



He said I was the biggest knuckle-head he ever saw, but I didn't trust him. Sooner or later I knew he'd insult me!



The Connoisseur



By FRANK BANTA

IT is infinitely more satisfactory to purchase wives when they are young. They are vastly more respectful.

Twelve is a good purchasing age. Lisa was twelve when I bargained for her, and she is an illustrious argument for the system.

I recall her excellent father and I facing each other across his gleaming synthol marble table that day. On the table were small metal shells of sweet liquor. And beside the shells were the sedulously gathered treasures I was formally offering for Lisa: A control knob, and a folded painting of one of our Navi-

gator's other-ship visions.

Lisa's father eagerly examined the mirror-bright, chrome surface of the control knob — which I had handed to him with a pretense of casualness — trying to still the trembling of his fingers.

"The last knob on the control board!" he said in an emotion-cracked voice. "How could you have broken it off? We've all been tugging at it for years."

I answered — I hope with no more than legitimate pride — "I managed to get a thin hacksaw blade between the knob and the control board. Then I sawed off the shaft."

He nodded approvingly. "With knuckle-headed men like you aboard ship we will certainly all go to *Hell*."

I bowed, but I did not let his flattery relax my caution. After all, we were bargaining for his prettiest daughter. What flattering words bear weight in the midst of a sale? He, of course, referred to the ringing sincerity of our Navigator's dying words: "If you knuckle-heads all want to go to *Hell*, just keep dismantling the ship!"

Swinging adroitly to my other item of barter, I mused aloud, "Our Navigator! What a strange, frantic creature he was. Full of the wild, lovely visions which effervesced from his books of fantasy. Imploring us not only to read the books but to believe them — and, failing that, drawing immortal paintings of the fantasies for us to see."

THEREWITH I opened the folded painting and handed it reverently to him. It showed a large globular ship with people living on the *outside* of it. The title of the painting was *Planet*.

Privately I had always thought the thing was wholly unnatural — a curious off-beat of the master's imagination. I was quite willing, despite its great beauty and its origin, to exchange it for something which to me was far more attractive at the mo-

ment. Namely a woman.

Lisa lay curled up on the narrow, in-wall couch, with her head propped up by a slim arm. She chewed her synthelgum lazily and surveyed me with mild interest. She was a tender-featured girl, with shimmering black, shoulder-length hair. It was possible to forecast that she would some day be a lovely and gentle-hearted woman.

Her father, notwithstanding his habitually rigid integrity, saw my lively interest in her and tried to increase my generous bid for her by an artifice of delay.

Holding the painting of the master at arm's length, he grumbled critically, "A vision of *Hell* would have been more to my liking. Unhappily our Navigator did not paint one of his radiant visions of that ship. Now, why would he prefer *Planet* to *Hell* — particularly when he described *Hell* as warm and enclosed like our own ship?"

I did not answer his frivolous complaint, knowing full well it was only bartering talk.

He handled the immortal painting with crudely feigned indifference. He could not quite bring himself to let go of it. He was determined to own it, I knew, and he sensed also my resolve to offer no more for Lisa. Yet slyly he determined on an evil course.

For, incredibly, he turned

to tranquil Lisa and asked: "What is your value, lovely child? Does he offer enough?"

And slowly lifting her candid eyes to him she shook her head NO!

"SHALL I bargain with her then?" I asked my friend caustically. I will own I was vexed.

Shrewdly he nodded. "Whatever she accepts will be our bargain." Then, laughing at my undignified discomfiture, "It is manifest she is more aware of her value than I."

"Will you be serious? It is not kindly to banter with a woman-child in such an important matter as her future."

But greed now fully possessed him. "I do not joke. Whatever she demands shall be her price." He sipped his sweet wine, hiding his eyes from my displeasure.

Concealing my fury, I turned to Lisa, who now sat up straight on the narrow couch with her long, slender legs folded under her. In the pace of grievous mortification I was not bitter toward her. It was not her fault. For her I extended the tolerance due the innocent.

"What is your cost, child?" I asked. "This control knob and other-ship vision of our Navigator are sufficient to purchase any girl-woman. What will you have?"

Lisa chewed her gum slowly while she formed her se-

rene thought. Then, shaking her oval head, she let fall in a dreamy, singsong voice, "Neither of these! Neither of these!"

Her father leaned forward anxiously. I told her, "There is a limit to your value. I will not give all of my treasures for you, lovely though you are. Choose what thing you will have, and if I can procure it, your father shall have it."

"I'll know it when I see it!" she said, smiling impudently.

THERE was nothing for me to do but go to my apartments and look for other treasures to show her. My thoughts were exceedingly bitter as I gathered the coveted articles one by one in my arms.

"Here." I displayed it to her when I had arrived back at her father's abode. "It is the steering wheel from the lifeboat. Feel its smooth texture, see its ebony luster. It is the only lifeboat steering wheel aboard ship. I had a terrible struggle with it until I broke off the shaft."

She seemed interested. I passed hurriedly on to another object. "Here is the handle of the atomic-pile damping rod. It was threaded inside. However, I have managed to grind the interior smooth."

She seemed definitely interested, but I did not linger. I unrolled the last treasure I had brought with me. At the

sight of it her father burst into merry chuckles.

"Yes," I said, smiling with a hint of sadness. "It is the inscrutable message we found protruding from the mouth of a machine some years ago. The machine has the name Teletype engraved upon it. We cannot imagine who put the message inside the machine — if indeed it is a message. But listen to the poetry of its words! I shall read it to you as though it were properly set out on paper instead of being cramped into continuous, senseless lines:

Colony ship, colony ship,
Turn around before it is too
late.
You have left the Galaxy.
We are the last planetary
system
You will encounter,
For ten thousand years."

Then, seeing her puzzlement, I said hastily, "But, of course, it is too adult for you, Lisa. Its mystery is for the scholar, its abstract beauty for the man of mature years. Come, let us turn back to these other treasures . . ."

It was not easy for her to choose, seemingly, with so much wealth about her. The control knob, the painting, the life-boat steering wheel, the atomic-pile damping-rod handle, the inscrutable poetry — all claimed her interest. But

in the end she chose as I wanted her to, and the bargain was struck.

List went to live in the compartment of my concubines that day, and at maturity became a concubine of exotic beauty. She bore her dark-haired children well.

BY the excellence of her father, he and I continued to be good friends. At least once a year I invite him to view the master's painting of *Planet*. We spend many contented hours together. Often through a porthole we watch the rapid movement of distant ships which our Navigator called *stars*, revolving in tiny circles at the side of the ship, making a complete circle in about two minutes. What prompts the behavior of these ships? It is all very curious, and I account myself fortunate that I have in my friend an intense capacity for speculation. Like myself, he is a scholar of honor, capable of long sustained discourse on lofty subjects which round out and deepen the mind. I forgive him his greed.

As I had intended, Lisa took the teletype nonsense message to be her value to her father. May I reiterate, it is infinitely more satisfactory to purchase wives when they are very young ladies? They are vastly more respectful. Admittedly they are saucy. **END**