

Why Ron Goulart fan-clubs have not sprung up in every corner of the English-speaking world must be a matter of concern to all who relish the dry and subtle flavor (or do we mean bouquet? No matter) of this young California advertising man's prose. Here the creator of Max, the Occult Investigator, takes us (if not Max) to Osbert Planet, whose age-old system of government includes the High Officials Community Brass Band, two Junior Prime Ministers, a Minister of Cafeterias, an elected Princess who must have either great political wisdom or be able to play some musical instrument, and detective V. M. Hickens—famous solver of snake cases—whose son is an Irish tenor in a Venusain joss house.

PRINCESS #22

by Ron Goulart

THE TRAIN STOPPED. BERT Sickles fell off the large packing case and crashed into a wicker hamper. He stayed on his knees and looked toward the small high window of the baggage car. Working out his hand blaster he crawled back to the case he was escorting to the capital. Outside there was more shooting, the fizzle of heavy blasters, angry yelling.

Maybe now he'd meet somebody interesting. There might be a chance to bump into some of the first class passengers if this was a full scale bandit raid. There was

never much opportunity to meet anyone worthwhile traveling in the baggage coach.

A wild shot came through the window and plunked into the ceiling. Bert got down behind the Biz Enterprise crate. He didn't think it was good publicity to carry the star of your show around in a crate, but BE knew best. Bert hoped the shooting wouldn't do any damage to the facrobot packed in there in all that excelsior.

The yelling was louder and closer. Bert pressed down nearer to the floor. This wasn't the kind of

excitement he'd been hoping for. Three and a half months now he'd been traveling across Osbert, setting up one night stands for the entertainment android. So far there had been no celebrities, no people of any real worth at all to meet. Bert was traveling with a reasonable facsimile of Donna Dayton, the famous Mars torch singer of a few years back. Donna Dayton herself was a nobody now, but fac-copy #22 still did okay out in the remoter planets. This was not what Bert had expected when he left his uncle's telekinesis plant and come to work for Biz Enterprises.

Bert had to admit that he was still only on the fringes of real show business. Now he was involved with the yokel stuff like androids and stereops. Someday he'd be working one of the nine major planets, meeting the right kind of people. The train started up again and Bert shot the handles off the wicker hamper.

"Easy with that thing. If you set the excelsior on fire we'll be in real trouble," said Donna Dayton.

Bert looked at the blaster, then at the black metal suitcase that held the Donna Dayton tapes. You put one in the back of the android and pushed a button to make it sing and talk. He hadn't done that. "Beg pardon?"

"Put that gun away and we'll talk. The trouble's over outside."

Bert dropped the gun and sat

down hard on the case. "Don't get excited now, Miss Dayton."

"You hardware men are all jumpy," said a girl's voice behind him.

Bert turned. "I was just running through my new act, miss." He didn't know how long she'd been standing there. He was certain Donna Dayton had spoken to him, but he didn't want to have it discussed.

"Not much of an act. You and a wooden box." The girl was a slim brunette.

"That's what they said on the big planets. So I'm out here on Osbert. What was the trouble by the way?"

Coming further into the baggage car the girl said, "Some ousted minister from Monarchy Hill in the capital. He was staging a protest meeting. He staged it right on the tracks and it slowed the train up."

"Anybody hurt?"

"Nobody was a good enough shot for that."

"Oh," said Bert. "Well nice to have met you."

The girl put her hands on her hips and frowned at him. "My name's Jan Nordlin and I'm in show business. *Live* show business. I came back here to see if my stuff was all right."

Bert nodded. He didn't recognize her face. She couldn't be anyone very successful.

"I'm a ventriloquist and if

there's one thing I hate it's those walking nickelodeons."

Bert narrowed one eye. "You mean my entertainment android, Donna Dayton #22?"

"That's the one. I saw your lousy act in the last territory." Jan shook her head and walked over to the crate.

"And I guess I saw your ventriloquist act just now."

"Sure," said Jan. "I can throw my voice any place. And you made me mad with your clumsiness. Nearly burning my hampers."

Bert knew enough about the biz to know live talent in the ventriloquism line never got very far. He decided to cut this short. "Check for damages and if there's anything needed bill Biz Enterprises." He turned to go.

"Wait till I check the dummies." Jan pulled open one of the wicker hampers and poked around inside. After she had done the same to the second crate she said, "The little fellows are okay."

"That's fine. Well, goodbye."

"I'm going to the capital to join a traveling show."

"I see."

"Are you going there?"

"Yes." The android was set to play two nights at the biggest automatic cafeteria in the capital. Some worthwhile people might be in the audience, royalty even.

"Why are you with BE selling this scrap metal entertainment?"

Bert watched the girl for a mo-

ment. "I guess I'm stagestruck."

"You have any talent yourself?"

"Nope," said Bert. "I just like to be around important kinds of people. Show folks and all. Oh, when I was a kid I did impersonations at parties."

"Did you impersonate people? Or machines?" asked Jan. "You seem to love this junk." She wacked the top of the android's case.

The android started singing.

Bert said, "Is that you?"

"No," said Jan over the singing. She moved back from the crate as he approached it.

"I guess I left a song tape in again. That's sloppy."

Jan watched Bert get his tool kit from among the piled baggage. "It's a catchy song, though."

Bert grunted and got out a crowbar. He rolled up his sleeves and pried the lid off in under ten minutes.

"That's better," said Jan as the lid came off. "I can hear much better now."

"Let's everybody shut up," said Bert, shoving his arms down into the bright yellow excelsior. The android was lying on its back and Bert had to reach around behind and switch off the tape. "There."

"How many of those things did you say there were?"

"Facs? Couple or three dozen I guess. Donna Dayton became popular on the big planets nearly ten years ago. There may have been

even more in circulation then. A few even got out to planets like this."

"I know." Jan began gathering her suitcases together. "Ever meet the real Donna Dayton?"

"No. She's a hasbeen now. Except for residuals from these things," said Bert.

"Where are you staying in the capital?"

"Biz Enterprises made the arrangements." Jan Nordlin was attractive, but Bert was determined not to waste his time on non-established personalities.

"Didn't they bother to tell you where they made the arrangements?"

"The Osbert Hawaiian I think."

"Right near Monarchy Hill."

Bert smiled. "Near the ruling families you mean?"

"Sure. On a clear day you can probably see right up to the top of the hill, to where Princess Louise herself hangs out."

"A real princess," said Bert. That would be some one worth meeting.

"I'll be at the Downtown Center Hotel. Look me up if you can."

"I have to arrange things," said Bert. "And get her to the hotel and all."

"Well, try." Jan smiled. "I just noticed, the train's stopping. We're there."

There was a final jerk and the baggage coach was still. "I may see you then."

"We can head for town together if you want to."

There was some kind of loud music coming close outside. The door of the car opened and a round red-cheeked man in a bright uniform came in with a saxophone under his arm. "Like the music?" he asked.

"Yes," said Bert. "Did you want an audition or something?"

The man laughed. "We've come to welcome you. That's the High Officials Community Brass Band."

"To welcome me?" This hadn't happened before anyplace. Usually he even had trouble finding someone to help him carry the android.

"If you're Bert Sickles who is presenting Donna Dayton you're the one." The man caught Bert's arm. "Come on. Some of the boys want you to ride on their shoulders."

Bert shrugged at Jan. "You'll have to go on without me. Sorry."

"Don't be. Goodbye." Jan smiled, gathered up her hampers and walked out.

"Oh," said the bandman. "That's not Donna Dayton?"

"No. She's in the crate."

"Hear there was a little trouble enroute. She make it okay?"

"Shipshape."

"Some people wanted to know." He pushed Bert ahead of him. "Welcome to the capital."

Bert smiled. This was more what he had in mind.

The Junior Prime Minister laughed apologetically. "It's the incline," he said to Bert.

"I see, Mr. Provle."

The other Junior Prime Minister, Hankit, got out of the official car. "Fix it in a minute."

Bert cleared his throat. "It's nice of you to invite me to a Command Performance."

Provle ran his thumb against the grain of his shadow of a beard and smiled again. "It livens things up."

"I'm surprised that you've heard of us out here."

"Your advance publicity was effective." Provle leaned forward and watched Hankit bend into the mechanism under the hood. "Your android is in good condition after the long journey?"

"She's packed in excelsior. She's fine. About how much time do we have to fill at the Command Performance?"

Hankit pulled himself back out and shook his head at them.

"What?" asked Provle, sliding across the seat.

"Who else is on the bill? How long will our turn be?"

"Nobody else on, just you."

Bert grinned. This was certainly flattering.

Provle joined Hankit in the dusk and they both stood looking into the engine.

Bert let himself relax for a moment. Below them were the first three circles of low fort-like houses

that made up Monarchy Hill. Four more rings of houses had to be passed through before they reached the top and the palace. "Let me have a look," said Bert, getting out of the official car. He'd had to patch up the Donna Dayton android a few times and so he knew a little something about machines.

Headlights brushed them. A big yellow van was coming down hill, horn honking. It wouldn't be able to pass.

The van stopped a few feet short of the car and the driver, a middle-aged man in a gold braided uniform leaned out of the cab. "Is this some further indignity?"

"Good evening, minister," said Hankit. "Our car is in trouble."

"The Minister of Cafeterias," whispered Provle to Bert.

"I am no longer a minister," said the uniformed man. "I've been kicked downhill. Down to level 2."

"Level 2?" said Hankit. He sighed and shook his head.

"I'll be stuck in Education, as Secretary of Chalk and Erasers. Now don't hold me up. The new minister has to be moved into my old house by lunchtime tomorrow. There's an important cabinet barbecue coming up."

"We really can't give you the right of way," said Provle. "We outrank you now."

The ex-minister jumped down to the road and came over to them.

"That the engine in there?"

"Yes," said Hankit, stepping aside.

"You don't keep it very clean. I'll give it a good smack with something."

"Wait," said Provle. "Are you certain that's the thing to do?"

"You may not know that I once served the Transportation Office as Under-Chairman of Blowouts. I know a thing or two. I have a big heavy pipe in my van. I'll get it."

Hankit shifted from foot to foot, clapping his hands together. "We're going to be late." He looked up at the top of the car, where the android's crate was strapped. "This won't harm the robot I hope."

"She's packed in excelsior," said Bert.

A new honking started behind them. Grinding up the road was a black van. It stopped a yard back of their car and a black-uniformed driver dropped out. "You'll have to make way for the new Minister of Cafeterias."

The old minister was back with a large metal pipe in his hand. "Another indignity?"

The new minister himself, a thin young man with a fine crew-cut, stepped from the black van. "You know very well that uniform goes with the job. Why are you using it for coveralls?"

"My suit's at the cleaners."

"I'm afraid I'll have to issue an order for you to remove it."

"This is what I get for being a nice person and leaving the hall runner behind for you."

"I have an important barbecue to attend in the morning and I can't go to it wearing a shabby hall rug. Now give me the uniform."

"Shabby, is it?"

Clapping his hands faster, Hankit began to bounce up and down. "We'll have to go on on foot."

"Agreed," said Provle, moving to unfasten the crate. "Can you carry this yourself, Mr. Sickles?"

"Not with two suitcases."

"I'll take one end then and we'll put the suitcases on top."

Hankit hesitated and then handed the car keys to the upcoming minister. "Do what you want with the car after you get your differences settled."

"Out of the way. I need room to swing this pipe," said the old minister.

As they hefted the case up hill Bert said, "I hope we won't be late for the show."

"What show?" said Hankit, who was walking beside him.

"The Command Performance."

"That show. No, there's no hurry." He reached out and patted the crate.

The Prime Minister dropped his cloak over a heavy straight chair and strode to the great stone fireplace. "They ought to put some

wood in this. I'm Walter Barnaby." His strong chin shot out once.

"They told me you were coming," said Bert.

"You're no doubt tired after your flight."

"I came by train."

"No wonder you're tired." Barnaby circled the room slowly his eyes half closed. "You ought to take a long rest."

"I usually can't get much rest before a show."

"What show?" Barnaby's chin twitched again.

"The Command Performance."

"Princess Louise is feeling poorly. The show may be postponed a week or more."

"I've got a series of shows and concerts to put on here."

"They've already been postponed."

"Well, I should let Biz Enterprises know."

"They know," Barnaby said. He got down on his hands and knees. "There. I thought so."

"More comfortable on all fours?"

"The crate's under the bed. I hadn't seen it anywhere."

"I thought it would be safe there."

Barnaby stood up. "It's probably damp under there. That's the last place I'd put an android of mine." He snapped his fingers. "I know of a warm dry place."

"Do they serve drinks there?"

"A place to store the android."

The prime minister knelt again, tugging at the crate.

"I can't let it out of my sight, sir. That's in my contract with BE. I even have to ride in the baggage coach with it."

"We'll let you come in and look at it now and then." Barnaby pulled the crate completely out from under Bert's bed.

"Look," said Bert. "What kind of monarchy is this? I'm impressed by meeting prime ministers and all, but I had hoped to shake hands with the princess herself. Not only don't I meet her, I have to sit here a week and do nothing. Maybe I should just take my android and go on about my business." Bert stopped. He hadn't intended to speak so strongly to someone of the Prime Minister's station.

"You like princesses, do you?"

"As a class, yes. They have a certain status that one can respect."

Barnaby smiled, his head bobbing. "I feel I can trust a man with your beliefs."

"You can."

"Princess Louise has been abducted. Three days ago while she was cutting the ribbon that opened a new downtown cafeteria."

"Carried off?"

"At high noon." Barnaby spread his hands. "What is worse she must appear at the preliminary judging of ladies in waiting a week hence."

"A week hence. Who took her?"

"We suspect a man named

Ward Rhymer. An opportunist from the south."

"Why'd he do it?"

"I don't know if you know how our age-old system of government works," said Barnaby. "I'll explain. Each year we hold a contest to select the prettiest girl in each town. This girl must be more than just a likeable beauty. She must have either great political wisdom or be able to play some musical instrument. From these girls the princess who rules all the territory is picked. The finals are held right here on Monarchy Hill."

"Sounds like as good a system as any," said Bert, sitting down on the crate.

"Careful of that," said Barnaby. "I think you will get some idea of Princess Louise's intense personal charm and accordion playing ability when I tell you that she has won the contest five years in a row."

"I'd like to meet her."

Barnaby winked. "I'll show you her picture." From a pocket deep inside his coat he drew out a small gold-framed oval picture. "There she is."

Bert shook his head. "That's not Princess Louise. That's Donna Dayton."

"Exactly," said Barnaby, laughing. "By the kind of divine coincidence that happens rarely your android and our princess are look-alikes."

"It's pretty incredible."

"If your android were to appear at the judging no one would know. Any attempt to discredit her for not appearing would fail."

"Wouldn't it be simpler to find the real Princess Louise and bring her back by next week?"

"We have put the case in the hands of a highly recommended operative and tracker. However, it's very essential that Princess Louise make an appearance next week. Should our search fail, we'll need your android."

"You've only got one guy out looking?"

"There is need for a certain amount of delicacy."

Bert got his suitcase out of the closet and unpacked his tool kit. "If you think it'll help you're welcome to Donna Dayton #22. See that she doesn't get banged up too much."

"We don't foresee any assassination attempts." Rubbing his palms along his legs Barnaby, smiling, watched Bert uncase the android.

Yellow excelsior spurted out onto the thick rug. "Look like the princess to you?"

Barnaby laughed. "Exactly."

"Will it fool people?"

"I'm certain. We have, fortunately, many recordings of the princess' lovely speeches and proclamations. We can edit them into something suitable for her to say at the judging." Barnaby bent to help Bert brush off the android.

"This does have a place for inserting tapes?"

"Up to three hours. Want me to show you how to work the control box?"

"Robotics is a hobby of mine," said Barnaby. "It's not all politics with prime ministers. I can operate the machine I know."

Bert propped the Donna Day-ton android up in a straight chair. If the princess looked like this, she must be pretty good. A tall, sun-tanned blonde. "Say, sir."

"Yes?"

"I wonder if, while you're setting up this impersonation, I might help look for the princess." It would be a great chance to meet some royalty.

"Well," said Barnaby, "we might have need for you here on The Hill."

"I might even find her."

Reaching out and arranging the android in the chair Barnaby said, "Very well. Go look up our operative in the morning and see if you can lend him a hand." Barnaby hurried over and took his cloak. "I have some sample speech tapes in my chambers. Would it be keeping you up if I brought them in and tried them out?"

"No, sir," said Bert, anxious to hear the princess' voice.

Barnaby bowed and ran out.

From the window Bert could see the rings of lights that circled around the hill. He took a deep breath. There was something

pleasant about being at the top of things.

Bert Sickles crossed the dirt road, gritting his teeth in the cold early morning air.

The automatic cafeteria was nearly empty. "Good morning," said the turnstile as Bert pushed through it.

Something had gone wrong with the cruller dispensers and they were shooting crullers in lopsided arcs across the width of the place.

"Catch one and join me," said a small weathered man in a second-hand brown overcoat. He edged his chair to one side and motioned Bert to sit next to him.

"No thanks. I'm meeting someone." The crullers were coming by at shoulder level and Bert decided to sit down till the machines fixed themselves.

"Nothing's going right this morning," said the man. He had a nose that was nearly round. Polishing it with his thumb, he said, "The griddle cake machine made one three and one half feet in diameter. It scared the hell out of the syrup dispenser. The cold weather does it. My name's H. M. Vickens."

"Pleased to meet you." Bert stood up after one last cruller sailed over. He sat down suddenly. "What did you say?"

"Griddle cake with a diameter of three and a half feet."

"I mean your name. You're Vickens?"

"The same."

"You don't have a son who's a confidential investigator?"

"My son's an Irish tenor in a Venusian joss house. If you're Sickles let's get going."

"The Prime Minister told you about me," said Bert. "I'd like to help bring back Princess Louise."

"Can you drive a truck?"

"Sure."

"I brought a war surplus half-track and I can't get the thing to run right. Come on." Vickens took an orange knit cap out of his overcoat and pulled it down on his head.

"Which war is it left over from?"

"They wouldn't tell me. Hasn't been a war on Osbert for twenty seven years, though."

Outside the morning was warming up. The flat sandy country around them was brightening. The half-track was parked on a patch of crushed stone next to the cafeteria.

"Think you can drive it?"

Bert stopped, then walked around the dusty grey truck. "I saw one like this in a kine once. I think I can handle it."

Vickens worried the skin on his nose. "We head south, toward the coast. I got a hunch that's the way they went with the princess."

Bert looked at the truck for a moment and then grinned. As long

as he got to the princess it didn't matter what the transportation was. There might be a way to bring her back in a first class train. He caught the keys Vickens tossed him and jumped into the driver's seat.

By nightfall the truck was moving, almost reliably, along a wide road that overlooked the ocean.

"But you don't get many good trunk murders anymore," Vickens was saying. "Not since teleportation caught on."

"I still wonder," said Bert, "why they haven't sent other people on this hunt. Princess Louise is the ruler of the whole territory."

"The important thing in cases like this is surprise. The fewer people involved the easier it is to sneak up."

"About time to stop for dinner?"

"Might as well. I think we're gaining on Rhymer. They'll probably stop for the night soon, too."

"Can we go to a non-automatic place?"

"I thought that was your line of work, machines and androids."

"Sure. But that lunchwagon upset me."

"You always have to be careful when you order soup," said Vickens. "Stop at the next inn you see on the left, a good place."

They parked near the sprawling dark brown place and went inside. It was crowded. There seemed to be some kind of enter-

tainment going on up near the long bar. Everyone was laughing.

Vickens found them a table. "I have a knack for locating things."

"I hope it holds up." Bert couldn't see who was doing the entertaining. He heard two or three voices going between laughter.

"Go on up and watch the show," said Vickens. "I'll handle the ordering."

"Fine," said Bert. He wasn't too used to live waiters anyway.

Bert almost turned back when he finally got to within seeing distance of the show. He was closed in on and so he had to stand there and watch Jan Nordlin and her ventriloquism act.

The girl had two seedy looking dummies, one resting on either knee. The three of them were involved in a confused conversation that everyone around Bert seemed to think was funny.

Since he was stuck there Bert tried to listen. Quite suddenly, although he had planned not to, he laughed. And he hadn't finished laughing when Jan looked toward him and smiled in recognition. He stopped and tried to look as though he had been laughing at something he had just thought of on his own. It was no use. He started laughing again.

Biting his lip he shoved back to the table. It was ridiculous that some limited young girl could get more of a response from an audi-

ence than Donna Dayton #22. She did. You could feel something that was never there with the people who watched Bert's android.

"You like snakes?" Vickens asked Bert.

"For eating?"

"No. I thought I might tell you some famous snake crimes I've solved."

"Do that. And talk in a loud voice."

Bert squinted in the fading night. They were there sure enough. Both of Jan Nordlin's dummies, sprawled on the truck seat. "Okay," Bert called, "Where are you?"

"In here."

The voice seemed to be coming from the back of the truck. "That you, Miss Nordlin?"

Jan jumped out of the cloth covered back end of the truck. "I slept out here last night. Was that all right?"

"Why didn't you stay with the rest of the show?"

Jan brushed the tangles out of her long dark hair. "The show folded before I could join it. I'm freelancing my way south to join another troupe."

"I suppose you know we're heading south."

"Yes."

"And you want a ride."

"Could you do it?"

Bert frowned. "We're on a pretty important mission."

"I know. Mr. Vickens told me last night." She smiled. "He trusts me."

"Then there was no reason to bother asking me."

Jan poked at the half-track treads with her foot. "Going to save the princess?"

"I hope we do. I want to meet her."

"She's the kind of important person you're interested in."

"That's right. And a blonde to boot." Bert turned away and went back into the inn.

They were crossing a stretch of flat pasture land, following a shortcut Vickens had recommended, when the front tire blew. The steering wheel took over and the truck half-circled and then slid in among a scattering of low scrub-covered dunes.

"Blow out," said Vickens as Bert got the truck stopped.

"You detectives always know what's going on." Bert got out.

"I'm not hurt in case you're wondering," said Jan, joining Bert from the back of the truck. "That tire's shot isn't it."

"Yep," said Bert.

"I'm going back and see if I can determine what caused the trouble," said Vickens. "My curiosity is aroused." He ran off, rubbing at his nose.

"Did you see a spare tire back in there?" Bert asked.

Jan locked her hands behind

her. "No, sir. This will slow down your princess hunt."

"Be quiet for awhile. I'll look in case you missed it."

"Wow!" shouted Vickens from beyond the dunes.

Bert ran in the direction of the shouting. There was now a deep pit just over the last dune. It was eight feet deep and Vickens was at the bottom. "You hurt?"

"No," said Vickens. "My foot is screwed up some, but that's all."

"I'll look for a rope."

"Don't touch, stand back," cried the little round-faced man who appeared from behind a dune. "There's a code among trappers. Isn't there, Captain?"

The captain appeared. He was a big brown man in a tan uniform with all the insignia and decoration removed. "Right, Tommy. Right. This young man will have to leave our catch strictly alone."

"Right you are, Captain McKinney."

Jan was there. "Capt. McKinney of the McKinney wild animal shows?"

"That's him," said Tommy, smoothing out his dark suit. "Right, Captain?"

"For sure, Tommy. You people will have to stand back while we hoist this thing and cage it. What is it this time, Tommy?"

"I don't know, sir. But I'm hoping for a wild panther."

"Get me out of this hole," shouted Vickens.

"There's no animal down there," said Bert. "Only our friend, Mr. Vickens."

"Protective coloration can fool you," said the captain. He crouched and moved toward the edge of the pit.

"We're short of panthers right now," Tommy said to Jan.

"It's usually either feast or famine," she said.

Captain McKinney stealthily unholstered his blaster. "All be on guard, I'm going to get a look at it."

"Let it be a panther," whispered Tommy.

"Looks like a mangy old man," said the captain.

"Don't let it fool you, Captain." Tommy stepped to the edge beside the captain. "You there, are you or are you not a wild animal?"

"I'm not wild, but I'm pretty damned mad. Now stop with the routines and fish me out."

Tommy snapped his fingers in annoyance. "You had no business falling into our animal trap if you're not an animal."

The captain straightened and holstered his gun. He uncoiled a yellow rope and, bracing himself, threw one end down to Vickens.

"The very rope we planned to tie up the wild panther with," said Tommy, turning away.

"Wow," said Vickens as Bert reached out and helped him free. "My ankle's all fouled up."

"Fair is fair," said Captain McKinney. "I'll transport you back

to my animal shelter and have one of my handlers patch you up. That's the sporting thing to do."

"As long as you don't cage me."

"These are bad days for the animal show," said Tommy.

"These are bad days for everything," said Bert. He wanted to get to know the princess. He was sorry about Vickens, but it was still a delay to the rescue.

"All things considered," said Jan, tucking her legs up under her on the smooth seat, "it was very sporting of Captain McKinney to loan us one of his trucks and to board Vickens until his broken leg is better."

"Why don't you throw your voice someplace where I can't hear it," said Bert, squeezing the wheel. "I'm trying to concentrate on following Vickens' trailing instructions."

"About finding the abductors' hideout."

"That's right."

"Turn left at the next cut off. Go about a mile and stop."

"You a spy?"

"No. I can follow a trail, though. And Rhymer usually hides out in the desert around here."

Bert grunted. He made the turn Jan had suggested and drove the mile. When he stopped the truck they were on flat dry country. Shaggy many-armed trees feinted in the warm wind. "I guess we leave the truck."

"Right. See those big rocks over there?"

Bert looked. A ring of building high yellow rocks was about a half mile off. "Yeah."

"I think they might be camped in there," Jan said. "Let's gather up some of Captain McKinney's animal blasters and check." She got out and stood on the road. "Look. Smoke."

"Okay," said Bert, watching the white smoke spiral up and fade into the dark blue sky. "Let's go get the princess."

Flat on his stomach in a clump of spikey brush Bert followed Jan's pointing finger.

"That black tent probably," she said.

"Because it's the only black one?"

"Right. Rhymer is like that. I'm certain this is his camp. And that should be his tent."

"How long before nightfall you think?"

"Be dark in a hour I'd say."

Bert inched back from the cliff edge. "No use spending an hour in that damned bush."

"You know," said Jan.

"What?"

"If I went around to the other side of this enclosure and threw my voice around, you might be able to sneak down from up here and surprise 'em."

"Can ventriloquists do that?"

"I can."

"Then let's do it."

"You're sure you have to rescue the princess. You don't want to let it pass?"

"I'm not scared."

"I didn't mean that. You're set on meeting her up close?"

"Yes," said Bert.

"Fine then. When it gets dark I'll scoot around and impersonate an invading army. You sneak down and rescue the princess."

"You'll be careful?"

Jan smiled faintly and moved back away from him and sat hugging her knees until it was almost night.

Even though he was expecting it, the army startled Bert. There were at least twenty hard fighting, gruff-voiced soldiers descending on the camp from the sound of it.

Bert let himself fall the rest of the way down the cliffside. He drew a hand blaster and moved ahead on all fours. The black tent was thirty yards away and he'd have to pass two lighted tents to get to it. While he moved quietly along three bearded mercenaries shot out of the nearest tent, waving blasters. They didn't sound as tough as Jan's army.

When the second tent emptied Bert stood up, almost straight. Then he ran to the black tent, edged around it and stepped in with his gun ready.

A single lamp burned on a low folding table. Sitting in a camp chair was the princess. No one

else was there. She did look very much like Donna Dayton.

Bert swallowed and moved nearer the princess. "Forgive me, your highness. I've come to take you back to your people." He bowed, hoping he was doing it right.

The princess did not blink, nor did she speak.

Drugged probably. "Don't worry, your highness," said Bert. "I'll carry you off safely. The best doctors on Osbert will snap you out of this."

In his excitement at being this close to an actual princess Bert became clumsy. Just short of her chair he tripped over a dropped canteen and stumbled over onto the princess.

Bert caught at her and tried to right the chair, but it was too late. The princess pitched out of his hands and fell to the hard ground.

She rattled once or twice, one arm flapped with a buzzing, and then she was still.

Bert looked at the princess. She'd been cold when he touched her. And she'd rattled. That wasn't the kind of thing a princess was supposed to do.

Bert lunged and caught up the princess. He shook her. Rattle she did. He became detached from any sense of time. He was still shaking the mechanical princess when two of Rhymer's men grabbed him.

Rhymer's long sharp nose spark-

led in the firelight. He rumbled his tight-curved black hair. "The other one is an android, too?"

Bert nodded, his manacles jiggling. "Right."

Rhymer laughed. "You're on their side. No doubt you were sent to throw me off. At this very moment I am on my way to return that blinking android and abduct the real princess."

"The Princess Louise they've got is Donna Dayton #22. The one you've got is #10."

"How am I going to get my daughter on the throne, a position she's ideally suited for, if I can't find the real princess and keep her out of the way."

"Mr. Rhymer," said Bert, "I'll tell you how it is." He avoided looking at Jan, who sat across the campfire from him. "About two minutes after I saw your princess in there I figured it out. The Prime Minister was anxious to have my Donna Dayton android in the palace. He sent me and one middle-aged operative out to bring back the princess. I don't think they care, on Monarchy Hill, whether they get this android back or not. They're got one just like it working for them."

"You suspect there's no real princess?"

"Biz Enterprises has three dozen of those androids in circulation. I bet about five years ago they looked the other way and let the Prime Minister acquire one."

"Look," said Jan. "Bert is right. I'm sure when Bert gets back to Monarchy Hill BE will have other plans for him. They did sell the PM the other Donna Dayton, Bert."

"You knew about the deal?" He looked at her now.

"Well, yes," she said. "Somebody still had to do the voices for all those speeches. I'm sorry. You wanted to come and look. So I let you."

"Ha," said Rhymer. "I don't have to wait for a contest. I will simply expose this corrupt government and put my daughter on the throne, right at the very top of Monarchy Hill." He slapped his hands together and laughed again.

"Could you turn us loose, too?" asked Bert. "We've got a borrowed truck to return."

"You're prisoners of war."

"The war hasn't started yet."

"That's right," said Rhymer, mo-

tioning two minions to unlock Bert and Jan. "Will you be leaving tonight? Should you stay on till morning there will be a chance to meet my daughter, the future princess."

"Not me," said Jan. "I've got to catch up with a show down south." She shook free of the manacles and walked away into the darkness beyond the fire.

Bert flexed his fingers. "A real princess, huh?"

"Beyond any doubt," grinned Rhymer. "And a stunning blonde, with a real gift for trombone improvisation."

Bert smiled. "Give her my best wishes for a happy reign."

"You're not staying then?"

"I have to return a truck. And then I may be joining a show in the south."

"More androids?"

"No," said Bert, starting after Jan. "Real people."

