

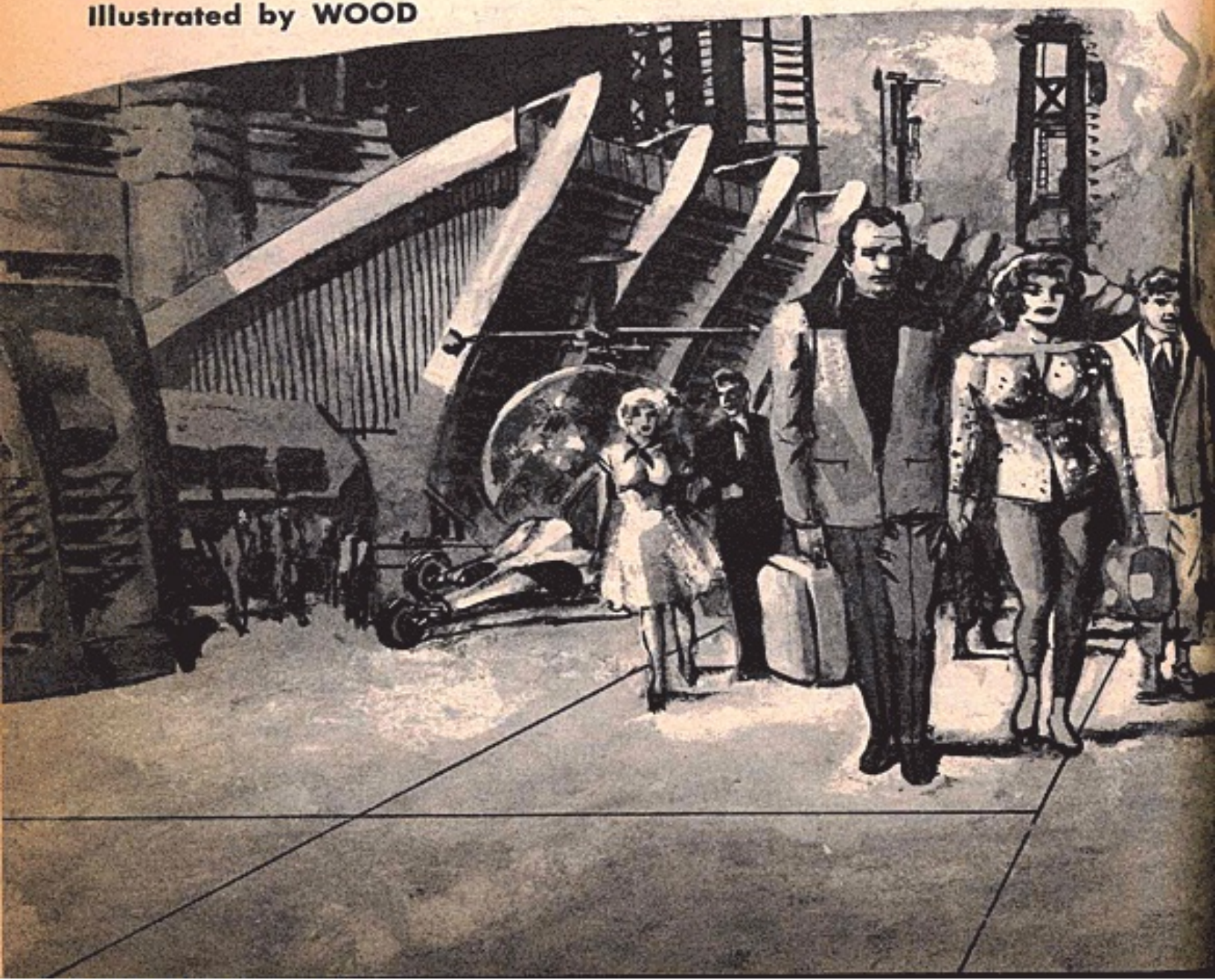
ROUND- AND- ROUND TRIP

By H. B. FYFE

Illustrated by WOOD

All he wanted to do was go

WHEN the passengers from Epseri II had been chauffeured from the *Centaur Queen* to the administration building of the spaceport, the man whose papers identified him as Robert L. Winstead trailed the others to the Interstellar Travel Agency counter. His taking an unobtrusive place near the



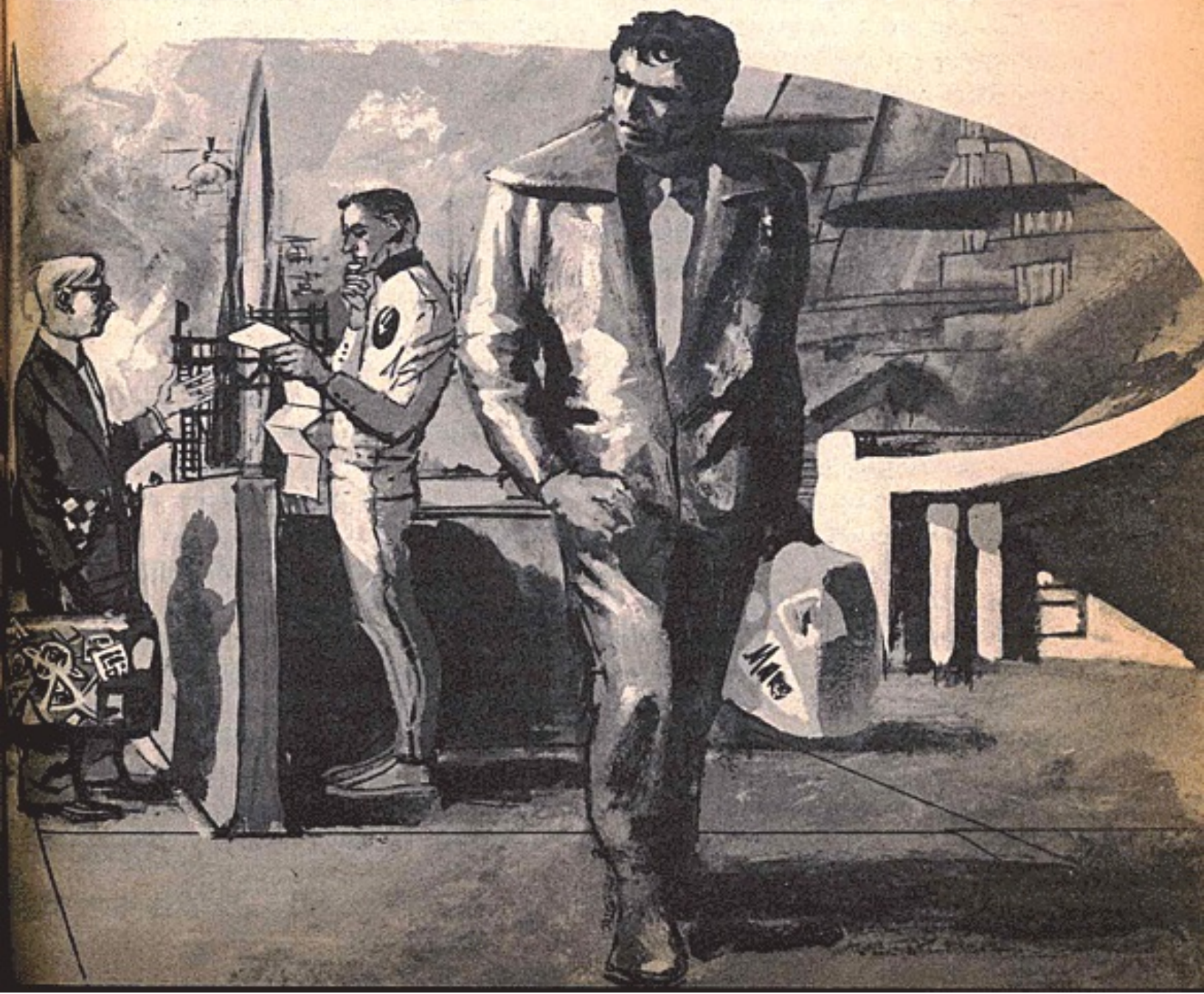
from here to there — but somehow the entire Milky Way had been converted into a squirrel cage.

end of the line was entirely in keeping with his unobtrusive appearance.

Of medium height but somewhat underweight, Winstead looked like a tired clerk who had not slept well in space. The wide trousers of his conservative maroon suit flapped about his thin shins and drew attention to the

fact that he had donned one blue and one green sock.

The processing was rapid; most of the two dozen passengers meant to stay here on St. Andrew V. Only a few, of whom Winstead was one, carried "ultimate destination" tickets. They remained after the locals had been taken in charge by a guide who



would see them into the adjacent city.

Winstead finally reached a clerk, a dark, extremely brisk young man. He presented his papers. The young man riffled through them, stamped the date of arrival on the travel record according to both local and Terran calendar, then turned back abruptly to the card showing Winstead's destination. He shook his head in puzzled annoyance.

"I'm very sorry, Mr. — uh — Winstead. Is this the proper ticket you've given me? Could you have gotten it mixed up with someone else's?"

The traveler coughed and spluttered worried, questioning noises. A look of vague alarm spread over his undistinguished features.

His wispy gray hair had become rumpled when he had pulled off and stuffed into a side pocket his rather sporty maroon-and-white checked cap. This, plus the fact that he had to look up to the clerk, lent him an air of the typical little man in the wrong queue. It did not help that he wore old-fashioned sunglasses instead of colored contacts, and had forgotten to remove them before peering at the ticket.

"Why — er — yes, yes, this is right," he said. "See, here's my name on it."

THE clerk sighed as he looked around, but his partner was busy. "Someone seems to have blown a nova, sir," he condescended to explain. "It says here your ultimate destination is Altair IV."

"Quite right, quite right," said Winstead. "Going out there to see what the sales possibilities are for —"

"And they sent you *here* from Epseri? That can't be, sir."

"But — they told me — don't you Agency people take care of picking out the routes?"

"Yes, sir, of course. Beyond the local Terran sphere of travel, there are very few scheduled flights and most of them are for important cargo. That's why your ticket simply shows your ultimate destination, and that's why the Interstellar Travel Agency was developed — to arrange for the traveler's progress by stages."

"Yes," said Winstead. "That is how they explained it to me."

The clerk met his worried gaze for a few moments before shaking himself slightly. He prodded the ticket on the counter between him and Winstead with a disdainful forefinger.

"Let me put it as simply as possible, Mr. — uh — Winstead," he said very patiently. "Somebody at your last stop sent you in the wrong direction."

"But — but — you just said

it went by stages. I realize I can't go in a direct line. It depends on whether you can find me the right ship, doesn't it?"

The young man glanced about once more for help, but none was available.

"We'll see what we can do," he said, examining the ticket sourly. He thumbed a button to roll out a length of note paper from a slot in the counter top and scribbled upon it with his lectropen. "Now, if you will please accompany that young lady to the Agency hotel with those other travelers, we will notify you the moment a desirable ship is scheduled to leave."

Winstead thanked him gratefully and turned away to locate his baggage. Under the conditions imposed by space travel, only the barest minimum was permitted. Even so, some little time was required to find his bag — an unlikely occurrence that the clerk accepted with a resigned air.

Finally, with the half dozen who also would be traveling onward, Winstead was off to the hotel and a day's rest.

As a matter of fact, it was three days' rest, before he was summoned. He was, perhaps by intent, confronted upon his arrival by a different clerk, a solid, square-faced girl. Winstead's nervous questions were reflected unanswered from a shield of

impervious calm. He received all the information the Agency seemed to feel was good for him and was sent out with a personal guide.

The guide delivered him to a thick thing named the *Stellar Streak*, clearly a workhorse freighter. Somehow, it never did become plain to Winstead until after he had emerged from his acceleration net that the destination was Topaz IV.

"But, Captain!" he protested. "Are you sure the people at the spaceport have not made some mistake? That is more or less the direction I came from."

The pilot stared impatiently at the papers thrust under his nose.

"Can't say, sir. We have our work cut out just to take the ship to where they tell us. Only reason we carry passengers is that regulations require cooperation with the Agency. Don't believe in it myself."

MR. WINSTEAD sighed and returned to his quarters. At least, on this ship, he still had a private compartment in which to float his net. There was even a chair, equipped with a safety belt and folding table, bolted to the deck. What he did miss was the general dining saloon of the liner he had taken from Epseri II.

Still, he reflected, travel can't always be luxurious.

He spent some time, after the ship had slipped into stellar drive, in unpacking his one small suitcase. He found that he had to take his shaver to the general head to plug it in, but otherwise got along comfortably enough. One or two of the crew who shared his turn at the galley counter, in fact, took him for an old space hopper and began to exchange yarns.

This sort of semi-suspended living passed the four-day hop to the Topaz system and the extra day necessary for planetary approach. When they landed, Winstead was the only passenger, either incoming or outgoing, to show up at the cargo shed designated as the spaceport administration building.

Here on Topaz IV, the Agency clerk was a part-time man who had to be called from the mines on the far side of the city. He arrived to find Winstead dozing on a cot at the end of the shed.

"Billy Callahan," he introduced himself. "They say you're not for the mines."

"That is correct," answered Winstead, stretching a kink out of his back. "I have my destination here in these papers . . . if you will bear with me a moment. . ."

He fumbled out his identification, travel record, and ticket. Callahan, rubbing his carrot hair

with a large, freckled hand, pored over them. A few minutes of searching through the battered desk that was his headquarters revealed the official arrival stamp. Its inky smear was duly added to the record.

"Now for your way outa here," grunted Callahan. "Meanwhile, how about a cigar, Mr. Winstead?"

"Why — thanks very much."

Winstead regarded the torpedo doubtfully. He wondered upon which planet the tobacco for it — if it was tobacco — had been grown.

"This might take a little while," said Callahan, applying to the ends of their cigars a lighter that could have welded I-beams. "It ain't every day we get a through traveler here. I gotta look up the Galatlas an' the shipping notices."

He hoisted a bulky catalogue from a side table onto his desk and blew off a cloud of dust. Winstead seized the excuse to cough out a lungful of smoke. His host reached out for the ticket.

"Ultimate destination Fomalhaut VIII," he read off. "Say! That ain't one I ever had to handle before!"

He leafed through the volume for some minutes, reexamined the ticket, then dug into two or three appendices. He tapped a knobby knuckle against his chin.

"It don't look to me, Mr. Winstead," he said thoughtfully, "like you shoulda wound up here at all. Fomalhaut VIII! That's a hell of a way from here!"

"The clerk at the last spaceport *did* seem to think there had been a mistake," Winstead volunteered cautiously.

"Somethin' sure slipped. Maybe some jet-head read his directions wrong an' sent you so many degrees Sol north instead of Sol south. Best you can say is you're still on the right general side of the Solar System."

"Oh, dear!" Winstead said, flustered. "What can you do about that?"

"Depends what ships, if any, are due here. If I was you, I'd take the first one out. Get to a bigger settlement, where you'll get a better choice of ships."

HE FLICKED ash from his cigar and inquired whether Winstead had retained quarters aboard the *Stellar Streak*. He was undaunted by the negative reply.

"Never mind," he said heartily. "We're too small to have an Agency hotel here, but I'll fix you up a place to stay in town."

They left Winstead's bag under the desk and set off by dilapidated groundcar for Topaz City. This turned out to be a crude, sprawling village of adobe

walls and corrugated plastic roofs. The varied colors of the roofs contrasted in desperate gaiety with the dun walls. As soon as Callahan skidded to a halt, the car was enveloped by its own dust cloud.

"Phew!" coughed Callahan. "Some day they're gonna have to pave the street!"

Winstead pulled out a handkerchief to mop his tear-flooded eyes. His thin chest heaved and he spat out muddy saliva.

"I'm sorry about that," apologized Callahan. "Tell you what — we don't have much civilization yet, but we do have a little cocktail lounge. Come along an' I'll get you somethin' to clear your throat."

The traveler allowed himself to be helped out of the car and guided along the "street" to a low building marked by a small parking jam. Most of the men and women that passed them on the way shouted out a greeting to his companion. They dressed with little distinction between the sexes in rough shirts, boots, and pants of a narrower pattern than Winstead's conservative suit. He was introduced to six or seven people he never expected to lay eyes upon again.

Frontier culture, he deduced. *Where humans are rare, each one counts for more.*

The first thing he saw in the

lounge was the girl guitarist. She was the only woman he had yet seen who was not wearing pants. In fact, it had hardly occurred to him that there might be someone in town who was not connected with the mines. This girl was hardly connected to her own brief costume.

The second thing he saw was a wall of friendly, weather-beaten faces, turning his way in response to Callahan's cheerful whoop. The third was a man-size drink somebody thrust at him.

After listening for quite a while to a repertoire of apparently ribald songs, most of them too local in humor for Winstead to follow, the traveler was led by Callahan to a sort of restaurant just down the street.

Winstead thought later that he had eaten something there, but what it might have been he forgot as soon as they returned to the cocktail lounge, for a bottle-swinging brawl broke out almost immediately in a far corner. After a form of order had been restored, there was a girl who danced; and presently Callahan was shaking him up and down on a spine-stiffening bed in a small, darkened room.

Winstead promptly discovered that he had, indeed, eaten. When he recovered, he followed Callahan out on wobbly legs to seek a remedy. It was a bright, sunny

day, but he could not even guess at the local time. A little while after they had been successful in finding the remedy, he forgot about it.

"Take care of Bobby Winstead for me a little while, George," he heard Callahan say to someone. "I gotta stop out at the port to check a ship for him. Be right back."

THE hospitality shown him shamed Winstead into inquiring where he might cash a traveler's check. With the proceeds, he was permitted to buy about one round in a dozen, and to join in the singing. He was eagerly pumped between stops along the street for the latest news of Terra. His least little knowledge was of interest to those he encountered.

At one point, he came to himself in the midst of drawing a current dress design on the bar for one of the girls. Callahan, whose return he had missed, dissuaded the lady from taking his charge home with her as a gesture of pure gratitude. He declared that Winstead had just enough time for a nap.

Winstead's next awakening was in the echo of a terrified scream.

A light was turned on and he discovered that the man-eating vine which had been strangling

him was in reality an acceleration net. The face that floated before him was clean-shaven and anxious.

With considerable mental effort, Winstead deduced that the face was inquiring as to his health.

"Quite . . . fine . . . thank . . . you," he answered with difficulty. "Haven't we met somewhere?"

"Sure! Last week, Mr. Winstead, when we took you to Topaz IV," said the face.

Winstead tried shaking his head. It did not hurt — very much — but he felt that his thinking was terribly slow. Then things began to click. He recognized the man as the second pilot of the *Stellar Queen*. It might have been easier had the spacer not been standing upside down to Winstead's twisted position.

He groped dizzily for a question that would not make him sound a complete idiot. The pilot saved him.

"Callahan, back on Topaz IV," he volunteered, "asked us to tell you the best routing he could figure was to go on with us to Queen Bess III. It's a busy spaceport, so he thinks you can make better connections."

"Oh. I . . . see," murmured Winstead.

Unzipping the opening of his net, he floated himself out gingerly.

"I hope it's all right, Mr. Win-

stead," said the spacer. "I know you went in there on an Altair IV destination, but old Callahan seemed to think he was sending you to Fomalhaut VIII. To tell the truth, I think he was a little over-fueled."

"I . . . didn't notice," said Winstead. "Tell me — how long were you down at Topaz?"

"Three days," the spacer told him. "They sure took a liking to you there, Mr. Winstead. A big crowd brought you out to the spaceport with Callahan. We found your bag under his desk by ourselves, but I don't know where you got that orange suit."

Winstead looked down at his clothing for the first time and flinched.

"But that was yesterday," continued the pilot. "You ought to be feeling like some chow by now, eh? Hey wait — the door is down here, Mr. Winstead!"

In six days, including one of landing maneuvers, they reached Queen Bess III, a very Terran world that was a minor crossroads of space travel.

Here, Winstead bade farewell to the *Stellar Queen*. His first stop was the communications office. He left a message to be transmitted to Callahan on Topaz IV by "fastest means" — *i. e.*, by the next spaceship headed that way. He said, simply, "Thanks for everything."

HE FOUND a good many travelers wandering about the clean, beautifully furnished waiting room of the Agency here. Winstead sank into a softly upholstered armchair, opened his bag, and began to sort out his papers. No sooner did he look up from this task than there appeared before him a pleasantly smiling, gray-haired man. He was about Winstead's height, but chunky and full of bounce.

"My name is John Aubrey," he announced. "I trust I can be of service. Are you stopping here on Bessie?"

"No, I — I'm just passing through," said Winstead. "I assume you are the Agency official here?"

"One of them," Aubrey said. "Ah, your papers? Thank you. We can just step this way into my office if you like."

He threaded his way between chairs, tables, and occasional travelers to one of a row of offices. It was the size of a large closet, but cheerfully decorated. Aubrey gave Winstead a chair and sat himself down behind an extremely modern desk to commit the required formalities upon the traveler's papers. The ultimate destination ticket Winstead had included gave him pause.

"Well, well, well!" he exclaimed. "Achernar X! Really! You must be with the government, I sup-

pose? Or a scientist? As I recall, Achernar is rather blue for human use, except our research outpost there, isn't it?"

"I — er — I am engaged in a little research," said Winstead. "You did very well to remember the place offhand."

"It is a long way out. Interesting. I wonder how I can get you there. Someone seems to have sent you — well, no matter. Just leave it to me. You'll be staying at our hotel, of course? Might as well, since you have paid for the service, eh? I'll have you flown over right away."

An aircar carried Winstead to the roof of a hotel overlooking a considerable metropolis. Having left his bag in his room, he found his way to the hotel department store and ordered another suit. He spent the rest of the afternoon sightseeing and decided that he might just as well have been on Terra. When he sat down to an excellent dinner that evening, he discovered that his appetite, unfortunately, had not recovered from his stay on Topaz IV.

He was awakened before dawn by the soft chime of his bedside screen. A touch of the button brought on the happy features of Aubrey.

Does he never rest? thought Winstead.

He pushed the audio button and answered.

"Good morning, Mr. Winstead," said the Agency man brightly. "Sorry to call so early, but I was extremely lucky to find you a passage toward Achernar."

"Not sure I want to go," Winstead muttered into his pillow.

Aubrey, apparently not hearing him, bubbled merrily on. There would be an aircar on the hotel roof for Winstead in half an hour. Haste was necessary because the ship was leaving from a spaceport fifty miles outside the city. Indeed, Winstead could count himself fortunate to have had the chance so quickly. Aubrey had found it only by checking all the private spacelines. After all, Achernar was a long way off.

Winstead thanked him blearily before switching off. He then dialed the hotel store, but got no more answer than he expected. Giving up thoughts of his new suit, he rose and struggled into his clothes.

QUEEN BESS had not yet poked her corona above the horizon when the aircar delivered him to a little island spaceport south of the city. A stocky, taciturn shadow met him. They walked silently out to a ship that towered darkly overhead.

"No inside elevator?" asked Winstead, peering at the skeleton framework rising beside the ship.

"Too much load."

They rode a creaking platform up through the chilly breeze until Winstead thought they would go past the nose of the monster. Clutching his bag in one hand and the single railing in the other, he edged across a narrow gangway to an airlock. Inside, he followed the crewman down a short, three-foot-diameter shaft to a square chamber, catching his bag on the ladder no more than a few times.

In the more adequate light here, the spacer was revealed as a swarthy man with a muscular, dark-stubbed face. He wore tight trousers and shirt of navy blue and a knit cap that might once have been white. With a preoccupied air, he pulled open a small door on the bulkhead at chest level.

"Let's have your bag," he said.

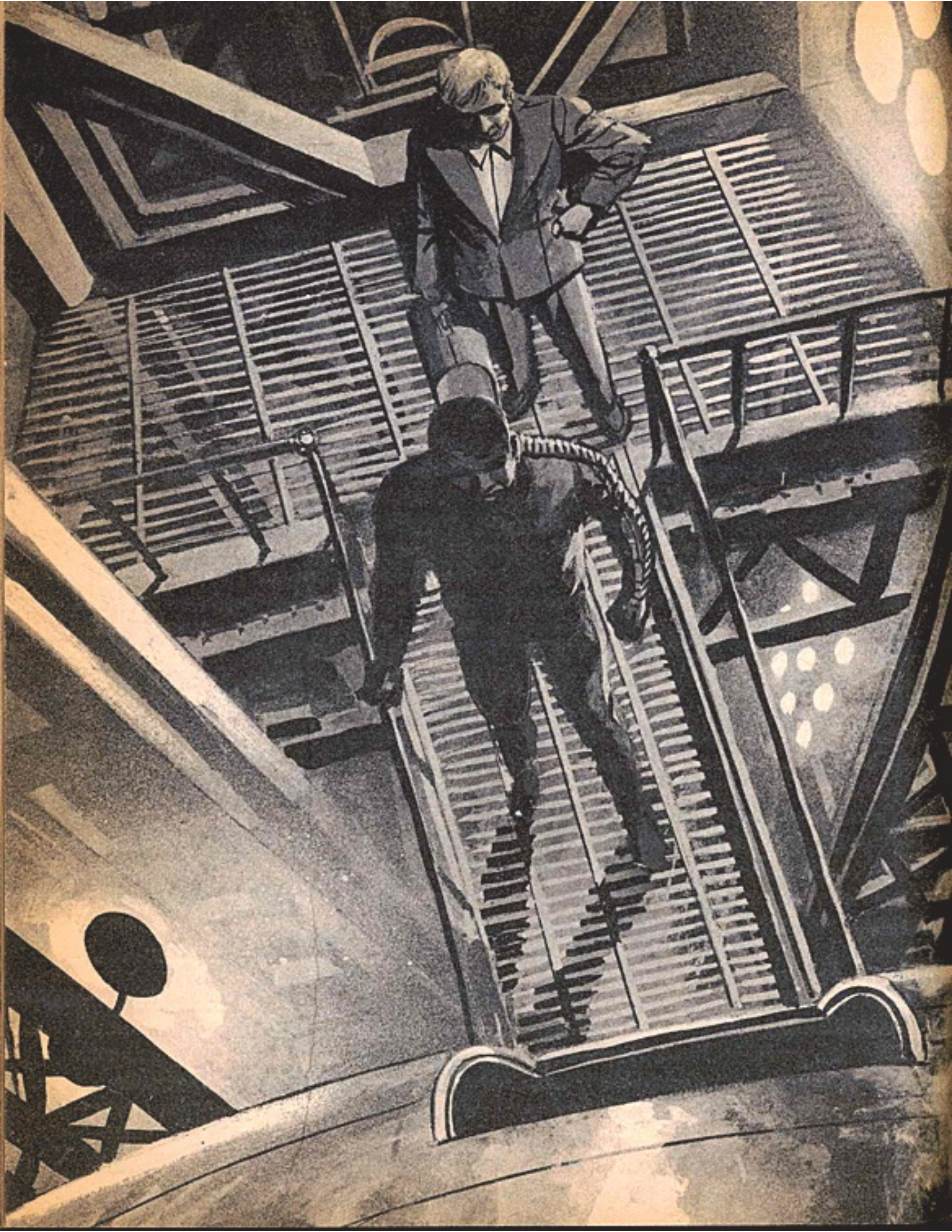
Winstead handed it over. The spacer shoved it into what seemed to be a spacious compartment in spite of the yard-square door.

"Now you," he said. "I'll give you a hand up."

"Up where?" asked Winstead innocently.

"In there. That's your acceleration compartment. Plenty of room. Armored, air-conditioned, has its own emergency rations of air and water."

Winstead stooped to peer into the opening. It was deeper than



he had thought, but a three-foot square was not much of a cross section. All surfaces inside were thickly padded and springy to the touch.

"Here's the light switch," the spacer said, turning on a soft interior light. "The rest of the facilities and instructions are on this plate beside the hatch. Okay now, grab that handhold up there so you go in feet first. Alley-oop!"

As long as I don't come out that way, thought Winstead, sliding into the compartment with surprising ease. He twisted around and discovered that the door had a small window.

"Make yourself comfortable," said the spacer. "Just don't forget to close the hatch when the takeoff buzzer sounds. You'd better listen for it."

He turned away. Winstead saw him look into several other little windows along the bulkhead.

"Are there other passengers?" asked Winstead.

"No. Just checking to see if all my crew stayed. Always seems to be one that slides down the pipe before takeoff. Dunno why they sign on if they don't like the risk."

"What — what risk?"

"Didn't the Agency tell you? We've got nothing below here but tanks of concentrated landing fuel for the station on Gelbchen II. The idea makes some of them

nervous now and then. They talk quiet, they walk quiet, and they wouldn't wear an orange suit."

He pulled open a door and nodded in gloomy satisfaction when the compartment proved to be empty.

"Is it dangerous?" asked Winstead.

THE spacer gnawed upon a very short thumbnail. "What's dangerous?" he retorted at last. "You can get killed any day under a downcoming aircar."

Winstead considered. "Where's the captain?" he inquired.

"I'm the captain."

"But — aren't you preparing to blast off?"

"I generally let my second pilot do it," said the spacer.

"But why? I thought —"

"Why? Because I own the ship, that's why."

"What has that got to do with it?" said Winstead. "I should think you'd want all the more to handle it yourself!"

"Listen — I sweated out years in space, saving the price of this can. If she blows up, d'you think I want to know that I did it? There's the buzzer. Button up!"

He pulled himself into a compartment like Winstead's and clapped the door shut. Winstead, beginning to perspire gently, found the safety straps, secured himself, and awaited the worst.

The *Leaky Dipper* sped through interstellar space for five silent and introverted days before reaching the little yellow sun named Gelbchen. The highlight of the flight was the day one of the crew dropped his mess tray on the deck, causing one faint, one case of palpitations, and one fist fight, in approximately that order.

The captain spent two days groping his way into an orbit about the second planet. When he announced that the cargo would be pumped into a number of small local tankers that had risen from the surface to meet them, Winstead volunteered to go down in the first one.

"Don't blame you," said the swarthy spacer. "I'd like to go too. Don't worry — they'll be good and careful landing. The stuff's that much more expensive now that it's been freighted out here."

"That is a — a great relief," said Winstead. "It's been very interesting. Good-by and good luck!"

"Likewise," said the captain.

If I ever meet Aubrey again! thought Winstead.

On the surface of the planet, he met with a thriving community that lived in a peculiar milieu blended of well-being and isolation. The spaceport was a center for refueling and repair. It was

supported by mines and mills, and by just enough agricultural organization to get by. The standard of living was comfortably high because of the services rendered and charged for; but some of the customs struck Winstead as being almost too informal.

"I think you're pulling my leg!" exclaimed the slim blonde at the Agency counter when Winstead was escorted in from the field. "Nobody would travel on the *Leaky Dipper* without being paid for it. You must have real nerve!"

She leaned uninhibitedly across the counter and planted a kiss on his cheek. He could not help noticing that she was not slim everywhere.

"I assure you, Miss — er — here are my papers."

"Oh, those! Let me see, I have a stamp somewhere in one of my drawers."

SHE rummaged through several hiding places under the counter. Winstead thought of the compartments on the *Leaky Dipper*. He leaned wearily on one elbow.

"Oh, well, it's time to close up anyway," the girl decided. She swept his papers into a drawer, after a fast glance at them. "We can fix these up tomorrow, Bob."

"You are a very quick reader," Winstead said.

"It said 'Robert L.,' didn't it?"

That's all I was looking for — your name. Mine's Carole, just to keep things straight. Now, since no more ships are due and no passengers can leave tonight, let's get out of here."

Winstead looked around, but the mechanic who had brought him in from the field had long since disappeared. Other clerks went about their own affairs in the background without showing any interest in him.

Carole hoisted herself onto the counter and twisted across in a swirl of skirts. There was no way for Winstead to avoid catching her. He saw that she was not really slim *anywhere*.

Grabbing his hand, she set off at a smart pace. He had just time to hook his bag off the counter as they passed it.

"You'll be wanting a place to stay," she said. "I'll bet you never slept well on that spaceship."

This so neatly paralleled Winstead's own opinion that he rejected a half-formed impulse to drag his feet.

They dashed pell-mell through a wide exit from the building to a parking lot. Carole led the way to a monstrous groundcar that looked as if its mother had been frightened by a truck. A moment later, they were boosting up to stellar speed along a more-or-less paved road to the city.

"They call it 'Junction,'"

Carole informed him. "You'd think they could have picked a better name for the only real city on the planet."

They buzzed through a narrow band of suburbs, along the edge of an open square and decelerated at a well-lighted avenue that looked like an entertainment section. Winstead noted that most of the men and women strolling past the taverns and theaters were dressed in work clothes.

"Just finishing their shifts, like me," Carole explained.

She slowed the monster a bit more upon entering a side street. They came to a section of four- and five-storied buildings whose metal curtain walls had the air of business offices. It developed immediately that they were apartment houses.

Carole pulled into an opening in a row of parked vehicles similar to hers. Winstead got out quickly, since his hostess seemed about to crawl across his lap to reach the door. He stared at the groundcar meditatively.

"Awful heap, isn't it?" said the blonde. "They have to make them that way here, so they can be converted for trucking. The spaceships count on Gelbchen II; everything else — including us — is what can be scraped up to do the job. Well, come on in!"

I really must be very tired,

Winstead thought as he meekly followed the girl into the lobby of the building.

INSIDE, two youths in coveralls were lounging on wooden chairs of austere design. One leaped to his feet at the sight of Carole. As he strode toward them, Winstead glanced over his shoulder to make sure of the door.

Turning back, he was just in time to find the young man seizing Carole in an enthusiastic embrace. The two melted together in a passionate kiss. Then the young man stepped back, checked his wristwatch and dashed for the door.

"Good night, kid," he called to her over his shoulder.

Carole waved jauntily. She took Winstead by the elbow.

"That was Wilfie," she explained. "We'll be getting married if we can ever get our job shifts straightened out. I hope I didn't make him late, poor boy — it was his only chance to see me until tomorrow."

Winstead was hardly aware of having been steered into an elevator. When they reached the second floor, Carole led him a few steps along the hall. She used a simple light-key to open an apartment door. Winstead followed her inside wordlessly.

"Let me take your bag," she said. "In here is the bedroom. I'll

bet you didn't have that much room on the spaceship."

"Well . . ."

"Now let's go in the kitchen and see what we can get you for dinner. I might as well feed you, since I figure to charge you fifty credits for the night."

Winstead remained silent by a considerable effort.

He wondered what his expression showed. Carole did not seem to notice anything. She prattled on about the folly of trying to find a room in one of the few hotels boasted by the city of Junction. Most of them, she claimed, would be full of carousing spacers. Meanwhile, she rummaged through a frozen food unit.

Winstead agreed to something in a foil package without knowing what. She popped it into an automatic infra-red heater. He allowed himself to be led by the hand to a large chair in the living room.

"There's the entertainment program for the TV," she told him. "Not that we have much here — most of it is old tapes from Terra. Make yourself comfortable while I change."

She pattered off into the bedroom, leaving Winstead weighing the program in a limp hand. He looked around the room. There were two doors to rooms or exits he had not been shown. What he had seen or could examine from

where he sat was very comfortably furnished, with a resilient carpet substitute from wall to wall and new-looking furniture of the simple Gelbchen style. Carole seemed partial to reds and other bright colors. Only the pastels of the walls had prevented a disaster.

Is it worth fifty credits? he asked himself. *On the other hand, if I go out looking for a hotel, will I just happen to have a hard time getting a ship?*

He glanced indecisively at the door to the bedroom into which Carole had vanished. It had been left slightly ajar. About the time he became aware of this, a tinny chime began to sound from the direction of the kitchen.

It continued until Winstead realized that he would have to investigate for himself. He entered the kitchen to find that the automatic heater had flipped up a small sign saying, "Hot!"

HE GUESSED the right button to get the door of the appliance open, looked around until he located a tray and tongs, and removed his dinner. Further search supplied him with cutlery. He opened the foil, discovering that he had chosen a meal of roast beef with mashed potatoes and two vegetables he had never seen on Terra.

Carole still had not appeared, so he carried his tray out to the dining area, which was furnished with bronze-colored metal chairs and table. It looked like a dinner for one, he reflected, but he was on a strange planet. As he hesitated, the bedroom door was flung back and footsteps sounded behind him.

"Go ahead and enjoy it," called Carole. "Wine in the sideboard there. Then make yourself at home for the night."

Winstead turned. The girl was bending to zip the front of one shoe. She was clad in coveralls of a yellow that made Winstead blink.

"I'm off," she announced cheerfully. "Got a second-shift job as an ambulance driver. I tell you, it's one big rat race to meet expenses on Gelbchen II! It helps when I can bring home guests from the spaceport, but Wilfie wants me to cut that out when we get married."

She waved and bustled out to the elevator.

Winstead wondered whether he had said good night.

He discovered after some minutes that he was leaning on the table with one thumb in the hot potatoes. He sat down, examining his thumb attentively. After due consideration, he licked off the potato, found a fork, and began to prod dubiously at the

local idea of vegetables . . .

He awoke next morning with a start of surprise at finding himself in neither a net nor a padded compartment. The bed was soft. It invited him to roll over for another half hour's snooze in the faintly perfumed room.

Perfume?

Bedroom . . . *Carole!*

Winstead sat straight up as full memory returned.

Everything was quiet. He threw back the electric blanket, checked a clock that must be set to planetary time, and decided that it was early morning. The window filters yielded to trial-and-error manipulation, flooding the room with cheerful sunlight not unlike that of a Terran summer morning. Winstead walked softly to the door and opened it a crack. The room outside remained dim and silent.

He washed in the adjoining bathroom and dressed rapidly. Feeling better prepared for the day, he sallied out to seek breakfast. The first sight that met his eyes was that of Carole sleeping on a couch under an aquamarine blanket she had plugged in at the socket of a floor lamp.

The thought of fifty credits restrained the impulse to pat her blonde head in commiseration. He thought of it a little more, thereby fighting down a mild at-

tack of conscience over appropriating the bed.

After all, he thought, here I have to get my own breakfast. She's probably tired out, but that's the reward of moonlighting. It's her planet, not mine.

WINSTEAD tiptoed to the kitchen door, slipped furtively through, and closed the door as quietly as possible behind him.

Two men eating breakfast at a small table looked up at him amiably.

"Gaagh!" said Winstead.

"Good morning," replied one man, who wore a rather feminine dressing gown.

The other, a ruddy, farmerish individual, grunted past a mouthful of toast.

"I beg your pardon," Winstead said.

"You must be another star traveler," said the gentleman in the dressing gown. "We knew there must be one when we saw Carole on the couch. I hope she gets you out of here quicker than she's finding a ship for me."

"You have been waiting for a spaceship?" Winstead asked.

"Over two weeks now," said the other. "The kid's fair enough about it, I must admit. She can't ship me toward Epseri, so she's been giving me a discount on my room."

"Sit down and have some eggs," invited the farmer type. "Brought 'em into town myself, along with my other produce."

Winstead eyed the platter of fried eggs. They were entirely too large to have come from chickens, but they looked good. He decided not to ask any questions.

It developed after he joined them at the table that the farmer was in the habit of boarding with Carole whenever he came to Junction on business. The traveler, one Cecil Feigelson, excused his borrowing Carole's robe on grounds of the scanty baggage allowed space travelers and the fact that he had been hanging about for so long. They assured him that he looked fine in pink.

Winstead drained his cup of coffee substitute, considered having another.

"You know," he said thoughtfully, "it hardly seems necessary to spend all that time finding a ship headed for Epseri. I — uh — happen to be going that way too. I suspect that a good, close look at the schedules down at the spaceport might show us a way."

"But Carole is the clerk in charge."

"I also happen to know a little about how it's done," said Winstead quietly. He added, "From traveling so much you know."

"Well, if you think anything

can be done, I'm all for it."

"When the kid wakes up, she could drive you down," suggested the farmer.

"That should require only a moment to arrange," said Winstead, rising to fill a pitcher with ice water. *Fifty credits a night!* he thought. *Wait till I get my hands on her shipping schedules!*

Hardly five minutes later, they all spilled out of the elevator into the lobby. Carole was still rather damp and angry. Cecil Feigelson's suitcase zipper was only three-quarters closed. Fortunately, he was wearing pants under the girl's dressing gown, which clashed horribly with Winstead's rumpled orange suit.

"Hey!" someone yelled as they blazed through the lobby.

Young Wilfie catapulted from a chair where he appeared to have been dozing.

Doesn't he have a home? wondered Winstead.

BY THE time they reached Carole's groundcar outside, the youth had somehow inserted himself into the group in place of the farmer. Winstead set the machine in motion while the others were scrambling for seats.

"Do you know how to drive one of these, friend?" asked Feigelson.

"I am an expert groundcar operator," Winstead assured him.

Unfortunately, he was soon forced to admit, he was accustomed to Terran cars that floated on cushions of air. Although bumps in the spaceport road encouraged a good deal of floating at the speed he was making, the Gelbchen vehicle was really designed for less intermittent wheel-to-ground contact.

The trip seemed shorter, though, than it had the previous evening. Winstead skidded to a halt at their destination and discovered that he was perspiring slightly. His passengers were in a frank sweat and lost several yards trailing him into the terminal and over to the Agency counter.

When they arrived, still quite pale, Winstead was already up to his elbows in shipping schedules and blank forms. A few passing clerks glanced curiously at Feigelson's frilly pink dressing gown, but they were used to outworld garb.

"Wait! That's my Galatlas you're tearing apart!" Carole protested breathlessly.

"How would you know, my dear?" asked Winstead, riffling the pages furiously. "Hah! Just as I thought — this cruise ship down here for supplies, the *Virgo*, is listed to make New Ceres next. The Galatlas shows that New Ceres is halfway to Epseri, Feigelson!"

"Wilfie!" wailed Carole. "Make him stop tearing the place apart like a saloon! Look at that stack of folders spilled all over the floor!"

Wilfie bestirred himself, but he was handicapped by being on the other side of the counter with Carole and Feigelson.

"What do you think you're doing?" he demanded truculently. "Where did you come from, anyway?"

"I came from Terra," said Winstead, pausing in filling out a form, "and I am more than ready to return. Combining a vacation with a business inspection trip occasionally becomes too exciting for a man of my years."

"Inspection trip?" echoed Carole, freezing.

"My hobby," said Winstead. "It keeps one in touch with the people who make the Agency go. This place, now, is the most slapdash, disorganized — Young man! You quit one of your jobs and take over this branch of the Interstellar Travel Agency. Don't argue — of course you can! What is your full name?"

"Me?" gasped Wilfie. "Wilfred Evans."

"All right, Evans, you're hired. You'll be able to get married and put a stop to all this nonsense of renting rooms while ships go out without our passengers."

"What authority have you to

— " began Carole indignantly.

"The first test of a chief agent," said Winstead, scribbling upon a business card, "is to know when to tell an assistant manager to button her hatch."

Wilfie accepted the card and glanced at both print and scribbling.

"Button your hatch!" he ordered Carole over his shoulder.

SHE STOOD silent, her mouth open about the same distance as Feigelson's. Winstead looked about for a local clock, and snatched up one of the sheets strewn about the counter. A departure time listed upon it made him swear. He leaped to Carole's phone, switching on sound and screen with one swipe of his thumb.

The blonde advanced a timid step, to read the card bearing Wilfie's appointment.

"Robert Winstead Lewis, Terra . . . President, Interstellar Travel Agency . . ."

"Winstead" was shouting at a face on the phone screen.

"You tell them who I am!" he demanded, holding up another of his cards to the scanner. "They'll manage to hold the ship three minutes until we reach her!"

He switched off, mopping his forehead with the back of his hand, and started around the counter. Carole swayed weakly

against Feigelson's supporting arm.

"Now, then!" snapped Winstead. "This branch will be checked in the near future, Evans. I trust that you are the sort of man who can show a firm hand, should he return home to discover a star traveler in his bedroom."

He smacked the flat of his own hand significantly upon the counter, staring at Carole between the eyes. Wilfie nodded thoughtfully.

Robert Winstead Lewis flagged down an unwary porter driving by on an empty baggage truck.

"Bring the bags, Feigelson!" he commanded, hopping aboard and seizing the controls. "As far as New Ceres, anyhow, we'll be going first-class!"

Picking up speed, the baggage truck squealed around a turn and headed for an exit to the spaceport. The porter looked back with a horrified expression, the pink gown fluttered beside the orange suit one last time, and they disappeared through the portal.

The air about the disorganized counter and reorganized agents continued to vibrate for some minutes.

Finally, the distant roar of a ship lifting for space penetrated to restore a sense of relative peace.

— H. B. FYFE