

The rubber plant was only a symbol but it was dangerous. It might endanger a planet—or it might take a human life!

I

IN 2212, when Walt Onegh died, Arm Brewer, Director of Staff, recommended Tom Calloway to fill the empty position as Director of Crews at Midwest Construction. The board, of course, confirmed.

One of Tom's first acts was to drop by Arm's office and thank him.

"I'd hoped—" he said. "But not so soon."

Arm clapped his big hand on Tom's shoulder. His cropped white hair aureoled his healthy pink face.

"Not a moment too soon," he said. "You're management material, Tom. A man of principles is rare in this cutthroat world of ours."

"You overestimate me," said Tom. But he glowed inside. It was true he had hoped; but not quite as modestly as he implied to Arm. Fifty was not old these days. But

neither was it young. And he would be fifty-one in three weeks. And with people knifing each other in the back for every little job or advantage. . .

"Run along and take over your offices," said Arm genially. "You inherit from Walt, lock, stock and barrel. Suite 312."

"Suite 312," echoed Tom, savoring it. For the three hundreds were third level. Executive.

THE meaning of lock, stock and barrel became more apparent when he actually stood in the outer room of his two-office suite, however. It obviously included Christine Nyall and the plant.

It was the plant which, of the two, struck him more strongly at first glance. Among the silver and opalescences, the businesslike glitter of the office, it stood out like a drab of nature, its

A TASTE OF TENURE

By GORDON R. DICKSON Illustrated by Wood

thick, shiny green leaves spread out flatly above the crystal pot.

"Why, what is it?" Tom asked, forcing a smile.

"A sort of rubber plant," Christine Nyall replied. She ducked her head above her stenomachine, then added, with almost a touch of defiance, "Mr. Onegh liked a touch of green about the place."

She did not meet his eye when speaking. It was this more than anything else that disturbed Tom, who had taken pride all his life in meeting everyone with a level gaze and a clear conscience. It was painfully obvious to him at this moment that Christine was being turtle-cautious. That was what came from being formerly Walt's secretary, and thus now a holdover.

The plain fact of the matter was that there was now no job for her, with Walt dead. In the glutted labor market of overpopulated Earth, there was not any other position available for her within the company—unless Tom made one. And Tom did not. His own secretary, Bera Karlson, had been with him twenty years. He had no intention of replacing her with this old woman. On the other hand, by virtue of her age and length of service, Christine was Class A Secretarial. She had tenure. She could not be discharged short

of the legal retirement age.

It was an uncomfortable situation, with its only possible solution lying in Christine's voluntary retirement. And it was clear she had no present intention of that.

"Um," said Tom, stepping over to the plant. He looked down at it. It was not a pretty thing, he thought; and on one broad and fleshy leaf a small spot showed whitely.

"It seems to have a touch of blight," he said.

"Oh no," said Christine, swiftly. "That's just a little bald spot."

"I see," said Tom. He turned away and went on into the private office to examine that which would be his.

AFTERWARDS, he took the problem of Christine home with him. It was still obsessing him after dinner, when he woke to the realization that his wife had been speaking to him and he had not been listening at all.

"What?" he asked. And looked at her contritely. "Sorry, Josi. I had my mind on the office."

She smiled at him forgivingly, this slim, amazingly youthful woman to whom he had been married for the last nineteen years. He had married late and, as he firmly believed, for love. And all that had come out of his marriage, including his two young sons—one fifteen and one eleven

—had made him idyllically happy.

"What's bothering you?" she asked.

"No," he said. "Tell me what you were talking about, instead." She shook her head.

"I'll save it," she said. "You first."

He stretched and straightened up on his couch, looking across to where she sat half-curved upon an overstuffed hassock, brown against the white of it, her long limbs and the slight angularity of her body softened by the lounging pajamas tightbelted around her slim waist.

"It's Christine Nyall," he said. "She's not retiring."

"Oh?" said Josi. "But that doesn't affect you, does it?"

"I'm afraid so." He grimaced slightly. "She's a holdover. And with no place to go she'll be staying in my outer office. You see—" He explained the holdover system, and tenure.

"But can't you make her do her sitting around someplace else?" asked Josi.

"Not without risking a writ of prejudice and a work fine, if a court convicts me," he said unhappily. "The tenure law reads she must be kept 'on the job'. And the job is that of being secretary to the Director of Crews."

"Oh," said Josi. There was silence. Finally he broke it by asking what had been on her mind.

"I shouldn't bother you with it now," she said.

"Nonsense. I shouldn't bring the office home with me, anyway. Go ahead."

"—Can't you talk her into retiring?"

Tom sighed.

"The only thing I can do is make life in the office a living hell for her," he said. "I've known it done before by other men with the same problem. Only I'm just not built to do something like that."

"No," she answered, looking at him.

"No." He looked down at his hand, which had closed itself into a fist. He opened it, wiggled the fingers, then looked again at Josi.

"We'll forget it," he said.

"Now, what was it you wanted to talk about?"

SHE got up from the hassock and came over to sit down beside him. He looked curiously at her.

"Something important?" he asked.

"Yes. Tom—"

"What?"

"You're class A management now," she said. "You've got tenure. You don't have to work any more. We don't need to go on living close to the Company Offices."

"No—" He still looked at her, slightly puzzled. "But what about it? Where would you want to live?"

"Away from the city."

He looked at her in astonishment, convinced that she must be joking. But her face was unsmiling.

"But there is no *away* from the city," he said. "Not nowadays. You know that, Josi. There's no unimproved land left anywhere in the world."

"There's the Preserves," she said.

"The Preserves!" He blinked. "But you can't live in them. They're parks. Deliberately restricted—you know that—by the government, so we'll have a few scraps of open country to look at and remember the past."

"Oh yes," she said. "But they have tourist lodges."

He smiled with sudden understanding. He reached out for her hands. Josi let him take them, but they lay limp and quiet in his grasp.

"Honey," he said. "I hate to disappoint you, but these cabins and things might as well be on Pluto as far as you and I are concerned. I know it looks like you can live around the Preserves. But you can't. Those tourist quarters have all been bought up years in advance by the big travel agencies. To get them you'd have to sign up for what they call perpetual tours—all-expense luxury set-ups. And the prices are fantastic. Why, for you and me and the boys, just the four of us, it'd

be twenty or thirty thousand a year." He smiled at her consolingly.

She still refused to smile back. Her face was calm and still.

"Forty," she said.

"Forty?" He frowned.

"Forty thousand a year, Tom, for the four of us."

He shook his head. Her words seemed to buzz in his ears.

"Forty thousand?" he echoed. "How do you know?"

"I've been checking up."

"But Josi—" He ran out of words, trying not to think what he could not help thinking. "You didn't suppose, seriously—"

"I've never supposed anything else," she replied. And he wondered then how she could look him in the eye and say it. "I've been waiting for this for a long time, Tom—longer than you'd believe. Since my first baby was born."

HE shook his head again, unbelievably.

"We can do it now," she said. "With your increase in salary and if we use the savings and borrow against your pension. We'll have enough for five years; and by that time you'll have got another income boost."

"Josi!"

"Oh, stop staring like that!" she snapped, suddenly. "Did you think I'd let my boys miss

out on a chance at what the real world once was, if there was any way at all to give them even a taste of it?"

He sat back on the couch, dazed. "It isn't like you."

"Because I've been a good wife all these years and done what *you* wanted, and lived where *you* wanted? You thought I never had a selfish desire of my own? Oh, Tom, Tom!" She clutched his hands with a strength that shocked him. "How long are you going to go on pretending that people are still like they were in the old days? There's no civilization left now. You ought to know that! It's claw, tooth and nail! And I'm looking after my children!"

"Josi," he said.

She shook her head at him. "Tom," she said, "Do you know how many people there are on Earth now?"

"Yes," he said. "And I know they're considering laws to control the population expansion."

"Control it!" She laughed like someone he had never seen before. "If they'd talked of controlling it fifty years ago, it might have helped us. What's going to help us now? It's my babies that have to grow up in a world where there's ten people for every job and no future for even the ones who get it. The only way they can *live* is if they make the right friends. And the only way they can meet the

right friends is to go where they are. And that's the Preserves!"

"Josi!" said Tom. "Nothing like that's necessary. I hope I've made a moderate success of myself in the world. And I can truthfully say I've done it by decent, honorable methods!"

"You!" she cried. "Oh, *you!* The great anachronism!"

"Josi—" But she was beyond all reasoning.

II

AS Tom came in through his outer office on his way to his desk the following morning, the rubber plant took his eye again. It grated on his overwrought nerves like a shabby challenge. He was on the verge of bursting out at Christine to get rid of it, when he became suddenly aware of its extraordinarily protected position on a new little ledge, hugging the wall by her desk—now pushed to the farthest possible distance from the desk of Bera Karlson, who had moved her own equipment in on the opposite side of the room. Abruptly he realized that he had been on the verge of taking out his own unhappiness on an underling—a thing he had never before allowed himself to do. He nodded to both women; and made himself smile.

"Good morning," he said.

They answered together—



Bera with a tinge of tension in her voice, Christine almost in a whisper. He went on into his own private office, the door sucking gently closed behind him.

He dropped in the chair at his own desk; and for a minute he sat limply, his eyes closed. The long, unfinished, unclear, unrewarding argument with Josi the evening before had left him drained of energy and clogged with bitterness. He had gained nothing but her promise to let him think this matter of the Preserves over for a few days before talking of it again.

He straightened with an effort and glanced at his appointment screen. The name of Orval Lasron glowed at him from its gray, opaque surface. He stared at the two words, troubled by some slightly ominous echo at the back of his mind, which they evoked. Surely, he did not know the man? After a moment, he gave up. Buzzing Bera to admit Lasron, he got up and crossed over to the one wall-wide window that looked down to the Executive Waiting Lounge, three floors below.

He heard Bera's voice speak out over the annunciator down there and a stocky, short man in middle age, with lumpy features, rose from a table. He crossed over to where the angle of the wall below cut him off from Tom's sight.

After a second, the man rose into sight on a floating magnetic disk, which came to a stop outside the window. Tom touched the dissolve button and extended his hand. Lasron stepped through the now non-existent window. His handshake was brisk and impersonal.

"I interrupted your drink down there," said Tom. "May I—"

"No, thanks," said the other.

TOM led the way back to his desk and both men seated themselves. Face to face, Lasron was somewhat more impressive than he had been at a distance. There was a hardness to his bunched features and his eyes seemed to show the light of a constant, buried anger.

"And what can I do for you, Mr. Lasron?"

"You don't know me," stated Lasron. He crossed one thick leg over the knee of the other.

"No."

"I'm the local agent for the Secretarial Code," said Lasron. "I didn't know you, either. You were in Sales before, were you?"

"That's right. Our labor relations were all handled higher up."

"Yes." Lasron shifted in his chair with an abrupt, impatient movement. "Well, you've got a holdover. Christine Nyall."

"I know," said Tom, sobering. "A shame that—"

"I don't think so," interrupted Lasron. "Christine doesn't think so. She intends to remain on the job. Quite happy in it. It's standard procedure in these cases to drop around on the one in Management responsible. Just as a reminder." He paused. "You understand."

"No," answered Tom, sitting straighter. "I don't think I do."

Lasron sighed.

"All right," he said. "Any evidence of prejudice and we'll slap a writ on you for a fine. Deal with an illegal outfit and we'll spend half the money in the treasury, if necessary, to get a felony rap to stick to you."

"Now, wait! Now, look here," said Tom. "Just a minute, Lasron. Just what do you think you're insinuating? My record is perfectly clean and fair. I know some people on Management Level have the popular reputation of pulling dirty tricks in cases like this. But for your private information—"

Lasron waved one hand, wearily.

"I have a code of ethics!" snapped Tom. "No, I don't pretend I wouldn't like to see Christine happily retired. But —" He became suddenly aware that he was talking to a man who was staring out the window, humming a small

tune nervously to himself, his fingers beating small, jerky time on the arm of his chair.

"Good," said Lasron, when Tom stopped. He got to his feet. His eyes of buried anger burnt briefly and impersonally on Tom, as if the man across the desk was something mechanical, troublesome and potentially dangerous. "I won't take up any more of your time."

Tom rose also, and punched the dissolve button.

"Drop by any time," he said, defiantly. "You don't have to make an appointment. Just walk in."

Lasron looked at him briefly. He appeared to be about to say something, then turned away. He nodded his head and stepped through the dissolve window onto the disk which wafted him down and out of sight.

Tom was left standing with a feeling of ugly inadequacy. He half-turned to his interoffice with the intention of calling Arm Brewer, to report the agent's threats. But it would be a bad beginning in the new position to go running for help right off the bat. He turned away again.

Then he thought of calling in Christine and challenging her about the agent's behavior. But that was not strictly fair, either. Time, he thought, sitting down at his desk again —time would iron matters out automatically.

TWO days later Josi reminded him of his promise to consider the move to the Preserves. He put her off, saying he had not had the chance to think, pleading the situation at the office.

"Just don't take too long, Tom," she said.

She said it in such an odd, unusual tone that he looked at her startled, and then looked away again before she could catch him staring. He wanted to ask her what she meant; but discovered suddenly he was afraid to.

That night he slept badly, and when he did get to sleep he slept late.

It was later than usual when he stepped through the entrance to his outer office. He could feel immediately that there was something wrong. As she answered his good morning, Christine kept her eyes fixed on the surface of her desk; while Bera, glancing deliberately at him, gave him a look of peculiar outrage, features set and a little pale. Tom shouldered past them both into the security of his own office, hoping to avoid the matter, whatever it was.

He was given no choice. On his appointment screen, Bera's name stood out brilliantly, in the space where his first appointment should have been. Tom hesitated for a moment, to put a small barrier of time between his entrance and

Bera's admission; and then pressed her button and summoned her in.

She came and sat down opposite him. It was abundantly clear that a crisis point had been reached, for as she sat on the edge of her chair her body was rigid with the glass-brittle tension of a woman on the verge of explosion.

THEY began calmly enough, but Bera's low voice quickly climbed the scale toward hysteria. She did not want to complain. He knew that she never complained; but — she reminded Tom of all the years she had worked for him. She asked him if he had ever had any reason to complain. She thought that over the years — and so on. Inevitably came the tears.

She sat in the big visitor's chair and cried, a large-boned, not unlovely woman at the end of her thirties; but past the point where tears could look good on her. Tom gave her a drink and waited until the emotion was controlled.

He was shocked to discover the whimpering fear that underlay her outburst.

"Why, Bera," he said, as soon as she was in fit shape to listen, "what makes you think I'd ever get rid of *you*? Why, I could no longer get along without you than—" he hunted for an enormous metaphor and could think of nothing but—"my right arm."

Bera gulped, "But *She* has tenure and I haven't, and you only need one of us."

"Then I'll just have to put up with both of you," he said, in a poor attempt to be jocular. "Anything else is ridiculous." He frowned. "Besides, I think after a while she'll get tired of not having a real job to do around here, and retire."

"No, she won't—the old biddy!" said Bera with sudden viciousness. "She wants to hang on forever."

"Now, you know that's not true," said Tom. "She just liked her job. All of us do."

"Well, I don't care. She doesn't belong in our office. Why doesn't she just go?"

"Where do you want her to go?" asked Tom, reasonably.

"I don't care. It isn't as if she'd starve to death. You make as much money retired nowadays as you do working."

"Well, she's not going to get your job," said Tom. "Now straighten up, Bera, and forget this nonsense. As far as I'm concerned, Christine has already retired."

"Then she shouldn't be allowed to clutter up the office with things like that plant of hers."

"Why, it's not a bad looking plant," said Tom. "I think it's rather a nice idea, having it there. Hardly anyone keeps flowers or plants around nowadays."

"It gets in my way," said Bera, sullenly. Tom felt it

was time to put his foot down.

"I'm sure you can work around it," he said. "Try it for a few weeks, anyway. If Christine is still here after then, and the plant still interferes around the office, we'll see about getting rid of it. All right?"

Tom got to his feet, which forced her to rise as well. "Try and get along with Christine, then, Bera. I'm leaving now. I just dropped by today to take a look at things. You can tell anyone who calls that I won't be back before tomorrow. Handle them as you like."

"Yes." She wiped her eyes.

"So long, then." He went out, closing the door on her answering good-by. In the outer office, Christine was sitting at her desk, her face expressionless and a sheet of paper filled with aimless doodlings before her.

"Well, I'm off for the rest of the day, Christine," he said.

"Good morning, Mr. Calloway," she replied, without looking up.

He went out the door.

WHEN the tension in the outer office did not improve, he took a trip to the other side of the building to talk to Arm.

"Tom!" Arm jumped to his feet as Tom entered, and came forward bouncily, his heavy face smiling under its white

hair. "How's our newest member upstairs here? Have a drink?"

"No thanks," said Tom. "How've you been, Arm?"

"How could I be? Eighty-seven and sound as the Company's credit rating!" Arm slapped his wide chest. "Why don't you and Josi step out with me one of these nights and find out for yourselves? See if the old bachelor can't outdo you yet?"

"I wouldn't doubt it. I'll talk to Josi about it," said Tom, smiling. "Arm, I hate to come running to you with troubles right away, but I've got stuck in a situation."

"That the straight sheet?" Arm punched for a drink and set it on the edge of his desk. "What is it?"

"Christine Nyall. Old Walt's secretary."

"Christine—? Oh, the hold-over!" Arm looked at Tom, pulled a long face and rocked abruptly with hearty laughter. "Now, that is rough. If only she'd been some young bounce, huh, Tom?"

Tom smiled agreeably, if perfunctorily.

"Well, well." Arm sobered. "So you've got old Walt's girl on your hands. You knew about her and Walt? Yes, I see you did. Well, now, what's the problem?"

"Well, since I brought Bera up with me, I've really no need for Christine. But she's trying to stick it out."

"They all do."

"For myself, I don't mind too much—after all, she's bound to retire eventually. But it crowds the office, you know how we are for space. And, worst of all, she's upsetting Bera."

"Well, now, that is serious," said Arm. "A good secretary, broken in over the years. I can see why you wouldn't want her disturbed. Why don't you do something about it?"

"But that's the point. What can I do?" said Tom. "She's got tenure. The representative of the Secretarial Code was around just a week or so ago to remind me of that. What *can* I do?"

Arm looked across the desk at him with a curious expression on his big face.

"You haven't been approached yet, then?" he said, slowly.

"Approached? By who?"

Arm's drink had been sitting unnoticed all this time. He picked it up now and sipped at it.

"There's people," he said, "who make a point of being useful in just such situations."

"There are?" Tom searched his expression for a clue. "In the face of the tenure law? What can they do? Who are they, anyway?"

"They contact you."

"But I mean—oh," said Tom. "Oh, oh I see!"

"I don't know anything about them myself," Arm said, sipping on his drink. "Nothing whatsoever. I've just heard about them."

"Of course," said Tom. There was a fumbling moment of silence.

"Sure you won't have a drink, after all?"

"Thanks," said Tom automatically. Arm had already punched for a full glass without waiting for an answer. Now he handed the drink over. Tom took it, his eyes staring unseeingly through the wall of Arm's office.

"**H**I!" said Josi, meeting him at the front door, when he arrived at home.

"Hello, honey." He kissed her. They went inside.

"You've been drinking," she said.

"I had a few at the office with Arm," he answered, as they sat down. "He wants us to go out with him one of these nights."

"That's nice," said Josi.

"You don't sound very enthusiastic," he said.

"No, I suppose not."

"Josi!" he burst out. "Josi, will you snap out of it? Can't you understand I've got a crisis brewing in that office of mine? If I don't handle this right, what do you think my chances of promotion will be?"

"I'm just waiting," she said.

"Here I am up to my ears in business troubles—"

"And spending the morning getting drunk with Arm."

It developed into a first class fight.

III

THE outer office had become an armed camp. There was no disguising the atmosphere of antagonism that existed there. Tom dodged through it as quickly as he could, and remained buried in the inner office during the hours of his working day.

But this was no solution. Bera became more and more unreliable until it became obvious, even to Tom, that her work had become clearly secondary to her feud with Christine. On Tuesday, at the beginning of the third week, Tom was disturbed at his desk by what could only be the sounds of a scuffle.

He went swiftly to the door of the outer office and jerked it open. The two women were standing facing each other, breathing hard, and the jar which held the plant was clutched with fierce protectiveness in the arms of Christine. As the door opened, she turned to look at Tom for a single moment, then turned back and put down the plant once more in its accustomed place. She reseated herself, silently. Bera turned and walked jerkily back to her

own desk and also sat down. Neither one said a word.

He waited until they were ostensibly busy again, then walked through the office and out of the front door. He did not say a word to Bera; and the back of his neck was aware that she stared after him with bitter, fearful eyes, while the woman across from her sat silent and depressed, her head down and her eyes hopelessly fixed on her desk.

Feeling as if he was choking, Tom made his way out of the building. He avoided the lobby lounge below and took an aircab to a rooftop bar nearby—the Parisien, it was called. Its small round tables and wire chairs were imitative of an old-fashioned sidewalk cafe. He ordered a tall scotch and tried to relax.

Things, he thought, could not go on like this. Twenty-four hours had been the limit on family quarrels between Josi and himself for years now. But the present one about the move to the Preserves seemed to renew itself daily. Softly, he pounded on the white, slick surface of the table with his fist. Trouble at the office. Trouble at home. And the two things feeding on each other to keep themselves alive. The tension between Josi and himself was blurring his usual decisiveness so that he was fumbling the office problem. And the office problem wore his

nerves thin so that one word from Josi was enough to set him off. Why couldn't Josi be a help instead of a hindrance at a time like this? And why couldn't Christine be sensible and retire?

THE scotch came. He accepted it automatically, indifferent to the anachronism of a live waiter instead of the usual delivery panel set in the table. The truth was, he had started out with a sneaking sympathy for Christine. It was not impossible for him to put himself in her shoes, to feel an empathy with her. He had, therefore, been half-inclined to let things drift, to let her sit out her remaining days in his office—perhaps even in time to give her small bits and pieces of work to make her feel necessary. He had never imagined such a violent reaction, however, from Bera. Who would have supposed. . .

A shadow fell abruptly across his table.

He looked up and saw gazing down at him a distinguished looking man of his own age. A handsome fellow, slim, with a touch of easy amusement at the corners of his thin mouth.

"Well, Mr. Calloway," said the man, "you're a hard person to get in touch with."

He sat down. Tom stared at him in astonishment.

"Hard?" He looked more

closely at the man. "Do I know you?"

"May I introduce myself?"

He put the question with such unnatural stilted formality that for a second Tom did not realize that it was an actual question, and not a rhetorical one.

"Is there any reason why you shouldn't?" asked Tom.

"Joe Smith," said the other, taking this as permission and offering his hand. "Utility Services."

Tom shook hands automatically.

"Utility Services?"

"Of course you don't know us. We aren't listed. In fact," Joe Smith turned to signal the anachronistic waiter, "legally we don't exist."

A bell rang in Tom's mind. He sat up straight behind his scotch and looked penetratingly at his visitor.

"And illegally?" he asked.

The man laughed.

"We understand you have a problem, Mr. Calloway—thanks—" he accepted his glass from the waiter. "A holdover."

"Who told you?"

"Why," said Smith, "it's a matter of public record, isn't it?" He looked at Tom. "We're prepared to help you out."

"How?"

Smith waved a hand.

DEPENDS on the difficulty. Once it was merely a matter of offering a job

with some dummy firm. But the Secretarial Code is well up on simple tricks like that, lately. In the case of your Christine—let's see. She was supposed to have been having a long-term affair with her former employer, wasn't she? Perhaps someone who resembled him a great deal could bring about her resignation."

"Now, look here," said Tom.

"Yes, Mr. Calloway?"

"I certainly wouldn't stand for anything like that."

Smith raised his eyebrows.

"What did you expect?" He leaned forward over the table, lowering his voice. "I'll tell you what you expected—a miracle. We don't deal in miracles. Just results."

Tom flushed.

"All right, Smith," he said. "I don't think we've got any business to do together."

"I think we have," said Smith. "Or rather, you have business to do with us. If not now, later. We're a business fact of life in this modern world, Mr. Calloway. Ugly, if you insist on looking at us that way, but just as unavoidable as any other fact of life."

"I don't think so," said Tom grimly.

"Don't you?" queried Smith. "Open your eyes, Mr. Calloway. This isn't the last century. It's the present. There's no way to hide from the facts of life now."

"I'm not sure I know what

you're talking about," said Tom. "But I'll tell you this. I've lived by my own code of ethics all my life. And got along all right. So go peddle your dirty papers someplace else."

"No, no," said Smith, shaking his head. "It's all very fine to have ethics, Mr. Calloway, but they simply don't work in business. They've gotten to be a luxury nobody can afford any more. Save your ethics for home. Tell them to the kids for bedtime stories when you tuck them in for the night. But don't go messing up your career with them. You'll regret it. Indeed you will, Calloway. People like this Christine expect to get kicked out. They just hang around creating a fuss until they are."

"IF you think you can say that—" Tom checked himself suddenly, remembering the office as it had been lately. Remembering Josi. "My wife—" he began, without thinking. Then he stopped.

"What about your wife?"

"None of your business!"

"Oh? But I take it," said Smith, looking at him closely, "you weren't about to listen to her, either?"

Tom shuddered suddenly and quite unexpectedly.

"It's all nonsense," he said.

"Someone walk over your grave?" said Smith, not entirely unmaliciously. "You

ought to know the truth as well as your wife. As well as me, for that matter." He waved his arm out over the parapet of the rooftops, at the endless buildings surrounding them. "Look at that. Full up. Ripe. Starting to rot, wouldn't you say?" He grinned at Tom.

"What're you talking about?" said Tom. "There's unlimited frontiers. New worlds..."

"You want to go? Do I want to go?" Smith sat back, shaking his head and took a drink from his glass. "Easier to stay here and face facts, Calloway. And the *fact you've* got to face—" he tapped with his fingernail on the shiny white tabletop, his nail making a hard clicking sound against it—"is that you must do for this Christine or, indirectly, she's going to do for you. If you don't get her out of that office, the mess'll grow. It'll grow until you find yourself into it too deep to pull yourself out. I've seen this sort of thing before." He got up. "Think about that Calloway. You or her. And the longer you hesitate, the more likely it's going to be both of you."

IT was evening before Tom found Christine Nyall.

After Smith left, Tom had tried to call her at the office. Bera hold him the older woman had gone for the day.

Bera did not have Christine's address, either, so Tom had been forced to go to a public tracing center. It took the center three hours to come up with a list of places where she might be found.

He located her at last, sitting at one of the small tables around the wide expanse of dance floor in one of the mid-age groups recreation centers. She sat alone, a barely touched drink in front of her, the glowingly white translucent dance floor throwing a pale illumination on her overpowered face. He strode over and sat down opposite her.

"Christine," he said.

She turned from her blank contemplation of the dancing couples on the floor and looked at him. As his identity registered, her features slid into the carefully controlled expression he was used to seeing at the office.

"Mr. Calloway," she murmured.

"Hello." He stumbled, suddenly at a loss for words. "Er—another drink?"

She touched the glass before her.

"Thanks, no," she said.

"I see," he said, "Well, I think I'll have one." He pressed buttons and waited for a few short seconds until a filled glass rose from the slot in the center of the table. He took it, swallowed largely and put it back on the table. "I've had a hard time finding you."

The words reminded him immediately of the man named Smith. He put his drink down with a gesture of revulsion. He looked at Christine, almost pleadingly.

"Look, Christine," he said, "do you really think you'd feel happier belonging to my office staff than you would, retired?"

She reached for her glass and turned it.

"Yes," she said, "Yes, I do."

"You know," he said, trying to joke, "sooner or later we all have to quit."

She looked up sharply. He saw her eyes were terrified.

"Not until retirement age!" she said, "I've got tenure!"

"Of course, of course. I know you've got tenure," said Tom. "But you do see—you're just putting off the inevitable, don't you?"

"I only want my rights. That's all!"

TOM took a heavy gulp from his glass. He pushed it away from him.

"Look," he said, "I want us to be friends. I know how I'd feel if I was—well—put in an awkward position with some years yet to go to retirement. I'd like to do what's best for you. And I know Bera. She can be difficult to get along with."

"I don't mind," said Christine carefully.

"Oh come now," said Tom.

"Informally—just between the two of us—I know she's been raising Cain ever since we moved into the new office."

"Bera's all right," she answered. "I like Bera."

Tom gaped at her. The statement was too monstrous to refute.

"Christine!" he burst out, finally. "Let's be honest, anyway!" She looked stubbornly down at her drink. "Look, if you really want to stay, you can. I'll talk to Bera. Or the three of us will all get together and thrash this thing out. That is, if you really want to stay."

She glanced up obliquely, almost slyly, at him.

"I can stay anyway," she said. "My tenure guarantees it."

"Of course! Of course you can stay!" cried Tom. "That's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about fitting you in, making a useful place for you."

"That's all right." He raised her head to look him squarely in the eye. "You don't have to bother about me."

"Good Lord!" shouted Tom. "Do you like things the way they are?"

"You might as well give up, Mr. Calloway," she said. "I know what my rights are, and I'm not going to give them up. If you've got any questions you can call up the

Secretarial Code and talk to Mr. Lasron. Of course, I'll have to report to him you tried to talk to me here, today."

For a moment Tom stared at her in amazement.

"You stupid woman!" he burst out finally. "Can't you see I'm trying to help?"

Christine's face went white and frightened. She jerked as if she had been struck. For a moment she sat as if paralyzed; then she made a small noise in her throat and scrambled up. She was hurrying off, before Tom could stop her, between the tables.

"Christine! Wait!" he called after her. But she was already gone.

IT was late when he at last got home. Josi was waiting for him in the lounge room.

"Had your supper?" she asked a little sharply, as he came in.

"I'm not hungry." He dropped into a chair.

"Would you like a drink? Or—" she stood over him—"have you had too many already?"

"Josi," he said wearily, putting his head in his hands, "don't start in on me now."

She sat down opposite him.

"I'm sorry, Tom," she said. "But we've got something to talk over. I've been waiting for you since this afternoon."

"Can't it wait?"

"No, Tom."

A note he had never before heard in her voice made him look up.

"I'm leaving things up to you, Tom," she said. "I went down to the tourist agency and told them to go ahead with our reservations."

"Josi!"

"You listen to me now. The plans are at a premium. I can't afford to wait. The Preserves may be filled up, or the price increased any day now, to where we can't afford it."

"Josi, listen!"

"No. Now I'm doing the talking, Tom," she said. "I told you I was going through with this. And I meant it. The reservation is in my name. If you won't come along, then I'm getting a divorce. My settlement will pay for the first few years of the plan; and after that we'll work things out any way we can. But whether you like it or not, whether you come or not, the boys and I are leaving for the Preserves. It's up to you, Tom."

She rose to her feet and left him, sitting in the lounge, numb and old and alone.

IV

THE next morning found him having breakfast at a poolside restaurant not far from the office. He had slipped out of the house to avoid

Josi, for reasons that were at the moment unclear to him. He sat at his small table under a striped awning, staring out at the early morning swimmers in the pool. The coffee seemed tasteless.

He had spent the whole of a wakeful night trying to believe what Josi had told him. Accepting it was something else again. First he had to believe she would do such a thing. It was all the more wildly improbable for the reason that he believed Josi still loved him. Only there seemed to be some startling and hitherto unsuspected limits to that love.

How, he wondered, staring at the pool, had Josi reached such a point? He tried to think back over their discussions—well, be honest and call them arguments. Had there been some point at which he had driven her to desperation? Thinking back, he could remember no such point. In fact, he had never given a definite "no" to the idea. He had merely been doubting and wanting to put off his decision until he could settle the problem of Christine.

That could only mean—he came back to the point not for the first nor even for the hundredth time since the previous evening—that Josi had simply long ago decided to eliminate him from the family. She had thought not *my*

husband, our family; but simply my children and I. She had cut him out.

Or had he ever belonged?

After a while, he got up and went to the office.

When he came in this morning, Bera was absorbed in her work; but Christine looked up at him with a momentary strange, unreadable expression. He brushed past both of them and went on into his own office.

He sat down at his desk. He had never been an early morning drinker; but now he punched for Scotch. After a moment, the tall glass rose to the surface of his desk and he took it. It tasted alien and bitter, like the coffee he had drunk earlier. But he forced himself to swallow it.

After a little while, the hard edges of his world softened somewhat. He straightened up and looked at his appointment screen.

There, waiting for him, was the name of Lasron. He got up from his desk and looked out the window, down into the lounge.

TH**ERE** was Lasron waiting. Tom made out the man's thick body seated alone at a table before a glass from which he was not drinking. His fingers seemed to be drumming on the table top. Impatient. Well, he would just have to wait. Tom came back to his desk and pushed the

button that summoned Christine.

She came in hesitantly, closing the door behind her instead of letting it suck shut automatically, and approached his desk.

"Sit down," said Tom.

She seated herself carefully on the edge of the big visitor's chair.

"Christine," he said, "I wanted to talk to you."

"I know," she answered. She was watching her own fingers, which she had laced together and was turning, backwards and forwards, in her lap.

"You know?" he said.

"I'm so terribly sorry, Mr. Calloway," she said. "I want to apologize—"

He stared at her in startlement. But she was hurrying on, tripping over her own words in her haste.

"I just couldn't help it after working here so long. I couldn't help thinking it was our office—mine and Mr. Onegh's. And then, when you're older and you've got no one—to be cut loose, to just eat and sleep and die and be forgotten—you go a little crazy, I guess."

"Well, now," said Tom, "Christine—"

"And they make matters worse for us down at the Secretarial Code. They warn us Management will try all sorts of dirty tricks to make us resign, when we've got tenure.

They get us so worked up, Mr. Calloway, that we can't trust anyone. And I didn't trust you. I called Mr. Lasron last night, after you talked to me. It wasn't until after I punched off the phone, that I thought to remember you hadn't been anything but kind. You didn't even complain about the plant."

Tom found his voice a little hoarse, and cleared it. "No point in being unfair."

"I know. I just couldn't believe it." She twisted her hands. "I want to tell you about that plant, Mr. Calloway. It—" She hesitated, and her powdered face twisted into a slight grotesqueness. "It meant a good deal to me. You must know about me and Mr. Onegh."

"Yes," said Tom.

"A lot of people knew." She was stroking one blue-veined hand with the fingers of the other, as if in fascination with the process. "They knew I loved him and they guessed—that was before his wife died—that we were getting away for a weekend, now and then. But nobody here knew we once had nearly a whole year together."

TOM jerked his head back from the window.

"Yes." She nodded a little. "It was before you came to the Company. There was an underground city supply unit to be set up in the Midlands,

on Venus. The Company took the bid. Mr. Onegh was sent out as Management Representative when we got the job. I took a leave of absence; and he pulled some strings to get me an appointment on the Government Inspection Crew. So we both went out, and no one here knew about it."

She stopped. Tom was staring at her. She went on.

"It was a year," she said. "We could have stayed on Venus. I wanted to. But Walter—" Her voice trailed off.

"He thought," said Tom, and was jarred at the sound of his own voice, so strange it sounded, "of his wife and his job here."

"Yes," she whispered.

Her index finger made little circles on the arm of the chair. She spoke again.

"He was a coward," she said. Tom started and looked at her with a sort of horror.

"I thought you loved him?"

"I did." She raised her head. "He wasn't a coward when I first met him. It was the years made him that. All the years and the sneaking around corners with me. And the business getting tighter and tighter every year, so that even someone who'd been with the Company as long as he had didn't feel safe."

"Class A Management. With tenure." Tom's throat was dry, suddenly.

She smiled sadly at him.

"Oh, they've got dirty

tricks for Management level, too," she said. "When I was working with Walter—" Her voice trailed off, embarrassedly.

TOM sat still in his chair. He opened his mouth, closed it again and suddenly, almost with violence, shoved himself to his feet. Turning, he stepped to the office window and looked out. Across from him, over the airy depths of the lounge below, he could make out Arm Brewer, his white thatch vigorously in movement beyond the pane of his window on the opposite side of the lounge.

"What about the plant?" Tom said without turning. "You were going to tell me about the rubber plant."

"Well, you know how Venus is," her voice rang in his ears. "The carbon dioxide blanket, the dust storms, nothing green anywhere. It was against the shipping rules, but he took the plant along when he went to Venus—for me. To make me happy. For that one year it grew in our home."

Out and below Tom, the lounge eddied in its steady movement of continual coming and going. Salesmen, jobhunters, caterers, favor-seekers, representatives like Lasron—the flotsam of the commercial sea. All waiting. All hungry.

Yes, thought Tom.

Just then, through the wide-swinging entrance of the lounge came the tall, thin figure of Mr. Smith. For a moment, Tom hung, not even breathing, staring down at the tall man.

Behind him, Christine talked on. But he heard her only as background noise. Smith had just nodded to Lasron, sitting at his table; and Lasron had lifted a hand in acknowledgement.

Mr. Smith paused to speak to the receptionist, his elegant head a little on one side. He turned and went over the opposite wall soaring up from the lounge. A disk came immediately to life on the floor, and he stepped aboard. It bore him upward to the window of Arm's office, opposite. The window dissolved before him as Arm reached out a hand in greeting. They went inside together and—did their heads turn to look for a moment in the direction of Tom's office as they went?

Tom had a sudden dizzying sensation of falling. It was as if the lounge below reached up with clutching fingers to drag him down. He clung to the window drape beside him for a minute, finding the heavy metallic cloth slippery in his damp hands. He took a deep breath, straightened and turned.

"Yes, yes," he said, interrupting Christine. "I appreciate your telling me about

the plant. But I think that in spite of the sentimental attachment you have for it, we'll have to get rid of it."

HER mouth open, she stared at him. In her astonishment she looked almost imbecilic.

"You understand," he went on, the words coming automatically, "I'm a liberal-minded man myself. But I can hardly be expected to put up with a souvenir of this type. After all, this is a business office, not a bedroom. I was a young man once myself—fairly recently, too. And I had my—er—fun. And I recognize that a single woman and a man with a perpetually ailing wife might have their problems on a physical plane. But to flaunt mementos of—well, it seems to me to be a little too much."

She looked up at him with a rabbit-like fascination, as if he had suddenly revealed scales and a moveless eye. He met her look squarely. It was odd, but he felt no need to avoid her. His eyes were heavy as pebbles in his face, and as insensitive to what he gazed at.

"So I'll just ask you to put it away somewhere right now," he said. He paused. "Naturally, I'm going to have to submit a memo on this to the Company psychiatrist. I believe you need help, Christine. Women often do at your

age. I'll do what I can by attaching a complete account of what you told me about you and Walter—"

With one quick, gasping intake of breath, she was on her feet. She turned and ran from his office. The impersonal machinery of the door closed it politely behind her.

Tom sat down at his desk. He felt as if he should be shaking, but he was not. He laid his hands on the desktop but felt nothing.

After a while he became aware of the sound of Bera's buzzer, calling for his attention. But he ignored it. It was not until some little time after that, that the door to his office opened and she came in. Her eyes were wide, showing too much white; and her lips trembled.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Mr. Calloway—Mr. Calloway, it's Christine!"

HE looked carefully at her. "What about Christine?"

"I'm worried. Perhaps I've been—I didn't think."

"Will you tell me," he said, "what it is? If you don't mind, Bera!"

"She locked herself in the supply closet in our outer office. She won't come out, and she doesn't—doesn't answer."

"Oh?" said Tom. "I see." He took a slow breath and leaned back in his chair.

"I'm scared. She took the plant. Oh, Mr. Calloway, I

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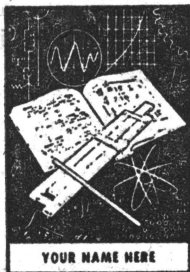
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A TASTE OF TENURE

didn't mean to be so nasty to her! If she's—"

"Control yourself, Bera." Tom got up from his chair. "I'm sure it's quite all right. Perhaps the door locked accidentally. Perhaps she had a little fainting fit in there. After all, she's not as young as she once was. Why don't you run down and get the janitor up here to unlock the door? Don't make a fuss about it. Just say the door's locked and we can't find the key."

"Oh, yes! I'll run!" said Bera. "I'll run right away!" She dashed out of the room.

After she had gone, Tom sat still for a second. Then he reached out and punched for a private connection to Arm Brewer on the interoffice phone.

Arm's face sprang into view on its screen.

"Who? Oh, Tom. What can I do for you?"

"Just give me a few pointers about something when you've got time, Arm," said Tom. "Josi and I are thinking of taking one of those perpetual tours around the Preserves—"

"Preserves? Sure!" boomed Arm. "I've been on them. Tell you all about it, if you want. How's things down at your end there?"

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to let Bera go after all," said Tom, steadily. "And keep Christine. Bera's gone all to

pieces lately. Lets her work go, and spends all her time picking on Christine. Of course, there's no tenure problem with Bera."

"Ah? I hadn't realized that," said Arm, raising white eyebrows. "Well, that settles your little problem."

"Yes. I'm afraid so." Tom sighed. "Too bad. I'd never have considered this if she'd—but, well, this is easier all around. She's been making life hell for Christine."

"Yeah. I heard something about that. Look, talk to you later, okay, Tom? I've got a little deal on right now."

"Fine. Thanks, Arm."

"Not at all. Any time."

Tom broke the connection and sat back, waiting for Bera to return. For a while he heard nothing but silence. But then, at last, there was the muffled sound of voices reentering his outer office. For a moment they murmured busily together; then there was the sound of a lock turning. Then silence.

—When the scream came, he was expecting it.

High and clear in Bera's voice, he had been expecting it all along. Sitting still at his desk, he did not move. Only the muscles of his body froze all together as if the blood in them had congealed at the sound; and the sweat stood suddenly out on his forehead like living water from the rock. —END



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