

*Two men and two women stranded, perhaps forever, on an unknown planet. . . . There were evidences that a high-level civilization had existed here quite recently—perhaps it still did, though you couldn't prove it by the dogs. . . .*

## STORM OVER SODOM

*by Robert F. Young*

FOR THE PAST HALF HOUR NINA had been sidling toward Collins, and now she was sitting so close to him that their shoulders touched. Joan, on his opposite side, had not been idle either, and was sitting equally close. Bedford, sitting on the other side of the campfire, kept his eyes fixed on the nervous flames and pretended not to notice.

Collins, his wits blunted by self-complacency, was turning the screw. "We could be a hell of a lot worse off," he was saying. "Suppose, for instance, that only three of us had survived—one man and two women, or two women and one man? Not that I'm trying to break everything down to sex, but just the same, we'd have a problem on our hands!"

"I'll say!" said Nina, her brown eyes regarding him reverently.

"I guess we would!" said Joan, not taking her blue eyes from his face.

It was a handsome face all right—even Bedford had to admit that. Clear gray eyes, good nose; a firm chin with a Cary Grant cleft. But Bedford knew that it wasn't Collins' handsomeness alone that made him irresistible to women. Bedford was handsome himself, as far as that went.

No, Collins' attractiveness stemmed from other qualities, too. He exuded camaraderie, whereas Bedford did not. He was warm and vital, whereas Bedford was cold and austere. His clear gray eyes revealed the peasant simplicity of his thought processes, whereas Bedford's cold blue ones were seldom drawn blinds concealing a storeroom filled with erudition, disillusionment and cynicism.

"When you come right down to it," Collins went on, giving the screw another turn, "what more could four survivors ask for? We've more than enough food to

last us till we can start growing our own. We've got good temporary shelters to live in while we're building permanent ones. Who knows? We may even found a colony of our own before we're done. Call it New Earth, maybe—or maybe New America!"

The fool! Bedford thought. Couldn't the man see the situation that was developing?

Abruptly Bedford stood up. "I'm going to take another look at the raft," he said, and walked off into the darkness.

He knew he was behaving jealously, and over two women at whom, forty-eight hours ago, he would not have looked at twice. But the same old pattern was manifesting itself again, and he had contended with it too many times in ordinary situations to be tolerant of it in this one. He had thought—or at least he had hoped—that under such an extraordinary set of circumstances it would not rear its ugly head.

Its appearance marked the apogee of irony. That four people in the same general age group should have climbed into the one life-raft to have gotten free from the *Anaxagoras* before the liner had gone critical was a miracle of no mean proportions; but that four people in the same general age group *and equally divided as to sex* should have done so was a miracle of such proportions that it predicated divine intervention, for

if four people had to be stranded for the rest of their lives on an alien, presumably uninhabited planet, certainly the ideal solution would be to make two of them men and two of them women. That way there would be a woman for each man and a man for each woman, and the next generation would probably never need to face the problem of incest.

But the appearance of the old pattern turned the accomplishment into a tour de force, for with the pattern you got a totally different setup. You got two women for one man and none for the other.

Bedford knew that it wasn't really that bad. He knew that eventually he'd end up with one of the women. But that was no less painful because he knew perfectly well which one of them it would be.

It would be the one Collins got sick of first.

The stars had come out, and in the east a small yellow moon was rising. From the distance came scattered yelping sounds reminiscent of the barking of dogs. Fireflies winked in the deeper shadows, mottling the darkness with tiny multicolored lights, and unknown insects sang strange songs in the alien underbrush.

The life-raft lay on a hilltop, its anti-gray tanks stove in from the crash-landing. Repairing them was out of the question, and there

had been no reason for Bedford to climb the hill to look at them again. There was no reason for him to be standing in the starlight now, staring at them. No reason except his pride.

Go back to the campfire, his common sense told him. Try to be mature about the situation. It's bound to improve. And in the meantime, there's nothing you can do. Some men have it, others don't.

But his common sense had told him too many things before, and most of them had turned out to be false. If when he was a boy he had listened to his common sense instead of to his teacher, he would have believed that the earth was flat, that the clouds were cotton candy and that the stars were streetlights in the sky. And if he listened to it now he would believe that an astral body as huge as Equuleus VI could not possibly go undetected by a rescue ship for more than a few days—or, at the most, a week.

The hell it couldn't! The astro-gator was dead, so it was useless to revile him for the error he had made; but it had been a booboo of Brobdingnagian proportions, and the odds against a rescue ship finding a planet as remote from the spaceways as Equuleus VI was, were a googol to one. And then there was the matter of the cosmic-radiation storm that had caused the *Anaxagoras* to go critical. The storm was still raging

throughout the Equuleus system, and any rescue ship that materialized in its midst would be bound to go critical, too.

Without realizing it, Bedford had raised his eyes and was staring at the stars. His job as interstellar correspondent for *Galactic News* had taken him to many far-flung worlds, and alien constellations were by no means new to him. Nevertheless, he never tired of looking at them, and he had developed a little game in which he tried to identify each with the object it most resembled. A star-pattern rising in the east caught his eye. To him, more than anything else it suggested the profile of a woman's face. Quickly he sought another, found one high in the north. That one resembled a woman's leg.

He lowered his eyes, pulled out his cigarettes and lit one with trembling fingers. The night was mild, a little on the humid side. The sea was not far away, and the wind that blew constantly and gently over the forests and the meadows was undoubtedly a trade wind. It would probably die away soon, now that the sun had set, and cold air would creep down from the snow-crowned mountains that rose beyond the littoral. It would be a good night for sleeping—

Sleeping alone . . .

Angrily, he flung the cigarette into the darkness. His anger was

all the more annoying because its source was illogical. During trajectory, he had hardly known Joan and Nina were alive. He had noticed them, yes, but only vaguely. Not that they weren't attractive—far from it—but the *Anaxagoras*, to him, had represented nothing more than a space-borne fragment of Earth, and on Earth, attractive women were a dime a dozen and even when you had the pattern to contend with, you could always buy your love—

On Earth you could.

Here you had to fight for it.

But how did you fight when you had no weapons with which to fight? How did you fight when you had the physical presence of Cyrano and your opponent was Adonis? It was like trying to subdue a man armed with a sub-machine gun with your bare hands.

Well anyway, Bedford thought, there's always the city.

They had glimpsed it in the distance just before they crashed. It had looked dead, but there was a possibility that it was not. And if it wasn't, then it might contain humans like themselves. The dog-like creatures they had seen lurking just beyond the boundary of the camp that afternoon constituted a good argument in favor of the human factor. Unquestionably they were tame—or had been at one time—and the domestication of dogs was a practice strictly characteristic of humans.

But if the city were dead? What then? Bedford shrugged. He'd be no worse off than he was now.

He started back down the hill to the campfire, paused when he saw the tall figure ascending the slope toward him. Then he stood in the darkness, waiting.

Collins was breathing hard from the climb when he reached Bedford's side, and he waited a while before he spoke. Then: "Thought I'd get a breath of air before I turned in," he said.

"You didn't climb all the way up here just to get a breath of air," Bedford said coldly.

"As a matter of fact, I didn't. I wanted to talk to you."

"There's nothing to talk about as far as I can see. Everything's said and done. We're here, and we're going to stay here—for a long time, maybe forever. And that just about sums it up."

"I was thinking of arrangements," Collins said.

"Arrangements? What arrangements?"

Collins shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "I—I mean arrangements between the women . . . and us. The way the setup is now, it's not going to work."

"Well what do you know!" Bedford said. "The bell finally rang. The way you were running off at the mouth about the Utopia we're going to found, I was beginning to think it never would! Well, what do you propose to do?"

"There's only one thing we can do under the circumstances," Collins said. "Draw lots."

"The hell you say!" Bedford felt the tightness of his face, his pride pounded in his brain like a piston lubricated with blood. "Draw lots—and the loser wins me and hates me for the rest of her life!"

"But why should she hate you? Use your head, Bedford. Joan and Nina understand the situation. They—"

"They don't like me. Neither one of them. And you know it as well as I know it. If you didn't know it, you wouldn't be up here now, talking about 'arrangements.'"

"Well how in hell do you expect them to like you when you don't give them a chance to? When you sulk on your side of the fire and ignore them? When you haven't said so much as ten words to them since we crashed!"

"Shut up!" Bedford said. "I don't want to hear any more about it." His breath felt hot against his dry lips, and his heart was hammering. "Tomorrow morning I'm taking my share of the rations and heading for the city. You can keep your lousy goddamn harem. I don't want any part of it!"

Collins was taken aback. "You—you're going alone?" he asked.

"That's right," Bedford said. "Alone."

He strode down the hill toward

the flickering red flower of the fire.

Bedford breasted the ridge, looked back the way he had come. Collins and the two girls were halfway up the slope. The two girls were staggering a little beneath the weight of their packs. Bedford shrugged. When Collins, apparently reluctant to be left alone with two predatory females, had suggested that the party should stick together, neither of them had demurred. So let them suffer.

He waited till they caught up to him, then started down the opposite side of the ridge. It was only midmorning, but the sun was already hot. In the valley below, a herd of the omnipresent dog-like creatures frolicked on the grassy bank of a brook. Every now and then one of them would break away from the group and head for a nearby coppice. Not long after, another would follow.

They both mystified and annoyed him. Mystified him because of the near-human conformation of their faces, annoyed him because there was a quality about their actions that was vaguely familiar. Then, too, he was dissatisfied with the term "dog-like." Certainly they resembled dogs as a group; but at least half of them had hoofs on their rear legs, and with their oddly pointed ears, resembled something else far more. But he could not put his finger on what that something was.

The creatures looked up as the party passed, and several of them gave a series of laughing barks. Despite himself, Bedford shuddered. Joan was just behind him, and glancing over his shoulder, he saw how white her oval face had become. Revulsion, he decided. That was what he felt, too. He extended his glance to Collins and Nina. Their faces told him nothing—well, not really nothing. Nina's swarthy Queen-of-Sheba face told him as plain as day that she was on the make for Collins.

But that wasn't exactly news.

There was nothing complicated about Nina. Bedford had needed to take but one look at her to spot her for what she was. He had seen her many times. She was the wife—or would have been, if events had followed their normal course—who supplements her husband's income with an income of her own and who insures that income, if possible, with an affair with her employer, but who in all other respects is faithful to her husband. She craved security the way a wino craves wine, and Collins, with his obvious masculinity, represented, in her peasant mind, the only source of security at present available.

At the base of the next ridge they made a brief halt for lunch, then went on. The terrain had been gradually rising, and presently it leveled off into a flat, creek-veined plateau, scattered with oa-

sis-like clumps of verdant trees. Beyond the plain, the green foothills blended so flawlessly with the lower slopes of the mountains that the mountains seemed to rise abruptly from the plain itself.

The effect was breath-taking. Behind him, Bedford heard Joan gasp. "They look almost as though they were going to fall on us!" she said.

"An optical illusion," Collins said.

"What a spot for a honeymoon!" said Nina.

The dog-like creatures were more numerous than ever, running in pairs, sometimes, over the plain, but clustered for the most part in the vicinity of the oases. Apparently the oases were the source of their food supply; every so often one of them would climb into one of the trees, pluck something from the branches and then return to the ground and devour it.

The term "dog-like" was proving more inadequate by the minute.

Presently Bedford became aware that Joan was walking abreast of him. Resolutely, he kept his eyes straight ahead and said nothing.

The silence endured for some time, walking soundlessly between them. A less cynical person than Bedford might have admitted to a variation of the pattern, especially when Joan made the first conversational sally. "What do you think

we'll find in the city, Mr. Bedford?" she asked.

But Bedford admitted to nothing. "Dust," he said.

"Why not life?"

"You saw it before the life-raft crashed. Can you deny that it's as modern as most cities on Earth? And do you think that a race of people technically competent enough to build it would lack devices for the detection of alien craft in its skies, or the means of contacting such craft immediately? No, if the city contained life we'd have known about it two days ago."

"Then why did you insist on coming?"

"Because I dislike reality in common with all human beings," Bedford said. "Because I want to pretend right up to the last bitter moment that things aren't really the way they seem. Because I want to keep hoping that when we come within sight of the gate, a golden-robed race of Atlanteans will come streaming out to meet us."

She smiled. "It would be nice, wouldn't it? But while we're hoping, let's not confine ourselves to one perfect commonwealth. Perhaps we'll find The City of the Sun, Utopia, Oceana and the New Atlantis all rolled into one."

For the first time Bedford really looked at her. But he saw only what he had seen before: the oval, almost noble, face, framed with shoulder-length, dark-brown hair;

the astonishingly clear complexion; the wide-apart blue eyes . . . the tall lithe body that successfully combined voluptuousness and grace . . . Aphrodyte. *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*. A twentieth century love goddess clad in twenty-second century emergency fatigues. . . . But what love goddess read More and Harrington? Bacon and Campanella?

And then he thought: It's a trick. She knows I'm an intellectual. Either she guessed it, or Collins told her. And Collins probably told her to walk ahead and keep me company. He wants to foist her on me temporarily while he makes a play for Nina.

His emotions froze, as they had so many times before. He did not even try to melt them. Even his voice was cold when he finally spoke:

"I've never been to any of those places," he said. "Are they Earth cities?"

Pink roses climbed invisible trellises and bloomed in her cheeks. She dropped her eyes. "I don't know," she said. "I've never been to them, either."

The conversation ended. He did not look at her again, and presently she dropped back and rejoined the others. Bedford forged ahead, increasing the pace. The pattern was always reoccurring, and he could never escape it. But he could show his contempt and indifference. He could prove that he was

unafraid of loneliness, that he was sufficient unto himself. And proud. Above all else, proud.

That night they camped in a small valley in the foothills, inflating their collapsible shelters and building a fire, confining the evening meal to condensed supper-tablets washed down with water taken from an adjacent spring. Bedford stood the first watch, sitting on a log some distance from the fire, his ray rifle resting across his knees. In addition to the dog-like creatures, the only animal life they had seen so far had consisted of Equuleus VI variants of the rodent and bird families; but there was the possibility that larger animals inhabited the area, and it was best to be prepared.

Sitting there, he listened to the stridulations of the alien insects in the shadows, comparing them to the stridulations of the Earth insects he had been familiar with during his boyhood. There was very little difference, really. For that matter, there was very little difference between the two planets. Both had seas and continents and forests; hills and dales and lakes; mountains and plains and rivers—Well, yes, there was one important difference:

Only one of them had intelligent life.

But that was a moot point, Bedford reminded himself. In his heart he believed that the argu-

ment he had given Joan was valid—that the race that had built the city would have contacted them upon their arrival if it still existed. But there might be other cities, primitive ones built by technically unskilled people, and the argument would not be valid in their case. He did not honestly believe that there were, but it was a possibility worth keeping in mind.

As he sat there, one of the girls said something in her sleep. They shared the same shelter, and he could not tell which one had spoken, but he could identify the single word: *David*. A husband? he wondered. No, not a husband: neither of them was married. A sweetheart, then? Or a brother? Abruptly he brought his thoughts to a halt. It simply hadn't occurred to him that either Nina or Joan might have someone on Earth whom she loved, who loved her in return; such an idea was too remote from the center of his universe, from the personal planet around which his ego orbited.

He had been on the verge of pitying someone other than himself; instinctively he shied away.

*Had she spoken the name aloud?*

She sat up on her pneumatic pallet in the unrelieved blackness of the shelter. Nina's breathing came rhythmically from the pallet beside her. Insects sang in the world without, and from the dis-



tance came a series of whining barks. There was no other sound.

She lay back on the pallet and closed her eyes again. Again, sleep came to her . . . sleep, and the dream-that-was-not-a-dream.

For the hundredth time she watched David walk toward her across the terminal-floor. David carrying candy and a dozen roses and the world. The same abject plea was in his eyes when he came up to her, in his voice when he spoke. "Please don't go, Joan. Please."

She felt her body stiffen, felt the coldness come into her eyes. She heard her cold irrevocable words: "Don't beg. You remind me of a dog."

In the oval terminal-window the shuttle ship was framed, sun-bright and building-tall. Over the P.A. a relentless voice was intoning: "All passengers for the *Anaxagoras* report to section C immediately. All passengers for the *Anaxagoras* report to section C immediately."

"Please don't go," David said again. "Please."

And she heard herself say, "Good by, David. Have fun on your exurban treadmill."

She watched herself walk away. She tried to make herself turn her head for one final look at the man who worshipped her, who would have showered her with security for the rest of her life. But she went right on walking, eyes

straight ahead, hating the peasant who could see her body but who could not hear her voice . . .

When she awoke again, the grayness of dawn was filtering through the walls of the shelter. This time it was not the dream-that-was-not-a-dream that had disturbed her, but something else. Listening, she heard the sound again, and this time she traced it to the pallet beside her. Nina was whimpering in her sleep.

Joan turned on her side and closed her eyes again. It was reassuring to know that the past was not her province alone.

It had been a bad dream, and even the warm fingertips of the rising sun could not loosen its grip upon her mind. Nina shuddered. She saw the sewing-room again, and the superintendent standing by her machine, leaning over her shoulder. Then she saw him look up, and following his eyes, she saw the new girl standing in the doorway. She saw the new girl blush, and then she saw the expression in the superintendent's eyes and knew that the after-hours rendezvous in the stockroom were over . . . and she had a sudden impulse to run out of the shelter and find Collins and throw herself into his arms before it was too late.

She fought the impulse back and forced herself to get up calmly and slip into the gray, one-piece garment that had been a part of the

life-raft's supplies. Joan was still asleep, her dark-brown hair spread out around her classic face, the filmy pallet-sheet adorning her long, full-breasted body like a Grecian robe. Nina bestowed a glance of purest hatred upon her and stepped out into the morning.

She washed in a nearby creek. When she returned, Bedford was stirring the fire and Joan was combing her hair in front of the shelter. Presently Collins appeared, and Nina put on her best smile. During breakfast she sat beside him by the fire, admiring his muscular arms, the strong column of his neck; the poise of his handsome head. Collins was a real man, for her money. Beside him, Bedford looked like a boy not quite out of his teens.

And yet there was a drive about Bedford that Collins lacked. He was a pusher, Bedford was. Not the foreman or the superintendent, but the— She shook her head, trying to straighten out her thoughts. Not the leader—that was what she meant. Bedford wasn't the leader: Collins was. Collins was the one you went to when things weren't going right, the one who covered up for you when you made mistakes, the one who recommended you for a raise. . . .

Desperately she pressed the heel of her hand against her forehead, quickly camouflaged the gesture by patting the waves of her black hair into place with her fingers. She glanced sideways at

Collins to see if he had noticed. He had not. He was talking to Joan.

Panic touched her. She fought it back. There was plenty of time, she reassured herself. And she had weapons Joan had probably never dreamed of. Tonight she would go to him, when Bedford was on watch. Once she'd slept with him, he'd have no eyes for another woman. Not for a long time, anyway.

Tonight, then. Tonight . . .

They broke camp and started out, Bedford again taking the lead. The plain rose gently into the first green wave of the foothills. Outbursts of trees became more and more frequent, blended finally into a park-like forest.

The forest teemed with the dog-like creatures. They were behind almost every tree. And they were eternally chasing after one another as though their lives depended on it. Bedford began to notice details about them that had escaped his attention before. Their humanoid faces were not, as he had first thought, identical. Each had characteristics of its own, and some were decidedly female while others were decidedly male. Logical enough, certainly.

Moreover, the male creatures were the ones with hoofs, the ones with the pointed ears . . .

The hills were gentle ones, but they kept rising higher and higher,

and when the party made camp late in the afternoon, there was a pronounced chill in the air. Collins had the first watch, Bedford the second. He could see his breath when he took over at 0200, and he added more wood to the fire and moved as close to the flames as he could get.

The heat was soporific, and presently he dozed. Suddenly he heard the faint susurrus of a zipper, and opening his eyes he saw Nina slipping out of the shelter she shared with Joan. There was another faint susurrus, and then she was running, naked, her black hair swirling round her face, toward the shelter where Collins slept alone. Bedford watched her unzip the doorway and disappear within. He watched the doorway close.

He made a grimace. One, he thought.

They came within sight of the city early the next morning. It lay far below them, a macrocosmic dewdrop cupped in the green palm of an idyllic valley. Beyond it, the last of the foothills rolled verdantly away to the slopes of the nearer mountains.

Joan tilted her head, listening. All of them heard it then—the sound of music, wafted up from the valley on the morning wind.

Bedford took a deep, incredulous breath. "So there is life after all! . . . But why didn't they

contact us? They *must* have an advanced technology, a communications system. Why, look at those transmission towers on the outskirts. And that long strip over there—that must be an airport of some kind."

"And those little specks along the edges must be grounded aircraft," Nina said.

Joan said, "All flights must be cancelled—otherwise we'd have spotted some of them by now."

"Couldn't be because of the weather," Collins said.

"Or at least not because of the weather locally," said Nina.

A sudden updraft of wind heightened the sound of the music. There was a certain wild gaiety about it, a sense of abandon. "A holiday!" Bedford said abruptly. "A three- or four-day holiday. That would explain it."

Joan nodded. "A holiday—or a festival of some kind. Celebrating the birth of their civilization, maybe, or—" She broke off as one of the dog-like creatures appeared on the slope below, running furiously. A moment later its pursuer came into view, tongue lolling, eyes glazed, and presently the two of them disappeared into the underbrush.

Two spots of pink kindled in her cheeks. "I hope they prove to be more civilized than their pets," she said.

"Those dogs don't act like pets to me," Collins said. "If they are

dogs." He turned to Bedford. "What's your opinion?"

Bedford found himself curiously reluctant to discuss the subject. "It's hard to say," he said. Then: "Come on. If we hurry we can get there before nightfall."

He started down the wooded slope. Joan followed, then Nina. Collins brought up the rear, watching the provocative sway of Nina's buttocks. He felt his fingertips begin to tremble, his temples begin to throb.

God! he thought. He'd never known a woman could be like that, and he'd known lots of women. He wanted to talk about the way she had been, to brag; but he couldn't very well brag to Bedford, and he certainly wouldn't be stupid enough to brag to Joan. It was all very frustrating. Half of the thrill in getting something out of the ordinary was in telling about it the next day. Well, he could be a lot worse off, he supposed. Look at Bedford there, depending on self-pity for his sex-kicks. What would someone like that do in bed with a red-hot item like Nina? Collins almost laughed aloud.

He shifted his gaze to Joan. She was some distance ahead, walking just behind Bedford. Nina or no Nina, Collins thought, Joan was the one he wanted. The Ninas were the ones you slept with in cheap skytels, but the Joans were the ones you hungered for all your life, dreamed of having and never

quite got. This one was going to be the exception to the rule, though. She had been giving him the cold shoulder ever since yesterday, why, he did not know—unless it was because of the disparaging remark he'd made about classical music. She'd seemed kind of offended at the time, though she hadn't said anything. Well, it didn't matter: she was still going to be the exception to the rule. Bedford no longer counted. When he had refused to draw lots, he had merely expedited the inevitable.

Suddenly Collins realized that Joan was no longer walking behind Bedford, but beside him. Momentarily, jealousy stung him; then he thought: *They're probably talking about the moon. Or the stars. She's as quixotic as he is.*

He returned his eyes to Nina's callipygian posterior. Again, his temples began to throb. Again, his fingertips began to tremble. Maybe if the two of them dropped behind a little more . . . There was plenty of concealment available . . . Take those bushes over there . . . He hurried ahead to overtake her.

That was when he noticed that he was walking on all fours.

Again, Bedford kept his eyes straight ahead and said nothing. Again, the silence walked soundlessly between them. This time, however, Joan made no attempt to drive it away, and finally, unable any longer to endure its presence,

Bedford performed the task himself. "If the city is a dependable criterion," he said, "we should find evidence of a race of people like ourselves. Some of the buildings struck me as being works of art."

Joan said, "Architecture isn't art—at least not in the strict sense of the word. It's too tangible. In their purest sense, the words 'art' and 'artist' are inapplicable to buildings and engineers. But we've milked the words of their original meaning by applying them to too many inferior occupations. Probably if there were still such an occupation as manual ditch-digging we'd call it 'Pick-and-Shovel Sculpturing.'"

"Or 'Practical Archaeology.'"

She laughed. *Thy teeth are like a flock of ewes that are newly shorn, he thought, which are come up from the washing; whereof every one hath twins, and none is bereaved among them.*

"You—" he began, and stopped. He wanted to know what she had been on Earth, what she had done, believed in, sought after; but knowing would be the beginning of intellectual intimacy and it was but one short step from intellectual intimacy to physical and emotional intimacy, and he was reluctant to make the step possible because he believed in his heart that she would not take it, that their relationship would continue on an intellectual level only, and that she would seek physical and

emotional intimacy elsewhere in order to abet it.

But she divined his question and parted the curtain of her own accord, and he had no recourse save to look. He caught a glimpse of rich meadowland, of distant stately trees. "I was an operatic soprano," she said, a curious tenseness in her voice. "In the process of pursuing such an anachronistic profession, one is bound, sooner or later, to take a rather dim view of the petty deceits of the peasantry."

The wide, full chest, the noble column of her neck; the goddessmien . . . "Wagnerian?" he asked.

She nodded. "Freia. Brünnhilde. Isolde . . ."

God! he thought. She must have sung the *Liebestod*. And he remembered the first time he had heard it; the night he had stood drunkenly in the little bar in Old York and listened to the tape which the eccentric owner had surreptitiously substituted for the usual anemic concatenation of modern medleys, and he remembered how the aria, with its wrenching background of interblending themes, had washed away his drunkenness and left him standing there, half-sobbing, overwhelmed with pain that was not pain, but apotheosis.

He realized presently that Joan was still talking, that her voice was no longer tense. At first, only part of what she was saying got through

to him: ". . . establishing a new Bayreuth on Thule . . . a revival of Wagner in the colonies . . ." Then: "That's how I happened to be on the *Anaxagoras*. Being a respected Brünnhilde in a wilderness is better than being a neglected Brünnhilde in a civilization addicted to play-it-yourself electric organs."

"Would you sing it for me sometime?"

"Sing what for you?"

"The *Liebestod*," he said, and the second he said it, a new expression settled upon her face and a warmth he had never known before came into her eyes, and he knew that he had stumbled upon the key, the password—the open sesame to her heart.

"Yes," she said, after a long while, her voice soft, her gaze gentle upon his face. "The *Liebestod*. I'd like to sing it to you."

It was not until they stopped in a grassy clearing to eat that they noticed that Collins and Nina were no longer following them. After finishing their midday rations, they lingered in the clearing for nearly an hour, watching their back-trail. But except for an occasional glimpse of a dog-like creature, they saw nothing.

Finally Joan said, "Should we look for them or go on?"

Bedford said, "If we backtrack, we'll never make the city before nightfall."

"Yes, but—"

It had to be faced. "Do you think they *want* us to find them?"

She stood up. "The peasant mentality," she said. "It always brings out my naïveté. Come on. They can join us in the city if they want to."

They walked in silence for the most part, moving into the wind, into the sound of the music. Birds daubed the foliage above them with evanescent streaks of color. The dog-like creatures, more numerous than ever, darted back and forth across their path.

"I thought—" Bedford began once.

"I know you did," she said, again divining his question. "And I did find Collins amusing at first, for a peasant. And then—"

"Then what?"

She evaded his eyes. "He betrayed himself. All peasants do, sooner or later."

"They have a happy facility for it," Bedford said.

The tree-shadows were long when at last they reached the walls of the city, and the sun had set by the time they found the gate. Beyond the gate, a wide avenue flowed between two delicate banks of buildings. High above the avenue, interlaced walkways hung like streamers caught in the city's hair.

The gate was open. The music was wild and carefree, and the avenue should have been filled with laughing, gaily caparisoned

people. It was not. It was filled with shadows.

As they stood there, one of the dog-like creatures emerged from the forest and ran past them through the gate. A moment later it disappeared into the shadows. Another followed in its wake, tongue lolling, eyes glazed. It, too, disappeared into the shadows.

Bedford was shocked, not because of the vague sense of familiarity which the two humanoid faces had evoked, but because of the parallel with which his mind had finally supplied him. In this case, as in all the others he had witnessed, the female was being pursued by the male; but now he knew that she wasn't being pursued simply because she was a female—

She was being pursued because she was a bitch in heat.

"Should we go in?" Joan asked.

Bedford shook his head. "I think we'd better wait till morning. It's too dark to see anything now."

"No it isn't. Look!"

One by one the city's lights were coming on. They were of various hues, and suspended in a thousand unexpected places. Some of them weren't suspended at all, or didn't seem to be, and floated like gaudy balloons high above the buildings. A mist had risen with the setting of the sun, and now it transmuted subtly into a motionless rainfall, the drops of which

were gold and blue and violet; yellow, red, pink, scarlet; amber, mauve, turquoise; silver, lavender and gray.

Joan gave a delighted laugh. "Why, it's like a carnival," she said. "Let's go look for the hot-dog stand!"

Bedford took her arm, and together they walked into the multi-colored mist. It *was* like a carnival, Bedford thought. But with a difference. Real carnivals were attended by thousands of people. This one had an attendance of only two.

Why was the city empty? he wondered. What had happened to its populace? The avenue vibrated faintly from the rhythm of subterranean machines and the crystalline flagstones were immaculate; but the buildings stared sightlessly at one another with lightless, empty eyes, and the walkways were deserted.

The architecture, while alien, had a basic similarity to that of most Earth cities—probably because it had been influenced by the same hereditary drive. There were the usual ithyphallic structures, unexpected as to décor but not surprising otherwise. On Equuleus VI, though, the feminine breast must have played an important role in the original fertility rites, for dome-like structures abounded, and the pap was interpreted in a thousand different roofpeaks.

They left the avenue and turned down a sidestreet. Choosing a building at random, they explored it from top to bottom, riding up and down on pneumatic lifts, entering apartment after apartment. Once, they surprised mechanical sweepers at work, and everywhere they saw signs of recent habitation; but nowhere did they find life.

In the street, Bedford said, "We've got a thousand places we can live in. If we can find their food warehouses, I'd say we had it made."

"Speaking of food—" Joan said.

They broke out supper-rations and ate, sitting on their packs in the middle of the street. After they finished, they went on.

The street debouched into another avenue, and they turned up it, walking hand in hand now, the mist and the music swirling softly around them. This avenue was different from the first: its portals were wide open, and beyond them, muted lights changed from hue to hue. Curious, they walked over to the nearest portal and stepped inside.

They found themselves in a large circular chamber. In its center a white, waist-high dais, fringed with petals of the same hue, revolved almost imperceptibly on a hidden shaft. Suspended above the middle of the dais was a transparent cylinder filled with moving images. The floor was a

flawless mirror, and on the concave wall, doors were spaced at even intervals. Mood music supplanted the music of the streets, and concealed lights accompanied it, changing from hue to hue to match each variation.

Joan was staring at the dais. "It—it looks almost like an altar."

"Or a bar," Bedford said.

It was Joan who discovered that the petals were bar-stools. Laughing, she slid onto one of them and placed her elbows on the dais. Instantly, a sphincteral opening appeared on the surface before her, and a glass brimming with reddish-gold liquid emerged. She picked it up, but Bedford, coming up behind her, took it from her hand. "Let me be the guinea pig," he said.

He held the glass under his nose and sniffed its contents. Wine. Wine—and something else. He touched the glass to his lips, intending only to taste the wine, but the taste was more than he had bargained for. Before he knew what had happened he had drunk every drop.

He set the empty glass on the dais with trembling fingers. It sank into the surface, was replaced by a full one. He let that one sit where it was.

Joan was looking at him. "It might have been poisoned."

He shook his head. "No. Not poisoned. Doped."



He raised his eyes to the transparent cylinder. Blue fire was blazing in him now. Even forewarned, he was shocked by what he saw. The city's inhabitants had been human all right—human enough for him to be able to tell what their taped images were doing. Suddenly he realized that Joan was watching, too, and despite the aphrodisiac in his bloodstream, he blushed.

He turned his back on the cylinder and stared at the doors that were evenly spaced along the concave wall—each opening, he knew now, into a room with bed but without view. His temples pounded, his throat felt dry. Abruptly he faced Joan. He moved the second glass closer to her hand. "Drink it," he said.

She regarded him steadily with blue clear eyes. "Is that the way you want me? Drugged, defenseless, willing to take on any man?"

The room seemed to shift, to blur. He swayed slightly, steadied himself against the dais. Slowly, he shook his head. "No, that's not the way I want you," he said.

She stood up, took his arm. "Come on, let's get some air."

He accompanied her into the street.

There was an eeriness about the multi-colored lights now, and a certain obscenity. Walking through their vacillating patterns, it was easy to picture the city as it had

once been. He saw the people swarming the streets, chasing from bar to bar, from bed to bed. Satyrs . . . nymphomaniacs . . .

He could think, now, with the chill night air pressing against his face and throat. A few moments ago he had been about to rip his cloak of culture from his shoulders and give rein to the animal chafing within him. He had been on the verge of behaving like a Collins or a Nina, on the verge of behaving like a peasant. He and Joan lived on a much higher plane. When it came time for them to make love, they would not make love like animals, but like humans.

They were ascending a wide, spiraling ramp now, Joan leading the way, her hand warm in his. Light-patterns played over her body, giving her one-piece garment a harlequin effect. Higher they climbed, and higher. The avenue became a chasm beneath them. Around them light-bubbles drifted and swirled, as insubstantial as air. The mist thinned out and the starlight broke through and fell like gentle rain.

"Here. We're high enough above the music now."

He followed her over a high-flung walkway to the roof of a lofty building. He heard the silence now. He saw the starlight on her face, her hair. Presently he heard her voice.

Isolde . . .

The magnificent columns of

sound, compounded of note on poignant note, rose ever higher above the carnival city till they reached the very stars. And the stars themselves took cognizance when the climactic note broke forth, and paused in their awesome courses. And then the slow, sad dying away into death and transfiguration . . .

He had sunk to the roof, and now he sat there, staring at the trembling stars. She knelt beside him, and when he turned his head she locked her fingers behind his neck and pressed his face against her breast. "Now," she whispered, "*now!*", and pressed ever harder, burying him deeper and deeper in soft darkness, shutting off his breath till he felt as though he were dying and wanted nothing more than to die. And then, when he was on the very brink of death, she released him and caught his lips with hers and blew the first life-giving breath into his starving lungs.

Morning washed the gaudy lights away and scrubbed the shadows from the streets. Joan and Bedford walked hand in hand down the avenue of bars.

The avenue debouched presently into an idyllic park, and they chose a path at random and wandered among the trees. When they reached the shore of an artificial lake, they paused and gazed out over the sparkling water. A series

of laughing barks sounded behind them, and turning, Bedford saw two of the dog-like creatures frolicking among the trees.

There was a vague familiarity about their faces, and suddenly he realized why. The two creatures were the same ones that had preceded him and Joan into the city.

Something about them fascinated him, and he continued to watch their antics. Joan had turned and was watching, too. Presently one of the creatures broke free from the trees and started running along the shore. The other followed. The sunlight caught both faces, eliciting every detail.

Bedford heard Joan gasp behind him. He heard his own hoarse breath. The faces were narrow and the features were exaggerated. Nevertheless, there was no mistaking whose they were. The first was Nina's, the second, Collins'.

Caricatures, Bedford thought. That was what they were. And all the other faces he had seen had been caricatures, too—caricatures emphasizing the sensual characteristics of the originals.

A simultaneous realization struck him. He had been right all along: both the sexes unquestionably resembled dogs, especially the female sex; but Greek mythology supplied much more appropriate terms.

Satyrs and wood nymphs!

Bedford understood everything

then: the emptiness of the city; the aphrodisiac wine; the sensuous music. For by the same token that a race of people could acquire god-like qualities by rising above itself and sublimating its sexual drive, a race of people could acquire animal-like qualities by stooping beneath itself and giving free rein to its sexual drive. And a cosmic storm containing unclassified particles capable of creating instability in an atomic pile could just as easily contain other unclassified particles capable of effecting chromosomatic transformations in individuals whose physical qualities were incompatible with their basic natures.

There were other cities, of course, but it was unlikely that their inhabitants had been any different from the inhabitants of this one. The absence of any aircraft in the skies indicated that the same fate had overtaken them, too. They, too, had probably been practicing universal birth-control and living like animals in civilized clothing long before the storm arrived. And when the storm arrived and the particle-bombardment began, metamorphosis in all cases had probably been instantaneous.

It hadn't been instantaneous in the case of Nina and Collins because neither of them, until their animal love-making had destroyed the last remnants of their decency, had been sufficiently incompatible. Once sufficient incompatibil-

ity had been attained, however, metamorphosis had followed inevitably.

Why, then, hadn't metamorphosis occurred in Joan and himself? They had made love, too.

The answer pounded in Bedford's brain, sent his blood coursing exultantly through his veins. Metamorphosis had not occurred—and would not occur—because there was no disharmony between their love-making and their physical qualities. Thanks to their loftier intellectual plane, their love-making had been noble, not base. They had not made love the way animals make love, or even the way humans make love—

They had made love in the manner of gods . . .

He turned eagerly to Joan to tell her of his insight. As he did so, she left his side and started running after Collins and Nina, tearing off her clothes. For some reason her behavior did not seem illogical, and after a moment he followed suit. When she dropped down on all fours, he did likewise.

A thought stirred in the back of his mind. He had had something he wanted to tell her, hadn't he? Something terribly important. He tried to concentrate, but just then he caught her scent, and his mind went blank. Deliciously blank. When she veered away from the shore and slipped among the trees, he followed eagerly, tongue lolling.