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Cover painting by Robert Gibson Jones, illustrating
a scene from "You Can't Escape From Mars!"

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The little creatures gathered around the two humans, watching them with interest.

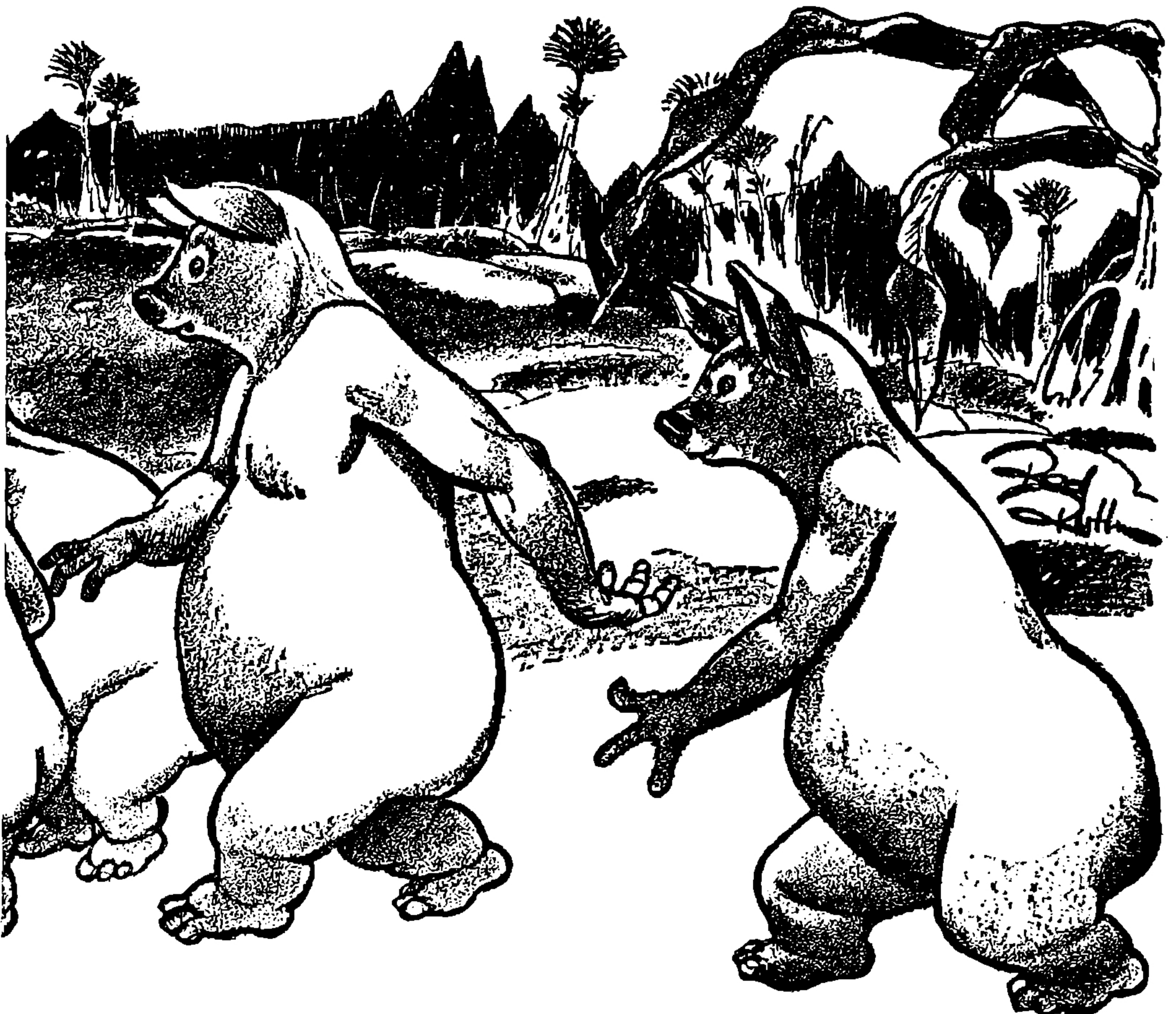
The ETERNAL EVE

By John Wyndham

With more men than women on Venus, Amanda had to decide whether to be loved or to be lucky!

THE MAN came clear of the trees, showing as a small light dot against the background of dark trunks. Amanda got the glasses on to him. His clothing was in a worse state than her own: the pants had picturesque rents, and

there was not a lot left of the shirt. Something unorthodox had happened to his hair and beard, too. He could have got it that way if he had let it grow until it bothered him and then impatiently hacked off a bunch here and there with a knife. At his back he



carried a pack. A rifle hung by its sling from his left shoulder. When Amanda recognized him her lips pressed a little more closely together, and she reached for her own rifle.

A few yards out into the open he stopped, scanning the hillside before him. At his back the pale pennant trees streamed like weeds in a brook, tall feather-tops swung to the light breeze, the fronds of the tree-ferns rippled so that waves of motion seemed to wash across the whole plain. For a minute or two he stood quite still. His gaze passed over and beyond the spot where she lay, without a pause. Then he hitched his pack, and began to plod upwards.

Behind her tuft of scrubby bushes Amanda waited, watching him detachedly, dispassionately. Presently, with slow, careful movements, she pushed her rifle gently forward, and set the telescopic sights. Her right hand slid back to the small, her finger on to the trigger. Then she paused. She let him come on another hundred yards, making a little to her left, and then reset the sights...

When she fired, he stopped, looking round wildly. He had no cover to drop to. She fired again...

After he fell he did not move any more. She put down the rifle, and took up the glasses to make sure.

All day long he lay there, with the pale, grass-like growth beneath him reddened by his blood. Towards evening she went down the hillside, carrying a rope. With it she dragged him laboriously to the edge of the cliffs. There she carefully unfastened the rope before she pushed the body over.

Then she went back to the cave.

AMANDA LAY on a blanket in the cave mouth. She rested on her elbows, her face cupped in her hands. In front the ground sloped steeply down to the cliff-edge. Be-

yond, growing dark now, was the sea—a fearsome, mysterious sea on which no ship had ever sailed.

At home, in such a setting, there would have been grey and white gulls wheeling plaintively, but here on Venus the birds were dark, business-like creatures, with no graceful leisure in their flight. The sea, by daylight, was a pale green, and slightly milky so that one could not look down into the water. A great deal of life went on in it—more, it seemed, in these latitudes than on the land. Birds, diving to catch fish in it, were likely not to reappear. Far out, large, unidentifiable shapes would break the water and stay visible for a few minutes. Sometimes huge, squid-like creatures swam slowly past. Now and then a kind of starfish, twenty or thirty feet across and looking like red coral, would cruise close inshore, keeping just awash. Most characteristic of all were the weed banks which came up on the northern current like floating islands with a life of their own, carrying colonies of small birds that pecked and fished in their pools as they drifted. Sometimes too, great limbs or flukes would slap the water, sending up clouds of spray from battle below. It was alien—and hostile to the very fringe. You had only to lean over the edge of the cliffs to see its outposts—the great crabs that patrolled the narrow foreshore like tanks on sentry-go.

Amanda, looking out across the unhorizoned sea, saw nothing of it. Her lips moved as she thought aloud, for she had been a long time alone.

"No!" she said. "It was *not* wrong. I've a *right* to protect myself—a *right*... He had no right over me. No one else has rights over me. I'm my own... He need not have come—he would have been all right if he had left me alone..."

"It wasn't wrong—it was horrible,

but it wasn't *wrong*... If another of them comes I shall do it again...and again...until they don't come any more...

"They shouldn't make me do it. They've no right... It's horrible... horrible...!"

The light faded behind the perpetual clouds, and the sea grew slowly darker. Stillness settled as the birds went to roost. Down in the forest the night would be beginning to hum with insects, but here there was none. There was only the gentle lap of the water—and from time to time a faint, brittle clashing. The great crabs down on the shore, where the body had gone, never seemed to sleep...

Amanda put her hands over her ears, but she could still seem to hear them restlessly clattering over the stones. She could picture them, too, stopping now and then to stand stock-still, their eyes alert and swivelling on their stalks, the enormous claws raised ready to seize anything that might fall from above...

She moved back into the cave, and lit a little clay lamp for company. Its tiny flame kept the darkness just at bay.

"It *wasn't* wrong..." she said, again. "He had no right... I'm a human being, not an animal... I want love and kindness—tenderness..."

She jumped to her feet and stood with her arms raised, both fists clenched, as though she hammered at something above her.

"Oh, God," cried Amanda. "Why me? Why me? Why out of all of them must it be *me*? I *won't* ... I *won't*... I refuse it. Do you hear? I *refuse*..."

She sank down again. Her lips trembled. The flame of the little lamp sparkled and then blurred as she let the tears come...

WHEN AMANDA VARK had first landed at the Melos settlement on Venus—and that was a time that now seemed infinitely further away than its measurement on the calendar—it had been in the expectation of an interesting, but uneventful assignment. In her concentration on the nature of the job itself, it had scarcely occurred to her that for eighteen months she would have to live as one of the residents of a pioneer settlement. But the fact that the place did have a life and mind of its own was made clear to them by the reserve with which the colony received them. The arrival of three men and two women who had nothing to do with prospecting, exploration or commerce, roused immediate suspicion. The fact that they introduced themselves as an anthropological expedition and were accredited as such, scarcely helped at all. For one thing, few of the residents had any idea what anthropology was, did, or might do, while those who believed that it somehow concerned the study of natives could only, in view of the non-existence of any human natives upon Venus, be disbelieved. The assumption, therefore, had quickly grown that they were some sort of inefficiently disguised government inquiry probably portending interference—and if there was one thing the colony felt solidly about, from the Administrator down to the visiting spacehand, it was interference.

Uncle Joe, as the eminent Dr. Thorer was known to his expedition's company, set himself patiently to disperse this cloud of misunderstanding. It was true, he agreed, that there were no human natives, but there were the griffas. From the scientific point of view these timid, silvery-furred little creatures were believed to be interesting. They were known to be intelligent and to live by some kind of

social system, and it was thought likely that but for man's arrival they would in time have risen to be the masters of Venus. The expectation was, therefore, that they would provide valuable material for the study of primitive sociology.

He made slow headway. The only colonial value placed on griffas resided in their silver pelts. It was not readily comprehensible that anyone should spend good money on an expedition just to find out how they lived. Nevertheless, as it became obvious that the party's did actually, if perplexingly, lie in these matters, suspicion began slowly to recede.

Gradually the men of the group came to be accepted, though still with reservation, but the position of the women was more difficult. The existence of two surnameless girls who had already established themselves in the colony did not make it any easier.

Maisie and Dorrie were a pair of those good-looking, well-built girls that inevitably turn up on frontiers. You could have found them with the forty-niners, or, at the right times, in Dawson City, Kimberley, or Coolgardie. It was Maisie's fancy to move with a feline languor in shiny, inappropriate, but indisputably popular frocks. Her genuine blonde hair she wore dressed to a masterly height. When she became vocal it was to thrum deeply rather than to speak, and to convey with it the impression of a Southern accent. Dorrie's line was vivacity. Her brown eyes gleamed in a lively face framed by dark curls. Her nose tilted up a little, and her mouth was red as a new wound. She chattered volubly, introducing, except in moments of stress, sounds that were vaguely continental.

The members of the colony knew where they were with them: with

Alice Felson and Amanda Vark they did not, so they waited to see.

IN THE matter of Alice it was not necessary to wait very long. At the age of twenty-nine she had already acquired two distinct reputations—one of them scholarly. To her work and to matters which interested her she brought an acutely analytical mind; when she was not working, she rested it thoroughly. The brilliance which exacted respect in academic circles moved right into the back seat. What took over would have been remarkable even in an uninhibited, poorly balanced seventeen-year-old; it seemed to know of no control but the accelerator. She lost practically no time in surrounding herself with an array of incipient crises very wearing to the nerves of a closed community.

But Amanda had remained problematical. There was a rumor that she was engaged to be married to someone back home on Earth. It was not true, but when she heard it, she felt it to have its uses, and refrained from denying it, so that the slight aloofness remained.

A month after her arrival she still had scarcely spoken to either of the other two girls. She was aware of them, and watched them with a naive admiration for their self-confidence. They made her feel terribly inexperienced and mousey by contrast in her plain shirt and trousers. Nor, she could see, were they unconscious of Alice and herself. They watched, too, and they noted, but out of a fund of experience they made no approach.

Things settled down like that. Amanda had plenty of work on her hands. She was by far the youngest of the party, and, as such, the natural recipient of much of the donkey work. But she was interested. It had not been easy at first to make sympathetic

contact with the griffas. Their naturally shy disposition had been greatly increased by the frontier tendency to shoot first and think afterwards—if at all. It took patience, perseverance, and numerous bars of chocolate to offset that result. Nevertheless, it was done, and she enjoyed helping to do it. She found them amusing and lovable little creatures, and with an intelligence so avid that the task became eminently worth while. Thus the party settled down to an assignment which seemed likely to prove for her, whatever it might be for Alice, unexciting. A matter of eighteen months (in Earth reckoning) of conscientious observation and note-taking, then the return home. No dream, no presentiment ever suggested to her that a time would come when she would be still on Venus living alone in a cave which she called her home—because there was no other home to go to...

AMANDA'S better acquaintance with Maisie and Dorrie arose from an incident which revealed that the life of the colony, even outside Alice's aura, was not always placid.

Markham Renarty had been seeing her back to her hut after the customary evening's relaxation at the Clubhouse. Markham had his points—there was no need of defensive tactics with him as there was likely to be with David Brice who was the youngest male member of the party—or as there certainly would have been with other self-suggested escorts. Markham was a family man. He was, indeed, well launched on one of his interminable and pointless anecdotes about his singularly boring wife and family back home on Earth, when a piercing scream brought them up standing.

As they realized which hut it must have come from, they began to run.

They set foot on the verandah just as the scream came again. The scene inside the hut required no explaining words. Dorrie, whose hut it was, stood pressed back against the further wall. Blood from a wound in her shoulder was trickling down one naked arm, and on the black satin bosom of her dress. Her visitor stood in the middle of the floor. He had a stained knife in his hand, and at the moment appeared to be trying to collect enough steadiness to approach her again. Amanda left him for Markham to deal with, and ran across to the girl. She was just in time to catch her as she folded up.

When Markham looked round from throwing out the drunk she was trying to staunch the wound with her handkerchief:

"Better get the doctor quickly. She's losing a lot," Amanda told him.

"The doc passed out cold an hour ago," he reminded her.

"Oh, God!" said Amanda. "Well, get the first-aid satchel from my hut, then—and hurry."

Dorrie opened her eyes.

"Is it bad?" she asked.

"It looks nastier and messier than it is. You'll be all right," Amanda told her, hoping that she sounded convincing. "Here, take a drink of this." And she held a cup to lips which now looked like a second gash. in the girl's white face.

"Pretty dim of me," Dorrie said. "Must be losing my touch. I can usually handle 'em okay." And she fainted again.

Markham came back with the first-aid case and began to fill a bowl with water.

"Do you know anything about this sort of job?" Amanda asked. "It's worse than I thought."

He shook his head. "Not a thing, I'm afraid."

Amanda compressed her lips, and

began to open the kit.

"Nor do I—but somebody's got to do something," she said, and set to work. "You'd better fetch her friend—if you can find her," she told him.

Maisie put in her appearance some ten minutes later. She said nothing, but sat down beside Amanda, watching, and handing things as necessary. When it was finished, they put Dorrie to bed.

Maisie looked at Amanda. She found a glass, and poured a stiff drink into it. Coming back, she put her arm round her.

"Good girl," she said. "Here, take a shot of this. You need it."

Amanda drank obediently. She choked a little on it—partly the strength of the spirit, but partly reaction.

"Sorry," she said. "I'm not the kind—I don't usually—" Then she burst soothingly into tears.

A look of gloomy purpose came into Maisie's eyes as her arm tightened round Amanda's shoulders.

"You just watch me blast the pants off that doc tomorrow," she said. "I'll get him so that he jitters at the sight of a bottle—even a coke."

FROM THE next day the colony had seemed to shift up and make room for Amanda. The two girls adopted an attitude towards her which varied between awe at her scholarship—which they appeared to regard as a cleverly developed though rather impractical form of higher guesswork—and a sense of responsibility towards her inexperience. Maisie particularly seemed to take this to heart. There were remarks which would make her frown.

"What troubles me, honey," she said once, "is your darned innocence. This ain't no location for it. Maybe you do genuinely forget that you're one quarter of the female population

here—but others don't. In a dump like this you gotta watch your step. Honest you have, all of the time. We *know*, don't we, Dorrie?"

"Sure," agreed Dorrie. "Kinda like juggling. You know those guys that keep a dozen balls in the air at once while they ride a bicycle on a wire? Well, that's it."

"I don't see—" Amanda began.

"That's just what's bitin' me. You don't see—but you will," Maisie told her. "Trouble is you've spent your life learning things, and there's a hell of a lot of difference between the things you learn and the things you just kinda get to know. But when you do see trouble beginning to come your way from some of the big irresistibles around here, then let us know. We can handle 'em."

Dorrie backed that up. With a confidence quite unimpaired by her recent lapse of skill, she added:

"Sure. You just tell us. We can fix 'em."

Amanda did not see a great deal of them, for their lives were busiest at times when hers was not, but she was glad to have earned their good will. It was a comforting thought, even if there appeared to be no likelihood of her having to call on them for aid. It needed the coming of the unbelievable disaster to draw them closer together for mutual support.

IN WHATEVER way the first news of the disaster had reached the Melos colony their faith in all they knew would have stopped them from believing it for a time. Some never did believe: a few minds refused to take it, and pitifully broke down. In the event, the news came in installments, building up to the incredible climax.

When first the radio men could raise no reply from Earth, it was simply inconvenient, and they were blamed for poor maintenance of their gear.

When the apparatus was found to be okay, the trouble was attributed to a radiation blanket which would pass in a while. When contact was made with the ship *Celestes* and her operator admitted that he too was unable to raise any of the Earth stations, it began to look more serious. But it was not until the *Astarte* which had put out from Venus a couple of weeks before reported that she would attempt to put about and return if possible—for lack of anywhere else to go—that it began to be unbelievable.

From that moment nobody talked of anything else—but they still did not really believe it. Even after the incoming *Diana* had grounded and her crew had told their story, one still hoped at heart that there had been some mistake, and a crowd still besieged the radio hut while, inside, the operators went on frenziedly trying to make contact with the Lunar Station, with the Port Gillington settlement on Mars, with ships in space, with anywhere that might answer with solid, reassuring news.

According to those on the *Diana* it had happened that there was a telescope turned back to Earth so that several of them had been able to watch the whole thing on the screen. One moment the Earth had been hanging in space, looking, as always, like a pearl with a cool, cloudy green shimmer; the next it resembled an over-ripe fruit that had split its skin, and the juice that burst from it was flame that stabbed thousands of miles into the darkness. There had been a few dazzling, awesome moments, and then it had begun to break into pieces. So rapid had been the disintegration that half an hour later the telescopes were unable to find more than a few measureable fragments. The *Diana's* crew could tell no more than that...

Everyone's recollection of the next

few days was hazy. Most of them were dazed and absent-minded. Some cursed steadily; others fell hopefully to praying for the first time in their lives. The majority chose the shortest road to illusion via the bar where they drank themselves comfortably stupid or into baseless but passionate arguments as to whether the disaster had been a natural phenomenon, a new weapon of war that had overreached itself, or the product of some atomic carelessness. To the rest, the actual cause seemed a matter of utterly unprofitable speculation. Whatever it had been, it could not possibly help anyone to know any more about it now....

A few more ships came in. Some corroborated the *Diana's* report. Others, looking out for a routine check of bearings, had found that where the Earth should have been there was nothing. The only additional information was that the moon was heading away into space and the planetary orbits were re-balancing themselves...

On the night after the *Diana* grounded, Amanda had gone out alone, still numbly incredulous. Looking up at the clouds eternally covering the Venusian sky she kept on telling herself that it could not be true. Whatever they were saying, the Earth must be somewhere up there still. Such a colossal catastrophe *could not* really happen....

Even later, when the other ships had added their evidence and she had to accept it, there was still a whisper somewhere which kept on saying: "It can't be real. A thing like that just *couldn't* happen. One day I'll wake up and find it's all there really—with things going on just as they always have."

It was a whisper which grew fainter and fainter, but it would never quite die away....

THE ADMINISTRATOR made some attempt to pull things together, but not with success. His authority had been behind him, not in him, and now he lacked weight. His efforts did little but set malcontents recalling earlier grudges, but he persisted.

Amanda spent hours of these unreal days in the company of Maisie and Dorrie, consuming endless cups of coffee and innumerable cigarettes. For some reason—possibly because there had never been any stable background to their lives—they seemed less effected than the rest, and their companionship steadied her. As Maisie said:

"It's the guys with the biggest plans that get knocked silliest. Dorrie and me have always gambled anyway; so what? While you're still breathin' life's gotta go on—they'll get round to that in a while."

Most other people Amanda avoided. She did not flock to the landing field with the rest when the few ships that had managed to make successful diversions came in to their final groundings. She was not even there when the last of all, the *U.S.S. Annabelle Lee*, made sanctuary on her last few pounds of fuel, bringing, among her crew, a young man named Michael Parbert...

ON THE afternoon of the day that somebody knifed the Administrator Maisie drifted into Amanda's hut. Amanda was working on some papers, but she pushed them aside and threw over a cigarette.

"What's the idea?" Maisie asked, as she lighted it. "That kind of stuff's no use to nobody no more."

"Uncle Joe's idea," Amanda explained. "He says that for all we know we're the only ones left anywhere, so it's up to us to make a record of all we know between us. Sort of encyclopaedia."

"Uh-huh. And who for?" Maisie wanted to know.

"Well, there *may* be others—and failing everything else he says that the griffas will be up to learning it one day. We've come a long way in five thousand years or so, he says, but we're only at the beginning really, so we ought to save what we can to help them along."

"Ought we?" said Maisie. "Looking at the funny way we've come, I'd say give the griffas or anything else a clean start—but then, I wouldn't know."

"Nor me," admitted Amanda, "—but it makes something to do." She changed the subject. "Who did it—the Administrator, I mean?"

Maisie inhaled, and blew the smoke out. She shook her head.

"I wouldn't know that, either. I might make a near guess, but what the hell? —If it wasn't one, it'd have been another. He had it coming, anyway. The thing is, it kinda writes off the old setup."

She sent another cloud of blue smoke thoughtfully across the room.

"Meaning—?" inquired Amanda.

Maisie leaned forward, and regarded her.

"Honey, I got a feeling things are going to break open around here. In a dump like this you gotta have a boss of some kind. A stuffed one was okay—with a government in back of him—but when the government's gone, and some guy's let out the rest of the stuffing—well, then you just naturally find some other guys getting big ideas. And the climate's likely to get kinda lively while they're deciding whose idea is the biggest."

"How lively?" Amanda asked.

Maisie shook her head.

"I'd like to know that, too. What isn't funny is having a lot of dopes around that are just about crazy on account of what's happened back

home. I know the poor devils can't help it—but that don't make it any healthier."

"I see," said Amanda.

Maisie looked doubtful.

"Maybe you do see: maybe you don't—quite. Trouble with educated gals is they keep seeing in one pocket, and understanding in another." She paused. Then she added: "You had a boy back home? One that you were set to marry, I mean—not just the kind a gal's gotta have for self-respect?"

Amanda hesitated.

"There *was* one..." she said, slowly. "But he didn't... Well, he was the only one I ever wanted—and when he chose somebody else, I wasn't interested in those things any more. So I got this job and came here."

THERE WAS a pause. Maisie said:

"It ain't natural, honey. You're a swell kid, you're young, you're pretty, you got it all."

"It's natural to me," said Amanda.

"In my experience," observed Maisie, "every gal is a one-man woman just so long—or so short."

"Except Alice?" suggested Amanda, attempting to deflect the conversation.

"*Not* excepting Alice. She's the so short part. Kinda concentrated while it lasts." Maisie ruminated a moment, and then reverted. "Well, I reckoned it'd be better for you to be expecting trouble when it comes. And when it does come, honey, take it from me the best thing is to—"

Amanda listened, impressed, to a sound, if unconventional, lecture in applied physiology. Her thanks at the end of it were as sincere as Maisie's intention. She had a grateful feeling in the sense of a friend at hand.

Nevertheless, the next few days

passed with less overt trouble than Maisie had led one to expect. No rival would-be leaders stood up to shoot it out, nor did any gang thrust an unsuitable chief into authority. The sensation of going to pieces continued quietly with an air of all round loosening up which it was no one's appointed business to check. Almost a whole week more passed before Amanda had her first personal encounter with trouble. It was when the latch of her hut door rattled one evening just as she was on the point of going to bed that it came.

"Who's there?" she called.

A thick voice that she could not place answered unintelligibly.

"Go away," she said. "This is the wrong hut."

But the man did not go away. She heard his feet shuffle, then something thudded against the door so that it bulged. There was a second thud, and it flew open as the bolt socket tore out. The man who stood in the door way was tall, burly, red-headed, and unsteady. She recognized him as one of the maintenance-shop crew.

"Get out of here, Badger," she said, firmly.

He swayed, and steadied himself by the doorpost.

"Now, now, 'Manda. 'S'not the way to speak to a visitor."

"Go on, Badger. Beat it," said Amanda.

"'S'not ladylike—'beat it'!" Badger reproved. He groped behind him for the door, and shut it. "Listen, 'Manda. You're a nische girl, you unnerstan' things. I got nothing now, all gone, nothing to live for any more. I wanna lose m'self."

"You'll have to go lose yourself some place else," Amanda told him, unfeelingly. "Get along now."

He stood approximately still, looking at her. Then his eyes narrowed,

and there was a displeasing grin on his lips.

"No, b'God! Why sh'd I go? C'm here."

Amanda did not move. She faced him steadily.

"Get out!" she said, again.

His grin widened.

"So you don't wanna play. Scared of me, huh." He began to advance, slowly and not very straightly.

Amanda was rather surprised to find herself very little scared of him. She stood her ground, carefully calculating the distance. When he was near enough, she let fly with all her strength, using her foot.

It was an unexpected, and, in Badger's view, highly dastardly form of attack. It was also successful. For the first time since his entrance she felt it safe to turn her back while she got her pistol. Then, to the groaning figure doubled up on the floor she said:

"Now will you get out! Go on!"

The answer was a moaned string of curses.

Amanda pressed the trigger and sent a bullet through the floorboards close beside his head.

"Go on. Beat it, quick," she repeated.

The sound of the shot sent a gleam of sense through Badger's befuddled discomfort. He dragged himself up and hobbled to the door. He paused with his hand on the post, as if considering some Parthian line, but the sight of the pistol discouraged it. He turned away into the darkness, and his picturesque mutterings faded out, to leave Amanda contemplating her own efficiency in the matter with some awe.

IT SEEMED as if that had been the sign for more things to move. The very next day Alice's present, a husky

young engineer, was neatly drilled through the head by, presumably, one of her pasts. It was a privation which rendered her almost inconsolable for two whole days. A night or two later an enterprising spaceman was shot while looting the general storehouse by somebody else with the same idea. The following evening a ridiculous but bloody knife fight broke out in the saloon over a sentimental record agreeable to some but intolerably nostalgic to others. A couple of nights after that, Amanda, kept awake by an unusually turbulent fracas, or maybe party, in Dorrie's hut, saw the silhouette of a man at work upon her window. She gave no warning, but reached under the pillow for the pistol. She did not know whether either of her shots hit the arm she aimed at, but, anyway, he left. Hurriedly. The following evening a ridiculous ham to put some bars across the windows. That evening a shot whizzed close to his head as he returned from seeing her home. The next morning she went to see Maisie about it.

"Okay. I'll get my grapevine humming," Maisie promised.

Three hours later she came around to Amanda's hut.

"It's that red-headed dope, Badger," she said. "You've got him kind of sore at you, honey. He's been telling his buddies you're gonna be his girl. The idea seems to be that if he scares everyone else off, you'll just take kindly to him sooner or later, out of lonesomeness."

"Oh, is it?" said Amanda. "Well, what do I do about that?"

Maisie considered.

"That Badger's one-tracked—and just kinda naturally stupid. Trouble is he's got quite a pull over that gang of his—so I guess they must be a grade more stupid. If I was you I'd let it ride awhile till things settle

down. It could be it'll just work off."

And Amanda, with no better suggestion of her own, agreed reluctantly.

It was about that time that she began to be aware that Michael Parbert, of the *Annabelle Lee*, seemed to be a member of every group she sat with in the Clubhouse. Sedulously she took no more notice of him than of any of the others. It was impossible not to know that he was a personable young man—but so were a number of others. She began to understand Dorrie's words on juggling and tight-wires. There was a feeling that everyone was just waiting for her to fumble or slip. It needed immense concentration to show no suggestion of partiality. It even drove her to staying away from the Clubhouse some evenings, to ease the strain by sitting in her hut in resentful solitude.

SOME THREE uneasy weeks later Maisie came around to Amanda's hut again.

"Big fight last night," she observed, as she lit her cigarette.

"Oh," said Amanda. She was not greatly interested. There seemed to be fights big or small most nights lately.

"Yeh. That Badger got beaten up," Maisie added.

Amanda looked up from the shirt she was mending.

"Badger! Who was it?"

"Michael. He had Badger out cold at the end, they tell me." She paused. Amanda said nothing. She went on: "You wouldn't want to know what it was all about?"

"No," said Amanda.

Maisie flicked her ash thoughtfully on to the floor.

"Listen, honey. You gotta face it. What're you gonna do?"

It was no good pretending not to understand Maisie. Amanda had learned that. She said:

"Nothing. Why should I?"

Maisie shook her head.

"You gotta do something."

"I don't see why."

"Now, don't act dumb with me, honey. You gotta pick yourself a boy-friend."

Maisie looked at her.

"Say, who do you think you are? There's all these guys lined up—all the men that are left now—all you gotta do is point at one an' say 'I'll have that dope there', an' he'll come runnin'. Sakes alive, what more do you want? It's all on a dish—and you don't even have to find a local Reno if he pans out bad."

"No," said Amanda. "I told you I only ever wanted one guy—I mean, man."

"But listen. Things are all different. From now on you gotta *live* here—we all have. That's not the same as just stayin' awhile—an' it's no good foolin' yourself that it is. You gotta quit playing the old act before it flops hard. You can't go on being the little mascot any more. An' if you keep on trying it, you'll be causing more trouble around here than that Alice. Maybe it's nice for you to sit there like a pretty little honey-pot with the lid tight on—I wouldn't know; I never been that way—but it's just hell and temptation for a lot of these guys. An' you can't blame 'em for that; it's human nature."

"*Human* nature?" said Amanda, scornfully.

"Sure. What else? You gotta make up your mind. You gotta team up, so's they can see the way things are. Just so long as you keep dangling around like a forbidden fruit we ain't goin' to have no kind of peace in this dump—an' that's a fact. Now what about this Michael, honey?"

"No," said Amanda.

"Why not? I say he's a good guy. I

oughta know; I seen plenty of the other kind. An' anyone who can lay out that Badger has got what it takes."

"No," said Amanda.

"Now, listen, honey—"

"No, no, no!" said Amanda, violently. "*No!* Do you hear? I won't be the purse in a slugger's prize fight. And I'm certainly not going to run to the big strong victor for protection. It's disgusting to be fought over as if I were a—a—a she-buffalo, or something. No!"

But Maisie was patient and persistent.

"Things are getting kinda primitive here," she said. "You ought to know the sort of thing that means, seein' it's your own subject. In a set-up that's goin' that way a girl's got two lines open: either she plays 'em along, the way Dorrie an' I do—an' I reckon you just ain't got the temperament—or she takes up with a guy who can put the fear of God into the rest of 'em. You think it over, honey, an' you'll see. You can get yourself a good guy to look after you, an' have cute babies, an' all that... It could be swell..."

"If you're so fond of babies—" Amanda began, and then stopped suddenly. "I'm sorry, Maisie."

"That's all right, 'Manda, dear. That's the way life is, an' I gotta take it... But *you* haven't, honey-lamb. So just think it over..."

"No!" said Amanda, and shook her head.

Nevertheless, she did spend a considerable part of her time thinking it over. There was no dodging it any more. She became increasingly aware of the tension around her as she sat in the Clubhouse, the way the men looked at her—and at one another. There were more fights; sometimes between surprisingly unexpected per-

sons. She grew nervous and self-conscious, unable to speak naturally to any of them for fear of what a careless word might provoke.

Even Uncle Joe felt himself moved to give her advice—and though its form was more classical, it was too much the same effect as Maisie's.

The feeling of pressure building up made Amanda restless and edgy, but it also increased her obstinacy.

"No!" she repeated to herself. "*I won't...* I won't be driven at one of them. I'm me; my own self. They shan't make me *belong* to one of them. Never...never... Damn them, all of them..."

BUT RESISTANCE did not diminish the pressure. The climax came when she wakened to hear a shot just outside her hut. Exactly what happened she never found out. To her ears it sounded like a private fight which the intervention of other parties turned into a brisk skirmish. In the course of it at least two bullets slammed in through the hut's wooden wall, and out the other side. Amanda stayed in bed, having her mind made up for her. When the sounds of battle died away, she had reached her decision.

The next day she managed to slip off unnoticed into the forest to make contact with the griffas. The little creatures welcomed her. Since the disaster they had been neglected, for the classes to which they had come so eagerly, both for instruction and candy, had been discontinued.

It was difficult to know how much they grasped of the situation, but they seemed clear enough on two essentials—secrecy, and willingness to act as porters for payment in chocolate. They were able to come and go without causing comment, and for a week they did so, carrying away into the forest parcels suitable to their size.

On the final day Maisie came in again. She put up all the old arguments, and ended:

"Honey, I know this isn't your kind of life. They way I see you is in an old cottage somewhere in your England—a place with a garden, an' you in a print frock, an' a big hat, an' so on— But, hell, kid, it just ain't there any more. You gotta face it..."

"No!" said Amanda.

It had been hard not to say good-bye to Maisie, but she resisted the temptation. There were tears in her eyes as she watched the tall figure in its ridiculous shiny dress sway lazily away.

In the evening she wrote a note for Maisie. Then she strapped up her pack, fixed the holster on her belt, and put the rifle to hand. After she had turned out the light, she sat waiting, watching the uncurtained window.

The fuse took longer than she had calculated. Then, just as she was deciding that something must have gone wrong there came a felty thump, and in a few seconds flames burst from the windows of an empty hut a hundred and fifty yards away. There were shouts and sounds of running feet, against the flames she could see dark figures dodging excitedly about. When she was satisfied that the blaze had attracted the attention of all who chanced not to be paralytically drunk she opened her door and slipped quietly away through the darkness towards the forest.

THE THING that saved both Amanda's resolution and her reason was that the griffas did not abandon her during her months in the cave. Even when all the chocolate was gone their insatiable curiosity still brought them up from the forest to examine, observe, and ask endless

questions until she found herself holding classes again. Long ago she had ceased to use even the little she had been able to learn of their language, and now they, too, seemed to be in the process of dropping it. Frequently she would hear them talking between themselves in their odd, fluty form of English—the more curious for its being learned from the *Works of William Shakespeare* and the *Oxford Book of English Verse*, which were Amanda's only books.

Nor was it a one-sided arrangement. By way of payment they kept her supplied with fruits, vegetables and edible roots, teaching her to live off the land in a way that she could never have taught herself.

Nearly six months passed before she had any news of the settlement, then one of the griffas surprised her by producing a packet of paper tied round with a string. She opened it to find a number of sheets written in a large, unpractised hand, with the signature 'Maisie' at the end.

From them she learned that the colony, after passing through a crisis, had now become more orderly. At the worst time Badger had acquired a following which threatened to dominate the whole place unless it were suppressed. Accordingly, it had been suppressed, and Uncle Joe had been elected president, chief, or whatever you liked to call it. After that Badger had disappeared. The radio operator had picked up distorted sounds on the Mars wavelength to show that somebody there was alive still, at least. Alice had disappeared, and alone. This was so improbable, that everyone feared the worst. She had been moody for a couple of days, and then vanished. No one had seen her go, she seemed to have taken nothing with her, and after two months there was still no sign of her. Dorrie had been dangerously ill, but was now

almost recovered. She was bitterly disappointed, though; apparently she had always wanted a baby, though nobody had guessed it, and now there was no more chance of it. Finally, what about Amanda coming back?

The implication was not lost on Amanda. She was now the very last hope. It was another bit of pressure to nag at her.

"No!" said Amanda. "I won't—I *won't*. They can't force me."

She wrote a brief reply on the back of one of the sheets, used the rest for lighting her fire, and decided to forget it.

FOR A DAY before he arrived Amanda had known from the griffas that there was a man coming her way. It did not greatly surprise her. Sooner or later someone would be bound to find out where she was. She had not known that it was Badger until she saw him through the glasses. Nor did she know how he had found her. She suspected that he must have caught and tortured a griffa till it told him. If so, he had got what he deserved. He'd torture no more griffas now.

After a day or two the shooting worried her less. If a soldier could claim a clear conscience in defending his country and his womenfolk, how could hers be the worse for defending herself?

Her life went on as before, for if one thing was certain, it was that Badger would not have passed on the details of his ill-gotten bit of information.

Yet, a few weeks later, the griffas brought her the news of another man working that way.

Once more she took her rifle and concealed herself in the same spot. As before she watched a distant fig-

ure come out of the trees. Through the glasses she saw that it was Michael Parbert—the 'good guy' that Maisie had wanted her to choose. She lowered the glasses, with a frown. The situation would have been easier had it been one of Badger's gang. She hesitated a moment, and then called to one of the griffas. A few minutes later she watched the little creature make a detour and then go scuttling down the hillside. As it got nearer to the man it raised its arms, and she knew that it was calling to him. Through the glasses, she watched them meet. She could see it giving him her warning, and telling him to go back, but he made no move to do so. For a moment he appeared to dispute. The griffa reached up and took hold of his pants, dragging back the way he had come. He did not move, but stood looking up the hill. Then he shook the griffa off with an impatient movement, and started to climb.

Amanda's frown returned.

"Very well, then," she said grimly. And she reached for her rifle...

Later on, she slung the coil of rope over her shoulder, and set off down the slope with a purposeful step. What she had done before, she was prepared to do again. But when she got there he was not dead. He lay on the pale, matted grassy stuff, with the blood slowly oozing and caking round his two wounds. He was light-headed, and crying like a child. She had never seen a man cry before. Her heart turned over, and she went down on her knees beside him.

"Oh, God," said Amanda, with tears in her own eyes. "What have I done...? What have I done...?"

FOR SEVERAL days it remained anybody's guess what Amanda had done, but then, though he was

very weak, he began unmistakably to get better.

Amanda, with a dozen or so griffas assisting, had carried him up to the cave. She had made him the most comfortable bed she could contrive with a mattress of springy twigs. And there he lay, delirious at first, then resting most of the time with his eyes shut. He made no complaints when she moved him to dress his wounds, and at first he was too exhausted to talk much. Occasionally she would see that his eyes were open, and that he had been watching her as she moved about the cave. Once he asked:

"Somebody shot me?"

"Yes," Amanda told him.

"Was it you?"

"Yes," she said, again.

"You're a bad shot. Why didn't you leave me there?"

"I don't know."

"Going to shoot me again when you've patched me up?"

"Go to sleep now, and stop asking silly questions," Amanda told him.

"I've got a letter for you. It's in my jacket—right hand pocket."

She found it, and pulled it out. It was queer to see an envelope again, and with 'Miss Amanda Vark' neatly written on it.

"Uncle Joe?" she asked.

He nodded. She tore it open. There were several sheets, and they started somewhat heavily. Dr. Thorer was prone to be a little pompous on paper:

My Dear Amanda,

This letter will not be easy for me to write, nor, perhaps, for you to read, yet I beg you to read it carefully and to consider its contents with the honesty which you would give to any social problem in your work...

Amanda read steadily on, with an

expression which revealed nothing of her feelings to Michael as he watched her. When she had finished it, she went to the cave mouth. She sat there for some minutes, unmoving, and gazing out across the sea. Then she picked up the letter, and read the last few lines again:

...It may be that elsewhere in the system some of us will survive, but we do not know that, nor are we likely ever to know. What we do know is that here it is you, my dear, who hold the keys of life and death. Why it should be to you that this wonderful and terrible thing has happened we shall also never know. But there is the chance that you might have daughters... You, and you alone, are vas vitae, the vessel of our life. Are you content that this shall be the end of it all? Can you carry such a burden on your mind? For you, Amanda, here, at least, are—Eve.

When she looked up she saw that Michael was still watching her.

"Do you know what this is?" she asked.

He nodded. "You did, too, even before you opened it," he said.

Amanda turned and looked over the sea again. Her fists were clenched.

"Why me...? Why me...? Am I an animal—a brood mare? I won't, I tell you! My life is *mine*—it doesn't belong to any of you. I *won't*...!"

She crumpled up the letter and threw it into the small fire before the cave. It curled, singed, and then caught.

"See! You can tell him. You can tell all of them when you go back."

And she ran away out of the cave.

CONVALESCENCE was slow. To begin with he tired quickly. In

the evening the feebleness of the clay lamps left them with nothing to do but talk. He could, she found, do plenty of that, and she herself had some months of arrears to make up. Their conversations rambled in every direction, skirting only the present situation—though it was not always easy to do that. It was difficult when they spoke of laughter, crowds, children, not to stop short suddenly, remembering that these things would never be again...

But it was natural that most of the talk should be retrospective, and it could often be so without being altogether saddening. Talking of places made them live again—for a time. Amanda found herself growing familiar with Massachusetts Avenue, and the Common, with Brattle Street, and the Halls and elms of Harvard. She had all the best shops in Boston marked down, and could have found her way to Aunt Mary's house in Back Bay, if necessary. In return she toured him around the colleges of Oxford, took him for a summer evening in a punt on the river, and showed him the sunrise from Magdalen College tower....

The griffas continued to come for lessons, and as Michael grew stronger he, too, became a teacher. He made types of simple tools for them to copy; he showed them how to fish with both net and rod; made them a potter's wheel, and a simple loom. It amused Amanda to look across and see him working with a serious expression, while the little creatures clustered about him no less intently, rather like—children. She knew that he was enjoying it, and for some reason it pleased her to see that he got on better with them than had the less practical men of her own party...

When he first began to get about

again she had formed the habit of keeping her pistol handy at night. It occurred to her that he had not once treated her as he might not have treated a younger brother, nor did he show the least sign of changing that attitude. In fact it would have seemed more normal if... But, anyway, you never could tell. She did not know that he had noticed the pistol until one night she turned round from tucking it into its place, and saw him looking at her. He was smiling. It was not an attractive kind of smile, because it turned the corners of his mouth down instead of up. He shook his head.

"You needn't bother with that thing. You're perfectly safe, you know. I'm kind of particular—allergic, you might say, to girls that shoot at me from cover. Sort of funny that way: just naturally got no interest in homicides, I guess."

"Oh," said Amanda, flatly. It didn't seem the kind of thing you could follow up.

ON A DAY which had begun like any other day he laid aside his breakfast bowl, and told her without warning:

"I'm okay now, near enough, so I'll be moving along."

Something hurt suddenly, and quite unexpectedly in Amanda's chest.

"You—you don't mean you're going?" she said.

"Yes. I can make it now—easy stages."

"But not today?"

"Looks a perfectly good day to me."

"But—"

"But what?"

"I—I don't know... Are you sure you're well enough yet?"

"Near ninety per cent, anyway. If I get stuck, one of the griffas can

fetch someone to pick me up."

"Yes, only—well, it's so unexpected, that's all."

"Why? What *did* you expect?"

Amanda looked at him confusedly. She had been to some trouble to prevent herself forming definite expectations of any kind.

"I—I don't know... I suppose it's goodbye, then?"

"That's it. Goodbye—and thank you for changing your mind."

"Changing—? But if you know I've—" she began. Then she stopped. "What do you mean?" she asked awkwardly.

"About killing me. What else?"

"Oh," said Amanda. "Oh, that."

As if in a dream she watched him put on his pack, still with the hole where one of her bullets had torn it. Her knuckles were white. As he picked up his rifle she made an uncertain movement, and then checked it.

"Goodbye," he said again.

"Goodbye," said Amanda, and damned her voice for sounding queer.

He went out of the cave. Half a minute later she followed round the shoulder of the hill to a point where she could watch him go. A party of griffas emerged from the trees to join him, and he strode on into the forest amongst them. He did not give one backward glance...

The whole landscape blurred before Amanda's eyes.

AFTER HE had gone, the cave should have reverted to what it was before he came. Logically, when one had got rid of the loom and all the other innovations by parking them in a smaller cave nearby, one was back to normal—only there was evidently something wrong with logic. Things did not automatically return

to their former placid order. Amanda found herself restless. Conversation with none but the griffas irked her. She grew short-tempered with them, to their dismay and bewilderment, and then was contrite over her burst of impatience—only to find herself behaving in the same way again five minutes later.

More than ever was she aware of the alienness of the things about her. When one was alone they seemed to press more closely. She became aware of that loneliness and the quiet as she had never been before. The days lacked purpose. She seemed incapable of getting back into the old routine by day, and by night the cave was too quiet. If she woke in the darkness she missed the reassuring sound of his slow, steady breathing. Instead, the only thing to be heard was the distant scrape and stir of the crabs down on the shore....

For the first time she began to have misgivings about her own strength. It was no longer simple to be detached. In her more honest moments she knew that something was happening to her resolution—but it was happening too late. Some weeks ago she could have heeded Uncle Joe's letter. She could have returned to the settlement and made her choice, with her pride saved by his appeal. But now—how could she go back now? After he had walked away from her—without once looking back....

She swayed between moods of loneliness and determination, misery, and bitter resolve. Yet she knew that the resolve was weakening. She would never again have the confidence which had coldly trained her rifle on the approaching Badger. She wondered what steps she would take when the griffas next warned her of someone's approach...and then left it to be decided at the time.

IN THE event, it was a decision she did not have to make, for there was no warning. Early on a day about a month after Michael had left she heard the griffas arriving as usual for their lesson, but among the pattering of their feet she detected another step. She pulled the pistol from her belt, and pointed it at the entrance. A figure, huge among its little escort, came to a stop in the cave mouth. Amanda's heart leaped once, and then sank. Against the light she could not see who it was; but she knew who it was not... The figure stood still a moment, then it said slowly, on a reproving note:

"Would you mind putting that thing down, honeylamb. It looks kinda nervous to me."

Amanda lowered the pistol, and stared at Maisie as she came in. Something seemed to give way and pour up inside her. She ran forward and clung. Maisie put up both arms and held her.

"There, there, Honey," she soothed her. It was all either of them said for quite a little time.

"How did you get here?" Amanda asked.

She had recovered, and hospitably brought out baskets of sweet shoots, and flat-cakes made from root flour.

"It wasn't so much the getting, as the getting to get," Maisie explained. "I'd have been here long before, but if there is one thing that those griffas have a thorough hold on, it's the meaning of the word 'secret'. I've been trying for months to persuade or bribe 'em. But it's kinda difficult with griffas, you know: now, if it had been men— Anyway, here I am—and three days of steady going it's taken me."

Amanda regarded her with admiring gratitude. Forest travel was not an activity one associated with Mai-

sie, any more than one associated her with the practical suit she now wore. She said:

"Why have you come, Maisie?"

"Well, honey, I wanted to see you. An', for another thing, I reckoned that anyone else who came would likely get shot. It's said to be sort of rough in these parts."

"Then—then he did get back all right?"

"Yeh," said Maisie. She did not amplify, but began a hunt in the pockets of her jacket and trousers. "I got a message for you some place."

"Yes...?" Amanda leaned forward, eagerly.

"Sure. Now where the hell would I have put it? This ain't my kind of outfit, you know," she complained. "Oh, here it is." She smoothed out the envelope. "From Uncle Joe," she added, handing it over.

"Oh..." said Amanda, flatly.

She took it. She opened it with reluctance, for she was sure what it would say. She was perfectly right.

"No!" she said, again, crumpling it up. "No!" But the negative lacked something of its old force—and there was another quality about it, too.

"That's all?" she asked.

"What else would there be?"

"I wondered... I don't know..."

Suddenly Amanda was crying.

Maisie took her hand.

"Now, honey, you don't want to get that way. You've been too long alone here. Snap out of it now, and come along back with me."

"But—but I can't—not now," sobbed Amanda. "He doesn't want me. He—he never looked back, not once. He s-said he h-hated girls that shoot from cover."

"Nonsense," Maisie told her, briskly. "Every smart girl always shoots from cover. So you've fallen for this guy, have you?"

"Y-yes," wept Amanda.

"Huh," said Maisie, "then I reckon that fixes it."

She got up and went to the entrance.

A minute later another step outside the cave made Amanda look up suddenly.

"It's—it's—Oh, Maisie, you've been cheating!"

"Me, honey? Never on your life. It's just what they call a forcing bid, maybe," Maisie said, and she drifted out of the cave as Michael walked in.

AN HOUR later she returned, with a heavy footfall.

"Long enough, you two," she said. "I got the whoozies watching those darned crabs down there. Good place to be checking out of."

Amanda, sitting close beside Michael, looked up.

"Not yet," she said, "we're going

to have a—a kind of honeymoon first."

"Huh. Well, every gal to her taste—but I'd lay off any idea of beach parties around here. If you mean it, I'll be getting along—and I'll see about fixing a hut ready for you. *And* I'll tell Uncle Joe you've decided to take his advice—he'll be kinda tickled."

"No!" said Amanda, with all her old decision. "I'm *not* taking his advice. *This* hasn't got anything at all to do with duty to community, or to posterity, or to history, or to moral obligations, or the racial urge to survive—or with anything but *me*. I'm doing it because I *want* to do it."

"Uh-huh," said Maisie, peaceably. "Well, it's your affair, so you should know, honey. Still, it wouldn't surprise me one little bit to hear that the other Eve once said just that selfsame thing..."

THE END
