

All
Stories
New

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UTILITY GIRL

by Basil Wells

illustrated by EMSH

Theo hadn't read all the fine print in her contract. She didn't know that, as utility girl, she was expected to cater to the needs of all eight regular crewmen throughout the three-year cruise.

During the early years of star hopping, after the problem of multiple light speed was broken, and light years were covered in months or weeks, space crews often needed extra hands. Utility hands, or apprentices, were signed on with the understanding that death or injury to the regulars might allow them to become crewmen. By use of intensive edutapes, they could be trained in a matter of days for the specialized duties. Pay was microscopic, but the glamor of star hopping, plus chronic unemployment on overcrowded Terra, kept the pool of men and women ever full.

Aboard a passenger liner, a utility tour could be very pleasant and instructive. To this branch of space hopping, ambitious young citizens of Terra and Mars flocked. The freighter service was something else, again; only the despairing or

apathetic signed up with it. Consequently, the utility berth on a freighter was often unfilled ...

THE INTERCOM grunted in the clipped Interling phrases of space, "Replacement Ute reporting aboard, sir. Wish to interview her?"

My jaws snapped. "Her? A woman this time is it? No! Show her to her quarters and warn her. No drinking or drugs!"

"Will do." The soft Lasdian voice, paused. "That all, sir?"



Grisa fought like a wildcat, trying to jab me with that hypo of sleep ...

"If my wife comes aboard—inform me."

"Yes, sir."

Was there a note of amusement or distaste in the voicing of these Interling words? After the voyage just completed from Aantar to Lunà, they could hold few illusions about my lush, lush of a wife. She drank often and heavily; she was addicted to the use of powdered *eduha* pods, a potent drug from Aantar. Yet, despite her excesses she was as shapely and fresh as the night when I first met her in a night club on one of the hothouse asteroids. Even after seven years of marriage, the very thought of her thrilled me.

Because of her, I had fired my old crew and taken 'out Aantarian registry for the *Khan*. My crew were alien humanoids—Lasdians and Aantarians. Only my fellow officer, Ralph Alpergen, of Terran ancestry via Mars, could speak our native tongue freely. And now Alpergen, astrogator and mate aboard the *Khan* since Aantar, was Grisa's latest conquest.... For three weeks she had not spoken to me; she was

gone Earthside, probably with him.

NO USE firing Alpergen at this late date; a hurried replacement might prove even more obnoxious. And, much as I hated the way my wife trampled on my sense of decency, I knew that I would do nothing. I was too afraid of losing her forever.

Perhaps this new utility hand might win Alpergen's interest, and send Grisa back to me.... I scorned the thought. Grisa's sultry, auburn-haired beauty outshone that of any drab female volunteer from the sunken gutters of Appalachia City.

I went back to checking the carbons and cargo slips of the supplies destined for Sebal, lone watery planet of a lusty, distant young sun charted as Groff D-3, and for the desert world of Kelso. In seven hours we blasted off for an overhaul at the asteroids and Factory In The Sky. At Factory, we would have the minimum of repairs. A freighter—especially one now under Aantarian registry—rated only patchwork overhauls.

In seven hours, we would

leave the lunar spacesite—to be gone for not less than seven years.

I wondered what Terra was really like. Grisa was due back from North America, where she had been born. I had never found time to accompany her. Always there were cargoes and owners' representatives and petty red tape to slash through. I had been born in space thirty four years before; my education came through spools of edutape and a single year at North Mars University, and Terra's vast underground cities could not be too much unlike the sunken lunar ports.

The *Khan* could blast off at any time now. The sooner the better. Cities or space stations seemed cramped and crowded after the vast freedom of space. The hours remaining would drag.

Cargo slips, storage manifests, union cargo thumpers' demand for overtime, demands for more economy from the other partners, and a fistful of charges from stores and hotels, Earthside.... A final check-off of the thousand and one minor items on requisition, and supposedly delivered—not the

least of which was warfarin to tickle space rats' palates.

THE INTERCOM rattled. "Lo, Glen." The throaty, almost hoarse voice made my stomach knot. "I'm back."

"So I hear," I managed, trying to keep my voice toneless.

"Alla space kinks unjointed," Grisa said. "Wait'll you see dresses'n gowns I bought." She laughed, a low broken gurgle like a pleased child's. "All's forgiven isn't it, Glen?"

I felt my teeth grate together and lock. But she knew. If she crooked her little finger or smiled....

"I'll be in your cabin," she whispered. "Something lacy, and black, and cool.... In an hour, Glen?"

"All right, Grisa. Sure.... And this time we'll really stick together. Right?"

"No more wild orbits," Grisa's voice said creamily. "I promise."

Silence. I looked down at the thinning stack of reports and bills. Forty minutes should do for them.

Resolutely I pushed the pink and black and auburn image of my wife from my brain. I

must finish this quickly, go to her, and then ready the ship for blastoff. The blood sang and throbbed in my temples and pulsed in my throat. For the moment, I was the luckiest man on Luna.

“SO THAT is what the hot-house asteroids are like.”

The words were soft and not intended for any other ears than the speaker's. She was polishing the reddish-veined metal legs of the ship's chart room tables, and watching the visual plate that monitored our approach to Asteroid 714. She was plain-featured, eyes wide and gray, and her brown hair pulled back severely. In shapeless gray coveralls and a limp cap of the same color, she seemed but a masquerading child.

“Ah.” I studied her. Three days out and this was my first glimpse of the new ute. “You're the utility hand?”

“Yes, Captain,” she said, a faint dimple denting her tanned right cheek. “I am Theodora Ellson.”

“Look plenty young,” I grunted, chewing all the while at an unlighted cigar. They were always unlighted aboard a

freighter. “Most of our female utes are middle-aged. Experienced hands.”

“Oh I can learn, Captain, sir,” she protested. “Tell me which edutapes to study. I'm sure I can carry out my duties satisfactorily.”

She tucked a stray lock of hair back into the coiled mass at the nape of her neck, and I scowled. She sounded, and appeared, little like the usual w o r n flamers who signed aboard.

“Why'd you sign up, Ellson?” I demanded gruffly.

She blushed, her plain face momentarily averted. It was a beautiful bit of acting, I thought—probably done by holding her breath or some other studied tension. I felt disgust and anger.

“It's my fiance. He's an engineer on Sebal. He was to send for me in eight years.” Her tongue was running away with her words, so rapidly did she talk.

“But after five years, with no word—not that I could expect any until next year—I quit my job out in Utah and came to the Moon to work my way out to join him.”

A pretty story! These women off the streets of Appalachia City's sunken levels all have them. And yet.... Her eyes were clear and bright with unshed tears— As though she feared I would censure her or put her out the airlock.

SHE COULD have heard the glamorous tales, or watched the vid-dramas that glorified the impossible romances of utes and wealthy passengers aboard the passenger space liners. The more sordid side of life for a female ute aboard a freighter is seldom widely publicized. If so, she was in for a shock.

"You can leave the *Khan* here among the hothouse asteroids, or at Factory In The Sky, Ellson," I said curtly. "Until then, you are relieved of any duties."

Tears came into the woman's wide-spaced eyes. Her hands spread wide, pleading. She was already on her knees where she had been working.

"Please," she begged. "Don't make me leave the ship. I must go on to Sebal!"

I shrugged and prepared to leave the cabin. I thought bet-

ter of it, however, and jabbed a thumb at her. "Do you think any man will want to marry you after you've served three years as a ute aboard a freighter, Ellson?"

"Why not? The pay is low, but the edutapes will improve my mind and earning potential. Of course he will want to marry me."

I laughed harshly. "Then he cares greatly for you, or little for his own reputation. To marry a woman who has cattered to the eight crewmen of a star freighter for three years, and to do it willingly" I shook my head. "Is he really that broad-minded?"

Theodora Ellson's face grew white and twisted. Her eyes were dark with shock and disbelief. She stood up.

"You mean to say *that* is part of my duties?" She looked down, her pale skin flooding red. "All the crew..."

"It's in the small print, Ellson."

"What sort of work could I find on—or rather in—the hollowed asteroids, Captain?" she asked breathlessly.

"Waitress or factory hand, if you are lucky. There is little

choice. Unemployment is as bad here as on Terra and Mars."

TH E O D O R A ELLSON'S back straightened and her mouth thinned with resolution.

"Never!" she cried. "I am going on to Sebal. Three years—I can endure the three years of being a ute—and then if Medson Blaiter does not want me, I will find work for which I have trained."

"Uum," I said, rubbing a finger along my newly-shaven jaw.

"Only one thing," uncertainly, "could you send me word, and permit darkness?" She paused, searching for words. "I could not work with them later, if I knew..."

I studied her downcast face with a grim sort of amusement. Let her know the suffering of waiting for the inevitable as I had known it. She was a woman like Grisa—not the same, not naturally amoral or a drunkard, but yet a woman—and she would pay. I hated all the women of the galaxy.

Already I had caught Grisa slipping out of the quarters of Alpergen—and this but a day after her promise of no more

wild orbits! I must have known, even while she promised, that she was completely without honor. Yet I could not give her up...

"An unusual request, Ellson. But—yes. I will establish that procedure." I relented for a moment. "However, while we are at Factory why not try to find something more congenial."

"Thank you, Captain," she said faintly, turning back to her polishing, "but my mind is made up. I stick."

I shrugged and left the chart room.

WE HAD SPENT four Earthside days in the null-gravity of Factory's vast hollow interior while repair crews went over the Khan. The five bulky Aantarians, and the three fragile-limbed Lasdians of my crew had spent most of their time in the shops and entertainment sectors that share the inner shell of the spinning cylinder with the factories. There the pseudo gravity is close to one tenth that of Earth, lessening with each inner level until the three-mile length of the spaceship yards is practically zero.

Grisa and Alpergen had disappeared until just before take-off, but Theodora Ellson had remained aboard to help me with the food supplies brought to us there from the hollowed crystalline asteroids—the Hothouse Asteroids. She had refused to visit the outer levels of the Factory but she did go with me to one of the sealed little worlds where hydroponics have brought green life and processing factories. But she had not applied there for work.

Now three space tugs had warped us out into open space, and we were in space drive—our first destination a year distant. A third of our cargo would be left on the desert planet of Kelso, and then it would be two years in space drive to Sebal.

"But what am I to do with my time?" Theodora Ellson, her final check of the supplies finished demanded. "Is there any objection to my using the technical edutapes?"

"You could gamble or play Aantarian *tchank* as the crew does," I told her. We were in the ship's lounge, Grisa, Alpergen, and myself. "Or Alpergen could teach you astrogation."

ALPERGEN'S graceful long body turned away from Grisa as his name was mentioned. He always moved smoothly, almost snakily, his dark eyes glittering. He studied the plain-faced ute in her ill-fitting gray coveralls. He laughed. "Why waste time on a moronic ute, when I can find something more interesting."

He looked down at Grisa and they both laughed. My fists clenched. I saw pity and embarrassment in the girl's face and I hated that even more. But I was Captain; a fight would solve nothing—it even might drive Grisa away from me for good.

"Sure. Use the tapes, Ellson," I said shortly. "In three years you should learn how to build a spacer as well as navigate."

She left the lounge and I followed a few minutes later. Grisa and Alpergen were too engrossed in their drinking and their conversation to know that I had gone.

I prowled the ship, checking on the pile and on the cargo. A silvery-haired Lasdian, long-limbed and nimble-fingered, was on duty. In space, the Las-

dians had proved their worth over we Terrestrians—they could withstand acceleration and extremes of temperature and gravity that would render us helpless. Only a lack of concentration kept Lasdians from becoming ship's officers; their minds were like quicksilver.

"The ship is clean," I commended him. "You have all done fine work, Anl."

Anl ducked his head, his enormous yellow eyes bright.

"It is ute who show us," he said, his narrow toothless mouth grinning. "Is good nest-keeper."

"Better than some we've had," I agreed, thinking of the surly male ute on the previous voyage. "Not so bossy."

THE AVERAGE ute—or even the average Terrestrial—considers all alien humanoids his inferiors; and this last one was an exaggerated example of his type. Eventually the Aantarians had refused to work with, or around him, and he had come to fear for his life. The blue-maned, golden-skinned giants are stolid, hard-working men, but even their

good nature could not tolerate a man like Hallek.

"We like ute, Theo," Anl said. "Teach her our talk. Aantar talk too, maybe."

I walked on, to the repair mech's control cubicle, and seated myself there. It was too bad that Ellson was a woman. A man could be groomed to take Alpergen's place—this would be his last tour of duty aboard the *Khan*. But a woman—no!

The helmet, with its thousands of needle-like filaments, I fitted down over my skull and adjusted. I closed the switch.

The hum muted and I experienced the familiar transition from a frail human body into the plastic-and-alloy robot giant that was the ship's repair mech. Through the scientific magic of the mentrol unit, my brain could see, and hear, and feel through this mech body as though it were my own. Not for us the clumsy space suits, the radiation burns, and the threat of sterility that plagued the early planet hoppers!

I stepped out of the retaining clamps and proceeded directly to the locks leading to empty space. I had inspected

the ship's interior; now it was time to examine the outer skin.

Ordinarily, this was a routine job assigned to one of the crewmen, but I enjoyed being away from the cramped ship's quarters for a time—even though it was by proxy. It was good to be alone.

THE YEAR-LONG hop to Kelso was much like any other voyage. The crewmen were on duty week-on, week-off—their off weeks spent in dreamless sleep if they so desired, a suspension of life induced by minute amounts of iberno. It was iberno that enabled the first slower-than-light ships to reach other solar systems—hops often lasted for several centuries, then. In fact our new star ships were contacting systems where the original expeditions were not due to arrive for hundreds of years.

Alpergen and my wife took their iberno shots regularly, but I refused mine. There was a growing suspicion in my mind that I might never come out of suspended animation once I entered it. With booster shots I could be rendered helpless, and

on a later hop my body could be *accidentally* destroyed. And my wife would inherit my percentage in the Aantarian registered ship—with Alpergen to captain it.

I had seen it in their eyes, a secret sort of impatience, every time I refused the shots.

Theodora Ellson, too, refused her iberno. She was busy with the edutapes and with her duties about the ship; gradually she took over most of Alpergen's work. Never had our records been so neat or so accurately documented. In one year, she learned more than many a seven year graduate of Terra's universities.

It was easy to forget that she was a woman. She was not like Grisa—not shapely or feminine or provocative. With her shortly-cut brown hair, and her bulky gray coveralls she resembled only an eager young man trying to learn about navigation and space.

SHE CAME to me often with questions that I could not readily answer; and as the long weeks passed I, too, used the dusty tapes to refresh my knowledge. We became friends,

our loneliness a mutual bond. I learned about her background, an orphan at eight, raised by a dour uncle in a mining village in Utah, and about the whirlwind courtship by the restless young engineering graduate from Appalachia City.

"And so your Medson Blaiter took the five thousand units your uncle left you, back to Appalachia with him," I said.

"He was going to furnish an apartment and buy a used hopter with it," she said. She laid down the control mechanism she was repairing there in the shop. "But apartments were hard to find."

I teetered back on my heels against the repair mech clipped to the bulkhead, my eyes narrowed with thought.

"And then Blaiter joined a mining expedition for Sebal," I went on, "and left without letting you know in advance."

"He couldn't, Captain; he had to decide at once. There was no work on Terra, or even Mars. Mining is almost dead—mines worked out or low grade."

"I realize that, Theo," I said impatiently. "But leaving with-

out contacting you—and with your five thousand..."

"That is to be invested on Sebal," she said quickly, "for me. He says it will be ten times as much by the time he sends for me."

I snorted inaudibly. There was no question in my mind about her *ambitious* lover. He had taken this simple rural woman's money and spent it with no intention of sending for her. She was probably only one of many that he had romanced. His enlisting for a tour in the mines of Sebal had meant escape from possible prosecution by *them*. *They* would never receive a ticket to Sebal.

Only, Theodora Ellson had decided to do something about it; she was following him on her own. In one year she had advanced, mentally, to her age of twenty-four. Given two more years of edutapes and Medson Blaiter would be confronted by a capable young woman demanding not only his name, but also the five thousand solar units—plus interest—due her.

SHE WAS a determined woman. She let neither dis-

tance or moralistic scruples stand in her way. I felt a gleeful sort of sympathy for Medson Blaiter. He would be getting what was due him once Theodora Ellson took control.

"Investments have a way of going sour," I said. "Be sure you check the receipts and records if that happens."

Her screwdriver clicked into its magnetized socket above the bench and she turned to me. Her wide-set gray eyes were hot, and there was a smear of grease across her nose from cheek to cheek.

"You think he's a worthless scoundrel just as my boss back in Utah said, don't you?" she demanded sharply. She blinked, wetly, and turned her head. "I can't blame you, though.

"Sometimes I think so, too," she confessed.

"We could all three be wrong, of course," I said, "but even if you lose everything you're qualified for several jobs. Mech technician, astro-gator, electronics tech, medical aide, pile super and a few dozen others."

"I am not sorry I left Utah," she said thoughtfully. "There must be some sort of ugliness

about any position, I suppose. So far, I have nothing to complain about on this ship, Captain."

Suddenly her mood changed. Her back straightened and her chin came up. With her streaked face and worn coveralls, and with her hands defiantly on her hips she was most pathetically unfeminine.

"Tell me, Captain," she said, "am I so hopelessly ugly that no man would ever want me?"

I laughed. "Theo," I said, "you're worth a dozen of the other kind. You've got something besides oversized glands and a baby face. You've got brains."

"Fine—wonderful!" She stamped her foot on the deck. "But do you think any man would ever want to—to see me around year after year?"

"Of course. I mean it sincerely, girl. You'll meet some one on Sebal, or elsewhere, who'll be lucky enough to marry you."

She grinned and headed out of the shop with her repaired control mechanism. At the door she paused. "I don't believe a word of it," she admitted, "but it sounds real nice."

That was less than twenty

hours before we snapped out of space drive and dropped on cushioning rocket blasts to the dusty gray world of Kelso.

THE MINES of Kelso are spotted along, and near, the thousand mile length of Kelso's equatorial rift. In this vast gouge, varying from three to six miles in depth and fifteen miles in width, a series of small lakes and ponds provide vegetation and game animals. Whatever caused the rift—a glancing giant meteorite, a volcanic explosion, or a vast trapped bubble of gases—it alone made Kelso inhabitable.

We grounded on a mile-wide disc of an island—flat, grassless, and less than a hundred feet from the mainland ringing the lake's eighty miles of shoreline. A causeway of rocks and other debris linked us with the mainland, and already the eight-wheeled beetle-vans, sealed and air-conditioned against the thin air and dust of the upper levels, were growling slowly across it.

There were supplies for twenty different mines to be checked out and signed for and loaded. The Aantarians worked

with speed and all their strength at loading the vans, for I had promised them two days planet leave. And the Lasdians darted here and there, directing the van drivers and their helpers, but doing little actual work themselves. We drove ourselves for the five hours remaining of Kelso's short eight hours of sunlight, and an hour after the sudden moonless night fell, all cargo was unloaded.

THE CREW left for whatever dubious entertainment the bedraggled females from their distant home planets might afford, plus an oversupply of their native wines and other potent brews. I knew that the first week in space would see a sore and surly crew, but with a two year jump in prospect I could not refuse them liberty. The ship was silent again, save for the occasional tunk-tunk of the tireless female ute's tools in the workshop.

My mate and Grisa, as usual, had left for the settlement, and I was sitting alone with my bitterness and loneliness. A wife who ignored me, a mate who despised and hated me, a crew of alien humanoids, and

a homeless girl who would do anything for transportation to her worthless lover. The years ahead seemed bleaker and more useless, as I viewed them.

Half asleep though I was, sprawled in the broad padded seat in the ship's little lounge, I heard the soft shuffle of heelless scuffs along the corridor. That it was not Theo, the ute, I was positive; from the sounds in the workshop she was testing the ailing repair mech.

I watched through slitted eyes. It was Grisa, soft, full-breasted and seductive as ever, who came so silently from the corridor, with her right hand concealed at her side. And behind her, his usual insolent smile wiped away for the moment, peered the dark, snaky features of Alpergen.

"Sleeping, dear?" whispered Grisa softly.

I made no answer. Apparently my silence satisfied her. Now her hand came up, a gleaming hypodermic in it.

IBERNO! I had no doubt about it now. And Alpergen was allowing Grisa to shoot the frozen death into my bloodstream. No! The sudden shock

brought me clarity of mind. It was Grisa who controlled the two of us. It was her whim to destroy me and briefly install Alpergen in my place.

In that instant all my desire for her was wiped out.

The needle came down toward my sprawled leg, hesitated at the thickness of my soiled coveralls, and came up toward my bared forearm. And then I twisted away, pulled myself behind the seat. My left hand smashed the hypodermic holding arm downward, and it fell to the deck. Grisa's wet painted mouth gaped with a sudden cry. She tried to manufacture a bewitching smile in that brief instant, but there was nothing to draw from on so brief notice.

A gun crashed, and the wind of a slug cooled my left cheek. I saw Grisa's green eyes widen as a sliver of her ear lobe vanished, taking with it a gouge of her glistening red hair.

Without turning, I knew that this must be Alpergen. Now, at all costs, they must kill me. Somehow, later, it must appear to be an accident; now the important thing was to destroy me.

I dropped behind the seat,

dragging Grisa down atop me. As a shield she was effective, being almost as broad as I; but her body could not arrest the passage of a heavy bullet should Alpergen decide to fire.

"No, Ralph," my wife gasped. "Too noisy. Use the needles."

Tiny needles tipped with paralyzing crystals would come spewing from the weapon Grisa named. One of them meant momentary helplessness—a dozen meant coma and death, unless I were treated at once.

I FLUNG Grisa aside, deciding to make a dash for the corridor and weapons of my own while he changed his attack. I knew that one stitching sweep across our bodies would paralyze us both; *all* of the needles could not miss. And Grisa, desperate, clung to my hip pocket. I lunged toward the other door.

The pocket tore free and I staggered, only to resume my flight. But the needle gun was sewing; I heard its hum, and spun about and toward the weapon. It was too late to escape the room. My only hope now was to reach Alpergen.

I felt the slight sting of a needle along my skull and was going down. The paralysis was almost instantaneous.

This was how it was going to end, I told myself. I will be conscious, but helpless, while they decide my fate. Over the side, here or in space. And some story to cover with the crew.

We had all forgotten the ute. Not that one small woman, without any weapons save the tools in the shop, could do anything to save me; the logical thing for her to do would be to slip out silently and carry word to the authorities.

But Theodora Ellson realized that she had another weapon, and she used it.

I lay in such a way that I saw the doorway to the lounge behind Alpergen. Suddenly the repair mech—bulky and very humanoid in shape, despite the unrepainted section of pseudoflesh over its right cheek—loomed there. Before its middle it held a section of spare hull plate as a shield. One hand gripped the plate and in the other was a heavy wrench.

THE WRENCH came up. Grisa cried out. Alpergen

sprang toward us even as the wrench fell, and fired his needle gun. In a moment he realized the futility of this and discarded it for his automatic. But the repair mech had followed.

Two bullets smashed into the heavy plate and ricocheted. The wrench swung, battered the gun from Alpergen's fingers, and then the repair mech hurled the plate flatwise against the mate's body. Alpergen went down, unconscious. And then the repair mech spun about and darted into the corridor.

I heard a shriek of rage and fear that cut off abruptly. Apparently Grisa had realized that Theo Ellson was controlling the giant robot, and she had tried to reach the control cubicle. But the ute had anticipated this.

The mech dragged a limp body, Grisa's, into the lounge and dropped it alongside Alpergen. Then it hunted out the automatic and the needle gun.

"You'll snap out of it in a few minutes, Captain," the rusty voice of the repair mech said. "Then you can call the police or do whatever you please."

I tried to answer but all I could do was stare my gratitude through watery unblinking eyes.

ONLY AFTER ten minutes of helplessness did feeling return to my legs and arms, and finally to my torso. A measure of numbness remained but I could get about and speak. The mech handed me the weapons and stood waiting.

"Thanks, Theo." I said, staring down at the scheming pair. "As of now you are mate and astrogator. We'll pick up another ute."

"What about these two?"

"Alpergen gets off without arrest, and with his pay and equipment; a police investigation would keep us here for weeks."

"And—your wife?"

"I'm cured. She's just another space girl to me now. She goes planetside along with Alpergen—plus all her gear, including *eduha* pods."

The repair mech turned away, picked up the metal plate, and left the lounge. And a moment later, freed of her mentrol helmet and her control

of the mech, Theodora Ellson rejoined me.

"I'll get their bags packed," she said.

Alpergen was struggling back toward awareness, groaning and muttering, and Grisa was conscious, but silent. I handed the needle gun to Theo.

"I'm dumping them both out the lock right now," I told her. "Maybe the ship will smell better then."

Theo smiled her appreciation as she swung the narrow-snouted weapon about in her competent small hand. I dragged Alpergen outside first, not caring too much when his body bumped into furnishings and bulkheads enroute. And then I carried Grisa, kicking and screeching obscenely, after him and closed the outer locks.

"Now," Theo said, "I will pack their gear."

"And I'll help you," I said.

The ship *did* smell better, I realized, and I saw more clearly and heard better. It was as though a sodden curtain of smog had rolled back from my brain—a cloud that had smothered me for all the months Grisa had been my wife. I felt alive again despite the linger-

ing numbness throughout my body.

THREE

THERE WAS one more little incident before the *Khan* blasted off for its touchdown on two year distant Sebal. A passenger liner had suffered a blow-up when its main pile's controls malfunctioned, and its passengers had escaped to Kelso. In the years ensuing most of them had found transportation to their destination—distant Sebal! Only five of them, three men and two women, remained.

With my mate and my wife gone, I had room for five passengers and so they came aboard. One of their names sounded familiar. He was a handsome, blond giant of a man, and very attentive to one of the middle-aged women of the party—the wealthy widow of a mine owner killed in the space disaster. His name was Blaiter.

So it was that I sent for Theo and they met in the chart room away from the rest of his party. I started to leave them but Theo grasped my sleeve. And Blaiter gasped as he saw who my mate was.

"Wait," she said, "this will be brief."

"Theo!" Blaiter gulped out. "How'd you get out here?"

"I came out to join you, Medson," she said, "on Sebal."

"But—I didn't... You didn't know anything about space. You couldn't sign on a ship."

"Oh that was simple." She laughed off-key and loudly. "I signed on as a utility hand. It wasn't bad; I learned a lot from the crew and the officers."

A series of expressions—disgust, anxiety, and sudden relief are what I ticketed them, flowed over his handsome fair features.

"Well," he said, and again, "well! That ends all thought of marriage of course. Why you're no better than a street walker, Theo! All those men..."

I started to say something, but Theo shook her head. "You mean you won't...even after you promised, Medson?" she demanded, her face hidden in her hands.

"I couldn't—even if I could forgive your actions. You see I was marooned here, penniless.

So I married a wealthy woman—Mrs. Holson."

THEO'S HANDS came away from her face and I was surprised to see that she was laughing. Then her features sobered. "Then you can hand over the five thousand units, Medson. You won't be needing them for us."

Blaiter paled and started to protest. I watched him going through his pockets. His total assets were slightly over three thousand units. Then I took a hand.

"We need another utility hand aboard, Blaiter," I said. "I can sign you on, your wages to go to the mate."

"No—no! I'll get the money from Clara. Just wait a little while."

Blaiter turned and hurried away down the corridor. I took Theo's arm. "Why didn't you tell the truth about being aboard an alien ship like this—that the crew considers you as sexually desirable as an Earthman considers a female gorilla or chimp?"

Theo grinned impishly. "You forgot to mention that fact to me when I signed on, too, Cap. ·[Turn To Page 116]

Utility Girl

(continued from page 41)

tain. If I hadn't read somewhere about only Terran ships retaining that stupid section of the contract, I might have left ship in the asteroids. But I knew that you were chartered under Aantarian registry."

"You acted as though you believed me," I accused.

Theo laughed at my scowl. "Naturally," she said. "I wanted to know how far you might carry the bluff before I spoke."

"Women," I groaned weakly, and grinned. "What about Blaiter? Why did you lead him to believe such a thing?"

"Believe it or not," she said, "but I was cured the moment I saw him again. How else

could I have driven him away so completely?"

I shook my head, admiring the dimple that came and went with her smile. How could I ever have thought her plain? Or perhaps it was something about space, and self confidence, and acquired poise that made her so attractive.

Blaiter came dashing in with the two thousand credits, tossed them at Theo, and vanished. The intercom came to life. It was approaching time for blast-off with Sebal at the end of this hop. We headed for the control room together.

It was going to be a good tour...