

If you wanted a really decent house, you had to go to work for General Housing . . . if your appliances went bad, you'd have to switch to General Appliances to replace them. Unfortunately for Larry Moss, there was no General Rebellion, and the General he seemed most likely to end up with was Court Martial.

PRIVATES ALL

by Floyd Wallace

THE ROBOT CLEANER COUGHED hoarsely, not unlike a seal with a fish caught in its throat, and scurried erratically, snorting noisily and nuzzling the dust.

The repairman wiped his hands. "It's running," he said.

"Not very well," said Larry Moss.

"Yeah, but it's running. What do you want?"

"It's guaranteed a lifetime."

"The lifetime of the appliance," said the repairman. "The first time something goes wrong, that's the end of the guarantee. If we can keep it going for you, that's strictly gravy."

"But it's comparatively new," said Larry. "I've seen them fifteen years old in better shape than this."

"Yeah? Who had one?"

"A friend of mine," said Larry.

"Did he work for General Appliances?"

"Yes."

"That's the difference. They don't build the same quality for Housing that they do for themselves."

Larry ignored the explanation. He watched the cleaner apprehensively as it approached the fireplace. The cleaner extended a tip cautiously toward the ashes and the firescreen obligingly rolled up out of the way for it. When a foot or so of the hose was exposed the screen banged down swiftly. The screen wasn't as fast as the cleaner, which withdrew the hose in time.

"Nothing wrong with those reactions," said the repairman.

The cleaner stood quivering in front of the fireplace. Again it extended the snout but when the screen rolled up it did not accept

the invitation. It shook and then rolled away and began vacuuming books.

"Done?" said Larry as the repairman packed his kit.

"Unless there's something else. I've gone over the dishwasher, stove, bed, and the landscape. Nothing else is covered by the service contract, is there?"

"I can't think of anything. I must say that nothing is working as well as when I bought the house."

"If I were you I wouldn't say it," growled the repairman. "It's not polite to bitch about housing if you work for General Housing. You do work for them, don't you?"

"I have a house."

"It could be your wife's."

"I work for Housing. She Entertainment."

"Entertainment? I'll bet she knows a trick or two." The repairman leered.

"Yes," said Larry. His wife was dear to him but she did not know a trick, let alone two. "Nothing more you can do with that cleaner?"

"It's noisy but it's working. If you're fussy about noise you can have it clean when you're out."

As he said this the cleaner picked up a book and blew on it heavily, scattering dust. Larry moved toward it but the repairman restrained him. "Take it easy. Give it a chance to show it knows what it's doing."

Several small snouts extended and began sucking in the dust cloud. Meanwhile the main snout opened wide and began to ingest the book. The book shape passed slowly through the tube and upon reaching the body slowly reversed direction and finally emerged from the nozzle somewhat crumpled but intact. The cleaner replaced the book on the shelf, vibrated, rolled to the next room and climbed on the table.

"See? It didn't hurt the book," said the repairman.

"I prefer flat books," said Larry. "Why is it on the table?"

Scratching his head the repairman went after it. "You've got me. You could use it for cleaning dishes."

"I have a dishwasher that picks up the dishes."

"Yeah, but this is a pretty good little machine."

"I don't want it on the table."

"Maybe it's forgotten the sixty-third robotic law," said the repairman.

"What's the sixty-third robotic law?"

"Don't expect me to remember. Robots themselves forget," said the repairman. "All I know is that when something goes wrong with these babies it's usually the sixty-third law. We'll fix that though."

The repairman knocked the cleaner off the table. It fell to the floor, whirred, and started to climb back. The repairman kicked it and

the cleaner stopped, buzzing questioningly. Again the repairman kicked it. The cleaner fled to the kitchen, opened the oven door and climbed in.

"That got it off the table," said the repairman.

"But I don't want it in the oven."

"You're intelligent. You ought to be able to think that through. It'll crawl out of the oven when the heat's turned on."

"I suppose it will," said Larry. "It just seems to me that it's a poor home when all the appliances don't work properly."

"Take my advice buddy. Don't say that to anybody but me and don't say it to me again," said the repairman with a scowl. "Ever hear of general laws?"

"I'm as loyal to the General as you are. I merely think that everything in a house should function perfectly."

"Don't think it either," said the repairman. "This place is falling apart. Do you know you've logged more than forty five thousand life hours on this shack?"

"That's counting company," said Larry. "There are three of us and we've had it less than four years."

"It's still wear, even if there's nobody in it. It has to be prorated, you know," said the repairman. "Why don't you buy a new place? Then you'll be satisfied."

The repairman left before Lar-

ry could reply and he still hadn't thought of what he should have said when Peggy came home. Peggy was a brass blonde, which was standard with General Entertainment. There was nothing compulsory in this standard, mostly it was a means of social identification. To nearly anyone Brass Blondes meant Entertainment and so Peggy was blonde, just as she would have carried books and a slide rule if she had been in Education.

She opened the door. "Home early?"

"I had to get the appliances fixed today."

"I can see that you did. The place is a mess."

"It's cleaner than it has been in weeks."

"Darling. Don't shout at me. I've had all I can take of temperament today."

"Oh, because you're in Entertainment. What's special about scheduling a program, a strictly commercial program?"

"Everything in Entertainment is temperament, even something you may think unglamorous. You knew this when you married me."

She meant it. As ridiculous as it was, she was capable of getting into a fierce argument over that. "I'm sorry. I know you've had it rough," he said. "What's really bothering me is this house."

"What's wrong with the house? I think it's nice."

"It *was* nice. Now it's wearing out."

"Oh," said Peggy. "I believe you're right."

"I shouldn't be," he said. "It's supposed to last a lifetime."

"Yes, but the lifetime of the house, naturally," she said. "How long does a girdle ad last? Lean hips, wide hips, the sensuous undulating pelvis, the stenographer's spread, the horsewoman's seat, the matron's development—the cycle runs through them all and then something else must be found. I've learned to expect this."

"But not a house. It should last," he said. "Now I'm told we should get a new one, just to have appliances that work."

"If that's what you think, trade it. I rely on your judgment," she said. "We'd better dress."

"But I've been trying to tell you—I don't see why we should have to trade it," he said. "I've been looking forward to the time the house would be paid off. After that I don't know but I have been considering General Nourishment."

"G—N? I suppose there are times you do want something special in the way of food," she said. "As for the house, I leave it entirely to you. It's your department. Dress now."

"Do we have to go out?" Her expression indicated they did. "Paper or cloth?"

"Informal. I'm sure you'll enjoy

yourself once you're out of the house."

"Maybe I won't," he said. "I saw Africa and China twice this week and we've already been to Mars and Venus. What's left?"

"Didn't I tell you?" she said calculatingly. "This is one party that's not transportation. We're going to the Kingans." She brushed her lips against his. "Food, darling. Hurry."

He suspected that she'd had no intention of going to the Kingans, until she found him in a difficult mood. As for the Kingans, they had nothing to recommend them except their food. One of them was in Nutrition.

Sandra came home from G—E (Education) and they put her to bed before leaving. She'd been fed at school—this was part of the Housing contract—Housing had a good Education clause, which was to be expected since few people bought houses who didn't also have children. Larry romped with her for half an hour since it was nothing for him to get ready and then left her with Peggy while he hurriedly changed. It was safe to leave Sandra alone. The sitter was the best.

This was another thing that had to be said for Housing. Their sitters were always the best and most up to date though the rates were the same as for anyone else. There was something about G—H, the good solid status that came

from owning a home, or possibly a secret agreement between the two generals that always produced the best sitters available.

They put Sandra in her room, turned the sitter on her, and went to the Kingans by third class Transportation. Third class T was not good, slow moving tangled streets belts instead of the faster and more comfortable underground tubes or the practically instantaneous first class air routes. But no one could have everything, at least not while there were young children. The solution was to have two or even three kids spaced just right so that between the time they grew up and before they married everyone in the family would be working for a different General. For a short period it was possible to have most things.

That was the way it went. Each General sold cheaply to his own private through the special discount credit card which granted a substantial mark-down on everything the General produced. To outsiders there was no discount and few people could afford to buy heavily from another General. This was not really a disadvantage. Anyone who knew what he wanted could shop around until he found the right General and stick with that General until he had his fill.

There were times, though, that it was inconvenient. Such as going third class T to a party that Larry

Moss went to only because occasionally he actually felt hungry for good food.

There was a crowd at the Kingans when they got there. At least it seemed crowded in four tiny rooms. Opal Kingan was Health now but until last year she'd been Appliances and this helped a little. Still, people could be stacked just so deep no matter how many space savers there were so there was hardly room to circulate. Larry and Peggy squeezed in the door and stood there until Opal saw them and came over.

"Dears," she said, pecking at Peggy's cheek and squeezing Larry's hand. "It's so nice. Do you know everyone?"

"I'll meet them," said Larry. He couldn't recognize anyone from the angle he saw them.

"Darling, you're radiant," said Peggy. "That's Health, I suppose."

"It is Health," giggled Opal. "About time, don't you think?"

It was about time, Larry thought. She was healthier than she had been but that was all that could be said. She was proof, if anyone needed it, that too much food was not good for any person.

"You almost persuaded me," said Peggy, arching her brows in a sweet smile. "But my General has compensations too. Oh, before I forget." She pretended to fumble in her purse for the tickets that were always there, presenting them with a flourish that was so

practiced it wasn't noticeable. "You might like to go to this."

"You shouldn't," said Opal, tucking the tickets away. "We hardly ever go anywhere but I'm sure we'll find use for these."

Larry saw her eyes widen pleasantly as she glanced at the tickets. Damn right they'd use them he thought. They didn't go out because they didn't have money. Fred was too sodden with food to consider overtime and extra work was bad for Opal's health. That's what they got for gorging so many years.

"It's nothing," said Peggy airily. Larry shook his head warningly but after a calculating inspection of the crowd Peggy continued: "Think anyone would care for entertainment?"

"I don't know who'll be able to see it—there are just too many here," said Opal with a laugh. "But it costs hardly anything with your card, does it? We can try."

Peggy hadn't bargained on this, Larry thought. He was the conservative one in the family. Perhaps this was mostly because he couldn't go around passing out pieces of a house. Once in a while he did get stuck by inviting too many people over but then they both had to pay for that. He couldn't just ask people to sit and admire the beautiful place they lived in. There had to be something else and what the Mosses could offer was entertainment.

Peggy's eyes shadowed but graciously she brought out her tele credit card. "We will try," she said.

"What a poor hostess I am," apologized Opal. "You haven't had a bite to eat. Wait here."

"No. You come with me. Larry'll bring me something." Peggy took a small cylindrical object out of her purse. "Here Larry. Plug in the checker and see how things are."

Larry took the checker and squeezed toward the kitchen. On his way he noticed one woman sitting on an elevator seat near the kitchen. For obvious reasons women usually sat on floor cushions or at least never raised their chairs to eye level. But this woman was quite proper in sitting so high. She had undergarments on. Most likely General Apparel. Nevertheless, Larry noticed her. She had nicely rounded thighs.

Larry squirmed into the kitchen and smelled the delicious aroma of food. He must be something of a gourmet to prefer food to ordinary nutrition. It was no better for the human body—but the taste. Yes, the taste. An elbow caught him in the ribs and jammed him against the doorway. "Well if it isn't Barry," a voice fractured his ear. "Thought you'd show up."

Wincing at the loudness as well as the mistaken name Larry turned. It was Fred Kingan, his host. "Couldn't keep me away."

"I should hope not," said Fred, thrusting a plate at Larry. "Have some food, fellow slob. Eat it up."

Larry mumbled that he had to plug in the checker but Fred had turned away and was shoving a plate at someone else and saying: "Eat, fellow slob."

Fred wasn't a bad guy. What he said was inoffensive—but it was the way he said it—as though the only reason people came to his parties was to eat. This was true, but he didn't have to say it.

Plate in hand, Larry found the power panel in back and opened it. There was not a vacant outlet. Every machine in the place was probably plugged in. He'd have to ask Opal what was safe to disconnect. He went back to the food and loaded the plate for Peggy. Every kind of food he could think of was here. Fred had splurged.

Larry edged out to the next room, searching for Peggy. He glanced up but the woman with undergarments had come down from the ceiling. It was too bad. She had fine legs and what else he couldn't see. He went on and finally found Peggy at the side of the circle around the tele. He gave her the plate and stayed to watch the program.

It was an old routine but good comedy, done by a famous comic who had created the bit twenty or thirty years ago. The story was that of the little pig who, as an experiment, was raised as a human, ev-

eryone around him pretending that he was a person. The comic, older and grayer than when he had first created the role, *was* the little pig to perfection. He pantomimed with great art, even suggesting a curly tail that wasn't there. A series of misadventures befell the pig, who, when young, was quite mischievous, but he did grow up and surprisingly, learned to read, write and speak.

Growing up believing that he was human, the pig behaved as one. However he was a smart pig and gradually he began to suspect the truth. And then one day at dinner he asked what it was he was eating. When told it was bacon he became visibly upset and left the table to look up the word in the dictionary. When he did not return they went after him and found him in his room. He was reciting in his little pig's voice of squeaky grunts: "Herewith, to take effect at once, I resign from the human race."

They asked him to repeat it and he did. The humans laughed and asked him to repeat it. With all the comic dignity he had the pig said it again, even more forcefully. The next scene showed him squealing as he was dragged away to the meat packing plant.

The merriment from this died away and Larry remembered he was hungry and went back to the kitchen. There was plenty of food left and he piled it on his plate.

Black rare roast beef and brown juicy ham with good fat, fresh purple onions and orange tomatoes, even olives, perfect and white. Gourmet stuff. He gulped it down before reminding himself that it was more pleasurable to eat slowly, savoring the taste sensations.

Few people were in the kitchen now; many had left to watch the entertainment. One who was there was the woman he'd seen previously sitting near the ceiling. That is, he thought it was she. He hadn't seen her face but this one was well dressed and was also wearing undergarments. She was talking to an older man and Larry could see the thin line of underthings around her thighs, well molded buttocks. There weren't two women of that description at the same party.

She was shapely, not tall and somewhat plump but with fine contours. If she weren't so well dressed he would say she was in Nutrition rather than Apparel. Maybe it was her husband who was in Nutrition but though there was nothing to suggest this, Larry didn't think she was married. The impression was there, however it came, that she was free to shop around and did so.

She squeezed affectionately the man she was talking to and came to Larry. "Uncle's such a dear, isn't he?"

His mouth was full so Larry grunted. Uncle was tall and quite

chunky too, a touch of gray in his hair and a full if somewhat ragged mustache. Distinguished possibly but not dear.

"Do I know you?" she said, smiling. "I'm Julie Sanford and that's my uncle, Hugh Taylor."

He swallowed and said: "Larry Moss." Her teeth were even and white and her face was plump, very attractive; her hair was black and sparkling. Except that the well fed siren was momentarily out of fashion she could be Entertainment as well as Nutrition or Apparel. She was hard to place.

"Delightful, isn't it?" she said, indicating what he was eating. "Sometimes I think synthetics are preferable to the real."

"Fred's in Nutrition," said Larry. Her ignorance was annoying.

"I know," she said, taking a thin slice of ham from his plate and nibbling it. "Delicious. No gamey flavor of animal protein."

She wore a brassiere and needed it. Larry pictured her in thin paper, translucent. She would be very attractive, but she was that now. Belatedly he remembered the checker and went to the power panel. There was still no place to connect it.

Julie asked him what the difficulty was and when he told her she said: "I shouldn't worry. A sitter is perfectly safe."

"I know, but a checker is supplied with each sitter and I might as well use it."

"That's sensible. Let's find out what appliance we can disconnect."

Larry agreed and when he finished eating went in search of Opal. The party was becoming confused and he didn't find her but Fred bumped into him. Fred carried a bottle. His face was red and his speech thick.

"Barry, old slob," he roared, brandishing the bottle. "Scotch wine. Real honest to god grain neutral spirits. Slop it up."

He dragged Larry to the wall and took a glass from a popout, spilling liquor into the glass which he thrust into Larry's hand. "Try this."

Larry tried it. He seldom used stimulants. They were expensive, difficult to get even in Nutrition. There were so many people and just so much food to go around that productivity couldn't be wasted on nonessentials. The scotch wine was therefore good, sweet and smoky, burning as it went down. It was partly imagination but he got a lift almost immediately.

"Drink it," said Fred, and drank half a tumblerful himself. Fred replenished Larry's glass and weaved off. Larry went looking for Opal but didn't find her. He did come upon Peggy, holding a glass and smiling warmly either at him or the man with his arm around her waist. It was just the alcohol and the party and Larry knew it didn't mean anything. The scotch

wine was getting to him too. He felt fuzzy and wonderful and almost forgot what he was looking for until Julie reminded him. "I've got your connection," she said.

He turned, bumping into her and not moving away. "Connection?"

"For the checker."

"Fine."

She took his glass before he spilled it and he followed her to the kitchen. He located the checker, plugging it in. This released the nearest end, allowing him to separate it into two parts. He put the part that wasn't plugged in into his pocket. Julie took a sip of the scotch wine and made a face.

"Good, isn't it?" he said.

"Well, powerful. I've had better."

"So have I," he said, though he hadn't. He did know that it made him feel wonderful and that was all that could be asked. He took the glass from her and gulped the contents in several swallows, shuddering pleasurably. She wavered in his sight. It was becoming a hell of a party, better than wandering over half the world or to Mars or Venus just to see what was to be seen.

Here there was nothing to look at except Julie Sanford and that suited him. Other people were in the kitchen but they were at the far end. He and Julie were stand-

ing in an alcove formed by a group of appliances that were too big to slide in and out of the walls and so in effect the two of them were quite alone. He stared in fascination at her dress. Formal and with undergarments. His finger traced the line of underthings across her thighs. "I like that," he said.

She moved away but not far. "What?"

He realized she thought he meant something different from what he intended. He was warm from what he had drunk and he tingled. "It's not many women who can afford underthings," he said.

"Oh."

She seemed disappointed and he didn't want to disappoint her. "I noticed you when I came in," he said. "You were sitting near the ceiling so I looked. Underthings show off a woman's legs so nicely." Now that he thought of it he had not merely admired the luxuries she obviously possessed. She was vibrant, freer than the people he knew.

He caught her hand clumsily and pulled her to him. She struggled but not much. When he kissed her it was almost shocking in intensity. It was actually shocking, though not from her. The tingling sensation and the warmth weren't from her either, nor from the alcohol.

He let go of her and took out the checker. It was glowing and

sparkling and had been for several minutes. If he hadn't been drunk he would have recognized that this was an emergency.

Julie straightened her dress, smiling. "That was unexpected."

"I didn't mean it," he said. "I'm sorry. I've got to get to the phone plate."

"Why did you do it then?" asked Julie. She caught sight of the glowing checker. "Don't worry. Nothing's wrong."

His head was still whirling but it was clearing rapidly. When he had to he could shake off a drunk fast. He left Julie and hurried to the phone plate. He didn't have a piece of general exchange in his pocket and had to dash off to find Peggy.

She was nowhere to be seen but her credit card was still in the tele. He snatched it out. No one said anything but he could sense the disapproval of those watching the entertainment. The hell with them. His kid came first.

There was some difficulty with the circuits and by the time he got a clear picture on the plate Peggy had heard and was at his side. She asked what was wrong but, intent on the picture, he didn't answer. Something was wrong with the viewer in his house and though the image was fine he couldn't raise a sound at that end. Sandra was sitting up in bed, a pinched frightened look on her face, and she didn't speak to him when he

called out to her, didn't seem to be aware that he was calling.

"What's the matter?" said Peggy.

"She's awake."

"Nothing else seems to be wrong."

"It's enough for me. I'm going home."

As he spoke Sandra got out of bed and wandered around, unaccountably shaking. The viewplate in the bedroom was connected to the sitter so obviously the sitter was invisible but it had to be there. "We'd better go, but there's no need to become upset about it," said Peggy.

"I'm not upset, but let's go."

Hurriedly he removed the credit card from the phone and gave it to her. They got their belongings together and left. Julie was waiting for them just outside the Kingans' apartment. "I heard," she said. "I'll give you a lift."

"A lift?" he said stupidly.

"It's faster than the street belts if you have to hurry," she said.

"Anything to get home," he said.

"I live down the hall. Come with me and I'll have you home in no time."

He didn't understand what she was talking about but he and Peggy followed Julie to her apartment and through it to an outside terrace on which was parked a neat little five passenger helicar. It passed through his mind that he

had misjudged Julie. She had much more than he had thought. He had never known anyone who had a *private* helicar, or known anyone who knew someone who had. If he hadn't been sweating out what was happening to Sandra he would have been impressed.

Julie swung the helicar out into the private lanes, chatting lightly to distract him. He answered but was not distracted. His head was beginning to ache, possibly from the unaccustomed use of stimulants. Skillfully Julie landed the helicar on their tiny lawn and he jumped out, heading for the house. The door opened as he approached. Inside he shivered. It was cold when he entered though he didn't notice it directly. Hurrying into the bedroom he snatched up Sandra who cried as he held her. Seconds later Peggy came and took Sandra from him.

He turned on the sitter. "What's the matter?"

"Your thermostats misbehaved," said Julie.

"It's forty degrees, twenty degrees below optimum sleeping comfort," said the sitter.

"Why didn't you do something about it?" he said.

"It's a sitter, not a fixer," said Julie.

"When the temperature dropped below the minimum I started radiating," said the sitter.

"My capacity was not sufficient to compensate for the cold air that came from the conditioning system. I attempted to warn you but contact was delayed."

Larry felt a little guilty, remembering why he couldn't be contacted, but it really wasn't his fault. It was the house. The sitter was still radiating heat but it couldn't warm an entire house when the air conditioning was pouring in cold air. Resentfully he went around kicking the walls where the thermostats were located and this had the desired effect; heat began blasting out of the vents and in a short time the place was comfortable. He and Julie went to the living room while Peggy put Sandra to bed and turned off the sitter.

"What a nice place," said Julie, standing in front of the roaring fire in the fireplace. It was too warm now but it was better than being cold.

"It's all right. It has drawbacks."

"It was just the thermostats, and they can be replaced. Of course it wouldn't do you much good unless you put in the best, and you can't get those unless you work for Appliances."

"This is the first time it's happened," he said.

"Possibly it may never occur again," she said. "Are you coming back to the party?"

"I don't think so. I've had it."

"Glad I could be of help. I'll go now."

She got up and he went with her to the helicar. After he came back he discussed the house with Peggy. She had little to say except to repeat what she had said, that the house was his department. If he wanted to trade it for a new one, that was his decision to make. It was not what he had in mind but she pleaded a headache and went to bed before he could tell her what solution had occurred to him.

He stayed up for nearly an hour after she retired, examining the idea thoroughly. It was his idea. Julie had suggested it unknowingly but it was basically his and he would have thought of it in the next few days if not tonight. It was a practical solution, completely sound. He wondered why more people hadn't made use of the principle he had discovered. It was simple, this was the important thing. He went to bed feeling that he had accomplished something and did not mention to Peggy then or later what he had decided.

Arrangements took several days and after that he had to wait several days while formalities were observed. It was not lightly that allegiances were transferred. Still, in less than two weeks he came home with a new future. There was nothing tangible to show Peggy that he had advanced and in a

way he regretted not having some token of the change but it would have to suffice to *know* that at last he was getting somewhere.

Peggy entered and brushed her lips perfunctorily against his. "Tired?" she said.

"Rather," he said and started to tell her but something twined about his legs. It was the cleaner, which had crept to them and was impartially vacuuming both him and Peggy. He kicked at it but it ducked and scurried away. In the kitchen he could hear it climb into the oven.

She wrinkled her nose in annoyance. "Really, you should do something about that. It creates a disturbance when I button up dinner."

It wasn't the way he planned it but it was a natural opening. "That's the second thing on my list. First are the thermostats."

"Nothing has happened since the one incident. Does it still bother you?"

"I think of it now and then. After thermostats the cleaner, and then I thought of a really good marketer and chef, or perhaps a bathroom cosmetic machine, unless you prefer a portable model."

She frowned. "Aren't you going overboard? These things are expensive."

"They would be, if I were in Housing."

"You didn't," she said.

"I did, just that," he said. "They need men in Appliances and things are a little slack in Housing so they allowed the transfer. Today I was sworn in. It was a beautifully simple ceremony which began: 'Neither to the highest nor the lowest position in General Appliances do I aspire but will accept what my ability and circumstances warrant. All of us gathered here, witnesses and oathmaker, are the General's privates and serve him in such capacity.'"

There was a catch in his breath. Larry went on. "After that I said: 'I do, until death do us part,' and was accepted, with a promotion. It was impressive."

"All ceremonies are alike," said Peggy.

"It wasn't that way in Housing."

"It was. You don't remember," she said. "Appliances doesn't have much status."

"I think it does," he said. "Few people have houses but everyone needs appliances. Besides, there was a promotion. Half a grade."

"They could have cut you down."

"They didn't."

"I hope it works out," she said. "Will we have to give up the house?"

"We have enough paid so that it was prorated to Appliances. I found that out before asking for a transfer."

"If you're happy I'm happy for you."

"I knew you would be. Celebration tonight?"

"Some other time," she said. "I just don't feel gay."

This was the way Appliances began. Thermostats were replaced and temperatures were always even. It was soon possible to take-home a new cleaner and it was efficient. Perhaps too much so. Color began to disappear from walls and sections of the floor were sucked loose, which occasioned sizable repair charges, but it was a good cleaner. It never climbed into the oven and he didn't have to kick it. Larry could look forward to many other things he always wanted.

But the new General was not the same as his old. There were inefficiencies that Housing wouldn't tolerate. For instance, all of the large machines were crated as soon as they were created. But many of them were sold within a radius of a few miles of the plant. It would be cheaper to deliver these machines uncrated.

In Appliances favor it must be said that they managed with a small inventory and yet no one waited ten minutes for the machine he asked for. Of course Appliances had a more predictable market than homes and apartments and hotels and their vast experience helped them set quotas so that their supply was always

just adequate to meet the demand. G-A *was* good and Larry might have conceded they could balance efficiencies Housing except for one thing: they didn't make proper use of Larry Moss. They didn't realize how good he had been in Housing and what he could do for them—if they'd let him.

Another thing he didn't fully approve of—hours. He didn't work longer than in housing but the distribution of his time was unbalanced. Some days he'd work overtime, a few minutes or several hours; other days he'd be sent home early. Each week it came out even but it disrupted his home life and he didn't care to think it would always be like this. He didn't want to adjust but in spite of himself he did gradually get used to this treatment.

It was no great surprise then when, for the third time in a month, Larry was told he should go home early. He heard it without wanting to, putting his things away slowly. It was two hours before Peggy would be home, two hours and a half before Sandra would leave Education. He didn't have a piece of general exchange in his pocket. A credit card for the belts but that was all. He'd rather work but they wouldn't let him so he'd have to find something else.

On his way out he stopped at the take-home counter. Novelties and gimcracks mostly, but they

were very cheap to Appliance privates and they came in handy when visiting. He selected one item, a tiny plug-in that ionized the air in a room, causing it to glow much as neon did in a tube. It was a startling little gadget; no other light source was needed when this was used and the illumination was the best that had yet been devised, as far as illumination alone was concerned.

There were almost certain to be defects, the chief of which was that if it ionized air it was almost certain to do the same to the nervous system of anyone who came near it. And what that would do to a person Larry didn't know. Anyway it hadn't been tested for this effect yet and so it was legal until positively proven to be harmful. Larry was no one to second guess the General. If it was good enough for Appliances no one else could complain. Besides he didn't want it for himself. Any number of his friends would welcome it as a gift and no questions asked. It was also cheap to him though possibly expensive to operate.

Larry went out and rode the belts aimlessly, except that he stayed in the single fare zone. There wasn't much to this and when, after ten minutes, he found himself near the Kingans' he decided to go see them. He hadn't visited them since the party and though there was no ulterior mo-

tive, Fred did serve good food. Fred would welcome the light-all gadget. His wife had worked in Appliances but that was last year and they wouldn't have this.

Larry got off the belt and prudently walked across the zone change, presenting and withdrawing the transfer in one swift motion to the belt monitor. The machine blinked but accepted the transfer and let him on. It was sharp little things of this nature that made Larry feel good. He knew his way around. He rode the belt to the Kingans', went up to their apartment and rang the bell. No one answered. He tried again but no one came. They were probably working, as everyone else was except those stupid enough to transfer to Appliances.

Larry sat in the lounge at the end of the hall and waited. An hour and forty minutes before he was due home. In a few minutes someone left an apartment and came toward him. At first Larry thought it was Fred. The two men were about the same size. But it couldn't be Fred because he would have answered if he'd been home. As the man came nearer Larry saw that though he was overweight as Fred was, he was somewhat older and his flesh hung loosely. The man smiled foolishly at Larry, awkwardly carrying a package under his arm. His behaviour was peculiar but

Larry thought nothing of it until the man shifted the package and Larry caught the smell. Food. Meat.

Larry hadn't noticed exactly which apartment the man had come from but now he was certain: Fred's. This was the all time low—a thief. In the words of the immortal General: "Who takes my purse takes nothing but a credit card which I can cancel in ten minutes without further liability. Who steals my product takes that which I have labored long to establish, the very symbol of my trademark." In the time it took to think this the man was past and Larry instinctively flung himself at the retreating figure. He misjudged and clipped the man's legs and the two of them went down together. The man grunted and twisted a frightened face toward Larry. "Don't," he whispered hoarsely. "I'll give you half."

Larry smashed his fist on the mouth that said it and had the satisfaction of seeing blood begin to trickle. The fat old man struggled and Larry threw another punch that flattened a bulbous nose. The fat man wouldn't give up and still he squirmed and tried to twist free. "Saboteur," shouted Larry. "Product thief."

With this, the apartments nearby emptied. What so many people were doing home at this hour Larry didn't know but they heard him and came boiling out. Taking

in the situation at a glance they surged around and jerked the fat old man from Larry and began beating him, striking out in fury. Larry got to his feet and watched from a distance. The crowd tore the old man's clothing and scratched at his face. They gave the thief everything they had and the principal reason he wasn't obliterated in seconds was that there were so many of them that they kept pulling each other away.

"Please," begged the fat man in a voice that rose higher. "Don't hit me. It's bad for my health. Doctors say so." He went down and they kicked him for a while but that was tame so they hauled him up and beat him again.

Larry watched but this was enough. The thief's face wasn't recognizable. One eye bulged dangerously. There was no blood there, but a clear colorless fluid dripped from a punctured eyeball. The mob ought to know when to stop. Larry's stomach contracted and he turned away. Beside him, though he hadn't known anyone was there, was the woman he'd met at the Kingans' party, Julie something or other. "We ought to call," he said tonelessly.

"I think so," said Julie. "We can call from my place."

They went down the hall to her apartment. Larry didn't have a single piece of general exchange

with him. He wanted her to charge it to his credit card but she said it was nothing and made the call herself.

Larry sat down. The thief deserved everything he got but Larry didn't want to go out until Protection arrived and took the man away. He didn't want to see the poor mangled bastard.

"I guess I did my part," he said when Julie Sanford, he remembered her name, finished calling. "I caught him."

"I thought it was you."

"How did you know?"

"I heard someone shouting in the hall. I opened the door and saw that you were holding him and then the mob came."

"You saw it," he said. "Why did he do it?"

"I imagine he couldn't resist the food the Kingans always have."

"Are you condoning his behaviour?"

"I'm not condoning anything. To him the temptation must have been irresistible."

"Why? He was fat," said Larry. "I never saw a fat person outside of Nutrition. He didn't have to steal someone else's food."

"I doubt that he's Nutrition. You heard him beg not to be hit because of his health."

"That doesn't put him in Health. What kind of illness produces obesity these days?"

"I can't say," said Julie. "We

conquer old diseases and new ones arise as fast as we can name them. I do know that most persons' lives are not conducive to physical fitness."

"You are justifying his behavior."

"I'm not," said Julie. "You wanted to know and I told you what I thought."

"Even if he is in Health, which I don't admit, he could have transferred to Nutrition. Being a gourmet is no excuse for stealing."

"I have an unfair advantage in the argument," said Julie. "He lives nearby so I've met him a few times and know him slightly. He's in Health for an obscure ailment. If he transfers he dies."

"You set me up on that," said Larry. "Maybe I should have let him get away. Fred wouldn't have missed the food."

"I think you did exactly what you should have," said Julie. "Most people can't have everything. In fact there are some who can have hardly anything. They're better off to accept it."

"Julie." A deep pleasant voice sounded.

"Uncle wants me," said Julie. "Excuse me. I'll be right back."

He watched her disappear into the next room. In spite of his somewhat gloomy preoccupation with the fat man it was a pleasure to see her walk. She had such fine motions to walk with. When she was gone he shook his head and

looked around, mostly to take his mind off what he had been thinking of.

The word for the apartment was gracious. He'd been here once before, when she'd flown him home during the crisis with the sitter but he'd been upset and hadn't noticed anything then. Though in the same building with the Kingans' it was nothing like their place. It was larger than his own home, which was considered a showplace. It was roomy and there was no need for space savers but there was plenty of these too, flush against the wall so that only a practiced eye could discern that there were space savers. The effect was one of quiet magnificence, more suitable for a board of Generals than a private residence.

A closet door swung open and this was another nice thing. In most apartments everything was efficient because if it wasn't people couldn't live there. Here there was enough room so that a door didn't have to function as an intricately put together machine that wouldn't work at all if one part failed. Larry got up to close the door and looked inside. Clothes—Julie's. Rows of dresses, coats and jackets. And everything was cloth, or fur or leather. There was not one paper article of apparel among them.

Larry sat down, dazzled. He couldn't place Julie and her uncle.

Housing, Apparel, Appliances, Transportation, Nutrition, Health—they seemed to belong to all of them. Generals lived no better, and they were not generals. They didn't have the authoritative manner.

Julie and her uncle came out soon after Larry sat down. "Julie tells me you captured a product thief," said Hugh Taylor in a meaty voice.

"I don't take credit for it."

"But we know where the credit belongs," said Hugh Taylor, wringing Larry's hand.

"Thanks. I'm Appliances," said Larry automatically, staring at the other's lapel for identification. There was none.

"That's a good field," said Taylor easily. "Where would we be without Appliances? Julie, this calls for a celebration. Bring a snack." He didn't say what he was in and it wasn't manners to ask. There couldn't be anything mysterious about it though—there shouldn't be.

Julie came back with a tray. Larry recognized crackers, though they were startlingly white, but the deep yellow squares and thin slices of some red meat, not bloody, just red, were beyond him. "Food?" he said, tasting a yellow square. It was somewhat bitter, but good in an odd fashion.

"Our own," said Taylor. "You may not be familiar with it. Try everything."

Larry tried. The red meat was strong, even gamey. From a wild animal the thought flashed through his mind. No, there wasn't one wild creature left on earth. He sipped the drink and looked up in surprise. "Champagne?"

"Beer," said Taylor with a laugh. "We serve things that belong together."

It was delicious, everything was, but he left as soon as he could get away. Even so it was late when he got home. Peggy had held dinner for him; Sandra had been fed and put to bed. They had a silent quarrel during dinner; he was not hungry and anyway their food was hardly the equal of what Julie had served.

The silent quarrel lasted through the tele programs and didn't end when they went to bed. He thought of the fat old man whose obesity did not come from overeating and probably was not as old as he seemed, perhaps no older than himself—and then he thought of Julie and her uncle. They were worlds apart.

He wondered why everything came so easily for Julie and her uncle—but the bed said: "Sleep." The thought disturbed him and he went on thinking it through the ten minute interval in which he was allowed to fall asleep naturally. He didn't reach a conclusion and was still awake when the bed again said: "Sleep." This time he

was not allowed further grace; the machine put him to sleep immediately.

In the morning he picked up his thoughts where he had left them and took them with him to work. He was preoccupied with this on the job and didn't stop a production line when the quota had been reached. This worked to his benefit. For once, which happened occasionally, predictions failed and there was a greater demand than anticipated for the appliance he had overproduced. It was a mistake, but since he had nothing to say in his own behalf—the best defense—instead of being demoted for goofing, he was credited with having instinctive insight and was allowed a token extra at the take-home counter.

He should have been excited and pleased at this but it didn't matter, as it once would have. He'd made up his mind.

It was a week before he was able to do anything with his decision. He'd made a mark in Appliances and since he was definitely upgrading his hours were more regular than they had been. But he was new and not completely accepted and once in a while he had to take dirty jobs and less desirable schedules. The first time he got off early he went calling on Julie Sanford.

He went to her apartment hoping *not* to see her and he got his wish. No one was home. The

door was locked but though the device was strong it was simply made. He had some mechanical skill and a good unscrambler put out by Appliances and with little difficulty he let himself inside. It was dangerous if he were caught—how much so both he and the fat man knew—but the rewards were such that he didn't think of danger. He went through the apartment hastily but thoroughly.

And there wasn't a thing.

Clothing, food, furniture, appliances—none of these gave him a clue. Neither Julie nor her uncle had ever stated their service. He had asked them directly and hinted otherwise but they had ignored him and evaded the questions so he didn't know and it was imperative that he find out.

Determinedly he searched again and finally in a wall-flush desk he came upon a number of photos of Julie. Mostly she wore tiny triangular shorts and a microscopic halter and though she was luscious when scantily dressed it wasn't this that intrigued him. He looked at the background in the pictures.

Behind her in the photos was an old fashioned house and much beyond that was a crude building and surrounding everything was a strange vegetation he'd never seen. In another picture Julie stood beside a huge ungainly machine whose function he couldn't guess. In still another she was

feeding animals. Live animals. They were not in a zoo or a mechanical reconstruction park.

He snapped the pictures with his minicamera, replaced what he had found, and left the apartment without being discovered.

In three days he made sense of what he had seen but it took him hours every night after work of running down the information he sought. During this time his relations with Peggy were strained. The silent quarrel never seemed to end. He didn't get a chance to talk over with her what he had planned but it wouldn't have made much difference. Once he knew what could be done he was going to do it. And Peggy wasn't much for talk unless the subject was entertainment, which this wasn't.

He made plans, checked the angles thoroughly, went back over his plans, and then made a special application for a transfer to General Farms.

And was brought to trial, a full dress General Court-martial.

It was brief and devastating. He was a witness in his own behalf, which was possibly his biggest mistake. The plant stopped work early—it was either that or overtime for the jurors. It was a short quota day and by speeding up the production lines they were able to turn out the proper volume and still quit half an hour early. 'Do you swear to tell the

truth and nothing but?" barked the bailiff. He worked on a control panel next to Larry's.

"By all the Generals," said Larry. He was confused. Telecameras were strategically placed, many of them focussed on him. He hadn't expected to be tried at all and certainly hadn't thought it would be done with such a production.

The judge, in regular hours the Lieutenant Manager of the plant, leaned back. "You have made application for a transfer to General Farms."

"Yes sir. A special application."

"This isn't in your favor. You are saying in effect that we must consider the application whether or not it is convenient for us to do so. We may not wish to let you go."

"I didn't mean it as a slur against Appliances."

"We are the ones who decide what it means." The judge smiled heavily. "By the way, it is General Appliances."

"General Appliances."

"That's better," said the judge. "Are you aware that General Farms is not a full general?"

"I am. It is subordinate to General Nutrition."

"And you still wish to transfer? To a lesser rank?"

"I do."

"This hardly makes sense. General Farms is in a state of decline. Every year there is less land

available to it and it produces less."

"That's what it says in the statement of General Profits."

"By this you must mean either that you don't believe the statements of General Profits or that there are other factors you haven't disclosed to this court. What are your reasons for transferring?"

Larry couldn't tell him. He had recognized, after digging through historical tapes, that the house behind Julie in the picture was a farm house. The animals she fed were cows, or some other domestic creature, and the vegetation was nothing less than a marketable crop.

And he couldn't say either that Farms, subordinate or not, had everything a man could want. It grew food so there was no shortage of that. There had to be houses for the people to live in and the best transportation there was to bring the produce to market and as for clothing—well, cotton was a crop.

Anything a person could want was available to those who worked for General Farms but Larry couldn't say this because it would start a rush and he'd be left out. Above all he had to conceal why he wanted to transfer. "No real reason, I suppose. I just want to transfer."

"This is an irresponsible attitude, doing what you want to," said the judge. "I am glad the

jurors are mature and sensible privates." He banged the gavel. "What are the charges?"

The foreman of the jury read them. Larry Moss was one of the best transfers to Appliances in the last five years, and in a way this was serious, that he was a transfer. Larry did not seem to be a stable person. In addition he had a fine sense of production and had once correctly forecast the demand for a machine when the integraph had failed. Not only this, he was punctual and had used his take-home credits as fast as they were available.

"This is an unusual case," said the judge. "Potentially you are a fine private."

"I will be as good for the next General."

"If we let you go."

"But you have to."

"I suppose we do, one way or another. You shouldn't have made a special application," said the judge with a drawn smile. "What is the verdict?"

The foreman of the jury had it ready but waited until the telecameras swung toward him. He read slowly. "The defendant, Larry Moss, has been grossly insubordinate and displays a lack of responsibility. He seems to need retraining. For this purpose we recommend that he be dishonorably discharged for a period of not less than two years. Then, and only if his attitude improves, should he

be given the opportunity of resuming his status as a professional private."

This was the verdict, prepared before the trial. Larry should have been warned by the telecameras. The law he was convicted under hadn't been used much recently, it hadn't been necessary to invoke it, but it was there whenever the occasion warranted. They'd dusted it off and thrown it into him. It was a shock and he couldn't actually believe it as they went through the ceremony of tearing up his credit card and removing his G-A pin and tossing it into the scrap heap where it could be easily found. They would use the pin again, sure, but it was a convenient myth that an emblem once sullied was never given to anyone else.

Larry walked home from the trial. Without his credit card he had to. He was late in getting home and Peggy was there before him. From her expression he knew she had heard. "You know," he said.

"It was on the tele," she said. "I don't think much of your idea of entertainment."

"It wasn't my fault," he said. "I didn't know they'd do this."

"Oh? They gave you an opportunity to reconsider."

"It wasn't much of an opportunity. I would have had to crawl. Anyway, I had made up my mind."

"You might have thought of me. You could have talked it over."

"What would you have said? That it was my decision. You always say that."

"Well, this decision is yours, if you want to claim it. What will become of us?"

"Nothing drastic. I can't go to Farms immediately but they can't keep me out of Employment."

"Don't be sure what they can do. Besides, Employment is not my idea of status."

There was more, much more, but Peggy was not without loyalty. She became furious, wept and relented, and when they went to bed she was quite warm to him, more ardent than she had been in months. The warmth lasted until a few hours before dawn when she awakened and wept again. Larry got up and went to his own bed. When he finally arose Peggy was gone, having left for work earlier than usual.

This prepared him for G-E (Employment) which was about what he expected it to be. They registered him along with older men and women who were inefficient and had never amounted to much with their generals and so had slipped into G-E, and the youngsters who were in their last years with Education and couldn't decide what they wanted to be when they got out and were using Employment to sample many jobs. They gave him a credit card

with the most unfavorable discount rate he had ever heard of but he didn't protest. There was one general even lower than Employment and he didn't care to investigate it first hand.

He was instructed to wait at the exchange until jobs came in. For two days he reported and waited and there was nothing for him; this was part of his retraining. After that he was told to stay home and call in every day. This was expensive, calls cost credits, and even more irksome than waiting at the exchange. At the exchange there were some people to talk to, among them a number of young girls who thought they were exceedingly attracted to him. He was somewhat of a celebrity. Few people were ever cashiered with as much a splash as he.

In a few days he did get jobs. Oddly, most of them were from Appliances, several hours or a few days at a time. He was given more responsible jobs than he'd gotten when working directly for them, was kept isolated from other technicians, and was never assigned to the plant he had once worked at. He never made a mistake, none that he was caught at, and he didn't complain of his pay scale, which was not quite half of what it had been.

Other jobs came from Housing. Since he had terminated there with nothing against him his pay scale was somewhat higher than

at G-A and working conditions were better. As if to compensate, he was not called by Housing as often.

But there was no work from Farms, not even a token assignment. He'd given them publicity and they should have come through with something. Even if they didn't need anyone they should have given him a handout. What he'd gone through to get to them was the best advertisement any general could have but they didn't acknowledge it in any way.

He couldn't think much about Farms though; his efforts were directed toward climbing. Progress was slow and uncertain, to the extent there was any, but the plodding wasn't wasted. Someday he'd be a professional private again and meanwhile, if he wasn't making a living at least he was able to keep up the payments on the house. He might have been bitter but he didn't have any place for strong emotions, even when Peggy started working nights.

She didn't tell him at first; she didn't come home when he expected her. Three hours later she finally came in. Sandra had been put to bed and he was sitting and staring at the fireplace, which wasn't functioning properly but which he couldn't afford to have repaired. She was tired but pleased. "Overtime?" he said.

"Sort of."

He didn't know why but her

reply made him feel uneasy. "Sort of? I should think you'd know."

"I do. I meant I don't get overtime scale for it."

"You've taken another job," he said.

"It was the least I could do. You're working hard and getting paid little for it. Another job won't hurt me."

"We're getting by," he said. This was approximately true. They had saved something and it wasn't going out as fast as he had anticipated.

"I don't want to argue," she said, going to her bedroom.

"At least you can tell me what the extra job is," he called after her. She didn't answer so he followed her. She had taken her blouse off but stopped undressing when he came in. He appreciated what a fine figure she had, particularly from the waist up, slender but good.

"Education," she said.

"Education? After working all day in Entertainment?"

"It's not strange. There are such things as adult evening classes. It helps pay for Sandra's schooling."

He did want to believe her, but it had been some time since he had felt close, wanting her as much as he did now. He touched her.

She didn't move away from his hand but he would have preferred it if she had. "I'm tired and dirty,"

she said. "I'd like to lie down before eating. Do you mind."

"I don't mind," he said, and went to the kitchen and started her dinner. When it was done she was sleeping and he didn't think he should call her. She had probably eaten a snack between jobs and she needed rest. He set the refreeze button on the food and ate it the next morning for breakfast. It was as tasteless as what he usually had.

Thereafter he worked with less enthusiasm. The slackening of his purpose was scarcely perceptible, even to himself. He was punctual and on the jobs he made no mistakes but he didn't have his old vitality. Possibly this was because he didn't get enough sleep. Often he stayed up waiting for Peggy who seemed to come home later each time she accepted an assignment from Education.

She didn't work every night. Education called her an average of four times a week but he never knew before he came home when this would be. When she did come early she was always tired from having been out late the previous night and went to bed, alone, soon after dinner. He saw very little of her and they spoke even less. There was nothing to say.

It was bad but he could endure it. He had to. He knew he shouldn't be suspicious since she was doing everything she could to help

out. There ought not to have been any place in his mind for the thoughts that kept recurring—until the night that Peggy didn't come home at all.

He stayed up till midnight doing nothing since entertainment, even with her credit card, was expensive. Finally the knowledge that he had to get up early and hold down an important production line forced him to bed. The bed whispered: Sleep, but it was hours before he did, and then it was a fitful slumber. He awakened shortly and got up, though the sleep mechanism urged him to stay in bed, going to Peggy's bedroom. She hadn't returned.

He washed his face and sat up, wishing for a drink. There was nothing in the house. Finally he went back to bed saying silently to himself, in unison with the sleep mechanism, that he should sleep. He didn't, until he got up and tinkered with the mechanism, adjusting it to the extreme range of power.

At dawn he awakened and lay there until it was time to get up. Peggy's bed had not been slept in. He fixed breakfast for Sandra and sent her to school. He sat, trying not to think but succeeding poorly. The call plate rang and he left without answering it. Employment. He didn't want to talk to them but sooner or later he'd have to. He went out and wandered the belts aimlessly, at least it

seemed aimless—but he found himself in front of the Entertainment office that Peggy worked in. Without thinking what he was going to do he went up.

Brushing off the receptionist he said he wanted to see Peggy. The girl at the desk smiled and said Peggy was probably available. In a few minutes she came back and said that Peggy was working and couldn't be disturbed. She didn't smile. He stared at her and repeated that he wanted to see Peggy. She thought he meant it because Peggy finally came out, nervous but determinedly gay.

"You didn't come home last night," he said.

"Let's go over here," she said, retreating to a corner of the lobby. "People can hear us."

He followed. He'd raise his voice so they'd hear what he wanted them to. "You didn't come home."

"You know I've been working."

"I know, but not at what you said. In a way it was adult evening education though. Wasn't it?"

"I got some sleep. It was late when I finished so I slept where I was."

"I can imagine. What I said is that you're not working for Education. You never have worked for them."

"Don't shout."

"I haven't raised my voice, but

I can understand why you don't want people to hear. Your part time job is in General Matrimony, isn't it? That's where you've been spending your evenings from the first."

"I'm not ashamed of anything I've done." She wouldn't look at him.

"I don't suppose you are. It's one thing to work for Matrimony when you're single, everybody does. But when you're already married men know it and expect more. I don't think you've disappointed them. Do you think that any one of those men will marry you?"

"Don't be sure what they'll do. You'd be surprised at the class of people that go there. I've met nothing but executives."

"I'm not surprised. Where else would they go for a quiet affair? It is Matrimony, say it."

"If you have to know, yes. It's Matrimony."

"You could have told me, Peggy," he said. "You didn't have to do it this way."

"I could have told you." Her face twisted. "You've humiliated me. I can't look at the people I work with. They know what you are. And you expect me to take this and come back for more. You don't think that I need to respect myself, that I have to do something to redeem myself. You—."

He raised his hand and then walked away so that he wouldn't

hit her. "Traitor," was the last thing he heard her say as he stumbled out of the office. On the street he wandered in a daze, hardly seeing where he was going. At length his head cleared and his stomach stopped trying to crawl up into his throat. The sunlight was astonishingly bright and the sky was too big to look at.

There was nothing left so he got on the belt that took him to Employment. He entered the building and sat in the waiting room. It was late and he was the only person there except for the clerical workers on the other side of the counter. No one noticed him until one of the young girls who was shopping around for a permanent job and who occasionally filled in on the Employment staff looked up. She was one of those who was attracted to him so she promptly miked him to report to the assignment counter.

He dragged himself there. "Private Moss, you're late," she said. "Report to Appliances immediately."

"I'm not going," he said.

"Not going? But you have a fine record. Don't spoil it."

"I can't go."

"If you have a job you must report."

"If I go to Appliances today I'll ruin everything," he said. "Don't force me to go."

Concern showed fleetingly on her face and she retreated in con-

sternation to the files at the rear of her office space. Presently she came back. "I think I've fixed it up," she said. "You were in very early today and took the first job that was offered. Naturally you can't go to Appliances. It's a job with a private person so you'll be all right." She smiled. "If you want to see me after work I'll put off my regular boyfriend."

"I may see you," he said, though he wasn't going to. A schoolgirl was not for him, whatever she might think.

He took the assignment card she gave him and made his way there without noticing where he was. Even though he recognized the Kingans' apartment when he passed it nothing jogged his memory until the door that he stopped at opened and, wearing something flimsy, Julie Sanford stood before him. "Employment called. I've been expecting you," she said in a sultry whisper.

It fell together in his mind. In not much more than a second he knew. Things had happened to him, unrelated events that combined in the most unfavorable way. From the first day he'd seen Julie nothing had gone as it should. This was not accidental, and he knew who was behind it. He shoved Julie inside and shut the door after him.

"You're strong," she said, wriggling inside the garment he gripped firmly.

"Strong, but stupid," he said. "I've stopped being stupid, just now. People have pushed me around enough. Tell me why you did it." She started to say something and he knew she was going to deny knowing what he was talking about. He slugged her, a short punch to her mid-section. She went down, grovelling at his feet, gasping for breath, and still denying that she had anything to do with his misfortunes.

He bent to pick her up and the short flimsy garment slid over her body, rolling up in a tight ring just above her breasts. Her body was voluptuous but it wasn't desire he felt nearly as much as anger. He jerked her erect and threw her into a chair. He slapped her face and while she blinked back tears he said: "Tell me in detail just what your scheme is."

"It isn't a scheme. I meant only to help."

He hit her again. "I don't need that kind of help."

She covered her face with her hands so he wouldn't hit her. "What do you think I did?" she said in a muffled voice.

Hers was a beautiful body and she made no attempt to cover it. He had mauled her but she seemed to have no resentment nor even fear. Instead there was a curious eagerness. His anger hadn't lessened but he wasn't sure where to turn it. "You led me on," he said. "You flaunted the things

you had in front of me. You let me know that you had everything a person can desire, and you led me to believe that I could have it too, just by asking."

"Is that all?"

She was peeking at him through her fingers. "No. You gave me access to your apartment. With what you've spent on this place you could have made it impossible for anyone to break in, but you didn't. You made it easy for anyone who wanted to get in. And it was clever to conceal the pictures, not too easy, but not difficult either. There was no real hint as to what General you were with, but with those cows, what else could it be?" He shook his head slowly. "Only General Farms doesn't want anyone."

She dropped her hands from her face and was smiling. "You think I did this to you?"

"Who else?"

"I did very little," she said. "Mostly it was you from the beginning. You're a rebel. It's there for anyone to see. That's why Appliances smashed you when you wanted to transfer. They have to keep people like you in line."

"But you didn't have anything to do with it," he said bitterly.

"Hardly anything," she said. "A canned ham and a bottle of wine convinced the Lieutenant Manager of Appliances that he should make an example of you. The point is: he was already go-

ing to do this. I merely showed him the best way," she shrugged. "As for the rest, I've had a standing order with employment, even before you registered, that you were to be sent to me the first day you refused to report for a General job."

He would have slugged her but somehow he was helpless before the contradiction of her warmth.

"There are other people like you," she murmured. "They are on a planet."

"Venus?" he snarled. "Mars? You can have them. They're worse than here."

"You hate generals," she said gently.

He was astounded at this. But once she said it he knew it was true and he couldn't remove the knowledge from his mind. He didn't want to. "Yes, all of them. Go ahead, call me a traitor."

"But I'm not calling you that." She took his hand and put it against her. Her belly was soft and gently curved and the hollow of her navel was deep.

"What can I do now?" he said. "I can't go on like this."

"You can go to the planet. It's not in this solar system, nor the nearest ten. Did you really think the animals in those pictures were cows? With eye stalks?"

"I thought they were horns."

"And six legs?"

"It was peculiar, but how do I know what geneticists are doing?"

"They aren't doing that much," she said. "Let me help you. The planet I told you about has less than ten million inhabitants, and it's bigger than earth and nicer than earth was in the beginning. We need strong people who are dissatisfied with their lives."

"I don't know what to believe," he said.

"You can believe me," she said. "I couldn't tell you until you made up your mind." She was on him, pressing close. He fumbled with the filmy garment and it tore. She ripped it off completely. "Let me help you. I want to help."

He let her help him right there. She was expert and enthusiastic. After that they went to the bedroom and when he awakened in the night she was still pressed close to him. She caressed him and he put his arm over her. He thought he heard the door open and in a few minutes softly close. He tensed. "What was that?"

"Probably uncle. Don't worry. He understands."

"I'm sure he does," he muttered.

She twined her arms and legs around his. "Go to sleep. Isn't this nice? You're the last one, so tomorrow the space ship leaves."

"The last one? Were there others?"

"Of course. Many others."

"Do they all get this treatment?"

"Would they?" she said archly.

"Half of them are women. But isn't this nice?"

It was nice and in the morning there was the space ship which left soon after he boarded it. It was a good ship though crowded. Larry knew he could expect this. They'd come light years to get recruits for the planet whose name he couldn't remember—he'd been told but it didn't stick—so they couldn't be fastidious about accommodations. Folding cots in a dorm for a hundred men, and one washroom. It was the same for the women on the other side of the ship. There was no prohibition against going to the women's side but Larry didn't. He didn't think much of his fellow recruits and didn't want to mingle more than he had to. They might be as rebellious as he but they seemed a sorry lot to him. Perhaps a few months on a good clean planet would straighten them out.

He didn't see much of Julie and her uncle, though this was not his choice. He had a few words with Julie when they first got on the ship and then she disappeared into a cabin forward, near her uncle's. Larry did see Hugh Taylor once or twice in the first few days they were out in space. Taylor had trimmed his mustache short and stopped combing gray into his hair and seemed much younger, perhaps Larry's age.

They slipped away from earth before Larry knew it and were out

of the solar system before he thought to look back to see what he was leaving. There was merely a bright star behind and not much more than that ahead. He could think he was traveling from nothing toward nothing—but he was leaving the generals behind.

One of the men Larry particularly avoided. This man was still fat but not so sloppy, with one sound eye and another that was a poor example of the glassmaker's art. He had Larry to thank for the glass eye in that scuffle near the Kingans' but this was not why Larry avoided him. He just didn't want to talk to him. There was no reason the fellow couldn't have had an eye transplant but probably Health considered him more of a liability than an asset and booted him out much in the same way Larry had been pitched out of Appliances. A moral turpitude clause no doubt, which saved them money. He might get a transplant on the new planet, which was most likely the reason he was on the ship.

Meanwhile, he didn't recognize Larry. He no longer had binocular vision and this made some difference but the probable reason for his failure to recall who Larry was must be that he was still in a state of residual shock and had never really looked at Larry during his capture. He'd been trying to get away, not fix Larry's face in his memory.

This was to the good, as was the food. That is, the food would have been fine but it was too good. Canned ham and aged steaks and frozen vegetables and fruits, some actually fresh. The real thing, because it was cheaper to bring it from the planet than to buy synthetics from earth. This was very rich and upset his stomach. At inconvenient times he had to rush to the washroom and heave. When it wasn't this it was sometimes diarrhea. He knew he'd eventually become accustomed to the food but until he did it was discouraging. It bothered him almost as much as the attitudes of most of the recruits.

They didn't have the spirit of pioneers bound for a sparsely settled planet. Most of them acted as though they were going from a job with a crummy General to a crummy job with another General. They'd have to change or he wasn't going to get along with them, new planet or not.

At times he thought of Peggy, wasting his emotions. He couldn't have talked her into coming with him and he wasn't sure he wanted her. That business with Matrimony was sour. As for Sandra, he would have liked to bring her, but it was pointless to think of it. Even a planet light years away had to get along with earth, and they couldn't risk kidnapping, which was what it would be called.

He isolated himself, wandering around the ship alone. He wanted to see Julie but she didn't seek him out and he felt foolish going after her. She knew where he was, if she felt inclined, and besides, he was not sure which cabin was hers. He was standing in a corridor, thinking this and looking out a port at stars when the one eyed man came toward him, grinning purposefully.

Instantly Larry headed for the washroom. It was a good excuse to avoid the man. It was a standard joke on the ship that Larry was the only person upset by the food. Actually a number of others had digestive difficulties but pretended they didn't and weren't noticed. The ruse didn't work this time; the fat man was in an exceptionally friendly mood and wouldn't be put off. He came in after Larry.

"Too bad," he said heavily as Larry hung his head and retched. "If you can stay with it G-P food will put you in the best shape of your life. Look at me." He patted his paunch.

Larry grunted dismally.

"You gotta say this for G-P," continued the man, "they give you the best of everything. Hell, even your assignments are all worked out before you get there and you don't have to think of a thing."

Larry wiped his lips and looked up. "G-P?"

"Sure. You know, General Planets."

"You're sure it's General?"

"Of course. Didn't you read the contract you signed?"

"I signed nothing."

"Maybe they overlooked it for you. Or it could be they figured you were soft and they'd wait until you got to the end of the line and then you'd have to take what they gave you."

Larry wiped his face on his sleeve and got up. The fat man blocked his way. "Sick or something? Can I help?"

"Everybody's helping me," said Larry. "Get out of my way or order yourself another glass eye."

He shoved the man aside and went forward. At the entrance to the bridge of the ship he was stopped by a steel door. It was closed and he couldn't open it. He beat on it with his fists until a glass section slid back and a crewman peered out. "What do you want?"

"I want to speak to the captain."

"The captain doesn't speak to recruits. Go to your quarters."

The crewman closed the glass section and Larry pounded on the door again until a spark of electricity jolted him. It was rapidly building up a strong charge and he knew he'd better not touch it again. He whirled and went straight to Hugh Taylor's cabin, the only person he knew that he was sure he'd be able to find. He didn't knock. He put his shoulder

against it and the door gave way.

He went in. Julie and Taylor both were there, startled and naked. Taylor was not in an avuncular position. Larry stared at them. It hardly mattered. "You're not her uncle," he said.

Taylor got up, grinning. "That's a fair guess. No relation." To Julie he said: "Go to your room. A scene's coming up. I know how to handle it."

Julie strolled unconcernedly to the door that led to her room. She smiled back archly at Larry as she closed the door behind her. Taylor put on a robe that was lying near. "Now let's get to it. Why did you break in?"

"General Planets," said Larry. He was breathing hard.

"What about G-P?"

"No one told me. I thought I was going where there were no Generals."

"Be sensible. You were against all Generals. We thought it best to keep it from you until you became accustomed to the idea. You'd been having difficulties and we didn't want to tax your emotions."

Larry swallowed. It might have been a bubble of pure nitrogen that stuck in his throat and seemed to seethe in his veins. "I thought I would be on my own," he said. "You led me to believe it was free."

Taylor went to a small desk and sat behind it. "Use your head. Settling planets is a big business. No

one can do it except a general. Besides, G-P isn't bad. You'll find things much easier than they are on earth. There are so few people."

"You should have told me. I might have come with you or I might have stayed on earth. But it would have been my choice."

Taylor slid open a drawer. "Look at it from my viewpoint, and Julie's," he said. "A lot of people won't go if they're merely exchanging generals, even if what they're leaving is rotten and what they're going to is good. How do you think we're going to get recruits unless we tell them what they want to hear?"

"I want to hear that I don't belong to any general," Larry said.

"Of course. It's the first impulse anyone has after he's had it raw," said Taylor. "I'm sure we can figure out a deal. You haven't signed a contract so we'll make it a good one. I've been thinking of getting out of this thing and we can arrange to have you take my place. You can work with Julie or if you don't like her you can choose your own partner."

Larry saw Taylor's hand drop casually into a desk drawer and with the motion he turned and ran. He was out of the door before Taylor could fire. He was far down the corridor when he heard the gun cough and felt something strike his back and wriggle in. He stumbled but kept going and

rounded the corner before Taylor could fire again. As soon as he was out of sight he reached behind him and touched a thin wire mesh just below his right shoulder. He got fingers beneath some of the wires and tugged, stopping at once. His back was on fire. A tracer had been planted in him and he wasn't going to get it out short of major surgery.

There was never a place to hide in any ship and with a tracer in him he had no chance at all but he was hurt and it didn't occur to him that he should wait and let them come. Taylor's voice came to him faintly. It was from the tracer. In his haste Taylor had forgotten to tune him out. It didn't make any difference. It didn't help him at all to know what Taylor said.

"Guards, all out. The usual trouble but a little worse. We've got an anti-general nut on the loose. He's got a tracer in him so you shouldn't have any trouble locating him." Taylor coughed. "Be careful and don't make him a basket case. General Planets doesn't pay for the baskets."

Larry was heading toward the dorm but the guards cut him off, turning him toward the front of the ship. He saw the first one in time and doubled back, running into another as he rounded a corner. The guard was more surprised than Larry and he went down. Larry planted a foot on the

guard's face and the man stayed down. There wasn't time to take his gun and anyway Larry didn't think he'd need it. He wasn't reasoning clearly but he knew that he couldn't let himself be taken.

He kept on, narrowly eluding the guards. His back was burning and his legs were aflame and the tracer below his shoulder broadcast every move he made and still the guards couldn't capture him. They were gradually restricting where he could go. This was the danger. If he could only get back to the dorm—but of course he couldn't. He stumbled at last into a blind corridor. There was no exit except at the far end, the hatch through which he'd entered the ship weeks ago on earth. Now that he thought of it, it was in the true sense the one way out.

He ran to the hatch and looked back. The guards were advancing slowly now that they knew they had him, were almost sure that they did. "Don't come near me," he gasped, gripping the double safety handles of the hatch. This didn't stop them though they approached more cautiously.

Still grasping the handles he faced them saying distinctly, so that he knew Taylor could hear, perhaps even see him if the tracer was rigged for a picture circuit: "Taylor, tell them to stay away. I've had my last general. They'll find out if they try to rush me."

They rushed him as he said it.

He was weakening and the hatch opened with more difficulty than he thought but he did manage to start it swinging when the first guard hit him. He kicked the guard aside and yanked harder and finally the air seal on the hatch broke open. Air whistled around him, carrying the nearest guard through the hatch and out of the ship. The other guards swarmed over him; the hatch automatically closed before anyone else was blown out. Someone jabbed a needle in him and then Larry didn't hear, see, or think a thing until he was sitting in Taylor's cabin.

"You all right?" said Taylor.

He had a gun again, in the desk drawer, but Larry knew he wouldn't need it. He nodded numbly. "Except my back. Cut the tracer out now. I'll hold still."

"That's what I mean," said Taylor. "This general's better than any you've ever worked for. Hell, he won't allow us to use stick-always tracers. Here. Take this."

Taylor poked a capsule into Larry's mouth and followed it with a glass of water that he tilted so Larry had to swallow. "The pill will cause the tracer to drop off in a few days. You won't hurt a bit. In fact you feel better already, don't you?"

"Not bad," said Larry. He was even more numb, euphoria spreading over him.

"You don't feel desperate," said

Taylor. "You know that we're really pulling for you."

"I guess I know it," said Larry. "I guess I flipped for a while. I'm over it now."

Taylor looked at him closely. "I think you mean it. Okay, just sit there for a minute."

Taylor went to a side port and opened a cover. Outside the port Larry could see a reddish gray balloon, and what had once been a profile, floating beside the ship. Taylor covered the port and knocked on the door to Julie's cabin. "Julie, thought I'd better tell you. Don't look out the port."

"I have looked. Is that his lungs?"

"Sometimes you disgust me."

"Sometimes you disgust me. This is going to look fine on our record."

"Wake up woman. Watch what's happening. That's the guard."

"Oh?" said Julie. "That makes me feel better. I like Larry."

"He's going to be all right," said Taylor. "But we can't send him back to the dorm. He'll have to stay up here with us."

"That will be cozy."

"For you it will be cozy," grunted Taylor. He came back to Larry.

"I'm sorry about the guard," said Larry.

"Don't be. You didn't push him out," said Taylor. "He knew about the out draft. At least he had

plenty of occasion to learn. If he didn't allow for it, that's his fault."

"I mean, I intended to open the hatch and go out there myself."

"You're not the first to think of that."

"And then when I saw what happened to the guard—I didn't want to any more."

"Of course not. When you get down to it no one wants to die."

"I did, but I don't want to now."

"Sure. We all make our peace, one way or another."

"I've accepted what I have to," said Larry. "And by the way—I don't want to inconvenience you—about staying up here. I don't see why I can't go back to the dorm."

"I do. You can't keep something like this quiet. They'd question you and upset you again. We can't have that happening."

"But I don't want to stand in your way."

"With Julie?" Taylor grinned. "Have you been to the women's dorm?"

"No."

"If you had you'd see why it's not an inconvenience. Some of them are frights, some are just all right, but some are real dolls. We'll work it this way. You'll be in Julie's cabin most of the time. Just make sure you and Julie stay there when the door between the cabins is locked. Understand?"

"I think I do."

"Good. I've got some business to get out of the way before we talk terms. Okay?"

"Certainly."

Taylor went to the wash basin and dashed cold water on his face. Then he jangled up the captain and said he wanted sub-etheric radio to earth.

"General Mortuary," shouted Taylor. "G-P ship New Life calling General Mortuary."

Enormous power was required to push a voice over that distance; a picture was out of the question. Very little voice came through even with all the power behind the signal so Larry heard nothing at all of the reply.

"Lieutenant Director of General Mortuary?" said Taylor. "We've got a case. No, we never take them with us. He's got to be buried on earth. He's from there. Besides it's more expensive if you come and get him. Yeah, I know, but you're in business to make money. We'll put a beeper on him and deaccelerate him at once so he won't follow the ship. Yes, the captain will give you our present position."

Taylor listened, running himself a glass of water. "Nothing can go wrong. Twenty five years with General Protection. You know that he's automatically got all the coverage there is. That's not all. He's got a family back on earth and probably other relatives. You

should be able to nick them plenty."

He drank the water. "Yeah, I know it's a good thing."

He switched off the sub-etheric radio and went to the desk and searched through, finally taking out a full box of cigars. He removed two, giving one to Larry. Larry fondled it, fingering the band that said General Mortuary.

"They're mine at the start of the trip," said Taylor. "But somehow I don't feel I should touch them until I actually have a case."

He lighted Larry's cigar. "This is another thing you'll learn about the job. The actual cash money G-M pays for a tip like the one I just gave them isn't much, but the little extras are choice."

Taylor lighted his own cigar, inhaling pleurably. "We'll talk terms for a bit and then you go over and let Julie help you with that shoulder. There isn't much anyone can do except wait for a few days, but Julie will cheer you up. She's surprisingly gentle with wounded men. This is what makes her such a good partner."

Taylor went on talking terms but Larry scarcely listened. He was quite numb, but at peace, agreeable. General Planets wasn't a bad general and he could do anything with the job he wanted. And the cigar was fine, once he got used to the idea it was the best cigar he'd ever had. It was the flavor.