The Agretians sentenced Grainger to 20 years—so much better, Chung Li pointed out, than one or two years.

ROPE'S END

by Miriam Allen deFord

It all happened so fast that it was over before Grainger became actually aware of it. One second he was driving his ground-car slowly and carefully down the main street of the City, and in the next the young Agretian had darted in front of it, stumbled, fallen under it, and lay grotesquely dead on the metal roadway.

Shaking, Grainger stopped and walked back to where the victim lay. A heldehar, one of the infrequent Agretian guards or policemen or soldiers—they were all three—pushed through the excited crowd and stood over the mangled body. Grainger went up to him and touched his big arm.

"I never saw him!" he gulped, fighting to contain his nausea. "He ran right into my path, and before I could make a move he—he—" He had difficulty finding enough words in his poor Agretian to make sense of what he was trying to say.

The heldehar looked at him. "You are Warren Grainger, the Terran," he said—not asked; in the City everyone knew everyone else at least by sight. "This young man was alive and now he is dead. Your brondun killed him."

"But it wasn't my fault—I couldn't help it. Ask any of these people—they saw."

"They saw, and they will speak. Be at the Hall of Judgment tomorrow two hours after sunrise, and you will receive your sentence."

Grainger felt a surge of relief at the words. If they weren't going to arrest him, if they were simply calling him to a hearing, the worst he could receive, he was sure, would be a reasonable fine. He knew nothing of Agretian law; in the two years that he had lived here there had been no crimes that he had heard of, no notice of trials in the daily news flashed on the screen in the Central Square. The spectators parted before him as he climbed back into his car and drove at snail's pace to his office. There all the Agretian clerks
seemed already aware of the accident, but nobody spoke of it, though he caught surreptitious glances of curiosity and sympathy.

Nevertheless, as the day wore on, he became increasingly uneasy. When he left the office, instead of going home he drove to the converted residence where Chung Li lived above his business establishment.

Chung Li and he were the only Terrans with permanent residence permits, the only Terrans living in the section of the City given over to aliens. They were scarcely friends; they were not even rivals, for the elderly Chinese had owned and run his export and import business for 15 years before young Grainger had sold the Agretians on permitting him to settle in the City as a competitor in the same line. Even though Chung Li obviously had more business than he could handle, he had resented the arrival of another claimant for the valuable Terran trade, and had shown his resentment openly. But surely, Grainger thought, he would not refuse to enlighten and help a fellow-terran in serious difficulties. There was no one else to appeal to nearer than the Solar consul, two star systems away.

He found Chung Li in his private rooms, furnished at enormous expense in the style of the rich Chinese of 500 years ago, before the revolution. A huge Agretian servant announced him, and it was in Agretian that the two men spoke, having no other language in common.

Ordinarily, Grainger knew, no conversation with Chung Li started without formalities. But by now he was too upset to stand on ceremony. "Chung Li," he blurted, "I'm in trouble."

"I know," said the Chinese gravely. "I have heard."

"Then you know it was an accident, pure and simple. What are they going to do to me?"

Chung Li paused before he answered, to light a pipe filled with that immensely valuable import, tobacco. When he spoke, his rejoinder seemed irrelevant.

"Have you seen sometimes in the streets of the City, fellow-Terran, people who wear around their necks a loop of steel rope?"

"Why, yes, I think so—a few. I took it for some badge of office."

"They are people whose deeds caused the death of another. Two of them I know—the captain of a fishing boat which by his bad seamanship was swamped, drowning his crew of three, and a nursemaid who let her charge slip from her arms to fracture its skull. They must wear the rope for the length of their sentence."

"And that's all? I suppose it means social ostracism—but surely not professional ostracism too, or they couldn't earn a living."
ROPE'S END

"It does not mean ostracism at all. Nobody will reproach you, or wish you ill—not even the relatives of the young person you killed. They will pity you."

Grainger laughed.

"As I have no social relations with any native, that certainly won't bother me! But if that's the way they punish people who kill others accidentally, what do they do to real murderers—execute them on the spot?"

"There are none. No Agretian within recorded history has ever murdered or deliberately injured another. As for what would happen if, say, you or I should do the other in, or any other resident alien should murder another alien —" Chung Li smiled briefly— "I can't imagine; they have no provision for such a crime. Revoke his papers and send him home, I suppose."

Warren Grainger breathed a relieved sigh as the last of his burden slipped from him.

"Thanks a lot, Chung Li," he said fervently. "You've put my mind at rest. I'll be able to sleep tonight—if I can get the memory of that poor devil I ran over out of my mind."

Chung Li gazed at him meditatively.

"I shall be at the hearing tomorrow," he said. "Afterwards we will go and drink a cup of chash together and discuss this further, when we know how long your sentence runs. . . . "I forgot to mention one thing—every year of your sentence you must report to the Hall of Judgment and let them adjust your neck-rope."

"You mean, to prove I haven't taken it off?"

"You can't take it off. It is riveted on."

The hearing was so short and so cut-and-dried as to seem perfunctory. Grainger heard his sentence pronounced and stood submissively while the thin steel rope was fastened about his neck. Chung Li had been mistaken; it was not riveted on. It extended almost to his waist, and he resolved to take it off whenever he was alone, though it would be politic to wear it in the office and on the street, at least until the affair had been forgotten.

The Chinese was waiting for him at the back of the courtroom. An Agretian couple stood by him, their size dwarfing that of the Terrans.

"Grainger," said Chung Li, "these are Vark and Aidunn. They are the parents of young Makar, who died yesterday."

He felt himself turning pale, then reddening with emotion.

"I can't tell you how much —" he stammered in his bad Agretian. "I—I don't know how to say how terribly I regret— If—I know all the money in Agretia couldn't make up to you—but if you'll let
me help with the—the expenses—"

His business caution brought him up short. He had meant, of course, to search out the relatives of the victim and make what recompense he could, but now he was laying himself open to some exorbitant claim that would be worse than any fine.

The two shook their heads. Vark spoke for them both.

"It was no fault of yours," he said. "Fate so willed it. He was our only child."

The mother laid a big six-fingered hand over his.

"We came—we asked to see you—only to say how very sorry we are for you."

Grainger stared at her, speechless. They both bowed, turned, and left silently, arm in arm. Dazed, he followed his fellow-Terran out of the building.

In the nearest inn, over the mildly inebriating chash, Chung Li broke their silence.

"Twenty years," he said. "That is very good."

"Good? You mean, compared to forty?"

"I mean compared to one or two."

"What are you talking about?"

"Would you prefer to die young?"

"What in high space do you mean?"

"As I told you, and as you heard the judge tell you this morn-

ing, every year you must go back to the Hall of Judgment and have the rope adjusted. What do you think the adjustment consists of?"

"What?"

"Every year the rope will be shortened by one-twentieth."

A cold chill swept over Grainger's body.

"But—but then at the end of twenty years—" he faltered.

"Yes," said Chung Li calmly, "At the end of twenty years it will strangle you."

Impulsively Grainger reached to draw the rope over his head and throw it from him. It clung immovably to the back of his neck. White with shock, his eyes questioned the other man.

"When I said 'riveted,'" explained Chung Li softly, "I did not mean a metal rivet. There is no way in which the rope can be removed from you, my friend. I do not know how it is done."

Grainger jumped to his feet and glanced around him wildly.

"I won't stand it!" he shouted. "They can't keep me here—I'll get away somehow—I'll appeal to the Solar consul."

"Read your permit papers, Grainger. One of the things you agreed to was to obey the laws of Agretia, just as if you were a native of the planet."

"Then I'll escape."

"How? Where to?" Chung Li's voice was gentle. "This is the only town of any size on Agretia. There
is only one spaceport. Nobody enters or leaves without inspection by the heldehars. No Terran captain would dare let you secretly on board, no matter how you bribed him; he would lose his license. If you managed to stow away he would turn you in; if you got away on Terra or any other planet you could live on, the authorities would have to send you back, by the terms of the Federation agreement.

"Believe me, if it were possible for me to help you escape, I would. I should then have a monopoly again."

"Then I'll die—I'll kill myself!"

"You are free to do so. But it seems rather foolish. At your age, and in your good health, you are now reasonably sure of 20 years of peace and comfort: why cut them short? Of course you will not be allowed to drive a bronadun again, but that is a minor inconvenience. Otherwise, you will live just as you have been living—only you will know the maximum span of your life—an advantage few of us possess. I am sure I shall be dead long before you, but it does not worry me. You may even marry and leave children, if you can persuade some young lady on Terra to come here to you, under the circumstances.

"For of course, my friend, you must be an exile forever. You will never see our home planet again."

Habit accustoms us to anything in time. After the first few months, Grainger grew used to the rope. After a year or two, he ceased having nightmares from which he woke sweating and screaming. At first he worked hard in order to forget; after a while he began working hard because business had always been his whole existence, and because he liked making money and living in comfort, even if there was no one to leave the money to and the comfort was only the alleviation of a certain doom.

He did not even consider Chung Li's last advice—to join some Terran matrimonial club (since there was no woman in his past whom he could think of as his wife, or who would be likely to desire him as her husband) and establish a family while his children could still be nearly grown before their father died. Terrans and Agretians could not interbreed, but the calubari, the Agretian hetaire, were satisfactory enough for what needs he did not drug with toil.

Four years went by, and he was almost adjusted to the necessities of his fate; sometimes he did not think of it for days on end. Chung Li died suddenly, and Grainger inherited his business; doubtless a new competitor would get a residence permit some day, but so far he was able to handle the older Terran's trade and his own as well.
And then something occurred that he had never anticipated. He fell in love.

Tourists were rare on Agretia—it was not an interesting planet, either scenically or historically. But every ship brought in some visitors—commercial representatives, journalists, scientists, scholars and research workers of one sort or another.

Luvina Nilsson was a physical anthropologist. She had a Foundation grant for a year’s analytical study of the Agretians. She came in on the Starfarer four years from the day when Warren Grainger had accidentally killed Makar. She was tall and slender and blonde, with delicate features but a warm, generous mouth and steady grey eyes. Grainger met her the day she landed—the small alien colony was like a neighborhood club. Something happened to him that had never happened before—something he had never believed could happen. Suddenly this slim girl became as necessary to him as air and water. And even in his newfound self-deprecation he could not ignore her instant response.

He had never been a coward, and he had always been honest. He was not simply in love with Luvina; he loved her. Before she could become too deeply committed, he told her his story. It was the hardest task of his 33 years. For answer, she threw her arms around his neck. She did not seem to notice the thin metal rope that already encircled it.

But later, when they sat in the close embrace that followed the avowals and the kisses, she burst passionately into speech.

“We'll find a way out, dearest!” she cried fiercely. “You'll get free somehow! I won't give you up after only sixteen years!”

“I would rather have sixteen days with you—” he began brokenly. His mouth sought hers again. “Marry me soon, my darling—we have so little time.”

“I'll marry you tomorrow, or as soon as the silly laws of this place allow. But I won't give up—there has to be a way out, and I won't rest till we find it.”

“There is no way, sweetheart. I've tried and tried. Chung Li was right. If you'll have me, then you must reconcile yourself to being a widow in sixteen years at the most.”

But in his heart a little fire was lighted that he had never thought to feel again. Its name was hope.

They were married by Agretian law and ceremony, since no other was available, and Luvina moved in to his bachelor apartment. On their wedding night they took a pledge to let their first year go by without concern for the future. Luvina would go ahead with her project, under her grant, measuring, weighing, and classifying the Agretians, analyzing their resem-
blances to and differences from Terrans. Warren would conduct his growing import and export business and do his best to make it grow more. Neither of them would talk, or, if they could help it, think about the rope around his neck or the doom awaiting him.

“But don’t think I’m forgetting,” Luvina said firmly, “I’m willing to spend the rest of my life on Agretia; I’m willing to carry on my work here as best I can; but I want your children, and I want them to have a father. I’m not going to give you up. And I’m not going to start a family till I know I’m going to keep you.”

So the months passed. It was not hard for Grainger to keep his part of the compact; he had long ago exhausted himself seeking vainly for some way out of the trap. Luvina never spoke of it, but he knew her mind was busy with the problem, and that she like him could find no solution.

And then came the fifth annual reminder, and another twenty-fifth of the rope was cut and the shortened halter fastened again, by that secret method he could not fathom, immovably to the back of his neck. The time of their pledge of silence was over, but both of them avoided the subject instinctively, since neither would acknowledge despair.

Sometimes he saw on the streets of the City others who wore his mark; he grew familiar with their faces, noticed the shortening of their ropes. Some of them had disappeared. He asked no questions; he knew what had happened to them.

Luvina’s study was finished. The Agretians had been most cooperative, and had submitted patiently to her calipers and scales and questionnaires. Grainger helped her assemble the charts and tables, the tapings of her conclusions, ready to send the material to the Foundation by the next Terra-bound ship.

“You haven’t discussed your findings with me at all,” he complained. “Don’t you think I’m interested?”

“There was nothing to discuss till now, darling. A lot of it is drearily technical, and it wouldn’t mean any more to you than your shipping manifests would mean to me. But the summary might interest you—this section here.”

“Then let’s play it back, so I can ask questions. After all, I have to deal with the Agretians all the time; the more I can learn about them the better.”

“All right, I’ll put it on for you. It will be a help to have someone else listen and comment, anyway—it might give me new insights that would let me make last-minute improvements even now.”

We’re both talking at random, Grainger thought bitterly. The time has come when we must face
something so much more important to us, and we're both putting it off, because there simply isn't any solution—there can't be—and we'll have to make ourselves accept it. Perhaps—a stab of fear pierced him—perhaps it will be too much for her, perhaps she will leave me, go back to Terra.

This wouldn't do. He forced himself to attention.

"At the outset, some generalizations can be made. The natives of Agretia are not merely humanoid; they are, in all essential respects, human—another species of human being from Homo sapiens, but distinctly the product of the same evolutionary forces.

"They have six-fingered hands and six-toed feet. Their circulatory and eliminative systems vary in some respects from ours. Their period of gestation is 11 months, and there are minor variations in the reproductive apparatus. There are significant differences in the cerebral cortex. These matters will all be discussed in detail.

"The most obvious difference at first sight is that on the average the Agretian, both male and female, is distinctly taller and heavier than the average Terran of even the tallest races. (See Chart CCVII.) The average full-grown Agretian male is seven and a half feet tall and weighs between three hundred and fifty and four hundred pounds. The musculature is consonant with this height and weight; they have large chests, heavy hips, wide shoulders, big arms, legs, and necks. Their heads—"

"Turn it off!" Grainger yelled.

"Turn it off!"

Bewildered, Luvina closed the circuit.

"What is it?" she cried. "Is something wrong? Are you sick?"

He stood there trembling, hardly able to speak.

"Their necks," he croaked.

"Their necks—"

She frowned in puzzlement. Then suddenly she saw it too.

"Oh, Warren! Their necks are twice as thick as ours," she gasped.

"It figures—they're used to their own size—How long was the rope when they first put it on you? Quick, let me measure it now."

She dashed for the measure, wrote down the figure with clumsy fingers.

"It's been five years. It's a quarter shorter than it was, which makes it originally— And a twentieth of that, taken off each year—let me see—"

He was there before her; they looked at each other with shining eyes.

"And 15 times more besides this still will leave—"

Another hasty calculation. Then she was sobbing in his arms, and his own tears were dropping on her blonde head.

"There'll still be a good twenty-five inches left at the end of the
twenty years,” he whispered. “They’ve estimated for—what is their average neck-size?”

“About twenty-eight inches.”

“And mine is sixteen. They figured it for their own size.”

“Won’t they come to realize it later, and cut off more each time?” she asked fearfully.

“They can’t. Maybe they realize it already, but Agretians are absolutely law-abiding, and they never change their rules. There’s nothing they can do, fifteen years from now, but remove the rope forever. My sentence will be served. They’ll have to set me free.”

And they did—fifteen years later to the day on which they had shackled him. It was quite a ceremony. Grainger went to it accompanied by Luvina and their three children. By this time he spoke Agretian as fluently as his Agretian-born youngsters. And he had planned his speech, full of resentment for the ordeal he had undergone before Luvina’s penetration had opened his eyes.

For an instant his neck felt bare and awkward, bereft of the rope it had worn so many years. The officiating judge who had removed it held out his arm, palm up, in the Agretian gesture of congratulation.

“You have borne your burden of shame bravely and modestly, Terran Grainger,” he said. “It must have been hard to endure so long the pity of your fellow-beings.”

Grainger stared at him, his planned speech frustrated.

“But—but haven’t you noticed,” he stammered at last, “that they made the rope too long—that it didn’t work the way they intended?”

The official looked puzzled.

“It was measured for your neck, not for our larger ones,” he explained.

“Do you mean,” asked Grainger, amazed. “that if I had been an Agretian it would have been still longer?”

“Of course—we have no desire to cause anyone physical discomfort.”

“But then—at the end of the sentence it could never have strangled me!”

It was the judge’s turn to be astonished—and offended.

“Strangled? What made you think that we would purposely kill a human being?”

Confusedly Grainger repeated what Chung Li had told him so long ago.

The judge was young; he did not remember Chung Li.

“But this Terran—you say he was your rival in trade? He resented your presence here?”

“Yes, but when I had my—my trouble, he helped me all he could with his advice.”

The Agretian sighed.

“I shall never understand the
Terran mind," he said. "You seem to delight in deceiving and causing pain to others, and then ascribing it to something you call a sense of humor."

"You mean," cried Grainger, "that Chung Li was just pulling my leg?"

The judge shook his head in bewilderment.

"Your leg? No, he was, in your inscrutable Terran manner which conceals vindictiveness under amusement, merely pulling the rope more tightly around your neck!"

In this issue...

Some time ago, we announced here that Grendel Briarton was receptive to suggestions for Ferdinand Feghoot adventures, and several quite good ones have since been received. Grendel would be glad to see more, and this is the procedure, if you are interested: Address your suggestions to Grendel Briarton, Fantasy and Science Fiction, 580 Fifth Ave., New York 36, New York, and be sure to include with your suggestion a note saying that you are willing to accept a one-year subscription to Fantasy and Science as full payment for your idea.

"Rogue Moon," Algis Budrys’ short novel in this issue, will be out soon, in expanded form, as a Gold Medal novel.

Coming soon...

Next month’s line-up is not definite as of this writing, but one item which will be included is "Time Lag," an adventurous sort of novelet by Poul Anderson, and another is "The Sources of the Nile," a short novelet by Avram Davidson which concerns a method of acquiring wealth not unlike, but rather more subtle and probable than, getting hold of a regular supply of tomorrow’s newspaper.