

SATURN

MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SCIENCE-FICTION

VOL. 1 NO. 2

MAY 1957

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SATURN, MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION is published bi-monthly by CANDAR PUBLISHING COMPANY, INC., at 1 Appleton Street, Holyoke, Mass.; Editorial office, 100 Madison Avenue, New York 17, N.Y. Copyright 1957 by CANDAR PUBLISHING CO., INC. Entered as Second Class Matter pending at the Post Office at Holyoke, Mass. Single copy 35c Subscriptions: Yearly (6 issues): U. S. and possessions \$2.00; Canada \$2.25, Foreign \$2.50. All material submitted must be accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelope. The publishers assume no responsibility for unsolicited material. The names of all characters used in these stories are fictitious; any resemblance to persons living or dead is coincidental. PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.

THE 4D BARGAIN

by Evelyn E. Smith

At last they had invented a handbag that would hold everything a lady could possibly want to put into it—and still be small, light, and fashionable. But would everything that went in always come out?

BUT WHERE does everything go?" Miss Nethercott asked, peering into the lining of the small handbag. "It must be somewhere."

"It goes into another dimension," Mr. Mendenhall explained patiently for the fifth time. "That's why we call it the extradimensional handbag.

Catchy name, isn't it?"

"It stinks," said Mr. Villardi, probing the bag's interior with a gingerly forefinger. "I wish you wouldn't keep coming up with these godawful novelty items, Mendenhall."

"Imagine," the handbag buyer went on, undaunted, "now a woman will be able to carry

a small, smart-looking pocket-book, and yet be able to put everything her heart desires inside of it. I guess you boys will be able to go to town on this, hey, Villardi?"

The advertising manager pulled a package of cigarettes, a key ring, a handkerchief, a salesorder book, and a copy of *Standard Rates and Data* out of the eight-inch cube. "Trouble is, nobody'll believe it," he said sourly, "because that's the copy we always use with our small handbags. Public'll put it down to routine hyperbole."

"But I don't understand." Miss Nethercott's large blue eyes appealed to Mr. Mendenhall. "Where were the things? They couldn't fit inside the bag. *It's too small!*"

"It's based on some kind of a scientific principle," Mr. Mendenhall told her. "Invented by a scientist, you know. I don't," he admitted. "entirely understand it myself; I guess I have the executive more than the scientific type mind. The way the fellow who sold them to me put it, seems there are lots and lots of dimensions, and we're using a paltry three."

"It does seem like an awful waste," Miss Nethercott agreed, nodding her golden

head. "You mean in this handbag we're just putting one more to use? Like electricity after Benjamin Franklin found out it was there all along?"

"That's the idea exactly!" Mr. Mendenhall beamed. "You're a bright little girl, Miss Nethercott." He patted her head. "Here, I want you to take one of these for your very own self. To inspire you in your work."

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Mendenhall! I really do need a new bag! Only, if you're going to be so kind as to give me a pocketbook, I'd rather have a big one because I carry my lunch to business, and—oh, yes, Mr. Mendenhall; thank you, Mr. Mendenhall!"

"Lessee," the buyer said thoughtfully, "I think we'd better put this line straight upstairs into the *Boutique*. We don't want all those ground-floor just-looking-arounders smearing them with their greasy paws. It isn't exactly a low-priced item." He chuckled. "Gotta charge for the extra dimension, you know."

"Maybe we're using only three dimensions," the advertising manager suggested, regarding the array of extra-dimensional handbags in the stockroom with distaste, "be-

cause somebody else is using the others."

"Let's not be whimsical, Villardi. How could there be anybody else? We're the only ones here, aren't we? Who else could be using the other dimensions?"

Miss Nethercott clutched her new handbag possessively. "But then where do all the things you put into it go?"

Mr. Mendenhall glared at her.

THE FIRST thing Balfig Twersnal noticed, as he slithered through the entry of his modest ground-floor apartment was that Sligny was disturbed. They had been mated for too many cycles for him to fail to catch her moods at once. And, if she was disturbed, he was disturbed.

"What is troubling you, my dearest?" he asked, twining his tendrils about hers.

"Oh, Balfig, I don't know how to tell you... I have a—*a Luxury!*"

He recoiled. "*A Luxury! Sligny! Did you steal it?*"

She drew herself up to her full sixteen feet. "Of course not, Balfig. How could you think I was capable of—of—?"

"I'm sorry, Sligny," he said humbly. "I know you couldn't

possibly have done an Unordained thing like that. But where did you get it?"

"It appeared suddenly in the air. Honestly it did." And she held out a tiny object to Balfig.

He started. "Sligny, it looks like—it looks like *Plastic.*"

She nodded mournfully. "I don't blame you for suspecting I stole it, really. Nobody will believe I didn't. What—what do you think it is?"

He looked at the thing. It was a six-inch rectangular bar with minuscule dentations formed out of one of the long sides. He sighed heavily. "Obviously it is useless." He looked at it again. "It isn't even ornamental."

She turned pale blue. "It's definitely a *Luxury* then. I was hoping it might sneak into the ornamental class and get by as an aesthetic necessity."

He made a negative sign. "Let's not fool ourselves; it has no purpose. It is clearly a *Luxury*. Why did it come to us? How did it come to us?" He put up a tendril. "No, Sligny, I believe you—but will anyone else? There is so much we cannot understand." He sighed. "I suppose it is *So Ordained.*" And he made a Sign of Reverence.

"Let's hide it!" she cried impetuously.

"Hide it!" He stared down at her. "And you know what'll happen if it's discovered then? It'll be the garnish mines for both of us, with no chance of reprieve!"

"Let's—" she took a deep breath—"let's destroy it!"

He looked at her in horror. "Destroy Plastic? An Artifact? An Ordained Luxury?"

"I—I'm sorry, Balfig. I didn't know what I was saying."

"I shall go to the House Supervisor," Balfig said firmly, "and declare it. It's the only thing to be done."

HE LEFT the apartment bravely enough, but, once outside, he surrendered to the tremors that shook his body. Only once in his life had he been as high as the two hundredth floor—when he and Sligny had been assigned the apartment on their mating day and the House Supervisor had given them both the customary speech of welcome and warning.

But now it was very different. He held his breath and rose to the Ordained Regions. Sliding past the long line of

waiting tenants of all levels, he diffidently approached the secretary, a young female in the garb of the hundred and ninety-ninth floor. "High is High and low is low," he gave the customary greeting.

"Name?" she snapped.

"B-Balfig Twersnal."

She pressed a button and the simulacrum of his personplate appeared in the plastotop of her desk. "Balfig Twersnal, Apartment 1XA2, vimgritch furler for Harsnoop-Tsalk, second floor?"

"That's right."

Her eyestalks were rigid with horror. "*But you have no appointment!*" All the other tenants turned to stare in disbelief.

"I—I know." He moistened his vocal apparatus. "But this is an emergency."

"I'll contact the First Ordained One right away!" she said, her voice trembling with the enormity of the situation.

The benevolent visage of Kiv Gzandor appeared in the crystal. "Yes, harchli, what is it?"

"There's a young male from the ground floor to see you, harch," she babbled. "Without an appointment! He says it's an emergency."

"Ah, an emergency," the Ordained One said with relish.

"Well, send him right in, harchli. An emergency always takes precedence."

Balfig slithered diffidently into the First Ordained One's office and stood before the desk, in which his personaplate glittered. In the presence of the House Supervisor, he felt as if he were standing before the Ordainer Himself. He tried to keep his eyes off the nine luxuries to which Gzandor's High rank entitled him.

"High is High and low is low, Highness," he quavered.

"Low is low and High is High. Well, Balfig," Gzandor said kindly, "tell me what it is you have done. Did you kill anyone? If it is someone on your own level, I promise you justice will be tempered with mercy. After all, you are young and boys will be boys."

"No, your Attitude," Balfig replied. "I have not killed anyone. I have—" he choked. "I have—quite by accident, you understand—come into possession of a Luxury."

The First Ordained One's eyestalks stood erect. "A Luxury! By the Ordainer, Twersnal, this is a serious matter. Give it here." Balfig handed the diminutive object over. "How did you come by it?"

Balfig had already deter-

mind that, at all costs, Sligny must be kept out of the affair. "It—it appeared to me in the air, Highness. Down in our apartment," he said. "Just a few minutes ago. I brought it right up to you."

"That is a very thin story, Twersnal," the Supervisor said sternly. "Can't you see for yourself how improbable it sounds?"

"Yes, Attitude, to me it does sound improbable. But then it is Ordained that there is so much that one in my unelevated position cannot understand. I had hoped that to those more Highly Placed it would seem quite possible. For it did happen."

"Mmmm." The Supervisor examined the Artifact. "I do not believe your story, Twersnal, but I will retain an open mind. The Artifact itself is one of the most useless I have ever seen, and, hence, the most Luxurious. Your crime is a serious one, my boy. The only thing in your favor is the fact that this seems to be an absolutely unique type of Plastic. If it is proved to be so, then the uniqueness of your explanation will become less unique, and, hence, its essential improbability will be essentially less improbable."

"Yes, H i g h n e s s," Balfig said miserably. "Then I do not have to go to the garnish mines yet?"

"You know, Balfig, that under our laws anyone is presumed to be innocent until we have decided he is guilty. So, until your case is adjudicated, simple apartment arrest will be sufficient. You will understand that we cannot afford to have a suspect Luxury lover furling our people's vimgritch."

"No, Altitude," Balfig said miserably. "High is High and low is low."

"And low is low and High is High."

"**B**UT I know I didn't 'just misplace' my comb!" Miss Nethercott protested. "I put it right into the bag in the stockroom, and when I got to the tenth floor powder room it was gone. There must be a hole or something in the bag."

"It's a brand-new bag and there can't possibly be a hole in it!" Mr. Mendenhall snapped. "During your afternoon rest period, you go down to Notions and get another comb. Tell them to charge it to Handbags."

"Oh, Mr. Mendenhall, you're such a doll!"

"Well, you show your appre-

ciation by getting out there and *selling those bags!*" Mr. Mendenhall gave Miss Nethercott a fatherly pinch on the cheek and rode away majestically on the down escalator.

Since business was never brisk in the *Boutique*, Miss Nethercott amused herself by filling the extradimensional handbags with all the portable objects in the vicinity. By and by, a small crowd of women had gathered to watch her. The department manager watched her too. Demonstrators might be all right for the ground floor, although he personally felt they were out of place anywhere in a store like Prettyman and Smoot, but they were definitely not appropriate for the *Boutique*.

"You see," Miss Nethercott declaimed dramatically, for she had theatrical ambitions and loved an audience, even of females, "you can put just as many things as you want into it, and it'll never bulge or get out of shape or anything."

"My," commented a customer, "how do they ever do that?"

"It's scientific," Miss Nethercott explained. "Like—like detergents. Who knows what they're made of? But they

work."

"Ah," said the woman wisely, "we live in an age of great technological advancement."

"Presto!" Miss Nethercott gleefully descended to a non-technical level, as she pulled a large suede envelope, a black velvet clutch, a gold evening carryall, and a cowhide briefcase out of the extradimensional bag.

"That's only four," a helpful customer pointed out. "You put in five—I saw you. There was a calfskin pouch, too."

Miss Nethercott felt around inside. "You must be mistaken, madam," she said coldly.

All the other women turned around to inspect the helpful customer from head to foot. She turned red underneath her rather unfortunate hat. "Sorry...perhaps I was," she gulped, and fled.

But the other women stayed and bought. That evening it turned out that a calfskin pouch was, in fact, missing from the eleventh floor hand-bag counter, but, since Miss Nethercott had sold the unprecedented number of fifty extradimensionals, at \$35.95 each, she was not taken to task.

However, when she sat down in the subway—after

giving the elderly gentleman who got up for her a ravishing smile in payment—she discovered that the pocket novel she had promoted from a susceptible clerk in Books was gone from the bag. She clicked her tongue in annoyance, and resolved to present the bag to her roommate, whose birthday was in the offing. Of course she had planned to give Gloria a \$5.95 rather than a \$35.95 present, but really she was very fond of Gloria, and, anyway, it wasn't as if she had paid for the thing.

"**B**ALFIG!" Sligny, emerging from the communication closet. "We're saved! An Artifact materialized in Margroop Slurg's living room too. She just called me up to tell me about it."

He raised a dull eyestalk. "A luxury?"

"Well, no, I suppose not. She says it's a receptacle. It opens up and you put little things in it. At least, it's empty inside, so it must be for that."

"Oh." He lowered his eyestalk. "Then it's a different case entirely."

"Not *entirely*. If a necessity materialized in her apartment and a Luxury materialized in

ours, then surely the Ordained Ones can see that possession of the Luxury is not our fault. Its coming was Ordained."

"And it is ordained that I should go to the garnish mines," Ballig replied miserably.

"That *we* should go, darling." Sligny said, "Wherever you go, I shall go too." They twined tendrils.

The communicator blipped. Sligny disentangled herself and dashed into the closet. "Oh, darling," she exclaimed as she came out, "everybody on our level seems to be getting Artifacts! Lazni Troob just told me she got a little receptacle—"

"Then it's not a Luxury."

"But, wait a minute, it's full of the most malodorous liquid you ever scented. How could it be useful?"

"Probably a medicine or a zorpak repellent," he said bitterly. "It's just our luck to be the only ones stuck with a Luxury. The fact of spontaneous materialization in itself isn't going to make much difference to the Ordained Ones; they know all about that sort of thing."

"And Teslot Snikk got a book!"

"A book! What kind of a

book? Anyhow, that rates as a necessity too."

"Not if you can't read it, it doesn't. This one is in some kind of secret script, Banmor told me, but Teslot says *he* can read it." She sniffed. "That Teslot thinks he's so smart—says the whole thing is an Ordained Vistation."

"I suppose," Ballig remarked without much interest, "he'll present it to the Ordained Ones for commentary and explanation?"

"No!" All of Sligny's eyes bulged from their stalks with the enormity of what she had to tell. "He says he is going to interpret and expound it *himself*."

"What! But how can he? He is on the lowest level, like us. He can't have opinions of his own."

"He says the book says he can."

Suddenly there was a faint glow in the corner of the room. A clink... and the glow disappeared.

"Just what happened before," Sligny commented, reaching forward to pick up the object before her mate could stop her. It was a tiny, plump cylinder of some base substance like gold."

"Even if it is only metal, it's

still another Luxury," Balfig said dully. "It's no use; we're doomed."

"Wait a minute—it seems to be a receptacle. The top comes off, see. But there's something inside." She peered into the little orifice despondently. "Something perfectly useless looking too."

She twiddled the thing with a tendril. A tiny red stick suddenly rose out of it. Balfig and Sligny jumped back, clinging to each other.

Sligny recovered herself first. "It's perfectly harmless." She picked up the object from the floor. "Look, it makes red marks; it must be useful!"

"But are red marks useful?"

THERE was another little glow and a thunk. This time it was a Plastic Artifact very much like the first one they'd received. Spots of light began to appear all over the room and objects of metal, Plastic, and strange, hard-to-malleable substances showered in one of them. There were queer little squares of cloth, papers of all shapes and sizes—some with secret writing on them, more with evil pictures and an unmistakable dainty tea sandwich.

"Don't eat it, Sligny!" Balfig yelled. "It may be poisonous! Although, maybe it would be better for us to end it all, at that! Sooner death than the garnish mines."

"Balfig!" Sligny said reproachfully. "You musn't talk like that. And, after all, I don't see why we *should* feel badly."

"You don't?"

"No." She picked up the Artifacts in her delicate tendrils. "Why should we? Aren't we the richest people in the House? Perhaps even in the City," she quipped. No one on their level could ever be quite sure that the concept of the City was one to be taken literally.

He was not amused. "But, Sligny—"

"Haven't you considered that the Ordained Ones no longer dare touch us? One or two or three Luxuries they could suspect us of stealing, but we have *hundreds*. There aren't that many in the House—probably not even in the Block! No one could possibly find that many to steal. And such unique ones, too. Don't you see, it must be Ordained that we should have them?"

"Frankly, I don't—"

At that moment the entry

urp urpled. Teslot Snikk's visage appeared on the interview screen. "Let me in, Balfig!" he exclaimed, omitting the customary salutation. "I have great news for you!"

Balfig pressed the opener, and Teslot, followed by a majority of the ground-floor tenants, surged in. "Low is low and High is High, harchin," Balfig said in mild surprise, as they filled his apartment. "I don't wish to seem inhospitable," he added, "but have you forgotten that associating with a suspect Luxury lover is enough to make you suspects yourselves?"

"Luxury lover, tcha!" Teslot snapped.

The heresy was enough to make even his cohorts gasp.

"We are all Luxury lovers!" he went on stoutly. "All of us here have Luxuries, and, by the Ordainer, we are going to keep them!"

"See, Balfig!" Sligny exclaimed. "Didn't I always say Teslot was the cleverest man on this floor?"

"...because," Teslot went on, thumping a tiny volume bound in a thin substance decorated with bright, eerie figures, "it is So Ordained."

"High is High and low is low," the crowd intoned rever-

ently.

"No! Low is High and High is low!" Teslot shrieked. "It is so written. For what other reason have all these Luxuries been bestowed only upon those who live on the lower floors. It is because the Ordainer has Chosen Us. He has reversed our whole Doctrine. Those on the High Floors, they shall be low under His Eyestalks, and those on the low shall be High. It is *Ordained!*"

"Low is High and High is low," chanted the crowd accomodatingly.

"To you, Balfig," shouted Teslot, "the first Ordained Revelation was made! To you"—he gestured around the Artifact-filled apartment—"were the most Luxuries given. Therefore, it is clearly indicated that you are to be our new House Supervisor. Come, let us oust the tyrannical Gzandor from his post and let you assume your rightful privileges as First Ordained One."

"But I wouldn't know what to do," Balfig demurred.

"Don't worry," Teslot advised him. "You just do what I tell you to."

"You go with Teslot, dear," Sligny said. "He knows best."

"High is low and low is High!" screeched the crowd.

"Hooray!"

"**L**OOK," SAID Mr. Mendenhall, "so we all make mistakes...."

"You want me to call the copywriters off?" Mr. Villardi demanded querulously. "After they already got started? I do wish you'd try out these novelty items before you turn them over to advertising."

"But how was I to know they would—in fact, I still don't *know* they did. If you ask me, it's just those god-damned women's carelessness!"

"*Mr. Mendenhall!*" Miss Nethercott protested. "Besides, I lost my comb and my Mickey Spillane, and I'm not careless."

"Most efficient little worker I ever had," the buyer murmured bemusedly. "But where could all that stuff they say they've been losing go? Most peculiar coincidence—that's what it must be. Because, we've checked the bags they brought back—not a hole in them."

"There's that hole into the extra dimension," Mr. Villardi pointed out.

"You know," Miss Nethercott said brightly, "it's funny but I didn't lose anything from

my bag until I went upstairs. And most of the ladies who came to return their bags happened to mention the same thing. There's probably a lot of ladies living on first and second floors who haven't had any trouble at all."

"Could we sell it as a low-altitude item maybe?" Mr. Mendall asked himself. "No, that wouldn't be practical. But why, why, *why* should all this have to happen to me?"

"You remember what I said about other people using the other dimensions?" Mr. Villardi suggested. "Well, just suppose for instance they happen to live higher up than we do. No reason they should start at our sea-level—no reason they should be anything like us, really. Anyhow, then our high floors would coincide with their first ones, and so things would start getting over to them only when—"

"Please, Villardi!" the buyer protested. "I got enough of a headache without your contributions."

"But it seems to me like an awfully reasonable explanation," Miss Nethercott insisted. "Of course," she added hastily, catching Mr. Mendenhall's eye, "either way we can't sell any more of the bags,

can we? We would lose good will."

Mr. Mendenhall nodded in sad agreement. "Not only that, but we've got to take back those we sold already, without any questions. Naturally the customers can't hold us responsible for the stuff that allegedly disappeared. They can try, all right, but they haven't a legal leg to stand on! And I guess Prettyman and Smoot will be able to stand the loss. After all, if they want me to keep in hot pursuit of the latest thing, they've got to expect an occasional turkey."

"A \$35.95 turkey is one hell of an expensive turkey," Mr. Villardi remarked.

Mr. Mendenhall ignored him. "I guess we'll have to sell out the whole consignment at cost on a no return basis."

"No!" exclaimed Mr. Vil-

lardi and Miss Nethercott almost simultaneously.

"You mean...a worthy charity?"

"I mean *destroy them*, Mendenhall," Mr. Villardi said. "It's absolutely the only thing to do. And, as you said, the store can absorb the loss."

Mr. Mendenhall rubbed his chin. "Yes, and it'll be a legitimate tax deduction, too. Guess that is what we better do. You're right, Villardi; I admit it freely." He sighed. "After all, what's a lousy ten thousand bucks to Prettyman and Smoot? A drop in the bucket. I guess there's no great harm done. We all made mistakes."

"Live and learn," said Miss Nethercott.

"That's it exactly." Mr. Mendenhall beamed at her.

THE END