

Science Fiction QUARTERLY

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MAGAZINE

THE EYE IN THE WINDOW

by SAM MERWIN Jr.

**THE SEDULOUS
APES**

by DENNIS WIEGAND

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This was the most natural-looking costume that Joe had ever seen.



A girl with an accent that eluded a trained linguist; a man whose "red devil" costume looked a little too realistic; a snooper for senatorial investigations who uncovered the greatest alien machinations ever — Joe Maturelli found himself in the middle and found he'd taken on responsibilities he'd never dreamed existed!

THE EYE IN THE WINDOW

FEATURED NOVEL

Of Tomorrow's Intrigue

by **Sam Merwin, Jr.**

illustrated by **KELLY FREAS**

THE SECOND thing Joe Maturelli noticed about Canada Potts was her voice. As a young man who had spent a major portion of his thirty-three years embellishing a native talent for languages—he spoke seven fluently, had a working knowledge of five more—Joe found himself puzzled by her accent. He had never heard anything quite like it before.

The variations from conventional American or British Isles English dialect were not obvious. To a less

acute ear her, "I would like to see Miss Wyndham. I have a complaint to register," might have passed for well-bred young-woman speech—perhaps with a trace of accent retained from a Norse governess. But to Joe it was definitely alien.

The first thing Joe had noticed about Miss Potts was her looks; she was definitely what a certain type of Britisher calls a "smasher". She was tall for a girl but eminently well proportioned—delightfully ample where

girls ought to be ample, delightfully slim where they ought to be slim. Her garb was expensively simple and her face combined spirit, intelligence and sensuality in a blend that, coupled with her figure, offered challenge to any man.

Wondering what combination of ethnics had bred this beauty, Joe replied "I'm afraid, Miss Potts, that Miss Wyndham is out of town until tomorrow. Is there anything I can do?"

She studied him briefly, then said, "I hope so—I've come to report a Peeping Tom and request that you have him stopped. It is most embarrassing." There was no trace of embarrassment in her speech or manner.

Joe indulged in some mental hand-rubbing. So Nesi Wyndham was keeping from him the knowledge that a dish—no, a full nine-course banquet—like Canada Potts, rented from the Wyndham Realty Corporation! It suggested to him that perhaps Nesi cared a little more about him than she had permitted him to know in years.

He said "If you'll just tell me where you live, and where this Peeping Tom is operating. . . ?"

She said, "I live at 500 East 62nd Street. This—spy—is operating from a first-floor apartment across the street. The number is 503."

"Just a moment, please," said Joe; "excuse me." He had to cross in front of Miss Potts to get at the files. Five hundred East 62nd Street was not a familiar property. And, as he passed close to his lovely client, he noticed a third thing about her.

Her face, beneath its light coating of powder, was covered with a fine layer of sweat. This was almost as puzzling as her accent, for the weather outside was autumn-cool; and neither by deep breathing nor by disarrayed grooming did Miss Potts show any signs of having been running. Actually, in a blue Irish-linen suit, she was dressed lightly for the day.

That Joe did not know the 500 house was not in itself remarkable; the Wyndham Estate in Manhattan was almost as far-flung as that of Vincent Astor. In his scant year of employment as Nesi Wyndham's realty assistant, Joe was well aware that he had absorbed mentally only a fraction of her complex inheritance. Furthermore, Nesi had an annoying way of keeping a lot of the reins in her own hands exclusively.

This minor mystery was explained when he found the file card in the "wholly rented" category. Apparently it had held no vacancies for a number of years. He said, for something to say, "Have you been living there long, Miss Potts?"

She made an odd graceful-awkward gesture, said, "Not long—a mere five months. I have a job with the U. N."

If she had moved in so recently, he thought, he ought to know about her—but he didn't. He decided again that Nesi was doing her best to keep him segregated from such as Miss Potts and his male ego expanded accordingly. He said, "Very well. Miss Potts. Suppose I go up there with you now and see what the situation is. Then I can call in the police to deal with it."

"Not the police," she told him firmly but quietly. "My job requires the greatest discretion. I'm afraid I shall have to ask you to deal with this—trouble-maker—on a more personal level."

"Could he really be a spy?" Joe asked. Then, at the scorn of her look, "I mean, with your job at the U. N. demanding discretion and all, I thought. . ."

"It's hardly likely," she told him. "Come along, then; I have a cab waiting outside."

Joe turned over the office to an aide, put on his hat, and went out with Miss Potts. She sat in her corner of the cab, refusing a cigaret and all conversational gambits. Yet, once or twice, he

received a definite impression that she was studying him covertly, almost hungrily, during the six-block ride from office to apartment. He wondered what the hell, decided Miss Potts was a definite oddball.

FIVE HUNDRED East 62nd Street proved to be a trim glass-brick and gleaming metal building, no larger than a fair-sized millionaire's mansion of pre-Depression vintage. It featured big picture windows and, from its east front, overlooked the River Drive. It was only four stories high. Joe wondered how it could possibly show a profit, decided it must be some special pet project of Nesi's.

He paid off the cabby and followed Miss Potts through a heavy modern bronze front door. Inside, the foyer was more like that of a private dwelling than of an apartment house. It featured soft grey carpeting, warm indirect lighting, casual and costly furniture. He noticed that Miss Potts was still perspiring gently.

He said, "I think I ought to talk to the super first, if you don't mind, Miss Potts." He wondered how she had ever come by such a sorely undescriptive surname.

She shrugged her shoulders. an act that did interesting things to the rest of her, and said, "Very well, if that's the proper form; but Bill doesn't know anything. I'll await you in my apartment." She moved toward a closed door to their right, which bore the single gilt initial *A*.

He finally found the superintendent in the basement, stretched out on someone's discarded chaise lounge with his hands folded behind the nape of his neck, listening to Polish music on a small radio. His name, it developed, was Bill Matchek, and he looked vaguely like Bull Montana of the old silent movies.

It didn't take two interchanges of dialogue for Joe to discover that he had

misunderstood Miss Potts' remark about Bill's not knowing anything. Joe had taken it to mean that the superintendent was unacquainted with the problem of the Peeping Tom. Now, it became evident, Bill knew nothing about anything; he was, thought Joe, the stupidest human being he had ever met—and he had met some prize examples in the course of his thirty-three years.

He discovered that even the basement had a picture window, which looked out on the street. Its view was marred by the fact that much of it was below sidewalk level, was further marred by protective bars. He peered through it at Number 503 across the street. Overhead he could hear Miss Potts or somebody moving around.

"You work for Miss Wyndham?" the superintendent asked, eyeing him with overt suspicion.

"I do," replied Joe for the third time. He produced his business-identification cards from an alligator-skin billfold and offered them for Matchek's inspection. The superintendent studied them with a painful scowl, rubbing a near-shaven head with his free hand. Finally he handed them back.

"I guess you're okay," he said. "What do you want?"

"Tell you when I find out more about it," Joe told him. This equivocal reply seemed to satisfy Matchek, who relapsed onto his couch. He turned up the volume on a polka as Joe got out of there.

As Joe emerged from the basement, the door of Apartment *A* opened; a man came out and walked across the soft grey carpeting toward the handsome bronze-doored elevator at the rear of the foyer. At least, Joe *thought* it was a man.

Three o'clock in the afternoon was an odd hour to be dressed for a masquerade ball; and television performers, as far as Joe knew, got into and out of costume in studio dressing

rooms. Yet this man was clad in a bright-red devil's costume, over which he wore a pair of pale pongee shorts. His tail protruded from a slit in the rear and was coiled gracefully about his left wrist. This detail reminded Joe inevitably of Stephen Vincent Benet's story about the King of the Cats.

As this somewhat flamboyant character brushed past him, Joe noted that, outside of the absurd shorts, the costume was remarkably well-made. It was impossible to tell, even at a distance of less than one foot, where the costume ended around the head and the face began. He might have decided the stranger wore a mask—except that, as he went by, his satanic countenance crinkled in an apologetic smile and he murmured, "Excuse me."

His eyes, while mild in expression, were red as rubies.

Joe decided, as he stared at the quietly-closing elevator doors, that the masquerade must have occurred the night before, and that, in view of the bright red eyes, he was gazing at the great granddaddy of all hangovers. *Poor devil!* he thought.

He decided to say nothing at all about it to Miss Potts.

She called a, "Come in," to his knock; the door was unbolted.

SHE WAS standing to one side of the picture window in her living room, concealed by gay cream-colored drapes adorned with gilded unicorns, blue griffons and crimson dragons in gay profusion. She beckoned to Joe and said, "Come over here and see for yourself."

He marveled anew at the charming amplitude of her figure in all the right places; and saw, as he took up a position beside her, that she was still sweating. It occurred to him that, if she had been out with the hungover Beelzebub he had just seen leaving her apartment, she must have a hangover, too—which would explain her extraordinary per-

spiration. A pang of jealousy assailed him as he inhaled the dry allure of the expensive scent she favored. Either its odor blanketed the perspiration, or the perspiration itself was odorless.

She said, "*There!* Do you see?"—He forced his mind back to business.

Number 503 did not feature picture windows. It was a reclaimed tenement building whose reclamation seemed to consist chiefly of a new and lurid coat of yellow paint. Fire escapes cascaded down its bilious facade like pigeon droppings down the statue of General Sherman in the Plaza.

Joe's gaze followed the direction of an elegantly manicured Potts forefinger toward a ground-floor window directly opposite. At first glance, it appeared facelessly dark and he had to squint to make out what this disturbing young woman wished him to see. A pair of dirty lace curtains across the way did nothing to help him.

Finally, however, he was able to make out a pair of small circles which appeared to rest almost side-by-side on the window sill. He peered twice more to make sure, then withdrew and retired to the depths of the living room. He said, "You must have remarkably good eyesight, Miss Potts. Not one person in a thousand could have spotted them."

"You saw, then?" she asked, turning to face him expectantly.

"I saw what looks like a pair of fieldglasses aimed at this building," he told her. He lit a cigaret, offered her one, which was refused, and added, "I still think the wisest move would be to let the police handle it."

"That is out of the question," was the prompt reply in Miss Potts' elusive accent. *Finnish?* he wondered. *No, too drawled, and with improper diphthongs. Perhaps some obscure Eastern European local dialect.* Joe felt like a devout cryptographer, confronted with some new and unfamiliar code; he would not

rest easy until he had solved it. Yet it would spoil the game to ask.

"In that case," he told her. "I'll have to consult Nesi—Miss Wyndham. She'll have to decide what to do." After all, he knew nothing whatever about these people. They might be under some sort of investigation—and he had no desire to get snarled up in anything of that nature. Certainly they were eccentric enough, Matchek included.

Miss Potts looked troubled—even angry. She said, "But I want action directly. And if Miss Wyndham is out of town until tomorrow..."

Joe took pity on her—she was scarcely a creature with whom he could enjoy being obdurate. *And what was that accent—Lombard?* No. He said, "Miss Wyndham won't be in the office until tomorrow. Actually, she'll be back in town sometime late this afternoon or tonight; I'll see if I can't get hold of her about this."

"If you will be so kind," was the reply. "I am very distressed that such a thing should happen at all."

Joe suppressed barely in time a, "By this time you ought to be used to it, honeychile." He said, "Well, that's the best I can do," and wished Miss Potts would drop her hauteur. It simply didn't go with the sensuality of her lip-and-nostril pattern.

Without warning, she dropped it. Joe felt her arms slip under his, felt himself pulled close against that magnificent female figure. Soft lips met his full on and seemed to devour them and other interesting things began to happen with appalling suddenness.

For a moment, he was much too startled to respond. The transition was too abrupt, too violent, too complete. And then he managed to murmur, "Miss Potts—Canada—*darling!*"—and got into the fight.

HE DID NOT hear the door behind him open, but he did hear it slam shut. Startled, he pulled half-free of

the suddenly and somewhat overwhelmingly amorous Miss Potts and looked around. There was nothing to see but the room, no one visible but himself and Miss Potts. Joe decided someone must have looked in, seen them and beat a hurried retreat. He hoped, fugitively, that it wasn't the hungover man in the red devil suit. That one seemed to have enough to trouble him, if his red eyes were a true index, without finding his girl in another man's arms moments after leaving her himself.

Abruptly, however, Miss Potts pulled free of him. She said, over his shoulder, something in a language utterly unlike any he had ever heard before. It sounded, to his appalled ears, like duck-talk with a vaguely English accent. Usually, he could pick out word patterns, even in totally alien tongues; but this seemed to rely more on intonation, like certain of the Chinese dialects, than on words. It was strangely musical—musical in a haunting way which suggested that some of its tones were inaudible to his ears.

"Who are you talking to?" he asked sharply.

The answer came from behind him, in the same weird non-cacophony, cast in a high twittering pitch. Duck-talk, delivered by a canary with a Tokyo accent, he thought.

He continued to stare blankly around him at the room. Whoever was with them appeared to have found a damned good hiding place; or else... He found it was his turn to sweat. And then, mercifully, he recalled that there were such things as microphones and amplifiers and house broadcasting systems. He eyed a large white water lily on a low oval table just to the left of the door. If a mike were planted in this room, that would be the spot for it.

All at once, he realized that Miss Potts was speaking to him—speaking to him with no trace of the sudden burst of affection she had just shown him, speaking to him as imperiously

as an Empress of old. She was saying, "Please—you must leave at once, Mr. Maturelli."

Joe pulled himself together hurriedly, reached for his hat. He said, "Thanks for the lipstick, Miss Potts. And I'll do what I can to get in touch with Miss Wyndham immediately."

"Do so," was the curt reply.

He headed toward the door, feeling like a schoolboy who had just been properly cuffed for dipping into the school candy supply. Then his native pride rallied and, along with it, something close to anger. No woman, no dame, no lady, was going to push him around so.

Just before he reached the door, he swerved toward the table with its pond lily in the wide bowl. If there were a microphone planted beneath it, he, as Nesi Wyndham's agent, had a right to know...

Behind him, he heard Miss Potts' startled gasp.

Then he collided with a solid yielding something that emitted an unmistakable animal grunt of surprise. Before he could gather scattered wits, Joe uttered a reflex, "Oops, excuse me."

To which, the nothing in front of him replied in piping but excellent English, "Certainly."

He got the hell out of there in a tearing hurry.

2



JOE DID NOT feel up to making a return to the office. Instead he walked, not ran, seven blocks downtown and one-and-a-half west to a pleasantly dim sanctuary whose neon sign, in the shape of an heraldic shield,

proclaimed it to be *The Bar Sinister*. There he found a certain comfort in a

double scotch mist and in the companionship of Stan Wilder, to whom he narrated what had just happened to him.

"It was like being trapped in a Charles Addams cartoon," he concluded. "When I bumped into—whatever the hell I *did* bump into, I got the damndest impression of being grabbed by two pairs of hands." He shivered, added, "*Brother!* What a thing to go through!"

Wilder leaned against the blond bar and looked down on Joe's five-eleven from the eminence of his own six-three. He drawled, "Skipping the Coney Island fun-house elements of this ridiculous story of yours, Guiseppi, it does contain points of interest. You say this babe lives at 500 East 62nd and works at the U. N.? Does she have a sort of double widow's peak?" And, at Joe's nod, "And does she walk with an odd little sway like this?" Putting down his glass Wilder did a near-perfect imitation of Canada Potts in motion.

"You know her?" Joe asked, astonished.

"Not yet," said Wilder with unmistakable emphasis; "but she's been walking by my place to and from work for months now." He rolled his eyes, licked his lips, made a slurping sound. "Even if your chick is a mere reasonable facsimile, I want."

"Hey!" said Joe in mild alarm. "She's a tenant; if you think I'm going to set her up for you, you're crazy."

"I may be crazy but I'm not as crazy as you—yet," Wilder told him cheerfully. "Invisible men with four arms!" He peered at Joe closely. "I'm beginning to think I'd better put in a call for the men with white suits and two arms each."

"Forget it," said Joe with a sigh. "The only thing crazy about me is telling this to you."

They bickered amiably, with the licence of old acquaintances. Stan Wilder was a huge tawny Californian

of about Joe's age. He had gone to a West Coast college on a football scholarship, taken a dislike to the head coach and soured that worthy permanently by getting his degree—and a Phi Beta Kappa key—in three years, thus depriving the team of his services during his senior season.

He had flown a carrier-based rescue helicopter off Korea until a well-placed piece of flak had retired him from the service with a disability pension that promised to keep him in hamburgers and coffee the rest of his life—a pension which he managed to hoist into the steaks and old fashioned class, thanks to a nose for occasional profitable deals. He was, in his genial fashion, a thoroughly successful and hard-working Metropolitan wolf.

Thanks to his prodding, Joe was still discussing the various attractions of Miss Canada Potts when Marta Crane came in, swinging her model's hatbox, and stood behind him. He was unaware of her presence until she said, in her flat, unexpectedly attractive girl-of-Manhattan accent, "So I suppose you're going to set up light house-keeping with *her*?"

Joe jumped and barely managed not to upset the drink in front of him. Marta possessed a number of notably good points, among them a willingness to be his girl—but she possessed a number of not-so-good ones as well, including a fierce possessive jealousy. He turned slowly, mustering himself for the battle to come.

But Stan moved quickly into the breach, with, "Don't snap your garter belt, honey; Joe's merely describing a setup he's rigging for me. Aren't you, Joe?"

JOE KNEW when he was licked. He said, "That's right, honey. She walked right into the office and Stan's been ogling her for months. How about a drink, doll?"

"If you think I came in here to dis-

cuss the weather, you're out of your mind," replied Marta, looking more than usual like a jungle cat under her green eyeshadow. She perched herself on a stool between the two men. "Gahd, what a day!" she exclaimed, accepting the martini the bartender put before her. "Thanks, Mike." And, to Joe and Stan, "That damned fool Gerhardi set up the pose nineteen times—count 'em, nineteen!—and then decided not to shoot till tomorrow."

"You should worry at fifteen dollars an hour," said Stan.

"Twenty." Marta corrected him sharply.

"Marry me, darling," Stan said promptly; "we could make beautiful bebop together."

Marta gave him a long low look. Then she said "Don't be facetious, you fine-feathered ape. Marriage to you would be like being the brass ring on a merry-go-round—only good for a free ride."

"Hey! I was only joking," said Stan.

"A hell of a thing to joke about," said Marta.

Stan said, "Joe, when do I get to meet this dream gal?"

"You know where she lives," Joe told him; "You're on your own."

"Fine thing," said Stan. "After all I've done for you. . ."

"For me or to me?" Joe countered. Then, to Marta, "I'd like to have seen Stan's face if you'd said yes."

"Why don't *you* ask me?" Marta countered; and somehow Joe knew she wasn't entirely kidding.

He captured her near hand and said, "Honey, trap your millionaire first. Then, when you've made your kill, I'll propose; unlike Stan, I don't have a disability pension."

Marta pulled her hand free and cuffed at him. She said, to Stan, "I think Joe's depraved—honestly!"

"You should know," Stan informed her.

"Merely trying to be realistic," said Joe, masking his inner relief at turning the conversation away from Canada Potts. All at once he remembered he was supposed to call Nesi Wyndham about the Peeping Tom. He glanced at his wristwatch, saw it was getting close to six o' clock, turned away—and found himself face-to-face with the object of his intended call.

Joe had known Nesi Wyndham for twenty-nine of his thirty-three years, had been in love with her for twelve of them. Nesi, born Agnes, with a built-in aversion to being called Aggie, was a perfect pint-sized Aphrodite. The top of her silver-red head came barely to the point of Joe's chin, even when she wore high heels; yet when the mood was upon her she could tower like a giantess by the mere power of her personality.

She was towering just then—in a simple black-wool dress that managed to suggest the excellence of her figure without throwing it at the onlooker, as did Marta's saffron tweed suit. Her usually softcut just off-cute features were steeled by an expression that seemed to Joe to be made up of equal parts of concern and anger. She said, in the casually clipped accents achieved by a very few of the very rich, "Joe, they told me at the office I'd find you here." There was a definite trace of contempt in her tone.

"I was just going to phone you," Joe told her. "There's a beef from 500 East 62nd' about a Peeping Tom."

"I know," Nesi said evenly. "They just called and told me about it; if your friends will excuse you..."

"Right, Nesi," he said, wondering why this scant hundred pounds of female could reduce him to such quivering male obedience.

"Hey!" cried Marta, who had been eyeing the dialogue with her head cocked slightly to one side, looking like a cobra preparing to strike. "You're taking me to dinner tonight, Joe."

"Stan will take care of you, honey—won't you, Stan?"

"A pleasure." The big ex-Californian began to glow with anticipation. "By the way, Joe..." He eyed Nesi inquiringly.

"Oh!" Joe regathered his manners, made the introduction. Then he got out of there with Nesi, before Marta could swing into action. She had long been suspicious of Joe's relations with his employer, and he had been at pains to explain that Nesi was not a girl any man in his right mind could fall for. Marta would be recalling such misleading statements once the initial shock wore off.

"Where to?" he asked when they reached the sidewalk.

Nesi frowned briefly, delightfully, while she made up her mind. Then she said, "There's such a lot to explain—and I have a dinner date at the *Tangier* with Dion Pearmain. Better go to your place. It's handier."

JOE'S TWO-AND-A-HALF-ROOM apartment lay halfway between *The Bar Sinister* and the Wyndham Realty office. It was an odd bachelor melange, containing a few magnificent Italian renaissance pieces and paintings, alongside second-hand, worn but comfortable chairs and sofa of various periods, picked up at auctions, and grocery-store-calendar nudes. Its bookshelves were stuffed with gold-leafed editions of Shakespeare, Racine, Moliere and Goethe (mostly unread) and Modern Library editions (dog-eared), along with a gay scattering of modern book-jackets. The mantel was crammed with Napoleonic soldiers in various stages of disrepair, the tables with lamps, ashtrays that served as coasters, coasters that served as ashtrays, magazines, both American and European, and a number of toby jugs of astonishing ugliness.

Nesi looked at the mixture as Joe turned on the lights and her belligerence melted. She moved to an ancient

refectory table under the twin casement windows against the far wall and ran a forefinger over the dull satin blackness of its surface. "Oh, Joe," she murmured "I remember this—it's from the Fiesole Villa."

"It's about all they got out of it when one of our planes hit it dead center with a 500-pounder in '44," he told her. Then, "Hey! That's right—it's your first visit here. Shall I break out the Old Grandad Moet Chandon?"

"That beautiful, beautiful villa!" Nesi sighed. Then, shaking herself out of it, "Not now, Joe. We're going to need our wits."

"I always said drinking takes half the fun out of it," said Joe, wondering why Nesi made him set so sophomoric.

"Joe!" she said warningly. It reminded him of a Westchester Kennel Club lady ordering her prize pup to heel. "Don't you *ever* think of anything else?"

"Around you, that would be an insult," he told her. "After that weekend in Southampton before I went overseas..."

"Joe!" she said again, more sharply. "You promised, when you came to work for me, not to mention that—that, well..." A slow pink blush raised charming havoc with her careful facial color scheme.

He took a step toward her but she sat down resolutely and said, "Joe, I didn't want you to know about 500 East 62nd Street."

"So I gathered when Miss Potts turned up this afternoon."

She frowned and said, "It was sheer bad luck, my being out of reach." Then, "Tell me everything that happened."

He did so, omitting only the embrace. Nesi heard him out and then said, "Joe, what was your impression of the whole business?"

He thought it over, told her, "Either that *I* was crazy or the whole

bunch of *them* were. What goes on up there anyway?"

She hesitated, then said, "Joe, I'm going to have to tell you. When I'm through, your first thought will probably be that *I* am out of my mind. Let me assure you now that I'm not. Tell me—you're so good at languages—what did you make of Miss Potts' accent?"

"I'm still trying to trace it," he admitted. "Do you know?"

"I know," said Nesi. "Miss Potts—which is not her real name, by the way—comes from Mars."

Joe upset one of the toby jugs, stooped to pick it up. If anyone but Nesi had said it, he'd have suspected a rib; but Nesi was probably the most sincere and straightforward person he had ever met. Still, he said, "You're not kidding?"

"I'm not kidding," she replied and her voice, like her expression was dead-ly serious.

He did some rapid-fire thinking, adjusting, said, "That accent—hmmm. And the way she kept sweating. Hell, it's cold on Mars—even a zero day there would be like June to us." He paused, eyed Nesi, added, "And how about my friend, the hungover devil?"

"He usually wears a disguise," she said. "His name here is Anatol Drayne and he comes from Venus. His skin color is caused by the fact that the cloud layer covering his native planet does not filter but intensifies the rays of the sun; all Venerians are red."

"Why the tail?" Joe asked, operating on reflexes alone.

Nesi said matter-of-factly, "Much of Venus is rocky desert by our standards and the winds are constant and heavy; they need their tails to latch onto the rocks and keep from being blown away."

"I see," said Joe, wishing he either had had nothing to drink or that he had another in his hand. "And what about my invisible man with the four arms?"

"He's from Titan, a moon of Saturn," she replied. "They need invisibility out there—something to do with the refraction effect of living so close to an immense gasbag like Saturn. It's more than an illusion, of course—I think it has something to do with induced curvature of light. It takes a polarized lens to photograph them. They're—very odd. Almost inhuman."

"But what are they doing *here*?" he asked a trifle desperately. "And how are you tangled up with them?"

"That's a long story." She accepted a cigarette gratefully, paused while he lit it for her. "I'll try to give you a quick briefing." She paused again, added, "Joe, I think I'm glad you fell into it today. It's tremendous load to carry—and I've had to carry it alone a lot of the time. It's simply too risky to let more than a handful of people in on it. Besides, with your gift for languages..."

"What was that ducktalk I heard them using?" he asked her.

"You mean this?" Nesi embarked on an extraordinary succession of sounds.

Joe said, "That's it—what is it?"

"Interplanetary lingua franca," she told him. Then, "Joe, I inherited the job of being New York Representative for the Interplanetary Hanse. My grandfather—remember him?—held it before me. Dad never knew about it, of course; he wasn't the type."

JOE RECALLED Nesi's father, an extraordinarily charming wastrel who had run blithely through five official marriages and heaven only knew how many unofficial ones. No, he would hardly have been the type for important responsibility. But Nesi's grandfather Wyndham—*there*, had been a fine rugged old Victorian, who had drunk his daily bottle of brandy and gone on making his millions and riding his jumpers right up to his final illness at the age of 84.

"Grandfather really trained me for the job," she went on. "You see, there has been undercover trade with other planets going on for more than two centuries. They've been visiting Earth regularly for thousands of years to check on progress—but any real basis for regular dealings has existed only since the Age of Reason in France.

"At first they picked their human agents from among scientists who could understand their needs, and princes who had the power to fulfill them. Franklin, Lavoisier. Frederick the Great, people like that. Then, with the rise of the industrial age—which they helped promote, by the way—certain private businessmen seemed to offer both greater security and efficiency. Grandfather was one of those they selected; he passed the job along to me."

"Good God!" said Joe, frankly appalled. "But how come this isn't a two-way deal? Why can't we visit their home planets?"

"We're not ready," Nesi replied promptly. And, when he opened his mouth to protest, "Joe, we can't even think globally. We regard anyone who suggests surrendering even a fragment of national sovereignty—in the name of world union—as a traitor. What do you think our reaction would be to taking orders from an interplanetary council?"

Joe winced. "A point," he said. "Still, disregarding a lot of things I haven't asked—about how they travel and land secretly and what sort of business they do—haven't they taken any Earthfolk back with them?"

"A few," she replied. "Now and then someone is needed to help an installation or nurse a plant growth under alien conditions. But there's a hitch—once you leave, you can't come back; it's—a security measure. But some disappearances..."

"I see," he said, though his thoughts were still whirling in pinwheel fashion. "No wonder they don't like the idea of

a Peeping Tom; and no wonder they don't want the police. What do you want me to do about that by the way?"

"Nothing—yet," she replied firmly. "I'm dining with Senator Pearmain tonight—I told you about it. I have a hunch he may be able to help out."

"I wouldn't trust that hard-shelled demagogue as far as I could throw him," Joe told her. "Why waste time with him?"

Nesi, who had risen, dropped her blue eyes demurely, toyed with a fold of her skirt. She said, "The Senator—Dion—is interested; but a satyr like you wouldn't understand that."

"It's because I *do* understand it I'm worried," he replied.

"And I'm late," she said. "Be a good boy, Joe—for once; we can talk it all over tomorrow."

3



WHEN NESI had gone, Joe made a moody raid on his own kitchen. Probably, he thought, he ought to return to *The Bar Sinister* and extricate Marta from whatever web Stan Wilder was endeavoring to weave

about her. But his current frame of mind was wholly out of key with the ribaldries and superficialities such a move would entail.

He poured himself a glass of milk, cut a slice of ham and placed a rectangle of processed cheddar on either side of it. And, as he munched on it, he considered the implications of what had happened to him, what he had learned, since Canada Potts walked into his office that afternoon.

Sweating ladies from Mars, red devils from Venus, invisible men from Titan, undercover interplanetary trade—and the threat of a Peeping Tom. It

was, he decided, rinsing out his milk glass, too much to take in at one gulp. He wondered if the whole business weren't some sort of a gigantic rib.

He poured some brandy into an old fashioned glass and returned to the living room. To give himself some tie with the familiar, he snapped on the television and tried to listen to Perry Como and the Fontaine Sisters. But if the inmates of 500 East 62nd Street were too alien to grasp, Perry Como was too familiar, too homely, for his current mood.

Although Nesi Wyndham was, in many ways, an enigma to him, Joe *knew* that she would never lend herself to any sort of a practical joke. It simply wasn't in her. Which meant that either her story was true, or she herself was the victim of some sort of swindle—and Nesi had far too much inherited acumen to fall for such a caper.

He decided to presuppose for the moment that Nesi was telling the truth. In which case, it was scarcely surprising that she had been unresponsive to one Joe Maturelli since his return from the wars. The load she was carrying on her tiny shoulders was enough to flatten the massive deltoids of an Atlas.

He sipped his Armagnac and decided that his ego was eliding at least a portion of the truth. Nesi knew he had been in love with her since prep-school prom and summer-vacation days. And, that one weekend in Southampton, just before he had gone overseas with the OSS, she had surprised and delighted him with her sudden and complete surrender. Since then, nothing.

He wondered if her viewpoint had changed because he had lost his money. There was, after all, a slight difference between Guiseppi Smith Maturelli Colonna-Sforza, Conti di Mazarino-Vanza, with inherited properties on both sides of the Atlantic—and Joe

Maturelli, realty agent with a dribbling pittance from the shattered remnants of a trust fund he was not even allowed to touch.

But his reasoning was false and he knew it. Nesi was not that sort of a snob. If she loved a man she would love him, no matter what his estate. All at once he found himself envisioning the rugged hoorah-handsome face of Senator Dion Pearmain, idol of the stupid-rich, the bigoted and the ignorant, his prematurely snow-white locks close to Nesi's gorgeous silver-red tresses across a snowy tablecloth in the flatteringly dim lights of the *Tangier*.

The thought was more than he could bear—as was the inactive role to which Nesi had relegated him. A sudden irresistible yearning to do something, anything, overwhelmed the indolence he had been cultivating carefully for years. When Nesi took him to task for his lack of ambition, it was his custom to say, "Don't worry, Nesi—I'm lying fallow for a while. One of these days..."

He was lying fallow no longer.

OUTSIDE, he sniffed the Indian Summer night air, enjoying its warmth and its underlying hint of cold weather ahead. He felt alive as he had not felt since those almost forgotten wartime days when he had lived dangerously, moment by moment, on missions behind the Nazi lines. He walked rapidly north to 62nd Street.

Unconsciously, thanks to his OSS training, Joe had registered a number of details about the yellow converted tenement that had sheltered the Peeping Tom that afternoon. There had been a familiar sort of narrow areaway running along the west side of the building, an areaway which would, he surmised from his familiarity with Manhattan real estate, run to the rear of the building.

It did. Joe found himself standing

amid ash barrels (7) and vocally amorous cats (2). In front of him was the ebon rectangle of a basement back door. As he suspected, it was unlocked; such a warren was seldom a target for burglars. Joe entered, felt around for a light cord, turned it on, made his way to the dingy stairway that led up to the first floor.

There, quick study informed him that the railroad flats, on either side of the hallway which split the building in two, ran all the way from front to rear. He went to the back, opened a dust-opaque window, climbed out onto a narrow ledge he had spotted from below. The window—the back window—of the Peeping Tom's apartment was both open and dark. He slid through it silently, discovered himself to be in a bedroom of sorts, dimly lit by a light somewhere in the midriff of the apartment.

Mercifully someone had laid linoleum over much of the floor so that Joe was able to move forward toward his objective—without risking the betrayal of creaky floorboards. He passed through a kitchen, another bedroom, a sort of foyer—where the green-shaded light dangled sadly from the ceiling on a cord—found the door to the front chamber closed.

It would be, he thought—no Peeping Tom could risk being spotted in a lighted room, and there would be enough light from the street outside to offer visibility. Joe found the foyer light-string, pulled it, felt his way forward through the sudden darkness. At the closed door, he paused a moment to let his eyes adjust.

Somewhere upstairs, a baby suddenly began to howl. A man cursed and a woman began denouncing him shrilly. Under cover of this welcome noise, Joe pushed the door open and slipped inside.

The watcher was there, all right, standing at the window, studying the 500 house across the street. Canada

Potts' Venetian blinds were tightly drawn, as was the only other lighted window in the building, save for Bill Matchek's basement. Joe wondered what in hell the man was watching for. He determined to find out.

He moved forward swiftly, silently—and fell headlong, with a tremendous clatter, over some obstruction on the floor.

The next few moments were a trifle confused. The watcher swung about before he could rise, tried to brain him with his fieldglasses. Joe, up on one knee, deflected the blow with a forearm, managed to trip his startled assailant so that they rolled about on the floor.

JOE, WHO knew considerable about judo, thanks to his wartime training, found himself up against another expert. If the uproar of his otherwise inglorious entrance had not put the watcher off-balance, he would have been out of luck. As it was, he managed to pin his man quite effectively in a hold which would result in a broken arm if the fellow moved.

The man said through pain-gritted teeth, "*Carissima—Jesu!*"

Joe said, "For gossakes, Paddy Locke!"

Somehow they were back in the foyer, with the light on, blinking foolishly at one another. Paddy Locke said, "Joe Maturelli—goddam! Where in hell did you spring from?" He was a black-haired chunky individual, half-Irish, half-Italian; he and Joe had worked a couple of missions around Florence for the OSS during the war.

Joe said, "Got a complaint about a Peeping Tom from across the street; I never thought it was you. What gives, anyway?"

"You still got it, Joe," said Paddy, working his arm painfully. "Listen, you better forget about this; I'm no Peeping Tom."

They lit cigarets while Joe checked

his memory and said, "I heard you were working down in Washington." He blinked as it came back. "Senator Pearmain's committee—right?"

"You got it, Joe," said Paddy. "What about you?"

"I work for the firm that owns the building," said Joe, with a nod toward 500. "What's wrong with them anyway?"

"I dunno," Paddy told him. "At first I thought we were on the trail of a Commie janitor—but now I don't know what to think. If I told you some of the things... I don't even dare put them in my report."

"I met Matchek this afternoon when the beef on your activity came in," Joe said. "Don't tell me *he's* subversive. He's the dumbest, thickest so-and-so I ever met in my life."

"So he's dumb," said Paddy; "so he's fronting for something not so dumb. We got a lead that this place is a drop for a lot of things that need investigating. But why should I tell you? You're on *their* side. Me, I'm just doing a job."

"And not well," said Joe. "You got spotted."

"Yeah," said Paddy unhappily. "I can't figure *that* out."

Joe knew better than to press further his erstwhile comrade. After another cigaret, he left, with a whole new set of implications to wrestle.

Senator Pearmain was investigating the apartment for traces of subversive activity—and, at the same time, making a play for Nesi. Coincidence? Unlikely; Joe decided further action was in order.

The *Tangier* offered its patrons a gleaming cream-and-coblat Moorish decor that might have been lifted in toto from the lot of a Hollywood technicolor musical. It also offered good food, good drink, good service, good Latin music—along with table-to-table glimpses of virtually every celebrity worth publicizing this side of the Iron Curtain. It was costly but worth every

double-sawbuck of it—if you had the double-sawbucks and cared for that sort of thing.

Joe bought a scotch at the bar and scanned table-sitters and dancers until he spotted Nesi and Senator Pearmain doing a discreet rumba on the boxing ring-sized floor. Nesi, in a pistachio-tinted near-topless something, was quite breathtaking. The Senator, in conventional male dinner dress, was quite bad-breath-taking, in Joe's solemn estimation.

Joe downed his drink like a major, squared his shoulders, smoothed his hair with both hands—then wormed his way between tables to the edge of the floor, waited until Nesi and the Senator came floating by, and cut in.

THE SENATOR looked as if he were going to protest but Nesi said quickly, "It's all right, Dion," and came into his arms. She did not look pleased at his appearance, muttered fiercely, "What do you think *you're* doing, Joe?"

"Sorry," he told her, giving his hips an expert flick in time to the beat. "I'll take off in a moment. But I think you ought to know—I cracked that stakeout across from the 500 place. I know the character doing the watching; he's one of Dear Dion's investigators."

Nesi danced a couple more steps, then halted abruptly, causing something of a traffic jam in front of the bandstand. She looked up at Joe, her smooth brow wrinkled, said, "You're not drunk, Joe?"

"It's the truth," he told her. "His name's Locke—Paddy Locke. I was on a couple of missions with him back in the bad old days." He exerted gentle pressure that caused her to resume dancing.

"But why, Joe?" she asked him. "Why?"

"Paddy claims your brilliant super, Bill Mathek, has been spouting leftist

views in his cups. And now he's beginning to get odd ideas about the tenants. And something about the place being a drop. Not that I blame him."

"Then Dion..." Her voice faded and her light eyes began to blaze. Her voice was unnaturally thin as she said, "Then Dion has been playing me for a sucker. Come on." She took his hand, tried to pull him toward the table where the Senator was sitting in solitary state, wiping his lips with a napkin.

"Where to?" Joe asked, holding her back.

"To give that double crossing rodent a piece of my mind," she said. "When I think of how he..." Again words failed her.

"Hold on," said Joe. "Wouldn't it be a lot smarter to go back and stick it out with him as if nothing were wrong?"

"I can't, Joe," she all but wailed. "I'm not enough actress for that. Joe—what am I going to *do*?"

He said, "I'll take you back to your table and duck. You tell your white-haired pal you've got a date with a powder puff; get your wrap and meet me outside. I still think you'd be smarter to stick it out. But anyway, don't blow your stack in public, honey."

Nesi merely nodded. She looked, during their progress back to the table, as if she were carved out of soap. Joe turned her over to the Senator, who was curt to put it mildly, then made his way outside to wait. He was halfway through a cigaret when Nesi slipped out and looked anxiously around for him, hugging a brief red-gold lame stole about her. He put her into a cab, gave the driver her address.

She said, "Joe, this is horrible. What if his—" she evidently could no longer trust herself to call the Senator by name—"spies find out anything? What are we going to do?"

"I thought you were in charge of

this pitch," he told her. "Remember, I'm new here." He looked down in surprise to find her huddling close to him.

She said in a very small voice, "Joe, I'm just realizing it's too much for me—if I'm responsible for betraying my trust to these people, I'll never get over it. I was just about to ask him to do something about that Peeping Tom when you cut in. Why, I'd have blown the whole business sky-high if you hadn't. Thanks, Joe."

Her eyes were shining up at him and he curled to kiss her. He felt all at once like a father to her—rather than like the wayward child she had made of him recently. But, mercifully, there was more to the kiss than that.

He said, when he could, "How long have you known Pearmain?"

She looked thoughtful, replied, "Oh, less than a month. Somebody introduced him to me at a party in Washington. And he was so darned charming and sweet!"

He would be! Joe thought but didn't say it. Nesi, unless her wits had entirely deserted her, had already figured that out. She said, "What do you think I should do about him? After all, I can't just leave him stranded at the table."

"Call him up there when you get to your house," Joe suggested. "Tell him you were suddenly taken ill; let him call you back if he doesn't believe you are home."

"Of course," she said. Then, abruptly, irrelevantly, "Joe, I haven't been very nice to you, have I?"

"You gave me a job," he replied.

She didn't say anything and, after a moment, he discovered that she was silently crying. He said, "Here—none of that," and held his handkerchief to her nose. "Now—*blow!*"

THE CAB pulled up in front of the white marble palace, on a corner of Fifth Avenue and the upper Seventies, which Nesi called home. Joe paid

the driver off, helped her to the sidewalk. She clung to his arm and there was no need to ask if she wanted him to come in. She opened her red-gold lame evening bag, fumbled for her keys...

Another cab door slammed, making Joe jump. He looked around to see Marta Crane moving toward them, unevenly but with determination implicit in every drunker step. He said, "Omi-god!"—it was all he had time to say before the whirlwind was upon them.

"Trying to tell me it was strictly business!" said Marta loudly. "You motheaten weasel!" Then, to Nesi, "I ought to snatch you baldheaded, you rotten spoiled little mansnatcher!"

She made a grab at the smaller girl, which Joe was barely able to fend off. He said to Nesi, "Sorry, honny—get inside and do what I told you; I'll see you tomorrow."

"You'll see nobody tomorrow!" shouted Marta furiously. "Standing me up for Miss Gotrocks, here! I'm going to..." She made another pass at Nesi, who slipped through the heavy iron-and-glass door of the mansion. Joe suppressed an impulse to place a fist hard on the point of Marta's decorative chin; instead, he half-wrestled, half-led her back to her cab.

There, Marta burst into tears. "Leaving me with that All-American wolf!" she sobbed. "Lying to me all this while! Treating me like some cheap shooting-gallery prize!"

He said, icily, "I've never exerted any claim over you, Marta. What gives you the right to exert any over me?"

She said, "Oooooo. Only a *man* could talk like *that!*"—and burst into renewed sobs. By the time they reached her apartment, Marta was maudlin. Joe got her inside and put her to bed. Then he left her and went back to his own apartment—alone.

He rather hoped the phone would ring—but it didn't. And, after a while, he managed to fall asleep.

4



JOE FELT as if he had spent the night in a mixmaster with the current on when he reached the office the next morning. He sent out for coffee, while making a pretense of examining the rental sheets for Wyndham Real-

ty, wondering if he couldn't have dreamed the whole business. More than once, as the hours went by, he reached for the telephone on his desk to call Nesi.

He needed orientation worse than ever before in his thirty-three years—but, after Marta's scene in front of her house, he didn't have the nerve.

At eleven-thirty his secretary informed him that a young lady wished to speak to him over the phone. It was Marta and, for once in her life, she was apologetic. "I don't know what got into me," she told him. "Thanks for bringing me home. I hope I didn't get you in any trouble—I mean, with your job and everything."

"Forget it," said Joe with something less than his usual chivalry. "I'm sorry I stood you up. But believe me, it was necessary."

"If you hadn't lied about your boss..." she said.

"I wasn't exactly lying," he insisted. "Besides, if I went into a tantrum every time you let an ad man take you out—"

"That's different," she said sharply; "that's business."

"So is Nesi Wyndham," he replied.

"Damned funny kind of business if you ask me," said Marta.

"And who asked you?" he countered.

"All right, I said I was sorry, you zombie. How about having dinner with

me tonight? You owe me something for last night."

"Sure—if I don't get tied up," he told her. There was no need to mention time or place. They invariably met at *The Bar Sinister* after work. Marta hung up on him in a huff.

Joe slammed his phone back hard on the cradle. *Undisciplined little so-and-so!* he thought angrily. *Lives on her looks and what she has that passes for brains. Pity the sucker who marries her.* Then, looking up as his secretary entered, "Yes, Miss Peebles?"

Miss Peebles laid a card on the blotter in front of him. "A gentleman to see you, Mr. Maturelli," she said in a voice that matched her ramrod face and figure.

"Show him in," said Joe, suppressing a gulp. For the card read, *Anatol Drayne, Imports and Exports, Manhattan*. Anatol Drayne, the red devil of 500 East 62nd Street, the man from Venus!

At first glance Joe failed to recognize him. His second impression was that Hollywood could take lessons in makeup from this being of another world. He looked like a perfectly normal man of Earth, if one accepted a slight disproportionate thickening about the midsection which, Joe decided, was caused by his furled tail. His eyes were brown with white pupils, his hair dark and well-groomed, his clothing immaculate, even a trifle dandified.

He smiled and said, "I see you're surprised. You shouldn't be; my normal appearance is rather too conspicuous here."

"I can see why it must be," said Joe. Then, "What can I do for you, Mr. Drayne?" He was fascinated by the man's accent.

"We received a call from Miss Wyndham last night," the Venerian said quietly. "Apparently she is turning over much of her share of our business affairs to you."

She might have told me, he thought.

He said, "I hope I don't bungle the job, Mr. Drayne."

"I'm sure you won't," was the reply. "But before we settle down to cases, there is one small matter that is causing us some concern. It has to do with our Martian colleague, Miss Canada Potts."

"Yes?" said Joe with the wary lift of an eyebrow.

"A short while ago," he said, "a young man called on Miss Potts and said you had sent him. She left with him before we could make sure he was what he represented himself to be. I had intended calling upon you this afternoon in any case, but in view of our uncertainty as to this young man's—reliability, I took the liberty of coming here this morning."

"I didn't send anyone," said Joe. He wished Nesi were here—oh, how he wished she were here. Thoughts of Senator Pearmain and Paddy Locke danced through his head, unlike the sugar plums of the Christmas poem. He added, "Did you see him?"

"I caught a glimpse of him," said Anatol Drayne. "He was a very large young man with very light hair."

"Omygod—Stan Wilder!" said Joe, who had forgotten all about his wolfish drinking crony. Apparently the erstwhile reluctant football player had picked up the ball and run with it.

"Should we be worried about him?" the Venerian inquired.

Joe shook his head. "Hardly," he said. "Stan's all right; he happens to have been drooling over Miss Potts for weeks. Like an idiot I told him where she lived—before I knew what the score was."

"I trust his health is good," said Anatol Drayne.

"Huh?" said Joe. Then, "Don't worry—Stan's rugged but he isn't dangerous. Actually he's about as deadly as a panda."

"I'm afraid you don't understand," the Venerian said delicately. "You see, Miss Potts is in season. I'm more con-

cerned as to what she may do to him, than for her welfare. A Martian female in season is—well, she is inclined to be insatiably passionate."

Joe recalled the devouring yet cold-blooded kiss he had received while in her apartment the previous afternoon. He said, "Sort of a one-woman Kinsey Report run amok?"

"You might call it that," said the Venerian with a half-smile; "I think we had better try to find her before evening."

"We ought to be able to find her," said Joe. Then, rising, "And, incidentally, I'd like to take you out for lunch, Mr. Drayne. We can discuss business over a meal."

OUTSIDE and headed for *The Bar Sinister*, he said, "I'm sorry to rush you like this, Drayne, but it just occurred to me that with a Senatorial investigation going on, my office might be tapped."

Drayne shook his head in puzzlement and said, "Sometimes I don't think this planet will ever recover from the cultural setback it received in the last Ice Age. But I suppose you're right."

Joe had half-hoped to find Stan and Miss Potts at *The Bar Sinister* but the missing couple was nowhere in evidence. *Sooner or later*, he thought, *they're bound to show up*. He told Drayne as much. The Venerian thanked him and studied the menu.

The meal Drayne ordered was indicative of his alien origin. It consisted of consomme, into which he poured a small pitcher of sour cream—a small steak over which he poured maple syrup—and, by way of dessert, vanilla ice cream with Russian dressing.

Patiently, he explained the reason for each eerie combination. The sour-cream soup, he explained, was a metabolism requirement to counteract the effect of Earth's debilitating coldness. The same reason applied in part to the steak and maple syrup, augmented by

what were to a Venerian deficiencies in the Earth diet. As for the ice cream with Russian dressing, he said with a twinkle of amused defiance, "I eat it because I like it; I am supposed to like dessert, am I not?"

"To each his own," muttered Joe, who was beginning to enjoy the alien despite his formal ways. He turned the conversation to the business his guest wished to discuss.

"Venus is basically a silicon planet," Anatol informed him. "While we can manufacture or synthesize most of the products we need, there is a great demand for hard wood—ironwood, teak, cypress, mahogany, redwood. Most of our metals are mined on the twilight zone of Mercury, and we have sufficient hard minerals to export. But there is simply no substitute in the entire Solar System for the hard woods of Earth; they are, literally, more valuable than diamonds on Venus."

"I don't want to appear dumb," said Joe, "but I'm absolutely in the dark about this whole operation; how do you get your wood from Earth to Venus?"

"By ship, of course," said the Venerian. "There is a landing due on Miss Wyndham's Pocono estate tomorrow night. We have purchased a shipment of high-grade redwood and mahogany for transport. I merely wish to make certain that it will be there; also, that payment has been made from Miss Wyndham's special account. We have already turned over to her the jewels required for payment at current rates."

"I'll find out," said Joe with a confidence he was far from feeling. "Anything else?"

The Venerian hesitated, then said, "I'm not sure you're sufficiently well acquainted with what we're doing to be of help."

"Try me," said Joe promptly. "After all, if I don't know I can't possibly help you."

"It's rather a delicate matter," said Drayne. "If it were still possible to trade directly behind the Iron Curtain, the problem would be easily solved. But, in recent years, the universal atmosphere of suspicion there has made our little trading projects next to impossible." He paused.

"As a result," he continued, "we have to move just about all of our export materials to our North American drop. Here, thanks to Miss Wyndham and a few others, our trade is still protected. But the rise of general suspicion in the United States is adding to our current difficulties."

"Then you're bringing in something from Russia for pickup tomorrow night?" Joe asked curiously.

Drayne shook his head, replied, "It's not quite that bad. We already have the shipment—it's a Martian perfume base, by the way, and Matchek has it stored in the furnace room of our building. But, with this Peeping Tom activity..." He shrugged.

"I see," said Joe, feeling unhappy about it. If these people—if they were people—were trading with the Soviets, Senator Pearmain might have something. He added, "I'll try to think of something. Why not let it wait till the next interplanetary pickup?"

THE VENERIAN sighed. "I fear you have no understanding of the complexity of such shipping," he said. "Every cubic millimeter of space, every milligram of weight, must be plotted Earth-years in advance. The postponement of even a portion of a cargo could be—well, perhaps not disastrous, but disastrously expensive."

"There's not much time then," said Joe uneasily.

"Virtually none at all," Drayne told him. "Frankly, my associates and I are most unhappy at recent turns of events."

"I can see how you might be," said Joe. Then, because he had nothing further constructive to offer, "Lord!

What I'd give for a look at your ship tomorrow night!"

The Venerian made a deprecating gesture, said, "It's merely a freighter—not one of the most modern, either. But why not come out with me for a look? I have to be on hand."

"You've got you a man," Joe told him. Then, "One thing that fascinates me is your interplanetary pidgin. How does it work?"

JOE LOST the next two hours. At the end of that time, thanks to his talent and training for linguistics, he had at least a rough idea of how the lingua franca worked. Actually, due to the fact that it operated on three tone-levels, it was an extremely comprehensive system of vocal exchange for all of its basic simplicity.

It even contained, somewhat to his amusement, a number of Earth-terms—notably the Italian *kepishe*, the Spanish *sabe*, the French *comment* and the ubiquitous Anglo-American *okay*. Each word had but a single form—its use as noun, verb, adjective or adverb depending upon the pitch of the user. While the parts of speech were not exactly equivalent, Anatol assured him that their approximation was usable.

Now that he understood it, Joe found that it no longer sounded like duck-talk. He said, frowning as he concentrated on words and proper pitch, "What is the chief staple of Mars-Earth trade?"

"For Mars—vegetable products of Earth—plus some luxury items, like perfume bases," said the Venerian. "For Earth—certain rare Martian lichens used in chemical and other scientific experiments. By the way, you seem to have an amazing knack for languages. I compliment you."

Joe grinned fatuously, then noted the curious regard he and his odd companions were getting from the surrounding tables. He said, "Oh-oh! Better cut it out for now; we're drawing attention."

He longed to ask further questions about interplanetary trade, about life and living on Venus, Mars and the Moons of Jupiter and Saturn; but a glance at his wristwatch informed him that it was already mid-afternoon and he had still to get in touch with Nesi. He said, speaking English this time, "Dammit, I've got to run, Anatol. There must be a couple of million things for me to learn before I have this business in hand. Thanks for the help."

"Thank you for lunch and for one of my most enjoyable afternoons on Earth," said the Venerian. "I, too, must be getting back; my eyes grow sensitive after a few hours in disguise." He paused while Joe paid the check, then added, "You think your friend might bring Miss Potts here? I'm a trifle worried."

"Sooner or later he's bound to," Joe assured him. "I'll cruise back here later and send her packing home."

"Again I am grateful." Anatol hesitated, said, "I begin to think it fortunate that Miss Wyndham has chosen you to help herself and us. Our expanded channels on this continent are still new. Of course, we are perfectly safe; we have certain resources, time-tested ways of taking care of ourselves and our secret. But the risk of discovery remains our greatest concern."

"I'll bet it does," said Joe, leading the way out of the restaurant. "We've got to put a crimp in Senator Pearmain. He doesn't know what he's meddling with. Well, so long, Anatol. Seeing you."

For the first time, Joe found himself accepting the fact of the aliens' existence, of their presence on Earth. What a tremendous operation it was, he thought. And the beauty of it, their most potent protection, lay in the fact that anyone who tried to expose them would almost certainly be considered a lunatic. He whistled a happy tune.

Since he was so thoroughly late, he used the back way, not wishing to face

any outraged would-be lessees who might be awaiting him in the outer office. He was going to *have* to get hold of Nesi. Despite what he had learned from the Venerian at lunch, he felt like a hinterlander at the helm of a huge ocean liner.

Using the back way proved to be a mistake. Had he come in as usual, Miss Pebbles might have been able to warn him. As it was he walked right into the arms of Paddy Locke, figuratively at any rate. Paddy was sitting in Joe's chair, with his feet on Joe's desk, wreathed in smoke from a large and odorous dark-brown cigar.

When Joe came in he turned his head lazily, said, "About time! What a racket—three hours for lunch!" He got to his feet, added, "Well, let's go—the Senator don't like to be kept waiting."

SENATOR PEARMAIN was ensconced in a luxurious two room suite atop a semi-residential hotel between Park and Lexington. Although his face was drawn with lines of strain and fatigue, he still presented a vital and handsome figure of a politician. He ordered Paddy Locke outside with a slight nod of his silver-thatched head, then told Joe to sit down.

"Maturelli," he said after giving Joe the benefit of a thorough going over with his eyes, "you seem to have the unenviable faculty of being very much in my hair."

"My only regret," said Joe, "is that it is wholly accidental."

The Senator permitted himself a smile. His voice, when he spoke, had the weary half-huskininess of too many speeches, too many highballs, too many conferences in the proverbial smoke-filled rooms. He said, "I think I was justified in being annoyed with you last night; you see, I had planned to propose to Miss Wyndham."

"You show excellent taste," said Joe, wondering what the Senator had in store for him.

"Thank you." The words were accompanied by a courtly nod. "My annoyance faded, however, less than an hour ago, when Miss Wyndham consented to be my wife."

"You're joking!" Joe simply couldn't believe it.

Pearmain's blue ice turned to ice-chips. He said, "I have been accused of many things in my time, young man, but never of having a sense of humor. I am not a light man by nature." He paused, then resumed his oration with, "My annoyance with you returned manyfold in short order. First, my bride-to-be, with commendable if scarcely diplomatic candor, confessed to an episode at Southampton, some ten or twelve years ago, in which you were involved."

There was another pause and Joe said nothing. The Senator cleared his throat and went on with, "Naturally, I shall hate your intestines as long as I live. But I trust that the many things my fiancée and I have in common will, in time, cause this bitter memory to fade."

Joe was stunned. He wondered if Nesi had gone out of her mind; he could think of nothing to say.

"Then my trusted investigator, Mr. Locke, came to me with a report of your activities last night," the Senator said. "I have reason to believe, as a result of his investigation, that my bride-to-be has been victimized by some highly unwholesome aliens, who have been utilizing one of her properties as a headquarters for their subversive intrigue. Naturally, I cannot permit this to endure."

"Why come to me?" Joe was on the alert now.

"Because, apparently for sentimental reasons, Agnes—Miss Wyndham has asked me to protect you against any involvement in the action I plan against these undesirables—though frankly, I have good reason to suspect you of *being* involved. Therefore, I am forced to put you in confinement of a

sort until my plans are completed and my fiancée and I are safely on our honeymoon tomorrow."

"You're going to have a busy day, Senator," said Joe. Then, "Why not relax this—investigation of yours. It seems highly unlikely to me that Nesi—Miss Wyndham—would allow herself to become caught in anything really dangerous to her country."

Pearmain's eyebrows, black as ink, drew together in a terrifying frown. "Young man," he said, "you may consider yourself fortunate that I do not plan to take Congressional action against you. I am choosing, perhaps unwisely, to consider you a mere nuisance—rather than a threat—until my plans are complete.

"As to the danger represented by this group of aliens battering so viciously upon Miss Wyndham," he went on, "you are either grossly ignorant or a traitorous liar, young man. What if I were to tell you that I have proof—not jury proof, perhaps, but sufficient to be convincing to myself—that these aliens had actually brought in, under cover, sufficient supplies of a singularly deadly new poison gas to reduce all of New York to a dead city in a mere matter of hours?"

"I wouldn't believe you," Joe said promptly. And as promptly recalled what Anatol Drayne had admitted over a lunch-cloth about smuggling from behind the Iron Curtain.

"Then you're an idiot," said the Senator.

The interview was over, and Joe didn't know why it had taken place. He decided the Senator must have wished a second look at the opposition that had come so close, in his solonical estimation, to upsetting his apple wagon. Come to consider it, Joe thought, the so-and-so was playing a pretty good hand. But why Nesi had ever consented to become his wife. . .

Joe shrugged, went on out, utterly baffled.

Paddy picked him up in the corri-

dor, walked with him to the elevator, pressed the *down* button. Joe said, "Thanks, Paddy—be seeing you around."

"You're so right, Joe," said Paddy; "you're on ice, boy."

5



JOE THOUGHT it over while he and Paddy Locke rode down in the hotel elevator. Outside, he said, "Suppose I start yelling violation of my civil rights? I haven't done anything you can charge me with."

Paddy gave him a quizzical look. Then he said, "You think not? You underestimate me, Joe. I could run up a very interesting list—and you could never clear yourself by eight a.m."

Joe thought it over, then said, "What time's the wedding?"

"Ten o'clock," said Paddy; "but you won't be there."

"I think the whole idea is crazy," said Joe. "Where the hell are you holding me?"

Paddy looked hurt. "We ain't holdin' you, Joe," he replied. "Whatever gave you that idea? You're just gonna spend a few hours in the privacy of your own apartment. And I do mean *privacy*."

Joe said, "For Lord's sake, let's have a drink somewhere before the death watch starts. I know a place close to my joint; I'll buy."

"You can say that again," said Paddy. "Which way?"

"Come on," said Joe, feeling suddenly weak in the knees. He had been desperately afraid his former colleague would turn down his suggestion. Because, between what the Senator and Paddy had told him, he was beginning

to get a most unhappy preview of events to come.

Pearmain had talked about "planned action against these undesireables" and "confinement until my plans are completed and my fiancée and I are safely on our honeymoon tomorrow." Paddy had given the hour of eight a.m. as a deadline, although the wedding was not scheduled for a couple of hours later. It looked to Joe very much as if the Senator was planning an eight-o'clock raid on the 500 East 62nd Street premises, to gain the whiphand over Nesi before he married her. The more he considered it, the surer he became.

The problem was to warn the inmates of the apartment house. Joe did not for a moment doubt their ability to take care of themselves if they were prepared. He felt certain that the telephone in his own apartment would be disconnected—else he would scarcely be confined there. His one chance, he knew, was *The Bar Sinister*. At this time of day Stan Wilder was almost certain to be there—which meant that Canada Potts might also be on hand. And Anatol Drayne might have returned there in an effort to locate the errant Martian girl.

Just what he could do, or how, Joe didn't know. He was going to have to play them as they came. But *The Bar Sinister* was his only chance. He felt certain the Senator had not been naive enough to give Nesi an inkling of his real plans. And if he could couple her to anything that looked like subversive activity, he would enjoy a powerful whip over her once they were married—over her and her fortune.

Stan Wilder was alone at the bar when Joe and Paddy entered. He looked flushed, a little punchdrunk and greeted Joe enthusiastically. "Lordy!" he exclaimed. "You sure set me up, baby—never met anything like her."

"Watch yourself, bub," warned Paddy out of the side of his mouth as Joe introduced him to the tall Californian.

"If you try anything, it'll cost you."

Joe figured it probably would, knowing Paddy of yore. He murmured, "Don't worry—I'm no idiot." Inwardly he was trying desperately to work out some way of conveying to Stan a message for his new girl friend—if "girl" was precisely the word for Canada Potts.

He said, "Have a big time with the little lady?"

"Brother!" said Stan, his somewhat glazed eyes taking on a sheen of sheer satisfaction. "She's out of this world!"

"I'm glad you're glad," said Joe, stifling the obvious retort—that Canada Potts actually *was* from out of this world. He said, "Where did you leave her?"

"Oh, she's here," said Stan. "She went back to powder her beautiful snoot."

Paddy, with his rye boilermaker in front of him said, "What is this, Joe?"

"You'll see any minute," Stan Wilder replied. He made the immemorial hour-glass gesture, kissed his fingertips. "If Joe hadn't located her for me, I'd never have known where to find her."

"She walked into my office yesterday," said Joe modestly; "it seems Stan has been ogling her for months."

A DOOR SLAMMED in the rear of the restaurant and Joe became tinglingly alert, while he tightened his grip on his as yet untouched scotch mist. This, he knew, was going to be it. Either he was going to get his message through to the Martian or there was going to be no warning. He had a plan of sorts—clumsy, but it would have to do.

Stan and Paddy were facing the bar and Joe was nearest the rear, which was all to the good. He watched Canada Potts approach out of the corner of his eye, noting irrelevantly that she looked as perfectly groomed as ever. When she came abreast of him, he swung about, as if accidentally, and

spilled his drink all over her dress in the collision that resulted.

Canada gave vent to an odd combination of sounds that could only have been a Martian curse. Stan cried out and Joe professed apologies for his clumsiness, grabbing a bar napkin and making a move to dry the wet spots on Canada's dress. She tried to pull away from him but he held her and whispered, in interplanetary lingua franca, "Raid tomorrow morning—eight." Then, in English, "Lord! I'm sorry, Miss Potts; I didn't see you coming at all."

"There's nothing to be done about it—*kapishe*," she replied and he noted she was still sweating lightly. Then, to Wilder, "Stan, I'm afraid I'd better go home; I seem to be soaked through."

Joe professed further apologies as relief coursed through him. In "season" or not, the Martian had her wits about her; his message was through. He and Paddy had another drink together, then walked the brief distance to his apartment. Joe decided to take a stand when they reached it. He had had quite enough of Paddy Locke for the present, had no idea of letting him inside for the night, said so. "You didn't used to be this way," said the investigator.

"And you didn't used to frame evidence on your friends," said Joe.

"I gotta eat," Paddy told him.

"Perhaps," said Joe. "But if you've got to play watchdog for me, do it outside. I don't doubt you or your pals have already been through this place. If you must be a *Fides Achates*, do it in style on the doorstep. Good bye now."

"What's a feedase akateys?" Paddy asked. He added, "Don't bother tryin' to use your phone, chum. It's out of order."

"Thanks," said Joe. "Thanks a lot, Paddy; happy doorstep."

He went on in, shut and bolted the door behind him, leaned against it in sheer relief. He went on into the living room, noted that a lamp was turned

on. Paddy and his boys were getting sloppy, he decided. He didn't see Nesi until she rose from the sofa and came toward him, saying, "Darling, I thought you were *never* coming!"

FOR ONCE in his life, Joe was stunned. He stood there stupidly, while Nesi wrapped her arms around him, saying, "I've done the most terrible thing, darling—the most awful thing. But I had to do it and I want you to understand."

"If you're talking about your impending marriage to Senator Pearhead Pearmain, that alleged gentleman just finished informing me about it himself," he told her. He looked down at her, saw her lips upraised to his, was unable to resist them. All at once it was like a retake of that now notorious weekend he had spent with Nesi a dozen years ago at Southampton. He wondered if any Martian, in or out of "season", could be better than this.

There was another fugitive thought of chivalry—of his letting this girl have her way with him on the eve of her marriage to another man. Then he thought of the other man in the case, of Paddy Locke doing guard duty outside the door—and gladly kissed chivalry farewell for the nonce. It was simply too good to resist—instead of keeping Nesi and himself apart, all they had succeeded in doing was locking them up together.

When some measure of sanity returned to both of them he looked at her and said, "What got into you anyway, honey—you're not going to marry that big phoney now, are you?"

"I must," she said simply. "You see, he—his investigators, rather—have found out too much about my—my real job. There's only one way to protect my people. I've got to do it, darling." In the dim light of the bedroom, tears were running down her face.

"Then what the hell is *this* all about?" he asked her.

"I don't blame you for talking like that," she said tragically. "Probably

I seem cheap—probably I always have. I gave myself to you once before, remember—when I thought I was going to lose you.”

So *that* was it, Joe thought. Nesi was one of those women who could not be stirred except by the thought of sacrifice. For the first time in his life he understood her—and, understanding her, fell out of love with her. Nesi was not the chilled steel character he had always supposed her to be—she was rather a prime neurotic perfectly calculated to make some poor husband miserable.

The protest against her marriage to Senator Pearmain, that had been on his lips, remained unuttered. Instead, he said, “When did you decide you were in love with me? You’ve given me a hard time—you’re *still* giving me one.” He added the last out of politeness.

“I think I’ve always loved you, darling,” she informed him, nestling against him, her lips lying close to his. “But last night...”

“You mean when I cut you out with the Senator?” he asked.

She shook her head. “No, darling—not that I wasn’t grateful. I didn’t realize how I felt until that dreadful girl made that ghastly scene in front of my house. Then I *knew* how I felt. Oh, Joe—when I think of all the time we’ve wasted!”

“Not me—you,” he told her. So Nesi was going to marry the Senator. Somehow it fitted. But in his mind’s eye he was thinking of Marta. Marta might not be rich, Marta might not be a lady, but Marta didn’t have to offer herself only as a sacrifice. All at once, Joe felt grateful to the Senator.

LATER THEY had something to eat and drink and, across the kitchen table, Joe said, “Nesi, we’ve got work to do. If you’re going to cut me in on this interplanetary business, there are a couple of things I’ve got to know.”

“That’s the reason I came up here—part of it, anyway,” she told him.

“If I take Dion out of the play, you’ve got to fill in for me. You see, his Peeping Tom has thrown a monkey wrench into a planned deal that must be completed tomorrow—no, tonight.”

“I know something about that little deal,” he told her. “So what’s the idea of bringing in Soviet poison gas as a Martian perfume base? Or didn’t you know about it?”

“Of course I did!” she exclaimed. “Oh dear, I know it sounds awful, but it isn’t, really. You must have noticed Miss Potts’ perfume when you were with her.”

“I did,” said Joe.

“Sniffing it didn’t hurt you, did it?” she asked. And, when he shook his head, “You know, all sorts of things make perfume bases. Well, there’s something about a fusion of this nerve-gas with a native blend of Martian chemicals that produces a harmless scent their women are crazy for. And you know the power of a woman...”

“I’m learning,” said Joe a trifle grimly. “But why go to Russia to get it? Why not buy it right here?”

“Because we couldn’t,” Nesi almost wailed. “Dion’s investigators had the American supplies sewed up too tightly. We *had* to make the purchase from Russia—unofficially, of course.”

“Of course,” said Joe. “And just how am I supposed to help out? If I get caught transporting the stuff out of 500, to this spaceport of yours in the Poconos, I’m a dead drake. And so, probably, is the whole interplanetary trading racket.”

“Don’t call it a racket,” she told him primly. And, with a sigh, “Now, perhaps, you understand why I’m so anxious to get out from under?”

“I wouldn’t call marrying Dion Pearmain exactly getting out from under,” he suggested.

She made a gesture of distaste. “Let’s not talk about it now, darling.” She looked around, saw it was growing light outside. “Why, we’ve wasted the whole night!” she exclaimed.

“I wouldn’t say that,” he replied.

All at once he remembered what he had learned and deduced about the Senator's plans the afternoon before. In the excitement of finding Nesi in his apartment, the intensity of their relationship, their discussion of the poison gas-perfume for Mars deal, Joe had forgotten about the raid. He said, "Just what is the good Senator offering you, honey, in return for you and your fortune?"

"He's not going to get my fortune," she replied with a determined thrust of her chin. "But for the rest, Dion has agreed not to make any move against my people until after our honeymoon. By that time I'm counting on having made different and safer arrangements for them—with your help, darling, of course."

"Of course, sweet," Joe mocked. Then, seriously, "I hate to tell you this, Nesi, but you're getting rooked."

"What do you mean?" she asked him.

He told her about the raid—which was scheduled, to his best belief, to take place within 40 minutes. He told her how he had figured it out. Finally, he told her about his visit to *The Bar Sinister* and the clumsy but effective way in which he had got a warning to Canada Potts. "So I guess it's okay," he concluded, "Anatol told me they could take care of themselves."

But Nesi had turned pale. She said, "You should have let me know sooner, Joe. This is awful!"

"Why?" he wanted to know.

"It's Titan—the invisible one—they don't have names on Titan," she said. "It's—the trouble is, he can't be moved this rapidly in Earth's gravity and atmosphere."

"He got around the apartment house okay," said Joe, puzzled.

"That's because he was close to his tank," said Nesi. "If he gets more than fifty yards away for more than an hour, he gets ill. And moving his tank is like moving two concert grands at once."

"Still going to marry the Senator?" Joe asked her.

"More than ever." Nesi's lips tightened. "If he's *that* dangerous, I'll have to keep an eye on him day and night." Then, reading Joe's expression correctly, "Darling, surely you understand; you and I simply weren't fated to live our lives together."

"We might have made it though," he replied, "if you hadn't made it so tough for both of us."

She was in his arms, her eyes filled with tears. "Please don't, darling!" she pleaded. "I know I deserve it—I don't know, sometimes I think I must be crazy. But at least we've got memories to go on."

"That we do," said Joe, thinking of the last time Marta had spent the night with him. He decided that he had been making life at least as difficult for Marta as Nesi had made it for him. If he ever got out of this interplanetary mess...

Nesi was shaking him, crying, "Joe! Snap out of it! We've got to get up to 62nd Street and stop that raid."

He was just struggling into his jacket when what sounded like a junior riot broke out in the hallway beyond the apartment front door. Nesi, struggling to get her silver-red hair in some sort of order, looked at Joe in alarm, said, "What's that?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," he replied blandly, though he had already recognized the voices of an outraged Paddy Locke and an even more outraged Marta Crane. Then, "Come on. Out the window. I'll go first—I can make the terrace next door easily. Then I'll pull you across. There's a fire-escape there."

"Why not use the door?" asked Nesi, perplexed.

"Because," said Joe, "there's a rat in the hall. And he works for the rat you intend to marry today. If Pearl-main finds out about you and me last night, he'll not only not marry you—

that might be fine—but he'll have me killed—which might not be so good. Remember that, will you, honey?"

"I'll remember, darling," she said. He gave her a quick buss, then scrambled out the window and extended a hand for her. Minutes later they were in a cab, speeding uptown toward 500 East 62nd Street.

6



HEY RAN a dead heat with the Senator's raid. He emerged from a black sedan, accompanied by a couple of tough-looking plainclothes operatives, just as Joe and Nesi stepped onto the sidewalk.

There was a brief tableau of silent, startled recognition in front of the entrance to 500 East 62nd Street.

Then Nesi said coldly, "So this is the way you keep your word."

The Senator shot his cuffs. In soothing-syrup tones, he said, "My dear, I can imagine your feelings. But consider mine; my first duty is, as it has always been, toward the welfare of my country. And surely this is bigger than our personal feelings."

"How corny can you get?" Joe put in.

Dion Pearmain's black brows beetled ferociously as he noted Joe's presence for the first time. "Young man," he said, "this time you have gone too far. I warned you..." He motioned one of his hard-faced aides, who stepped toward Joe.

But Nesi said, "If you lay a hand on Joe, our wedding is off. If there were anything subversive here—which there isn't—Joe is not involved in any way. You leave him alone."

The Senator wrestled silently with himself on the sidewalk; Duty fought

valiantly against the thought of the Wyndham millions, and Duty lost. Pearmain said ominously, "All right, leave him alone—for now." Then, to Joe, "But don't try anything, young man." And, to Nesi, "Very well, my dear, shall we go inside?" He offered her an arm in true courtly fashion.

Nesi balked. She stayed put, said, "No, Dion, if you expect me to keep my pledge to you, you'll have to keep yours to me; if you enter this building, our marriage is off."

Again the Senator went into a one-man wrestling match; and this time Expediency got into the fight to make it a three-way affair. He said, "Very well—but if this young man means so much to you, I feel entirely justified in taking action against him. Unless you release me from that part of the pledge, I shall have to conduct the raid as planned."

It was Nesi's turn to wrestle. The look she turned on Joe was at first piteous, then became dominated by an expression of inimitable compassion. Joe began to wish increasingly for an ability to render himself invisible like the creature from Titan. Nesi was running true to form; she was unable to resist a sacrifice, even if it involved a man she claimed to have loved for more than a decade and with whom she had just spent the night.

Joe decided it was time to speak for himself. He said, "Listen, Senator—why not compromise? You and Nesi—Miss Wyndham take off and get married. Let Paddy Locke take over here; I'll be glad to remain in his custody."

"Oh, Joe—*thank* you!" Nesi exclaimed. "That will make everything perfect, won't it, my dear?"

After a moment the Senator growled, "Yeah—except that Paddy isn't here."

"Reporting for duty, chief," said Paddy, coming to a stop in front of the Senator. He cast a malevolent eye at Joe, an eye that appeared to be turning rapidly black.

"Very well then," said Pearmain. "It's your pigeon, Locke; and heaven help you if you foul it up."

"I won't, sir," said the agent.

"Better call off the rest of your dogs," said Joe.

It took some doing but, with Nesi's support, Joe found himself, minutes later, standing with Paddy on the pavement. Paddy said, "You wait till I get you in private, you louse; what's the idea of setting that babe on me?"

"Me? Setting a babe on you?" Joe countered, though he could guess how Paddy had acquired the black eye. Crossing his fingers mentally, he hoped Marta was all right. He added, "It was damned decent of you, Paddy, to stand guard over Miss Wyndham and me last night, while she was indulging in her final pre-marital fling."

"Huh?" Paddy's mouth fell open and his one good remaining eye became glazed with horror. "Joe!" he whispered hotly. "I didn't—you wouldn't..."

"Not if you behave yourself, sugar," Joe said sweetly.

"But I gotta walk through a raid," Paddy pleaded.

Realizing that he held the whip hand over the agent, Joe nodded politely and led the way inside the house. The outer door was unlatched and Joe, after looking around the foyer briefly, rapped on the door of Canada Potts' apartment.

JOE WONDERED what precautions the aliens had taken.

He didn't have long to wait. Paddy Locke rapped again, when his first summons was unanswered, then shouted, "Open up in there."

The door was flung violently open. A large bare fist appeared rapidly, backed by a singularly large hairy muscular arm. The fist made fearsome, scrunching impact with the Locke countenance. The agent gave vent to a single squawk of alarm, then flew

back across the foyer to thump his head hard against the opposite wall and collapse in a heap on the floor.

Stan Wilder, clad in peppermint striped shorts, appeared from behind his fist. He looked at Joe, then at the unconscious Paddy, then back at Joe. He said mildly, "What's the big idea, chum?"

"You just knocked out a Congressional investigator," said Joe. And, as Miss Potts, wearing a coral pink robe, appeared in the doorway, "You could have done without him tonight, hon-e-y."

"We thought we might need him," said a new voice. Anatol Drayne, wearing his human disguise under a beautifully tailored Oxford grey lounge suit, stood in the elevator door. "I was listening at my window, Joe; you seem to have handled things well."

"Thanks," said Joe, "but I'll never keep out of jail now. I might as well be hung for a sheep though. What do you want me to do?"

"We need a car," said the Venerian thoughtfully. "Matchek has need of the truck. How about him?" With a nod toward Paddy Locke.

"Better frisk him before he comes to," said Joe.

"Will do," Stan Wilder put in. And, as he padded across the foyer to obey, "Don't worry, chum. They let me in on what this thing is all about last night; I'm for Canada, so I'll play ball."

He crouched, removed a gun, a wallet, a handkerchief and a book of keys from the unconscious man's pocket. Drayne said, "His car's down the block; I saw him get out of it when he got here. Shall we go?"

Outside they found the ape-like Matchek in the act of closing the car-trunk on Paddy Locke's sedan. Drayne looked at the janitor inquisitively. "All loaded up, Bill?" he asked.

"All load," said the latter. "No key—I bust lock."

Joe got into the front seat as the Venerian took his place behind the wheel. He said, "Anatol, think I can earn a living on Venus or Mars?"

DRAYNE looked at him oddly when they stopped for a red light on their way across town to the Lincoln Tunnel. He said, "Are you joking, Joe? Sometimes it's hard to tell."

"I'm not joking," Joe moaned. "When Paddy Locke comes out of it, back there, he'll keep after me till he has me behind bars. What's more, he'll get the Senator after me. And Nesi will have to keep shut lest she expose the whole shebang—and I'll have to keep shut or be locked up as a lunatic. No, I'm for taking a *long* trip."

Drayne said, "With your gift for languages, you could be very useful on Venus. Mars might prove—uncomfortable for you during parts of the year. But you could adapt to Venus; other Earthfolk have. Of course, you know you can never come back here. That's why we never *ask* anyone from Earth to make the trip."

"Consider me a volunteer," Joe told him. "I don't know what I'm getting into, but it couldn't be worse than what I've got into right here in little old New York."

"You have a point," Drayne told him. "I fear you may be right to consider yourself—expendable. Of course, once we have taken care of moving Titan's tub, we can protect ourselves. Miss Potts has United Nations Diplomatic Immunity, while I have influential connections. And even your impetuous young friend, Wilder, can hardly be blamed for falling for a girl as charming as Miss Potts. But you, I fear, will be a goat if you remain. It might be wise for you to—leave."

"Where are you taking Titan, by the way?" Joe asked, just for something to say while he considered the step he was planning. Oddly enough, he found himself really regretting but

one thing that leaving Marta forever.

"Temporarily, to Miss Wyndham's house," was the reply. "Matchek and your friend Wilder are making the move under Miss Potts' supervision. Miss Wyndham has the only available bathroom large enough to contain both him and his tub."

He paused, added, "You may be lonely at first on Venus. I can speak from experience when I warn you that life on a strange planet is not happy at first. Everything is too alien, too different. But you will adjust—and from what I have seen of your temperament, you're not the type to stay lonely long."

They were somewhere midway in the Jersey Meadows as the Venerian finished his statement. And, from behind them, a voice spoke, a female voice for the moment both cynical and venomous. It belonged to Marta Crane, and she said, "That's just what I'm afraid of. I don't know where



you're going, Joe, but I'm not letting you out of my sight."

Joe and the Venerian exchanged a glance of complete surprise and then Joe said, "Where in hell did you come from, Marta?"

"From right here under the rug, where that goon put me after he dragged me out of your apartment house."

"It's all right," said Joe. "Get up?"

"How can I?" she retorted, "when I'm handcuffed to the heater?"

Joe pulled the keys from the ignition without turning it off. He scrambled over into the back seat and tried one after another, until, at last, he got his girl unlocked. She essayed the impossible task of assuming frozen hauteur while trying to get herself in some sort of order. Finally she said, "Where are we anyway?"

"I don't know about you," Joe told her, "but I'm on my way to Venus by fast freight."

"Now I know you're really crazy," the girl told him. But anger returned and she blazed, "You stood me up two nights running, you rat! So when I decided to crash your place this morning, this goon at the door knocked me cold. Did you hire him to keep me out, or was it an idea of that business-as-usual boss of yours?"

"Hardly—it was the idea of Senator Pearmain—the man she's marrying today," Joe told her.

SHE REFUSED stoutly to believe any part of this statement until, shortly after they reached the Poconos, it came in as a newsflash over the car radio. And then, when she saw some of the alien apparatus on the great field, hidden in a deep bowl-like valley of Nesi's inherited estate, protected from intruders by an electrified wire mesh fence, she looked at Joe in something like panic.

"Joe," she whispered, "are you really going—somewhere?"

He put down carefully the cylinder

of nerve-gas he had just removed from the trunk compartment of the car. "That's right," he said, "I'm going to Venus. Hell, sugar, I've got to; I'm in so much trouble I couldn't hope to stay out of jail on this planet."

"Joe," she said, looking as if she were going to be sick. "Is there anywhere around here I could lie down?"

"Sure," said Joe. "Just hang on a moment." He finished stowing the final cylinder in a pick-up revetment on the edge of the circular field, then escorted the bewildered girl toward the long, low lodge, whose rustic exterior belied the luxury of its internal appointments.

Most of the afternoon he spent with Anatol Drayne, while the Venerian briefed him on the second planet. Once his lungs had been adapted to certain atmosphere differences, he learned, he would be able to live quite comfortably.

"You'll even find a small Earth-colony at Venus City," said Drayne. "And, of course, there are always a number of Martian girls and women in the interplanetary colony. Oddly enough, their males do not transplant as well; the Martian male is brittle, inadaptably."

"Sounds bearable," said Joe. "But what will I do?"

"Probably work with translations," the Venerian told him. "The way your people are producing books, there's an appalling lot of it to be done. The Interplanetary Council has to keep in touch, you know. I repeat, you ought to make a valuable interworld citizen."

There were a thousand details to try to absorb in a very few hours. And then, with Drayne and a shivering Marta, he stood in the post-twilight darkness, watching the vast shape of the space-ship to blot out the stars while it came down slowly for a perfect landing.

He was introduced to the captain, who directed unloading and loading operations largely by means of a flash-

light strapped to the tip of his tail. Matter-of-fact bustle—what might have been the routine activity of an airport, a railroad station or a bus-terminal—went on around them with smooth efficiency. Rare minerals and other import items, were put aground, the hardwood and nerve-gas taken aboard. Then it was time for Joe to say farewell.

"You'll have plenty of room," the captain informed him. "We dropped off a couple of extra passengers in the Asteroid Belt on our way in from Titan. Glad to have you aboard."

"Joe." Marta's voice was no longer quavering, as it had been most of the day. It was decided, even possessive, as she said, "I'm coming with you. Some of these women look much too much like women for me to have a moment's peace if I don't."

Joe looked at Anatole Drayne. The latter smiled in the darkness and said, "I think you'll find they *are* women. And women of Earth are considered

singularly beautiful on my planet. In fact, some schools of thought hold them the most beautiful of the entire Solar System."

"Reverse Venuses," said Joe. "I'll be damned!"

"I'm coming with you," Marta repeated firmly. "So don't try to stop me, if you know what's good for you."

"Who's trying?" Joe countered. "Come on, honey—let's get aboard."

A little later, when they were alone in an alien cabin, he heard her giggle, eyed her suspiciously, asked, "What's so funny?"

She said, looking pleasantly evil, "Oh, I was just thinking of what's going to happen when Senator Pearmain takes his first bath in his bride's house."

And Joe, recalling where Titan's tub had been placed, knew then—if he had ever doubted it—that he wasn't going to be lonely.

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