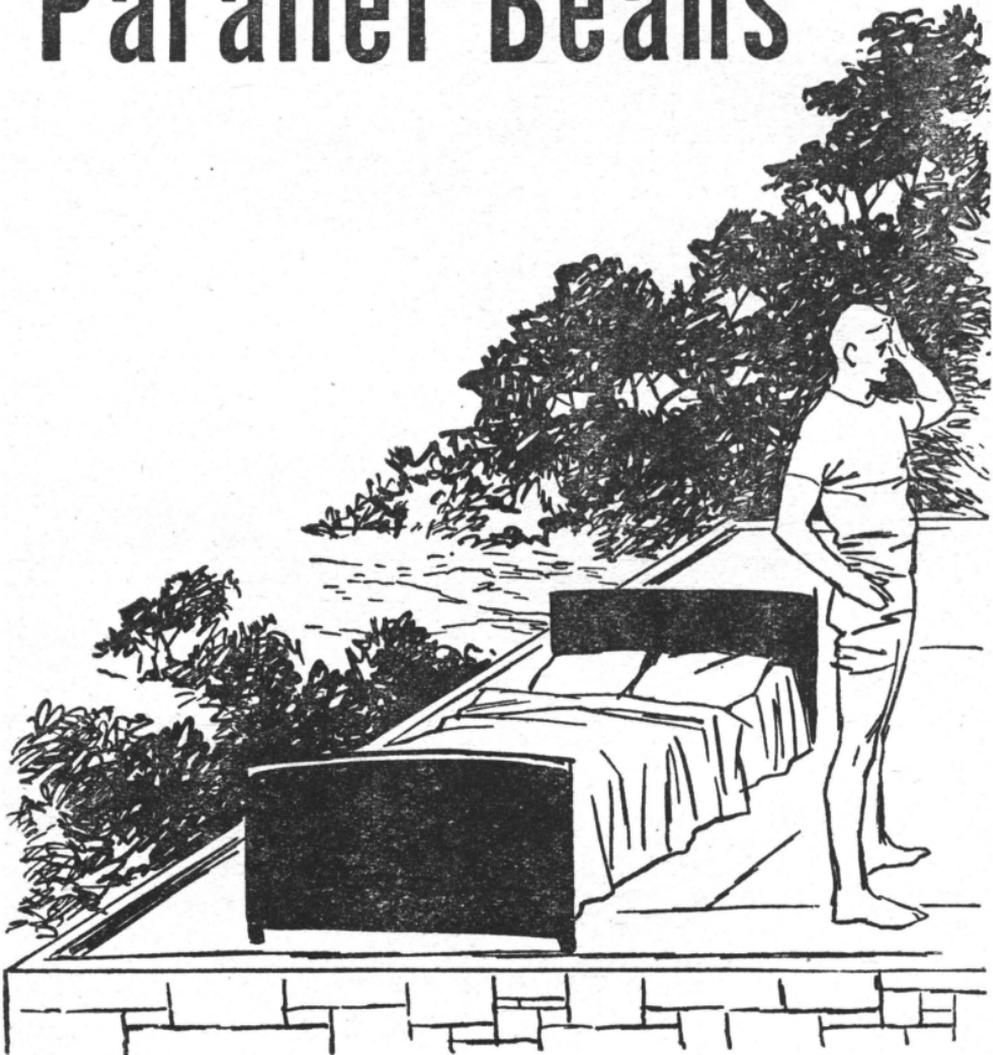


*Warning! Don't try to pass  
any phony zulceets — it can  
cost you everything you own!*

By MARGARET ST. CLAIR

Illustrated by WOOD

# Parallel Beans





**T**HE fat announcer said threateningly, "'n I want to warn you that the government is cracking down on zulceet forging. They won't permit our matter-transmitters to be mulcted by cheap zulceet forgers any longer. Sales via the zulceet slot play a vital role in our economic life. The new penalties for forging are strict, and will be strictly enforced." The bib around his pudgy neck shook indignantly. His piggy eyes glared.

George switched off the TV. The programs from the parallel time-stream stations were lousy anyway. He looked at his wife.

She was frowning anxiously. "Do you think they'll attach our house? It's a darling house. And we've made a lot of payments on it."

"I don't see how they could," George answered. His voice was calmer than he felt. "According to Herbert, they're in a time-stream parallel to ours, so I doubt they can really get at us, in the first place. Getting those beans across into our stream is about as much as they could do. And in the second place, a silver fifty-cent piece isn't a forged zulceet. It's legal U. S. tender. The whole thing's unfair. Fifty cents is more than those beans were worth."

"They weren't very good beans," Nina agreed. She sighed. "I know Herbert meant well," she said. "He

thought we'd enjoy trying the beans we'd been hearing advertised on the parallel time-stream stations. But sometimes I wish he'd never repaired our TV set, or installed the zulceet slot on it, or put the fifty cents in the slot. It would have been better to have the regular repairman work on it. The 'Notice of Attachment of Domicile' they sent frightens me."

**T**HERE was a thud of feet from the vacant lot outside. The back door opened and, as if the mention of his name had evoked him, Herbert came bounding in.

"Hi, sis," he said. "D'I smell caramel cake, hunh? You got caramel cake for supper tonight, hunh, sis?"

"Yes, dear," Nina answered, her face softening. "Would you like a piece?"

"Double zorch!" Herbert cried joyously. He leapt toward the kitchen, with Nina after him.

George glared at his back. When he wasn't with his brother-in-law, he wondered why he disliked the boy so. That Herbert had no manners could be laid to his age, and modern education was responsible for the fact that he sometimes spelled "cat" with a "Q." On the credit side, Herbert was a whizz with anything electronic (too much of a whizz—his repairs to the TV set had started all the trou-

ble), and he got straight A's in physics and math. But he was bumptious, officious, and opinionated. He told Nina what detergent to use, and advised George in the choice of razor blades. What really made George loathe him was that he was always after Nina's cakes.

Herbert came back from the kitchen with a glass of milk and a slab of cake. "Good cake," he said, swallowing. "Icing's grainy, though. You must've stirred it too much, sis."

"I expect I did," Nina agreed submissively. "Herbert, I'm worried. Do you think the people in the parallel time-stream will attach our house?"

"Sure," said Herbert. "Why not? They sent you the notice. They think you forged a zulceet."

"But—"

"It's a difficulty of communication," replied Herbert, licking a crumb of caramel icing from his face. "You ought to try to square things. Don't want them to take over the house."

"We can't give back the beans. We ate them."

"That's what you ought to explain."

There was a silence. George looked at his wife and his brother-in-law. Then he went in the kitchen and came back with a can of present, non-parallel-time beans. He got

paper and a pencil from the desk.

"What'cha going to do?" Herbert asked interestedly.

"Put the beans in the zulceet slot, with a note. The beans are for compensation, and the note is to explain."

"Won't work," Herbert said, in a superior voice.

"Why not?" George demanded. He was growing angry.

"They don't understand English. They're not like us. They may not be human beings at all."

"English is what they speak!"

"Naw, they don't. Your mind just translates it mentally. I bet what they talk isn't any more like English than it is, unh, like Chinese."

"Nuts, the 'Notice of Attachment of Domicile' is in English!"

Herbert shrugged. "You'll be sorry," he said.

George was too annoyed to answer. He finished writing the note, fastened it around the can with a rubber band, and put the can in the merchandise bin at the end of the zulceet slot. He pressed the lever. The can disappeared.

**T**HERE was a slight pause. Then four green cans, cans of parallel time-stream beans, dropped out of the merchandise bin.

"They've sent more," said Nina. She laughed hysterical-

ly. "More of those same old lousy beans!"

Herbert giggled. "I told you so," he said.

George managed to restrain himself from bashing the cans in Herbert's face. "If you know so blasted much—"

There was a whuffle from the zulceet slot and a document dropped out. It was ornamented with purple ribbons and big official-looking blue seals. George picked it up and broke the seals.

"Notice of Aggravated Offense," he read aloud. "When-as the owners of videal set no. 37765" (the number was blurred) "have compounded their offense of zulceet forging by a repetition of said offense, they are informed that immediate attachment of spouse, female sex, has been adjudged against them. This judgment is without appeal. Videal Intercity Authority."

Nina's jaw had dropped down. "Spouse, female sex—George! Oh! That's *me!*"

"I thought something like this would happen," Herbert observed. He took a gulp of milk. "Nina had better stay away from near the TV set."

"But—I don't get it," George said. He had put his arm around Nina and was holding her close to him.

"They think your can of present-time beans was meant as another forged zulceet," Herbert explained. "So they're going to attach sis." He fin-

ished the milk and put the glass down on the table. "Don'tcha worry about it," he said kindly. "I'll fix it up."

He rummaged through the pockets of his plastic jacket, pulled out a tiny piece of paper and a pencil, and began to write.

"What are you writing?" George demanded. "You just said they don't understand English."

"Um-hum. But mathematics is a universal language. I'm explaining in mathematical terms about how I came to install the zulceet slot on the TV set. Once they realize we're in a different time-stream from theirs, they'll give up the idea of attaching sis or bothering the house."

He folded the paper to the size of a postage stamp, put it in the slot, and pressed the lever. George waited. But no more cans of parallel-time-stream beans appeared.

"That did it," Herbert said jubilantly. "Told yuh they'd understand math, didn't I? Guess I'm pretty big deal, hunh, sis, pretty big d—"

**H**E disappeared.

His disappearance was so sudden and so complete that George involuntarily looked up at the ceiling, expecting to find him being drawn up through it. Herbert wasn't there, of course, He wasn't anywhere.

Nina giggled hysterically.

The whites of her eyes were showing. "They've attached him," she said. "Whu-whu-whu-whu! They've attached Herbert, instead."

"Instead—?" George demanded blankly. He couldn't seem to focus on things.

"Attached him instead of me. Whu-whu-whu! Whu, whu, whu, whu!" She began to cry.

George put his arm around her. He was just getting her calm when there came another whuffle from the zulceet slot.

This time it was neither beans nor another legal-looking document. It was a piece of paper folded up small, and even before he unfolded it, George knew who it was from.

"They are all mixed up," it began without preamble. "I have been here a couple of days now—" George and Nina looked at each other; it hadn't been ten minutes yet—"and I am eggsplaining it to them. It is hard wurk. They are plenty dumm. A bunch squares. But do not wurry. I am alrighte. Herbt."

George looked up from the paper. "But why would they attach *him*?" he demanded.

"Because they think he's me," said Nina. "Don't you see what he says? They're all mixed up—he says so—and plenty dumb. Maybe they aren't really human beings at all—we don't really know that they are. Those beans tasted funny. Maybe they even

thought that math paper Herbert put in the slot was a confession of zulceet forging. But anyhow, they think Herbert's me. They think he's your *wife*!"

She began to go whu-whu-whu once more. Once more George calmed her. Though they discussed the disappearance over and over again, they could find no better explanation than the one Nina had advanced. When it got dark Nina called her mother and told her Herbert was staying with them that night.

GEORGE couldn't get to sleep. He heard Nina sighing, and knew she couldn't either. At last she said, "George, I'm scared."

"Don't be, honey. There isn't anything more to worry about. The worst has already happened. And Herbert says he's all right."

"Yes, but—there was that first paper, the Notice of Attachment of Domicile."

"Well?"

"We didn't do it. You remember, it said if the vextix wasn't wrytled by Jurnal 40th, they'd attach the house. And we didn't wrytle it because we didn't know what it was. So they could still attach the house!"

"Go to sleep, honey. Herbert said he was explaining things. He'll get it fixed up."

"But—all right."

Her breathing quieted. The

sound was soothing, and George drifted off to sleep himself. He wakened some hours later, feeling very cold.

He pulled the blanket up, but the room was still too chilly. He'd have to shut the window.

He looked around to orient himself before getting out of bed. What he saw startled him into full wakefulness. There were stars overhead. Stars! Then the roof—

He put his hand on Nina's shoulder and shook her gently. "Honey . . . they've attached the house."

For a moment Nina was silent. He thought she must still be asleep. Then she answered, "It's because we didn't wrytle the vextix, I suppose. Did they take everything?"

"It's too dark to be sure. But I think so. Except the bed."

"It's probably illegal to attach the bed."

For a moment George thought she was going to begin whu-whu-ing again, but she didn't. She pulled a quilt around her shoulders and put her feet on the floor. "Let's go see just what they did attach," she said.

Their cautious inspection did not take long. Except for the concrete slab that formed the foundation of the house, and the bed in which they had been sleeping, everything was gone. Their domicile had been thoroughly attached.

Nina said, "I never realized before how limited the floor space in the house was. We can't take three steps without being at the edge of the foundation. Well. Do you suppose we'll have to keep up the payments even though the house is gone?"

"I imagine so. And it's going to be difficult, explaining to the bank what happened to their security."

Nina sniffled. "—No, I'm not going to cry. But I'm disappointed in Herbert. I thought he'd be able to clear things up with the parallel time-stream people better than this."

"Um. You'd better get back in bed, honey. You'll freeze, going around like this."

Nina obeyed. George sat down beside her dejectedly. "It'll be light soon," she said. "Maybe we can think of something to do when it's light. I wish we could make some coffee. Coffee would help a lot. —Oh! What was that?"

**T**HERE had been a soft yet profound vibration in the air, like a deep harp string being plucked. The vibration was repeated. Abruptly the gray pre-dawn light around them was blotted out.

George swallowed. He said, "Honey, I think they've unattached the house."

It was true. Their dazed tour found everything back in place. Even the books Herbert

had given them for a wedding present—a two-volume set of log tables—were back in the bookcase.

They looked at each other. At last Nina drew a quavering sigh. "Let's go outside," she said. "I don't know what—but I'm afraid. Let's go outside."

"All right," said George.

In the chill gray light the exterior of the house was irreproachably normal. The lawn, the pelargoniums, the mail box, the sidewalk, were all in place. But on the vacant lot adjoining, the vacant lot Herbert had run across yesterday afternoon, there was a house whose exterior was also irreproachably normal. Its lawn, its pelargoniums, its mail box, its sidewalk, were also all in place.

Nina clutched at George's shoulder. In a high voice she said, "They've sent another our house. They've sent back two of our house."

"Maybe there's some mistake. Do you want to go over and look at the other one?"

"I don't need to go look. I know without looking. It's exactly like our house. It is our house. Everything's the same. There is even half a caramel cake on the cake dish out in the kitchen."

She began to cry gently. George stood embracing her helplessly while the sky grew light. At last he drew her back within their own house that

wasn't on the formerly vacant lot.

They sat down in the living room. George's mind was busy with financial considerations. If he could contact the owner of the vacant lot—Beckstein, his name was—before he heard about the house on his lot—and if there wasn't trouble with the zoning laws—but of course George didn't have a building permit. Did you need a building permit for a house that was already built? Probably. And was the second their house too near the first one? Would Beckstein sue if he found out about the house before George could buy the lot? And what about the zoning laws?

He kept on petting Nina. At last he said, "I'm going to turn on the TV set."

"Just more trouble," she answered in a muffled voice.

"Um. Maybe we'll get some explanation of all this." He clicked the switch.

**T**HERE was a soft whuffle from the zulceet slot. A document—the most official-looking, the most formidable to date—dropped out. There was scarcely an inch on its exterior that wasn't covered with blue wax seals.

George opened it. The heading was in very large Gothic lettering. "Notice of Restoration and Recompensation," it read.

"Whenas it has come to the

attention of the Videal Intercity Authority that the domicile of the owners of videal set no. 37765" (still blurred) "was wrongfully attached, and, whenas it has come to the attention of the Videal Intercity Authority that the spouse, female sex, of the owners of videal set No. 37765" (just as blurred as ever) "was wrongfully attached also, be it enacted by the puissance of the Videal Intercity Authority in council assembled that said domicile and said spouse, female sex, be immediately restored. And be it further enacted by the said puissance of said Videal Intercity Authority that Recompensation for said wrongful attachment be made synchronously, via the Imperial Duplisissix. Signed, Videal Intercity Authority in full council assembled." Underneath the signature there was a truly enormous blue wax seal.

George closed his eyes and then opened them. There was really nothing to be said.

The doorbell rang.

They both jumped. George went to answer it. Herbert was standing with a pleased grin on the porch.

"Hi, George," he said. "Hi, sis. Miss me a lot, hunh? I was gone a long time, but I finally got it fixed, didn't I? Do I ever know my stuff!"

He sounded jubilant, but George was struck by a curious echoing quality in his brother-in-law's words. He opened the door wide and looked out at the their house that stood on the erstwhile vacant lot.

A Herbert was standing on the porch of the other their house too. For a wild moment George wondered if there was a George and a Nina inside that house also. But there was a slightly puzzled look on the second Herbert's face.

"Whyn't you answer?" The Herberts went on. It was light enough so George could see that their lips were moving in perfect unison. They weren't twins, any more than the houses were; the Herberts were the same Herbert, in the sense that the houses were the same house. Recompensation had been made via the Imperial Duplisissix; presumably the Videal Intercity Authority had thought that George would enjoy having two spouses, female sex; and George now had two brothers-in-law.

"Sis made any cakes lately?" the pair asked brightly. "She makes good cakes, if they had better icing. D'ju learn how to make better icing while I was gone, sis? How's for a nice piece cake?"

**END**