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*With this somewhat disturbing story, we introduce another of F&SF's discoveries. Richard Brookbank is a teacher, a linguist, a traveler, a connoisseur of food, drink and music, a former operative of a top secret anti-Fascist underground railway, a good friend of such favorite writers of ours as Christopher Wood and Q. Patrick, and a man capable of once sending us a long letter explaining how we should answer a telegram which he had not yet sent but which we would receive before the letter. The individuality and even madness of his stories are fortunately of a more logical sort. You'll meet Brookbank in various odd moods in later issues of F&SF; try him first with this curious study of the manner in which, on other planets, psychological symbols may take the most physical forms.*

## The Cocoon

by RICHARD BROOKBANK

"I'LL HAVE things ready in a jiffy, sir," said Lieutenant Sharpley.

Irritably, Captain Woolser watched him set up camp. Sharpley's well-groomed fingers clicked open the snaps of neat little kits where everything fitted snugly into place. Not a movement was wasted. Woolser sat down wearily on the hard, granite surface of the plain and watched, feeding his hatred. Even after three days of travelling on foot through this blazing and desolate waste, Lieutenant Sharpley looked as if he'd just stepped from a fresh cold shower where he had used the best personal detergent and hummed some neat little tune. Now he was setting up their defensive electro-screen in a circle around them, neatly, fussily, somehow boy-scoutishly. Woolser scratched at his week's growth of beard, stifled a yawn, and watched Sharpley with narrowing eyes. Of all people to be rescued by! The realization that he would like to kill this man came as a mild shock. Did one of those damned little kits contain his missing digita tablets? No. If Lieutenant Sharpley had sneaked them, he'd have them in a pocket. Old be-prepared Sharpley always did the right thing. How the captain longed for just one soothing digita!

"If you want to shave, sir, I have one of those new type razors. It might make you more comfortable." He stepped over and respectfully handed Woolser a miniature shaving kit.

"Never did like these gadgets," said Woolser heavily.

"We will be at the ship tomorrow noon, sir," reminded Sharpley.

You'd think, Woolser said to himself, that the damned ship was to be the scene of the Interplanetary Ball. And here was Sharpley pertly telling him what to do! He turned the kit over in his hands. "Shave-aire," proclaimed the glittering letters on the top. "Gets the whiskers at the root, with compressed air. No blades, no fuss, leaves skin fresh and smooth."

Fresh and smooth, like Sharpley's. Comely, clipped, and contained. His very body sheathed him like a neat box, nicely planed and sanded. Fine workmanship, no flaws visible — to anyone else. But Woolser knew. The entire appearance was one big flaw. What if the cocoon-makers got at *him*?

He laughed aloud at the thought and Sharpley started, then glanced quickly away.

"Camp's set up now, sir," he reported. "I've infused water and dissolved some gamma tablets for supper." He smiled despite himself, in bashful pride. "Been saving them all along for the last night, sir."

Woolser sat silent. If he expected to be commended, let him wait for it, or let him break out the intoxicating diga tablets. But Sharpley's confidential humor persisted.

"You know sir, I'll be glad to get back to the ship. Er — perhaps I haven't told you, Captain Woolser, that I'm to be assigned a wife as soon as we return to earth. I know her, too. I arranged it myself."

The captain made no response. He was toying with that phrase of Sharpley's about reaching the ship tomorrow noon, and its implied reproof at his appearance. The gall of the man! He decided he'd be damned if he'd shave. There had been humiliation enough in being rescued by this boy scout who stole diga from you and secretly despised you.

"She's really such a nice girl, sir, and she admires you a great deal. I've never understood why they put her in the unassigned class. Of course she does look — well, a little sultry —" he paused and blushed — "but then anybody who knows her at all knows she'll make a model wife. I had the devil of a time getting her out of that class and assigned to me."

Woolser wished he would shut up. What did he care about assigned or unassigned women? That was the business of the Assignment Bureau. Of course Sharpley would stick his impudent nose in and tamper. But the captain was willing to bet that the Morals Police wouldn't let him get away with it.

"I'm sure Roberta would love to have you visit us, sir," Sharpley went on.

"Roberta!" Captain Woolser almost yelled.

"Why yes, sir," said the lieutenant, startled. "Roberta Contini. She told me you had met —"

Woolser tossed the shaving kit away in disgust and turned his back.

"Lieutenant, are we *never* going to drink that gamma solution, so I can get some sleep?" he managed to get out at last.

"Oh, I'm very sorry, sir, I'm afraid it slipped my mind for an instant." He jumped to his feet and brought over a cup of steaming broth. Woolser took it absently, his brain leafing feverishly through memories.

Roberta! Sultry, moist-eyed, slumberous, volcanic Roberta Contini, assigned to this automatic jackass! Her indolent, slightly hoarse voice whispering sweetly at his scrubbed ear, and his answer in his robot-tenor. Her lazy, honeyed beauty assigned to an aseptic box of pigeonholes! The thought made him tremble, the gamma broth turned sour in his mouth. This was the final blow. This was the ultimate crime be-prepared Sharpley had "innocently" committed against him. No, but this he would never get away with, never! Woolser shook his head violently.

"Bertram," he remembered Roberta's whisper, "come now, my pet —" and here she had kissed him on the ear, and nipped it lightly with her teeth, "what's on my Bertram's mind? Tell big sister all about it!"

It was that awful combination of Roberta's, kissing your ear so you nearly went crazy, and then calling herself your "big sister." And since the big sister just didn't go with a kiss on the ear, he had been reduced to a bewildered little brother, and only just got away in time not to make a fool of himself. He remembered her throaty chuckle when he left in confusion.

Snap, click! Sharpley was undoing the sleeping kits. Woolser felt that if he heard another such neat sound he would beat the ground and howl. But no, there were no more of them. The lieutenant merely rolled out the beds at a respectful distance and slipped into his.

"Well, sir, good night!" he said crisply, and turned on his side.

But Woolser could see his eyes were still open. Of course he would be thinking about Roberta. His little mind was probably already phrasing the concise way in which he would tell her all about how he had rescued his Captain Woolser from the awful cocoon-makers of Vispra. Woolser touched his paralysis gun for reassurance, smiled grimly, and waited. He knew that sleep came quickly to pigeonhole minds. To Sharpley's correct little brain, staying awake would probably appear messy and disorderly, once you'd put yourself to bed.

The darkness that spread about them was red, with Vispra's peculiar atmospheric dust. There was no sound, aside from the lieutenant's breathing and the faint hum given off by the electro-screen, its glow revealing the dim plain stretching immensely into the night. The ship tomorrow at noon, thought Woolser. The ship and the eyes of the crew and of that security-service Sergeant Bowler, waiting for his explanation of why he had bailed

out and abandoned his ship when no apparent danger threatened. The lives of everyone aboard had been placed in jeopardy by this pointless irresponsibility, his report would intone. Woolser wondered what he could say. How could he describe the panic and despair, the deliberate overdose of digita tablets, the hallucinations? Sharpley had gotten nothing from him; neither would they. Words might describe events, but not a state of soul.

He thought of Frieda, his own assigned wife. No choice had been granted to him, a captain of major space expeditions for over ten years, a man entrusted with greater responsibilities than that bird-brain Sharpley could ever hope for. But then he had enemies everywhere, and he was despised and suspected by everyone, even by his wife. And to top it all, he was positive now that his heavy, domineering Frieda Schutt was a member of the secret security service, set to watch him.

In Roberta, more than in any of the unassigned group, he had hoped to find consolation at last. His position would have enabled him to have her placed on the reserve list, with her own living quarters. If she had wanted it. Woolser had been too afraid of a refusal to ask her. Frieda must have known about that idea, though, and she must have connived with Sharpley to work out this ingenious little arrangement. As a matter of fact, he suspected that brief assignment to Earth's moon. It was clearly a frame-up. He had gone out there on orders to observe the test flight of a new-type space ship, a ship that hadn't even been completed when he got there! Then three weeks of waiting. His every movement had been watched, too, he was sure. He had taken to digita tablets; everybody there took them — it was a moon specialty. They intoxicated, but he was so used to them by now he hardly felt them.

And then, on the day the new ship was to make its flight, word came that he was to be assigned a special mission to Vispra, in a ship which could reach the astonishing speed of a light year every four minutes. But why Vispra? Frieda must have wanted more time. Vispra, an earth-like planet supporting two Earth colonies, hadn't been visited for years. One of the main reasons was its tremendous distance, 3,600 light years away. Of course his ship could make the trip in ten days, but then why hadn't he been called back to Earth to take over? Why had they sent his ship to the moon, where Lieutenant Sharpley turned the command over to him? Why the sudden rush? He was certain Frieda had her finger in the pie somewhere. Now she would be pawing through his things, with that grin of hungry malice on her face. She would uncover his journals, of course, and cart them down to dinner with her, where she would eat and laugh over them. Before very long, she would be bound to come upon the desperate and heart-sick letters to Roberta, letters of entreaty he had always postponed sending. Frieda would

scour his room with deliberate Teutonic system, searching away with those quick little blue eyes that were never still for more than a second. Then she would think of the books. He saw her going through every page of every book on his shelves until the unhappy outpourings of his most intimate tenderness fell out into her big hands. And how beefy her satisfaction would be! She would, of course, memorize the choicest passages and mouth them at him again and again, in hearty derision. Or she could turn them over to the Morals Police, just for the record. Or even give them to Roberta, with a friendly grin. His thoughts veered away from the idea.

Bailing out of a ship over the Vispran wastes. Just bailing out suddenly. Why? He didn't know.

Captain Woolser sighed wretchedly and looked out into the red night. They couldn't be very far from the desert's edge and the largest city, New London, with its pleasant parks and gay night life. There were friendly Earth colonies at both poles of Vispra, pleasantly watered, with an affable climate. Trees imported from Earth grew luxuriantly; he remembered them; it was only this central vast belt of waste granite that bred a hostile species. At least it was contained by its climate. If ships occasionally fell, unequipped to defend themselves, they rotted here while their passengers disappeared. The cocoon-makers . . .

Captain Woolser warmed at the thought. Quietly he got up and stole over to Lieutenant Sharpley's neatly-folded jacket. With infinite care he slipped his fingers into the breast pocket. A smile of triumph and contempt spread over his face as he pulled forth the phial of diga tablets. He took three, a moderate dose, put the phial into his own pocket, and stole back again to sit where he had been before. Where was he? The cocoon-makers.

When he had bailed out in that sudden hopeless hysteria, his gravity neutralizer had brought him gently down onto the granite plain. Here, on the vast stretch of hardness and red darkness, he had stumbled for hours, curiously unafraid, glad to be alone at last. His hysteria gave away almost at once to a soothing calmness. Tired at last, he had stretched out and fallen asleep, hoping the night would last long. It was a deeper, cooler sleep than he had had in a long time. But when he awoke it was to reality and terror.

They had him.

The famous cocoon-makers of Vispra, tiny, termite-like life forms of the wasteland, had tied him to the spot with their fine mesh of web. Just above his head he could dimly perceive the arch of his cocoon, the whole surface moving and undulating with the swarming life of the builders. The daylight outside penetrated thickly in a dim red glow where the walls were still thin. Yet even as he watched, the light grew dimmer as the cocoon-makers sealed him in with incredible speed.

Panic seized him and he strained at his bonds with all his might. The sweat rolled off him, but he could not budge an inch. The cocoon thickened, and the darkness was more than darkness. It was sheer, unbroken black, moving with thousands of busy insects. Woolser gasped for breath, and realized that his senseless struggle was using up the air. Yet as he breathed he realized that some kind of ventilation had been provided, or he would long since have suffocated. Then he remembered the accounts he had read of these cocoons, of how men had been kept alive in them for years. Those few who had been rescued told of regular feeding and blood-letting, of being kept perfectly clean. He thought of his chances of rescue, and decided at first that they were fairly good. Space hatches on the ship would register the time they were opened, from which it would be easy to compute the exact location over which he had bailed out. He wore spoor-boots, which a spoor-detector could easily follow to this spot. But would Sharpley, now in command, be likely to rescue him? He almost laughed at the thought.

Then he was suddenly aware of a general movement, incredibly subtle, over his entire body. Avenues of delicate irritation across his body revealed the routes chosen by the termites. Focus where he would, millions of black dots danced in a thick impenetrable mass. He was suddenly maddened by it, by the inability to move, while his body swarmed with the delicate vibrations of a thousand unseen crawling things. He cried out in anguish and struggled again to move. At last he gave up and lay still.

In a little while he realized that something new was happening. A constant tickle on his lower lip revealed that large numbers were congregating there. He shut his lips tight, but something that had been deposited trickled through, a kind of sweet-tasting broth. He was obliged to swallow. It was not unpleasant stuff at all, and being hungry, he finally opened his lips to take in more. It was constantly supplied there at the lower lip and he swallowed it every few minutes, almost automatically, from then on.

The blood-letting he had feared proved to be almost painless after all. A tiny wound kept open in his back allowed for a regular but very moderate loss. He found himself calculating, oddly, that he must be losing about a quarter of the amount they were giving him in the form of broth.

Time passed, a great deal of time it must have been, he guessed. He was kept clean, his supply of air and broth never failed. His spasmodic struggles, like a fly in a spider web, he had long since given up in a drowsy luxury of surrender. It was like returning to the womb, he thought, back, far back, to the womb. Everything was taken care of. The temperature of the cocoon never varied, and the first cramped annoyance of being constantly in the same position soon passed away. He was reduced to a mere machine of metabolism, he realised; yet he comforted himself with the thought that

he was vital to thousands of creatures, that he supplied them with the sustenance of their lives, a sort of Great Mother for which they repaid him by attending to his own needs. Drowsily he conceded that it seemed a fair exchange.

After a time he thought no more at all, but slipped off into a pleasant vacuity that was timeless. The darkness and the warmth were pleasant, the constant broth was good to the taste. The days and the nights could pass by overhead unheeded, there was nothing to worry about, nothing to be done, nothing he could do — everything was taken care of. He came to admire his captors, even to feel grateful to them. The cocoon was a snug refuge, its walls protected him.

And so it was that when the roof was ripped off his cocoon and the light of day exploded into his face, he was too stunned to know, at first, what was happening. It was a long time before he could bear to open his eyes, and when he finally did and saw that his rescuer was Sharpley, he was less pleased than a rescuer has some right to expect. Then came the lieutenant's little speech, which seemed to pass all limits of presumption.

"I came for you alone, sir," Sharpley had said, "because I felt you would rather be found in this — er — state by a friend. I knew you were going through an awful lot if you decided to bail out, and I thought you needed time to collect yourself before you were interrogated by Sergeant Bowler."

And he had probably already stolen the diga tablets when he was making this little Eagle-scout speech!

Woolser looked over to where the lieutenant lay sleeping. Then he remembered something else Sharpley had said.

"It must have been horrible, sir. You know, you said you didn't want to be rescued, and you were talking to *them* when I dug you out!"

Now he tried to imagine a cocoon over Sharpley, where he lay over there, and chuckled. If he loved neatness so, it would be the neatest thing that ever happened to him!

Woolser swallowed another diga tablet and took out his paralysis gun. He put the adjustor onto "total paralysis" and moved the time indicator to twenty-four hours. The electro-screen would run out in twelve. He paused. Might as well give the fool an even chance. He changed the indicator to twelve and one half hours and stole over to the lieutenant's side. He stood there a moment, then pointed the gun and fired. Sharpley didn't even move.

Woolser took off his spoor-boots, shielded the electro-screen, and stepped through.

"I'm coming, you little bastards!" he shouted, running and feeling his freedom like a heady tonic.

He ran a long way before he finally lay down to wait.