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ABSOLUTE POWER

By J. T. McINTOSH

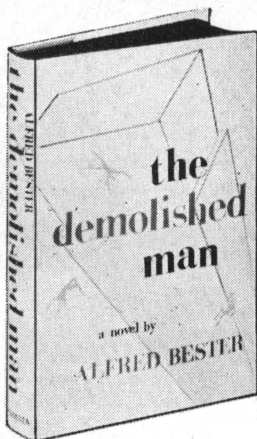


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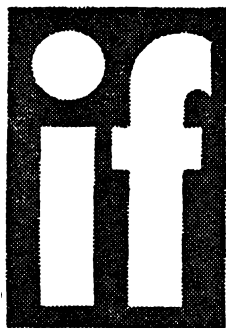
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Having an impossible planet and an even more impossible girl to bring to heel—those were the odds Barr liked to take.

ABSOLUTE POWER

By J. T. McINTOSH

Illustrated by Dick Francis

I

SUITABLY, Edgar Dainton had his office right at the top of the immense Planet Development Company Building. He was signing letters when Paul Fackley came in.

"Well?" said Dainton, looking up.

"They've turned it down, E. D.," said Fackley. "We're pulling out of Bullance. They said the usual things—PDC has a responsibility to the shareholders—Bullance is a white elephant—under the present government regula-

tions it's impossible to make Bullance pay—better get out before we lose any more."

Dainton nodded. He was a very kindly, mild-mannered, reasonable man to be the director of a vast economic empire such as that controlled by the Planet Development Company. He had found that on the whole it paid to be kindly, mild-mannered and reasonable.

"What was said about my personal submission?" he asked.

"Well, you can go ahead with it," Fackley said. "But there was a strong recommen-

dation not to throw your money away. And you know how I feel, E. D.—it wouldn't be a worthwhile gamble. If you lose, you lose not only your money but prestige as well."

"I know," said Dainton.

In an economic empire there is no life membership for dictators. Dainton was the director of the PDC program, but what he said only went when it paid off. And Bullance wasn't paying off. Dainton wanted to keep trying; everybody else wanted to cut their losses.

Now Dainton had offered to finance from his own pocket one last try. And what Fackley said was undeniably true—if the last try failed, Dainton would lose face as well as money. He would have been expensively wrong. PDC directors weren't supposed to be expensively wrong, even when they footed the bill themselves.

It was a gamble for big stakes. If it came off, everybody would remember (or would be gently reminded if they didn't) that Dainton had opposed PDC's withdrawal from Bullance and had taken over the account personally because the board had turned down all his recommendations. He would probably sell back the rights for a colossal sum, his prestige rocketing sky-high as well as his bank account. But if it didn't come

off, it would always be remembered that he'd been badly wrong once, and could be badly wrong again.

"When I told them you wanted ninety-five per cent of the profits," said Fackley, "they didn't even haggle. They just said, 'What profits?' You're not going ahead with it, are you, E. D.?"

Dainton glanced at his watch. "Barr's due in a few minutes. I'll make a final decision when I meet him."

Fackley hesitated. He was a very able and intensely loyal assistant. "If you're doing this on Miss Dainton's account . . . I mean, I know you intend to send her with him . . . I mean . . ."

"What *do* you mean, Paul?" Dainton asked gently.

"Just that I think the board would understand if you have private reasons. If you mean the project to be a flop, for reasons of your own . . ."

"Now why would I want that?"

"Well, if you do, let me drop a hint to the members of the board. Then at least they won't start to question your judgment."

Dainton smiled slightly. "Thanks, Paul. You're smart *and* you're loyal. I wish between us we'd been able to make Roxie marry you."

Fackley flushed slightly. "That's over."

"I know," Dainton sighed. "Pity."

FAR below in the gargantuan PDC building, Lyn Barr was looking about him with the naive curiosity of the hick he was. In the vast hall of the PDC Building a thousand tiny planets revolved rapidly round a hundred tiny suns. The display must have cost a million to install and several thousand a year to run.

"Yes?" said a supercilious blonde.

"I want to see somebody called Dainton."

The blonde smiled a supercilious smile. "I'm sorry, sir. Perhaps you'd care to see Mr. Decker. He—"

"Decker didn't ask to see me."

Her plucked brows rose incredulously. "You mean you have an appointment with Mr. Dainton? Mr. Edgar Dainton?"

"He said for me to come at four," said Lyn patiently. "I guess he only wants to bluster and bawl me out because I just took five thousand off him, but—"

"Mr. Dainton could give a bellhop five thousand and never notice it," the blonde said with a wintry smile.

"Maybe. You ever know a millionaire who didn't scream blue murder if somebody gyped him out of a dime?"

Still incredulous, the blonde snapped a switch. A few sec-

onds later, incoherently apologetic, she was taking him up personally in an elevator.

An express elevator was something new in Lyn's experience. The floor tried to come up and hit him, but he stiffened his knees just in time and kept it where it was. When the elevator stopped at the top of the immensely tall building, he glanced down at the blonde's neat ankles.

"Thought your panties might have fallen down," he explained. "But then, *your* pants would never fall down, would they?"

About to become icily supercilious again, the blonde remembered that this man was about to see Edgar Dainton. She tried to laugh as if at a scintillating witticism.

In the large, bright room at the top of the building, Dainton and Lyn Barr eyed each other.

"I got the five thousand all right, Mr. Dainton," Lyn said pleasantly. "Thanks for asking."

"How did you find out about that?" Dainton said.

"I always read the small print. When I came from Mars on one of your ships, naturally I had to look at the conditions. And I found this clause: 179 (a) Compensation (transfer in space): Should it be necessary to transfer passengers to another ship in space, except as under 178 (a) and (c), compensation of

five thousand dollars will be paid to said passengers on demand."

"You knew, of course," said Dainton, "that that clause dated from the time when transfers were hazardous and people had to be assured that there wouldn't be any? And that for the last hundred years or so there have always been transfers from tender to ship and back to tender?"

Lyn smiled. "But this clause is still there in black and white among the conditions."

"Was," Dainton said. "It's out now."

The two men looked at each other. And though Dainton was thirty years older than Barr, small and plump instead of tall and thin, and neatly dressed instead of shambling and untidy, they saw they had a good deal in common.

They were both patient men. They liked to see what was to be seen before committing themselves further. It would obviously be rare for either of them to lose his temper. They would be kind to old ladies in the street. Women would like them, believing erroneously they needed mothering. Neither of them would have any difficulty in getting children to accept them as equals.

"So you didn't bring me here to swear at me?" Lyn asked.

"I brought you here to give you a hundred thousand."

Lyn showed no sign of shock. "I'll take it."

"Barr, would you say you were a gambler?"

Lyn considered the matter with the grave curiosity of a man who is often mildly surprised, rarely startled. "No, I guess not," he said at last.

"But it wouldn't surprise you to know that many people think you are?"

"No, it wouldn't."

"I've had you closely investigated, Barr. I'm going to offer you a job, a very important job. I think you're enough of a gambler to take it on these terms: If you fail, living expenses and fifty a week. If you succeed, the same living expenses, the same fifty, and a bonus of a hundred thousand."

"What makes you think I could handle a job like that?"

"The conviction that you can do other things besides reading small print. But there's something I have to tell you before you say any more. Not about the job itself—that's straightforward enough. Impossible, probably, but quite straightforward. What I want to tell you about is something that goes with the job."

LYN waited, but Dainton seemed to be waiting for a comment. So Lyn asked: "What goes with the job?"

"My daughter Roxie," said Dainton.

"I guess you don't mean I'm supposed to marry her."

"You guess right. Not that I'd mind. I'd rather she married you than the fool she no doubt will marry when she finds somebody useless enough. But she won't marry you. When I say she goes with the job, I mean that I propose to send you to Bullance as Premier, and Roxie with you."

"Premier?" said Lyn, almost astonished. "And you think *I'm* a gambler?"

Dainton smiled. "I never denied that I was. This is one of my biggest gambles, Barr. Along with that, I want to turn Roxie into a normal, healthy girl of twenty-two with no more than the usual emotional problems. If you can do that, Bullance can go to hell."

Lyn's memory stirred. Even on Mars he had heard of the Young Daintons. "Wasn't there—didn't she have a brother?"

"Willie. He was always violent with his girl friends. Finally he killed one and shot himself rather than face trial. Somebody might save Roxie, though, if he was patient and good at reading small print. She isn't all bad."

"Let's get this straight. Is my job premiership of Bullance or psychiatrist to Roxie? And if it's the latter, am I supposed to cure her or marry her or both?"

"Your job is to be Premier of Bullance and work out a solution there. So far nobody has got within light-years of solving it. In your spare time, do what you can about Roxie—if anybody can do anything about Roxie. Marry her if you like, and if you can."

Dainton sighed. Lyn didn't have to be told what he was thinking. Dainton was thinking about two children he had never seemed to have time for, two children who had always had absolutely everything except the love of a father and a mother—or, for that matter, anyone.

"You still haven't answered my question," said Lyn. "Which is my job?"

Dainton pulled himself together. "A good man can do three or four things at once, and I think you might be a good man. Save Bullance and you get a hundred grand at least—probably a lot more. Save Roxie, and . . . no, I won't ask for too much. Do anything for Roxie and you'll find me more grateful than about Bullance. If there's any conflict between the two things, Bullance can go to hell if you can do anything for Roxie. And, Barr, if Roxie tells me one thing and you say another, I don't think I'm going to believe Roxie."

Lyn always liked time to think things over. But he knew already that he was going to take the job Dainton

offered, for about six different reasons.

"Why," he asked, "are you so sure your daughter will go with me?"

"She wants to be a premier on a primitive world," said Dainton bleakly. "And I've told her she has no chance unless she does this first. She has no chance anyway."

"Why not?"

"The reason she wants to rule a world is to prove that Ghengis Khan, Hitler and the Russian revolutionaries were humanitarian, sentimental philanthropists."

"Yet you say she isn't all bad?"

"I think she isn't," said Dainton quietly. "But maybe I'm biased, being her father."

III

ON THE company ship out to Bullance, Lyn saw very little of Roxie Dainton. It wasn't until the ship was nearly due to land that all the young officers on board had become heartily sick of Roxie. The stewardesses, of course, had been sick of her from the start.

Lyn knew that he must in due course clash violently with Roxie, and was quite satisfied to postpone hostilities until they were on Bullance and the *Meredith* had left. He had divided his time between winning money from anyone on board ship who would play

any gambling game with him and reading about Bullance.

Bullance was a pleasant enough world, apart from being slightly too hot. Its air and water were non-poisonous, the highest life-form—about twenty per cent less intelligent than humans—was friendly and completely harmless, and no other animal on the planet was larger than a cat.

Like most friendly, harmless worlds, Bullance had very little to offer Terran civilization. In fact, only one commodity was worth exporting.

It seemed to be almost a natural law that if a world was vicious, poisonous, unstable and in other respects highly dangerous, it was invariably rich in things Earthmen wanted. And if it was as harmless as Bullance, it produced practically nothing of any value.

Simple economics thus ensured that all the important settlements were on extremely tough worlds. Bullance was too far from any thickly populated world to have any value as a vacation resort; consequently any colony there had to depend on what it could produce for necessities, and on what it could export for luxuries.

The one commodity which Bullance did export was very valuable, and if it could have been exported in quantity, Bullance could have become

wealthy. This was so far from being the case that PDC had already ceased to subsidize the small settlement that existed there, and it owed its present precarious existence to Edgar Dainton's personal backing.

Called *manna* without any particular originality or imagination, Bullance's one valuable commodity was partly natural and partly manufactured by the highest life-form, a humanoid species with gray skin known officially as Bullanese and unofficially as Maniacs (because they brought in manna). The Maniacs performed a long and complicated process with the sap of certain trees, a mash of leaves, different kinds of soil and a common form of gelatin.

The result was manna, the Maniac's staple diet. It would have been a great delicacy back on Earth but for the fact that hardly anybody could afford to eat it. Occasionally some very rich man on Earth would invite a very few guests to dinner and serve manna. He rarely did it again if he wanted to remain a very rich man.

Most of the manna that was brought in from Bullance was used in the production of expensive plastics which could not be given the same qualities by any other process. Some was used in fabulous ceramics. It also produced the finest possible film base, used with the thinnest emulsions

when great enlargement was required.

There was no difficulty in selling manna for great sums. The difficulty was in getting it.

The only way to produce it was the way the Maniacs produced it on Bullance. And unfortunately manna didn't keep much longer than the time taken to transport it to Earth. So the supply of manna depended (a) on the Bullanese bringing it in, and (b) on their bringing it in at the right time and in the right quantities.

Lyn had before him the exasperating story of manna supplies brought to the PDC base on Bullance. In January, 2175, stock was 170 tons—more than a shipload. But the next ship to call arrived in May, by which time only 10 tons were still consignable. Shortly after the ship had left, the Bullanese supplied a further 110 tons. By November, when the next ship was due, only five tons were fresh enough to stand the journey.

It wasn't that the ships called at the wrong time of year. Their schedules had been changed repeatedly. It wasn't that the Bullanese were not prepared to supply manna. It was simply that there seemed to be no way of getting them to bring in supplies at the right time, or know when the next big supply was coming.

Everything seemed to have been tried. Once a ship had been kept waiting indefinitely on Bullance, ready to blast off whenever she was fully loaded. When she did blast off, a year and four months later, she was only half full, because by the time the last small quantities of manna had been brought in, the first bales had gone bad and had to be unloaded. Half a shipload was an exceedingly valuable cargo—but the cost of keeping a ship and her crew idle for sixteen months was ruinous. Besides, the crew was near mutiny by the time the ship finally left Bullance, and when she got back to Earth the various unions inserted clauses in their contracts forbidding a stay of more than a month on Bullance.

No wonder, Lyn thought, the PDC board had decided to cut their losses in Bullance. What he didn't understand was what Dainton hoped he, Lyn Barr, was going to accomplish.

Still, Lyn was quite prepared to try to find a solution. He was always prepared to try.

IV

"HI," SAID Roxie. She hadn't knocked. "Am I interrupting anything?"

"Could I be anything but delighted?" said Lyn, pushing his book aside.

"Can't you do better than

that?" She threw herself moodily on the locker, which was the only item of furniture in the tiny cabin other than the folded bed on which Lyn was sitting.

She wore a vivid scarlet skirt with hundreds of pleats and a blazing yellow blouse stretched tightly across breasts which could stand it. She was neither tall nor short, neither blonde nor brunette, but if she hadn't been Roxie Dainton she could have been a showgirl. If she was twisted and frustrated, it certainly wasn't because she was ugly.

"Look," she said, "I don't get it. Why is my father sending you to Bullance?"

"Because he thought I might see a way of making manna imports pay."

"Oh, that's censored," she said impatiently. "He's paying you to do a nursemaid job on me, isn't he? He doesn't give a tinker's damn about Bullance."

Lyn shook his head. "Bullance could and ought to be a gold mine. Why it isn't is because no matter what the market value of manna is, a shipload of ten tons every six months won't pay all the expenses. Forty tons would. And if we could guarantee a shipload every month—"

"Don't be a bloody fool. Think I don't know anything about Bullance? Kick the Maniacs around and there

won't be any more trouble with them."

"Unfortunately," said Lyn carefully, "there's a government inspector permanently on the station to prevent just that. The Bullanese have legal rights, same as anybody else."

"Do it when he isn't looking, then."

"I'm afraid that won't work. The Bullanese would simply move away from the PDC station and there wouldn't be any manna at all."

"Let's cut the pretense," she said angrily. "What's your real job?"

Lyn leaned back comfortably on the bed. "I'm supposed to make Bullance pay. That means getting more manna exports, somehow. Naturally, this ship will take back any manna which happens to be waiting when we land. I can neither take credit if there's a lot nor be blamed if there isn't. But in two months' time another ship is coming, a special ship, and it's my job to arrange that there'll be a cargo of manna waiting for it. That's my job. That's what I'm here for."

"For God's sake, stop talking about manna, I'm sick of hearing about the censored stuff. You're supposed to turn me into a solid citizen, aren't you?"

Lyn was quite prepared to follow that line. "What par-

ticular objection do you have to solid citizens?"

She twitched her skirt impatiently. "They're boring."

"It seems to me," said Lyn, "that you spend most of your time being bored anyway, whether you're surrounded by solid citizens or not."

She sighed. "It's true, damn it. You think I believe I'm the most important thing in the Galaxy, don't you?"

"I haven't had much opportunity to make up my mind what you think."

"You think I'm stinking with pride, don't you?"

"No," said Lyn. "I think that nobody has a lower opinion of Roxie Dainton than you have."

SHE blinked and gasped. "Well, that was a poke in the gut," she said. "You think you're smart, don't you?"

"Not as smart as I'd like to be," said Lyn.

"You must be smart. The old man doesn't pick fools. How are you going to set to work on me?"

"Miss Dainton," said Lyn firmly, "whether you believe me or not is your affair, but my immediate concern is the supply of manna and I have no qualifications as a doctor, psychiatrist or priest. If I were supposed to be a big brother to you, would I have kept out of your way the whole voyage?"

"You might have," Roxie said thoughtfully, "if you were smart. By this time I'm fed up with everybody on this ship, and everybody is fed up with me—except you."

"How could people get fed up with a girl like you?"

"Don't act dumb."

"I'm not acting."

She threw up a leg restlessly and the shoe sailed off her foot across the cabin. Her skirt slid up and she didn't bother to pull it down again. "Why should I tell you?"

"No reason, only that if you don't like to talk about yourself, there must really be something unusual about you."

"I guess you're right," she said moodily. "I guess nothing interests me much any more except seeing people squirm. It's always possible to make them squirm, you know. You think now that I'll never make you writhe, but you're wrong. You'll squirm just like everybody else."

"Women too?"

"Women are easiest. They are always in competition and I win because I don't want what the other girl wants; I only want to win. You know Mary Shearing, the night stewardess? She's crazy over Porter. Porter's married, but that doesn't matter. On the *Meredith* Porter is all hers, and that's something his wife can never share. Well, I made her say I couldn't take

Porter away from her, and then I took Porter away from her. I didn't sleep with him because he was easier to handle with his tongue hanging out. I made him fight with Mary and tell her she made him sick and he was going to get away from her if he had to transfer to another ship or another company. I made her tell him she wouldn't have anything to do with him if he was the last man alive. Then I kicked Porter out and never spoke to him again."

"Very pretty," Lyn said. "Maybe I haven't heard about these things because I'm supposed to be a big wheel and might get somebody fired. I gather Mary and Porter are not the only two who hate you?"

"I got Benning crazy for me too. I had him where he thought he was really getting someplace, and then kicked him out as well. I found out that Brenda Cowley took his job because her second child is a spastic and needs expensive care. It's easy to make her writhe . . . You see, there is always a way."

"And that makes you feel good?"

"No," said Roxie bleakly, "it makes me feel the same way you would feel if you did it."

THERE was a long silence, quite a companionable silence, for though Lyn could

see why people hated Roxie, he didn't hate her. You could not hate anybody you pitied.

At last she said: "It was the old man's fault. He gave me everything except what I needed. I know now that nobody should ever get all he asks for. But it's too late."

"You said it. I didn't."

"And it's true. At eighteen, if I'd met the right man . . . But now I'm twenty-two. That's four years of doing anything to make people squirm. It's too late now."

"Well, if you want me to agree, I will."

She stood up. "No, I don't want you to agree. I'm God damned if I know what I want."

"Watch your language. There's a lady present."

She stared down at him. "Are you telling me how to behave, nursemaid?"

"No. Only how not to talk."

Suddenly she laughed, a hard, jeering laugh. "If swearing shocks you, I guess you don't have any idea what I'm like. Want to know why I want to be premier of a world like Bullance?"

"I can guess."

Her eyes became slits and she almost snarled. "To be in control of a world—in sole command, the boss, the one person with absolute power—that's the one thing I haven't tried. To have the power of life and death, to make people crawl, to think up the

craziest things and make people do them, to be able to beat natives to death . . . I'd do anything for that power."

Lyn said nothing.

She looked at him, the cruelty already beginning to die out of her face. But for a moment he had seen the hell behind her eyes. He began for the first time to believe that it really was too late, that she was rotten all the way through.

Perhaps she guessed this, for as her eyes met his she suddenly spun on her heel and went out of the cabin, leaving her shoe behind.

V

BULLANCE was a hot, moist world, a yellow-green hell. Not trusting the local insects, both Lyn and Roxie were wearing protective coveralls as they emerged from the ship.

"Jesus!" said Roxie as the heat hit them, and for once Lyn felt blasphemy was justified.

Within a couple of minutes they found that there were five tons of fresh manna waiting, and two hundred tons spoiled. Joe Gunther, the PDC base commander, jumped around in his vexation. "If the ship had been four months earlier," he said to Lyn, almost in tears, "practically all the loss on the Bullance books would have been paid up!"

Lyn wondered if it was really impossible to keep a ship waiting on Bullance, ready to blast off whenever she was fully loaded. However, he didn't weaken his position as PDC troubleshooter by making what might be a silly suggestion.

Gunther's jumping about irritated Roxie. "Why don't you just lash out instead of holding it in?" she demanded.

Gunther started to say something he might have regretted.

"This," said Lyn, "is Miss Roxanne Dainton."

Gunther checked himself immediately. "Delighted to make your acquaintance, Miss Dainton," he gasped. "Glad you found yourself able to visit Bullance. We'll show you as much as we can before the *Meredith* blasts off."

"She's not going back with the ship," said Lyn. "She's staying here."

Gunther goggled. Before he could say anything, Roxie saw something silvery moving in the jungle and exclaimed: "Look! Is that one of the Maniacs?"

Gunther recovered himself. "We don't use that word, Miss Dainton," he said, playfully chiding. "The Bullanese have enough sense to realize that the term is derogatory and—"

"I'll call them what I bloody well like."

Lyn thought the opportu-

nity as good as any to show how things stood. "No, Miss Dainton. If you look at the terms of my contract, you'll find that I can send you right back on the ship if you don't behave yourself."

For a moment it looked as if Roxie would explode. Then her fury blew itself out in irritation. "What the hell does it matter what you call the lousy bugs?" She calmed herself down. "Okay, I'll call them Bullanese, Boss."

Gunther's eyes widened again. Neither the way Roxie talked nor the way this man Barr treated her was what he would have expected.

They were standing outside the PDC base, a large white building at one side of a huge clearing which was used as a landing field both for spaceships and the landplanes the base staff used.

IT WAS obvious at a glance that Bullance was an alien world. The predominant color was a startling yellow-green, with tomato reds a close second. Nearly all the bushes and trees had the same basic shape, a strange one to people from Earth. Strong, hard trunks which drew up no moisture held the main bodies of the plants well clear of the ground. Temporary roots at the end of springy arms dug themselves down into rich soil, ready to fly up out of danger when touched, leaving

only expendable tips to their fate. Most of the herbivorous animals of Bullance were very small, and plants had developed in this way for self-defense.

"That's Zin," said Gunther, as the Bullanese emerged from the bush. "And I can guess what he wants." He sighed.

"First time I ever saw a bug with clothes on," said Roxie.

Bullanese were not insects, yet it was not unnatural that Roxie should choose to call them bugs. There was a certain insectlike exaggeration of even their humanoid characteristics. They had big heads, tiny chests, bulbous pelvises and long, spindly limbs, and their skin, though soft and very like human skin, was a slaty gray color which gave it the appearance of being a shell. Nevertheless, they could be quite attractive in an alien kind of way, for instead of the awkwardness which would have meant ugliness, their movements had a smoothness and grace which had beauty in it. It was merely not a human beauty.

They were attractive as the long-limbed pixies drawn by human artists were attractive. Their clothing helped. Zin wore a V-shaped breechcloth which made his pelvis look less bulbous and a loose jacket like a bolero, both in a brilliant orange material

like satin, but finer and brighter.

Zin ignored Lyn altogether, looked curiously and doubtfully at Roxie, nodded his head and began to speak in a high singsong voice to Gunther.

One of the first things he must do, Lyn decided, was learn the language. Gunther might or might not resent him, though, if he did, he had given no indication of the fact so far, but it wouldn't do to be able to communicate with the Bullanese only through Gunther.

Roxie fidgeted impatiently in the throbbing heat as the conversation went on and on. Presently she shrugged, unzipped her coveralls and stripped them off. Her shorts were very short.

When the discussion was finished, Zin shot another curious glance at Roxie. This time he was flabbergasted. In the first place, he hadn't seen her take off her coveralls and the transformation appeared to strike him as magical. In the second place, the lines of her body, previously concealed, now could hardly have been more obvious, and Zin clearly had never seen any lines like them.

As he went away he kept glancing back over his shoulder at Roxie. He seemed reluctant to go at all.

"You've made a hit, Miss Dainton," said Lyn.

She turned on him irritably. "Are you doing that to annoy me?"

"Doing what?" asked Lyn.

"Calling me Miss Dainton."

"No. I'll call you anything you like." But Lyn spoke absently. He wanted to hear what Joe Gunther had to say. Gunther wasn't looking happy.

"The Bullanese want a ton of manna back," said Gunther. "That means only four tons for the *Meredith*."

"Don't tell me you're going to give them it!" Roxie exclaimed.

"Have to. They only bring it in on condition that they can have it back if they need it. I told him they could have all the spoiled manna too. It's no good to us."

"What good is it to them?" Lyn asked.

"They make cloth with it. Like what he was wearing."

Manna was very useful stuff, apparently. The material Zin had worn would command a high price on Earth, perhaps enough to make it worth while shipping it. Another thing for Lyn Barr to look into.

"Shall we go into the base?" Gunther said.

"Bloody high time," Roxie grumbled.

VI

WHEN Lyn decided to go out for a walk after lunch, he found to his sur-

prise that Roxie wanted to go with him. Perhaps "wanted" was too strong a word to describe her sullen admission that she wouldn't mind coming along.

"It would be an unexpected pleasure," he said. "But I'm only going to have a look around."

"I know." She swore suddenly. "I've a good mind to go back on the *Meredith*."

"Why?" Lyn asked. If Roxie went, half his job went too, but he wouldn't be sorry. The problem of manna supplies interested him and he would be quite happy to concentrate entirely on that.

"There are twenty-nine human beings on Bullance," said Roxie bitterly, "and you and I are the only two under forty."

Lyn smiled slightly. "You could have found that out before you came."

"The *Meredith* isn't blasting off until tomorrow. Why is the crew still cooped up in it? Why don't they come out and stretch their legs?"

"We've been immunized against Bullanese bacteria and they haven't. It wouldn't be worth the trouble and the expense. If there was anything to do or see on Bullance, it would be different."

The subtle approach seemed to be working. Roxie's frown became blacker. But then abruptly she seemed to sense what Lyn was thinking. "Why

don't you want me to stay here?"

"If you believe that," said Lyn, "you can't believe any more that my job is to be a nursemaid to you."

"Maybe I don't. Why do you want to get rid of me? Am I ugly? Do you hate women?"

"You're not ugly and if you were anybody but Roxie Dainton I'd be glad for you to stay."

"What does *that* mean?"

Lyn looked at her thoughtfully. She now wore green-and-white striped shorts and halter. She was spectacular, all right.

"All the men on this station you could possibly be interested in are married and have their wives with them," he said patiently. "And, as you have already pointed out, they are all over forty. Nevertheless, within a week you'll have the base in an uproar."

She liked that. "I guess so."

"That's nothing to be proud of. Any other bitch as young and pretty as you could do the same."

"Who are you calling a bitch?"

"My job will be a hell of a lot easier if you go home."

"Who's swearing now?"

"I don't use words like you do."

"Like these?" she said, and listed them.

Lyn didn't hesitate. He took her by the shoulder and led her into one of the washrooms

just inside the base. She didn't struggle until he began to push her over a basin.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" she demanded.

"You wash your body, don't you?" he said. "You wouldn't like it to be offensive. Well, your mouth is."

HE BENT her back over the sink. Although she fought violently, she was helpless, unable to make the best use of her strength or tear him with her nails. Holding her wrists above her head with one hand, he crammed soap in her mouth.

Not for quite a while did he release her, by which time her teeth and lips were covered with soap and her curses were smothered in bubbles. When she was free she gathered herself to dive at him, but changed her mind. It was more urgent to wash out her mouth.

She did so. Lyn had an opportunity to walk out on her. He didn't take it.

When she had spat out all the soap she straightened to face him furiously. Her face was red, her hair a mess, and one of the straps of her halter had snapped.

"I could kill you!" she breathed, and he believed her. "You did that so I'd leave on the *Meredith*, didn't you?"

"If you want the truth, I did it to try to make you talk cleaner. How would you feel

if people found out that you wore your slip for a month without washing it?"

"You're crazy. I don't—"

"You talk as if you did."

As she appeared to have no comeback, he turned to go. "I take it I'm no longer to be honored with your company?"

She shrugged. "You take it wrong. I might as well come. There's nothing else for me to do."

Lyn had had talks with Gunther and Dr. Allison, the station's medical officer, to supplement his theoretical knowledge of Bullance. There was no danger from the Bullanese, no danger from the small animals of the jungle, no danger at all in walking about except the risk of getting lost, which was slight with the station's radio mast to guide them.

Lyn and Roxie walked in silence for a while. There were a lot of Bullanese about, all staring at Roxie. She ignored them.

There was certainly very little to see, once the first impression of a yellow-green and red world had been established. There were no mountains in this part of Bullance, and no seas. Small rivers fed a multitude of lakes which were rarely as much as a mile long. As far as the eye could see there was nothing but flat country overgrown with yellow-green plants and red plants, with

an occasional stream or lake breaking the monotony.

"Is there any danger in swimming in these lakes?" Roxie asked abruptly.

"None at all. The fish are like ours—they stay out of the way of anything bigger than themselves."

"I wish I'd brought a swimsuit out here with me."

"Bathe without it."

She looked at him sharply. "Of course I'm shameless too?"

"Well, aren't you?"

She didn't answer. Nothing more was said until she almost tripped over one of the Bullanese. "Oh, obscene these Maniacs!" she exclaimed irritably. Her irritation dissolved in a grin. "That just came out. But it doesn't matter. You've got no soap with you."

It was the first time he had seen her smile. He changed his mind. Well, why not say so?

"I hope you don't go back in the *Meredith*," he said.

"Obscenity," she said rudely. "You're a nursemaid after all."

That was why not say so. She couldn't take anything resembling a compliment.

"Did you ever love anybody, Roxie?" he asked.

"Yes, and got kicked in the belly."

"Naturally. You invited it." She frowned. "Huh?"

"You always get what you



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want, don't you?" Lyn said.
"Obscenity," she said again,
and turned and left him.

VII

THAT night Gunther told Lyn excitedly that twenty-five tons of manna had been brought in during the day.

"Isn't that usual?" Lyn asked. "I mean, don't they bring it in when the ship arrives?"

"They never have before. You remember, just this morning Zin came to ask for some back. I thought it would be weeks before they brought any more."

"They seemed very interested in Miss Dainton. Could that have anything to do with that?"

"Interested? What do you mean?"

"When we went out for a walk we saw scores of them. They were in every bush, all staring at Roxie."

Gunther became excited. "That's it, Mr. Barr. That's it! They're a polite race. If they're curious about something around here, they bring manna—as an excuse to come and watch. It's happened once or twice when we were building things or making a dam."

"Then I'll hold back the *Meredith* and make sure the Bullanese get a chance to see Roxie again tomorrow."

"It won't last. It never does. A couple of days, no more."

"You've tried to make it last?"

"Of course. Offered to teach them how to do things. They come for two days, bringing manna in. Then they stop."

"All the same, we'll keep this business going as long as we can."

That night, before sleeping, Lyn considered the possibility of turning Roxie into a white goddess. The corny tactic, he knew, worked more often with primitive peoples than it had any right to.

Now what would be a goddess for a race prepared to accept a living creature as divine? A beautiful creature, for a start. Roxie was that, even to the Bullanese. Or maybe she was fascinatingly ugly. It didn't matter—Roxie still had something which the other twenty-eight men and women at the station obviously didn't have. Next, intelligence. Well, Roxie was more intelligent than a Bullanese genius. True, many of the other twenty-eight were more intelligent, but they didn't look like Roxie.

Anything he could do to set up Roxie as a Bullanese goddess, Lyn was prepared to try. Meantime he had given orders holding the *Meredith* for a few days—and he no longer had any thought of trying to persuade Roxie to leave on the ship.

This might be the thing he was looking for.

Next morning Roxie didn't want to go out.

The Bullanese never entered the station. If Roxie was to be on view, she had to go out.

Lyn considered telling Roxie his real reason, but decided against it. He already knew that cooperation wasn't a word in her dictionary.

"Let's go for a swim," he said.

"I don't feel like it."

"You're not ill, are you?"

"I just don't feel like it. Leave me alone."

"Okay," he said.

His patience was rewarded. An hour later, having searched for diversion in the station and failed to find it, Roxie came looking for him, carrying a towel.

At first, as they made their way to the nearest lake, they saw no Bullanese. Then there were a few in the bushes. Then even more than there had been the day before—scores, perhaps hundreds.

Lyn rejoiced, hoping Gunther was right and they wouldn't come without bringing manna.

"I hear the bugs brought in twenty-five tons yesterday," Roxie abruptly said.

"That's right," said Lyn guardedly.

"That just shows, doesn't it? They've got it all the time, stored somewhere. All we have to do is beat a few of them."

"Hobley's here to stop that."

"Hobley can be bribed, can't he?"

"I doubt it. I get the idea he's a little stupid, but conscientious and thoroughly honest."

"What a dull man he must be." And that marked the end of Roxie's interest in Hobley or in manna.

She had a swimsuit under her dress. They bathed for half an hour, and Lyn found that it was not merely possible, but quite easy, to have fun with Roxie. She liked swimming and was a good swimmer. At a pool she could be an ordinary girl.

Afterward, as they lay in the hot sun, letting it dry them, he wasn't in any hurry to start talking. He knew already that conversation with Roxie was rather like walking a tightrope over a bed of nettles.

"I wanted to go to a dangerous world," Roxie said, "not one like this."

"Why? Want to get killed?"

"No, but I don't think I'm meant to live long."

"You mean you don't want to live long?"

"I never want to be old." She shuddered.

"Being old is all right if somebody loves you."

She laughed her hard, strident laugh. "Are you going to make love to me?"

"No. I'm just telling you

that if you got people to start liking you, you could face the thought of being old."

SHE laughed again, mirthlessly. "When people like me, it's the old man's millions they like."

"Not necessarily," said Lyn Barr.

"How can I tell?"

"If it was me, you would know it. As of now, I don't like you. Despite your father's millions. So, if I suddenly started to like you, you'd know it was because of you, not your father's millions."

"Think I care a damn whether you like me or not?" she asked scornfully. "If I ever fall in love again, it's not likely to be with you."

"I'm not talking about love. You may not care whether I love you or not, but you do want me to like you."

She was silent for a long time.

There were Bullanese all around them, silently watching, but it was possible to forget them after a while. Roxie seemed to have done so already. Lyn didn't want to forget them. He was keeping Roxie on show as long as possible.

"Anyway," she said bitterly, "you don't like me. You've said so."

"It's the truth," he nodded. "But I'm a simple sort of fellow. If you become likeable, I'll like you."

The hard laugh rang out again. "So I was right. You're trying to make me a solid citizen."

"Roxie, do you ever take a good look at yourself?"

"Physically, all the time. The way you're talking about, no."

"Even if you do, you can't see the important thing. People don't."

"And you can?"

"Yes. You won't find happiness, Roxie, in new things, things you haven't experienced before, like being premier of a PDC world. If you're ever going to find happiness, it'll be in the ordinary things, the things you've already scorned."

"When I want a sermon, I'll ask for it."

"Sermon or not, Roxie, that's the truth."

There was another long silence. This time Lyn broke it. "Anyway," he said, "I like you a lot better today than I did yesterday."

"Why?"

"You know why."

She didn't answer, so she probably did. She hadn't been obscene or profane all day.

That day the Bullanese brought more than thirty tons of manna.

VIII

WITHIN a week the *Meredith* was fully loaded, and Lyn sent her off with a

personal letter to Edgar Dainton.

It had been agreed that Lyn was neither to be blamed if the *Meredith* returned empty nor congratulated if she had a good load. The real test was the size of the second consignment, after Lyn had been on Bullance for two months.

However, the *Meredith* had the first full load of fresh manna ever to be consigned, and Lyn saw no reason why he shouldn't take the credit for it. His letter wasn't modest; it was almost cocky. If he succeeded, he did not want his success to be ascribed to blind luck.

Roxie didn't leave on the *Meredith*. "I guess I might as well stay," she said grudgingly.

Lyn laughed. "You might as well."

She shot a suspicious glance at him. "What's so funny?"

"Admit it, Roxie. You've been happier the last five days than you've been for years."

She shrugged. "Oh, sure. It hasn't been too bad—apart from those bugs following me around everywhere. I've almost been happy. But that's only the first few days. It won't last. It never does."

"If you're determined it won't, it won't."

"Don't be an idiot," she said irritably. "Of course I want to be happy. Who doesn't? It's just—every time I get around to enjoying anything, some-

thing happens and it all crumbles to dust."

"Maybe it won't this time."

"Lyn, tell me the truth. Please. Did my father hire you to try and straighten me out? I've got to know. Please tell me."

"If he did," Lyn observed, "I guess I must be doing a pretty good job. You just said 'please' twice. You never used to do that."

"Lyn, tell me the truth. Please!"

"I'm here to arrange manna shipments," Lyn said carefully. "I told you that and it's true. But your father also said that if I could do anything for you—that was his phrase, 'if you can do anything for Roxie'—Bullance could go to hell."

"I see," Roxie bitterly said. "So you're only obeying orders. Keeping little Roxie out of mischief."

"Would I have told you that just now if that were all there was to it?"

Her expression was half suspicious, half hopeful. He knew that she was beginning to think she was falling in love with him. Whether she was right was another matter. He certainly wasn't in love with her, and he suspected that she was merely responding to decent treatment from somebody who could take a lot without losing his temper.

"Frankly," he said, "at first I'd have been glad to have you leave on the *Meredith*. I get

a hundred thousand dollars if I manage to clear up the trouble with manna supplies. I would have been quite glad to get rid of you and concentrate on that. But I changed my mind."

"When?"

"That day when I crammed soap in your mouth. You didn't bear malice. You came out with me afterward. I admired you for that, Roxie. I hadn't known you could take it as well as handing it out."

"Want me to burst into tears?" she said in a hard voice.

"Not unless you want to."

"Well, I guess if I had a heart to break it was broken a long time ago." With sudden vehemence she added: "Only, for God's sake, Lyn, if you're going to try, do it now and not later."

THE armistice between Roxie and Lyn lasted for nearly a week more without incidents. He still took her swimming every day, although the Bullanese had gradually lost interest in Roxie and the manna deliveries had practically stopped.

Lyn was studying the Bullanese language, which was neither extensive nor complicated, and at the same time learning everything else he could find that might be of use to him.

The Bullanese didn't have much sense of time. It was

clear enough to Lyn now that he would never get them trained to bring in manna every two months or every six. There was no way of *making* them produce it. The code under which PDC was licensed to operate was strictly enforced by Hobley, and it was a fair enough code. No interference with the local people, no threats, no display of force.

All the Bullanese wanted from the Terrans was a supply of small, portable articles to make life easier for them—knives, needles, scissors, matches, electric torches, nails, screws, screwdrivers, compasses, pins, hand mirrors, razors and the like. They had quite enough sales resistance to refuse anything they didn't really need—politely, for they were a polite people.

Consequently, the only bargaining point PDC had was the not very strong desire of the Bullanese for certain items which they could get any time they cared to bring in a little manna. PDC had made strenuous efforts to sell them other things, including buildings, tractors and weather control, but the Bullanese simply didn't want any of these things.

There seemed to be no way to make them bring in manna in April rather than in June. Refusing to take it at the wrong time did more harm than good. They didn't care—

and having got the idea that the strangers no longer wanted manna, and passed it around by the efficient bush telegraph of primitive peoples, they ceased bothering to bring it at all. It was far better from PDC's point of view to take it at any time than to allow the Bullanese to think they were no longer interested.

It was still anybody's guess why the Maniacs had been so interested in Roxie at first, why their interest had waned, whether it could be kindled again and how to go about it.

"Not much is known about the Bullanese, really," Dr. Roza, the psychologist, told Lyn. "They're harmless, courteous, but not very interested in us. They don't regard us as gods and never did. We can fly in the sky, but they don't want to fly. Only an ambitious race would admire our human civilization and they're not ambitious."

"I never thought of that," Lyn admitted. "We think some of the things we do are pretty wonderful. But you're quite right—only a race that wanted to do the same things would be impressed by them."

"They wouldn't care if we all disappeared one night," Roza said. "In the old days, we'd have made them slaves and forced them to respect us, or pretend to. Under the present regulations, we more or less invite them to ignore us."

"What about religion? Do you know about that?" Lyn asked.

Roza shook his head. "There are ceremonies of some kind—at irregular intervals, for they don't even have a calendar and, as you know, there are no seasons on Bullance. I've asked to attend them but I was put off—politely, of course. I don't think they can amount to much, because there's no particular excitement before or after."

Nevertheless, Lyn was very interested in this. He believed that the Bullanese had at first regarded Roxie as some kind of goddess and that their interest had dwindled only when she failed to do whatever their idea of a goddess should do.

Anyway, it was a line to try. And there wasn't much doubt that if he could re-establish Roxie as a goddess, the manna would start rolling in again. Which would be a good thing, for the next ship, the *Henry James*, was due in about seven weeks.

IX

ROXIE hummed to herself as she hurried through the corridors to Lyn's office. When she noticed what she was doing she stopped at once, telling herself sharply that you couldn't make yourself happy just by humming a tune.

About to enter the office, she paused to tuck her blouse down into the waistband of her skirt and pat her hair.

And she heard Lyn say: "I still think we can make them interested in Roxie again. After all, you say there's never been anything like it before—nearly 200 tons in a week."

Gunther's voice said: "They don't come and look at her any more?"

"For the last week we've hardly seen the natives at all. And when we do run into one of them, he looks at Roxie pretty much as he'd look at you or me."

"When they did come, was it only males, or females too?"

"That's the funny thing—nearly as many females as males. They didn't seem to want to touch her, only to be near her, to look at her. I used to get her to sunbathe close to the bushes, so that lots of them could—"

Roxie flung the door open and faced him, eyes blazing. "So all you cared about was manna!"

"Come on in, Roxie. I'll be with you right away."

"Those times we went swimming and sunbathing, you were putting on a show for the bugs. I didn't matter at all—all you cared about was how much manna the God-damned Maniacs brought. When I thought you were interested in me, what you were

really interested in was a hundred thousand dollars!"

Lyn smiled. "How about coming swimming with me, Roxie?"

"No," she screamed, "and I never will again!"

Her high heels struck like machine-gun bullets as she ran down the corridor.

"I'd better go after her," Lyn said to Gunther. "Excuse me."

She wasn't in her room. She wasn't in the station. She wasn't at any of the pools in which she and Lyn had swum. He gave up the search, knowing she'd have to come in sometime.

He didn't curse fate, or himself, or Roxie. Earlier, he hadn't dared tell her that part of his reason for spending all those hours swimming and sunbathing with her had been the effect it seemed to have on manna supplies. By this time, he wouldn't have thought she would fly off the handle like that. But then, part of her trouble was her gloomy certainty that at any moment something would spoil everything and throw her back into the pit.

She had been sure she would find something like this sometime. Being sure, she had found it.

SHE ran through the bush until she was exhausted by the heat. Her thoughts weren't coherent; there was

nothing but a dull misery in her heart. Her anger was gone.

She didn't particularly want to swim, but she was beside a lake and she was hot. She had no towel or bathing suit. Carelessly she threw down her skirt and her blouse, stripped and waded into the water.

When she had swum across the lake she began to feel better. Perhaps there might be excuses for Lyn, she thought. She would never trust him the way she had. She would always be on her guard. All the same, now that he had shown himself to be no better and no worse than most of the men she had known in the past, there was no reason why she shouldn't . . .

Still swimming, she found herself crying. That hadn't happened for years. She had thought she had shed her last tears, that there were none left.

Slowly she began to wade from the lake. Her temper flared again when she saw a Bullanese squatting by her clothes, watching her.

She sank under the water again. "Go away!" she shouted. He didn't move. She swore at him, using all the foul words she hadn't used for nearly two weeks now.

Her rage mounted. Reason told her that since the creature on the bank was of a different species from herself, it didn't matter being naked be-

fore him any more than before a dog or a cat. But she wasn't listening to reason. She wanted to climb out of the water and get dressed.

Suddenly her anger boiled over. "I'll teach you," she muttered, and waded out of the water. The Bullanese continued to stare at her, not moving.

She hit him in the middle and he folded. She hit him several times with small, hard fists. He seemed to have no idea of self-defense, and each time a blow landed he jerked convulsively.

When he fell on the ground, twitching, Roxie turned her back on him, dressed and left him where he lay.

At the entrance to the station she met Lyn. "You've got trouble," she said grimly. "I've just beaten up one of your Maniacs."

She pushed past him into the building.

Hobley arrested her five minutes later.

X

THE Bullanese wasn't dead, but he wasn't far from it. Two of the porters carried him to the nearest village, Morat, on a stretcher. The Bullanese in the village took charge of him without making a fuss about it; perhaps they assumed there had been an accident, and the injured Maniac, being unconscious, was

in no position to give his story.

At the PDC base, Hobley convened a court. Lyn didn't say a word. Although he was Premier of Bullance, immediately a crime was committed, all of Lyn's power passed to Hobley.

The charge was attempted murder.

The trial was brief and businesslike. Roxie was sentenced to detention within the base until the next ship arrived, and then deportation.

"And you're very lucky, Miss Dainton," Hobley told her, "that we don't have power to do more than deport you. Natives on PDC worlds have the same rights as humans. You should get ten years for this."

Roxie said nothing. She had been white, frightened, incoherent, very much alone ever since she had been arrested. The court proceedings seemed like a bad dream.

It was Gunther who brought the steel band and fitted it on her wrist. "You know what this is, Miss Dainton? You can go anywhere you like within the station, but if you attempt to leave it, a needle will prick your arm and you'll black out. You understand?"

She nodded. This couldn't be happening either.

Then everybody was filing out and she was left alone in the projection room which had been used for the court.

She sat down and let her forehead rest on the table in front of her.

Only a couple of hours ago she had been happy. She had believed in Lyn Barr as she had never believed in any man before, almost loved him, certainly respected him as she had never thought she'd respect any human being again.

Then her idealistic picture of him had been shattered, and in her angry misery she had attacked a native and . . .

She still was a little hazy about that. Even after the solemn words and grim faces of the court, it still seemed to her that all she'd done was what anybody would have done in the heat of the moment—anybody but Lyn, of course.

There she went again, thinking Lyn was something special. In fact, he had shown himself to be just like . . .

"Roxie," said Lyn.

She sat up. Suddenly she was crying, and in his arms for the first time.

"If only you hadn't run out like that," Lyn said when she had dried her eyes. "Roxie, you gave yourself a lot of heartache for nothing. You know that now, don't you?"

"No, I don't know it now." She tried to be sharp and bitter and unforgiving, but it's hard to cut a man down to size when you've just been convicted of a crime.

"Well, I'm telling you, then.

What did you hear? That it was the Maniacs' interest in you that made them bring manna to the station. That ought to give you a kick, instead of making you furious."

"You know it wasn't that. It was learning that all you cared about was—"

"Roxie, that first day we went out I didn't know the natives were going to bring manna because of you. Yesterday and today I knew they weren't, because they stopped days ago. Did I say to you, 'Roxie, the natives don't care about you any more, so I'm sure you'll understand if I haven't any time for you now—good-by—thanks for your help'?"

"No, but that first week you were thinking about the manna, not about me."

Lyn grinned. "If you think I can lie beside you and think about manna, with you in that white swimsuit of yours, you must have a very curious idea of the things men think about."

Her eyes were hardly dry, but she was laughing. And she was sorry about the native now, for he'd been beaten up for nothing.

LYN went to the village rather warily, uncertain of his reception. But the Bullanese seemed indifferent to the fact that one of their number had been half killed.

Zin was the one he usually

talked to: "Is the injured man all right?" Lyn asked.

Zin held out his hands in the Bullanese equivalent of the Gallic shrug.

"Did he speak?"

"Yes. Zar said the White Lady por. But some of us went to see and she did not por."

"What is 'por'?"

Zin held out his hands again. Por was por.

Questioning a Bullanese was rather like discussing Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* with a somewhat backward child, but Lyn had nothing to lose.

"Why did you like the White Lady?"

"Because she por."

Lyn tried to work that out. Zar, the Bullanese whom Roxie had injured, had said she por; the Bullanese used to like her because she por.

"She doesn't por now?" he asked.

"No. Some of us went to see, and she does not por."

Zar, who had said Roxie por, had seen her wade nude from a lake. Formerly, when apparently she por, she had sunbathed beside a pool. But that wasn't it; until yesterday she'd continued swimming and sunbathing, yet it seemed she didn't por any more.

"The White Lady is beautiful," Lyn said tentatively.

"Yes."

Quick agreement, but that wasn't it either. She was still

beautiful and she didn't por any more.

Yet there was a possibility there. That the Bullanese, although they belonged to a different race, had found Roxie attractive was beyond doubt. Zin himself, that first day, had found her interesting in coveralls, but more so when she took them off. Yet one could grow tired of even a beautiful girl in a swimsuit, especially if she was of an alien race. But suppose, after one had grown tired of her in a swimsuit, she took it off?

Well, that would explain how Roxie could cease to por except to Zar that morning. And if that explanation was correct, Roxie might be a source of more manna yet, if she could be persuaded . . .

Back at the station, Benders, the language expert, wasn't much help about "por."

"I've come across it once or twice," he said, "without being able to establish its meaning. It's connected with religion somehow."

"That I guessed," Lyn said. "The tentative conclusion I reached was too damned simple. You're sure it's nothing to do with beauty—attraction—even sex as well?"

Benders shook his head. "I'm not sure. Get an invitation to one of the Bullanese religious ceremonies and you might find out. If you do, let me know."

Lyn knew Benders was be-

ing mildly sarcastic, but the suggestion gave him an idea. "I will," he said thoughtfully. "I will."

XI

BEFORE mentioning his plans to Roxie, Lyn went to Hobley to plead with him.

"I'm sorry, Premier," Hobley said firmly. "I haven't got the power to interfere with the sentence. And whether the Bullanese are concerned about the crime or not is neither here nor there. Miss Dainton was found guilty and sentence was passed. I really can't do anything."

"Hobley," said Lyn, "I know you're autonomous and I'm not trying to bribe or intimidate you. But if the base here is abandoned and Bullance is closed to commerce, and if I report that this happened because Mr. Hobley wouldn't cooperate with me, do you think you'll be popular with your own superiors?"

Hobley, who was a fat man, began to sweat. "If that isn't intimidation, I don't know what is."

"Mr. Hobley, you're a man of intelligence. Now, as you no doubt know, the fact that the *Meredith* left with a full load of manna was due entirely to the interest of the Bullanese in Roxie Dainton. If I am to achieve anything before the *Henry James* arrives, I need Roxie Dainton—and I need her outside the station."

Hobley found a face-saver. "Well, of course, if you'll be with her all the time and are prepared to take full responsibility . . ." he said. "After all, I don't want to be uncooperative, Premier."

Roxie was a tougher nut to crack. She didn't get furious and tell him she'd see him in hell first. She merely frowned slightly and said: "Lyn, I wish I knew how to take you. Sometimes I think I could trust you with anything. And other times it seems you'd sell me and your own soul and anything else you could think of, just to have another man-na load waiting for the *Henry James*."

"If you did trust me," said Lyn cheerfully, "things would be easier for both of us."

She shook her head somberly. "It isn't as easy as that to start trusting people."

"I'm telling you honestly, Roxie, I'm trying to fix up Bullance for your father, and for the hundred grand I'm going to get for doing it, and at the same time I'm getting to like a girl and she's getting to like me. I haven't made a pass at you yet, have I?"

"No," she said. "You haven't."

"If and when I do, I'll mean it. Doesn't the fact that I haven't, so far, show that you can trust me?"

"I don't know what it shows. I don't know where I'm at, and you're trying to do

so many things at once, I don't know what you really want either."

"If you want to stay cooped up here until the *Henry James* arrives, you can. If you don't, come swimming with me the way we used to."

"Except that I have to swim in the raw and you call all the Maniacs from far and wide to come and look at me."

Lyn grinned. "To tell the honest truth," he said, "all this is an elaborate plot to get you to swim with me."

"I'm not too happy about that either."

"No, but that's all right. I am—and you trust me, don't you, Roxie?"

THE Bullanese came, scores of them. They kept out of the way as much as possible, as before.

After some hesitation, Roxie, who had been relieved of the bracelet meant to keep her a prisoner in the base, threw off her clothes. Lyn kept his bathing trunks on.

They swam and returned to the bank. Roxie had promised to sunbathe and to try to forget the Bullanese ogling her from behind every bush.

But she didn't have to try. Before they reached the bank, the Bullanese were gone, every last one of them.

"Well, it didn't work," she said, throwing her wet hair back out of her eyes.

"I told you," said Lyn, "it

was all an elaborate plot to get you to swim in the raw."

"Lyn, you really don't mind that it didn't work? That the Bullanese don't care about me any more?"

"Roxie, even if you made the Bullanese sick, I'd still like you the way you are."

She reached for her clothes. "This was science, remember?"

"Yes," he said. "You'd better get dressed. Because I'm still not going to make a pass at you, and it's heroic work not to."

"SHE DID not por," said Zin. He wasn't angry—Bullanese were never angry. He didn't blame Lyn—Bullanese never blamed anybody.

"Zin, what do you have to do to por?" asked Lyn Barr.

"I cannot por."

"No, but the White Lady—what was she doing when she did por?"

"Nothing."

Lyn searched in his mind for a formula which might get the right answer. It wasn't ignorance of the language which stumped him; it was the language itself. So there wasn't much hope of finding other words to explain por.

Then Lyn had an idea. "Sometimes you have ceremonies," he said.

"Yes."

"Suppose the White Lady attended one of these ceremonies?"

Zin started to make a polite, roundabout refusal.

But when he was allowed to speak, Lyn said: "If she was present at such a ceremony, she might por."

Zin was silent for a long time. At last he said: "Next time, I will send for you and you will bring the White Lady."

XII

THE *Henry James* arrived three weeks early. All the manna there was at the base was twenty tons which the *Meredith* hadn't been able to take.

Although Lyn had the right to hold the *Henry James* at least three weeks, and more if necessary, he wished she hadn't been early. Something might have happened in the next three weeks—a Bullanese religious ceremony, for instance.

The arrival of the ship, however, did give him an opportunity to make another experiment. He borrowed the prettiest girls on the *Henry James*, had them immunized against Bullanese bacteria, and took them swimming with Roxie.

It was another flop. Quite a few Bullanese came to watch, wildly curious. But apparently not one of the girls could por.

No manna was delivered.

Roxie had been silent and withdrawn while the girls

were around, and especially as Lyn had laughed and had fun with them.

Later, when the girls were back on the *Henry James*, she said: "That little redhead certainly has a nice figure."

"Yes, but you don't need to be jealous," Lyn said. "Her father isn't a millionaire."

Roxie turned to him quickly. "Lyn, I know what it's like now. When I used to compete with another girl for a man—any girl, any man—I always won because I didn't give a damn about either of them. It's easy when you don't care."

Lyn didn't say anything.

"Don't get me wrong," she said. "I know I'm different now, happier, less unsure. And you've done it, Lyn."

He shook his head. "I didn't do anything. If somebody who's all mixed up starts untwisting himself, others can help, but they can't do the job. I told you once I'd like you if you became likable, Roxie. Well, I like you now. I like you a lot."

A COUPLE of weeks passed and then the summons came. There were no regular dates for ceremonies any more than the Bullanese had regular dates for anything. Apparently what happened was simply that everyone felt it was time for a ceremony.

"And you're lucky you only had to wait a couple of

weeks," Roza told Lyn. "We don't know every time they hold a ceremony, naturally. But there's sometimes more than six months between them." He sighed. "I wish I were coming with you."

"Sorry," Lyn said. "The invitation is purely for Roxie, in the hope that she'll por again. And it's assumed I'll go along because they've hardly ever seen Roxie without me."

"Well, don't miss anything," Roza said.

Roxie wasn't keen on the affair. She had never really taken to the Bullanese; despite their alien grace they repelled her, and probably when she had beaten up Zar part of the reason had been a fear of him, an unthinking urge to destroy him.

However, by this time it seemed so natural to do as Lyn told her that she never seriously considered refusing to go, although she did say: "Lyn, does this manna business really matter to you? Suppose the Maniacs never did bring any more and you had to go back and say you'd failed?"

"I wouldn't like to do that," he said. "But I don't suppose it would break me. After all, your father knows that the chances of success aren't high. And I guess he's pretty pleased to get one full shipload—something that never happened before."

"Suppose you do fail—will you be sorry you tried? Will you be sorry you ever came to Bullance?"

He grinned. "I know what you want me to say, but I'm not going to say it. Not now."

He didn't mention any possibility of danger to Roxie, apart from warning her, whatever happened, not to show surprise or lose her head. However, he knew that even a polite, peaceful race like the Bullanese, who had never harmed a human being, might suddenly become very different during the fervor of a religious ceremony. In his pockets he had two guns which between them could fire several hundred bullets singly or very rapidly. And he had arranged for Hobley and Gunther to be listening not too far from the village, ready to come running if any shots were fired.

As for Roxie, he merely had her dress in a shimmering white gown with spangled tights underneath it, just in case she should be called on to take part in the ceremony or preside over it, or anything of the sort. Although lately it had seemed that whatever por was, it had nothing to do with Roxie's physical charms, he still wasn't entirely convinced.

As night fell they went to Morat and Zin motioned them to sit in the shadows of an open hut. The village looked

the same as usual and the only preparation which had been made was that two posts had been driven into the ground about eight feet apart.

"What is going to happen, Zin?" Lyn asked.

Zin disappeared into the shadows, pretending not to have heard.

There was no elaborate ceremonial at the beginning, at any rate. Gradually the clearing in the center of the village filled. There was little or no talking, for the Bullanese were not a talkative race. They stood about in their ordinary clothes as if waiting for a *deus ex machina* to arrive and start the proceedings.

THOUGH Lyn and Roxie were in deep shadow, the Bullanese knew they were there, and periodically shot curious glances at them. There was nothing resembling the eager interest which had once been shown in Roxie.

Presently a wooden box was brought out and all the Bullanese, male and female, crowded around it. Some sort of draw seemed to be going on. When it was over, five of them stood to one side—two women and three men.

Still there seemed to be no excitement, no feeling of anticipation. Someone pointed with a kind of wand and one of the five lay down.

Before Lyn and Roxie sus-

pected what was going to happen, the Bullanese with the wand had driven its sharp point into the bulbous pelvis of the man on the ground. The stick went straight through and pinned the creature to the soft ground beneath him. He moaned, writhing and twitching like an insect on a pin, clearly in mortal agony.

Roxie made a muffled exclamation of horror. Lyn grabbed her arm and pressed it. At such a time, it might be dangerous to draw attention to themselves.

Now there was excitement and pleasure. The Bullanese filed past the dying Maniac, looking down on his agony in simple delight.

A few minutes later the second of the five victims was similarly skewered and his moans mingled with those of the other. Then one of the women was pinned to the ground, and the other man. The four of them screamed and groaned in torture, their gray limbs thrashing about. They formed a square about the two posts.

Roxie closed her eyes, but almost immediately opened them again. Some of the Bullanese held flares now, and it was impossible not to watch the scene in the center of the dark clearing.

There was a sort of pattern in the wanderings of the Bullanese, through the square of

victims, out at the other side and back. Although there was no singing and dancing, everybody was happy—except the four dying creatures with sharp wands through them.

The remaining victim, a young female, stood aside. She was not bound. Only at the last moment, when they came for her, did terror take over and she tried to flee.

They caught her and brought her to the center of the square. Her ankles were tied to one post about five feet from the ground. Her wrists were bound to the other, and she lay in mid-air, stretched taut. About her the four other victims still moaned and writhed.

There was a shout and at the signal the girl tied to the posts was surrounded. For a moment Lyn and Roxie couldn't see what was happening. Then Roxie put her hands over her eyes, and Lyn turned his head away, sickened.

He would have taken Roxie away right then if he could, but it was several hours before they could go. By that time the four skewered Maniacs were dead. They hadn't been eaten. Apparently it wasn't worth eating anybody unless he was alive. The body of the girl, what remained of it, still hung from the posts.

One by one the Bullanese had left the square and gone into their own cottages. At last, when the square was

empty except for the bodies of the five victims, Lyn pulled Roxie to her feet and they began to run back to the base. She was crying helplessly.

XIII

IN THE large, bright room at the top of the PDC Building, Lyn said: "I took the whole colony off Bullance, with all the most valuable equipment. We're not allowed to interfere."

Dainton shuddered. "Roxie saw this?"

"She's getting over it. She used to think she was cruel. Now she knows she's not."

"I still don't get it. What was por? Why were the Bullanese fascinated by Roxie at first?"

"Nobody guessed that such a primitive race had a kind of telepathy," Lyn said. "Empathy, rather. They draw strength from misery and grief and pain and bitterness. When Roxie arrived on Bullance, she was quite a treat for them. She was por. By just being near her, they could get a real jag—no need to torture one of themselves to death."

"But Roxie stopped being so bitter and miserable. She began to be almost happy. No thanks to the Maniacs—they don't draw grief out; they just stand around and get drunk on it. Anyway, Roxie wasn't so bitter any more. She wasn't in mental agony—ex-

cept that day when she beat up Zar, and as he truthfully told the others, she por again. Only by the time the other Bullanese got close enough to her to sense it, she didn't por any more."

"I see," said Edgar Dainton thoughtfully.

"PDC employees are well balanced, stable. Roxie was the first and only human of her type the Maniacs ever encountered. Now if you really want manna and aren't too concerned about your methods, you can hire a lot of miserable people and send them out to Bullance. You'll get a lot of manna."

"I don't think I will, somehow . . . Hey, sit down! We've hardly started to talk!"

"I've finished," said Lyn pleasantly, "and I've got a date with your daughter. For a change, we're going swimming."

Dainton didn't smile, but his eyes were warm and a little moist. "You are, are you?"

"I'm going to make a pass at Roxie. Do you mind?"

"Mean you never have?"

"Not like this one. I had to see you first and make sure her father's prospects were good enough to marry her."

"Take care of her," Dainton said huskily.

"That's one thing I'm good at," Lyn said. "All Roxie ever needed was love. I'm going to see she gets it—from you and me both."

END