

# SUPER-SCIENCE FICTION

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**ILLUSTRATIONS** by *Emsh, Orban and Bowman*

W. W. Scott — Editor

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# THE CHILDLESS ONES

by DANIEL F. GALOUYE

NOVELETTE

*illustrated by* EMSH

It seemed odd. In fact it seemed impossible. But it was true that the natives of the new planet had no interest in sex or reproduction. None, none at all!

## CHAPTER I

**I**T was the native population that was responsible for temporary designation of the planet as Repugnant-I in Survey Headquarters files.

Everything else was charming—pastel skies at sunset, pale green raindrops that fell occasionally against a backdrop of majestic mountains, soft breezes that caressed fields of flowers and surrated through silent forests.

The primitives, though, were a different matter. Their limbs were spindly and knotted and their bodies bulged and sagged and exuded viscous fluids that

eventually dried and caked off like scales.

They were heavy-browed, with small, deep-sunken and dismal eyes. There was a gash for a mouth that exposed craggy, discolored teeth, cheekbones that clung to their faces like tired astrodomes, and an oleaginous mop of hair, dripping reeky slime on neck and shoulders.

No nose. Only two repulsive orifices.

Oh, they were humanoid, all right—if an observer were allowed sufficient latitude in defining the term.

By comparison, Miss Jennifer—all two hundred and ten



pounds of her—s e e m e d possessed of a certain quiet beauty, despite her myopic vision corrected by thick-lensed glasses, a full crop of freckles and blemishes, flabby and ankleless legs, and an inordinately long and askew nose that punctuated her prognathous face.

Miss Jennifer was Survey Crew Fourteen's microbiologist.

And the comparison between her and the natives was being undertaken reflectively and somewhat tastelessly by Major Volkert, military coordinator for the survey, as he lolled beneath the canopy in front of his tent.

He watched the microbiologist scooping up earth on the other side of the clearing near the primitive huts. Hefting the slotted tray, she started back for the lab tent with her specimens of nitrogen-fixing bacteria.

Volkert laughed silently in self-deprecation and turned away, reminding himself that it wasn't wise to think of Miss Jennifer—not even in terms of relative attractiveness. Unwittingly, she served as a gauge of

space fatigue among the otherwise all-male crew. It was understood that when she "started looking good," it was time to head for home.

**T**HE major prudently waited until Miss Jennifer was settled in her lab before he ventured out into the street. He strode stiffly past the rows of tents.

Shoulders square, hands clasped rigidly behind his back, head high—that was the way to effect an attitude of complete confidence. What if it was a swagger? It was good for the morale of the troops. And it reassured the civilian technicians that the military contingent was equal to any emergency.

He brushed the flap aside and entered Medical.

Dr. Farrell, blunt in stature like the major but lacking the military man's aplomb, stepped back from the surgical table and looked up futilely.

His eyes were apologetic, his shoulders slanted. "It's beyond me, Major. I've approached it from the standpoint of hormonal deficiency, psychology,

biochemistry and diatetics. All without any results."

He shrugged helplessly and stared down at the unconscious native. "Poor devil. No matter which way you add it up, she just doesn't have the merest beginning of a sex urge. They're all that way—the males even worse."

"What about those hormone injections week before last?"

"Utterly negative. And we shot the males so full of androgen and oreton and the females so full of estrone that the stuff was practically coming out of their ears."

Volkert dropped listlessly into a chair, purposely not looking at the repellent native. "We've got to find out what makes them like that, Farrell. From what we've seen so far, this planet is otherwise well suited for colonization."

"Ideally," the other agreed.

"Of course," Volkert went on, "we'll have to get rid of the natives somehow—perhaps enclosed reservations. And enforced extinction should they start reproducing again. But if we don't find out *why* they're not having children, we'll never

know whether human colonists would lose their sex instinct here too."

"I've psyched most of our personnel. We all still check out normally on that score."

"Yes. But for how long?"

Farrell was grimly silent as he slipped off his gloves and smoothed back his graying hair.

"There's something that stinks from here to Antares about this thing," Major Volkert offered misgivingly. "This race has been kicking around for thousand of years. And all of a sudden, just a few years before contact with galactic civilization overtakes them, they quit having children—as though they were precognizant of our coming."

"What else?" the doctor asked gloomily, pointedly not challenging Volkert's postulation.

"They could have hid the children when they saw the contact ship."

"So well that even your spit and polish boys couldn't find them after Survey took over?"

Volkert strained with impatience. "But this is stupid!

Are you suggesting that *twenty years ago* they actually sensed we were coming and decided to quit reproducing?"

Farrell spread his hands simply. "The absence of libido is there—empirically established."

Volkert laughed. "There's a plausible explanation. For some reason they just haven't had any children lately. For some *elementary and biological* reason. You are to find out why—and before the ship returns in sixty day with our replacements."

The woman stirred and sat up. She left the imprint of her back and arms on the surgical table—outlined in slimy exudation and sickly green scales.

The movement had removed part of her body from the cone of odor-killing rays. And now the overpowering stench was like a nauseous, smothering heaviness in the air. It was carion under a steaming sun, decaying polyps on a hot beach, a slaughterhouse fetid with warm, flowing blood.

"Get her out of here—quick!" Volkert shouted.

Grimacing, Farrell ad-

dressed her in the native tongue. She stared dismally at the major and he retched as he looked briefly into the noseless caricature of a face.

Then she staggered toward the tent flap, faltering as she passed near Volkert. He lunged out of her way. God! That vile, monstrous distortion of the human form had almost touched him!

NIGHTTIME was more merciful. You couldn't see the natives then. They never ventured from their huts after dark—not since Volkert had declared a sunset curfew and had shot down the first three primitives who had violated it.

The major strolled leisurely down the street, enjoying both his security inspection and the breeze that blew in from the bay to the south.

"Howdy, Major."

Volkert looked around abruptly. It was the systemologist, trudging toward the observatory.

"Evening, Wattley," he returned stiffly. "Getting the system all down on paper?"

"Just about." The old man

paused briefly. "I've got all the major planetary motions charted."

"That's fine. And oddities crop up?"

"Not yet—except the absence of inner planets. The closest is over a hundred million miles from the sun. But I think I've got the explanation. You see—"

Voices welled boisterously in the military barracks and Volkert strode swiftly toward the large tent. Nearing it, he could hear several of the men in a heated argument:

"Psychoemissive—t h a t ' s what I said! Where'd you go to school?"

"He's right, Ralph," someone agreed. "There *are* psychoemissive stars—over fifty of them on record. They give out invisible radiation along the psychofrequency range. Sometimes they resonate with certain thought bands and touch off psychosomatic behavior."

"Rubbish!"

"They can, Ralph," assured a third voice. "Sol is one. It wasn't until they reached the outer planets, almost out of

range of the emissions, that they found out men weren't half as timid and fearful five hundred million miles from Sol as they were on Earth."

Volkert barged into the darkness of the tent and sent his flashlight beam swinging along the rows of cots.

"Knock it off! Or every last one of you will draw a double dose of guard duty!"

The responsive silence was instantaneous.

And the major strode back into the street, savoring the tight-lipped determination that he'd be damned if he wasn't going to have as taut a command here as he'd had on all his previous surveys.

"Oh—Maj-or..."

Volkert winced, wishing there were nearby shadows into which he could melt. But he was directly in the cone of one of the spotlights. "Yes, Miss Jennifer?"

"I do believe there's a short in my light circuit." Her voice strove valiantly to be honey-coated as she stood at the entrance to her tent. "Would you check it for me, please?"

"I'll have Lieutenant Hutchinson come right over."

But he doubted Hutchinson would ever get there. The communications officer, who also doubled as electrician, would dispatch his sergeant, who in turn would send one of the corporals.

## CHAPTER II

IT wasn't until several days later, though, that Volkert had the opportunity to talk with the lieutenant about Miss Jennifer's shorted circuit.

"No, Major. I didn't pass the buck," Hutchinson disclosed, not looking up from his work on the transmitter modulator. "I went myself."

Volkert frowned at the lieutenant. He was one of those still-dedicated kids, fresh out of the Academy—clean cut, rather handsome. Until now he had appreciated the subtle jokes about Miss Jennifer, who was ten years his senior, as much as the next man in camp.

"Was there a short?"

"Of course not." Hutchinson placed his soldering iron on the rack and looked up, smiling. "Jenny was just feeling spry again, poor thing. She likes to

be noticed occasionally."

"That two-ton bitch! I'll—"

"She's really not a bad old gal, Major—not when you get to know her."

Volkert drew back disapprobatively, surprised by the other's lack of reserve toward the microbiologist. Maybe he'd better check Hutchinson's record. It might be that the lieutenant had had only a few day's planetary leave between his last assignment and this one.

He turned to leave.

"Major—about this modulator. I haven't been able to do much good with it."

"You mean we're still out of contact with Sector Base?"

Hutchinson nodded. "Our carrier wave's getting through all right. But we can't modulate it with a signal—not until I do a complete job of coil re-winding and circuit balancing."

"How long will it be before we can contact them?"

"Two, three weeks I suppose. It'd be sooner if I had the right equipment and materials."

Volkert scowled. "Damned good thing everything's in hand. I'd hate to have to get a



message through to save our skins."

"I would too, sir."

Outside, the major paused and stared toward the native village. It wasn't difficult to look at them from this distance, since they appeared as only indistinct figures—mere outlines against the background of forest and sky and mountain. Actually, the only thing that reminded him now of their dreadful disfigurements and vile appearance was the slime that covered their bodies and glittered in the sunlight.

The activity he'd first noticed the day before was still in progress. Only, now the natives seemed to be going about their dedicated tasks more fervently, more excitedly. The men were throwing up hastily constructed additions to the shacks. New huts were being built. The women were decking the outer walls and entrances with wreaths and garlands and hanging festoons of blossoms from hovel to hovel.

It was, Volkert imagined, as though the wretched things were revolting against their ugliness and expressing self-re-

sentment by surrounding themselves with all the beauty they could gather from the fields and forest.

But it must all have some sociological significance. He made a mental note to speak with Dr. Steimann about it. The anthropologist would certainly have already noticed the manifestation and started research into it.

LATER that morning Wattle, a sheaf of charts under one arm and a spectroscope under the other, hastened across the field toward the observatory.

It was the first time Volkert had seen the astronomer outside during the day since the survey crew had been landed a month ago to relieve the initial contact gang. Normally, the systemologist worked all night and rarely ventured from his tent between sunrise and sunset.

Dr. Wattle was the oldest person in the survey crew. Reticent and thoroughly absorbed in his duties, he had little time for the nonessential. He was a wisp of a man, with a vestigial

fringe of white hair surrounding an irregular and heavily-veined scalp.

Volkert watched him enter the cupola, then saw the slot slide open and the telescope poke out. The dome pivoted around and the tube swung up, centering on a pale point of light in the southern sky, not very far from the sun.

Curious, the major walked over to the dome and rapped on the door.

"Go away. I'm busy."

Volkert entered and found the astronomer with his face pasted against the telescope's eyepiece. Viewed through the slot, from the darkness of the dome, the point of light seemed to shine even more brightly. The planet, he guessed, was either awfully close or it had a tremendous reflective index to appear so brilliant at this time of day.

"Any danger from that thing?" he asked.

"Uh-uh," Wattlely grunted negatively, petulantly.

"Will it come closer?"

"Uh-huh."

"Close enough to upset anything?"

"Uh-uh."

"You sure it won't—"

Wattlely swatted the telescope housing and swung around, all five feet, one inch of him bristling. "When I'm working, Major, don't interrupt me. You can examine my records and reports whenever you like. But I won't sacrifice my time in pointless conversation!"

The astronomer returned bluntly to his work.

Irate old goat! Volkert thought as he swung the door open.

"Dullest system I've ever run across," the other grumbled, returning to the eyepiece "And the minute the one interesting feature shows up—"

There was a commotion in front of the enlisted men's barracks—the din of angry voices, the sharp reports of fists on flesh.

Volkert rounded the corner of the tent and went barging into the crowd of off-duty troops, elbowing them aside until he reached the two fighting men. He ducked under a wild blow and grabbed the combatants—both junior corporals of the gunnery detail—by their scruffs.

"Hold it!" he shouted  
"You're both under arrest!"

"He started it," charged one of the men, a lean redhead.

"Yeah?" returned the other breathlessly. "Well he didn't have any right telling me to lay off!"

"Lay off what?" the major demanded.

The two men looked disconcertedly down at their hands. Several of the others snickered.

"Lay off what" Volkert repeated.

"Jenny," offered a sergeant, amused.

Volkert started and released the pair.

"Miss Jennifer?" His voice cracked with disbelief.

But it was asinine! He had been on eight assignments with the old bag. She hadn't grown any less pathetically unattractive since the first. And never had anyone been indiscriminate enough to show her the merest amount of attention—not even the elderly civilians.

But now there were two—two *young* men—who had apparently found something in her desirable enough to fight over!

Across the street, Miss Jennifer's massive bulk blocked the doorway of her tent. Smiling proudly, she winked at the redhead and he grinned back.

"Sergeant," Volkert called out. "See that these two men are taken to the lockup!"

**W**ITHIN two days, though, the pair had been released, assigned extra duty and restricted from further contact with the civilian complement.

Wattley's play-toy speck of light shone brighter in the southern daytime sky. The natives worked more frenziedly at their task of beautifying the village. Lieutenant Hutchinson's transmitter, besides defying all attempts at repair, had developed further trouble, shattering its subethereal crystal. And Volkert was even more fretful over Farrell's inability to learn why the natives were totally disinterested in sex and children.

Tired of waiting for the doctor to report, he went over to Medical and found Farrell taking a blood sample from a native man who had been forcibly escorted there by two gloved and masked orderlies.

The major withdrew from the vicinity of the tent until the primitive was dismissed. Gagging as the creature passed him, he went on in to see the physician.

"Farrell," he asked pensively, propping his booted foot on a chair and draping his forearm over the upraised knee, "anybody ever think of simply asking these natives why they don't have children?"

The other nodded soberly. "They won't talk about things like that. Social taboo." Then he smiled. "However, I think we've made a significant discovery, working with Anthropology."

"What does Steimann know about this business?"

"Nothing. But he's enough enough of a student of races and individuals to have noticed something that escaped the rest of us."

"What?"

"We've observed there are no natives between the zero and twenty-year-old age groups, roughly. Not being familiar with physical features as correlated with age among those creatures, we've assumed

that the population was spread randomly between the twenty-year-olds and the limiting age of eighty or ninety."

"Isn't it?"

"It is *not*, Major." Farrell grinned briefly. "If you look closer you'll see there's one group about twenty years old, another about forty, a third about sixty, and so fourth. But there are *no persons of in-between ages*—none that fail to fit neatly into the twenty-, forty-, sixty- or eighty-year-old groups!"

Volkert scowled heavily. "I don't—"

"It's simple, Major. Twenty years ago wasn't the first time these people quit having children. It seems they quit periodically, laying off for twenty years each time."

Volkert mulled the information. It was interesting enough, but actually it added little materially to the solution.

"But," he reminded discouragingly, "we still don't know what happens during those twenty-year sexless periods—what makes them lose their mating instinct for so long a time."

"No, we don't," Farrell admitted. "But at least we have another clue to work with."

"And we still don't know whether, after a few months here, our colonists would fall into the same pattern. You realize, of course, that if we were restricted 'to one child every twenty years we'd soon die off for lack of adequate replacements."

"You're right. The Repugnants would too, except that they have five or six kids at a time. Steimann found that out when he counted fraternal noses in some of the huts."

**"MAJOR Volkert! Major Volkert!"**

Miss Jennifer's voice, strained through the heavy canvas, was imperative.

The major went outside.

"You'll simply have to do something," she insisted. "If it had happened just once, I wouldn't have bothered you. But two nights in a row is too much. And now *this!*"

Leveling a flabby arm, she pointed accusingly down the street.

Wattley, who had evidently

followed her at a distance, drew back indecisively, turned and slunk away.

"You'll just have to speak with him," Miss Jennifer fumed.

"What did he do?" Volkert stared into the strained face, made even more unsightly by a full-blossomed blush which outlined the blemishes more clearly.

"He came sneaking into my tent twice!" Her jaw, trembling with indignation, stuck out to an impossible degree. "And now he's started following me through the street!"

Volkert took a deep breath of incredulity. By stretching his imagination, he might concede that two young bucks could become planet-crazy and lose their sense of pulchritudinous values. But Wattley was an old man who had decades ago reluctantly put aside such things as sex and amatory escapades.

And it couldn't be that Jenny was desperately imagining the sort of intriguing situations that had been denied her all her life. Wattley's guilt was evident in his furtive actions, in his

failure to refute Jenny's shouted accusations.

"All right, Miss Jennifer. I'll see that it doesn't happen again."

Volkert helplessly flapped his hands against his thighs. It just didn't make sense. The natives had become sexual duds. And all along he had feared that whatever made the poor creatures that way would eventually have the same influence on the survey crew and subsequently on the colonists.

But no. Instead the men, even the most erotically unresponsive Dr. Wattley, were apparently becoming oversexed—to a ridiculous degree.

### CHAPTER III

**V**OLKERT was up early the next morning—in time to intercept Dr. Steimann as he headed across the field toward the native village.

The major had lain awake half the night doing mental gymnastics with Wattley's incongruous behavior, the recalcitrant subethereal transmitter, the natives' lack of sexual response, and the unguessable

purpose behind the beautification of their village.

It was the last enigma that concerned him most from the standpoint of safety for the survey party. Ritual on a primitive world occasionally meant irrational behavior and augured trouble for strangers.

He overtook the anthropologist halfway across the clearing, just as the latter was adjusting his deodorization mask.

"One moment, Steimann. I thought perhaps you might brief me on what's going on over there—the flowers and construction."

The anthropologist slipped off his mask, exposing a small, hatched face that narrowed down from excessively wide cheekbones to a too-sharp chin, made even more pointed by a meticulously trimmed Vandyke.

"I think I can, Major. I'm putting it down as a religious function. You see, these people are ditheists. They believe in two gods, descendants of a single god-father. They're preparing to celebrate their Festival of the Two Sons."

Volkert stiffened. "They

won't get too fanatic, will they?"

"I think not.

"What's all the construction for?"

"The festival is also the occasion for some sort of sociological upheaval in the village. Until now, a complete family occupied each hut. But the ritual will trigger the disintegration of the basic family unit, with the twenty-year-olds striking out on their own."

The major nodded comprehendingly.

Steimann shrugged. "I'm afraid that's about all I can tell you now. I still have to learn the details of the festival. It has something to do with the reascendancy of one of their gods."

"You'll keep me posted?"

The anthropologist smiled. "Of course I will, Major."

**B**ACK in camp, Volkert made a worried inspection of the establishments and decided there was some sort of indescribable undercurrent to what until now had been a simple, monotonous survey crew routine.

It wasn't anything he could

readily put his finger on. But it was there just the same—lurking in the absorbed-in-nothing stares of the off-duty men who lolled about the recreation area, in the more-than-casual attention the civilian technicians and soldiers were devoting to the pin-up portraits on the mess hall bulleting board.

Behind the barracks he found four of the younger artillery-men wistfully scratching lewd drawings in the sand. He routed them with a stern reprimand, but lingered to survey the products of their idle labor.

Despite the fact that the entire personnel was supposed to have been conditioned against entertaining any sex thoughts other than casually, they seemed to be occupied with nothing else. He'd have to take it up with Psychology when he got back to Sector Headquarters.

On the main street, he watched Miss Jennifer stroll leisurely toward Supply. And a score of fancying eyes traced her progress with an interest that was somewhat more than incidental.

In a way, Volkert felt rather

pleased that Jenny seemed to be coming into her own. Actually, she wasn't as much of a decrepit old bag as the men jokingly made her out to be, although her hair *was* a bit unkempt—the way it straggled over her forehead.

Her jaw did protude a bit, but not enough to warrant the “old battle-axe” moniker the boys had hung on her. Come to think of it, though, he hadn't heard them call her that in the last day or two.

Volkert was still standing in the street as she came out of Supply. Watching her, he decided she must have gone on a diet. At least, she seemed to have lost a good deal of weight. And, quite definitely, her eyes were rather interesting and—

He jolted himself from his errant thoughts with a whispered “damn!” and strode resolutely for his tent.

High in the southern sky, Wattle's shimmering planet came out from behind a cloud. It seemed considerably larger than when the major had first seen it. As a matter of fact, it was more than a *point* of light. He could almost make out the disk.

THE sound of gunfire routed Major Volkert from bed the next morning. He grabbed his revolver and jerked his robe about him, wondering why the artillery hadn't opened up first

Outside, men scurried from the street, diving behind tents or throwing themselves into the ditches. A junior corporal with a Mark IV rifle lay prone under the canopy of the Microbiology lab. He was pouring slugs toward the Dispensary across the street.

Sergeant Yelverton and a private returned the fire with revolvers.

The private went down clutching his shoulder as Volkert dived for cover behind the pickup truck.

Yelverton took careful aim and fired three rapid shots. The junior corporal stiffened, as though an electrical shock had gone through his body, and went limp. Volkert could see the flow of blood from the crisp hole in his forehead.

A stark silence fell over the camp as the major, venturing out from behind the truck, was suddenly aware of the soft sobs



coming from the Microbiology lab.

Miss Jennifer staggered out, hands hiding her face. One sleeve of her dress was torn completely off, exposing a fleshy shoulder, and a shoe was missing. She'd evidently been in a struggle.

Volkert shoved the revolver in his pocket and went over. "What happened?"

Sergeant Yelverton holstered his gun and crossed the street too. "Leave her alone. Can't you see she's had it?"

The man reached a consoling hand out toward Miss Jennifer. But Volkert caught it and swung him around.

"I want an explanation, Sergeant!"

The other soldiers and civilians began filtering back into the street.

"Rogers must have gone berserk," a technician said, nodding at the dead rifleman. "He surprised her in the lab."

"We didn't know it until she started screaming," Yelverton added, grasping Miss Jennifer tenderly around the shoulder. "We didn't know he had a rifle either."

"All right." Volkert gestured toward the wounded private. "Two of you men get Jones into the Dispensary."

He turned to the sergeant. "I'll take care of Miss Jennifer."

"She'll be all right with me," Yelverton assured.

"I said I'll take care of her."

The sergeant backed off grudgingly.

Volkert took Miss Jennifer by the elbow, his other hand enfolding hers, and led her off toward her tent. Poor kid, he sympathized, she must have been scared half to death. Unconsciously, he squeezed her fingers and was surprised when she returned the gesture. When he looked over she was smiling.

But he caught himself. Poor *kid*? Hell, he realized, she was at least as old as he—chronologically if not on the official record.

At her tent, she asked in words that were spoken softer than he'd ever heard her speak before, "Won't you come in, Major?"

He started to accept, but backed off impulsively. "I'm hardly dressed, Miss Jennifer."

Anyway, I should think you'd be all shaken up after that experience."

She laid her hand on his arm and looked away painfully. "He was so—crude. It wasn't pleasant at all."

The conversation, it seemed, was not without its subtle traps. He turned abruptly and headed for his tent, realizing that the same thing which had driven the junior corporal to such desperate behavior must have been responsible for the astronomer's anomalous actions too.

In other men, such tendencies had been restrained. But in the corporal and Wattley they had predominated. Perhaps if he spoke with the systemologist—

**V**OLKERT had spoken with the elderly astronomer before—the same day Miss Jennifer had complained. He had relayed her objections and had added his own terse warning, coupled with threats of arrest and summary trial.

But Wattley had only stared off into the distance and snickered. There had been a mis-

chievous twinkle in his eyes and no small amount of reborn pride in his voice as he said, "Very well, Major. I'll watch myself. But it isn't often that quenched fires are rekindled in a man of my age."

And his eyes had narrowed bitterly. "Damn the luck! To be caught in a place like this—practically a total isolation!"

But now, after Volkert had entered the astronomer's observatory without even the courtesy of knocking, Wattley wasn't so sociably inclined.

"Get out," he ordered, looking up from the spectroscope. "I'm busy. I've held myself in check."

"No doubt you have, Doctor. But I'd like your opinion of what made you act up like that the other day."

Wattley waved him silent and adjusted the instrument's collimator.

"In the interest of self-illumination," he said, laughing dryly. "there's nothing I'd rather discuss. But, as you can appreciate, I'm too far behind in my work to spare the time."

The systemologist turned momentarily to the telescope,

centered its sight on the planet that shone like a tiny, silver disk just south of the sun, and engaged the driving mechanism.

Volkert glanced impatiently out the domed slot. Across the field the natives, still preparing for their ritual, had decorated the village to a ridiculously gaudy degree. And they were still hauling in baskets of blossoms from the forest.

"Dr. Wattlely—please! This is important!" Damned if he would ever again take out a survey party with a temperamental old buzzard who had to be coddled.

The systemologist paused and glanced up wearily. "Let me show you what I'm up against, Major," he said with patronizing patience as he went to the chart cabinet.

"It's taken a month to completely classify Repugnant." Wattlely nodded at the sun, visible in all its greatness and brilliance through the dome's slot. "But that was an easy job, compared with what's ahead."

He found the chart he was searching for and unrolled it on the table. "Here's a schematic

of the system. You'll notice there's none of what we'd normally classify as inner planets, although we have more than our share of outer ones."

Volkert peered over the old man's shoulder to study the outline—the asterisk that represented the solar body, the prominent circle denoting Repugnant-I's orbit, the thirteen additional concentric rings showing the orbits of the other planets.

But he stiffened and gripped the table, his eyes widening in astonishment, his voice faltering. "That—that thing!" He stabbed the chart with a trembling finger. "What is it?"

"That's what I'll have to sweat blood over if I'm going to classify it before it gets out of range."

Volkert only stared incredulously at the astronomer and at the chart. It couldn't be! Yet, that symbol nestled so close to the asterisk was—*had to be*—

He seized Whattlely's arm desperately and pointed outside—at the bright disk of light below the sun. "You mean that thing out there *isn't* a planet?"

"You can read astronomical symbols, Major. You see what is on the chart."

"Good God!" Volkert clawed distraughtly at his face as he stared at the symbol. It *couldn't* be. Yet, it *was!* And the most ironic thing about it all was the fact that he *should have know*. Steimann had practically told him—*had* told him. But he'd failed to understand because of a phonetic misapprehension.

He whirled for the door, but paused to face the systemologist. "Get over to my quarters on the double. I'm calling an emergency meeting."

#### CHAPTER IV

**T**HE response to the call was immediate. All the principals converged on Volkert's tent within five minutes—all except Wattley, who had to be "escorted" by the officer of the day.

Besides the astronomer and the major, there were Steimann, the anthropologist; Farrell, in charge of Medicine; Lieutenant Hutchinson of Communications, and Captain

Raleigh, the OD.

Farrell swabbed his brow with a crumpled handkerchief and stared expectantly at the major. "This about the natives' sexual behavior?"

"That and something more important—quite a bit more important." Volkert leaned tensely over the table. "What do you know about psychoemissive stars, Doctor?"

Farrell shrugged. "Not much more than the average layman. But if you're thinking of using that gimmick to explain the lack of sex urge among the natives, you're on the wrong trajectory."

"How do you figure that?"

"A psychoemissive star—even if there is one that radiates along a sex-stimulating band—couldn't just quit emitting psycho-frequencies at the drop of a hat, as Repugnant would have had to do every twenty years. It couldn't do that any more than a normal sun could just quit giving off light at the snap of a finger. Simply put, there aren't even any variable PE stars."

Volkert straightened and paced around the table. "I

quite agree with you, Doctor. I, too, considered and rejected the PE effect."

"Then—"

The major motioned for attention and turned toward the astronomer, who was still grumbling and staring severely at Captain Raleigh.

"Dr. Wattley, tell them what was on the chart you just showed me."

The systemologist rose protestingly. "I resent—"

"Tell them!"

Wattley bent visibly before the major's shouted order. "A schematic of the Repugnant system."

"And what was the object closest to the sun?"

"A companion sun—a dwarf—the second half of this binary system. It follows an orbit perpendicular to the zodiac. That's what knocked out the inner planets."

Farrell started and stared at the major, then more attentively at Wattley. Steimann and Hutchinson glanced at each other, confused. Raleigh tensed dully.

"The second half of a binary," Volkert repeated. "Why

didn't you tell me about it before?"

"You knew about it. We were briefed on the system, weren't we?"

"I was briefed on the defensive aspect of a projected survey. I was told nothing about Repugnant being a binary."

Wattley squirmed. "They told *me*—at Systemology Headquarters. Guess I forgot to pass it on."

"Thanks," said the major bitterly.

Steimann rose and spread his thin hands. "I don't see what all this—" he began.

Volkert turned upon him. "Of course you don't. But then you wouldn't. You're too damned wrapped up in your specialty—like Wattley. But you knew there were two suns in this system too, didn't you?"

"I suppose I did," the anthropologist said thoughtfully. "Their socio-religious background indicated as much. But you've got no legitimate complaint. I told you as much as I knew."

"Of course you did," Volkert admitted sourly. "Only, when you said 'the Festival of

the *Two Suns*, I naturally assumed you meant 'Two Sons,' since you'd just said their gods were descendants of a single god-father."

Captain Raleigh shifted in his chair. "I don't get it, Major. What does it all add up to? Are you trying to prove the natives don't have anything to do with sex because of that second sun?"

But Volkert turned back toward Farrell. "How long has it been since that race reproduced?"

"About twenty years."

The major stared at the astronomer. "And what's the period of that binary companion, Dr. Wattle?"

"Why—*twenty years!*"

Volkert spread his hands and dropped into a chair. "And there you have it, gentleman."

**F**ARRELL was first to break the strained silence. "Then it is stellar psychoemissions! Those natives reproduce only whenever Repugnant-B swings around Repugnant-A, close to this planet."

Volkert nodded. "It triggers off psychosomatic glandular re-

actions, making the natives sexually potent. Then, during the twenty years this planet is out of range of the emissions, the natives are impotent again."

Hutchinson snapped his fingers. "That's why they're building new huts! It's almost mating time!"

Volkert was staring out the window, across the field at the village. He watched a woman draping a string of flowers over the entrance to a newly-constructed hut.

One of the men brought her another basket of blossoms. But, playfully, she overturned it on his head and lunged into the forest, turning to see whether the man was following. He was—and quite eagerly.

"Not *almost*, Lieutenant," Volkert corrected grimly.

Steimann was shaking his head self-deprecatingly. "I should have recognized the direct connection between sex and sun. There were clues. One of their gods was the God of Light; the other was the God of Fertility."

Volkert rose and began pacing again. "Well, gentlemen.

What are we going to do?"

"Do?" Farrell laughed. "Why, just let them go ahead with their mating, I suppose."

The major laced him with a severe stare. "I don't mean about *them*, Doctor. I mean about *us*. The men. Miss Jenny."

Steimann and Wattlely groaned dismally.

"But—but what's going to happen?" Hutchinson asked apprehensively. "To us, I mean."

Volkert hunched his shoulders. "Figure it out yourself. You and I and the other men have a certain normal sex drive to begin with. We don't need a PE sun to trigger us off.

"But the natives have a sex-interest level of zero—until the necessary hormonal changes are stimulated by Repugnant-B's radiation. Those same radiations, however, are going to have a *proportionately greater* effect on us!"

Raleigh sat up rigidly. "If it makes them sexually normal," he whispered soberly, "it's going to make us *hypersexual!*"

Volkert stared ominously at the others. "It wouldn't make

much difference if Miss Jennifer weren't here. But, unalterably, she is. And you've seen what's already started happening among us."

The major turned sharply on Wattlely. "When will Repugnant-B get closest?"

"In about five days—that's as near as I can figure."

Steimann fingered his Vandike. "That checks. The native festival is supposed to reach its climax in five days."

"But," Wattlely warned, "our trouble won't be over then. The companion still has to recede out of range. That'll take about another ten days."

Volkert faced the lieutenant. "Any hope of fixing that transmitter?"

"Not much, Major," Hutchinson said apologetically. "That wouldn't solve anything anyway. Even if we could contact Sector Headquarters today, it would be two weeks before they could land a party out of hyper."

Major Volkert hitched his belt. "Then we'll have to improvise and ride it out... Farrell, break out all the counter-stimulants you've got and see that

each man gets a double dose daily until we run out."

"Raleigh." He motioned toward the OD. "Collect all sidearms. I'll come over to the arsenal after and we'll run an inventory."

"But suppose something happens?" Wattlely protested. "Suppose we need the guns?"

"There won't be much chance of that." Volkert laughed mirthlessly. "The natives are going to be too busy."

"Farrell," he continued with his plan. "Take Miss Jennifer in for a medical checkup. Give her a tranquilizer for the time being. Then we'll lock her up in the guardhouse."

The doctor started out, but a bit too eagerly perhaps to suit Volkert. "Wattlely and Hutchinson, you go along with him."

**B**UT Miss Jennifer was nowhere to be found.

When Farrell came to the arsenal to report her missing, the major looked up anxiously from his sidearms check-off list. "You certain she isn't in her tent or in Microbiology?"

Farrell shook his head.

"She must be in the field gathering specimens then."

"All her equipment's still in the lab, Major."

Captain Raleigh looked around from the racks of weapons. "I thought I saw her walking off into the forest late this morning," the OD offered. "But I couldn't see who was with her."

Volkert felt a sudden flash of envious rage well up in his cheeks. "Mustering the troops and civilians, Captain. We'll see who else is missing."

The technicians were lined up abreast on one side of the street and the soldiers on the other. Volkert listened attentively to roll call, but long before it was complete he suspected who was missing. It must be Sergeant Yelverton, who had already fought too viciously and had seemed to enjoy killing the junior corporal in defense of Miss Jennifer's honor.

The major was suddenly aware that his fists were balled into tight, determined knots behind his back.

In the middle of the street Captain Raleigh and one of the



civilians raised their voices to complete the roll call as weird sounds from primitive instruments came booming more loudly across the field.

Volkert glanced disdainfully in the direction of the village. Most of the decorating was apparently complete. And now the Repugnants had entered a more expressive phase of their festival. They sang incessantly. But it was like the sort of dismal moaning that was to be expected from such impossibly repulsive and vile creatures. They danced continually. The movements, however, were a disgusting mockery of grace and rhythm.

Captain Raleigh came over, closing the roster book. "It's Sergeant Yelverton, sir."

Volkert nodded scornfully. So it *was* the gunnery sergeant! He fists contracted into even tighter masses.

The ranks broke up and troops and civilians alike went off mumbling disgruntledly, aware now that both Miss Jennifer and one of the soldiers were missing and fully resentful of the implication.

Two corporals drew up in

front of the major. "We'd like to volunteer our squads, sir," one of them announced, "to form a party and go rescue Miss Jennifer."

Others overheard and rushed up to join the pair, their faces grim with resolution.

"It seems to me," said the major dourly, "that the matter of rescue isn't involved. She went off willingly."

But they pushed on into the forest anyway—scores of them, all bristling with determination.

Volkert let them go off on their quest, then stood pensively in the street watching Repugnant-A, a blazing orange disk, slip toward the mountain range to the west. Its small, silvery companion followed dutifully.

And, in the village, the singing rose to a more frenzied pitch as dozens of native women left the assembly and slipped off into the woods with only pretended stealth. A few of the men followed.

**J**ENNY returned the next morning.

She emerged from the forest

just as Major Volkert's patience had come to a desperate end and as he considered mustering an all-complement search party.

She approached the camp humming gaily, her eyes staring abstractedly into the distance, her face transfigured. She wore a garland of flowers around her neck and there was a huge blossom in her hair.

For a moment Volkert, buckling on his holster in front of his tent, realized how ludicrous she appeared. And he was sobered by the contrast of soft, delicate flowers and the ungainly bulk of the woman who wore them.

But his moment of rational perspective was short-lived as he joined the men who rushed solicitously to her side.

Yelverton, Volkert resolved bitterly, would pay for this! But then, the major wondered briefly, how much of his resentment was in the interest of impartial justice and how much represented personal indignation?

He reached Jenny and sympathetically extended a hand. But she turned away indifferently, ignoring him and the

others, and headed for her tent.

She had deliberately spurned him! And he had only wanted to help—to put his arm around her, to reassure and protect her!

There was a rumble of discontent from the men who had gathered in the street and the major turned to see them staring at the edge of the forest—at Yelverton, who stood there indecisive and afraid.

Several of the soldiers broke and lunged for the sergeant. Others, instinctively reaching for their holsters and finding them empty, turned and raced for the arsenal.

Volkert reached the arms tent first and whirled to face the charging men. He fired a shot into the air and they drew up sharply.

"There'll be no issue of side-arms!" he announced decisively.

The men withdrew reluctantly, then rushed off to join the others in vengeful pursuit of Sergeant Yelverton. One paused to snatch up a length of rope that lay in a ditch.

"Farrell!" Volkert spied the doctor and shouted before the

having locked her up; that, otherwise, the night was serenely beautiful, with the full disk of Repugnant-B's orange moon shimmering as it rose over the range to the east.

Back home, the major realized, savoring the thought, it would be a night for lovers. But here—

He rose and slipped his boots on and snapped his holster about his waist. He paced nervously. And, without conscious direction, his aimless steps took him outside, down the street and around beyond the assembly tent to the lock-up.

A brilliant but fitful light flared spasmodically against the olive drab canvas of the tent next to the guardhouse.

Already the gray tinge of dawn was pushing the darkness of night away from the horizon. He crept silently around the tent and stepped into the full glow of the flickering light.

Dr. Steimann was directing the flame of an oxyacetylene cutting torch against the cell's padlock. Miss Jennifer, her face leering expectantly in the light of the sputtering jet, was visible through the bars.

His thin features etched with eagerness, Dr. Wattley trundled another cylinder of compressed gas from the supply tent, then bent over the anthropologist's shoulder to see how much progress he was making.

Swearing soundlessly, Volkert circled wide and came up from behind the two men. He swung the butt of the revolver and Steimann collapsed with a grunt.

Wattley turned and sped away. Until he had rounded the corner of the next tent, Volkert kept the revolver aimed at his back, eager to fire but reluctant to do so until he could be sure whether his motive was one of justified expediency or envious wrath.

"I was praying you'd come in time, Major," Miss Jennifer lied cooingly. "I wanted to scream. But I was afraid. I didn't know what they'd do."

He only stared uncertainly. Her face was visible now in the pale light of dawn—sincere, dotting, fascinating.

"You did come for me, didn't you, Charles?"

He closed his eyes and shook his head, trying to restore a semblance of rationality that

latter could gain the obscurity of the woods.

The other drew up hesitatingly and headed back.

"We're men of control, Doctor," the major appealed. "With a simple determination, we can be above all this. And I need sane help. Go get the pickup truck."

Together, they loaded all the sidearms and other stored weapons on the truck. Then Volkert drove around to the ten gun emplacements, deserted in the frenzy of the moment, and detached all the firing pins, tossing them in with the other weapons.

There would be nothing to fear from the fact that the artillery pieces were now useless. The natives had been given a convincing demonstration of their firepower and were amply impressed. The mere presence of the disarmed guns would suffice for protection.

It wasn't until Volkert had dumped the entire lot off the cliff into the deep waters of the bay that he allowed himself a moment of relaxation. Now if the men were insanely aroused, they had only their fists to use.

When he returned to camp, however, he found a private and a civilian technician advancing stealthily on Miss Jennifer's tent. He shot them both, then, in a moment of restraint, marched Miss Jenny off to the steel-walled guardhouse.

Lusty cries from the forest gave evidence that the sergeant had been flushed from hiding.

Yelverton screamed twice.

Then all was quiet, except for the mournful singing of the natives and the dismal throb and cry of their instruments.

And Repugnant-B was a tiny, glittering jewel beside the relatively soft glow of its giant companion.

## CHAPTER V

VOLKERT tossed fitfully in bed that night, as though his intense anxiety could make the days march by more swiftly and return the camp to normal.

But there were other disturbing thoughts that contributed to his restlessness—that Jenny was alone and doubtlessly lonely in her cold steel prison that she must despise him for

would be independent of the glandular changes stimulated by Repugnant-B.

But an impartial appraisal of Jenny was impossible now. All that mattered was that she was there, beckoning coyly, irresistibly.

She rattled the door of the guardhouse and her intense supplication was implicit in the harsh sound.

But, God! He couldn't!

Nevertheless he reached into his pocket and got the key.

"That's it, Charles!" she encouraged avidly. "Let me out and we'll go away—together. Just you and me!"

He opened the door and she stepped out, staring almost reverentially into his perspiration-filmed face.

It was a timeless moment in which the door of eternity stood ajar. In the native village across the field, even the interminable ritual music paused and a portentous silence lay thick over the countryside.

Jenny extended her arms and came forward eagerly.

Volkert raised his revolver and emptied the chamber into her chest.

FOR an eternity he stood there—motionless, staring at her lifeless form.

A pale orange sun came up and cast an unworldly glow over the scene.

Civilian technicians and soldiers filtered from the tents and the forest and stood gaping, some of them eventually smiling in relief.

Volkert's hand finally relaxed and the gun fell to the ground.

It had been *that* simple, he told himself. And he remembered that once his uncle, a rancher on one of the outworlds, had had a female *watras* that seemed eternally to be in heat. And there were always scores of male *watras* yowling and barking and tearing up the orchards in their mating tournaments, even though the bitch was penned up. Peace returned only after he had killed the captive animal.

Volkert allowed himself a brief smile of amusement. He was probably the only man in galactic history who'd have a medal pinned on him for being farsighted enough to murder

defenseless woman.

But there was a rustling in the forest all around him and the major looked up apprehensively.

Several of the men, facing the woods, were backing away. Two of them whirled around and only object fear was written on their faces.

Then the natives emerged from the shadows—advancing furtively, eagerly. Their bodies, covered with the sickly green mucous, glistened in the early morning sunlight. Their doleful eyes, peering avidly now out of the grotesque masks that were their faces, darted from soldier to civilian and back to soldier.

One of them started a low, suggestive chant and the others took it up as the survey crew members backed horrified toward the center of the camp.

Then Volkert gagged on his

breath as he saw that all the hundreds of primitives surrounding them were women!

Now he remembered, rather nauseously, that the women of the village outnumbered the men almost two to one.

And there were still two days to go before Repugnant-B even reached conjunction!

He screamed hoarsely.

But his cry was drowned out by the frenzied shouts of one of the soldiers who had fallen before the irresistible advance of the natives. Two of the women overtook the private and pulled him toward the forest. He screamed once more before he retched and fainted.

And the women came on like a stampeding herd.

Later, a stillness fell over the deserted camp and the forest breezes blew warm and soft all that day.

THE END

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