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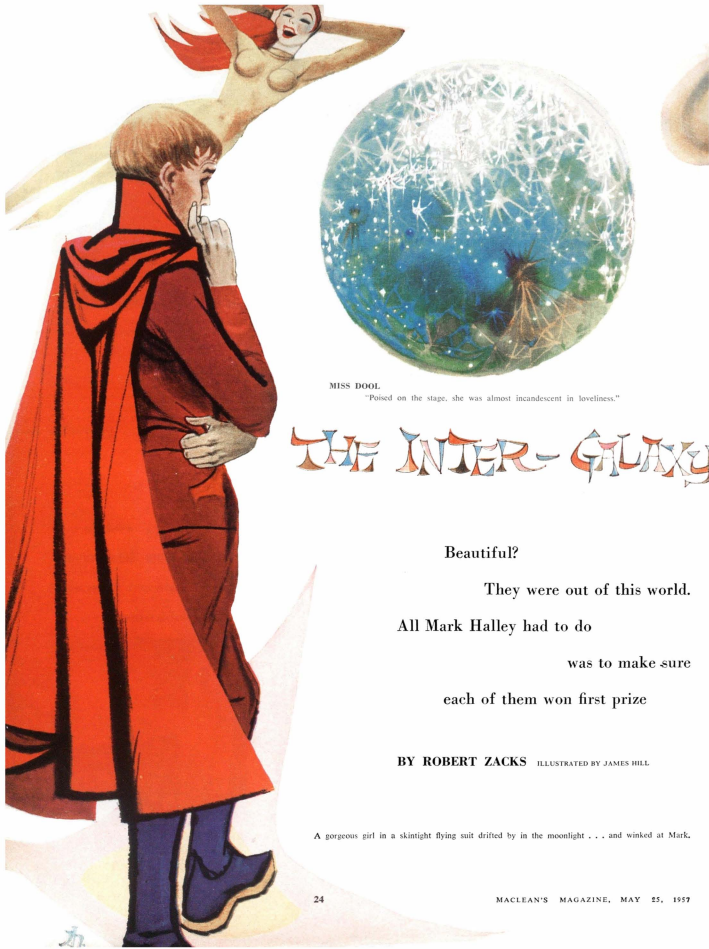
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MISS DOOL

"Poised on the stage, she was almost incandescent in loveliness."

THE INTER-GALAXY

Beautiful?

They were out of this world.

All Mark Halley had to do

was to make sure

each of them won first prize

BY ROBERT ZACKS ILLUSTRATED BY JAMES HILL

A gorgeous girl in a skintight flying suit drifted by in the moonlight . . . and winked at Mark.



MISS PYLIC CLOUD

"As they watched in wonder, the vague shape hovered and whirled."



MISS MIRRI

"As she danced her petals moved demurely."

BEAUTY CONTEST

When Mark Halley was summoned by the World Council ruling the earth to accept a contract he was both incredulous and overjoyed. As a one-man public-relations firm he'd been barely scraping by on small jobs for private firms. Sizzling with excitement he stared at his Visorphone screen where the image of the grey-haired official Summoner was waiting politely.

The big time, at last, said Mark happily. "What kind of assignment is it?"

The Summoner said smoothly, "Judging an inter-galaxy beauty contest. Different life forms will compete for the most attractive —"

"Oh no!" yelped Mark, turning pale. "Nothing doing. Not interested. I heard all about that."

The Summoner said, "Well, come down and discuss it."

"Are you kidding?" snorted Mark. "I know World Contract Law. Subsection 6a says a World Contract is accepted when a summoinee steps over the threshold of the World Council Chamber. You're not going to rope me into that deal. Sorry."

As the Summoner's image snapped off the screen he had an angry glint in his eyes.

Mark knew none of the big public-relations outfits had been willing to risk their necks on such an explosive assignment. This was to be the first inter-galaxy beauty contest and the losers

would represent whole planets of alien life. Even in contests between curvaceous lovely women of Earth the losers became lifelong enemies of the judges and poured venom on their unfortunate heads. So what would happen in an inter-galaxy beauty contest where the entrants were from newly contacted and unknown planets with whom Earth was striving to keep on friendly terms?

Soft music in the clouds

Mark shuddered. God help the fellow who got stuck with that contract.

Suddenly he grinned. Lucky he hadn't passed the threshold of the World Council Chamber or he'd have been stuck. It certainly paid to know your contract law.

Still chuckling, Mark belted on his antigravity belt and left the building. The cool night air never smelled so sweet, and he was so filled with relief at his escape he actually walked six blocks before pressing the belt control and drifting upward.

He navigated himself to one of the floating spheres that shimmered attractively at the two-thousand-foot level, entered the porthole and his ears were immediately soothed with soft music from the dance band. He returned to gravity

and was presently shown to a table by a waiter.

"I'm treating myself tonight," Mark said expansively. "The best wine in the galaxy, if you please. And that new dish I heard about on the news, eh? What's it called again?"

The waiter beamed and rubbed his hands together. "Mashed potatoes, sir. It is a dish of the ancients, sir. Our food-research specialists finally succeeded in germinating those seeds that the archaeologists found. A very rare dish indeed, and most expensive," he added discreetly.

Mark laughed. "Who cares? Let's have a dish."

It tasted marvelous. After dinner Mark left the restaurant, humming happily, filled with a sense of freedom from care. A gorgeous girl drifted past in the light of the silver moon. She wore a skintight golden flying suit and she gave Mark a wink and touched her waist control band so she floated down toward the shadows of the trees.

Mark's blood pressure rose. He breathed deeply and he directed his flight down after her. Oh brother, this was as nice a break as he'd ever seen. He touched lightly to the ground and walked through the shrubbery, calling softly, "Hey, baby, where are you? Hey —"

"Here," she said behind him, and with that, something slammed the back of his head and he sank down and down . . . continued on page 46



There was no margin for error. Offend anyone from outer space and Mark faced a horrible fate

MARK found himself seated in a chair, alone in a room that looked oddly familiar. Before him was a table around which were ten other armchairs similar to the one holding him. As he groggily put his hand to his aching skull, his mouth opened in a gasp of combined pain and frightened recognition.

"Oh no!" he moaned.
He was in the World Council Chamber. As he sat there, stupefied at how he'd been shanghaied, the door opened and the ten councilmen entered solemnly, draped in their judicial black gowns. Each took his place. Mark took one look at their iron-hard faces, the granite-strong mouths, and he knew the utter futility of protesting.

One of the councilmen said in deliberate tones, "Mark Halley, by appearing in this chamber in response to our summons you have, under World Law, accepted the contract we are now going to outline to you."

"I am honored," said Mark, wincing at the pain from the swollen lump on his head. "I am privileged to serve this august body and my world."

There were very tiny smiles which flickered away.

"Success in this assignment," said the councilman softly, "will yield you five years of support on luxury level."

Mark drew a deep breath of astonishment, forgetting his aching head.

"However," said the councilman grimly, "failure may result in an unknown and unpleasant fate to be determined by some alien life form on its own world. We admit it is a most difficult assignment, which is why the fee for success is so high."

They all stared at Mark intently, studying him. He swallowed with some difficulty. "I know about the inter-galaxy beauty contest. It was suggested by one of the ambassadors from a new planet, wasn't it? He had studied our customs and decided it would be a nice cultural method of getting acquainted," said Mark.

"That is substantially correct," said the councilman dryly. "We could hardly refuse. They would have taken offense. Your problem is to judge the beauty contest so that everybody is left happy. This is a complex situation because of the unexpected things that happen whenever an alien life form first comes to visit this planet."

Mark turned pale. "What do you mean? What unexpected things?"

"Well," said the councilman thoughtfully. "Twenty years ago one of those giant living crystals from the dark star Pleggan landed on Earth for preliminary discussions on a treaty. We'd dealt with them on their own star for ten years from our pioneering spaceships and never had a bit of trouble."

He paused. Mark stammered, "W-what happened?"

"The minute it landed, he exploded," said the councilman wisely. "Pleggan immediately declared war. We had no choice but to wipe out every living crystal before they killed us." He scowled.

"Why did it explode?" said Mark unhappily.

"Haven't the least idea. Our scientists think there may be some difference in our gravitational effect that shattered the crystal. But to this day we're just guessing as to the cause."

Mark stood there mutely, his face a shade of pale green.

"However, the entire resources of Earth will be at your disposal," said the councilman gravely. "All the machinery and executive talent of the top public-relations firms will be at your command. An entire pleasure city has been evacuated

for the reception of the alien life form beauty contestants. Summaries of preliminary studies made of these new cultures will be supplied you. Translation experts, specialists of every kind will be made available."

"That's f-f-fine," said Mark nervously. In formal tones the white-haired councilman said, "Mark Halley, the contract between World Council and you is duly recorded."

The entire council chorused, "In effect!"

None of them looked at Mark. Grimly, politely they stared at the vast conference table. Mark got up. Obviously there was nothing more to be said. He turned and walked out of the chamber.

As he moved down a long, impressively dimmed passage, two uniformed men closed in, one on each side of him. They wore uniforms of white with scarlet piping on the collars and pockets. It was the design of the highly efficient Liaison Corps, the group of technicians whose speciality it was to unravel bureaucratic red tape, *fast*. If not, woe into the slow-

poke; be he a powerful politician or a lowly clerk he was apt to find the circumstances of his life unpleasantly altered.

"Jeff Wintner reporting for duty, sir," said the hawk-faced young man on Mark's left. "I am under your orders until further notice."

"Sam Blenheim, sir," said the huge fellow with the moon face at Mark's right. "I'm the other half of this Liaison team."

Mark said hopefully. "All right, all right, let's get going."

A WEEK later, after long days of feverish study, Mark was nervously waiting at the outdoor area set up for the landing of the spaceships bringing the contestants. Full responsibility for feeding and sheltering the alien life forms had been assumed by the aliens themselves. They would live in their own ships and, utilizing data supplied by our scientists, prepare their own adaptation techniques to life on the surface of Earth. Communications had been established by language experts long skilled in such galaxy problems.

There were fifty men grouped in a shimmering plastic booth, near the stage which was transcendently beautiful. Each specialist had a microphone, a control board studded with dials and meters—and fear in his heart. Because, like Mark, they could be sacrificed to appeasement if anything went wrong.

They tensely hunched over their microphones, looking up only to whisper to each other or glance toward the stage steps where Mark was conferring with Jeff Wintner, the Liaison man.

"Okay, sir," Jeff was saying. "The plan is complete. We get them in and out fast, one beauty contestant at a time for a maximum of five minutes on stage. Our translator communicates vast approval in the alien life form's language. We indicate the life form has far surpassed any of the Earth entries in its class, and we give it a medalion or certificate."

"That's it," said Mark, prowling in a small circle, his hands nervously thrust in his pockets. "How about the canned applause?"

"That was tough, but we got it. The applause will match the alien culture. We nearly tripped on one of them—picked up a disapproval communication instead of applause."

"Oh no!" said Mark, turning pale. "It's okay now, though. We—ooops, here comes number one."

Mark turned with Jeff and saw the bubble spaceship from the planet Dool, of Danger III area, drift from the rear parking area and come to rest against the stage. As a door slid open Jeff rapidly spoke into his lapel microphone. In the shimmering control booth the specialists made rapid motions on control boards. *I hope nothing goes wrong*, thought Mark.

OUT of the door opening in the spaceship extended a long, wide metal ramp. As a series of melodious chimes began to ring out, a strange object rolled from the ship and down the ramp. It was a thirty-foot sphere, ponderous and deliberate, which rolled with a faint grinding sound as if its great weight were taking the surface of the stage.

"A-uh," murmured Jeff appreciatively, as suddenly strong spotlights were flashed upon the sphere. From a million facets of the surface it glittered with unbelievable beauty.

It poised in the centre of the stage, almost incandescent in loveliness.

"What is it?" asked Mark in awe. "A diamond?"

"No," said Jeff. "Salt. Pure crystalline salt on that outer shell."

"What's inside?"

"We're not sure. We suspect sodium and chlorine are kept from combining inside and form an energy pattern that supplies —"

He stopped. Something was wrong. Where was the order putting the Earth contestants in this class onstage? As he bent toward his lapel microphone Sam Blenheim's voice came from the tiny but efficient speaker beside it. "Get that creature offstage *quick!* Signal their spaceship to call it back inside."

"Why?" yelled Mark into his own transmitter as Jeff instantly relayed Sam's instructions to the control booth within which could be seen frantic action.

Sam said rapidly, "Going to rain in a few minutes."

Mark looked up and saw the fast-forming cloud, dark-bellied and bulging, sweeping in over the hill on the horizon. "Holy Moses," he gasped. "And this creature's made of salt —"

"There's no rain on Planet Dool," muttered Jeff as he tensely watched the huge sparkling ball of alien life begin

to move, rolling ponderously toward the space ship. "It would be like pouring a stream of acid over a human."

"Too bad we couldn't have this affair indoors," moaned Sam's voice.

"Some of the entrants are naturally claustrophobic," muttered Jeff in answer. "They even have transparent walls to their spaceships for that reason."

As Mark held his breath the entrant from Dool safely made its ship and the door slid closed behind it. At that moment a pattering of rain sounded. Mark spoke rapidly into his own microphone. "Tell the ship we do not control rain of this planet. We can predict it but not control it. Tell them also that their entrant has won first prize in its class."

They waited, their mouths grim, not looking at each other. Anything could happen with a near catastrophe like this barely avoided.

Then the message came in answer.

"It is most fortunate you signaled the danger in time. That was our beloved queen on your stage. We thank you in her name for the victory. We are now departing. Your atmosphere is too corrosive for us, Farewell."

Suddenly their spaceship was gone.

Mark's knees felt rubbery. He sat down and put his head in his hands. "Oh, brother, that was a close shave."

Mark felt Jeff's hand on his shoulder. "We'd better get ready for the next contestant. Are you okay? Can you continue?"

"I'm just dandy," said Mark dully. He sat down, staring at the slanting rain which was already slowing up as the thunderclouds passed by. As the clouds broke and showed blue sky, Mark began to laugh hysterically.

"Maybe you'd better lie down for a moment," said Jeff. "I can pull Sam from the Research Room. We can handle it." "I'm okay," said Mark, a wild grin on his face. "I was just thinking about that creature. It was made of crystalline salt, eh?"

"So what?"

"So what? We shake salt onto our food, don't we?" said Mark. "Would that alien life form consider us as monsters who eat their flesh? Suppose we went to a planet where such creatures as they lived on the flesh of captive men? I mean—"

"By gosh," muttered Jeff. "I see what you mean."

By this time the sun was shining and the next spaceship had drifted to a stop over the huge stage. From an almost invisible opening streamed a jetlike blast of dust. It was a beauty contestant.

As they watched in wonderment it formed into a vague hooded shape which swirled and changed in a hovering cloud, remaining in one spot.

As Mark stared in uneasy amazement, Sam Blehheim's voice said briefly from the speaker on Jeff's lapel. "Beauty contestant from Pyllic Cloud, in Danger III. Each speck of dust is a cell in the body, and is electrically charged. No surface tension or particular body form."

"This is a new one on me," muttered Mark.

Jeff said in a low voice. "It's highly intelligent. Our scientists are afraid of it."

Suddenly the dust cloud formed into a hoop and whirled in one spot like a wheel turning at high speed. Immediately it reshaped into a most intricate woven form like taffy being pulled into a seaman's rope knot. Before they could comment on it, another change brought a reforming into a compact ball, so tight the dust now appeared to be a solid.

The ball hovered and slowly turned like a planet. Then, simultaneously, they all saw it at once.

"It's Earth, a duplicate of Earth," cried Mark, as he recognized the outline in lighter browns, of the North American continent.

Sam's voice said urgently from the microphone. "Suggest immediate recognition of its graciousness and beauty, sir." Mark said hastily. "Right. To communications. We are overwhelmed by your control and—and forms."

"Oh migosh!" yelled Jeff suddenly. "We're in trouble again!" He pointed to the horizon and at first, when Mark saw the rainbow that came after the rain, he was nonplussed, but then he remembered also. He groaned. These creatures of the Pyllic Cloud of Danger III, communicated by emitting a glow of colors in various patterns of a complicated kind. And the colors of the spectrum arranged in nature's bow pattern were, to them, the vulgar equivalent of the simple drooling of an imbecile, or spitting on the rug in the living room.

Both Jeff and Mark wheeled toward the beauty contestant. Sure enough the solid ball representing Earth had exploded into an agitated cloud of dust which promptly streamed back into the small opening on the spaceship.

Sam's voice said helplessly. "Message, sir, from Pyllic Cloud spaceship. Best

translation we can get is, 'Your allowing this crudity to be said to us is unforgivable. We are departing.'"

"Explain to them," yelled Mark. "In-sult unintended. This is a natural phenomenon of our atmosphere after rain." They were going crazy in the control booth.

Back came the message, sharply. "We demand immediate obliteration of the insult as proof of good will. Otherwise we shall establish your hostile intentions with our government."

Jeff looked stunned. Mark choked out. "How am I going to obliterate a rainbow?"

"You'd better," said Jeff almost in a whisper. "You'd just damn well better, and fast."

Shocked into frenzy by as huge a dose of adrenaline as his scared glands ever kicked into the blood stream, Mark's brain leaped toward survival.

He found an answer. "Sam," he shouted into the microphone. "I want twenty spaceships making an impenetrable smoke screen between this area and the rainbow. I want it in five minutes."

"Can do," said Sam's voice in a relieved tone.

Soon dark dots on the sky turned into spaceships which poured out a billowing fantastic flood of cloud which shut off the entire sky holding the insulting and vulgar rainbow.

A message came from the Pyllic Cloud spaceship. "We accept your apology."

"Tell them," said Mark, mooping his forehead. "That our Earth contestants in this class of beauty contest have withdrawn after seeing their entrant since it is obvious that Earth entrants are inferior to theirs in every way."

The answer came promptly. "How very true. In that case, farewell. We shall re-

port favorably on your cultural attainments."

Their spaceship zoomed from sight.

WELL," said Mark huskily, "only one more to go. I think we've made it." "Maybe," said Jeff.

"Who's next?"

"Mirri. Form of life vegetation, ambulatory," Jeff spoke into his microphone to the control booth. "Let's wrap this last one up, fellows, and get our necks out of the noise, huh? Get our entries onstage now."

Buttons were punched. On the vast and lovely stage, rising from the hidden compartments underneath, came the Earth entries for this class, rare orchids, crimson roses, huge bunches of pussy willow.

"Wow!" breathed Mark as the beauty contestant from Mirri slowly came out of the spaceship which had drifted into position on the stage. Beside him Jeff uttered a deep sigh of appreciation.

A giant ambulatory flower swayed on to the stage. It had exquisite petals of glowing lavender which, as they watched

in breathless admiration, subtly changed to a phosphorescent purple and again changed to a brilliant yellow right from the soul of a sun.

And its motions! As it moved gracefully onstage on delicate tendril feet the huge petals moved demurely, like a woman's eyelids dropping over a flirtatious glance. The enchanting effect was almost hypnotic.

"Beautiful, beautiful," said Mark, dazed.

"Applause," Jeff hissed into his lapel microphone.

In the booth another button was hit and the applause came. A screen slid up facing the stage and on it flashed an animated cartoon scene in the specific pattern of motion that was approved on the star Mirri. The giant lovely flower bowed and delicately moved back toward the ship. Then it halted, swayed, its petals whipping about in agitated motion. As Mark and Jeff stared in horror, it stumbled and crawled pitifully toward the two ugly cactulike plants that came racing belligerently from the spaceship to assist it.

"What happened?" yelled Mark, his face turning green with fear. "Find out, quick."

Jeff snarled into his lapel microphone and in the control booth a sweating language specialist gestured in sign language to a communication screen: "What happened? Tell us! We do not know and wish to make amends."

Three minutes after the limp flower had been carried into the alien ship whose door slammed shut with an angry bang, the fantastic message was indignantly flashed via the screen in the control booth by an outraged soldier of Mirri.

"He says," muttered Jeff, "that the lady was was—" He stopped, gulped, then finished, "She was raped."

Mark looked at him numbly. "Raped? How can a flower be raped?" Then he understood and put his hand to his head. "Omigosh, pollen. Some pollen floating in the air. Or an insect—a bee landed on her and the pollen on its legs—"

"It is rape," said Jeff, "to an intelligent, ambulatory flower. I think we're in bad trouble."

"We should have had an enclosed air-conditioned stage," said Mark, dazed.

"Never mind that," said Jeff. "You better think fast what to do."

But for once Mark couldn't think of a thing. His mind went blank. The Mirri spaceship took off. Mark stared after it. Then he became aware he was surrounded by men in the silver and black of the police.

MARK prowled the bare room that was his cell, ready to blow his top from sheer boredom. Even execution was better than this inaction, he thought. But when, in the fourth week, they came for him, their faces grim, he bucked fearfully against the wall.

"Mark Halley," said the captain of the guard stiffly, "come with us."

Mark's shoulders sagged. "We're going to the trial, I suppose?"

"There will be no trial," said the captain.

"I have a right to a trial!" shouted Mark.

"Not when charges have been dropped." The captain glared at Mark as did the other police officers. "Oh, you lucky dog. Why can't things like this happen to us?"

Mark stared at them. "Things? Things like what?"

"Like," snarled the captain, "getting five years of support on luxury-level allowances. Pleasure-palace time, a private space yacht—"

"—What happened to that galloping flower from Mirri?" said Mark, hardly breathing. "Didn't she bud?"

"Oh yes. Yes indeed. As pregnant as a flower can be. Only it turned out the new baby was a mutant that is resistant to a deadly virus disease that the Mirri had been battling for centuries. The whole population on Mirri is in wild celebration. So out you go."

Mark went. He could hardly wait to get out and begin the joyous life he'd won. The only thing he stopped for was to buy a flower for his lapel. ★