



# SCIENCE FICTION

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## GLEANERS

by Clifford D. Simak



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# GRAVY TRAIN

**By DANIEL F. GALOUYE**

*Ever hear of evil fairies who  
grant three wishes? McWorther's  
was more efficient. One wish  
was plenty to bring catastrophe!*

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## I

At one hundred and thirty, life was indeed gratifying for Titus McWorther. But for one missing detail, it would have been perfect.

With his wife, Edna, he had planned well for retirement. His idyllic estate consisted of a second-hand planetoid, thirty miles in circumference, which was the only habitable piece of matter in its system. Complete with supplementary gravity generator, a compact atmosphere, a mantle of lush topsoil and a carefully selected biota, McWorther's World was both his delight and his pride.

Its principal asset was, of course, its isolation.

Well away from the mainstream of galactic civilization, McWorther's Star was smugly hidden behind a dark nebula, through which he and Edna plunged twice a year to the fringe of the cluster—just to observe and mock convention, if for nothing else.

It was an ideal setup.

But, after two sedentary years, Titus realized he still needed one item to make his retirement complete. So he dispatched this tight-beamed message to the packet order department of Rear-Sobucks and Company in the West Cluster Federation's Hub City:

Dear Sir:

Please send one automatic bather with back-scrubbing attachment and toy boat docks, as listed in your videolog under order No. 4678-25C. Charge same to credit account No. W414754-B24D.

Sincerely yours,  
Titus McWorther, Potentate  
McWorther's World

He listed the coordinates of the star and the orbital factor of his planetoid.

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Unfortunately, the hyper-spatial line between McWorther's World and the nearest relay center was partly coincident with the link to the politically noncommitted world of Gauyuth-VI.

This condition, together with the fact that components of a communication are sent by separate pulse, sometimes leads to the embarrassing phenomenon known as "message interfusion," which is retransmission of the right text with the wrong signature.

And it so happened that as Titus McWorther's order was en route, the system was also being burdened with this intelligence to the Ganymede Extension of the Western Cluster's State Department:

Dear Sir:

This will verify our agreement and authorize implementation of interstellar aid arrangements as set forth in conferences with your ambassador. If such arrangements produce mutual satisfaction, we will quite readily declare concurrence, in principle at least, with the political aims of the Western Cluster.

Respectfully yours,  
Ogarm Netath,  
Prime Minister  
Gauyuth-VI

Appended to the signature were the coordinates of Gauyuth and the orbital factor of its Number Six planet.



Wharton Hoverly, undersecretary of cosmic aid for the Western Cluster, plucked at his thick, gray mustache as he reread the space-o-gram.

He punched the videobox stud. "Mallston!"

The younger and more composed face of his assistant stared from the screen. "Yes, sir?"

"Anything yet?"

"Not a thing. We have no record of a—McWorther's World."

"What do you suppose?"

"Well, it seems authentic enough. We do know Ambassador Summerson has been working in that general area."

"And you think Summerson signed an aid agreement with this potentate?"

"I'd say the message speaks for itself."

Again, Hoverly worried his mustache. "Did you check with Summerson?"

"He's on extended leave."

"What do you think we ought to do?"

"McWorther's World must be a critical area. And evidently we're going to get what we want out of the deal, since the Potentate speaks of concurrence with Western Cluster aims."

Impatiently, the undersecretary glanced out the window. Ganymede was well out of the Jovian umbra now. If he didn't leave soon, he'd be late for his conference with the commerce department on Farside Luna.

"All right, Mallston," he said. "Put McWorther's World on a Class A aid schedule. That ought to hold the Potentate until Summerson gets back."



In the commercial section of Hub City, Rear-Sobucks and Company occupied a monstrous building whose emblematic tip pierced the clouds.

On the two hundredth floor, the twenty-seventh vice-president strode through the rail gate, tossed the secretary a "don't-bother-to-announce-me" glance and went on into the inner office of the twenty-sixth vice-president.

"Got something I thought you'd be interested in, V.R.," he told the limp-faced man behind the desk. "There may be a promotion angle."

"What is it?" V.R. asked, not exactly gripping his chair with anticipation.

The other placed the space-o-gram on the desk. "It's from an Ogarm Netath, *prime minister* of a place called Gauyuth-Six. He wants an automatic bather."

V.R. extended a "so what?" glare.

"Don't you see? Big shots like that don't place personal orders. But here's one who thinks so much of a Rear-Sobucks item that he forgets all about convention."

"And so, Wheeler, you want to capitalize on his good name in some sort of promotion gimmick," V.R. said through taut lips.

Wheeler shrank. "But I thought—"

"Never mind what you thought. Fill his order. Send it compliments of—let's see, Gauyuth-Six is uncommitted—compliments of the Western Cluster."



It was a fine morning on McWorther's World. Cotton-candy clouds floated over the fields. Dreaming herons, balanced on slender legs, gave the shallows of the lake a tufted appearance. A delightful breeze, artificially generated at the equator, wafted flowering stalks and rocked the air car and spaceabout at their moorings.

Titus snorted on the veranda and reached for his julep. He was a chunky little man, with the ruddiness of good health tinting his face and overflowing onto his partly bald pate.

"Where are you, Titus?" an anxious voice disturbed the quiet of the house.

"Out here, Love."

Edna appeared in the doorway. Despite her age, there was still the fascination in her timeless eyes that had snared Titus more than ninety years ago.

"The chef burned the beans again," she said, frowning.

"Guess I'll have to fix it."

"You know it's not the cooker. It's that darned gravity."

He realized now it was a weight fluctuation that had nudged him from his nap.

"I've got it *set* that way, Love," he explained. "We did not get clouds in the contract. But by varying the gravity control we can have them for nothing. It all has to do with atmospheric pressure."

Edna cast a resigned glance skyward. "If that's the way you want it—fleecy clouds and burnt beans—"

The guttural scream of braking jets rattled the windows and sent the herons winging for the safety of the other hemisphere. Hesitating on the fringe of the atmosphere, the freighter altered its approach and landed beside the house.



Titus went out to meet the skipper and his three assistants whose arms were filled with printed forms.

"You Potentate McWorther?" the skipper asked.

Titus smiled in embarrassment. "It's a gag. I just call myself that."

"We got your order," the other snapped. "Where do you want it?"

Titus' small eyes widened with an inner vision of the automatic bather—a vision which went on in speculation to dispose of the crude shower-masseur, for which he and Edna were getting a bit too old.

"If you'll put it on the veranda—" He paused and shouted back toward the house. "Edna, get out the grapplers. We're in business."

"Fun-ny," the skipper observed with dry derision. Then he signaled to his waiting assistants.

They came forward and, one by one, thrust their stacks of printed forms against Titus' chest. His arms came up in a reflex to accept the offerings. But, as the third assistant's contribution sent the stack soaring in front of his face, he went down under the weight.

When he had extricated himself from the mound of paper, the men had returned to their ship. And now its sides were folding down and scores of huge crates were drifting out on repulsor beams and fluttering to the ground.

Soon the freighter was gone and Edna was at his side.

"What *have* you gotten us into now, Titus?"

"Honest, Love—I don't know."

Suddenly his ears were splitting with the thunderous roar of a thousand ships plunging down to the surface as far as he could see around the perimeter of his small world. Each pulled to a halt a few feet from the ground, opened its sides and disgorged vast mounds of crates and sacks, boxes and barrels, naked hills of coarse material that hissed like gravel as it spewed from chutes, gleaming masses of machinery.

Confounded, Titus seized one of the slips of paper. It was an invoice listing two hundred earth movers, seventy-five instant pavers, five hundred concrete mixers.

Matching his frown, Edna read a second sheet and demanded, "What on earth do you expect to do with a hundred thousand barrels of wheat germ oil? Four

thousand kegs of eight-penny nails? Forty-five hundred tons of soybeans?"

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At his secluded villa, Prime Minister Netath was entertaining his foreign minister, Ugaza Bataul.

Netath leaned against the terrace bar and proposed a toast. "To an era of plenty."

Bataul smiled. "At the expense of the Western Cluster."

They gulped the drinks and Netath stared down into his empty glass. "We're quite fortunate that the Western Cluster's aspirations are extending to this sector."

"As long as we can be sure that there won't be any *military* advances." Bataul added the qualification with misgiving.

"Oh, there's no danger of that. Actually, we're lucky we didn't try to get on the Eastern Cluster's gravy train. We'd have had to make a lot of concessions."

Heralding its own approach with a sputtering rumble, the station 'copter came in low over the trees and dropped down on the lawn. Netath walked over as his chauffeur climbed out of the cab and used antigrav grapples to float a large crate out of the freight compartment.

"Just picked it up at the space terminal," the man explained. "Must be that aid shipment."

Bataul laughed. "You mean the first batch of credit certificates, maybe."

The chauffeur pressed the "unpack" stud. The sides of the crate fell outward.

"What *is* it?" Netath drew back, surveying the ivory, tanklike thing with its sparkling fixtures and flexible appendages.

Bataul bent and read the words on the inscription plate: "Deluxe Automatic Bather—4678-25C."

By then, Netath had found the torn, soiled delivery tag. He read the part of the writing that was still legible:

*"... sincerely hope this expression of Western amity meets with your satisfaction. If we can serve you again, please don't hesitate...."*

Infuriated, he imparted a vindictive kick to the crate and crumpled the paper.

"*That's* the cosmic aid we were expecting?" Bataul sputtered.

"Capitalist Western dogs!" Netath exclaimed. "They were just trifling with our planetary honor!"

"It's an insult against our racial character!" the foreign minister said severely. "They *know* we have no use for a bather, shedding our skin as we do once a day."

Netath forced restraint into his features. "We will not lose our diplomatic poise. There is always the chance a mistake has been made."

He drew the contacter out of his pocket and shouted into its grid, "Miss Yalera?"

"Yes, sir?" came the instant answer.

"Take a space-o-gram to Solaria."



## II

When the initial error was made at the hyper-spatial relay station, a pattern had been set. Committed categorically to the memory banks were the false associations between the State Department's Ganymede Extension and Potentate McWorther, between Premier Netath and Rear-Sobucks.

Thus, it was somewhat to be expected that Undersecretary Hoverly should find himself chewing on the under-bristles of his mustache as he read the latest space-o-gram.

Dear Sir:

Needless to say, we are somewhat disappointed over the Western Cluster's meager response to our desperate need.

Perhaps Ambassador Summerson misrepresented our agreement. In that event, we feel sure that consultation with his Excellency will set the record straight.

We would appreciate prompt attention to this detail. Otherwise, in the interest of our people, we shall feel compelled to seek satisfaction elsewhere.

Respectfully yours,  
Titus McWorther,  
Potentate

Hoverly tossed the message on his desk, punched the audio-com button and called for his assistant. When Mallston arrived, the undersecretary was still pacing.

"Did you take care of the McWorther World aid consignment?" he asked.

Mallston nodded. "Delivery should have been made day before yesterday. Full Class A schedule."

"Well, it wasn't enough!" Hoverly extended a stiff finger toward the space-o-gram. "Read that."

Looking up finally, Mallston said, "Evidently we dropped the ball."

"Indeed we did. Ambassador Summerson must have promised the Potentate the whole works."

Hoverly resumed pacing. "I should have guessed as much. President Roswell only last week hinted that the Western Cluster should level its galactic commerce sights on that entire sector."

Mallston pondered the gravity of the space-o-gram. "Maybe we should lay the McWorther development before the President."

Bristling, the undersecretary said, "And call attention to our own incompetence? We'll straighten this matter out by doing what we should have done in the first place—by putting the Potentate on the double-A priority list. Full and immediate delivery under Class B through K schedules."

Mallston started out, but paused at the door. "How about cultural exchange?"

"We'll play it safe by assuming Summerson shot the works in that category too. Round up every uncommitted cultural group in the cluster."



Shaking his head deprecatingly, the twenty-seventh vice-president stood before the desk of the next highest official in the Rear-Sobucks hierarchy.

"Well, Wheeler," V.R. clipped without looking up. "What is it this time?"

"I'm afraid Netath didn't take too kindly to our gesture."

"Netath? Netath?" V.R. milked the name for its significance.

"Ogarm Netath. The prime minister of that Gauyuth place. The automatic

bather."

"Oh, *that* one."

Wheeler handed over the space-o-gram and V.R. muttered through the message:

Dear Sir:

I'm sure you made a mistake filling my order. You've got to come pick up your shipment right away. We're up to our ears and it's shaking us to pieces.

Yours in disappointment,  
Ogarm Netath,  
Prime Minister

Growling, V.R. dropped an effervescent pill into a glass of water. "You can't get anywhere with these back-planet bumpkins. I doubt that this Netath ever *had* a bath. Send him a Supplementary Manual of Operating Instructions."

Wheeler started for the door.

But V.R. called after him. "And bill the prime minister for that article. It'll teach him to show a little bit of appreciation."



Titus winced before the persistent tremors that came through the floor of his cellar. He made another adjustment on the gravity control deflecting the planetoid's center of pseudomass another few feet. The ground beneath him finally quieted.

"Three days," he mumbled, dragging himself up the stairs.

Edna received him with hands on hips. "Three days—what?"

"Getting things balanced again."

"What are you going to do about all that stuff cluttering up our beautiful planetoid?" She was near tears.

With Edna dogging his steps, he returned to the veranda, where his julep was now quite thin and warm in the rays of the setting sun.

"We'll have to find out where it came from first," he said, staring dismally over the mountains of machinery and grain, the tumbled stacks of crates and barrels

and kegs, the lesser rows of wheeled and winged vehicles.

"Seems to me," Edna persisted, "that the invoices will show that." She gestured at what remained of the stacks of printed forms.

The rest of the slips were strewn over the ground as far as he could see. "Only the *first* sheet will show the origin—if we could ever find it," Titus explained.

He went out to the air car, warmed it up and sent it churning skyward. Near the attenuated top of the atmosphere, he was able to see exactly how much extraneous stuff had been dumped on his world. The main area of disposal seemed to have been within a two-mile radius of the house.

An ever-widening helical course, wending its way alternately from night to day, eventually brought him on a great circle that sliced over both poles. Then, with his searchlights still burning, he spiraled inward, covering the other hemisphere. The rest of his world was in primal order.

He started for home around the daylight side.

But even above the noise of his own rotorjets, the stridence of descending freighters erupted in a pandemonium of sound all around him. Great clouds of rockets, clustered in fleets, were darkening the sky and raining down onto the surface.

He barely managed to pull out from under one of the formations before it could pinch him against the ground. Swearing in oaths that he had not used in years, he headed for the nearest group of ships. Before he could close in, they had discharged their cargoes and thundered off into space again.

He altered course for another detachment of freighters, only to meet with the same frustrating results. By the time he had aimed his craft at a third group, all the ships had blasted away, leaving everywhere great, gleaming mounds and stacks and irregular rows of crates and containers that completely obscured the surface.

Enraged, Titus gunned the craft for home. He picked his way between several monstrous peaks of grain, some of them soaring nearly all the way up through the six-hundred-foot-thick atmosphere, and threw on his brakes to avoid collision with a tremendous pyramid of what looked like corn kernels.

With stark apprehension, he envisioned his world shaking apart under the eccentric forces. But he quelled his fears with logic: This new addition of mass, apparently distributed evenly over all but the four square miles that had already

served as a dumping ground, would be unbalanced only to a negligible degree.

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Titus flicked on his landing lights as he headed into the night. But from over the horizon came a glare considerably stronger than the candlepower of his own electrical system. As he pulled up to the mooring pylon, the explanation was evident.

Scores of Pullman crafts were packed so tightly around his house that the blunt noses of several were sticking out over the veranda.

He cut off the idling jets. The militant strains of a Venurian march, blaring from the instruments of a hundred-piece symphony, swelled up mightily all around him. The orchestra itself was wedged between two residential crafts while the roof of McWorther's generating house served as the conductor's podium.

On the veranda, a full troupe of Simalean Ballet dancers swirled and caracoled, not seeming to mind that they were occasionally overflowing the tiles and flouncing not so lightly through Edna's caladiums.

His wife stood helplessly by, still gripping the autobroom which she had evidently wielded without success in an attempt to rout the intruders.

Dismayed, Titus elbowed his way through a dedicated choral group that was patriotically rendering the "Fayothian Anthem," sidestepped a tumbling foursome obviously from one of the Lesser Javapa planets and pushed aside a debating team which was having little luck making itself heard above the general cacophony.

Edna swept out to meet him. "Titus, they just won't leave!"

"Who are they? What do they want?"

"I don't know." She was having a difficult time restraining herself. "They asked for the ministry of something or other. Then they said they were cooped up so long that they had to get some practice."

Titus bellowed for attention. But nobody turned an ear, except a pirouetting ballerina who whirled to a stop nearby, glissaded over in front of him and made a theatrical display of bending over and planting a set of lip-prints on his forehead—a gesture that fed considerable fuel to Edna's vexation.

"You're cute," the dancer tittered. "You got the word on this place, Pudgy? What

is it—a stopover station?"

Before he could answer, one of the tumblers shouted, "It's snowing!"

The choral group broke reverently into the ancient carol "Noel" while the orchestra paused on an upbeat and swung into a jazzed-up "Jingle Bells."

Perplexed, Titus stared at the dancing snowflakes. But that was impossible! It *never* snowed here on McWorther's World!

Then he remembered the grain peak he had skirted on the way home. It had extended high above the infrared and ultraviolet shields—into the naked, hot zone where restless winds had wafted the kernels eastward.

He picked up one of the "flakes."

*Popcorn!*

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### III

Many light years away, the Emperor of the Eastern Cluster whirled around, kicked his bejeweled train out of the way and faced his chief adviser. "So they've opened up a new aid offensive?"

"And a most vital one." The adviser blew on his spectacles and burnished the lenses against his sleeve. "A place called McWorther. Our intelligence got its coordinates from their consignment documents."

"Never heard of it."

"That's what's so insidious about this whole capitalist plot. They've kept it under their hats."

"And why is it so vital?"

The adviser directed the Emperor's attention to a space globe suspended from the ceiling. He pressed two buttons on the wall and twin beams of light intersected within the sphere. "That's McWorther's location."

"Why—why—" the Emperor stammered. "That outflanks us completely!"

"What concerns me is how many other undisclosed but settled worlds lie in that same general area."



"A whole raft of them, no doubt," the Emperor said pessimistically.

"What are we going to do?"

"In this critical sector we've got to make friends—and fast! We'll begin with the McWorther place."

"How far do you want to go?"

"All the way. Empty the surplus bins. Clear out the warehouses. Let McWorther have every available pound of material and equipment."

"Terms?"

"Terms be damned! We let the Western Cluster steal a march on us. We've got to recoup. Everything goes as an outright gift—with all the cultural trimmings thrown in."



Titus splashed into the cellar and struck out for the hypertransmitter.

It was a peculiar flood. Suffusing the water was a thick scum that flashed iridescently as it caught the glint of light from the ceiling. He stuck his finger into the dross and applied it to the tip of his tongue.

Syrup!

He thought of the thousands of barrels that had been dumped into the lake and surmised that the contaminated water was backing up through the drainage system.

He altered course for the pumps.

And, like ships in convoy, a score of virtuosos invaded the cellar, paddling in his wake.

The soprano's piercing voice assailed his ears. "In all my theatrical experience, I have never been subjected to such indignity! I insist—"

But a violinist pushed forward, wielding his bow like a stiff finger. "You, sir, are holding back on us. No doubt you know what our future instructions are."

"I've never seen such fascist highhandedness," complained a diminutive choreographer in the uniform of a Palosov Rocket Dancer. "In the name of the ministry of culture of the Eastern Federation, I demand to see a representative of

His Imperial Highness!"

Ignoring them, Titus trudged on to the pumps and set them for maximum drain-off.

The Simalean ballerina did a series of rapid turns and watched the spray and the pattern of ripples that issued from her darting feet.

"Exquisite!" she exuberated. "I shall have to speak with the *maître de ballet* about a nymphal sequence!"

"Come on, Pop." One of the tumblers confronted Titus. "What's the gimmick? Why are they keeping us loafing around here?"

"Why?" roared a dramatist, allowing his voice full rein in the acoustic inadequacy of the cellar. "I'll tell you: It's a capitalist scheme to abduct the top talent of the glorious workers' federation!"

Hands clamped over his ears, Titus finally made it to the hypertransmitter. He juggled its dials, beat on the cabinet, lifted a foot from the water and gave it a couple of kicks broadside.

No results. It was obviously shorted out from the flood. And none of the Pullman crafts was equipped with long-range communications gear.

Titus waded from the cellar, plodded through the house, leaving pools of syrupy water in his wake, and stalked onto the veranda.

The scene was no less hectic than it had been. There were two orchestras now. And they were waging a war of decibels to determine whether the "East Cluster Blastoff March" or the "West Cluster Anthem" should prevail over McWorther's World.

Two debating teams were holding forth on the comparative benefits of proletarian solidarity and the free enterprise system. Beyond the caladium bed, Edna, who seemed to have finally succumbed to frustrated abandon, had struck a face-to-the-sun and wind-in-her-hair posture for a portraitist who was drowning futility in artistic endeavor.

But there was neither wind nor sun to accommodate the pose, Titus lamented. For, after yesterday's deliveries by the bright red cargo ships, which had obviously been from the Eastern Cluster, there was little left of McWorther's World that could be recognized.

The immediate area around the house had been spared in the deluge of material.

But, beyond, great sloping expanses of grain and crates, barrels, boxes, machinery, bulging sacks and drums stretched up and away like the inner walls of a crater.

Fortunately, disposal onto the surface of McWorther's World had stopped. But not delivery to the system. Coruscating pinpoints of flame, far out in space, signified the presence of thousands upon thousands of cargo carriers that were dropping off their freight in solar orbit. The items of merchandise themselves were indistinguishable. But their composite existence was beginning to take on the appearance of a great ring of fragmented particles stretching around the sun.

And Titus supposed that it was only the reliability of the mass-fending generators attached to each article that tentatively kept them all separate and prevented them from plunging like a devastating hailstorm onto the surface of his world.

He slumped to the ground and bracketed his cheeks between his palms. For some unaccountable reason, it seemed that the productivity of the entire universe was being showered down on his private planetoid in one vast gravy-train effect.

Only he was drowning in the gravy.



"And that's my story." Undersecretary of Cosmic Aid Hoverly laid his hands on the conference table. "And we now have McWorther's World on a total aid schedule."

President Roswell, an angular man with a troubled face, drummed his fingertips together. "Gentlemen, this is most serious."

On his right, Ambassador Summerson's head bobbed in accord. The gesture spread next to the chief of intelligence, then to Hoyerly, thus making the circuit back to Roswell.

"To sum up, then," said the President, "you, Hoverly, authorized aid for a McWorther's World in the 47-126 area."

The undersecretary glanced away uneasily.

"But you, Summerson," Roswell continued, "have no record of having signed aid agreements with such a place."

"That's right," the ambassador verified. "But deciding to accommodate

McWorther's World was the most fantastic stroke of good luck imaginable."

Hoverly squinted. "I don't follow you."

"When you sent aid to the Potentate, not only did you pick what will undoubtedly develop into the most critical political area of the millennium, but you also beat the Easties to the draw in a sector that they had staked out all for themselves."

"A stroke of sheer luck," President Roswell concurred.

The roving ambassador leaned back smiling. "The chance timing was perfect too. We beat them by less than two weeks."

But the intelligence chief's face was rigid with dejection. "We got there 'firstest,' to use an ancient expression, but not with the 'mostest.' Our agents in Imperial City report that the amount of aid authorized for McWorther's World is unbelievable. The entire Eastern Cluster is going on a full austerity basis to support the program."

"That shows what value they place on McWorther's World and the sector it opens up," Roswell offered. "When they found out we'd moved in ahead of them, their reaction was frantic."

Summerson rose. "This, then, gentlemen, is it."

"It certainly is." Roswell's voice was heavy with despondency. "The most God-awful aid war the cluster has ever seen."

"We can't back out," the ambassador warned. "We've got to get busy and face up to the task."

"With every resource at our disposal. To ignore the challenge would be to surrender this entire section of the galaxy to the Easties."

The President was silent a moment. "Gentlemen, I am herewith sounding a call to economic arms. Cancel all other aid commitments and activity. Throw everything we have got, everything we can ever hope to produce, at McWorther's World."

"I think you'd better call on the Potentate personally," Summerson proposed.

"That," said Roswell, "is exactly what I intend to do."



Adjusting the drape of his robe, the Emperor sent his eyes flicking over the report. Finally he lurched from his chair with a resounding "Eureka!"

"So you see how it is, Your Imperial Highness," his chief adviser offered. "By cutting in on their McWorther World operation, we have indeed touched a sensitive Western spot."

"There's no question about that," the Emperor said lustily. He was a portly man whose sartorial excesses made him seem even more imposing. His eyes, recessed under thickset brows, flared with triumph as he said, "McWorther's World must figure prominently in their planning. From the way they cut loose with everything they had when they found out we were stepping in too, damned if I'm not convinced this new system will be the pivotal point of their entire future strategy."

"Then we'd better order double production quotas on every world that flies the Eastern flag."

"*Triple* quotas. And have my space yacht refitted by tomorrow."

"You're going somewhere, Highness?" asked the adviser.

"This Potentate McWorther is likely to be the third most important political figure in the galaxy. I'm not going to lose any time getting over there and pumping his hand."



His face flushed with rage, Ogarm Netath tossed the space-o-gram at his foreign minister, then snatched it back out of Bataul's hands before he had a chance to read it.

"It's a bill!" Netath's voice quivered. "They sent us a bill for that damned bather monstrosity!"

Bataul's brow, to all appearances, was ready for spring planting. "Let me have another look at it."

Netath stood there trembling while the foreign minister sent his eyes darting over the paper.

"It's from Rear-Sobucks!" Bataul exclaimed. "A retail concern that obviously handles automatic bathers!"

"But it was our aid shipment, wasn't it?"

"Apparently not. It says here, '... for merchandise previously extended *in behalf* of the Western Cluster....'"

"I don't understand."

Bataul's features struggled through a gamut of expressions. "I think I'm just beginning to. Do you remember last year when we had that communications survey made? Between here and the nearest Western relay station, there was that single system. I think some crackpot had laid claim—of course. McWorther's his name. Calls himself a potentate."

Netath stiffened. "And you think—?"

"I think both we and McWorther are victims of message interfusion," Bataul said flatly.

"And our aid shipments—?"

"I'd bet McWorther must be wringing his hands over more loot than he'll ever be able to count."

Netath started punching buttons on his desk. "We've got work to do."

"What kind?"

"First you're going to get off a message to this Rear-Sobucks bunch and tell them what they can do with their bill *and* their automatic bather—if it'll fit. You can also explain what's happened."

"This time we'll send the message around the *right* leg of the cluster," Bataul assured.

"Then we're hopping over to this McWorther system and laying down the law to that character. *That* I want to do personally."



"This," said Twenty-Seventh Vice-President Wheeler of Rear-Sobucks, "explains it all."

"Communications interfusion?" the twenty-sixth vice-president asked.

"Absolutely, V.R. Just like Premier Netath says."

"Then there's a Rear-Sobucks customer who has been unnecessarily inconvenienced and still hasn't been satisfied?"

With a curt nod, Wheeler confirmed the other's fear.

V.R. rose from his desk and wagged a finger at the other. "I still don't understand it all, Wheeler. But I can't avoid the impression that you're somehow responsible for the mess."

Wheeler cowered.

"*You're* going to take a trip—now!" V.R. went on, gathering steam. "*You're* going to deliver a bather personally to this Potentate McWorther. *You're* going to extend the apologies of the entire Rear-Sobucks organization!"

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#### IV

Titus poured his tenth consecutive julep—directly from the bottle, without the benefit of ice, sugar or mint—and leaned back in his chair. His occupancy of a corner of the veranda had been a hard-won concession.

Almost indifferent now, he stared at the hundreds of virtuosos and shouted, "Go home!"

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But there was little zing in his voice and the words were, of course, lost in the confused sea of sound—musical, argumentative, operatic and otherwise. Heedless, the orchestras played, the ballet dancers whirled, painters sketched, gymnasts tumbled, dramatists soliloquized and the vocalists made it plain that they would give no quarter.

McWorther's World shud-shuddered. And the towering peaks of machinery and grain, cases and crates rumbled ominously as their slopes shifted. Titus' ears popped and he suddenly felt a giddiness that was all out of proportion to the number of juleps he had consumed.

An all-too-brief silence fell over the multitude. Then, as stability returned to the

planetoid, they dived back into their various activities.

They were damned fools, McWorther thought. Even if it meant risking their lives, they would be willing to stay there and consort in their Olympian ecstasy of artistic communion. It was a field day, old home week, esoteric *anschluss*, a fraternal blowout—all rolled into one.

A distant explosion rent what was left of the compact atmosphere. And, as an immediate consequence, additional hundreds of tons of grain *hissed* down a nearby slope and eased into the lake.

Somewhat concerned, Titus stared at the myriad points of light coruscating deep out in space. What was happening was obvious: There were millions, perhaps billions of articles of freight in the same orbit—all maintaining their distances from the planetoid and from one another by virtue of their mass-repulsion generators. And, where that many electronic units were concerned, the breakdown factor became a predictable quantity. McWorther's World could now expect to be the target of a plunging chunk of cargo once every four or five minutes.

Another few hours, Titus realized, and that interval would be reduced to four or five seconds. For he could readily see the infinite streams of freighters that were still arriving and dropping off additional cargo.

As a matter of fact, it was so thick out there now that only a faint, diffused light was coming through from McWorther's Sun.

Titus poured himself another mintless, sugarless, iceless julep.



The insigne of the Western Cluster emblazoned on its side, a giant ship felt its way down through the atmosphere, sidled this way and that as it squeezed through the barrier of anchored Pullman crafts, pulled up and hovered over the southern edge of the veranda.

At that particular moment, Titus had been quite fascinated with the tumblers' practice session. One of the gymnasts, preparing for a back-flip, had taken a boost from the cupped hands of another. Only the resulting arc through the air was executed with slow-motion rhythm that took the performer to a height of perhaps twenty feet before he floated back to the ground.



At the same time, Titus' ears popped again and he had the odd sensation that the deck chair was shrinking away beneath him.

The newly arrived ship lowered an escalator to the surface and the pilot glided down, landing only a few feet from McWorther.

"There seems to be some mistake," he said. "I was given these coordinates and orbital factor for a—" he checked his notebook—"McWorther's World."

"This," said Titus stiffly, "*is* McWorther's World."

Cupping his hands, the pilot called back into the ship. "We're on the right place."

An alarmed face poked out of the hatch.

"*This* is it?"

Titus lurched to his feet, returning an equally startled expression. The man coming clown the escalator was President Vance Roswell of the Western Federation! He had seen the face on thousands of newscasts.

Roswell, sickened, stared at the mountains of supplies on the obscured surface of the planetoid. He tilted his head back and took in the glimmering sea of cargo out in space, the flaring trails of exhaust jets that criss-crossed in an infinite pattern as endless streams of ships jockeyed into position to discharge more freight. Then he dropped to the veranda railing and buried his face hopelessly in his hands.

By then, one of the orchestra conductors, who had also recognized the President, had abruptly brought his baton down to terminate the "Lyraen Overture." He led his ensemble into a stirring rendition of the "West Cluster Anthem."

Without interrupting his misery, Roswell elevated a limp hand and signaled for quiet.

But even before the musicians tapered to silence on a jagged, perplexed note, the other orchestra blared forth with the "East Cluster Blastoff March," all its members standing and facing the northern edge of the veranda.

Titus watched the impressive vessel float to the surface, its almost invisible repulsor beams jostling the lesser Pullman ships out of its way. Splashed across its side was the fist-clutching-galaxy symbol of the Eastern Federation.

He was still gawking when the hatch opened, ushering onto the tiled surface none other than the Emperor himself—an immense, brilliantly robed man who swept like a bowling ball through his retinue of aides.

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There were two distant explosions, one close on the heels of the other, and the planetoid convulsed. That time, Titus imagined, he had seen one of the masses of cargo plunging to the surface.

The Emperor drew up before Titus. But although his lips moved, no audible sound came from his mouth, since he was in the immediate range of the Eastern Symphony Orchestra's bass section.

Scowling, he whirled, threw up his arms and bellowed for silence. Quiet came as though someone had pulled a plug.

"Now," he said, propping his fists on his hips and flaring his robe out even further, "perhaps someone will enlighten me. I'm looking for McWorther's World. It's supposed to be here."

Titus poured a triple, undiluted julep and gulped down half of it. He said, "You're standing on it."

"*This!* That's impossible! What's the population?"

"Two—not counting the transients." Titus started to offer the Emperor the rest of his julep, thought better of it and drank it himself.

Roswell withdrew from his dejection, looked up and nodded, verifying the Emperor's stark suspicion. It was apparent that the President was only then aware of the Emperor's identity. And the latter was obviously no less surprised on recognizing his counterpart from the Western Cluster.

They only stared uncertainly at each other while the hundreds of virtuosos, sensing the propriety of demonstrating their loyalty, split into two groups and took sides behind their respective leaders.

Roswell laughed finally. It was a high-pitched, unnatural sound that conveyed no glee at all and grew only more ragged as his shifting stare once again took in the completely ruined merchandise on the surface, the practically irretrievable cargoes adrift in space. His pitiable outburst suggested an infinity of futility over the wanton waste. It spoke wordlessly of sterility for hundreds of productive worlds over the years ahead—economic sterility, and its inevitable consequence of military impotence.

The Emperor watched him for a moment, then dropped to the veranda rail beside him. He didn't join in the almost hysterical laughter. But his glum features

reflected sympathetic appreciation of Roswell's predicament. And in his heavy silence was the admission that the circumstances were mutual.

McWorther's World trembled again. Titus inclined his head to one side, jiggling a finger in his ear to stop it from popping. He could have sworn, too, that he had seen the Emperor and the President levitate a good several inches off the rail.

Edna stalked from the house, surveyed the new arrivals without giving any indication she had recognized them and wagged a finger in her husband's face.

"Titus, this has gone far enough!" she exclaimed. "If you don't—"

"Later, Love," he pacified. "Something's going wrong."

She was taken aback by his understatement. But he hadn't meant it that way. He had merely expressed suspicion over his recurrent sensations of lightness.



Almost at the same time, two other ships dropped down at the edge of the veranda. The hatch of the first sprang open and disgorged a thin man in a swallow-tail coat who drew rigidly erect and announced:

"His Most August Excellency, Prime Minister Netath of Gauyuth-Six!"

Ogarm Netath, indignation branding his features, strode out. "Where's this Potentate McWorther character?" he demanded.

A hundred extended fingers singled out Titus, who was just then pouring a thirteenth julep.

Netath stomped over. "You, sir, have got *my* aid consignments!"

By that time, the other ship had thrown open its hatch and a short, stout man in a business suit emerged.

"I am Wheeler of Rear-Sobucks and Company," he disclosed, standing to one side so that two men working with antigrav grapples could wrestle a large crate onto the veranda. "I have an apology and an automatic bather for Potentate McWorther."

But Titus turned his back on the man, abruptly facing his wife. "Good God! What day is it?"

She frowned in puzzlement. "Why, Wednesday."

There was a sharp explosion nearby as another article of cargo came hurtling down from space.

"And it's almost noon!"

She nodded, still perplexed.

"Get into the spaceabout, Love—*quick!*"

She hesitated and he gave her a shove.

But he paused and faced the others. "You got just about fifteen minutes to climb into your contraptions and clear out—all of you! Because by then we'll be fresh out of gravity!"

And they'd be lucky if they had *that much* time, he realized as he followed Edna into the small craft. He had known he would have to face the inevitable crisis on Wednesday. But all along he had been off one day in his calculations, such that he had been sure today was only Tuesday.

"What is it, Titus?" his wife asked as he strapped himself in beside her.

"The supplementary gravity generator hasn't been refueled! It's sputtering out!"

From space, he watched the end of McWorther's World.

The atmosphere went first, *swooshing* outward as a result of abrupt decompression and leaving a halo of frozen water crystals in its wake. Then the cargo that was piled on the surface recoiled from its own cumulative pressure and shot out into space. The topsoil followed suit, dispersing like a dust storm, while the lakes boiled in one instant and their vapor froze in the next.

Before any of the hurtling mess could reach his spaceabout, Titus followed the Pullman crafts, the Rear-Sobucks delivery vehicle and the Presidential and Imperial yachts into hyperspace.



Titus and Edna McWorther have given up rustic retirement. Instead they are living out their declining years in a floating villa just off the Jersey coast.

Life is still gratifying, with the exception of one detail.

But Titus is resolved that he and his wife will have to be content with the shower-masseur for the rest of their lives.

At any rate, he'll be damned if he'll put in another order for an automatic bather, with or without a back-scrubbing attachment.

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