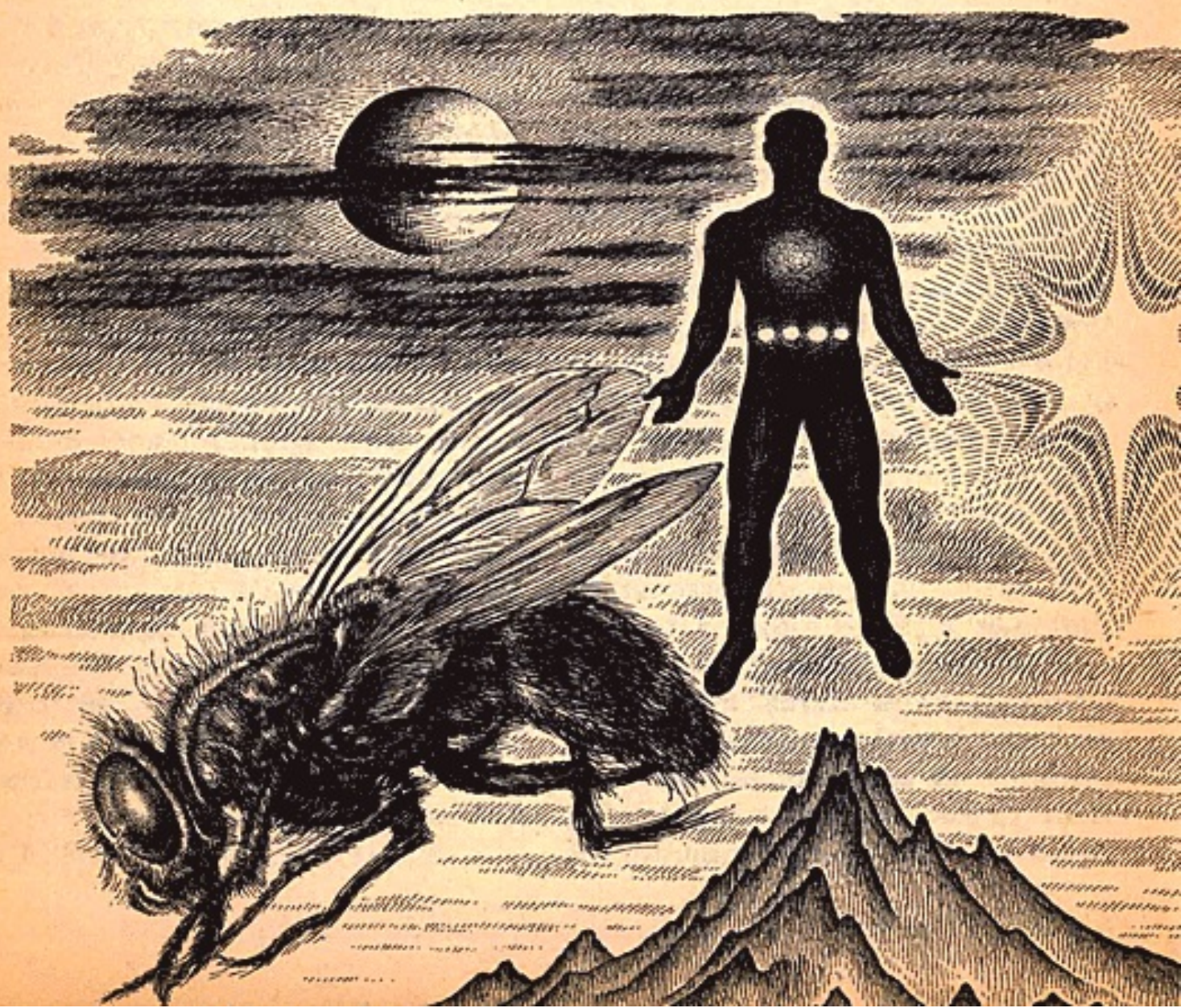


# The Wrong World

By J. T. McINTOSH

*Say "Oops, sorry" to a planet that has been  
conquered by mistake? No, find a diplomatic  
formula — meaning justify conquest — or else!*

Illustrated by FINLAY





**C**ONSOLIDATION Officer Breeli couldn't have had a better first impression of the newly conquered world. The sun was shining brilliantly as he stepped from the ship, and the richness of this planet called Earth dazzled him.

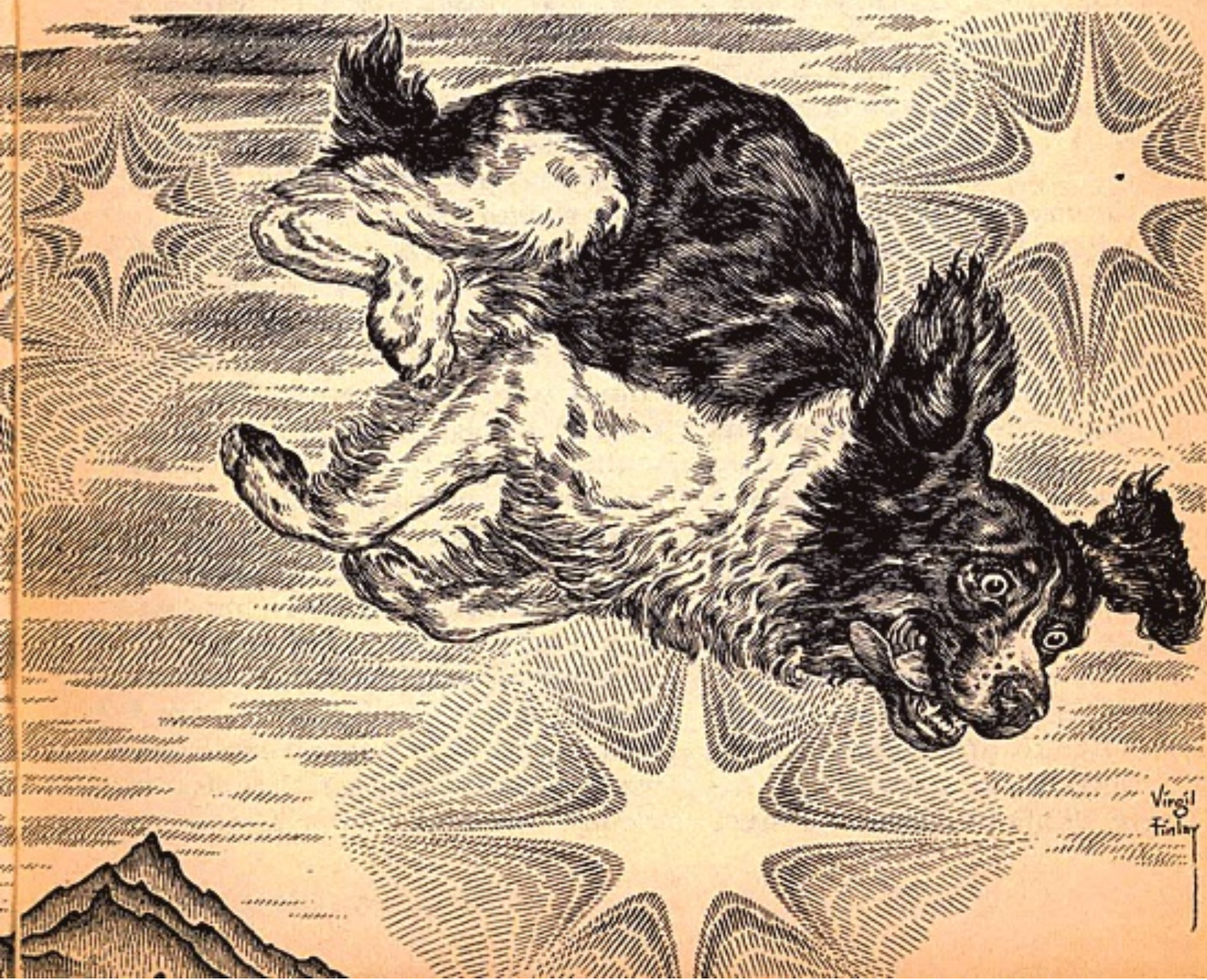
Even the clouds, white and fleecy in an otherwise blue sky, were beautiful. Breeli had never seen beautiful clouds before. The landscape, rolling in gentle swells and curves to a shimmering gold and blue horizon, was a dream in green and brown.

Earth was quite a planet.

It was a pity that the Terrans were only at the Fifteenth Level. This wasn't a world to conquer, a world to ravage, a world to keep in subjection. This was a world to welcome cordially as a full member of the Pastan Federation.

However, only members of human races which had reached the Eighteenth or Nineteenth Levels were eligible for full membership of the Federation, and according to the last survey . . .

Breeli's reflections were disturbed as his gaze fell on two na-





tive men painting a fence across the spaceport. Their white overalls didn't reveal much of their physical contours, but enough to indicate that the Terrans were a hundred per cent human, though the males were broader and heavier than Pastan men.

What interrupted Breeli's train of thought wasn't the mere sight of the two natives, however, but the way they were working. They seemed to be doing the job quickly, sensibly and efficiently, and without supervision. Their overalls, too, weren't of Pastan design, yet at that distance they looked well designed and serviceable.

Breeli could have sworn he was looking at two members of an Eighteenth Level race.

**T**HAT was impossible, of course. General Prani would never have gone ahead with the total conquest plans if the Terrans had turned out to be Eighteenth Level. Anyway, the last survey had been made only a few thousand years before, and the Terrans had then been unquestionably Fifteenth Level, having just learned the uses of metals. They were probably Sixteenth Level now, but no higher.

"There's a car waiting for you, sir," said the lieutenant at Breeli's elbow. "I'm to drive you to General Prani's headquarters."

Breeli didn't allow his pleasure

at the first sight of Earth to lure him into familiarity. Consolidation Officers held rank equivalent to field marshals, and since they were, in effect, civilians arriving after the shooting was over to take matters out of the hands of the military, they were never exactly popular with them. Scrupulous formality was best.

"Thank you, Lieutenant," he said.

"And this is your shield, sir," said the lieutenant, holding out a plastic belt with four small black discs on it.

Breeli raised his eyebrows. "I thought this world was supposed to be conquered."

"Depends what you mean by conquered, sir. There's no military resistance any more. But we all wear shields."

The standard equipment defense shield radiated around its wearer a force field which in ordinary circumstances remained completely quiescent. But if enough energy was generated within it quickly enough, the field became a miniature hyperspace drive. A bullet entering the field, for example, was rapidly shunted into hyperspace, its own impetus supplying the necessary power.

Men wearing shields could be strangled or stabbed, but they couldn't be shot, and an explosion wouldn't harm them, unless it was violent enough and big enough



to swamp the field and topple shield, wearer and blast into hyperspace. Shields even afforded protection against too enthusiastic knife-thrusts. If you wanted to kill a man wearing a shield, you had to insert your knife into a convenient vital spot and press it home gently but firmly. And it was no use trying to hit him on the head with a blunt instrument.

But Breeli always felt uncomfortable when he wore one. "Put it away, Lieutenant," he said. "I'll take my chances."

"General Prani's orders, sir," the lieutenant persisted. "All Pastan personnel must wear shields at all times."

"I imagine my orders overrule General Prani's," Breeli remarked. "Where's the car, Lieutenant?"

The lieutenant wasn't enjoying himself, but he stood firm. "I can't drive you to headquarters if you don't have a shield, sir."

Lieutenants just didn't dictate to Consolidation Officers. But Breeli knew in his heart the lieutenant was right. Instead of making an issue of it — he could have had him arrested on the spot — Breeli meekly accepted the belt, swallowed hard and buckled it on.

**B**REELI stared at the car when they came to it. It was long, black and shiny, with a lot of glittering chromium. He wanted to ask the lieutenant who had built

a car like that, and why, but restrained himself. No doubt somebody had made it to impress the natives.

The greatest shock came when the car turned smoothly onto a six-lane highway. Breeli was stunned. This roadway couldn't have been constructed by the occupying forces in the time at their disposal. Besides, why would they want a six-lane motorway? Obviously, therefore, it had been there before they came.

The Terrans had made it.

The implications were shattering. A Seventeenth Level race could have made such a road, conceivably even a Sixteenth Level race under intelligent supervision. But only an Eighteenth Level civilization would have any use for such a trafficway.

It was suddenly clear that the car he was in was of Terran origin, made for the highway on which it was running with such effortless ease, speed and comfort.

"Lieutenant," he said, controlling his voice with an effort, "these Terrans are Eighteenth Level."

"Yes, sir," said the lieutenant. "Perhaps Nineteenth."

"Then why—" Breeli began, and checked himself abruptly. Better to see Prani first.

An error of catastrophic proportions had been made. General Prani, sent to conquer Earth, had attacked and subdued an Eight-



eenth — possibly Nineteenth — Level culture.

It was a ghastly blunder. When you moved in on a world peopled by apes, what the apes thought about it didn't matter very much. Even a Fifteenth Level race could be shoveled aside without much compunction — not exterminated, of course, for all races had a right to develop. A race at the Seventeenth Level, curiously enough, invariably welcomed conquest. They fought hard and savagely, but they respected conquest and learned rapidly from their conquerors. Conquest was good for them.

An Eighteenth Level race, however, had a great respect for the value of human life and liberty. It had a delicately balanced economy which could easily be ruined. It had a highly developed social structure. Most of all, it had pride and a strong sense of its own importance.

Moral issues aside, conquering an Eighteenth Level civilization didn't pay. It wasn't good for the conquerors or conquered.

But moral issues couldn't be kept aside. A capital crime had been committed.

Heads would roll for this.

**T**HE car slowed slightly to turn off the motorway. There had been no other vehicles on it, and the only living creatures to be

seen had been Pastan guards on foot, patrolling the grass verges. Presumably General Prani had commandeered this whole area, permitting no Terrans to enter.

The exit was ingenious. The car sped off to the right to turn to the left, crossing the motorway by a bridge. Silently, Breeli cursed General Prani. Hadn't it been obvious at a glance that these Terrans must be wooed, not ravished?

The very much inferior road on which they were now traveling had footpaths on each side, and Breeli's eyes almost popped from his head when he had his first glimpse of Terran women — three of them, on the sidewalk.

"Stop the car!" he shouted. "Those women . . ."

The lieutenant slowed the car but didn't stop. "Sorry, sir," he said. His face was red with embarrassment at having to thwart a Consolidation Officer for the second time in ten minutes. "Don't you think you'd better see General Prani first, sir? I mean, you don't know the native language, and anyway . . . I'm very sorry, sir."

"You have no specific orders to stop when I tell you?" Breeli asked.

"No, sir. But . . . no, sir."

"It's merely your own idea, then, not to do what I tell you, and make me do what I don't want to do?"



"I . . . yes, sir."

"What's your name?"

"Lieutenant Wilt, sir," the driver said miserably, knowing he was in for trouble.

Breeli, his first unthinking impulse to stop and take a closer look at the three women thwarted, could see excellent reasons why he should not do so. As Wilt had said, he couldn't speak the language. Also, he didn't yet know the terms of Earth's surrender. Perhaps there were religious, racial and social taboos of which he knew nothing.

Once more Lieutenant Wilt was undoubtedly right.

Wilt was a man to watch, possibly a man to have promoted. However, there was no need to reassure him just at this moment.

The car turned into a drive flanked by trees and slowed to a crawl. So Prani's headquarters still had to be protected by a diverter, Breeli mused. Natural enough, if the Terrans really were Nineteenth Level.

The diverter was simply a big defense shield with a wider field of application. Ships protected by it could divert even atomic explosions into hyperspace. When it was used for the defense of a town or building, it could be set so low that only a shell or bomb-blast would cause a reaction violent enough to trigger the shield, or so high that even a stray dog

blundering into it would be toppled into hyperspace.

The fact that the lieutenant dropped the car's speed to about ten miles an hour as he approached the yellow building among the trees indicated that General Prani had his diverters at very cautious settings.

**B**REELI did not, of course, recognize the yellow building as a roadhouse, but he was struck by its attractive, functional lines. The sick feeling which had come over him returned as he saw the sparkling swimming pool to one side of the building. That was conclusive. Only a civilized race could have the know-how and organizing ability to collect and pipe water where they wanted it in such quantities that a huge open-air pool with a circulating system was a practical proposition. A Seventeenth Level race might collect and pipe the water, but it couldn't circulate, purify and aerate it.

Prani would be executed. Breeli wouldn't be held responsible for something he had arrived too late to prevent, but things wouldn't be exactly comfortable for him either.

Breeli was a little surprised to be ushered in by a native woman who spoke fluent Pastan with a tolerable accent.

"What's your name?" he asked.



"Dorothy Green, sir. I am chief Terran liaison officer."

"Appointed by the Terrans or by General Prani?"

"By mutual agreement, sir."

She had a pleasant voice which didn't go with her appearance. Unlike the three women Breeli had seen on the way, she was frankly unattractive. She was painfully thin, colorless, and though her drab brown-gray uniform was neat and spotless, it did nothing for her.

As long as Terran females had to be employed at HQ, it was very sensible that they should be unattractive enough to prove no distraction. If those three girls had jobs at HQ, Breeli reflected, very little paper work would be done.

"How do I address you?" he asked, wondering if this would provoke a bitter retort.

"As you wish," she said. "Dorothy or Green or both."

"Very well," he said, not committing himself. He thought he sensed sorrow in this girl, which would account for some of her drabness. He wondered if it was sorrow on account of the Pastans or anything they had done. "Don't you ever smile?"

"Not very often," she said, not smiling. "You'll find General Prani in there, sir."

**P**RANI was middle-aged and fat and complacent and had the thick, moist lips of a sensual-

ist. Everything became clear to Breeli at first sight of him.

General Prani wasn't very bright. Somehow, through sheer good luck, he had been saved from ignominy time and again by the ability and intelligence of his subordinates. Somehow he had become a general and had been entrusted with an important mission.

And, of course, he had bungled it.

"Glad to see you, sir," said Prani. "I think we'll manage to make you comfortable here. The native women are quite . . . shall we say cooperative? Yes, this is a splendid world. Modesty apart, I think I've done a pretty good job, sir."

The buffoon was actually pleased with himself.

"General," said Breeli quietly, "the Terrans are at the Eighteenth Level, I understand."

"I haven't given it much thought, sir. Nineteenth, I should say. No detailed assessment has been made. Modesty apart, not every general could conquer a Nineteenth Level world."

"General, aren't you aware that it's a serious crime under Federation law to interfere with races above the Seventeenth Level?"

"But I was sent to conquer this world. Naturally I obeyed my orders."

"You were sent to subjugate a Fifteenth or Sixteenth Level



world. You found a race at the Nineteenth Level. Didn't it even occur to you that your orders no longer applied?"

"Sir," Prani said stiffly, "I have risen to my present position in the Pastan Federation Army by doing exactly as I was told. It is not for me to question the orders of men far abler . . . hum . . . than myself. In this case my orders were to conquer Earth. It was nothing to me if the Terrans were Fifteenth Level, or Nineteenth, or any other level. I merely did my duty as a soldier in the service of the Pastan Federation."

"Quite," said Breeli drily.

There were two possible ways out, neither particularly honest—but in interstellar politics, expediency had to play a large part. If the Terran resistance had been slight, it might be possible to pretend there had been no conflict at all, merely police action. And if sufficient time could be gained somehow, it might be possible to pretend that the Terrans had been at the Seventeenth Level when Prani conquered the world, and had developed rapidly afterwards, owing to contact with the Pastans.

"Have you seen the native women, sir?" Prani asked, magnanimously forgiving Breeli for failing to appreciate him.

"Some of them."

"Do you want one, sir?"

Breeli restrained himself with

an effort. Anyone capable of the criminal idiocy of attacking a Nineteenth Level world was naturally incapable of seeing that it was criminal idiocy.

"There will be no difficulty about that?" he asked.

"None, sir," said Prani expansively. "At first these Terrans bitterly resented what they called the rape of their women, but there was a sudden reversal of their attitude. I have not, of course, taken it upon myself to permit marriage between Pastans and native women, but if you will be guided by me, sir, you will give permission soon. Many Terran women are exceedingly attractive—"

"Like Dorothy Green?"

"You're joking, sir. Certainly not like Dorothy Green. Intelligent girl, useful, but ugly. Modesty apart, I am very attractive to women, sir, and . . . but meantime, shall I have half a dozen sent in for you to choose from?"

**A** GAIN a sharp reprimand teetered on Breeli's lips. But he wanted to know more before committing himself. "As you wish."

General Prani spoke into the intercom. When he had finished, Breeli said: "I take it Terran resistance was slight? That's an extremely good thing. We may yet manage to get out of this without—"

"Slight?" Prani cried, affronted.



"Sir, this has been the greatest campaign in the entire history of the Pastan Federation, and, modesty apart, the greatest victory!"

Breeli groaned.

Prani settled himself comfortably behind his desk and started his prepared speech complacently. "I'll begin with a paradox, sir. These people are advancing technologically at an enormous rate. In the last fifteen of their years—about ten of ours—they have advanced more rapidly than we ever did in any fifty years of our history. Yet, if we had arrived fifteen years ago, we'd never have conquered them at all."

"They have been concentrating too much on nuclear power?"

Prani's jaw dropped. In his astonishment, he was rude. "Who told you?"

"No one. But I am not unintelligent, General—and this kind of thing has happened before."

The general was not convinced. "I see you deserve your high position, sir. You are precisely right. Fifteen years ago—I use the local measure of time, of course—the Terrans' defenses were largely non-nuclear. In the meantime they have gone over almost entirely to nuclear power."

"So when you arrived, channeling all nuclear explosions into hyperspace, they had nothing to fight with?"

Prani wasn't pleased at the

brusque interruption. "Frankly, sir, it was an unpleasant shock to be attacked with atomic weapons when we believed this was a Fifteenth Level world. But I pride myself on flexible command. Modesty apart, few generals could have changed their plans so rapidly. I—"

"At the moment, I don't want a campaign report, General. You fought the Terrans and beat them."

The general waved a pudgy hand deprecatingly. "I was in command, sir. Despite the fact that I had been completely misinformed about the people of this world, I pressed home the attack without fear of consequences, and won a great victory for the Pastan Federation."

"General," said Breeli drily, "consequences have caught up with you. But before I say any more, what were your losses in men and materials?"

"The Terrans fought with considerable military skill. Had I not myself been resolute—"

"Yes, General. The losses?"

"It was, of course, an expensive campaign, sir."

"Precisely. Let me see the figures."

"I have them here, sir."

He handed Breeli a single sheet of paper.

There was a long silence. Then:

"You call this victory?" Breeli whispered.



"I told you it was the greatest battle in the entire history of the Pastan Federation, sir."

"So you did. The Terrans, I imagine, suffered similar losses?"

"Oh, considerably more, sir."

**T**HAT was that, then. The catastrophe was even greater than Breeli had feared. There was nothing for it but to place Prani under arrest and have him sent back to Pasta for trial.

Breeli had one last try. Almost pleadingly he said: "When you found the Terrans far more advanced than you had been led to expect, didn't you consider trying to form a peaceful alliance with them, instead of going ahead with plans for conquest?"

"No, sir," said Prani bluntly. "I was ordered to conquer this world. I had no authority to do anything else."

Breeli sighed. Lieutenant Wilt had no authority to stop the Consolidation Officer doing something rash — yet Wilt had done so. Twice.

"General, if you were ordered to make a surprise attack on Tuesday evening and you discovered on Tuesday afternoon that the enemy had not only heard about the attack but were waiting for it — would you still attack?"

"Certainly," said Prani.

Breeli sighed again.

"I gather," said Prani, "that you

consider I have acted wrongly in this matter?"

"General Prani, your family will find it necessary to change their name. Every official who had anything to do with sending you on this mission will be examined for latent insanity — and rightly so, for most of the blame is theirs. You, General, will consider yourself—"

A welcome relief for the shocked, incredulous Prani was afforded by the sudden arrival of the six Terran girls he had requested. They came in boldly and arranged themselves against one wall of the office, smiling and laughing. They were neither insolent nor timid.

And Breeli would have rated each one of them, individually, the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

That they looked exotic was hardly surprising. They were slightly paler, slightly smaller than Pastan women. Their eyes were a little larger, set further apart. Their legs were longer, their arms a little shorter. The contrasts of their bodies were more extreme—larger busts and hips, smaller waists.

Any one of them would have been a sensation in a Pastan street, and it would have occurred to no one to think of her as alien.

In dress they varied considerably. Two wore long skirts, one a



very short skirt. One wore loose slacks, one tight pants, one very brief shorts. All wore belts that emphasized their small waists, and all except one had tight blouses or dress tops that plainly showed why they had tight blouses. There were two blondes, three brunettes, one redhead.

"Do any of them speak Pastan?" Breeli asked.

"We all do," said the redhead. She was the one in the shorts. All the girls looked as if they had good figures, but in her case there was no possible doubt about it. Above her tiny red shorts she wore a white strapless suntop, and as he looked at her Breeli felt as he hadn't felt since he left his concupiscent teens behind him.

"That's Margo Day," said Prani, who had already recovered his usual complacency. "I'd have taken her myself, only I already have a woman, and those Terran girls are very jealous."

"Any of us would consider it an honor to meet your requirements, Consolidation Officer Breeli," said the redhead, Margo Day.

Breeli started. "You know me?"

"And your high position," she said respectfully. "You're what we would call a governor. Please make your choice, sire. Satisfaction is guaranteed, sire."

"What is 'sire'?"

"It means father. A very respectful form of address, sire."

**B**REELI was no fool and he knew irony when he heard it. Margo Day was laughing up her non-existent sleeve at him. Only a fool complains about something he can't prove, however.

Until this moment he had merely been playing along with the situation, without any real intention of taking a Terran mistress. But why not take one? If Terran women were as compliant as this, nothing he did was going to make the position any worse than it was already. Indeed, it seemed as if the Terrans had fully accepted the situation, and in that case the effects of General Prani's colossal blunder might not be so bad.

Every instinct in Breeli but one screamed at him to choose Margo Day. She headed the group in looks, personality and brains.

The dissenting instinct, however, was a very important one. If the enemy — and these women were the enemy, after what Prani had done — wanted him to do something, he preferred to do something else.

"What's your name?" he asked the blonde beside Margo.

"Helen Krauss," the girl in the tight pants said, and Breeli sensed with satisfaction that she and Margo Day and all the others were in some way disconcerted. He hadn't been expected to pick Helen Krauss.

"Wait for me outside," he told



Helen Krauss, and turned back to Prani.

The six girls filed out.

"Tell me," said Breeli sharply, when the door had closed behind them, "are these people really conquered? Is their resistance over?"

"I would not have given the signal for your arrival otherwise," Prani said loftily.

"You mean there's no sabotage? No assassination? Can I trust that woman Helen Krauss with my life?"

"Oh, I wouldn't suggest that, sir," said Prani. "You'll have a guard, naturally. You have your shield. She'll be searched frequently. She mustn't be given the slightest chance to—"

"Then there is sabotage? Assassination?"

"Occasionally, when officers and men are careless, sir. But—"

"Why don't you stop it by reprisals?"

"There's a clause in the surrender terms, sir. They wouldn't sign without it. No reprisals for acts by individuals. A conspiracy has to be proved. After all, sir, we're the conquerors. For years individual rebels will commit what subversive acts they can. Modesty apart, sir, I consider it a triumph to arrange such an early armistice. Without that clause they'd have gone on fighting until—"

"I see."

So it was neither a peaceful alliance with the Terrans nor a proper conquest. The sooner Breeli found out exactly what it was, the better.

"I'm going on a tour of inspection of the district," Breeli said, postponing the question of what to do about General Prani. "Can I have Lieutenant Wilt as guide?"

"Who's Lieutenant Wilt, sir?"

"He drove me from the spaceport."

"Then he must have gone back there, sir. I'll detail Captain Barvel."

"I'd rather have Lieutenant Wilt. Oh, well, never mind."

**W**ILT, as Prani thought, had been sent back to the spaceport after delivering his important passenger.

The girl Helen Krauss was waiting outside. Breeli particularly wanted to have her along, being sure that he could find out a great deal from her — not necessarily believing what she said. What she talked freely and truthfully about would be what the Terrans didn't mind his knowing. When she seemed to be lying, or refused to answer, or pretended not to know, he would have a few lines to investigate.

He had no idea what he was going to do. He couldn't very well tell the Terrans the attack on



them had been a mistake. The conquest of Earth was an accomplished fact, and Breeli could see no way of making a tactical withdrawal and pretending that umpteen thousand dead Pastans and Terrans were still alive. Yet the subjection of a Nineteenth Level world couldn't go on.

It wasn't a moral question any more. It was a political one. The moral crime had already been committed; now the problem was to minimize its effects. Since Earth was still struggling under the yoke, perhaps the Pastan Army could allow itself to be driven from the planet, allegedly by a Seventeenth Level race on the threshold of the Eighteenth Level. Then, a few centuries later, Earth, now an acknowledged Nineteenth Level civilization, could be offered peaceful affiliation to the Federation.

That would get around most of the awkward points. But too many Pastan Army officers and men knew that the Terrans were already far beyond the Seventeenth Level, and when they got home the explosive truth would be out.

No, that wouldn't work. But what would?

Breeli became aware that Dorothy Green was carefully instructing Captain Barvel on the itinerary to be followed. Although Breeli said nothing, he thought a lot. This Terran female seemed to have a lot of responsibility, and

she knew exactly where he was going to be all afternoon at any moment. Why was she trusted to such an extent?

"Please stick to this route, Captain Barvel," she was saying earnestly, "or I can't be responsible for what might happen."

Breeli took another good look at Dorothy Green. She was a small, slim, restless, energetic creature, with tiny, sharp features and short dark hair. Her body was stringy and bony, and he couldn't imagine anyone of any race finding her desirable.

It was a pleasure after looking at Dorothy Green to watch Helen climbing into the car assigned to him. He climbed in after her. He found it interesting that she recoiled involuntarily at first as his hip touched hers, and then leaned against him provocatively.

"What do you think of Dorothy Green?" he asked abruptly.

THE unexpected question baffled her, and it was some seconds before she could think of anything to say. "Why, what should I think of her?"

"That's what I'm asking you," said Breeli. "Do you despise her as a traitor?"

"Her husband is a hostage. She's got to work for you."

"I didn't know there were any hostages."

"General Prani wouldn't accept



Terran liaison officers unless he had hostages."

That was sensible of Prani, in the circumstances. Although it had been criminal idiocy to attack and defeat the Terrans, it wouldn't improve matters to be so weak and ingratiating that the occupation was ineffective.

Perhaps the fact that Dorothy Green's husband was a hostage explained her somber manner.

"So you have a ceremony of marriage?" asked Breeli.

"Of course," Helen said, surprised.

"Are you married?"

"Me? No."

"Don't you want to be married?"

"Every girl does."

"Then why aren't you?"

"Nobody ever asked me."

"And somebody asked Dorothy Green?"

"Yes." She clearly had no idea what he was getting at.

Apparently Terran men married girls with brains rather than beauty. It was logical, but Breeli knew of no other race which was logical in that particular way.

If it was true that Terran men married women for their intelligence rather than their looks, that might explain why six girls like those he had seen in Prani's office had nothing better to do with themselves than become the mistresses of Pastan officers.

Yet Margo Day had seemed intelligent . . .

The car was returning to the six-lane highway. Captain Barvel was in the back with a couple of guards. Breeli would have preferred to be alone with Helen, but recognized the need for guards. He was the most important man in many light-years. No doubt the Terrans, who seemed to know all about him, would kill him if they could. He remembered Dorothy's earnest warning to Barvel: "Please stick to this route, or I can't be responsible for what might happen."

The car reached the feed-in to the motorway. Again it was necessary to cross the vast trafficway by a bridge, since they were going in the opposite direction from the spaceport. The six lanes looked naked without cars flashing along them.

"Where's all the traffic now?" Breeli asked.

Barvel started to answer, but Breeli cut him off. He was interested in Helen's answers, not Barvel's.

"None of us are allowed in this area except liaison personnel," she said.

"How about you and Margo and the other girls?"

"We're liaison personnel."

So the Terrans *officially* provided mistresses for high-ranking Pastan officers.



"How do you feel about us, Helen?"

"Does it matter?"

"Yes. Do you hate us?"

**S**HE struggled to find an answer. Apparently she didn't want to say yes, but felt the impossibility of saying no.

"Why are you here with me?" Breeli asked pointedly.

"Because you told me to—"

"You know what I mean."

"It's an honor . . ." Helen said without conviction.

"Nonsense. Margo Day was being sarcastic when she said that. What are you doing it for? Money? Prestige? A chance to slip a knife between my ribs?"

She said nothing, which was sensible of her.

Helen Krauss wasn't bright for a Terran. There was no character, no personality, no humor in her answers. She was like a beautiful robot which made the right responses when the right buttons were pushed.

A beautiful robot. Breeli considered it seriously for a moment. Possibly the Terrans were sufficiently advanced to make lifelike robots . . . no, that was absurd. However, to make absolutely sure, he resolved to have Helen Krauss X-rayed when they got back.

Still considering the possibility, he was a little too late in noticing something which would normally

have put him on his guard at once. The driver had asked Barvel a question, Barvel had replied, and Helen had said:

"Say, are we going to Heronville? Why didn't you tell me? Turn off right here and we'll save fourteen miles."

Suppose she were a robot. Prani had a Terran mistress too. Suppose some night, when practically every high-ranking Pastan officer had a beautiful Terran robot with him, a button was pushed and all the beautiful robots blew up . . .

The car had turned off the highway and was traveling more slowly along a narrow feed road. "Wait a minute," said Breeli. "Didn't Dorothy Green say—"

The mine tripped by the car's front wheels exploded under the rear left wheel. The car and its contents flew in many directions in many pieces. Their shields entirely enveloped in the explosion, Barvel, the driver and the two guards were victims of blowback and disappeared into hyperspace. And Helen Krauss had no shield.

Breeli, farthest from the explosion, was saved by his shield. But he was blown twenty feet in the air, and as he approached the ground extremely rapidly, the shield, faced with the task of shunting a world eight thousand miles in diameter into hyperspace, prudently gave up.

Breeli landed in a bush and







found to his dazed astonishment that he was able to scramble out of it. He staggered a short distance and tripped over something. Looking down, he felt sick.

Helen Krauss had been no robot.

**B**REELI regained consciousness in bed. For a few seconds he lay bringing himself up to date, reliving the explosion. Then he opened his eyes.

Lieutenant Wilt was with him, young, solid, reassuring. Breeli was puzzled. Why Wilt?

Breeli could hardly guess that Prani, distracted and terrified after the incident, jolted out of his usual state of self-satisfaction, hadn't dared to face Breeli. After dredging his mind for someone to whom he could delegate the task, he had remembered that Breeli had asked for Wilt as his driver.

"What shape am I in?" Breeli asked.

"You're fine, sir," Wilt said. "Not even concussion. Bruises, of course. You'll be able to walk out of here tomorrow."

"The others?"

"All dead or going into hyperspace, sir."

Wilt was bewildered. He had expected a strong reprimand once Breeli had seen General Prani, and when he'd been called back from the spaceport, he had expected to get it. Instead he found

that Consolidation Officer Breeli had had a miraculous escape from death and that he, Wilt, was expected to sit and wait for him to regain consciousness. Why he had been chosen for this, Wilt couldn't begin to guess. He assumed some mistake had been made in the transmission of orders.

Breeli wasn't thinking about Wilt at the moment, nor of his escape, nor of the people who had been with him. He was wondering how the explosion had been arranged.

Dorothy Green had sent him on the route he had taken, but the alteration in the route had been Helen's. How had that dumb Ter-ran blonde fixed things so that four Pastan officers and very nearly the Consolidation Officer as well had been killed?

"What are you doing here?" he asked abruptly.

"I don't know, sir," said Wilt. "I was told to sit with you. I'm Lieutenant Wilt, sir, the driver who—"

"I know. You nearly died in that car, Wilt. I asked for you as driver."

"You did, sir?" Wilt was astonished.

"Perhaps you wouldn't have died. Perhaps you'd have had the sense not to follow that girl's directions."

"It was her then, sir?"

"I don't know. I'm going to find



out. Bring Dorothy Green here."

"Yes, sir." He hesitated. "Are you . . . can you handle this affair, sir?"

"If I can't," said Breeli, closing his eyes, "I'll have the benefit of your wisdom and experience, Lieutenant."

Wilt looked at him doubtfully. "Yes, sir."

**D**OROTHY Green was white-faced but resolute. "I gave your driver a route entirely on roads which are constantly guarded," she said. "He should have known not to turn off them at any point, for any reason."

"But you're not heartbroken that four Pastan officers died."

"Governor Breeli, I—"

"If I cut a hole in you," Breeli said thoughtfully, "would you bleed?"

"Naturally."

"We'll try it and see."

She went even whiter. But her voice was steady. "Governor, your people so far have at least been just. You know I couldn't have been directly concerned in the attempt on your life."

"Not directly — but indirectly?"

"In no way. Most of the roads in this country are mined. I know that. Your men know that. Ask anyone. Ask the lieutenant here. Anyone who turned off the highway was a fool. I couldn't have made him do it even if I wanted

to. If I had given your driver a route involving side roads, I'd have been questioned at once."

"Give me your hand."

She did so, wonderingly. He grasped her thin wrist. Her heart was beating rapidly but strongly. It was inconceivable that she was anything but a human female. He would have to abandon the robot idea.

"You can go," he said. Then, when she was relieved and off her guard, he asked: "Do you still love your husband, Dorothy?"

She recoiled from him. "Until you said that," she whispered, "I thought you were quite human, Governor."

Breeli was at a loss. "I'm not threatening to have him killed. I merely asked if you love him."

"The answer is yes, I do." And for the first time he saw fierce warmth in her brown eyes as she stared back defiantly at him. Her fierceness couldn't make her pretty — but it could, and did, make her suddenly intensely alive.

"Where is he?" Breeli asked.

"At an internment camp a hundred miles from here. I see him every Sunday."

"You could visit him oftener than that if you like. Shall I arrange it?"

"It wouldn't be any good," she said, the fierceness fading.

She puzzled him. No doubt the separation from the man she loved



explained her unhappiness. But in his experience intelligent, efficient, energetic people usually managed to get what they wanted, even if they didn't have beauty to help them. Surely, if all she wanted was to be with her husband, she could get out of serving as a liaison officer and have him restored to her.

"When were you married?" he asked.

"Six years ago, when I was twenty."

"Were you pretty then?"

"No more than I am now."

"It doesn't bother you, not being pretty?"

"I'm quite happy the way I am."

He made a gesture, and she went.

"Is it true that most of the roads are mined?" Breeli asked Wilt.

"Yes, sir. Your driver was very careless."

"Well, he paid for it."

Wilt looked at him curiously. This Consolidation Officer revealed a humanity rare in the lieutenant's experience of high-ranking officers.

**M**ARGO Day sauntered in. She had changed her already scanty costume for an even scantier one. Now she wore white striped shorts and a completely—and deliberately—inadequate black halter. Lying in bed, Breeli suddenly felt uncomfortably warm.

"Do you always dress like that?" he asked.

"No, sire," she said, "but I thought that if I gave you a better look at the merchandise, I might make a sale."

"And if it doesn't?"

"Maybe I should have played hard to get. Shall I go and put on a long black cloak instead?"

"You mean you want to take Helen's place? You think I'd be fool enough to let another Terran girl try to kill me?"

"Well, that's the snag," Margo said frankly. "That's why I have to use good salesmanship."

She was actually admitting that she was prepared to be his mistress just for a chance to kill him.

"Were you in on the plan?"

"No, that must have been Helen's and nobody else's."

"How do you think she managed it?"

"Oh, she was just lucky there was a mine there, and unlucky that she was killed and you weren't. Still, it was a good bargain — her life for four Pastans."

"Your attitude seems different from what it was earlier."

"How? I said it would be an honor to be your mistress. Which, in this crazy situation, it is. It would be an even greater honor to kill you, sire."

"Dorothy Green's been trying hard to convince me she wouldn't kill me."



"She's different. Her husband is a hostage. Anyway, she's a renegade. If you don't stay in control, she'll get half a dozen bullets in the guts anyway. I'm not a renegade. I've got nothing to fear from my own people."

"Despite collaboration?"

"What collaboration? Everybody knows I'll stick a knife in your back if I get the chance."

Her honesty was startling. Yet everything she said made sense. Conquerors on a human planet umpteen light-years from their own had to have women, even women who would kill them if they could.

"Suppose you gave me your word not to make any attempt on my life?"

"Suppose anything you like. You'd be stupid to take my word, sire."

"Would you give it?"

She laughed. "This is a very theoretical conversation, isn't it? Sure, I'll promise not to try to kill you. I've already told you that I'll do it if I get the chance. That makes me a liar anyway."

"I think I'll take you up on your offer, all the same."

"That's great, sire. Want me to get into bed with you now?"

Wilt choked.

"No. I'll send for you when I want you."

"Mean you want me to go?"

"Yes."

WHEN the door had closed behind her, Breeli said thoughtfully: "Have you got an Earth girl, Wilt?"

"Yes, sir."

"Doesn't it bother you to know she'd stick a knife in you if she could?"

"She wouldn't, sir. Not Nancy."

"Don't be too sure, Lieutenant. These people seem to have a remarkable passion for freedom."

"Yes, sir. 'Give me liberty or give me death.' A Terran saying, sir."

"Said by a man or a woman?"

Wilt looked surprised. "A man, sir. Terran society isn't a matriarchy."

"No? That makes the present situation very hard to understand."

"Sir?"

"Never mind. It looks as if the attempt on my life and the deaths of my guards will have to be passed off as a regrettable accident. Wilt, was the war really savage?"

"Yes, sir."

"Yet you don't think your little friend would kill you?"

"I'm sure of it. She — she loves me, sir."

"Why?"

"Sir?"

"Why? Is she pretty?"

"Yes, sir. Very."

"How does that make sense, Wilt? Earth's far beyond the stage



of respecting conquerors. Why do their most beautiful women throw themselves at our heads? Outside of fiction, girls like Margo Day don't have to be heroines. They can leave that to plain girls. Why, Wilt, why?"

"I don't quite understand, sir."

"Well, think about it, Lieutenant. Meanwhile, bring me some publications to read. Terran publications, with pictures."

"Yes, sir. Some came in, today."

"I want old ones too. Publications printed before the occupation."

"There aren't any, sir."

"Then find some."

"I mean there are none left, sir. They've all been destroyed."

"Get some from a waste disposal organization."

"You still don't understand, sir. A lot of us wanted to see old Terran publications, to get some kind of picture of what Earth was like before we came. But we've never been able to find any. The Terrans have destroyed them all."

"Deliberately, so that we can't see them?"

"It would appear so, sir."

"That's strange," Breeli mused. "What would there be in publications that they wouldn't want us to see?"

"We don't know, sir. We've often wondered."

"Yet current publications are freely available?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right, Lieutenant, bring me some."

**B**REELI was left with his thoughts. There were many things about which he was puzzled. But very soon he would have to take some sort of action.

The present situation couldn't be allowed to continue, that was certain. The Pastan Federation would never ratify any solution to the Earth problem based on a military occupation of a Nineteenth Level world. Already Breeli had once been on the point of ordering Prani to consider himself under arrest.

Yet how could he go to the Terran leaders, whoever and wherever they were, and say: "I'm sorry General Prani conquered Earth. It was a stupid mistake. Now can we please be friends?"

He might say: "The Pastan Federation is just. We will withdraw under certain conditions," and give them all they asked. But the Terrans were intelligent enough to realize that that came to the same thing.

Damn General Prani!

Breeli glanced moodily through the publications that Wilt had brought. Unable to understand a single word of the text, all he could do was look at the pictures.

There were newspapers, books, technical journals, women's maga-



zines, weeklies and monthlies devoted to current events, fashion, sport, finance, hobbies of various kinds, music, films, agriculture, television, radio, education . . .

"Wilt!" he shouted.

The lieutenant, who had been on guard outside the door, came in at once.

"Get hold of some Terran films made before the occupation force arrived. Any kind of films."

Wilt shook his head. "Sorry, sir. There aren't any of those either."

"Destroyed like the old publications?"

"Yes, sir. They didn't destroy their art treasures, though, if that's any help, sir."

"Well, is it?"

"Not that I could see, sir. Lots of nudes. Very beautiful females. The males are pretty bulky, however."

"True to life, at least. Terran men are mostly overbuilt."

Breeli waved him away and stared at the publications that littered his bed. In what way were these different from the ones which had appeared before the occupation? In their occasional reference to the Pastans, certainly. But that was no reason to hide or destroy pre-conquest publications.

One of the magazines had a color picture of Margo Day on the cover, wearing panties and folded arms. In one of the others was a picture of Helen Krauss,

not wearing anything at all. He wished he could read what was said about them.

Still staring at the beautiful picture of Margo, he found sleep closing in on him. Not unnaturally, he had lurid dreams in which Margo was much more to him than a sister.

THE next day he was able to walk out of the hospital, as Wilt had promised, stiff and sore but otherwise in good working order. Wilt wanted to take his arm; Breeli refused help.

"I am *not* old enough to be your father, Lieutenant," he said, annoyed.

"No, sir. I didn't think you were."

"Send Margo Day to me."

"Is that wise, sir?"

Breeli stifled the impulse to snap at him. Having chosen Wilt because Wilt would answer back, he wouldn't be acting very logically to snap at Wilt for doing so.

"Are you sure Nancy wouldn't kill you?" Breeli asked instead.

"Quite sure, sir. But that's different. I've known her for weeks. We'll be married whenever marriages between Terrans and Pastans are permitted. This girl Margo Day—"

"Nancy's prepared to go and live in Pasta?"

"Yes, sir. She loves me. But Margo Day—"



"It is inconceivable that any woman could ever love me, Lieutenant?"

"No, sir. But not in five minutes. Next month Margo Day might not want to assassinate you. Even next week. But today she means what she says."

There was a lot of sense in what Wilt said, and Breeli made due allowance for it. Normal women with normal instincts, whatever their race, found cold hate difficult to preserve along with growing affection. Wilt's Nancy had probably started out with the attitude which Margo had forcefully expressed, but now . . . yes, Wilt was probably right. About Nancy and about Margo.

"Send Margo Day to me," Breeli said.

"Yes, sir," said Wilt disapprovingly.

It was very pleasant.

It gave Breeli no answers.

Nor, in the days that passed, did Breeli find any simple solution to his problem.

In a military sense, Earth was submissive. There weren't even riots. The countries of the world went about their business, for the most part ignoring the Pastan conquest. Earth's economic, social and political systems hadn't been as easily upset as Breeli had feared.

But every day, somewhere, despite their shields, four or five Pastan soldiers died. Usually four

or five Terrans died with them. But Earth could afford it, not being at the end of a light-years-long supply and reinforcements line.

The plain fact was, Earth didn't want to be occupied.

Once Breeli said to Dorothy Green: "If I wanted to have a conference with Earth's leaders, could you arrange it? How long would you need?"

"You can tell me anything you want communicated to the Terran governments, sir."

"Yes, but I might want to see them myself."

"I'm chief liaison officer, sir." There was mild reproof in her tone.

"I know that. But what if I have an offer to make?"

"You can make it to me, sir."

And with that Breeli had to be content. He made no offer. He didn't know what to offer.

SEEING no harm in it, he issued an order permitting intermarriage. One of the first to take advantage of this was Lieutenant Wilt, who married his Nancy. Breeli attended the wedding and kissed the bride. Wilt was right — Nancy was a pretty girl. Not a Margo Day, but pretty.

Seeing them together, Breeli didn't think Nancy could possibly be playing a part.

As far as he could, Breeli kept



out of Prani's way because he knew that whatever happened he was Prani's executioner. Breeli had no choice about that — only about the manner and date of Prani's trial.

He made a lot of visits to various parts of the world, accompanied by Margo and a suitable number of guards.

In Hawaii Margo said: "Come for a swim, sire. I'll find out where you're most likely to be eaten by a shark."

In the Swiss Alps she said: "Let's climb a mountain, sire, and I'll push you off."

In Brazil she stopped calling him "sire." Knowing she used the title as an insult, Breeli had steadfastly refused to comment on it one way or the other. But when she started calling him Breel — the "I" on the end of his name was titular — he began to suspect that even if she got the chance to assassinate him, she wouldn't.

In Australia she said: "Do you really need all these guards, Breel? I'm getting tired of sleeping six in a bed."

This was exaggeration. Breeli never slept in the same room as she did, but apart from refusing to let her near him when he was asleep, he took no special precautions against her.

In England he gave her a chance to kill him and she didn't take it.

In Florida she said: "Yes, Breel, I'll marry you."

She insisted on fixing the date of the wedding, which for a moment made him suspicious again. Assassinations had tailed off lately. Intuitively, when she picked the following Friday, he suspected that something was due to happen on Friday.

Suppose a Terran coup of some kind had been planned. Surprise would be essential, for the Pastans had decisively overcome all Earth's resistance once, and could do it again. And if such a coup had been planned, Margo, given the chance to assassinate the Consolidation Officer, might very well refrain.

"You're up to something," he said.

"Look, Breel," she said. "We'd better get one thing straight. If I marry you, I'll mean it. I'll go anywhere with you. I'll become as Pastan as you are. There's nothing new in that. Lots of girls have married former enemies. Once we're married, you can trust me."

"I believe all that. But you make me more certain than ever that something's going to happen between now and Friday."

She laughed in the old mocking way and said nothing.

**I**N the night he tossed and turned uneasily, and at last opened his eyes and looked at



Margo, sleeping peacefully beside him. The moonlight which shone through the uncurtained window rimlit the lovely satin skin of cheek, shoulder and breast. For a week now he had trusted her to the extent of sleeping with her.

He loved her and he was all but certain she loved him. Yet he knew his duty was to find out whatever it was she knew, however he had to do it.

She knew something and had hardly bothered to deny it. When they had talked hours ago, things had been easy, comfortable between them, and it had been more or less a joke that Margo wouldn't tell him what was on her mind.

In the stillness of the night, it was clear that it was no joke. He ought to turn her over to the psychologists to have whatever she knew pried out of her.

He got up and paced about the bedroom restlessly. Aside from the time when the car he was in had been blown to pieces, his stay on Earth had been too pleasant, too easy, too spuriously comfortable. He hadn't seen any shooting, fighting, dying. Any killing he heard of, except that one incident, had been offstage.

Yet he knew that the Terrans had a passionate love of liberty and would do anything to drive the invaders from their world.

The only reason for their present comparative passiveness was that there was nothing they could do against the diverter, and they knew it. They could attack every one of the Pastan Army's bases and installations from all directions at once, but if they did so, they'd simply be shut out until the Pastans were ready to strike back, and then get beaten as decisively as before. They knew it. That was why the occupation was apparently peaceful.

There remained the fact that Prani had immorally and illegally attacked and conquered a Nineteenth Level world, and Breeli still hadn't the ghost of an idea what to do about it.

He had never had a survey made to establish beyond doubt what the Terrans' cultural level actually was. The reason was that it was still possible to pretend that Earth was Seventeenth Level, although the pretense was pretty thin.

After a survey, it would no longer be possible.

"Come back to bed, darling," Margo muttered sleepily.

"What's going to happen on Friday?" he demanded.

"Friday?" She smiled without opening her eyes. "I'm going to get married."

Long after she was asleep, Breeli stared at her. Finally he told himself he was imagining things.



**A**LTHOUGH marriage hadn't long been permitted between Pastans and Terrans, already nearly half the occupying forces had married Terran girls. It wasn't really surprising — only single men were sent on occupation duties, except for top brass like General Prani.

The strange thing was that the Terrans seemed to regard Pastan-Terran marriage as a joke.

When it was announced that Governor Breeli was to marry Margo Day, cartoons depicting him and Margo in improbable attitudes appeared in most Terran newspapers. They were never actually obscene or libelous. But Breeli learned how astute Terran newspapermen could be in establishing just how far they could go, and then go there with barely a millimeter to spare.

Breeli found Margo at the pool chuckling over a cartoon in one of the New York papers. It depicted a very glamorous Margo with an unglamorous Breeli at her feet and the Earth at Breeli's.

"Is that funny?" he asked.

"I think so. You wouldn't."

"I'm supposed to have a sense of humor."

"The man who gets a custard pie in his face never thinks it's funny."

"Is marrying you like getting a custard pie in my face?"

She sobered. "You don't really

mind, Breel? I didn't think it would bother you."

"It doesn't. But I didn't expect to find you laughing at a thing like that."

"Well, you at my feet, and the Earth at yours . . . Every girl wants to marry a prince, especially Americans, who sneer at princes, and you're a sort of prince. Tell me, is the wedding off?"

He looked at her. She wore a deep green swimsuit which brought out all her vivid coloring. He had had plenty of opportunity to tire of her, but the result had been quite the opposite. He reached for her.

Feeling her stiffen, he cast a glance over his shoulder. He blinked incredulously. Dorothy Green, most unexpectedly clad in a white two-piece swimsuit, and smiling, was coming to join them. She looked more like a bean-pole than usual.

"Mind if I talk to you?" she asked Breeli.

"Go right ahead," said Margo viciously, and jumped to her feet and walked away.

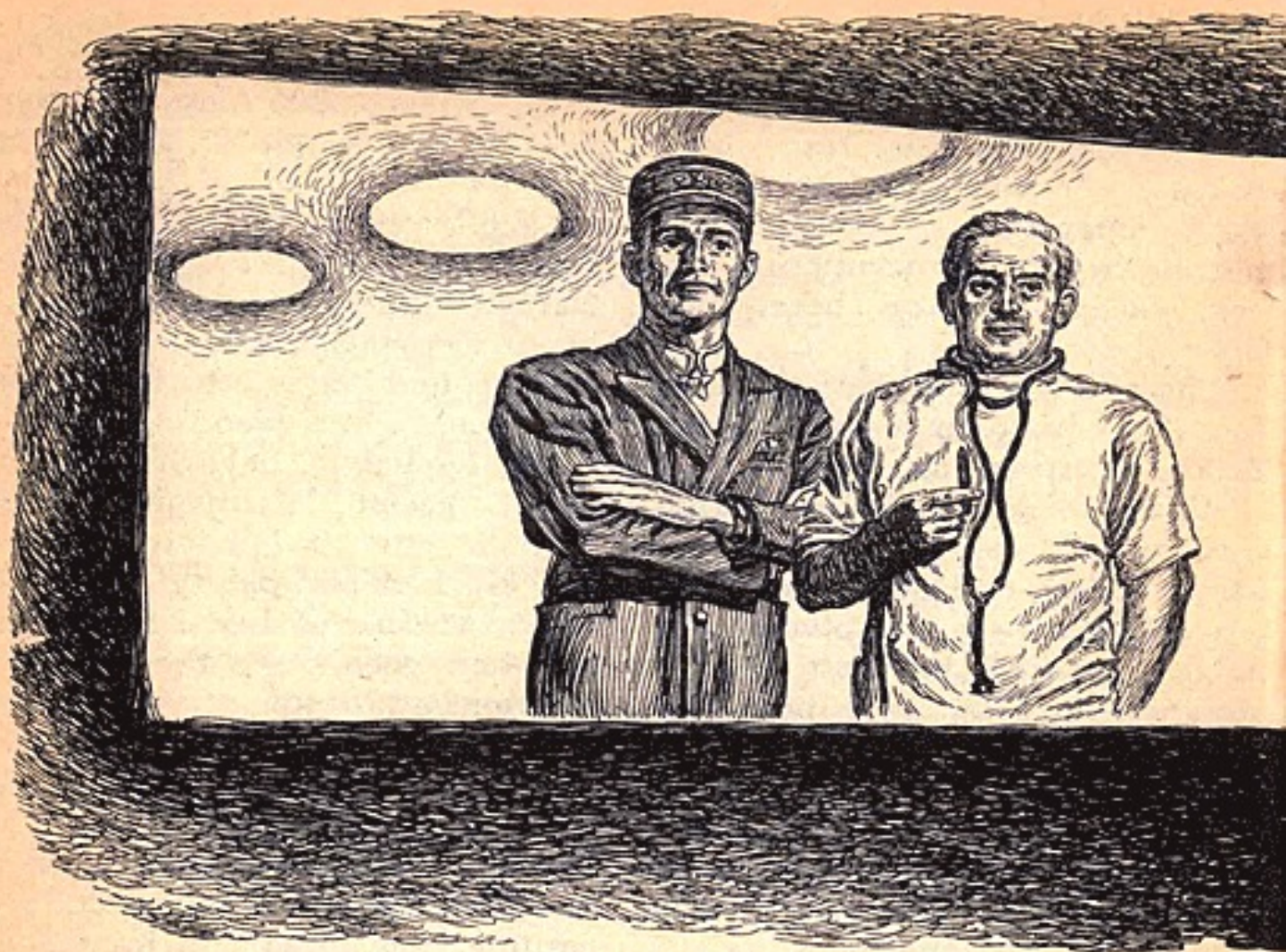
Breeli stared after her.

"What got into Margo?" he asked.

Dorothy sat by the edge of the pool where Margo had been. "She's a patriot," she said indifferently. "Patriots can't be expected to like me."

"But she's marrying me. I'm a





Pastan. Why should she hate you for working with Pastans?"

Dorothy shrugged. "I thought you understood people, Governor. Does anyone like a traitor — even the people who *use* the traitor?"

"But you're not . . . well, never mind. What do you want to talk about?"

It was the wedding, of course. Dorothy was in charge of security arrangements. For ten minutes they discussed the matter as impersonally as if it were a cattle

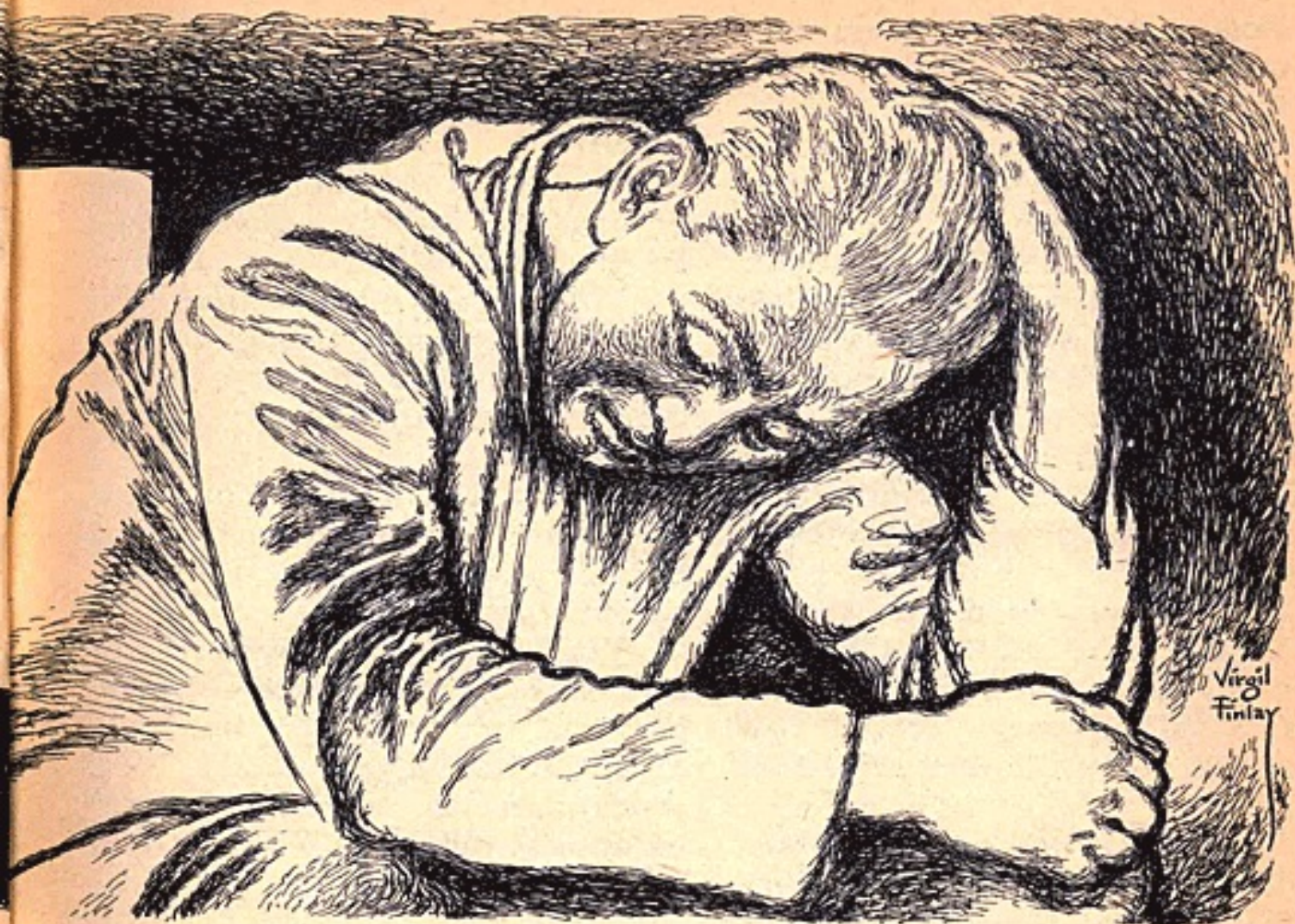
show. Breeli agreed that a Ter-ran church wedding would be best, with a Pastan ceremony back on Pasta later.

At the end of ten minutes, finding Dorothy brighter and more sympathetic than usual, Breeli asked: "What kind of wedding did you have?"

A spasm crossed her face. "Please. We're concerned only with you and Margo Day."

"We could arrange to have your husband present if you like."





ONCE more passion flamed in her eyes. She jumped to her feet exactly as Margo had done, and was going to hurry away likewise. But Breeli caught her around the waist and pulled her down again. It was like handling an undernourished child.

"Dorothy," he said, "is there something I don't know about your husband? Was he wounded in the fighting? Has he been badly treated? Or what?"

Her passion died, and her small

breasts stopped heaving. "You don't know?" she whispered. "I thought you did, I thought . . . I apologize, Governor. No, it wasn't anything to do with the fighting. Long before that, Jack was . . . sick."

"What do you mean, sick?"

"His mind . . . if you must have it in plain language, Governor, he's out of his mind. No, he isn't badly treated. In fact, one of the reasons I took this job was because he'd be treated better as a



hostage, better looked after, than I could afford otherwise."

"But why hasn't he been cured?"

"Incurable, Governor." There was a world of grief in her voice. "Brain damage?"

"No. I'm not a psychologist, Governor, and anyway, I'd rather not talk about it. There's a Pastan doctor at the internment camp, a Dr. Morn. Ask him."

Breeli stood up. "I will. Dorothy, if I've said anything that hurt you, I'm sorry. I didn't know about this."

He had himself driven to the camp and saw Jack Green through one-way glass. Dorothy's husband was a tall, massive young man who sat very still and stared at the floor.

"Manic-depressive," Dr. Morn explained, turning away. "A very sad case. I've requested permission to treat him, but so far I've had no reply. I presume my request is shuttling back and forth along a series of muddy ruts known as the usual channels."

"Could you cure him?"

"Within a week."

"Then go ahead. You have permission now."

"Thank you. These Terrans have a wry saying: Better late than never."

"Have you any idea, Doctor, why the Terrans left him like that? Is he some kind of criminal or outcast?"

Dr. Morn raised his eyebrows quizzically. "Do you mean you don't know? Haven't you seen my report?"

"It, too, is probably shuttling through the usual channels," said Breeli drily. "What was it about?"

"The Terrans haven't cured him because they can't. Though a very advanced people in many ways, they're backward in psychological medicine."

Breeli stared at him. "You mean they can't cure neuroses? But I haven't seen an uncompensated neurotic yet."

"You wouldn't. They're really a remarkably stable race — which, perhaps, is why psychological medicine has lagged among them. Really serious neurosis is comparatively rare. But when it does occur, they can't do a thing about it."

"So, unless you took a hand, Jack Green would be like that for the rest of his life?"

"Yes."

"His wife, Doctor — have you met his wife?"

"Yes." The doctor sighed. "A remarkably plain girl, in a world of such feminine pulchritude. However, she's gone through a lot of unnecessary misery."

"Didn't you tell her he could be cured?"

"Until I was permitted to do so, I hardly thought it humane to tell her I could."



"No, of course not. And by the same token, I won't tell her what's going on until he *is* cured. Will you send him to HQ when the cure is complete, Dr. Morn? I'll take the responsibility."

The doctor looked puzzled. "But why not tell her now?"

"And get her so hopeful that she has no thought for — collaboration? That's not practical politics, Doctor."

**I**T wasn't until he was almost back at HQ that the significance of Dr. Morn's explanation detonated under Breeli like the bomb which had nearly killed him.

The Eighteenth Level was the level of stability. It was the level of culture at which a race learned to repair its own mental disorders.

The Terrans were an exceptionally stable race, though quite possibly they themselves didn't think so. Neurotics among them generally managed to compensate without treatment. Though they remained neurotics, they seldom reached the state at which treatment, in a Pastan world, would have been compulsory.

Consequently the Terrans had, in effect, reached the Nineteenth Level by a different route from the usual one. From the standard point of view, they were Nineteenth Level; there was no doubt about that.

But part of the definition of the

rise from Seventeenth to Eighteenth Level was the development of practical psychological medicine.

*Technically, the Terrans were Seventeenth Level and the conquest of Earth had been quite in order.*

It was a technicality, of course. Put on the right track, Terran psychologists could develop the necessary techniques in a matter of months. Then, by any standards, they would be Nineteenth Level.

But it was all Breeli needed. Now he could whitewash Prani and the conquest of Earth and anything else he liked. There would be no need to mention that he'd spent weeks on Earth before learning about the gap.

He almost danced into HQ.

"General," he said with more cordiality than he had shown since the moment he met Prani, "you're saved. The Terrans are Seventeenth Level."

Prani was affronted. "Sir, you know very well they're Nineteenth. No Seventeenth Level race could have fought such battles. Modesty apart, I may say —"

"General," said Breeli with only mild exasperation, "if you follow that line, you're dead. Your only hope is to let me show that the Terrans are Seventeenth Level. Now are you going to do as I say, or do I have to relieve you of your command?"



"Sir!" The general went white, then red, then mottled.

"I can do it, you know."

"Yes, sir, I know, but —"

"All right, then. I have reason to believe that something's brewing. I don't know what, but it doesn't matter. As of ten minutes from now, all bases will be closed until further notice. Recall all personnel. Set diverters to exclude bombs, shells, gas, men, women, children and all animals, insects and bacteria. Transmit these orders through Pastan personnel, not through Dorothy Green, or any other Green or Dorothy. The only contact between Pastans and Terrans in the next few days will be the marriage of myself and Margo."

"But that's the first thing to cancel, sir! If there's really going to be a revolt, there must be plans for your assassination at the ceremony!"

"I don't think so. But I'll warn Dorothy and Margo that if there are, it'll be the worst mistake Earth ever made."

WITH some difficulty Breeli found Dr. Morn's report, stuck fast in a bottleneck. He read it with interest.

The Terrans, like all races which didn't have psychotherapy that really worked, were all more or less off balance. That didn't make them much different from any other highly developed race, or the Pas-

tans themselves, for every advanced civilization permitted a lot of personal liberty, which meant that only dangerous psychotics could be compulsorily treated. Earth achieved much the same practical result by shutting dangerous psychotics away in asylums or prisons.

But the Terrans were conscious of the deficiency and uneasy about it. There were experiments in rehabilitation — idealistic, dangerous experiments when no practical psychotherapeutic techniques existed.

The Terrans would be very glad to have a psychotherapy which worked.

Seeing all his troubles dissolving, Breeli once more felt like dancing. When he met Margo in one of the corridors, he did literally dance into his office with her.

"What's got into you, Breel?" she asked breathlessly.

"I've just found the key!" he cried.

"What key?"

"The key to Terran-Pastan cooperation. Friendship. Peace. Alliance."

"Isn't that a bit optimistic?"

"No. After we're married, I'll tell you about it."

"I think you'd better tell me now."

He grinned at her. "Margo, I don't care what you've got up your sleeve. I've got something bigger."



She looked at him thoughtfully. "You've got something that's going to put you in a strong position?"

"Yes."

"Then maybe it had better wait. You're going to need it."

He sobered. "Margo, I'm trusting you. If there's anything funny about the ceremony, your world will regret it for generations. That's not a threat. It's a friendly warning."

"Didn't I promise it would go off according to plan?"

"Yes, but long ago you told me you'd promise anything I liked, and I'd be a fool to believe you. Didn't you?"

She was hurt. "Why are you marrying me if you don't trust me?"

"Because you're beautiful and I love you."

"Is that the right order of importance?"

"No. Honestly, Margo, I don't think you'd betray me."

She looked at him with troubled eyes.

**T**HE wedding of Margo Day and Consolidation Officer Breeli — or Governor Breeli, as he was known to the Terrans — was a big propaganda occasion.

It took place in St. Clement's Church in a small town near Prani's headquarters. Film and television cameras were there in force. Margo and Breeli were attended by near-

ly all the Pastans who had married Terrans, and Terrans who had married Pastans — a large congregation. That had been Dorothy Green's inspiration.

Margo looked ravishing in pink. Breeli wore a Terran suit. Dorothy Green was matron of honor.

The Reverend Thaddeus White had refused to perform the ceremony until he had a chat with Breeli about religion. Finding that the Pastan view of a Divine Purpose was not so different, he had withdrawn his objections and agreed to officiate.

Nothing untoward happened until Margo and Breeli left the church. Then Breeli was rather surprised to find Dorothy coming into their car with them.

"Do we need a chaperon?" he asked Margo.

"Mr. Breeli," said Dorothy, as the car started, "you are no longer governor. You and Margo are being deported at once."

Breeli smiled. "Tell me more."

"I'm sorry about this, Breel," Margo said, "but I did want to marry you, and I also wanted to free Earth. That's why it was timed this way. I'm coming with you to the spaceport."

"And what are you going to do about the Pastan bases all over Earth?"

"We're not going to do anything," said Dorothy calmly. "We've done it."



For the first time Breeli became anxious. "What are you trying to tell me?"

"Well, it's been a fairly bloodless victory," Dorothy Green said. "We don't want another war. But you're reasonable people. Now that we have the diverter, I don't think you'll want to —"

"You have the *diverter*?"

Dorothy shrugged. "Well, how long did you think it would take us to crack it? An hour ago, we cancelled all diverter fields, and thousands of men walked into every Pastan base and took over. There were hardly any casualties. I'm sorry to report that General Prani is dead—he wasn't very good with weapons, I'm afraid. We're sending you and every Pastan officer or soldier who married a Terran girl back to Pasta, and keeping everybody else prisoner. I think we should be able to reach agreement after you've reported the facts to your government and come back to arrange terms."

Breeli began to laugh silently. Prani's death was unfortunate, but it would simplify matters. It was ironic that as soon as Breeli had discovered Earth was technically a Seventeenth Level world, and the conquest was therefore justified, they should pull something like this.

Margo was laughing too, puzzled but prepared to share the joke. Dorothy was merely puzzled.

"Tell the driver to take us to HQ," Breeli said.

"We're taking you to the spaceport. You're to be—"

"I know. Let's go to HQ all the same. I'm expecting somebody there."

"You're not Governor Breeli any more," Dorothy said again. "You don't give the orders —"

"I'm expecting Jack Green," Breeli said.

That passion in her eyes again, she grabbed Breeli's shoulders. "What have you done to him?"

"Tell the driver," Breeli said. She did so.

**H** EADQUARTERS looked the same, except that there were no Pastans about, only Terrans, mostly men, none of whom Breeli had ever seen before. A tall, broad Terran colonel called Armstrong seemed to be in charge.

"Well done," Breeli congratulated him. "A very well-planned operation."

"Thank you," said the colonel, surprised but courteous. "What are you doing here?"

Breeli had Margo on one arm and Dorothy on the other. "Frankly, this maneuver of yours comes at a very convenient time. I'm glad it was comparatively bloodless, though. I couldn't have condoned a massacre. Now that this has happened, I think we should withdraw in force. Only don't you think it



would be better if the Pastans who have married Terran women remain here, and all the others go home?"

"You don't seem to understand the situation," said Armstrong. "We're in command now."

"Perhaps," Breeli admitted. "But the Pastans with Terran sympathies are the obvious ones to stay here while the agreements are arranged. Margo and I will go, but not for long. We'll be back."

The colonel's courtesy was wearing thin. "Mr. Breeli, we don't want a state of perpetual warfare between Earth and Pasta. That's why we planned a coup with as few casualties as possible on either side. But —"

"But we still have something to offer," Breeli said, "a high card to play." His gaze rose over Dorothy's head. She turned and gasped.

Jack Green strode to her and took her in his arms. There was something in his appearance, his bearing, that showed he was a whole man again.

Suddenly the unfeminine Dorothy Green became very feminine.

"Was that your key?" Margo demanded.

"Yes. Won't Earth be grateful for sanity? No more psychopaths. You'll be able to get by with almost no prisons and much smaller asylums. We can't do anything for congenital defects, I'm afraid, but aside from that, only physical brain

damage is beyond our skill."

The colonel was out of his depth. Dorothy, however, once she had recovered from the altogether pleasant shock, became chief liaison officer very strongly biased in Breeli's favor.

"Shall we go into your office, Mr. Breeli?" she asked, still in Jack Green's arms.

**I**N the end, as Breeli had suggested, it was the Pastans who had not married Terran women who returned immediately to their own world. Some of them were very reluctant to go.

Margo and Nancy were the only Terrans to leave with them. Breeli was not unaware of the effect they were going to have on Pastan TV.

The arrangements had been easy because Earth had prudently decided not to be difficult, realizing that if Pasta's tail were tweaked too violently, Earth might still be reconquered.

"You seem happy," Margo said as the Pastan ship prepared to make the first hyperspace jump.

"I am," said Breeli. "I'm going on my honeymoon. And you should see my bride!"

"You don't care that we won in the end?"

He wondered whether to tell her the truth, and decided against it. It wouldn't make any Terran any happier to know that the brief war had been unnecessary, that those



who had died shouldn't have died. Let Margo believe, as Breeli's superior's would believe, that Earth had been a paradox, a Seventeenth Level world that went straight to Nineteenth when Pastan psychologists told them a few things they ought to have seen for themselves long ago.

He kissed her instead.

**S**HE released herself. "Breel, I've got a confession to make."

"You needn't bother," he said.

"I figured it out long ago."

She gasped.

"And I don't mind," he added.

"Why should I?"

"I didn't think you would, because it's what you think that matters. But how did you know?"

"You went too far trying to hide it. Destroying all old publications and films . . ."

"Yes, but if any Pastan had seen one, he'd have known —"

"Perhaps. But girls like you and Helen Krauss and the others were brave, and you were necessary to Earth's plans. We had to take Terran mistresses or you'd never have been able to find out the things you did. Only somebody thought we'd better not know that the Terran girls we happened to admire were-

n't the ones Terrans regarded as glamor girls. It wouldn't have made any difference, Margo. You — and the Rubens and Greek nudes — would still have appealed to us."

"That's what's so wonderful," she said. "You'd never believe how nice it is to find people who think you're beautiful after knowing all your life that —"

Breeli shook his head. "You're perfect."

"Glad you think so." And she meant it.

"They must have found out very early," Breeli said, "that we were attracted to the Rubens type. And they thought something might be made of the fact. So they carefully prevented us from finding out the kind of girls *they* were attracted to. They needn't have bothered. We must have seen some of the girls they think are beautiful, and didn't give them a second glance."

"You did," said Margo.

"Who, for instance?"

"Dorothy Green."

"You're not going to tell me *she's* the Terran idea of a glamor girl!"

"Six years ago," said Margo, "she was Miss America — just before she married Jack Green."

— J. T. McINTOSH

