trapping a man's hand. Holland worked it free for him, because the elevator wouldn't start until that was done. The man looked grateful, but glanced at Holland's face and said nothing.

They could have made the elevator larger, Holland supposed, but you had to keep in practice, didn't you? The Snoop worked Holland's jaw muscles into a grin.

"Stop it," Holland said silently.

"I was thinking."

"Well, don't."

"Twenty-eight," called the elevator P. A. "Weapon sales and repair." Several people left the elevator.

"Thirty. Hand-to-hand combat." A big raw-boned girl gazed about defiantly and got off the elevator.

"Thirty-seven," said the P. A. "Assignations." Holland shoved his way forward in the still-crowded elevator, receiving no co-operation from its passengers. He barely made it in time before the door whisked shut.

"Some theta," said the Snoop; "you're a bundle of anxiety."

"Listen," Holland said, hoping he could convey anger with the un-vocal words. "This is very important to me. I don't want my partner to know I've got a Snoop."

"Oh, you needn't worry. We don't reveal our presence to outsiders."

"Well, I've got a Joint Status Advancement Permit, and—"

"A Climber's License," said the Snoop, thinking a chuckle.

Holland nodded and was glad the corridor was empty. "You'd better not interfere, that's all."

The Snoop did not answer. Holland stood for a moment outside the door of room 3718, took a deep breath and opened it.

"I THOUGHT you would be older," the girl said, studying him.

"I didn't expect a girl," Holland told her.

"What's wrong with a girl?"

"I didn't expect one."

"Have you looked at the J.S.A.P.?" she asked.

"Haven't had the chance; I usually like to meet my partner first."

"Oh? You've had a Joint Permit before?"

"Naturally," said Holland. "It's the only way you can really get ahead."

"This is my first," the girl admitted. She seemed less sure of herself now than when Holland had first entered the small room. "You must have a pretty high status," she said. "You'll see what I mean when you read the Permit."

"Later," Holland told her. "Yes, I'm a Twelve; but don't get any ideas."

"How could I? I'd need a Permit, wouldn't I?"

"It's happened before," Holland said. "You come in here, slug my real partner, and—"

"I would if I could," she replied boldly. "but I lack the status. I'm a Four."

"I've never worked with a Four," Holland said distastefully.

"Where'd you start?"

"Six."

"You were lucky, then. I started as a Two; I received a Permit for another Two and took care of him."

"Two plus Two; so now you're a Four. Married?"

"No. The Permit says you're single, too."

**HOLLAND** nodded. "I was expecting a man. You never know what you're getting yourself into with a girl."

She shrugged. "You could turn down the Permit, of course; but there's no telling how long you'd have to wait for another one like this. We've got the most we could under the circumstances. A Sixteen."

Holland whistled.

"You're really Climbing," the Snoop observed.

"Shut up," Holland said silently.

"I won't be a liability," the

girl predicted; "I've got much more to gain than you have."

"And far less experience."

Shrugging again, the girl took out a cigaret case and opened it. She reached for a cigaret and dropped the case at Holland's feet.

"Hell, she's crude," Holland told the Snoop. She was going to try something, of course, to prove her capability. But it was so patently obvious—for under normal circumstances Holland wouldn't retrieve the cigaret case for her.

"Go ahead," the Snoop said. "It might be amusing."

**HOLLAND** crouched and reached out for the cigaret case. It was gold, with a single synthetic gem set in the center of the cover. Holland looked up and saw the girl's foot moving swiftly as his fingers closed on the case. With his free hand he grasped her ankle and twisted. She yelped, lost her balance and fell heavily. Holland was still holding her ankle. She wore a high-heeled shoe with retractable leather on the heel; a deadly two-inch spike of metal was exposed.

"Let go of me," she gasped, grimacing with pain. "I was only going to show you I can take care of myself; I wouldn't have cut you."

"You couldn't have," Hol-

land said, releasing her foot. She stood up and glared at him. "You're not merely wrong," Holland went on relentlessly, "you're pathetic. The man's a Sixteen, you said. Know what that means? You've got to be subtle. Unless you're subtle, you'll never get close enough to use that trick heel or anything like it. Is that how you killed the other Two?"

"I'm not required to talk about that. Well, are you going to look at the Permit, or aren't you?"

"I won't return it, if that's what you're worrying about; I'll go through with it. But let's get one thing straight: I'm in charge. You do whatever I say."

The girl pouted. "Yes, sir."

"And don't act subservient; that would give us away. Look, I've never had a female partner before, but according to what I've read, it might be a good idea if we got married."

"Married?"

"That should be interesting," the Snoop said.

**HOLLAND** scowled irritably, not bothering to answer the Snoop. "Yes, married; that way we could be together all the time without arousing suspicion." The more he thought about it, the more

he liked the idea; they could really work as a team. A female partner might have her advantages, after all. "Is it all right with you?"

"If we include an automatic divorce clause, I guess so."

"Splendid," Holland said. "Now, about the division of this Sixteen's status—"

"Oh, that's no problem; it's an even number. Eight for you and eight for me."

"Like hell," Holland said. "You want to triple your status while I make a gain of two-thirds? You think I'm crazy? If I took twelve and you took four, we'd each be exactly doubling our status. That's the best you'll get from me. I think it's plenty lenient, anyway; I *am* a Twelve, you know."

"Lenient," she muttered bitterly.

"Take it or leave it." Holland headed for the door.

"Wait. That would make you a Twenty-four; you can't go higher than that in this city."

"I'll apply for an exit permit."

"You'll be awfully young, for a Twenty-four."

"Youngest in the city, I think."

"And probably not half as sharp as you believe," the girl mused.

**H**OLLAND smiled. "Now you're using your head. You'll know all about me. How I operate. My personal habits. If you could arrange to link up with another Sixteen—assuming we succeed—and get a Permit to tackle me, you'd really be Climbing."

"Doesn't it frighten you?"

"I'm trembling," Holland said, still smiling.

"Well, it's a deal: Four for me and twelve for you. I think we'll get along fine, mister." The girl took the manifold copy of her Joint Status Advancement Permit from a pocket of her blouse. She had, Holland observed, already broken the seal on it. He removed his own copy from his billfold and broke the seal. They filled in the acquisition of status points on each copy and initialed it with a pen the girl supplied.

"You're a sharp trader," the Snoop told Holland. "All those points and marriage too, while it lasts. I've found a splendid host. She's quite beautiful, you know, Holland; we're going to enjoy ourselves, aren't we?"

"You damn Snoop!" Holland said silently, savagely. "That's all you really want, isn't it? I'm nothing but a vehicle. You latch onto me and enjoy sensual pleasures."

"Whatever you say," the

Snoop told him calmly.

"Well, is there another explanation for you?"

"You humans haven't thought so."

"I'm asking you."

"We've been here for fifty years. Your psychologists have tried their best to explain us—after spending a decade or so trying to explain us away!"

"Don't be so amused," Holland protested. "You're making me smile. She's looking at me; she'll wonder—"

"What's the matter?" the girl asked.

"I'm reading the Permit," Holland told her.

**T**HE SNOOP settled back comfortably in his mind. "And still," the Snoop said, "you know nothing. Nothing. Have you ever thought of us in terms of an invasion—from space, say?"

"I've read it in the Sunday supplements."

"How do you think the idea was planted, Holland?" the Snoop demanded.

"Some other time," Holland snapped. Then aloud, after quickly scanning the J.S.A.P.: "Saul Gurdin, eh? I've heard of him. He's never taken out a Permit in his life; he ought to be easy game."

"He's been too busy," said the girl, whose name, accord-



ing to the Permit, was Julia Randall. "He builds bridges on Venus, but he's a citizen of this city."

"He spends a lot of time on Venus, though," Holland offered.

"Just the other day over a telecast, I happened to see where he's on Venus now."

"Oh, great," Holland said.

"What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing, I guess."

"We can apply for a temporary exit permit to fulfill the terms of the J.S.A.P. We can get married and take our honeymoon on Venus. There's a Marriage Bureau here in Status Center, isn't there?"

"Yes," said Holland.

"I can't wait," the Snoop declared happily. Holland got the notion of the bodiless entity stretching languidly inside his mind.

"What are you so glum about?" Julia Randall asked Holland, who was busy cursing the Snoop silently. "This won't be the first J.S.A.P. marriage; we might as well get to know each other."

"Yes," said Holland. She came into his arms and let him kiss her. It was a long kiss and a good one. She both wanted to be kissed and knew how to kiss.

"Are you going to murder Jason Gurdin on your honey-

moon, or when it's over?" the Snoop asked Holland.

## II

JULIA SAID, "Really, darling, if you want to read a book on our first night out in space... What is that book, anyway?"

Holland propped his knees up under the covers so she wouldn't see the title on the dust jacket of the book. It was a foolish gesture, he realized; she could always look at the book later. "Why don't you go out to the clubroom and have a drink?" he suggested. "I'll join you in a while. It's still early."

"What's the matter with you?" the Snoop asked. The Snoop seemed disappointed.

Julia went into the dressing room of their suite and soon re-appeared in comfortable cruise clothing. "All right," she said, but not happily; "I'll see you in the clubroom. Aside from everything else," she reminded Holland, "we have a lot of planning to do."

Holland nodded and heard the door shut behind her. He returned with unrewarded eagerness to his book. He had read fifty pages so far and still knew next to nothing about Snoops. The book was Morrison's supposedly defini-

tive *Snoops: Fifty Years of Silent Invasion.*

"That won't really help you," the Snoop said. Holland had learned to understand the Snoop's way of expressing itself. Those words had been said almost with a yawn. "He's on the wrong track entirely."

"But you said yourself it was an invasion of some kind."

"Well, yes; other than that, Morrison knows nothing."

"Statistically, he gives the incidence of Snoop seizure broken down by status groups." Holland found himself defending the almost worthless book.

"Does he, indeed? But how does he know? Many hosts keep their seizure a secret. "You will, for example; won't you?"

"If I can help it, yes."

"Then Morrison doesn't really know what he's talking about."

"This will be the biggest status jump I ever attempted," Holland said. "Is that why you're here?"

"What on earth ever gave you that idea?"

"I thought perhaps the government—"

"You mean, that I'm artificial? Dear me, Holland, no. I assure you, I am as real and as live and—yes—as natural as

you are. Naturally, if a man attempts an enormous status jump, he's going to be filled with anxiety, which is what attracts me."

"IT'S Morrison's estimate," Holland continued doggedly, "that there are some three thousand Snoops on Earth. His statistics don't include Venus, Mars, or the Jovian Moons."

"Three thousand? The estimate is too conservative. Although, at one time, our number here was far less than that."

"You've had reinforcements?" Holland asked, feeling ridiculous as he remained consistent with Morrison's idea of an invasion.

"Reinforcements? No, Holland; we are natural and fully alive. We grow and grow old; we have all the natural functions of a living creature. We don't need reinforcements. We reproduce."

Holland could not accept the statement without considerable reservations. "You aren't physical," he said, as if that gave the lie to the Snoop's avowed ability to reproduce.

"Holland. I'm surprised at you. When your first space-ships reached the moon, the explorers found life. The scientists were astounded, but there it was."

"That's different," Holland protested. "The lunas manufacture oxygen and water from the moon's surface; they can also adjust to a comparatively wide range of temperature. But they're as physical as any life on Earth is. The same basic elements: carbon, hydrogen, oxygen and nitrogen. Besides, you're sentient and the lunas are not."

"There was life on Mars, but you expected that. And Venus?"

"We thought Venus would be a planet-wide dustbowl. It wasn't; it's a water-world. Of course there's life."

"And life on the Jovian Moons. Where else, Holland?"

"We haven't been anywhere else."

**"YOU'LL** find life everywhere, Holland—everywhere. Whatever power created the universe, its purpose was life; it has been immensely successful. In empty space, you wouldn't expect life to have physical substance, would you?"

"Space isn't empty," Holland said with petty triumph.

"But what exists in space is more tenuous than any vacuum you can produce on Earth. Unless you can conceive of an impossibly tenu-

ous creature, spreading over millions of miles of space and somehow achieving an organizational whole despite the limitations, you've got to admit that life in space—"

"If there's life in space."

"—would probably not be physical. Capable of symbiosis with a physical creature, of course, for a charge of energy in a vacuum learns nothing. Don't argue with it, Holland; accept it. I'm here."

"What do you want?" Holland asked.

"Doesn't Morrison tell you?"

"Morrison says you feed on emotion; he says you live according to a rigid calculus of hedonism. As soon as you find a host who emotes more powerfully, you'll scam. He says you make no distinction between pleasure and pain or success and failure. He says..."

"He couldn't be further from the truth," the Snoop replied crisply. "In fifty years your people have learned next to nothing about us."

"Morrison—"

"Well, that isn't quite true. Some of you learn, but wisely don't talk. They couldn't very well, not in a culture of social psychopathy."

"What the hell are you talking about now?"

"You'll see," said the Snoop... "Perhaps."

"You won't tell me?"

"I never do. Not unless... but I'm tired. I'm going to sleep now. Even pure energy needs rest and replenishment. Ahh..."

"Snoop? Snoop?"

There was no answer.

**T**HIS WAS the third time in the thirty-six hours since the Snoop had entered his mind that it had apparently ceased to exist. Unfortunately, Holland knew, this was only temporary. The Snoop was resting; the Snoop would be back.

While dressing, Holland was thinking about Saul Gurdin. Gurdin was big—Sixteen. Some few people were satisfied with their status, and Gurdin was one of them. In the twenty years since reaching his majority, Gurdin had never taken out a Permit. Holland licked his lips; it meant Jason Gurdin ought to be a pushover. Certainly more of a pushover than you could expect a Sixteen to be under any other circumstances.

After dressing, Holland headed for the clubroom, using the handrails in the corridor to pull his weightless free-falling body forward. Julia Randall—make that Julia Holland—was really liv-

ing it up, he thought. She was visiting a Ten-to-Fifteen clubroom for the first time in her life, thanks to her marriage. Thus Holland decided he could make demands on her, although their marriage was obviously contracted only for the sake of their Joint Permit.

Holland whistled cheerfully as he floated along. He was glad now he'd been occupied with the Snoop. Julia had seemed mildly upset, so maybe the demands could hardly be regarded as demands. Anyway, it was better this way. A clubroom with more status value than she had ever visited before, some drinks and sensual weightless dancing...

**B**UT IT did not work out that way. When Holland reached the Ten-to-Fifteen clubroom, Julia was thoroughly occupied with a young mining engineer from Mars. She waved airily at Holland when she saw him, but continued dancing. The young engineer was very good, gliding and floating in a complex three-dimensional rhythm, while Julia followed him with a seemingly effortless abandon. They were easily the best dancers in the air, Holland observed, although the clubroom was crowded. For a few moments he watched the cou-

ples swirling and floating, then shrugged and sat down at a table anchoring the magnetic soles of his shoes on the floor-plate under his chair.

"What emotion is that?" the Snoop asked him. "It isn't a simple one, Holland."

"Go to hell," said Holland, and ordered a drink.

"Jealousy? But that's incredible. I thought jealousy was reserved for matters of status. Oh, I see. But it's subtle. You're angry at Julia because she isn't concentrating on your J.S.A.P. This leads you to believe the job will be difficult, which makes you jealous of Saul Gurdin's status. Interesting."

**JULIA WAVED** again from directly above Holland's table. Seconds later, the music stopped. With her partner, Julia came floating down. As was customary, the ship-steward had earlier introduced the passengers by status and occupation, not by name.

Now Julia said, "Larry, I'd like you to meet my brother, Robert Holland. Bob dear, this is Harry Gurdin."

"Gurdin?" said Holland foolishly as Julia and Harry Gurdin sat down at the table.

"Yes. His father is Saul Gurdin, the famous Venusian bridge builder. You've heard of him, haven't you?"

"Your sister is lovely," Larry Gurdin said. He was a pale, thin boy of perhaps twenty-two. He had started out in life at his father's status, which was Sixteen. He spoke condescendingly. "I never would have come to the Ten-to-Fifteen clubroom," he admitted, "if I hadn't spotted your sister."

"Drink?" Holland asked him.

"Of course," said Larry in a voice that brooked no argument. "I'll pay."

There were four more rounds of dancing before Holland returned alone to their suite. During the third, he had one dance with Julia. He glowered at her but she seemed to find it amusing, for they danced together sedately and without sensual abandon. "After all," Julia said, "we're brother and sister."

"Well, I hope you know what you're doing."

"He's Gurdin's son, don't you see? If I play this right he'll introduce us to the old man as soon as we reach Venus, be careful, Bob; don't hold me like that. He'll suspect."

"But damn it, we—"

"It's only a marriage of convenience, so calm down; I won't be able to dance with you at all if you don't."

He was going to make a

nasty remark, but the Snoop said, "Be objective, Holland."

HE RETURNED with Julia to the table and spent the rest of the evening glaring into his drink. Larry Gurdin monopolized all of Julia's time after that; and although Holland had brought along a copy of *Who's Who in Status Sixteen*—so they could plan the elder Gurdin's demise with the help of the biographical material the book contained—they planned nothing.

"Intuitively, I know this is the right way to go about it," Julia said on the third night. On the fourth shipboard night, Julia came into their suite very late, and looking very flushed and happy. She wouldn't let Holland touch her, but by then he had given up trying.

On the final night before Venusian planetfall, there was a status murder aboard ship. The victorious Ten, a woman of considerable charm who had enticed a male Ten to her stateroom and killed him there, was given a party by the ship's captain. For once the barriers of status were overlooked and the brand new Twenty was feted by everyone except the steward, who was busy filling out the necessary official forms and

flushing the body into space.

LARRY GURDIN cornered Holland at the party. Young Gurdin had had too much to drink but looked very natty in a cruise suit of a shimmering silver fabric. As a Twelve, Holland could not afford such clothing and felt a stab of jealousy as Larry said: "Old man, I've been meaning to talk to you about your sister. You're Twelves, aren't you?"

"Yes," said Holland.

"Well, I'm going to give Julia a chance for advancement that she wouldn't get unless she killed someone." Larry chuckled softly. "I'm going to ask her to marry me as soon as we reach Venus."

Holland looked at him blankly.

"Well, what do you think? I've already asked Julia about your family. She told me you have none—which makes you her guardian. Naturally the prerogative is mine but I wouldn't do it without your approval. Wouldn't want my brother-in-law applying for a Permit now, would I?"

"No," said Holland.

"Well, then?"

"Julia; it's up to Julia. I'll speak to Julia."

"In that case if I have your permission, let me speak to her. You realize, this will be

a great help to your own status. Through me, you'll be able to make contacts above your status level. While it's true that a man can take out a Permit with an unspecified victim, your chances are that much greater if you know exactly who the victim will be. Agreed?"

"Yes," Holland said automatically. "And I appreciate it."

"I'll speak to Julia tomorrow. Well good night."

I'll speak to her tonight, Holland thought.

**"B**UT DARLING, that's just wonderful," Julia said later after Holland had explained the situation. "What are you so glum about? Don't you have any imagination at all?"

"What will you tell him?"

"I'll tell him yes—but a girl can't be expected to marry immediately, not without preparation. We'll get to meet his father. We won't have any trouble at all; this ought to convince you about a woman partner, Bob."

She leaned down over Holland and brushed her lips against his cheek. He reached up and held her, but she seemed very cool and distant. He released her and watched her climb into bed. She was asleep almost immediately.

"What are you going to do?" the Snoop demanded.

"Why, I don't know; Julia is probably right."

"It depends on whose viewpoint you use."

"What do you mean?"

"I would merely like to point out that if you and Julia are successful, her status jumps from Four to Eight under the terms of your agreement."

"Which is a pretty commendable jump."

"Yes, but," said the Snoop.

"But what? Go ahead and finish it."

"I'd rather you did your own thinking."

"You mean about Larry Gurdin? Oh," said Holland suddenly, "I see. He's a Sixteen, like his father. If he asks Julia to marry him, which he will, and if Julia agrees—"

"Which she will."

"You think so?" asked Holland, shocked.

"Go ahead with your thought."

"If she agrees, her status jumps from Four to Sixteen, since a wife receives the status of her husband. But," added Holland triumphantly, "we've got this Permit."

**"W**HICH she can break merely by visiting the Status Office in the nearest

Venusian city. She doesn't have to inform you of it; the office does. By the time they get around to it, it could be too late."

"Yes," said Holland grimly. "Now I see what you mean. Julia agrees to marry Larry and doesn't give a damn about me. She breaks the Permit without telling me, because she's too busy—"

"Wrong," said the Snoop: "Because she doesn't want to tell you. What happens if a Permit is rendered invalid, but you go ahead with your plans anyway?"

"I've had it," said Holland. "I'm broken all the way down—to Four probably, and possibly even to two. Provided I commit a crime in the process. But if she tells Larry—"

"Assume that young Gurdin doesn't care for his father: The typical filial antagonism, no matter what the status. Why weren't you born an Eighteen or a Twenty, Pop, instead of a Sixteen? That sort of thing. Now, if Julia invalidates the Permit and—"

"Let me finish. Julia invalidates it but doesn't tell me. I go ahead with our plans; I kill Saul Gurdin. Naturally, his lost status doesn't belong to me, but it has to be accounted for in some way. *Who's Who* says he's a widower, and therefore his son,

Larry, will inherit his status."

"Precisely," said the Snoop. "Thus, by marrying Larry Gurdin and leaving you in the lurch, Julia not only jumps from a Four to a Sixteen instead of merely to an Eight, but stands a good chance of hitting Thirty-two—which, as you know, is the highest possible status. How many thirty-two's are there in the solar system, Holland?"

"Ten, I think," Holland said glumly.

"Some figure like that—and they're untouchable: They've reached the top and cannot be considered Permit material. That's the possibility facing Julia right now, Holland. You can't blame her, but you'd better be careful."

"But she can't—can't turn on me like that!"

The Snoop worked Holland's jaw muscles into a smile. "Wouldn't you?" it said.

"I—yes, I suppose so. But what can I do about Julia now?"

"That," admitted the Snoop, "is a good question."

"Did you say something, darling?" Julia asked sleepily.

Holland felt like strangling her. He didn't, though; strangling Julia under the current circumstances was illegal.



## III

**J**ULIA DISAPPEARED soon after they had gone through Venusian customs. Holland, who had expected it, was nevertheless furious. He waited for her in their hotel room, wishing the Snoop would awake inside his mind. He needed someone to talk to; even a Snoop would be better than nothing.

He picked up the dial-server to order a drink, but a voice said: "Mr. Holland? Are you in to callers?"

"What callers?"

"A Mr. Saul Gurdin."

"What did you say?" Holland shouted.

"Mr. Saul Gurdin is here to see you."

"Send him up," said Holland; "send him right up."

Holland dialed for drinks, quickly; they were iced and ready when Saul Gurdin entered his room. The elder Gurdin was a great shaggy bear of a man, who wore shorts and sandals and nothing else. His skin was bronzed and leathery, covered with a considerable growth of gray hair. He had not shaved in two weeks, Holland judged; his heavy, pear-shaped face was bristling with stiff white whiskers. His head was completely bald.

"You're Holland?" he said. "I won't have it."

"You won't have what, sir? Drink?"

"Thank you, thank you." Gurdin downed his drink in two quick gulps. He looked at Holland's, which hadn't been touched yet; Holland slid it across the table toward him and dialed for more.

"Understand," said Gurdin, smacking his lips, "I have nothing against Twelves. Some Twelves are very nice people, I'm sure; *you* look like a decent sort, I'm sure. And it isn't that I like my son," Gurdin added defensively, "so don't misunderstand. I've never cared for the boy at all, Holland. It's the prestige I'm thinking of. This marriage is out of the question."

"They told you?" Holland asked.

Larry called from the ship yesterday. He's not going to marry a Twelve while I'm alive, you can bet on that." Gurdin chuckled, loosening phlegm in his throat. "And I'm pretty damn indestructible, Holland, so don't get any ideas. You know how many folks have lost status trying to fulfill a Permit on me?"

"No," admitted Holland.

"Fifteen; and five more died trying. It's why I haven't tried for advancement myself,

Holland. Sixteen is pretty good, I figure. If I go higher than that, unless I reach Immunity, then just that many more folks will try to get Permits on me. Know when I'm well off, I guess."

"**YOU** COULD reach Immunity," Holland said boldly, "if you got a Permit on your son."

"What are you talking about?" Gurdin gasped.

"You understand," Holland said, "I'm telling you this only to protect myself. Julia Randall Holland is not my sister; she's my wife."

"Your wife?" Suddenly wary, Gurdin looked about the room for a weapon. He headed ponderously for the desk, but Holland said: "I wouldn't."

When Saul Gurdin turned around, he was facing a stunner which Holland held easily, familiarly in his hand. "Calm down," Holland said. "I'm sure you'll find the usual guest arsenal in the desk, but you'd never reach it."

"Are you going to kill me?" Gurdin demanded. "That would be a crime, wouldn't it?"

"I'm not sure; depends on the time. If Julia hasn't reached the Status Office yet—but it's too risky. No, I won't kill you, unless you

make it necessary. Will you listen to me now?"

"I don't have much choice, do I?"

"Julia Randall and I contracted marriage because we took out a J.S.A.P. on your life. When Julia met Larry, I think she changed her mind. Originally, she was only a Four and we had decided to split your status eight and four. When Larry proposed, though, she got other ideas: To marry him; to let me kill you, which would be illegal if she cancelled the Permit—which I think she's doing right now. Then Larry would be willed your status, and Julia and Larry would be Thirty-two's—and immune. Neat, isn't it?"

**SAUL GURDIN** smiled. "Hearing that, I can almost feel affection for the boy. I didn't know it, but he's a real Climber."

"What are you going to do about it?" Holland asked.

"How can I be sure you're telling the truth?"

"Julia's my wife, not my sister. If she marries Larry, our own marriage automatically becomes null and void, since Larry's status is higher than mine. But what's in it for Larry? He probably feels the same way about inferior status as you do. With Julia's

help he can become a Thirty-two."

"But he doesn't need *her* help. If he really wanted to, he could just take out a Permit on me."

"Think of the risk," Holland pointed out. "If he was to fail, you might kill him. This way, though, there isn't any risk for him. If I kill you illegally, he inherits your status; if I fail, he's lost nothing."

"He'd be saddled with an inferior wife."

"He could always get a divorce."

"You still haven't given me any conclusive proof."

"And I won't be able to, Mr. Gurdin. But you might be willing to buy this: if I find Julia's cancelled our Permit, it would be pretty conclusive, wouldn't it?"

"I'm not sure I follow that."

**"IT'S SIMPLE.** Even if she really wanted to marry your son, and let it go at that, she'd have no reason to cancel the Permit. She could have her cake and eat it, as the expression goes: Because, if we were successful, she'd add the four status points under our agreement to the Sixteen she'd have when Larry marries her, making her a Twenty. Larry wouldn't mind, would he?"

"We've never been very close," mused Gurdin.

"So, if she cancels the Permit, it can mean only one thing: She and Larry want me to kill you illegally."

"Sound logic," said the Snoop, awakening; "I'm proud of you."

"You keep out of this," Holland replied, silently.

"I suppose so," Gurdin admitted reluctantly. "But what can I do about it?"

"Plenty" Holland told him enthusiastically. "I'm going to the Status Office as soon as Julia gets back. If she's cancelled our Permit, I'll wait until she marries your son, then I'll take a Permit out for her."

"Twelve, eh? But you can't; she'd rank you by four points."

"I hadn't thought of that," Holland admitted. "I know: I'll take the permit out immediately, while she's still my wife. Then, if I kill her after she's married, I'd only get the twelve points I contracted for and the four extra points will go into the annual lottery. The government's always happy with an arrangement like that."

"You Climbers," Saul Gurdin said, with reluctant admiration; "I've got to hand it to you. It takes a lot of sweating, Holland. That would

make you a Twenty-four, eh? It's more than you would have received under the original Permit, too.

"Well, you can put that stunner away now, boy. What do I do about all this?"

"That's easy," Holland replied. "You take a Permit out on Larry. Here's your chance to reach Immunity at one blow. What do you think?"

"AN HOUR ago, I would have said no. I don't like the boy, but he *is* my own flesh and blood. Still, if he's in this with your wife, as you claim—"

"It makes sense, doesn't it?"

"Too much sense," Gurdin admitted. "Holland, I think I'll do it. Makes a man feel wonderful, the prospect of Immunity. Well, let me know about that Permit business, will you? Whether she cancelled it or not?"

Holland nodded and followed Gurdin toward the door. Just then they heard footsteps in the hall. "That will be Julia," Holland gasped; "we'll have to hide you somewhere." He grasped the older man's arm and pulled him back toward the center of the room. "The closet?"

"What do you have to hide him for?" the Snoop wanted to know.

"What do you have to hide me for?" Gurdin asked. "I'm here on a social call. My son called from the ship; naturally I'm interested in meeting my prospective in-law."

"But if Julia learns we've been talking together—"

"We'll pretend we've just met. There, now, it's too late, isn't it?"

Saul Gurdin was right. Together they turned and watched the door open.

"SO YOU'RE Robert Holland." Gurdin said jovially, as if they had just met. "It's a pleasure, a real pleasure."

"I certainly didn't expect to meet you, Mr. Gurdin," Holland replied. He hoped his voice sounded convincing.

"Oh, am I interrupting something?" Julia asked. She was wearing the briefest of Venusian tour garments. Since the current fashion trend was to reveal and highlight rather than conceal, and since it had only come off the drawing boards at Paris, Denver and Canalopolis two or three years ago, Holland and Saul Gurdin stared at her in frank and not a little breathless admiration.

"Your sister is very lovely," Gurdin said.

"Darling, who is your nice

friend?" Julia asked Holland.

"You're not interrupting anything," he said. "This is Saul Gurdin—you know, the mining engineer's father?"

"Larry's father. Well, this is an unexpected pleasure. Mr. Gurdin, I hope you don't think...these fashions, I mean—"

"Not at all, my dear," Gurdin chuckled. "I'm not *that* old." He studied Julia with what seemed to Holland unnecessary attention to details. He said, "I understand that Larry has asked you to marry him."

"That's right, sir," Julia said.

"Well, Holland," Gurdin beamed, "your sister and I ought to get better acquainted, don't you think?"

"Bob probably has a million things to attend to, anyway," Julia said. "Don't you, Bob dear?"

"You'd better get out of here," the Snoop told Holland; "you're getting angry."

"Well, I don't like the way he's looking at her," Holland said silently. "You think it's all right to leave them? There's one possibility I hadn't thought of."

"I know," said the Snoop, who sounded infinitely amused. "The idea is probably just occurring to Saul Gurdin."

"That no good—"

"Temper," cautioned the Snoop.

"Well?" Gurdin demanded. He went to the door and opened it for Holland.

"Goodbye, dear," Julia called over Gurdin's bare, bristly shoulder.

"If," Holland said to the Snoop as he headed for the elevator, "Julia decides she prefers Saul Gurdin to his son—"

"Exactly what I was thinking," agreed the Snoop.

"But I could still go ahead and take out a Permit on Julia."

"Yes, you could do that. Except that Saul Gurdin knows all about it."

#### IV

"LET ME see," said the clerk at the Status Office. "Permit NY-46-02, issued at New York, on Earth. Contracting parties, Twelve Robert M. Holland and Four Julia P. Randall. Here we are. May I see your identification, please?"

Holland showed it to him.

"Yes, sir; that Permit was cancelled by the Four less than an hour ago."

"I'd like to take out another Permit," Holland said.

"But that would be impossible, sir."

"Impossible?"

"Yes. You have a temporary exit permit from New York City; it terminates with the Permit under consideration. In other words, it has already terminated. You can remain on Venus, of course—"

"Oh, sure," said Holland bitterly.

"But that makes you fair game for anyone, including those of lower status. Naturally, under the existing statutes, we will have to publish that fact."

"Don't I have a period of grace?" Holland asked. "It wasn't my idea to terminate the Permit: I'd still like to go through with it, but of course I can't."

"You will have several hours," said the clerk, "until such time as the facts in your case have been published. This is not a legal period of grace, you understand. The time-interval is unavoidable."

"When's the next ship for Earth?" Holland asked. He had no choice now. The whole business was a dismal failure for him, however it turned out for Julia Randall. He'd been outfoxed and now the situation was suddenly, perilously dangerous. He'd be fair game for anyone, once the knowledge was made public.

"You'd better see a travel agent," the clerk suggested.

"Well, tell me this: Don't they have to take out a Permit?"

"Who?"

"Anyone who wants my status points?"

"Why, no. No, that isn't the situation at all. You have no business here, so your status is completely excess now. You're fair game, as I said. A Permit could be issued on request, retroactively, after your demise."

"Thank you," said Holland dully. He turned around and began to walk away.

"Careful," said the Snoop. "The clerk's a Six. He'll never have another chance like this, and he's beginning to realize it."

**H**OLLAND spun around swiftly, dropping to his knees as he did so. A stunner blast roared over his head, bouncing harmlessly off the wall behind him since it was only lethal to nerve cells. He groped for his own stunner, found it, dived headfirst as the clerk fired again. Holland shot the clerk in the face with his stunner, killing the man instantly.

The investigation was brief but thorough. Holland was guilty of no crime; he had killed in self-defense. The police wouldn't press the point

anyway, since the dead clerk's status points went into the lottery. The bigger the annual lottery, the greater chance you had of winning a few free status points.

But everyone looked at Holland strangely as he left: the three policemen, the two stretcher-bearers from the morgue, the official from Lottery.

"They're all afraid," the Snoop pointed out. "that if they start something someone else might finish it for them and get your status. It's the only thing saving you now."

"I know," Holland admitted bleakly. "I'd better hurry to a travel agent."

"No; they'll be expecting that. They probably have friends among the travel agents. You wouldn't have a chance."

"The spaceport?"

"The same thing. You're in trouble, Holland. I'm afraid this symbiotic relationship of ours is going to end very shortly. I'm truly sorry."

"Symbiotic, hell," Holland stormed as he left the Status Office quickly. "You've brought me nothing but trouble since you first showed up."

"I? I have done nothing. If I had been given an opportunity...but one can't work

on the psychopathy of a corpse, can he?"

"WHAT ARE you so glum about?" Holland asked the Snoop an hour later. "Nothing happens to you if I'm killed, does it?"

"Certainly not. But we Snoops are capable of a high degree of empathy."

"Literally, you mean," said Holland.

"No. In the old classic sense. You humans have lost it almost entirely, you know. It's why you—"

"No philosophic lectures, please," Holland said. "The thing that gets me mad is Julia. She's not here on an expired exit permit. Oh no, not her."

"I don't see the distinction."

"If she's promised a marriage contract by either Saul Gurdin or his son, the law doesn't apply to her. But me, I'm fair game for anyone. What does she care about that, though?"

"No empathy," insisted the Snoop. "You see?"

Holland was sitting in a bar and grill, half a mile from the spaceport. He had called the port earlier to learn when the next earthbound ship was leaving. He was waiting now, chain-smoking and drinking cup after cup of strong native coffee.

"You'll never make it," the Snoop predicted. "Haven't you had the feeling that someone was following you?"

"No, Holland said.

"I'm better at that than you are. You should have studied those men at the Status Office more closely; look over there."

**H**OLLAND felt his neck craning to the left as the Snoop sent motor impulses to his neck muscles. "Those two fellows at the corner table?" the Snoop said.

"They do look familiar."

"They should. You saw them an hour ago at the Status Office; they carried the clerk's body out."

All at once, Holland felt vulnerable. He had been sitting with his back to the two government mortuary flunkies. He squirmed around in his chair until he could see them without craning his neck. They were watching him boldly.

"But what are they waiting for?" Holland asked.

"Why should they settle for six points each? They're each waiting for the other to lose patience. They have nothing to lose, waiting another half hour or so; they know the ship schedule."

"I'll make a run for it the last possible moment," Hol-

land said desperately. "If I kill them, it will be self-defense."

"And then what?"

"Why, I'll go back to Earth. To New York."

"You'll still be fair game on the ship. With no hiding place."

**H**OLLAND didn't answer. It was one thing to fail in a Status Advancement Permit and have your status reduced; it was quite another to die in the process. Out of frustration and anger he had blamed the Snoop, but it really wasn't the Snoop's fault. The Snoop hadn't been anything but an observer, as far as he could tell. He could place the real blame at Julia Randall's doorstep, though. The more he thought about it, the angrier he became. That girl. Yes, that girl. Climbing all over Holland to get where she was going. And still his wife, as of right now...

"Say, wait a minute," said Holland. "All aspects of the status of the superior spouse can be claimed by the inferior."

"You were the Twelve and Julia the Four," the Snoop reminded him.

"No. I'm thinking of another aspect entirely. Julia is still under the extended pro-



tection of her exit permit from New York, because she's contracted a marriage with Larry Gurdin. But until the moment that marriage is actually joined, I'm still her husband. Therefore, if legally I share the advantages of her status, the clerk at the Status Office made a mistake. I'm not fair game after all, am I?"

"It's a subtle point," said the Snoop. "But I like your mind, Holland. With all its devious ways. However—"

"Uh-oh," mumbled Holland.

"Yes, whatever those verbal grunts mean. I merely want to point out that when a Climber determines to bring about your violent demise, he won't stop to study any loopholes in the law. You'll be dead and unlamented before the loopholes are found. Perhaps they would then strip the victorious Climber of his status points, but that wouldn't concern a dead man, would it?"

"You mean—even if I'm right, that wouldn't help me with those two birds over there or anyone like them."

"Precisely. I should also like to point out, by the way, that if you left here now and ran all the way you might possibly reach the spaceport before the Earth liner blasted off." And, when Holland stood up quickly, pushing his

chair back: "It wasn't a very good idea anyway. Sit down."

HOLLAND glanced at the two mortuary flunkies, who were still thorough students of Robert Holland's every move. As Holland watched them, one of them glanced at his wrist-chrono, relaxed considerably and leaned across the table to mutter something to his companion. They smiled and lit cigarettes.

"They realized you've missed your spaceship," the Snoop told Holland. "They figure you're not going to make a break for it now."

"What am I supposed to do?" Holland groaned. "Just sit here and wait until they decide which one of them will kill me?"

"You could make a break for it; you're armed."

Holland considered his chances. He was closer to the exit than the mortuary flunkies were. They were obviously armed, and watching him like a pair of hawks; and while each one probably hoped he could earn Holland's twelve points for himself, a sudden attempt at flight on Holland's part might swing the balance in favor of a joint effort.

"They'd never let me leave

here alive," Holland told the Snoop.

"Alone, they wouldn't; but look who's coming." Laughter bubbled in Holland's throat. Holland grimaced. He didn't feel like laughing; it was the Snoop.

**H**OLLAND looked up suddenly, Snoop-motivated. Larry Gurdin came in quickly through the door, spotted Holland and rushed toward his table. Larry's face was white, his eyes big. He glanced about furtively; he did not resemble his confident bear of a father in the slightest.

"Holland," he said, falling into a chair. "Thank God I've found you."

"How did you know where I was?" Holland demanded, grim visions of half of Venus flocking to the little bar and grill to be on hand for his demise.

"I was to meet Julia in your hotel lobby. When she wasn't there, I went upstairs, thinking you had somehow found out—"

"Hah!" Holland spat, surprised at the pretty triumph he felt. "Then you admit everything?"

"It doesn't matter. Not now."

"It certainly doesn't," the Snoop agreed.

"I found them there," Gurdin said. "Your wife—"

"She told you we're married?"

"My life's in danger," Larry said, "and so is yours; I think we can help each other. They—they were very cozy. I know my father. That look in his eyes—like when he wins a big bridge-building contract. I went to the Status Office, found out what happened, knew you'd be someplace near the spaceport—"

"All right, you're a good detective. What do you want?"

"Get off your high horse, Holland; you're fair game for anyone now. Well, aren't you?" And, when Holland nodded glumly: "Of course, I'm not; but when my father and your wife form an alliance—"

"Marriage?"

**"YES, BUT** will you let me finish? She'll convince him we were out to get him. She'll distort the truth, poisoning his mind against me, and—"

"Admit it, you damn hypocrite. Wasn't that the idea?"

"I," said Larry Gurdin haughtily, "never would have laid a hand on my father. Naturally, if through ignorance you had gone ahead with your original plan—and if Julia and I had followed through with ours—we stood to inherit

my father's sixteen points upon his death."

"But Julia was never really fond of you. She seems fond of your father, genuinely. Is that it?"

"Yes," Larry admitted. "Probably, they'll get married. Believing he can't trust me—although I'd be more than happy to drop the whole thing now—my father will decide to be a Climber for the first time in his life. They'll take a Permit out on my life; but since my father is thoroughly naive when it comes to Climbing, your Julia will be the executioner."

Holland chuckled. He waited for the Snoop to make some comment, but the Snoop was silent. He glanced quickly at the two mortuary flunkies, who were looking not at Holland but at Larry, discussing this unexpected complication in low tones. "That's tough," Holland said finally. "What do you expect me to do about it?"

"Without help, you'll never leave Venus alive. I can give you that help; I'll do it provided you help me."

"How can you get me off Venus?"

"We Gurdins are wealthy. A disguise. A bribe to a spaceship captain with no questions asked..."

"IT'S A chance," the Snoop told Holland. "He could probably do it."

"What do you want in return?" Holland asked.

Larry licked his lips, his eyes darting anxiously to the door. "Kill Julia."

"But I have no status on Venus. Even if I wanted to, I couldn't take out a Permit."

"I'm not asking you to take out a Permit. Kill her."

"Murder," said Holland coldly "is crime punishable by life imprisonment."

"You know Julia", Larry pleaded. "You lived with her aboard the spaceship; you know her habits. If you can kill her without getting caught, that will buy your escape. If you refuse, it means your own life and you know it."

"But to commit murder—"

"Man, you're a Climber, aren't you? What's the difference how you label it? Don't tell me you have moral compunctions?"

"Not after the way Julia's been double-dealing."

"Then what is it?"

Holland shrugged. "The last thing a Climber worries about is getting caught. It doesn't matter; there's no necessity to cover your tracks. But at murder I'd be a novice."

"That", said Larry "is your

problem. If you consider it a bigger problem than your lack of status on Venus—"

"No. No, I don't. Are you sure about your father and Julia?"

"Sure enough to believe my life's in danger. He said he was taking her out to our estate. My guess is they'll stop at the Status Office first for a Joint Permit." Larry gulped. "Oh me."

"And if I said yes?"

"**C**OME TO the estate with me," Larry Gurdin said eagerly. "I'll pretend to be pretending I think you're Julia's brother; you pretend to be in the dark about everything. They'll suspect nothing. If you succeed in killing Julia, I know my father will forget about the whole thing. Well, what do you say?"

The Snoop stirred in Holland's mind. "Agree to it," the Snoop said. "Even if you're not sure. At least young Gurdin can help you leave this place alive."

Holland nodded. "All right," he said slowly. "It's a deal. But first," he gestured toward the two mortuary flunkies, and explained.

A few moments later, Larry got up and walked to the bar to order something. This placed him behind the two mortuary flunkies, who were now giving Holland all their

attention. When Holland then stood up and came toward them, the two would-be assassins were suddenly busy studying their fingernails, the grease-splattered menu, each other, the checkered tablecloth, the very bad oil paintings of Venusian flora and fauna on the wall, anything.

**H**OLLAND smiled as he reached them. "Don't turn around," he said in a conversational tone. "My friend is watching you; he's holding a blaster in his hand. If you try anything, he'll kill you."

"There must be some mistake," one of them men blurted.

The other one merely turned ashen.

"Here's what," Holland said. "Sit perfectly still. I'm getting out of here." He watched the ashen one turn around and look at Larry Gurdin, becoming, if anything, whiter. Holland went on: "Give me all your money, please."

"Our money?"

"Come on. Yes." He waited while they went through their pockets. He collected their money. "Now," he asked, "are you hungry?" And, when they didn't answer: "Because you're going to order a meal, a large meal."

"But you just took our cash; we couldn't pay—"

"Now you're beginning to understand. Waitress!" Holland yelled.

A plump girl appeared with her little order pad. "My friends," Holland said, "would each like the biggest steak you have, with all the trimmings."

"Domestic or terrestrial, sir?"

"Terrestrial. It's more expensive, isn't it? Splendid. They will also start with two Sun of Venus cocktails, native clams, chowder "

"Honest," said the ashen one. "I'm not very hungry."

Holland looked behind him at Larry Gurdin and went on ordering the rest of the dinner. The waitress departed with a professional smile.

"When they find out we can't pay," the ashen one groaned, "they'll call the police."

"Fine," said Holland, and waited until the girl brought their drinks. He smiled, toasted them with an invisible glass, signaled Larry, and headed for the door. Larry covered his retreat, then followed him outside.

"That was very neat," Larry said in the bright hot glare of the Venusian cloud-blanket.

"I thought so."

"You're shrewd, Holland; you should do very well at Bridge Haven."

"Bridge Haven?"

"Our estate. Come on, we'll get a 'copter cab."

## V

THIS IS an unexpected pleasure," Saul Gurdin said. He was wearing slacks and a sport shirt, lounging clothes circa mid-twentieth century style. He still looked like a bear. He addressed his words at Holland, avoiding his son's eyes altogether. "Julia has been telling me so much about her brother."

Brother? thought Holland. For Larry's benefit? Probably. Saul Gurdin knew that Larry was aware of the truth about Julia and Holland, Holland decided. But the elder Gurdin did not know if he were supposed to be aware of it, from his son's point of view.

"Is Julia here?" Larry asked.

"Preparing herself for dinner," Gurdin said. "You're barely in time."

"And plenty hungry," Holland admitted. He needed time to think, and realized he wouldn't get it. He found the idea of killing Julia sans status advancement surprisingly appealing. She de-

served it, certainly; often a status victim didn't.

"That's excellent," the Snoop told him.

"What's excellent?"

"It's the first moral distinction of that sort I've seen you make. An out-and-out psychopath wouldn't."

"**YOU'RE** always harping on psychopathy," Holland retorted silently while the elder Gurdin led them inside through a long, alabaster white Georgian portico.

"True, I am. Did it ever occur to you that psychopathy might be the bane of life?"

"I never thought about it."

"Well, it did occur to you that life in abundance seems to have been the aim of our Creator, didn't it?"

"I guess so," Holland said.

"And if one life-form—or better still, one single entity—is indifferent to the continued existence of another, is, as a matter of fact, quite willing to end it without adequate motivation—"

"You lost me somewhere."

"One kills for food, or to protect one's mate or offspring, or in self-defense—but in a completely artificial system like the social status system here in your culture one kills, indifferently, for what on the natural level is a

completely unsatisfactory reason."

"You mean status advancement? But it's getting ahead."

"Yes? How?"

"Well—"

"Additional status does not necessarily mean additional wealth, even granting wealth as a sufficient motive for killing. Status advancement brings no more food, or protection of self or family, no greater health, no longer life, no increased number of progeny. What you gain, I take it, is social prestige?"

"**WELL,**" Holland said, suddenly and strangely on the defensive, "the ultimate goal of a Climber is Thirty-two and immunity. That's protection for the self and family, isn't it?"

"How many Thirty-twos have you at any given time? Ten? A dozen perhaps? They are hardly significant, Holland. But to return: the point I make is that for the first time you actually weighed killing. Tell me: At this moment would you rather kill Saul Gurdin legally, and gain his status points—assuming that were possible—or murder Julia outside the law because of her double-dealing?"

"Julia," Holland said at once.

"You see? There's hope for us."

"Us?"

"I am neither parasite nor disinterested observer. I told you our relationship was symbiotic."

"I still don't see how."

"Life," said the Snoop. "The purpose of the Universe. Life and more life. A psychopathic society is anti-life. If you grant this, if you grant both of these points and if, as it has been postulated both by your religion and your astrophysics that there is a constant conserver of the physical universe, doesn't it seem possible to you that a conserver of the life of the universe might also exist?"

"You?" Holland gasped, forgetting himself and using his voice.

"What was that?" Saul Gurdin asked.

"Nothing. Nothing." They had entered the estate proper, now. It was vast and Georgian, two dozen Monticellos sprawl over the filled in Venusian marshland. Holland could smell the marsh and wondered what they used for insect control at night.

"SNOOP?" Holland called inside his mind. The Snoop didn't answer.

"There's Julia now," Gurdin said.

Julia came across a polished hardwood floor toward them. She wore a white low-necked gown which fit the mood of Bridge Haven. Holland half-expected to hear the lilting strains of a minuet and see the great hall fill with curtseying girls and bowing men.

"Larry!" Julia cried, running into the younger Gurdin's arms. It didn't seem to bother Saul Gurdin at all, Holland observed. Naturally, it wouldn't. If they had already taken out the Permit on Larry, which seemed likely, Julia would want to gain and hold his confidence. "I've been waiting for you to come, hoping you would come tonight so you could show me around Bridge Haven," she said. "Your father wanted to do the honors, but it wouldn't have been the same. Do we have time before dinner?"

"I doubt it," Gurdin replied. "Dinner is probably ready now. What you children forget is that a Venusian day is nearly a month long; you don't have to worry about nightfall. Well, shall we eat?"

THEY DID, in a dining room as unnecessarily vast as this mammoth Monticello had augered. That is, all but Larry ate. Larry said he wasn't hungry, although he did take coffee from the pew-

ter pot which was brought to the table. After dinner, Saul Gurdin leaned back with a cigar and patted his belly, which had swelled considerably. "You children take the grand tour if you want," he said. "Brandy and a cigar is what I want."

"Join us, Bob?" Larry asked, as Julia took his hand and led him from the table.

"Now, Larry," Julia said, pouting. "I hardly ever get a chance to be alone with you. I'm sure my brother will understand; won't you Bob dear?"

"But he hasn't seen Bridge Haven," Larry protested weakly.

"After cigar and brandy, let your father show it to him," Julia said by way of dismissing the subject.

Larry looked forlornly at Holland, but followed Julia from the dining room. "Brandy?" asked Saul Gurdin.

"What about our conversation of this afternoon, Mr. Gurdin?"

"Yes, that. Well, you see—" Gurdin's voice trailed off in sullen confusion.

"Well, well, well," Holland said. "Don't tell me Julia decided an additional criss-cross was possible."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing, I guess." Gur-

din's attitude, however, served to confirm his son's suspicions.

"I'm still considering it," Saul Gurdin said and abruptly launched himself into an effusive lecture on the points of interest at Bridge Haven. This took the better part of half an hour and showed no signs of ending until a scream cut the flow off in mid-sentence.

"That was Julia!" Gurdin gasped. He sounded very surprised.

**T**OGETHER, they ran from the dining room. The scream had seemed quite distant to Holland, but Saul Gurdin covered ground with unexpected speed, if not grace. They sped through sculptured gardens and across streams which were spanned by miniature suspension, cantilever, concrete-arch and continuous truss bridges.

Julia screamed again. Much closer. A hot wind plucked at Holland's clothing. With the heat and humidity, they couldn't run much further.

"The marsh," Gurdin panted; "she's in the marsh."

And then, crossing a final bubbling stream—flowing from a hot spring, Holland decided—they came upon Larry. He was standing perfectly still, leaning forward from the hips slightly.



He was watching Julia.

Who was waist-deep in quicksand and floundering.

"Courage!" Gurdin cried. "Courage, child; I'll get some branches."

"Extend your arms like floats," Holland said practically. "They'll distribute your weight so you'll sink more slowly. And don't flounder like that; you'll only go quicker. Keep calm. We'll get you out with the branches." He could hear Gurdin plunging back across the miniature bridge toward the nearest of the gardens.

"My boy," the Snoop said paternally. "Do you realize you're trying to save her life?"

"Gurdin saw; it would be murder. Then the younger Gurdin couldn't help me. Don't worry, I'm not getting soft."

"But I thought—"

"Well, you can just forget it."

Julia wailed, "It's pulling me. Like wet hands."

"You're rationalizing," the Snoop persisted. "What *did* Gurdin see? An accident, possibly. Julia hasn't accused Larry."

"She will, before she goes under—if we let her go under. We can't."

GURDIN came plunging back across the bridge with several large uprooted shrubs. Snorting and panting, he thrust them out across the bog toward Julia, who grasped the branches. The quicksand was now sucking almost at her armpits. Except for Julia's immersion, the sand looked wet but quite innocent.

"Here," Saul Gurdin told Holland. "Grab these shrubs and pull."

Holland did so. Between them, they drew Julia loose slowly. The sand made faint sucking, protesting noises. Larry Gurdin stood there watching, mopping his brow. When Julia finally reached firm ground, she sank down on it, exhausted.

"Did Larry—" Gurdin began.

Julia shook her head and pointed mutely at her throat. The elder Gurdin surprised everyone by producing a small flask, uncorking it and tilting it to her lips. Julia swallowed and gagged, her eyes suddenly filling with tears. Somewhere nearby, a bird chattered angrily at them.

"Well?" Gurdin repeated. He was looking at Larry now; his face livid.

"I told her about the bog," Larry said. "She insisted on seeing it. She said, 'What's

quicksand like? I never saw it.' We came here; she tried to push me. We struggled and she fell in." He out-stared his father. "Let her try to deny it."

"Are you strong enough to walk now?" Holland asked Julia.

"I think so."

**H**E HELPED her to her feet. She stood there for a moment, leaning against him, brushing the slime from her gown.

"Well, deny it," Larry said hotly.

Julia didn't look at him. "I don't want to talk about it," she said. "I only want to get away from here. I'm drenched."

They began to walk back across the bridge, Julia leaning against Holland for support. "If you tried to murder your future mother—" Gurdin began.

"Then you admit it!" Larry cried.

"Certainly I admit it. Julia and I will be married, won't we, my dear?"

Julia looked first at Larry, then at Holland. Holland tried to keep his face blank. Julia nodded slowly, drawing away from Holland and walking without aid when they crossed the third bridge. No one said anything on the long

walk back to the house, but Larry tried to catch Holland's eye several times, particularly as they crossed the deeper, swifter streams. Holland couldn't help smiling but, he realized, it might have been the Snoop.

"Snoop," he said, "what am I going to do now?"

"Larry wants you to kill Julia. He tried once and failed. He probably knows he won't get another chance. Julia wants your protection. Saul Gurdin—"

"—Isn't sure," Holland finished for the Snoop. "Why doesn't Julia contradict Larry's story, though?"

"She wants your protection, but she's still going to try for Larry. She doesn't want to talk about it, doesn't want Saul Gurdin to know she's afraid. What are you going to do, Holland?"

"That's what I just asked you."

**T**HE SNOOP had the advantage. It went away to the back of Holland's mind and although he tried to summon it, there was no response. There was likewise no response from either Gurdin or from Julia all the way back to the great house. They walked like robots, Holland thought, each immersed in his own plans.

One of Gurdin's servants, a leathery-skinned old settler with a grave face surprisingly like a chimpanzee's, opened the front door for them, then plucked at Holland's sleeve as Holland walked past him. "Begging your pardon, sir," he said. "You're Robert Holland, aren't you?"

"Yes," said Holland automatically.

"Heard all about you on the video," the old man said.

Holland waited until the others had walked on, then grasped the old man's tunic and drew the chimpanzee face close to his own. "What are you going to do about it?" he rasped.

"Oh, not I, sir. Nothing. Absolutely nothing. I am an old man. I have no ambitions."

"Just don't you forget it."

"No, sir. I won't."

Holland began to walk away.

"But the others, sir."

"Others?"

"I thought I would tell you. They don't like old Jonah. Well, and what of it? I lose no love on them. However, certain of them are dreaming of ways to collect a certain twelve status points. The cook. The gardener. Even the chambermaid. Fair game, they said. Right here in this house. Oh, there's nothing specific. But my advice is to be on

your guard, sir. Every step of the way."

"THANK you, Jonah," Holland said with feeling. The old man stuck a dry hot paw in Holland's hand. Holland shook it and went after the others. Outside Bridge Haven, it was bad enough. Fair game. Anyone could kill him, legally, but first they would have to identify him. Here he was known, and fair game as elsewhere.

He wondered if he should leave immediately. It seemed like a sensible idea, except that the chances of spacing out for Earth without help were nil. But if he could kill Julia now at once, Larry Gurdin would help him; that was the bargain. A vision swam before his eyes. Julia, exhausted, drawn from the bog.

Suddenly, quite unexpectedly, he felt sorry for her. It was ridiculous, he told himself. He had an impulse to laugh again. He cursed the Snoop thoroughly, but the Snoop did not respond. Why should he feel sorry for Julia? She had double-crossed him cheerfully enough, hadn't she?

"Sympathy," said the Snoop. "Empathy. Conscience. You're making splendid progress, Robert. May I call you Robert?"

"What the hell kind of splendid progress is that. I'm fouling up my own chances."

"Perhaps not. At any rate, you're almost cured. How do you feel about Climbing, Robert?"

"Why—indifferent! I just don't care about it. Besides, if a man didn't use up all his energy thinking of new and better ways to Climb, status-wise, he might be able to concentrate on making more money or having a good time, or getting married and raising a fine family—"

"Substitution. The first out-phase. If we can get you off Venus in one piece, you'll be a new man. And you won't be alone. You'll be surprised at the number of Climbers who have been cured."

"Cured? How?"

"**S**YMBIOSIS," said the Snoop. "My mind is not like yours. I've been living in yours, but you've also been living in mine. Since mine is directed toward your thoughts, that means you've been examining Robert Holland's mind through the eyes of a Snoop. Purely a figure of speech, naturally, since I have no eyes. At any rate, that is where the symbiosis—*watch out!*"

Holland had been walking through the well of the spiral

staircase which ascended to the upper storeys of the mansion. He heeded the Snoop's warning almost instinctively, lunging aside as something large and heavy landed on the marble floor not two feet from him with a dull thud. Holland looked up but could see no one on the staircase.

What had fallen—what had almost struck him—was a suitcase. Holland hefted it. Fifty pounds or more, he judged. He opened it. The suitcase was filled with hundreds of microreader spools. Dropped several storeys, it made a weapon of sorts. Probably not lethal, he thought. The attempt had been a crude one, but there were born Climbers and there were failures. The next attempt might not be so crude.

It might even be successful.

"What floor?" Holland asked the Snoop.

"Third, I think."

"Let's go."

## VI

**T**HE CHAMBERMAID, a tall gray-haired woman with considerable fuzz on her upper lip, was feeding wet clothing into the wall ironer when Holland found her. He dropped the suitcase at her feet but she didn't bat an eye-

lash. Crude but cool. Well, there were people like that.

"Are you alone up here?" Holland demanded.

"I think so."

"Then you tried to kill me."

She shrugged. "There's a law against it?"

"No, damn you, but—"

"You can't kill *me*, Mr. Holland. No one saw me make the attempt, so it wouldn't be self-defense. I won't lie to you. If I get another opportunity, I'm going to try again. With more success, I hope. I'm only a Six, you see. Incidentally, do you have any advice?"

She spoke so matter-of-factly that Holland found himself replying: "Advice on what?"

"You're quite a Climber, I hear. Advice on committing status murder."

"Go," said Holland, "to hell." He was trying hard not to giggle. The Snoop seemed giddy; the Snoop wanted to giggle.

**S**AUL GURDIN was alone downstairs. He looked very unhappy. "Julia's in bed," he said. "Fagged, I guess. Larry's mooning, if Venus had a moon. What do you want?"

"Did you know I was fair game?"

"Servants told me. They're an ineffectual lot; got to

keep them happy. You can take care of yourself, can't you?"

"Not when I'm asleep. Not when my food is poisoned."

"You can always leave if you want to. Can't you?"

"Where would I go?"

"Umm-mm. But you can't stay here permanently. Do you have some kind of a deal with Larry? Or Julia? I'm beginning to think I wouldn't put it past either of them."

"I thought you want to marry Julia."

"Sex and self-protection. A wife can't take out a Permit against her husband. But if you're planning something—"

Holland took out his blaster and pointed it at Saul Gurdin. The big bearish face blanched. "I could kill you now," Holland said. "I'm not going to; I only want to prove a point. You're safe. If I have any deal, it doesn't concern you. Now, I'm tired. It's been a long day. I want a safe place to sleep."

"Second floor," said Gurdin. "Any room. You can bolt the door from the inside. All right?"

Before Holland could answer, someone yelled. It wasn't Julia. It sounded like Larry.

"Not again," Gurdin wailed. "I'm beginning to wonder about Climbing. I should have

left well enough alone, as they say."

"It was upstairs!" Holland shouted. "Let's go."

"To the rescue?" the Snoop asked. The Snoop sounded amused.

"Larry's my ticket off Venus," Holland said, running for the stairs.

**THEY MET** the tall gray-haired chambermaid on the landing. "It came from in there," she said, pointing at one of the doors in the long hallway.

There was the sound of things being thrown, things shattering. Holland ran to the door grasped the handle, shook it. "Open up!"

"Help!" Larry Gurdin cried from inside the room.

The door was locked. Holland rammed it with his shoulder once, bruisingly. The door held firm. He fired his blaster at the lock mechanism and kicked the door in.

Larry Gurdin was on the floor. His shirt was torn and bloody, but the wound seemed superficial. The bedroom was a shambles. Julia stood over Larry, poised on one foot like a dancer. The heel of her raised shoe was retracted, revealing the three inch metal spike. She glanced at Holland and Saul Gurdin, not seeing Larry roll over and away. She brought the heel down swift-

ly where his neck had been. The metal spike caught in the hardwood floor. She shook her foot to get it loose, but the spike held fast.

Larry climbed unsteadily to his feet, staggering toward her, his arms outstretched. "I'll kill you with my bare hands."

Julia strained frantically, her foot abruptly coming clear of the trick shoe. Her momentum carried her head-first toward Larry, her head butting his chin and jerking his head back. He stumbled toward the bed and sat down on it.

"You!" Julia screamed at Holland and Saul Gurdin. "If you hadn't interfered, he'd be dead by now."

"A fine bargain you made," Larry told Holland sullenly. "I thought I'd have to do it myself. But she—"

Julia flung herself at him, shouting, "You call yourself a man!" They rolled off the bed, their hands about each other's neck.

"By God, I'll kill him myself!" Saul Gurdin stormed, grabbing the blaster from Holland's hand. Without turning, Holland drove his elbow into the older man's stomach and heard a woosh of air, which meant that Gurdin was out of commission for a while.

HOLLAND ran to Julia and Larry, kneeling near them, trying to pull them apart. Larry kicked him; Julia tried to bite his hand. He tore them apart but they both began to attack him, Julia with tooth and nail and Larry with awkward fists. Saul Gurdin reeled toward them with the blaster; his face was green. He clubbed at Larry with the stock of the large hand-weapon but hit Julia instead. She screamed and fell away from Holland.

Just then the chambermaid rushed into the room with a triumphant smile, plucked the weapon from Gurdin's hand and pointed it at Holland. "Twelve Points!" she cried, and fired.

But Holland was already moving before she fired. He felt the blaster sear air over his head, moved inside her long arm before she could fire again and grappled with her for possession of the weapon. He got it and pushed her away. She stumbled over Julia, who was just trying to get up.

"What do you want?" Julia gasped just before the chambermaid slugged her with a hard bony fist.

"You're fired!" Saul Gurdin cried, walking toward the chambermaid, who was now

wrestling on the floor with Julia. Gurdin tripped over the spike shoe and fell on top of them. The chambermaid screamed.

"You turncoat," Larry told Holland, coming for him.

"Me?" Holland parried a clumsily-thrown right cross. "Me, a turncoat? I only want to get out of here with my skin."

LARRY swung again. It was his best punch and it took Holland on the side of the jaw; Larry went very white when Holland merely backed up a step, shook his head and waited for more—if any.

There wasn't any. "I'd already arranged it for you, before I came to Julia's room. It's the spacer *Orion*, leaving in five hours."

"But why, if you thought I—"

"I wanted to get rid of you. I thought you might make trouble. I—"

Saul Gurdin appeared from the swirl of arms and legs on the floor. He cuffed his son soundly with an open right hand. Larry sat down, which made Julia desert the chambermaid with a glad cry, and attack him with an even gladder one.

"You could have killed Larry with the blaster when he

attacked you," the Snoop told Holland.

"What for? He couldn't hurt me. I'm fed up with—"

"Wonderful!" chirped the Snoop, if a silent voice could be said to chirp. "My work here is almost finished. Listen to me, Robert. You'll get away. Larry's arranged things for you with the captain of the *Orion*. On Earth, you'll find others who are cured. You'll know them by their actions, their behavior, their indifference to Status which, unlike Saul Gurdin's former indifference, is permanent. You understand?"

"No. I—"

"You will. It's happening now, Robert. You're cured of psychopathy."

"How can you tell?"

"I can tell. It has nothing to do with you. It's me; it's my reward. Perhaps—who knows?—I'm a Climber, too. A Snoop cures psychopathy, which is a Snoop's purpose on any world in the universe, and then a Snoop—a Snoop—"

"Snoop? Snoop, where are you?"

**I**T HAD happened before, but not like this. The Snoop was going, permanently. He could sense it.

"—buds—" The Snoop's final word. *Buds?* What the devil did the Snoop mean by that?

Larry and Julia were fighting. Julia, who used teeth, elbows and knees uninhibitedly, was getting the better of it. All at once, she stopped. She stood up. "Who?" she said. "What—?"

Larry wiped blood from his face. He looked bewildered; he seemed to be listening to something.

"Who said that?" the chambermaid demanded. No one looked at her. "Voices..." she added.

Saul Gurdin alone seemed composed. He was almost smiling. "Snoop?" he said. Holland knew what the answer would be. *Snoop I am.*

The Snoop was a Climber too. The Snoop cured people—and budded.

*The Snoop?*

Four Snoops now.

Holland turned around and went outside. No one tried to stop him. If careful, he should be able to reach the spaceport, he thought. The captain of the *Orion* had been paid, expected him.

"Be careful," someone said behind him. He turned around. It was Julia, but it wasn't Julia's voice.

"Good luck," Gurdin called after Holland. It wasn't—quite—Saul Gurdin's voice either. "And thank you, Holland."