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SCIENCE FICTION[®]

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THAT'S HOW IT GOES

By J. T. McINTOSH



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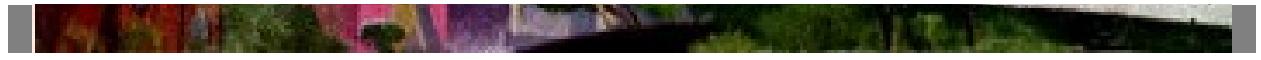
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK OUT OF MIND

OUT OF MIND

By WILLIAM W. STUART

**Nirva was a real bore. The food was
always great, the climate tediously
fine, the view monotonously lovely,
the girls relentlessly amiable.
But, oddly, everybody went there!**

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"Vacation trip to Nirva?!?" snapped Secad Screed—Galactic Sector Administrator J. Gomer Screed, a serious-minded man who rarely lost his temper. That was a pity; it was a lousy temper. "A mindless excursion, and completely outside my Sector at that! Woman, are both you and Garten out of your minds? Who do you think is going to run my administration with both Garten and I on a childish vacation to this absurd 'Dream Planet' of yours?"

"Well—there is Deputy Assistant Prinot and—"

"Ha! And then what do you suppose would be left of my record here and my prospects of promotion—after Depast Prinot and the others put in five solid weeks wrecking all my work?"

Secast Garten, short, a little chubby, the opposite of his chief (who looked like a deep-thinking, bald stork scheduled for delivery of Siamese quintuplets in a typhoon,) grinned. He was seated out of the direct line of verbal fire, on a rock-hard hassock at one side of the barely furnished Screed apartment. He grinned, knowing what Secad Screed would do with a similar opportunity at Division Hq.

"Oh, now, dear," soothed Mrs. Screed, a mousey, chronically anxious little woman with five years experience as secretary and ten as wife in learning to soothe her husband. "Prinot is such a nice man. Don't worry so about things. Just put them out of your mind; they'll be all right."

"What?" Fifteen years experience she had soothing him, but she never did seem to get the knack of it. Or, perhaps, it was a matter of Screed's conscientiously refusing to be soothed, as a matter of discipline. A wife should know her place. Women being what they were, light minded, he felt it only fair that he should regularly point it out to her. He didn't want to spoil her. And he didn't either—unless it was in the matter of favoring her with his personal attentions weekly, at 11:30 p.m., each Friday.

This was big of him. She was lucky. Secad Screed was a big man, Administrative Officer in full command of a major sun system at only 56, wedded to his work and dedicated to becoming more and more important. Mrs. Screed's position was, in a way, almost bigamous. She had a rich, full

fifteen minutes every Friday, and what more could any woman want of life?

At the moment, this one imagined she wanted to take a vacation trip to some nonsensical, little known, semi-mythical dream planet that Garten—the fool!—had been telling her about. "Garten—"

"You are so right, J.G., so right. Give Prinot and those boys an inch and they'll be measuring you out for a grave with it, while they sharpen their knives. Half a chance and they'd foul up your whole Sector Administration. But—you know, sir, after five straight years on the job for both you and me, a five-week vacation is compulsory. We do have our orders."

"Mf-f-f!" That was true and that was the rub. "But we don't have to chase off so far we can't keep an eye on things!"

"Of course, sir. Or—an idea you gave me just the other day, sir—with the recent Truad activity over in Sector Y, we could put this whole system into an emergency invasion alert drill, sir. For the duration—of our vacation. Then every move Prinot makes will have to follow the book—or a court-martial when we get back. With you presiding, eh?"

Secad Screed smiled a thin smile. "I thought of that, of course, Garten. Clever of you to see it. Given time, I may be able to make a passably capable assistant of you after all."

Garten was necessarily more skilled at soothing Screed than was Mrs. S., whose somewhat special status brought her very limited privileges but considerable job security. Garten had hung on, sometimes narrowly, for some five years now.

"Yes sir. I hope so, sir."

"But not as long as you come up with asinine suggestions for us to throw away valuable time on some scarcely heard of 'dream planet.' Even though Centrad does enforce these foolish compulsory vacations, there is no reason why the time cannot be turned to some useful account."

"But, dear," murmured Mrs. Screed wistfully.

"No! Viola, you seem to have lost whatever few wits you once possessed. Why in the Galactic Universe would I go to some tiny, sink-hole, single planet system not even important enough to have a Service Administration? Even I have scarcely heard of the place. Garten, what ever got into you?"

"Uh—ah, well, sir. You see I—uh—have always admired so your report on waste and extravagance on Primus that you made following your last vacation five years ago just before coming here. The way you toppled the entire Sector Administration, forced a dozen or more early retirements and —"

"And got me my promotion to Secad."

"Yes, sir. A sensational job, and much talked of at Centrad, I know. Well sir, I just thought that, since this Nirva is so little known, something of a mystery you know, and something of a sore point with Centrad too, perhaps it might be ripe for an expose."

"Mph. Nonsense, Garten. Not important enough—though, come to consider, it is odd how little public information there is about the place. Centrad is covering something.... Hm-m. Never bothered to check the secret files on it myself. Just for curiosity, Garten, what *is* the detail on the thing?"

Mrs. Screed leaned back in her chair; glanced blankly about the bare apartment; picked idly at a cuticle; tried, with apprehensively expressive features, to register total disinterest. Once, before discouragement set in, she had been a modestly pretty young woman. Now she was merely modest.

"Viola," snapped Screed, "go fix some refreshment. Ice water, crackers, something. Can't have you sitting there mooning over this Nirva nonsense of Garten's. Your mind has too great an affinity for nonsense."

"Yes, sir. Well, sir—"

Mrs. Screed threw him a fleeting, timid smile over her shoulder as she left the room through the kitchen door, back of Screed's arm chair. Inside of two minutes she was back, standing very quietly in the doorway with a pitcher of water and a dish of plain, protein crackers on a tray. Garten talked on.

"Nirva, as you know, is the single planet of a small sun off on the fringes of this region of the Galaxy. It seemed so insignificant it was never even visited until something like fifty years ago. Then a questionable prospector ship had a minor breakdown and was forced to come out of an inter-space jump near the Nirva system. The prospectors had been ten years out. They were coming back empty-handed, nothing to show, not one valuable planet found. There they were. Spectroanalysis of Nirva didn't show much, but they decided to check anyway. They were desperate, dreaming out of all reason of a last-ditch success—dreaming of a civilized, friendly planet, hospitable natives, rich beyond belief, foolishly ready for exploitation, eager to load them up with fissionable minerals and so on. You know how those old space tramp adventurers used to be, sir."

"Hmph. Tramps, yes. So?"

"So they landed and discovered Nirva; the Dream Planet. Of course they didn't find that out at the time."

"What did they find?"

"They found a civilized, friendly planet, hospitable natives, rich beyond belief, foolishly ready for exploitation, eager to load them up with fissionable minerals and so on. There wasn't even a communication problem. The people, handsome, human type, were telepathic. Well. Their visit, although no two of the eleven men on the ship could agree on the details, was one glorious celebration. Liquor and no hangovers. Women, the most beautiful in the universe, competing with each other to do everything—I mean *everything*—for the pleasure of the space heroes. In fact, it seemed a space tramp's dream of heaven. They hated to leave."

"If the place was such a degenerate's delight, why did they leave?"

"Just simple greed, apparently. Their ship was loaded with the most valuable cargo in history. They couldn't resist the urge to take it back and cash in; to strut around and be big heroes, men of wealth and power back home. Finally, and with plenty of regrets, they blasted off. A couple of jumps, six months—travel was slow then, of course—and they landed at the regional capital. They reported their discovery and claims, turned in the cargo for analysis and sale—and, listening for the cheers, sat back to collect their fortunes. Instead of cheers, they got the universal horse laugh."

"A laugh? At a fortune? Why—oh, yes. Of course; turned out they made a pretty stupid mistake about that cargo, eh?"

"Well, it seemed a funny mistake. Their whole cargo of rare, fissionable elements was nothing but perfectly ordinary sand and rock. Now, this crew was rough, but prospecting was their business. They knew their business. It just wasn't possible that they could have made such a mistake. At first the officials were inclined to drop the whole thing as a pointless hoax. But it was so pointless. Somebody was sharp enough to push for an investigation on that account. They rounded up the prospectors, who were all hustling around trying to promote supplies to get them back to Nirva. They got a psychiatric team to run them all through a complete check. The clues to the truth of the matter turned up then; but they were not, at least not generally understood."

"What—?"

"The psychiatric team found that each of the eleven told a similar story, and actually had a similar mental picture of Nirva. But, examined closely, the detail, the artifacts, the—uh—types and—ah—um—habits of the women were startlingly, if not sensationally, different. So different that, in fact, the planet seemed to be perfect. Perfect according to each crewman's idea of the perfect planet. Some of them had pretty crude ideals of perfection, of course. The psychiatric team pushed through an order grounding all members of the crew. All of them ended badly, by the way—seven suicides, two murders, two violent mental cases. The team submitted a completely inconclusive report. Then they proposed that they all be sent to examine Nirva."

"Well? Get to the point, Garten!"

"The expedition went out. It never came back. No word ever came back. The administration jumped to a conclusion that the planet, Nirva, had become hostile and the expeditionary force captured. A battle cruiser, advised to expect resistance and with orders to use all force necessary to pacify the planet and rescue prisoners, was sent out. The cruiser went. It met resistance near Nirva and won a brilliant victory. The Nirva forces surrendered. The ship landed and officers and crew were feted by the defeated population. Prisoners were rescued. Finally, and with some little reluctance the captain, a

devoted family man, gave orders and the cruiser headed back. But—at the first jump away, the prisoners and something like two-thirds of the cruiser's crew vanished. Naturally there was a good deal of excitement.

"Arrant nonsense."

"Yes, sir. Of course. But—two further rescue expeditions ran into much the same thing. It seemed that only individuals with the most vital and binding ties or absorbing interests back home ever came back from Nirva. Others, especially anyone with the least trace of instability, stayed there."

"A lunatic planet for the feeble-minded!"

"Uh—yes, sir. In a manner of speaking. At least the officially approved conclusion regarding Nirva is this. No way to be certain but, presumably, from sample materials and distance observation, it appears a rather ordinary, Earth-type planet physically. It is inhabited by a race, physical characteristics doubtful, probably humanoid, having, unique mental properties. Imaginative, very powerful, hypnotic. And, the theory goes, these people exercise a sort of group mind power with individualistic overtones. To all intents and purposes, they modify their physical—and social—surroundings to suit themselves. Each then lives quite literally in a world of his own. The world of his dreams. For visitors from outside, same thing. Each person who lands on Nirva, or even approaches it without a powerful force shield, sees what he imagines he should see. He finds whatever he may be looking for. A man who has mental air castles, you might say, can go to Nirva and move right into them. As they say, sir, the planet of dreams."

"Hallucinations!"

"Yes, sir. But controlled, pleasant—and having all the force, feel and effect of reality. So the theory has it, that is. Of course, travel to Nirva is so restricted as to be almost completely prohibited now and the information wiped from public records. The administration could see that it might become disastrously over popular."

"Why not wipe out the whole lunatic asylum of a system?"

"Ah—yes. Well—uh—perhaps some of the men at the top thought perhaps it might turn out to be useful in—uh—some way."

"There have been rumors of mysterious disappearances of officials. Weakness."

"Yes sir. Exactly."

"A haven for weak-minded idiots to be taken in by stupid, parlor hypnotics. Why should I waste my time and talent exposing something so totally and transparently stupid?"

"Of course, sir. It would be a difficult thing to try to manage. I'm sure—in spite of the enormous publicity and promotional possibilities in clearing up the mystery—that it's not the sort of thing a solid administrator would care to get mixed up in."

The Secad looked interested.

"A perfectly horrible sounding place," interrupted Viola from her doorway, "I had no idea it would be anything like that. It sounds immoral, actually. I wouldn't go."

The Secad looked thoughtful.

"Besides," added Garten, "I'm certain, now I consider it, we couldn't possibly manage to get a clearance to visit Nirva anyway."

"Well, then," said Viola firmly. "You know how the Secad needs a rest. I do hope you can find something more suitable for our vacation than that. Some place that's *quiet* and *respectable* and—"

The Secad looked convinced. "Oh, shut up, Viola. And you too, Garten. If we must go on a vacation, we must—but I shall decide where we will go. Is that clear?"

That was clear.

Nirva stuck in the mind of Secad Screed. He was, certainly, the sanest, soundest, solidest and most sensible of men. It was not possible to trick him into any hasty, ill-considered action.

Still, it rankled to have Garten and, of all people, Viola tell him he couldn't go to Nirva—and couldn't succeed in doing anything about it if he did.

Of course, it is true that a man can trust no one but himself. It was transparently obvious that Viola and that pip-squeek Garten were trying to con him into taking them to Nirva. But it was an irritation. And maybe the thing did, actually, offer the possibility for something sensational in the way of a coup.

Naturally, Garten and Viola were interested only in the supposed cheap thrills of the dream planet, the chance to escape from practical, business-like reality into some degenerate make-believe. They both needed a lesson. They should be shown how poor and weak a thing a romantic dream is, when brought up short by the trained, superior, analytical administrative mind.

The next day at work he set Garten to work drafting up orders for an emergency invasion alert drill "just in case." He then consulted with his Neuro-Surgeon General.

"Naturally, Dr. Treadmel, I would never dream of directing any illegal actions within my own jurisdiction—where, of course, I am Secad and therefore the judge of all questions of legality. And of your Department too, Doctor, you may take note. However, the information I am endeavoring to extract from you I shall apply, if at all, solely to the planet Nirva. Not to any of ours."

"Yes, sir."

"Very well, Doctor. Now. You are familiar with hypnotics, are you not?"

"Sir!" The Doctor was hurt. "One of the primary duties—"

"All right. You are familiar with hypnotics. You use them all the time in legal questions, crime, employment interviewing in depth and so on. Naturally. And you are also aware of various measures—yes, yes, I know they are specifically barred by the Public Safety Amendment—some mechanical and some narcotic, that may be taken to counteract or prevent hypnosis. So. My question is this. Would such measures as your low power, hyper-electronic broadcast and your anti-hypnotic drugs be effective against the spell or illusion the inhabitants of Nirva use on visitors and, perhaps, themselves?"

"Well, now, Secad Screed, that is an extremely interesting question."

"I am interested only in the answer, Doctor."

"Uf. Yes, sir. Well, I can see no reason why they wouldn't be effective—always supposing the subjective hypnotic theory of the place is correct. That is—in theory—this group mind, which is supposed to provide the basis, should be totally disrupted by the random or scrambling effect of the electronic broadcast. The drugs, on the other hand, would render the individual who took the drug, during the period of its effectiveness, totally un- or non-receptive to the impulse, whereas—"

"All right, Doctor. You are trying to say, in your obfuscating manner, that the measures would be effective. Right?"

"Subjectively, not taking into account the hypothetical possibility of random foci—and, of course, barring circumstances outside the range of—"

"Doctor! Yes? Or no?"

"Well—uh—yes."

"Doctor, when you have quite finished the duties I am about to assign you, I suggest you visit my legal staff for a game of circumlocution. In the meantime—get me that drug."

"Yes, sir. You understand the limitations—"

"And give Chief Engineer Barstow the specifics for an anti-hypnotic electronic amplifier, suitable for placing in satellite orbit."

"But—"

"Around Nirva. *Good-by*, Doctor!"

And that would take care of that.

Of course Nirva, the Dream Planet, was a fake. It was a fairy story for childish minds, not capable of affecting the mature intellect. But there was nothing like being doubly sure. Secad Screed was always sure.

The only thing that upset him more than being not quite sure was the idea of something being wrong. But of course this never happened.

"All right, Viola," he said that night, after letting her sit, fidgety, looking the question she didn't quite dare to ask all evening long. "So you want to go to this ridiculous planet, Nirva. Don't you?"

"Dear, of course not! Not if you don't think—that is, you said it was stupid. So of course we wouldn't—"

"Please, Viola. You should know better than to try to deceive me. And so should Garten. It is completely and transparently clear to me that both of you are trying to get me to take you to this so-called dream world. Childish escapism. You know that?"

"Yes, of course, dear."

"Very well. We are going."

"Oh! How wonderful. Thank you!"

"Don't thank me now. Later, afterward, you can thank me. When I have done you and Garten the service of showing you the infantile immaturity of your own minds. I am, Viola my dear, going to expose to the Galaxy this tawdry charlatanism for the little carnival illusion that it is. I shall show you the superior mental power of a mind—mine—that can face reality. You, and possibly even Garten, like drug addicts think you can escape from fact into a dream world."

"Oh, no."

"You will learn that there is no escape. I shall show you to yourselves. And you will see that run-down, sink-hole planet of lotus eaters for the degenerate mental slum it truly must be and is."

"Oh? Well, it is good of you to go to so much trouble."

Smugly, "The expose may prove of some advantage in my Service career."

"Of course, dear."

Of course. Of course, there was a period of frantic, forced-draft preparation by certain of the Administration Departments. Garten was voluble in his admiration of the plan for the electronic broadcast, anti-hypnotic satellite for Nirva. On the drugs, he had no comment. He was not, in fact, informed of this part of the plan. Clearance for Secad Screed and party to visit the "Limited Access" Planet, Nirva, was obtained from Inter-Regional

Headquarters with surprisingly, if not suspiciously, little difficulty. Screed smiled a sour little smile. Jealousy, perhaps. He would show them, too.

In two weeks standard time, they—Secad Screed, Mrs. Viola Screed and Secast Garten—were on the way. It was a small ship, with a crew specially screened for the stop at Nirva, bound for the farther reaches of the Galaxy. At the end of three inter-space jumps it would orbit in to leave them on Nirva. Five weeks later, on the return trip, it would put in again to pick them up.

At the end of the third jump, Secad Screed and party, VIP's certainly, visited the ship's captain in the control room.

"We are coming in to the planet now, Captain," announced Screed informatively. "I want to be certain that the satellite is functioning properly and placed in planned orbit, regular, between sixty and ninety minutes."

"Yes, sir," sighed the captain, a morose-looking man with an anachronistic, drooping moustache, "Believe me, Secad Screed, within my deplorably narrow limits I do know my business. Your satellite is being attended to now. We are within the field of Nirva. We will make our run in, fingers crossed, so you may debark."

"Fingers crossed, Captain? Hmph! Well—let's have a look at the thing on the view screen."

"Sorry—but no, sir. We go in on automatic instruments, with special electric power shield up all the way. I'll cut the shield just long enough for you to land and back up she goes. Likely I'll lose a couple of my crew at that."

"Nonsense! Have you no confidence in the satellite?"

The captain shrugged. "I take no chances."

This was a line of reason Screed could well appreciate—in himself. From the captain it seemed foolishness.

"Surely, Captain, if you were to lose crewmen you could and would insist upon their immediate return?"

"Insist, Secad Screed? How? You do not, I think, have quite the full picture

of this thing. Its appeal, the pull of your own personal perfect dream world, is very strong. If I didn't have a wife and six sweet kids back home that I only see a month or two out of the year—well. This Nirva problem is like this. We go in. Down screen. Off you and your party go. My crew? All present. OK, back up with the screen—and *then* we find out who is actually on the ship."

"But if they were all present—?"

"Maybe present; maybe nothing but projected illusions. It is not possible to distinguish. So, say a couple are missing when the screen goes up. Suppose I down screen again. Protest. The natives are all apology. The men return."

"All right then."

"Not exactly. When the screen is up again—maybe instead of two missing, by then I would have four gone. The temptation gets too strong. Fighting it is like doubling bets to get even on a crooked wheel."

"Hmph!" Slack handling. Incredibly slack. It certainly was time a man who knew his own mind took over.

The satellite was orbiting. He had taken an anti-hypnosis pill. So too, although he hadn't bothered to tell them about it, had Viola and Garten, in their coffee. "Well, Captain. Your problems with Nirva are over. I—" he drew himself up in full executive-command stance—"am going to straighten the place out. In five weeks, when you return to pick us up, you will find Nirva, under my administration, a sound, sensible, stable colony. And we three will all return with you."

"Oh?" The captain was a skeptic.

"Of course," said Viola, "When my husband says a thing will be done, you can count it done."

"And this other gentleman, Secast Garten?"

"Naturally, sir. Secad Screed is a man of his word. Not even Nirva could alter his determination."

"I see. Well, I'm not a betting man, of course. Regulations. But if I were—"

"Yes, Captain?" Secad Screed's voice cracked icily.

"I would like to bet a year's salary that all three of you won't go back with me."

"Well, Captain. As Senior Service Officer aboard, I make the regulations here. I'll just take that bet. A year's salary, against yours. Nice odds for you there, Captain. That is a bet. Garten, you and Viola are witness."

The Captain smiled sourly and nodded. Screed turned on his heel, annoyed. "Come Viola; Garten." Viola bowed her head and followed. Garten lingered a minute.

"Captain? If you'd care to hedge a bit of that bet, I'll take, say, half of it?"

The captain looked at him. An ordinary man. Not young, not old; not big, not small. Just a man, almost extraordinarily ordinary. And certainly not too bright since, as he clearly intended to stay on Nirva, what good would it do him to win half of that old snake Screed's bet? The Captain shook his head. "Thanks, Secast Garten, but since you won't—well. No, thanks, I'll keep it."

Garten shrugged regretfully. "So? Well, I could use the money but no matter. I think you have a good bet, Captain. It's my bet, too."

A half hour and the ship settled gently on the surface of the planet. The three passengers for Nirva were ready at the air-lock.

"Down screen!"

Screed heard the words over the intercom. For a moment a sense of confusion, of uncertainty of purpose touched with dizzying, empty fear, swept over him. Abruptly it was gone. Confidence, more certain and invincible than ever, flooded back. He knew what he must do. And he knew that he would surely do it.

A thrill of anticipatory triumph brought a little twisted smile to his thin lips but, half turning his head toward Viola and Garten, all he said was, peremptorily, "Come."



They stood, three small figures, on the surface of Nirva, the dream planet,

beside the space ship.

They were edged away from it by a discomforting mental pressure as the ship's force field snapped back on. Nirva. It seemed nothing so much. Pleasant enough, perhaps, but in a shockingly disordered, unimproved sort of way. Much the sort of thing Screed had expected.

There was a bright sun overhead with a slight rosy-pink tint to it, low green hills and some sort of town or settlement in the near distance. The sky was a deep blue, almost purple, dotted with feathery, pinkish clouds. All right. Probably it was quite suitable for exploitation as an agricultural planet. Not too much quick profit in it, perhaps, but well worth salvage.

Screed, Viola and Garten were standing near the center of a cleared field, possibly a bungled excuse for a space port. Across it, a ramshackle building leaned tiredly to one side. As the space ship rose silently behind them, some sort of wheeled vehicle started toward them from the building, raising a small cloud of pinkish-white dust as it came.

"How awful," said Viola, echoing Screed's thoughts. "It's so shamefully rundown and neglected looking."

"A Galactic disgrace," agreed Garten from the other side.

"So," said Secad Screed, the leader. "You see?"

The native vehicle, a rattle-trap affair reminiscent of ancient earth internal combustion wagons, clattered up. The driver was unclearly human under a slovenly, unkempt exterior; he was also middle-aged, fat and anxious as he stumbled out. "Ah," he said eagerly, "distinguished visitors! And—uh—is it possible—that is, I mean to say, I—we all in fact, wonder if it could be you who is responsible for the sudden, total change that seems to have affected our—ah—perceptive climate?"



"And if we are," snapped Screed, "it was certainly a degenerative situation that desperately needed changing. You and all your people should thank me for it. And you will."

"Oh yes," said the native. "We already do, indeed. But—uh—the thing is, not that we aren't grateful for the awakening, but it is all so horribly confusing to us. You see, what I mean to say, we don't know exactly what—"

"You need leadership! Strong, efficient leadership."

"That's it exactly. If only you would—"

"I shall." He made an expansive, condescending gesture. "I, with the help of Mrs. Screed—I, by the way, am Secad Screed, the Leader—and my assistant,

will take full command of all administration immediately. You will find that I will soon whip you into shape."

"Ah, sir, how can we ever repay you?"

"Perhaps something may be worked out. Now, we must get started. Take me at once to your ruling body."

"Ah. Do you suppose the Council of Dreamers—?"

"Hmph; just the sort of thing we shall have done with once and for all. But we must start someplace, I suppose. Let us proceed."

They all climbed somewhat apprehensively into the vehicle. They proceeded.

Screed proceeded.

He proceeded, with Viola and Garten cheering and trailing along some little distance to the rear, to carry out his total plan. It was almost too easy.

"Almost," thought Screed as the obedient, grateful citizens of Nirva labored frantically to remake their world into a model Class II, Galactic Service AgPlan. "But then, no one else could ever make a start here. It is simply that, to a mind and character like mine, all things are easy."

He was, not for the first time, mildly surprised at his own brilliance, and totally admiring.

Perhaps he was justified. Certainly both Viola and the sometimes cynical seeming Garten were all awed respect. The reformation of Nirva advanced at a remarkable pace. The people, rudely awakened from a generations-long dream, were confused, aimless, purposeless. Like the bewildered representative at the space port, they wanted nothing more than a firm leader to give them direction. Having apparently no will of their own, they went to work with a will. Screed's will.

Screed was pleasantly surprised. It seemed that before the development of the "dream world of the group mind," some five hundred years before, they had been a progressive people with a modestly advanced technology. With the group mind, all of the old knowledge and technical abilities had, quite

inadvertently, been passed on from generation to generation. Direction was all they needed. Having no power of resistance, they accepted it with total obedience. When Screed said, as he often did, "You people are not here to think; you're here to do what I tell you," they smiled in whole-hearted agreement and did just what he told them. It was delightful.

In five short weeks the reconstruction of Nirva was well advanced. New cities and smoke-belching factories were rising from old ruins. Fields were plowed and sowed.

And the space ship came back.

Reluctantly Screed cut short a series of final instruction conferences with his newly appointed deputy directors and administrators. He picked up Viola and Garten from their quarters in the refurbished ruin of an ancient mansion on a hill overlooking the new capital and they rode to the space port in his vehicle, primitive in design but gleaming, shining like new in the rosy-pink sunshine.

The citizenry lined the roadway, torn between sobs and cheers. Screed, smiling, and sternly gracious, waved a regretful farewell. At the ship he paused for a last word with his senior deputy. In unfamiliar tones of anxious concern, he said, "Now, you have all my memos and instructions. You're sure you can handle it? Carry on just the way I have directed?"

"Of course, glorious supreme leader. In your wisdom you have pointed us the way. We shall not stray."

"Well—everything has been going well, very well. In a way I hate to leave and take the chance on your fouling everything up."

"We shall do our poor best, great leader."

"Yes," said Screed, doubtfully. "True enough. But even so—"

They could feel the space ship's screen cut off. The port opened.

From the vast crowd of Nirvans spread across the space port there came a great whispering noise, something between a sigh and a moan of sad farewell, as Screed turned and followed the other two through the port and

into the ship.

"Ah, Captain," said Screed, smiling a thin smile of triumph. "You doubted my ability to remake Nirva. But now you have seen it. Quite a change, eh?"

"Oh sure. Quite a change. Of course, there always is."

"And, Captain, you will note that we are all here. All three of us. You have, I fear, lost your bet."

The Captain shrugged. "Better get to your cabin now, ready for take off."

In the cabin Screed settled back in a chair and looked up at the other two with an odd air of defiance. "All right," he said, "I did it, didn't I? Just the way I told you."

"Screen on," said the Captain over the intercom.

To the three in the cabin the air seemed to turn shimmery, hazy, indistinct for a moment. Then it cleared.

Garten and Viola stood by the doorway, arm in arm, staring. Screed, Secad Screed, the leader, was gone.

"There," said Garten with deep satisfaction, "He did do it."

Viola sighed, smiling. "Darling! He did! It worked just the way you said it would. But I'm still not sure I quite understand why—or how."

"It doesn't really matter. But—you noticed he quit taking the anti-hypnotic pills after the first week?"

"Yes. Did that make any difference? The satellite worked, didn't it? And everything else went just the way he wanted it. It all seemed perfect—for him."

"Sure it did. And that was what he couldn't face losing."

"Hmm?"

"Well, it seemed that everything went exactly the way he imagined it would. The satellite worked. The people followed him. Everything. But maybe we all

only imagined it. How can we be sure? After all, those things—plus our purely personal concerns that he was far too busy to take any note of—"'

Viola blushed, quite charmingly for a plain, mousy little woman.

"—were what we were expecting too. How can we know, for sure, what was real and what was illusion?"'

Viola looked suddenly offended.

"About the planet, I mean."

Viola looked mollified.

"But the planet—I think Screed is running the thing; I'm not sure. As long as he is there, he *knows* he is running it. Here—who knows? That was the chance he couldn't take, the chance his mind refused to face. If he were here, *could he still be sure he was right?*"'

Viola smiled the feminine smile that dismisses a question no longer of personal consequence and snuggled closer to Garten. "Well," she said, "at least we know he isn't here. That's all that matters."

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