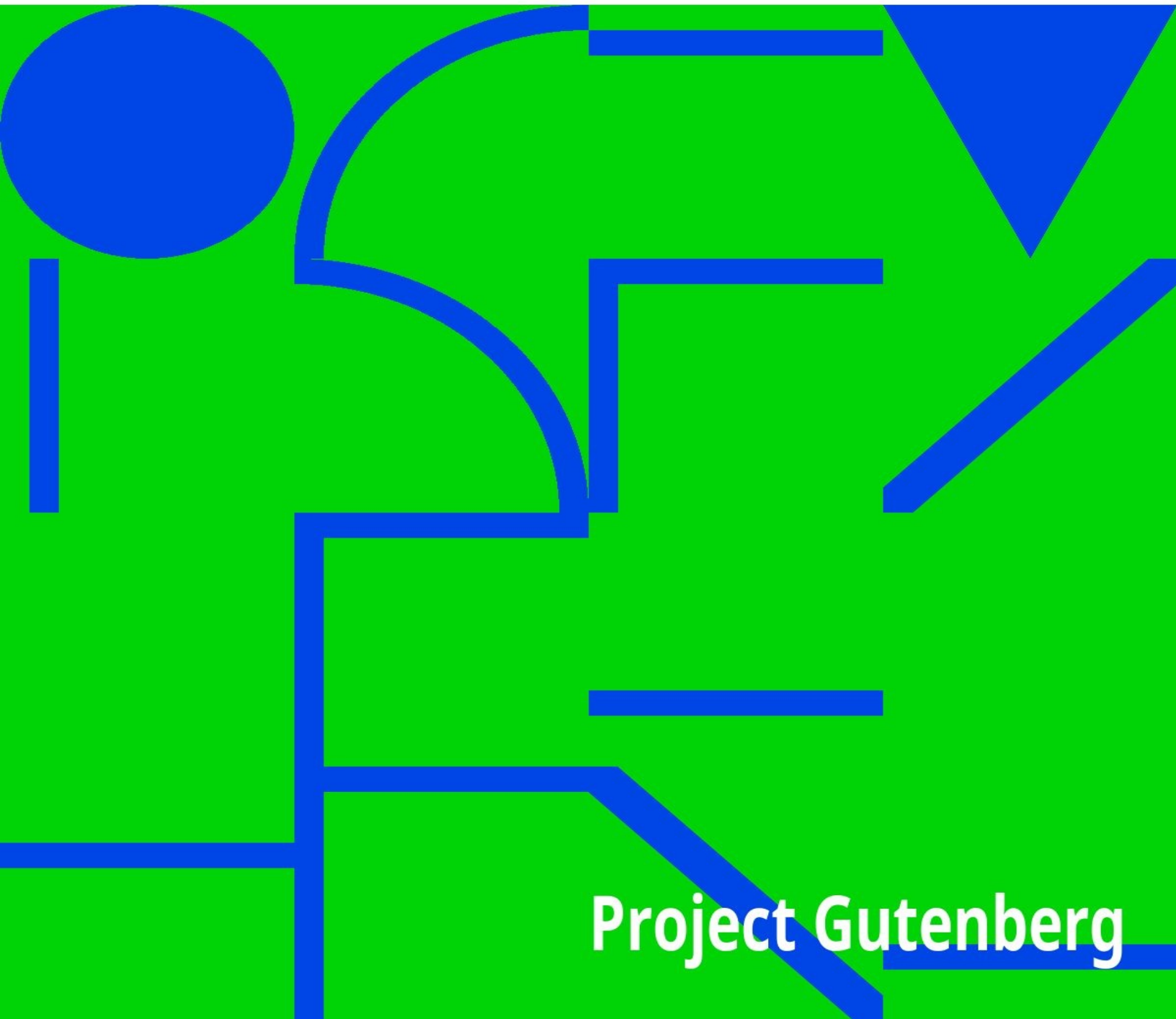


Question of Comfort

Les Cole



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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK QUESTION OF COMFORT ***

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The Gravity Gang was a group of geniuses—devoting its brilliance to creating a realistic Solar System for Disneyland. That was the story, anyway. No one would have believed all that stuff about cops and robbers from outer space.

QUESTION OF COMFORT

By LES COLLINS

MY JOB, finished now, had been getting them to Disneyland. The problem was bringing one in particular—one I had to find. The timing was uncomfortably close.

I'd taken the last of the yellow pills yesterday, tossing the bottle away with a sort of indifferent frustration. I won or lost on the validity of my logic—and whether I'd built a better mousetrap.

The pills had given me 24 hours before the fatal weakness took hold; nevertheless, I waited as long as I could. That left me less than an hour, now; strangely, as I walked in the eerie darkness of an early morning, virtually deserted Disneyland, I felt calm. And yet, my life depended on the one I sought being inside the Tour building.

I was seeking a monster of terrible potential, yet so innocuous looking that he'd not stand out. I couldn't produce him, couldn't say where in the world he was. Nevertheless he was the basis, the motivation second only to mine. I took the long, hard way—three years—making him come to me.

Two years were devoted to acclimatization, learning, and then swinging this job: just to put the idea across.

Assigned to Disneyland Public Relations in the offices at Burbank, I'd begun with the usual low-pay, low-level jobs. I didn't, couldn't mind; at least I had a foot in the right door. Within six months, I reached a point where I could present the idea.

It had enough merit. My boss—35 years' experience enabled him to recognize a good idea—took it to his boss who took it to The Boss.

Tomorrowland is the orphan division of Disneyland, thrown in as sop to those interested more in the future than the past. My idea was to sex up Tomorrowland: Tour the Solar System.

Not really, but we'd bill it that way. The Tour of the Solar System Building was to be large. Its rooms would reproduce environments of parts of the System, as best we knew them.

I'll never forget the first planning session when we realists were underdogs, yet swung the basic direction. By then, the Hollywood Mind had appeared. The Hollywood Mind is definitely a real thing, a vicious thing, a blank thing, that paternalistically insists It knows what the public wants.

There was general agreement on broad outlines. Trouble began over Venus.

"Of course," said one of the Minds, "we'll easily create a swampy environment ____"

I burst out with quiet desperation: "May I comment?"

The realists were churning. Right there, sides were being chosen. I let all know my side immediately.

"Venus is hot, but it's desert heat. Continuous dust storms with fantastic winds ____"

"People'd never go for that junk," interrupted the Mind. "Everyone knows Venus is swampy."

"Everyone whose reading tastes matured no further than Edgar Rice Burroughs!"

The Mind, with a if-you-know-so-much-why-aintcha-rich look, sneered, "How come you know all about it?"

Speechless, I spread my hands. This joker was leading with his chin, forcing the fight. I had to hit him again; if I lost, I lost good. "A person," I said slowly and rhythmically, "with normal intelligence and a minute interest in the universe, will keep step with the major sciences, at least on an elementary level. I must stress the qualification of normal intelligence."

The Mind, face contorted, was determined to get me. I was in a very vulnerable spot; more important, so was the idea.

Mind began an emotional tirade, and mentally I damned him. It couldn't have mattered to him what environment we used, but he was politicking where he shouldn't.

There was silence when he stopped. This was the crux; The Boss would decide. I held my breath.

He said, "We'll make it hot and dusty." The realists had won; the rest climbed on the bandwagon but quick; and the temple was cleansed.

It was natural—because at the moment I was fair-haired—for the project to become mine. God knows, I worked hard for it. I'd have to watch the Mind, though; he would make things as difficult as possible.

However, he'd proved he was the one person I wasn't seeking. One down and 2,499,999,999 to go.

Within a few days, a new opposition coalition formed, headed by the Mind. Fortunately, they helped. I'd hesitated on one last point. Pushed. I gambled the momentum of the initial enthusiasm would carry it.



Originally the plan was a series of rooms, glassed off, that people could stare into. There was something much better; engineering and I spent 36 hours straight, figuring costs, juggling space and equipment, until the modification didn't look too expensive—juggling is always possible in technical proposals. For the results, the cost was worth it. I hand-carried the proposal in.

Why not take people *through* the rooms? We could even design a simulated, usable spacesuit. There'd be airlock doors between the rooms for effectiveness, insulation, economy. No children under ten allowed; no adults over 50. They'd go through in groups of 10 or 11.

Sure, I realized this was the most elaborate, most ambitious concession ever planned. The greatest ever attempted in its line, it would cost—both us and the public. But people will pay for value. They'd go for a buck-and-a-half or even two; the lines of those filing past the windows, at 50 cents a crack, would also bring in the dough.

They bought it. Not all—they nixed my idea of creating exact environmental conditions; and I didn't insist, luck and Hollywood being what they are.

From the first, I established a special group to work on one problem. They were dubbed the Gravity Gang, and immediately after, the GG. I hired them for the gravity of the situation, a standard gag that, once uttered, became as trite as the phrase. The Tour's realism would be affected by normal weight sensations.

The team consisted of a female set designer—who'd turn any male head—from the Studio, a garage mechanic with 30 years' experience, an electronics engineer, a science fiction writer, and the prettiest competent secretary available. I found Hazel, discovering with delight she'd had three years of anthropology at UCLA.

As soon as they assembled, I explained their job: find a way to give the illusion of lessened gravity.

Working conditions would be the best possible—why I'd wanted the women pretty—and their time was their own. I found the GG responded by working 10 hours a day and thinking another 14. They were that sort.

I couldn't know the GG was foredoomed to failure by its very collective nature; nor could I know, by its nature, the GG meant the difference between my success and failure.

The opposition put one over; we'd started referring to the job as Tour of the System Project. Next day, it was going the rounds as TS project. Words, words, and men will always fight with words.

Actually, the initials were worthy of the name. The engineering problems mounted like crazy. Words, words, and one of them got to the outside world. Or maybe it was the additional construction crew we hired.

One logical spot for the building was next to the moon flight. The Tour building now would be bigger than first planned, so we extended it southeasterly. This meant changing the roadbed of the Santa Fe & Disneyland R.R. It put me up to my ears in plane surveying—and gave me a nasty shock.

I looked up at someone's shout, in time to see a ton of cat rolling down the embankment at me.



What we were doing was easy. Using a spiral to transition gradually from tangent to circular curve and from circular curve to tangent. Easy? Yeah. Sure.

If this was my baby, I'd damned well better know its personality traits. I was out with the surveyors, I was out with the construction gang, I was out at the wrong time.

As the yellow beast, mindless servant of man, thundered down, I dove for the

rocks. Thank God for the rocks—we'd had to import them: the soil in Orange County is fine for oranges, but too soft for train roadbeds.

Choking on the dust, I rolled over. The cat perched, grinning drunkenly, on the rocks. The opposition or an accident? Surely the Mind wasn't *that* desperate. But I was; I had to keep the idea alive, for myself as well as completion of the original mission.

Several million hands pulled me out; several million more patted away the dust. Motionless, I'd just seen the driver of the cat. Seen him—and was sorry.

He stood tall but hunched over; gaunt, with pasty skin, vapid eyes, and a kind of yellow-nondescript hair.

It wasn't the physical characteristics, very similar to mine, that bothered me—once after an incomplete pass, I'd been told by a young lady that I was a "thin, sallow lecher." I was swept by waves of impending trouble, more frightened of him than of the opposition in toto. Then, relieved, I realized the man wasn't the one I was expecting.

Back in my office, I wasn't allowed the luxury of nervous reaction. Our spacesuit man wanted an Ok on design changes. Changes? What changes?... Oh, yes, go ahead.

A materials man wanted to know about weight. I told him where to go—for the information.

A written progress report from the GG briefly, sardonically, said: "All the talk about increased costs and lowered budget has decided us to ask if any aircraft, missile, or AEC groups have come up with anti-gravity. It'd be a lot simpler that way. Love and kisses."

I shrugged, wrote them a memo to take a week off for fishing, wenching, or reading Van Es on the Pleistocene stratigraphy of Java. I didn't care, as long as they returned with a fresh point of view.

Things were hectic already, less than four months after we'd started. And we hadn't much to show, except a shift in the roadbed of the SF & D RR. The opposition, growing stronger each day, could sit back and rest the case, with nothing more than a smug, needling, I-told-you-so look.

The day finally came when we broke ground for the building. It was quite an

achievement, and I invited the GG to dinner. I'd been drawn to the bunch of screwballs—the only name possible—more and more. Maybe because they were my brain-child, or maybe because lately they were the only human company in which I could relax.

The Hotel is about a half-mile south of Disneyland. I arrived early, hoping to grab a ginger ale. Our set designer, Frank—christened Francis—caught me at the door.

"Wanted to buy you a drink. This is the first time we've met socially."

That was true; it was equally true something bothered her. Damn it! Trapped, I'd have to drink. We ordered, and I mulled it over. Waited, but she said nothing.



The drinks came. I shook several little, bright-yellow pills from the bottle, swallowed them, then drank. Frank cocked her head inquisitively.

"If you must know, they're for my ulcer."

"Didn't know you had one."

"Don't, but I'll probably get one, any day."

She laughed, and I drank again. I should do my drinking alone because I get boiled incredibly fast. It happened now. One second I was sober; the next, drunk.

Resting a cheek on a wobbly palm-and-elbow, I said, "Has everyone ever said you are the most beautiful—"

"Yes, but in your present state, it isn't a good idea for you to add to that number."

I shifted to the other forearm. "Frank, things might be different if I weren't a thin, sallow lecher."

"What a nice compliment—"

"Uh huh."

"Especially since I work for you, nominally anyway—"

"Uh huh, nominally."

"Bosses should not make passes

At gals who work as lower classes."

"Uh, huh, familiar."

"But you are, and getting more so daily—"

"Uh hu—are what?" I asked in surprise.

"Thin, tired: the GG has decided you're working too hard."

"Because I don't use Vano." I grinned, having waited long to put that one across.

"Be serious and listen—"

"*You* listen: if I'm working too hard, it's to finish. I *must*, and soon."

"This compulsion," she paced her words, "will kill you if you let it."

"It'll kill me if I don't let it—"

"Here comes Harry."

It was time. Blearily, I fumbled with the pills, spilled the bottle. Frank helped me gather them up, as Harry arrived.

He said, a look of worry on his gaunt, gray features, "The rest of us are waiting."

Concerned, Frank asked, "Think you're able?"

"Anytime you say," I answered, in a cold-sober monotone.

She flushed, knowing I was sober, not knowing certainly if I were serious.

When we were seated, I said enthusiastically, "Chateaubriand tonight, gangsters."

The GG did not react as expected.

Dex, the electronics engineer, said quietly, "If it's steak when the ground is broken, what'll it be when the thing is finished?"

"A feast, for all the animals in the world—just like Suleiman-bin-Daoud." This, from the GG writer, Mel.

Their faces showed the same thing that bothered Frank.

Harry said, "We have something to do."

"Well, do it!" I tried weak joviality: "It can't be anything of earth-shaking gravity."

Hazel, long since accepted as a GG member, replied, "It's just that we're ... resigned."

"What?"

"We've produced nothing in months of sustained effort. That's why we're resigning," Dex replied disgustedly.

Frank touched my arm, said softly, "We've examined every angle. With the money available, it's just impossible to give a sensation of changed weight. And we know they've been pressuring you about us being on the payroll."

"Wait"—desperately—"if you pull out, everything will go. The opposition needs only something like this. Besides, the GG is the one bit of insanity I can depend on in a practical world, the prop for my judgment—"

Harry: "Clouded judgment."

Mel: "Expensive prop."

Having grown used to their friendly insults, I sensed their resolution weakening, felt the pendulum swinging back.

The waitress interrupted with news of an urgent phone call. It was the worst possible time for me to leave. And the news I got threw me. Feeling the weight of the world, I returned.

"Can't be in two places at once," I said bitterly. "Go ahead without me; I'm leaving."

"Wait a few minutes," Mel said, between bites of steak, "we want to resign. Sit down."

"Damn it, I can't! I spoke to The Boss. I've pulled a boo-boo, but big."

"What happened?"

"Bonestell will do the backgrounds, but he has to know what rocks we're putting in the rooms. What rocks are we? Anybody have an idea what the surface of Mars looks like? God, how could I have missed that?"

"Sit down," Dex said casually, "we want to resign."

Hazel added, "You can have your rocks in 24 hours. We worked it out weeks ago. I *did* read Van Es, and Harry has prospected, and Dex knows minerals, and Mel pushed his way through Tyrrell's 'Principles of Petrology'—"

"The science of rocks," Mel interrupted, between bites of steak.

"We got interested one day." Frank's pretty, dark eyes danced.

"We want to resign," Dex repeated casually, "so sit down."

I sat.

They began throwing the ball faster than I could catch: "No atmosphere on Mercury, then no oxidation; I insist there'd be no straight metals.... The asteroids? Ferromagnesian blocks of some kind—any basalts around here?... For Venus, grab a truckload of granodiorite—the spotted stuff—from the Sierra-Nevadas and tint it pink.... Lateritic soils for Mars? You crazy? Must have water and a subtropical climate...."

It hit me: a valid use for the GG, one that already saved money. Make them a brain team, trouble-shooters, or problem-solvers on questions that could not be solved.

I said, "Fine, go ahead. About your resignations—"

Mel said something indistinguishable—I'd caught him *on* a bite of steak.

Hazel, belligerent, demanded: "Are you asking *us* to resign?"

Apparently I wasn't. So they stuck, and another crisis was met. Unfortunately, by then, I'd forgotten the shock and warning I got from the cat.



Things moved swiftly, more easily. The GG took over, becoming, in effect, my staff. They'd become more: five different extensions of me, each capable of acting correctly. As a team, they meshed beautifully.

Too beautifully, at one point. Dex and Hazel were seeing eye-to-eye, even in the dark, and I worried about the effect on the others. I might as well have worried about the effect of a light bulb on the sun. They married or some such, refused time off, and the GG functioned, if anything, better. It was almost indecent the way the five got along together.

A new problem arose: temperature. We weren't reproducing actual temperatures, but the rooms needed a marked change, for reality's sake. I'd insisted on that, and having won the point, was stuck with it. It was after 2 A.M.; I was alone in the office.

The sound of the outer door closing startled me. Footsteps approached; I hurried to clean my desk, sweeping the bottle into the drawer.

"You're up too late. Go home." Frank had a nonarguable look in her eye. "You're supposed to be getting sleep."

"I am, far more than before you guys began helping, but—"

"But with all that extra sleep, you're looking worse."

"I don't *need* any more sleep!" I said angrily, then tried diversion, "Been on a date?"

"Yes, but I thought I'd better check on you." She moved close to the desk, and I remembered the last time we'd been alone, in the bar. Now I was glad I wasn't drunk.

"What the devil are you up to?"

She pawed through the desk drawers. "Finding what you tried to hide—"

"Wait, Frank!" I yelled, too late.

She looked at the bottle, then me, with a strange expression: a little pity—not patronizing—but mostly feminine understanding. "Soda pop? Of course. You don't like alcohol, do you?"

"No." Gruffly.

Her eyes blinked rapidly, as though holding back tears. "I know what's the matter with you; I *really* know."

"There's nothing the matter with me that—"

"That beating this mess won't solve." We hadn't heard Mel enter. He leaned casually against the door. "Terrific idea for a story."

I shrugged. "Seems to be homecoming night."

"Not quite," he glanced at his watch, "but wait another few minutes."

He was right: Harry, out of breath, was the last of the GG to arrive.

"Now what?" I asked. "Surely this meeting isn't an accident?"

Dex said thoughtfully, "No, not really, but it is in the sense you mean. We didn't agree to appear tonight. Yet logically, it's time for the temperature problem—well, I guess each of us came down to help."

What could I do? That was the GG, characteristically, so we talked temperatures.

"What I was thinking," Harry began slowly, "was a sort of superthermostat." Harry, as usual, came to the right starting point.

Frank smiled, "That's right, especially considering layout. Venus and Mercury are hot; the others, cold. What about a control console that'll light when the rooms get outside normal temperature range? Then the operator—"

"Hey! Why an operator?" Mel questioned. "We ought to make this automatic." He grinned. "Giant computer ... can see it now: the brain comes alive, tries to destroy anyone turning it off—"

I asked: "Have you been *reading* the stuff you write?" Funny enough for 3 A.M.

Dex said calmly, "We *can* work this—in fact, we can tie it in pink ribbons and forget it. An electronics outfit in Pasadena makes an automatic scanning and logging system. Works off punched-paper tape. We'll code the right poop, and the system will compare it with the actual raw data. Feedback will be to a master control servo that'll activate the heater or cooler. Now, we need the right pickup —"

I snapped my fingers. "Variable resistor bridge. Couple of resistors equal at the right temperature. There'll be a frequency change with changing temperature—better than a thermocouple, I think."

They looked at me as though I were butting in.

"You've been reading, too," Dex accused. "Ok, we'll use a temperature bulb. Trouble is, with this system, we'd better let it run continuously. That'll drive costs up."

Hazel asked, "Can't we use the heat, maybe to drive a compressor? The sudden expansion of air could cool the rest. Harry?"

Harry hadn't time to answer.

"What'll this cost?" I snapped.

"Roughly, 15 to 18 thousand," Dex replied.

"What?"

With fine impartiality, they ignored me completely. Harry continued, as though without interruption, "Ye-es, I guess a compressor-and-coolant system could be arranged ..."



We broke up at 6 A.M. I took one of my pills, frowning at the bottle. Seemed to be emptying fast. Sleepily, I shook the thought off and faced the new day—little knowing the opposition had managed to skizzle us again.

The last displays were moons of Jupiter and Saturn; it was impossible to recreate tortured conditions of the planets themselves. Saturn's closest moon, Mimas, was picked.

Our grand finale: landing on Mimas with Saturn rising spectacularly out of the east. Mimas is in the plane of the rings, so they couldn't be obvious. We'd show enough, however, to make it damned impressive, and explain it by libration of the satellite.

The mechanics of realistically moving Saturn was rougher than a cob. And that's where the opposition fixed us. They claimed there wasn't enough drama in the tour. Let it end with a flash of light, a roar, and a meteor striking nearby.

The roar came from us. Mimas had no atmosphere—how could the meteor sound off or burn up? We finally compromised, permitting the meteor to hit.

We'd decided early the customers couldn't walk through. Mel first, Harry, then Dex, together produced an electric-powered, open runabout. The cart ran on

treads in contact with skillfully hidden tracks, for the current channel. A futuristic touch, that—we'd say the cart ran on broadcast power.

The power source provided cart headlights, and made batteries unnecessary for the guide's walkie-talkie and the customers' helmet receivers.

Mimas' last section of track was on a vibrating platform. The cart tripped a switch; when the meteor supposedly hit, the platform would drop and rise three inches, fast, twisting while it did—"enough," Mel said grimly, "to shake the damned *kishkas* out of 'em!"

We cracked that one, just in time for another. It began with Venus, as most of my problems had. We planned constant dust storms for Venus. Real quick, there'd be nothing left of the Bonestell's backgrounds but a blank wall, from mechanical erosion.

And how did we intend—?

Glass—

Too easily scratched. Lord, another one: how will the half-a-buck customers be able to see inside?

Glass and one of those silicon plastics?

Better, but—

Harry beat it: glass, plastic, *and* a boundary layer of cold air, jetted down from the ceiling, in front of the background painting and back of the look-in window. I was glad, for lately, Harry had begun to age. Thin and gray, he showed the strain—as did all of us.



We were sitting in an administration office at the park. I now recognized the symptoms; when the GG had no real problems, its collective mind usually turned to my health. I wouldn't admit it, but I felt a little peaked. Little? Hell, bone-tired, dog-weary pooped. Seemed every motion was effort, but soon it would end.

The phone rang. With the message, it *was* ended.

"Let's go, grouseketeers."

There was almost a pregnant pause. Six months: conception of the idea to delivery of finished product; six months, working together, fighting men, nature, and the perversity of inanimate objects—all of this now was done.

No one moved; Frank verbalized it: "I'm scared." She sounded scared.

"Better than being petrified, which I am," I answered. "But we might as well face it."

We dragged over to the TS building, an impressive structure.

The guide played it straight, told us exactly how to suit up. Then, in the cart, we edged into the tunnel that was the first lock, and—warned to set our filters—emerged onto the blinding surface of Mercury.

We felt the heat momentarily—Mercury and Venus were kept at a constant 140 F, the others at 0 F—but it was a deliberate thrill. Then cool air from the cart suit-connections began circulating.

Bonestell was magnificent, as always. Yellow landscape, spatter cones, glittering streaks that might be metal in the volcanic ground—created by dusting ground mica on wet glue to catch the reflection of the sun. It was a masterpiece.

The sun. Black sky holding a giant, blazing ball. Too damned yellow, but filtered carbon arcs were the best we could do.

Down, into the tunnel that was lock two. This next one ... Venus, obvious opposition point of attack, where we'd had the most trouble: Venus *had* to be right.

It was! A blast of wind struck us, and dust, swirling everywhere. We'd discovered there's no such thing as a sand storm—it's really dust—so we'd taken pains making things look right. Sand dunes were carefully cemented in place; dust rippling over gave the proper illusion.

Oddly shaped rocks, dimly seen, strengthened the impression of wind-abraded topography. Rocks were reddish, overlain by smears of bright yellow. Lot of trouble placing all that flowers of sulfur, but we postulated a liquid sulfur-sulfur dioxide-carbon dioxide cycle.

Overhead, a diffused, intense yellow light. The sun—we were on the daylight side.

I sighed, relaxed, knowing this one had worked out.

We gave the moon little time. For those who had become homesick, Earth was hanging magnificently in the sky. At a crater wall, we stopped, ostensibly to let souvenir hunters pick at small pieces of lunar rock without leaving the cart.

We'd argued hours on what type to use, till Mel dragged out his rock book. Most, automatically, had wanted basalt. However, the moon's density being low, heavier rocks are probably scarce—one good reason not to expect radioactive ores there. We finally settled for rhyolite and obsidian.

Stopping on the moon had another purpose. We kept the room temperature at 70 F, for heating and cooling economy; the transition from Venus to Mars was much simpler if ambient temperature dropped from 140 to 70 and from 70 to 0, rather than straight through the range.



Next, a Martian polar cap, and we looked down a long canal that disappeared on the horizon. Water appeared to run uphill for that effect. The whole scene looked like an Arizona highway at dusk—what it should have. To our right, a suggestion of—damn the opposition's eyes—culture: a large stone whatzit. It was a jarring note.

We selected one of those nondescript asteroids with just enough diameter to show extreme curvature. Frank had done magnificently. I found myself hanging onto the cart. Headlights deliberately dimmed, on the rocky surface, the cart bumped wildly. The sky was black, broken only by little, hard chunks of light. No horizon. The feeling of being ready to drop was intense, possibly too much so.

Europa, then, in a valley of ice. We'd picked Jupiter's third moon because its frozen atmosphere permitted some eerie pseudo-ice sculpturing. As we moved, Jupiter appeared between breaks and peaks in the sheer wall. Worked nicely, seeing the monstrous planet distended overhead, like a gaily colored beach ball moving with us, as the moon from a train window. Unfortunately, the ice forms detracted somewhat.

Mimas, pitch black, then a glow. Stark landscape quickly becoming visible. Steep cliffs, rocky plain. Saturn rising. The rings, their shadow on the globe, the beauty of it, made me sit stunned, though I knew what to expect.

The guide warned us radar spotted an approaching object, probably a meteor. We ran, the cart at maximum speed—not much, really. It tore at you, wanting to stare at Saturn, wanting to duck.

Hit the special section, dropped and rose our three inches—one hell of a distance—and the tour was over. I kept thinking, insanely, that the meteor *was* a perfect conflict touch.

We unsuited silently. Finally, Hazel breathed, "Hallelujah!" It was summation of success. There now remained but one thing: wait for the quarry to show.

I estimated the necessary time at four days and nights after opening. It was hard to wait, hard not to fidget under the watchful—the only word—eyes of the GG. They were up to something, undoubtedly. But there was something far more important: I'd narrowed the 2,499,999,999 down to five.

The one I sought was a member of the GG.



Opening night brought Harry and Frank to my office. They tried to be casual, engaged me in desultory nothings. Frank looked reproachful—I was there too late.

The following night, Mel ambled in at midnight. He grinned, discussed a plot, suggested we go out for a beer, changed his mind, left.

The third night, I waited in the dark. Nor was I disappointed: Dex and Hazel showed.

"What do you want? It's 2 A.M.!"

There was a long regrouping pause; then Hazel said, "Dex has a fine idea."

"Well?"

"I've been thinking about gravity—"

"About time," I said sarcastically, disliking myself but hoping it would get rid of them, "we opened three days ago."

He ignored my petulance and grinned. "No, I meant anti-gravity. I think it's possible. If you had a superconductor in an inductance field—"

"Why tell me?"

"Thought you'd have some ideas."

I shook my head. "That's what I hired *you* for. My only idea right now is going to sleep."

Bewildered, they left.

And on the fourth night, no one came. So I headed for the Tour. Now, having risked everything on my logic, I was a dead pigeon if wrong. There were only minutes left.

I eased through the back door, heard our automation equipment humming. Despite darkness, I shortcutted, nearly reaching the door to the service hallway in back of the planetary rooms. There was a distinct click, and a flashlight blinded me. I waited, stifling a cry, knowing if it were he, death was next.

Death never spoke in such quiet, sweet tones. Frank asked, "What are you doing here?"

Frank, Frank, not you!

Surprise shocked me: the light, her voice, the sudden suspicion. Still, diversion and counterattack ... "Perhaps you've the explaining to do," I said nastily. "Why are you here?"

Her wide-eyed ingenuousness making me more suspicious, she answered, "Waiting to see if you'd appear." Then she stopped being truthful: "You forget we had a date—"

"We didn't have any damned date," I said flatly, hurting deep within.

"All right, I want to know why you're still driving yourself. It isn't work; that's finished."

The way she talked made me hopeful. Maybe she wasn't the one ... and then came fear. Frank, if he's here, you're in danger. The monster respects nothing we hold dear—law, property, dignity, life.

There was one way to find out: make her leave. I wrenched the flashlight from her, smashed it on the concrete floor. "I mean this: get the hell out of here, and stay out!"

She said, distastefully, "I've seen it happen, but never this fast. You've gone Hollywood, you're a genius, you're tremendous—forgetting other people who helped. Go ahead with your mysterious deal—and I hope we never meet again."

I struggled with ambivalence. This might be a trick; if not, Frank now hated me irreparably.

No time to worry about human emotions, not any more. Nausea reminded me of the primary purpose. I continued down the dark hallway, listening for Frank's return, hoping she needn't die.

Light was unnecessary: I knew the right door. Because it started here, it would end here. Quickly, silently, I slipped inside the Venus room. With peculiar relief, I realized Frank wasn't it: my nose led me right to the monster.

In an ecstatic, semistuporous state, smelling strongly of sulfur dioxide, he couldn't have been aware of me. Couldn't?

"It took you long enough." He didn't bother to turn from the rock he was huddled against.

"I had to be sure." I felt anything but the calm carried in my voice. "No wonder the GG got the right answers, with you making initial starts. Say, were you responsible for the cat that rolled at me?"

"An accident. Obviously, I wanted this room built as much as you." Harry, now undisguised, languorously turned. "Your little trap didn't quite come off—a danger in fighting a superior intellect."

"No trap. I had a job to do; it's done."

"Job? Job?" Infuriated, leaping to his feet, he shouted, "Speak the native tongue, filth!"

"What's the use? Because of you, I'll never again have the chance. And you no longer have a native tongue."

"Who were those judges," he asked bitterly, "to declare *me* an outcast?"

"Representatives of an outraged society." I almost lost my temper, thinking of this deviant's crimes. "You were lucky to get banishment instead of death."

He grinned. "So were you."

"True. I tried to find the proper place, where you'd have some chance."

He laughed openly. "I fixed the ship nicely."

"You don't understand at all—"

"I counted on your being a hero, trying to save us. So, I escaped."

"For three years only."

"What do you mean?"

"One of us won't leave here."

Harry frowned, then tried cunning. "Aren't you being silly? We are hopelessly marooned. Surely there are overriding considerations to your childish devotion to duty."

I shook my head. "This is too small a room for us. Even if I trusted you, I couldn't allow you at this naive young world."

Voices suddenly approached. "The GG?" Harry questioned.

"Didn't know they were coming." Desperately, I looked about, found an eroded mass. "Hide there; I'll get rid of them."

"You'd better—we have business." Possibly it was the only time I've agreed with him. Mel and Dex came in. I called, "Over here!"



Dex snapped his fingers. "*Knew* it was Venus."

Mel wrinkled his nose. "Sulfur dioxide, too, like we figured. Soda pop, when I broke into that tender scene between you and Frank—that gave you necessary carbon dioxide, right, am I not?"

"Yes ... Why don't you guys leave me alone?" Beginning to falter in the heat, they dripped perspiration. "You could die in this chilly climate."

Dex said, "Listen for a second. We don't have to break up. Let's form a service organization, 'Problems, Inc.' or some equally stupid title. Very soon we could afford a private bedroom, like this, for you to stay in all the time—"

"Need only two or three nights in ten." Harry was moving restlessly. He wouldn't wait much longer. "Combination of oxygen, carbon dioxide, and sulfur under relatively high temperature is how I eat. Pills can substitute, but not for protracted periods. That's why I had to build this room. Couple of weeks, and I'll be in the pink; as pink as you, anyway."

Abruptly, I lay down, ignoring them. I had to make my friends go. Harry could literally have shredded them. Footsteps: the door closed; relief and loneliness joined me, but only for a moment.

His voice sliced the darkness: "I'm a man of honor, and must warn you. If we fight, you'll lose. I escaped with far more pills than you; you're weaker."

I said sardonically, "With you stealing parts of my supply, that's probably the only truthful thing you've said!"

"I've been in here three nights, adjusting my metabolism ..."

He came at me then, not breaking his flow of speech. At home, I'd have been surprised at the dishonor. Instead, I was expecting it. He ran into my balled fist.

If we'd been home ... if, if, if, if, if. At full strength, I could have broken his neck with the blow. Now, he simply rolled back and fell. Laughing, he attacked again. We were weak as babes, and fought like it. Clumsily, slowly, we went through the motions.

He'd been right—he was a little stronger, and the relative difference began to tell. Soon I was falling from his blows.

Hands on my neck, he kneed me hard in the stomach. Violently ill, I felt the sulfur dioxide rush from my lungs.

I remembered one trick they'd taught at school, and I used it. Unable to break his hold, I managed to get my hands around his throat. We locked, each silent.

Silent until I felt my last reserves going, until the crooning of the Song of Eternity began. This couldn't happen, not to this planet. With all my strength, I gave one last squeeze—but it failed. From somewhere, light-years of light-years away, I heard Frank, realized I'd played the fool: she'd been working for the monster.

A blinding flash inside my head—and the Last Darkness descended.

The light hadn't been inside my head: it flooded the room. Dimly, I was aware of the injection, and immediately felt better. Harry was gone.

The GG, minus one, was gathered around. Mel said, "It was a dilute solution of cerium nitrate. We figured the percentage on the basis of the pill Frank swiped. Hope you aren't poisoned."

"No." My voice was weak, "Need it. Oxidizing agent for the sulfur."

"Harry's dead," Hazel frowned. "When we came in, you'd broken his neck, were crooning to yourself."

So *I* had been crooning the Song of Eternity? "I'm a"—I felt silly—"a cop on a mission. I waited until whichever of you it was settled down here. That one had to be the criminal, to be done away with."

"Dex and I got rid of the body," Mel said. "No need to worry unless ... unless you've read my stories. Perhaps *you* are the criminal. I'll be watching."

"No proof, of course ... Do *you* believe I'm the criminal?"

Mel smiled. "No, but I'll watch anyway."

"More closely than tonight, I hope," Hazel said acidly. "If it hadn't been for her..."

I saw Frank, and was ashamed of my suspicions. She was silent, looking concerned. They all did, and I was warmed. Because, despite discomfort, they worried about me, an alien, a stranger. "Better leave. Heat's getting you."

Dex asked, "When are you going back?"

I shrugged. "Never. The ship is in the Gulf of California ... Harry did that."

"What about our company? We can research anti-gravity. You might reach home yet."

I shook my head. "Said I was a policeman. I don't know very much—"

"Perfectly normal!" Mel said before Hazel shooshed him.

Dex was insistent: "Any cop knows at least something about his motorcycle."

Was I right about the superconductor?"

"Yes. Now, get out of here, idiots, before there's no one left to form the company!"

Hazel, perspiring freely, red hair shimmering, kissed me. "We figured you out real, real early. We aren't ever wrong, and I'm glad we stayed with you, Mr. Venus." She laughed joyously, "First time I've ever kissed a Venusian!"

Frank, head close to mine, said softly, "I'm terribly sorry I said those things, but you had to believe I was angry, so I could call the others—"

"And I did everything possible to get you out...."

We were silent; then I said what I'd been fighting not to, for so long. "Frank ... Francis?"

She understood, and stared horrified at me. I'd lost. Bowed my head, feeling like the damned fool I was.

She looked around the room. "It's so strange!"

"And with ingrained racial conditioning, you couldn't respond to a thin, sallow alien."

"I don't know," she said hesitantly.

"I do!" Mel said. "The oldest story in science fiction; it's true; I can't write it."

"Why not?"

"No editor in right or wrong mind would buy the beautiful Earth damsel, after whom lusts the Monster from Venus—"

Frank snapped: "He isn't a monster! And his manners are better than many writers' I could name ..."

Her voice trailed off with awareness of Mel's tiny smile—a smile that widened. He pulled her toward the door. "What a story! We'll hold the wedding in a Turkish Bath."

Alone, I sighed, comfortable again after three years. I was grateful to the GG, and would do anything, within limits, for them. Yet, my newly adopted planet needed protection. Babes in the woods, they'd be torn to pieces outside.

Fortunately, the GG didn't know my meaning of "policeman", my home's highest order of intellect. I'd assure the group finally getting anti-gravity and use of planetary lines of force. But not the hyperspace drive, not for a good long while.

I certainly couldn't destroy the GG's confidence. I couldn't hurt them. They were so sure about me—so sure they were never wrong. How could I explain I'd been looking for a decent, habitable planet like Venus to discharge my captive, that I was from another galaxy?

THE END

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