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Thrilling WONDER Stories

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THRILLING ANC WONDER STORIES

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WHEN TIME WENT Mad
a complete short novel
By DIRK WYLIE AND
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**THE VOICE OF
THE LOBSTER**
a novelet of the future
By HENRY
KUTTNER

**THE DANCING
GIRL OF
GANYMEDE**
a fantastic novelet
By LEIGH BRACKETT

A THRILLING
PUBLICATION

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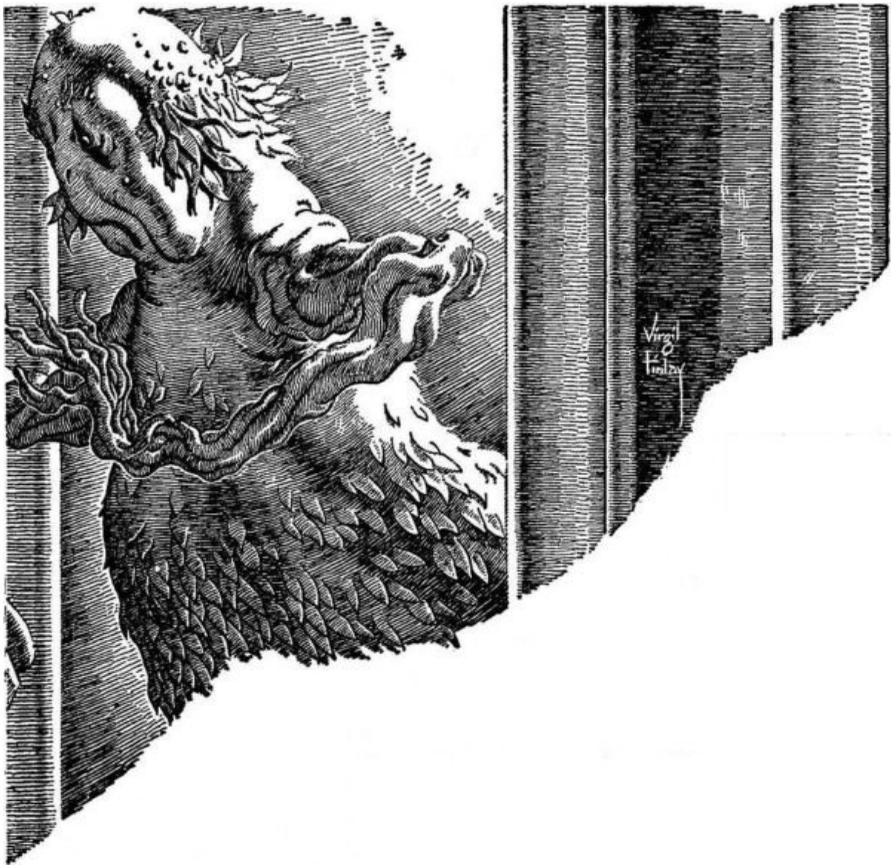
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“Depend on me,” said Macduff as the unhappy vegetable pushed a slim and lovely being toward him



The Voice of the Lobster

By

HENRY KUTTNER

Illustrated by Virgil Finlay.

First published *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, February 1950.

Even the slickest of confidence tricks can backfire at times, but Macduff proves he's the most resourceful swindler in all space!

CHAPTER I

Getaway

Tilting his cigar at a safe angle Terence Lao-T'se Macduff applied a wary eye to the peephole in the curtain and searched the audience for trouble.

"A set-up," he muttered under his breath. "Or is it? I have the inexplicable sensation of wet mice creeping slowly up and down my spine. What a pity I wasn't able to get that Lesser Vegan girl to front for me. Ah, well. Here I go."

He drew up his rotund form as the curtain slowly rose.

"Good evening to you all," he said jovially. "I am happy to see so many eager seekers after knowledge, from the parts of the Galaxy, gathered here tonight on this, Aldebaran's greenest world—"

Muffled noises rose from the audience, mingled with the musky odor of Aldebaranese and the scents of many other races and species. For it was Lottery Time on Aldebaran Tau and the famous celebration based on the counting of seeds in the first *sphyghi*-fruit of the season had as usual drawn luck-worshippers from all over the Galaxy. There was even an Earthman, with shaggy red hair and a scowling face, who sat in the front row, glaring up at Macduff.

Uneasily evading that glare, Macduff went on with some haste.

"Ladies, gentlemen and Aldebaranese, I offer you my All-Purpose Radio-isotopic Hormone Rejuvenating Elixir, the priceless discovery which will give you the golden treasury of youth at a sum easily within the reach of each and every—"

An ambiguous missile whizzed past Macduff's head. His trained ear screened out words in a dozen different interstellar tongues and realized that none of them implied approval.

The red-haired Earthman was bellowing, "The mon's a crook! Nae doot about it!" Macduff, automatically dodging an over-ripe fruit, looked pensively at him.

"Oh-oh," Macduff was thinking. "I wonder how he found out those cards were marked for black light?"

He held up his arms dramatically for silence, took a backward step and kicked the trigger on the trap-door. Instantly he dropped out of sight. From the audience rose a tremendous bellow of balked fury. Macduff, scuttling rapidly past discarded flats of scenery, heard feet thundering above him.

"There will be chlorophyll spilled tonight," he mused, sprinting. "That's the trouble with these Aldebaranese, they're still vegetables at heart. No sense of ethics, merely tropisms."

His racing feet tripped over a half-empty box of progesterone, a hormone necessary when a sucker, or customer, was fowl or mammal strain.

"Can't be the hormones," he pondered, kicking boxes out of his path. "It must have been the radio-isotope. I shall write a scorching letter to that Chicago outfit. Fly-by-nights, of course. I should have suspected the quality of their product at that price. Three months, forsooth! Why, it hasn't been a fortnight since I sold the first bottle—and it's taken this long to finish the pay-offs and start hoping for a net profit."

This was serious. Tonight had been the first occasion on which he hoped to put the profits from All-Purpose Radio-isotopic Hormone Rejuvenating Elixir into his own pocket. Aldebaran officials had a greed which one didn't normally associate with vegetable ancestry.

How was he going to get enough money to ensure his passage spaceward in a hurry if speed seemed indicated?

“Trouble, trouble,” Macduff murmured, as he fled down a corridor, ducked out of the exit and foresightedly sent a tower of empty boxes crashing down, blocking the door. Screams of rage came from behind him.

“Sounds like Babel,” he said, trotting. “That’s the trouble with galactic travel. Too many overemotional races.” Doubling and twisting along a planned course, he continued to mutter marginal comments, for Macduff generally moved in a haze of sotto voce remarks confidently addressed to himself, usually approving in nature.

After a time, deciding that he had put a safe distance between himself and justice, he slowed his pace, paused at a dingy hockshop and paid out a few coins from his paltry store. In return he was given a small battered suitcase, which contained everything necessary for a hurried departure—everything, that is, except the really vital factor. Macduff had no space-ticket.

Had he anticipated the full extent of Aldebaranese rapacity and corruption he could perhaps have brought along more pay-off funds. But he had wanted his arrival to coincide with the great *sphyghi* festival and time pressed. Still, there were ways. Captain Masterson of the *Sutter* owed him a favor and the *Sutter* was due to take off early next morning.

“Possibly,” Macduff ruminated, trudging on, “something might be arranged. Let me see, now. Item one. There’s Ao.” Ao was the Lesser Vegan girl whose remarkable semi-hypnotic powers would make her such an excellent front man, figuratively speaking.

“Borrowing ticket money won’t solve Item One. If I succeed in getting Ao I’ll have to deal with her guardian, Item Two.”

Item Two represented an Algolian native named Ess Pu.^[1] Macduff had taken pains to keep himself informed of Ess Pu’s whereabouts and so knew that the Algolian was no doubt still involved in the same game of dice he had begun two days ago at the UV Lantern Dream-Mill, not far from the center of town. His opponent was probably still the Mayor of Aldebaran City.

[1] (An approximation. The actual name is unspellable.)

“Moreover,” Macduff reflected, “both Ess Pu and Ao have tickets on the *Sutter*. Very good. The answer is obvious. All I have to do is get in that dice game, win Ao and both tickets and shake the dust of this inferior planet from my feet.”

Swinging the suitcase jauntily, he scuttled along by back alleys, conscious of a distant, mounting tumult, until he reached the door of the UV Lantern Dream-Mill, a low broad arch closed with leather curtains. On the threshold he paused to glance back, puzzled by the apparent riot that had broken out.

Submerged feelings of guilt, plus his natural self-esteem, made him wonder if he himself might be the cause of all that uproar. However, since he had only roused the inhabitants of an entire city against him^[2] he concluded vaguely that perhaps there was a fire.

[2] (As a result of having sold them the Earth.)

So he pushed the curtains aside and entered the UV Lantern, looking around sharply to make certain Angus Ramsay wasn’t present. Ramsay, as the reader will guess, was the red-haired gentleman last heard defaming Macduff in the theater.

“And, after all, *he* was the one who insisted on buying a bottle of the Elixir,” Macduff mused. “Well, he isn’t here. Ess Pu, however, is. In all fairness, I’ve given him every chance to sell me Ao. Now let him take the consequences.”

Squaring his narrow shoulders (for it cannot be denied that Macduff was somewhat bottle-shaped in appearance) he moved through the crowd toward the back of the room, where Ess Pu crouched over a green-topped table with his companion, the Mayor of the city.

To a non-cosmopolitan observer it would have seemed that a lobster was playing PK dice with one of the local plant-men. But Macduff was a cosmopolitan in the literal sense of the word. And from his first meeting with Ess Pu, some weeks ago, he had recognized a worthy and formidable opponent.

All Algolians are dangerous. They are noted for their feuds, furies and their inverted affective tone scale. “It’s extraordinary,” Macduff mused, looking pensively at Ess Pu. “They feel fine only when they’re hating someone. The sensations of pleasure and pain are reversed. Algolians find the emotions of rage, hate and cruelty pro-survival. A lamentable state of affairs.”

Ess Pu clanked a scaly elbow on the table and rattled the dice-cup in the face of his cringing opponent; As everyone is familiar with Aldebaranese plant-men, in view of their popular video-films, the Mayor need not be described.

Macduff sank into a nearby chair and opened the suitcase on his lap, rummaging through its varied contents which included a deck of tarots, some engraved plutonium stock (worthless); and a number of sample bottles of hormones and isotopes.

There was also a small capsule of Lethean dust, that unpleasant drug which affects the psychokinetic feed-back mechanism. As an injury to the cerebellum causes purpose-tremor, so Lethean dust causes PK tremor. Macduff felt that a reasonable amount of psychic oscillation in Ess Pu might prove profitable to Macduff. With this in mind, he watched the game intently.

The Algolian waved his stalked eyes over the table. Crinkled membranes around his mouth turned pale blue. The dice spun madly. They fell—seven. Ess Pu’s membranes turned green. One of the dice quivered, strained, rolled over. The Algolian’s claws clicked shut with satisfaction, the Mayor wrung his hands and Macduff, emitting cries of admiration, leaned forward to pat Ess Pu’s sloping shoulder while he deftly emptied the unlidded capsule into the Algolian’s drink.

“My lad,” Macduff said raptly, “I have traveled the Galaxy from end to end and never before—”

“Tchah!” Ess Pu said sourly, pulling his winnings across the board. He added that he wouldn’t sell Ao to Macduff now even if he could. “So get out!” he finished, snapping a claw contemptuously in Macduff’s face.

“Why can’t you sell Ao?” Macduff demanded. “Though sell, of course, is a misleading verb. What I mean—”

He understood the Algolian to say that Ao now belonged to the Mayor.

Macduff turned surprised eyes on this personage, who furtively evaded the look.

“I didn’t recognize your Honor,” he said. “So many non-humanoid species are hard to tell apart. But did I understand you to say you *sold* her to the Mayor, Ess Pu? As I remember, Lesser Vegan Control merely leases its subjects to suitable guardians—”

“It was a transfer of guardianship,” the Mayor said hastily, lying in his teeth.

“Get out,” Ess Pu snarled. “You’ve got no use for Ao. She’s an *objet d’art*.”

“Your French is excellent for a lobster,” Macduff said with delicate tact. “And as for having a use for the lovely creature my scientific researches will shortly include the prognostication of mood-responses in large groups. As we all know, Lesser Vegans have the curious ability to make people punch-drunk. With a girl like Ao on the platform I could feel perfectly sure of my audience—”

A video screen burst in with a wild squawk. Everyone looked up sharply. Supplementary screens in infra-red and UV, for the use of customers with specialized vision, hummed with invisibly duplicated pictures of an announcer’s popeyed face.

“—Citizens’ Purity Organization has just called a mass meeting—”

The Mayor, looking frightened, started to get up and then thought better of it. There seemed to be something on his conscience.

Ess Pu told Macduff profanely to go away. He enlarged insultingly on the suggestion.

“Pah,” Macduff said bravely, knowing himself more agile than the Algolian. “Drop dead.”

Ess Pu’s mouth-membranes turned scarlet. Before he could speak, Macduff offered quickly to buy Ao’s ticket, a proposition he had neither intention nor ability to fulfill.

“I haven’t got her ticket!” Ess Pu roared. “She still has it! Now get out before I—” He strangled on his own fury, coughed and took a stiff drink. Ignoring Macduff, he threw a six and shoved a stack of chips to the center of the table. The Mayor, with nervous reluctance, glanced at the video screen and faded the bet. At that point the videos broke in with a squeal.

“—mobs marching on Administration! Aroused populace demands ousting of present officials, charging long-term corruption! This political pot was brought to a boil tonight by the exposure off an alleged swindler named Macduff—”

The Mayor of Aldebaran City jumped up and tried to run. One of Ess Pu’s claw’s caught him by the coat-tail. The video squawked on, giving an all-too-accurate description of the Radio-isotopic Elixir swindler and only the thick haze in the air kept Macduff from immediate exposure.

He hesitated uncertainly, reason telling him that something of interest was developing at the dice table while instinct urged him to run.

“I’ve got to get home!” the Mayor wailed. “Vital matters—”

“You’re staking Ao?” the crustacean demanded, with a significant brandish of his claws. “You are, eh? Right? Then *say so!*”

“Yes,” the harassed Mayor cried. “Oh, yes, yes, yes. Anything!”

“Six is my point,” said Ess Pu, rattling the dice-cup. His membranes became oddly mottled. He wriggled his eye-stalks unnervingly. Macduff, remembering the Lethean dust, began to edge toward the door.

There was a bellow of surprised rage from the Algolian as the disobedient cubes turned up seven. Ess Pu clawed at his throat, snatched up his glass, and peered suspiciously into it. The jig was up.

Roars of fury reverberated from wall to wall of the Dream-Mill as Macduff slipped out through the curtains and pattered rapidly off down the street in the cool musky dark of the Aldebaran night.

“Nevertheless, I still need a ticket,” he reflected. “I also need Ao if possible. This leads me, by obvious degrees, to the Mayor’s palace. Provided I’m not torn limb from limb in the meantime,” he added, dodging into another alley to avoid the spreading torchlit mobs that were by now seething hither and thither through the aroused city.

“How ridiculous. At times like these I’m grateful for being born into a civilized race. There’s no sun like Sol,” he summed up, creeping hastily under a fence as a mob poured down the alley toward him.

Emerging on the other side and trotting down a lane, he reached the back door of a luxurious palace done in pink porphyry with ebony edgings and banged the knocker firmly against its plate. There was a soft, sliding noise and Macduff fixed a peremptory gaze upon the one-way Judas mirror in the door.

“Message from the Mayor,” he announced in a brisk voice. “He’s in trouble. He sent me to bring that Lesser Vegan girl to him immediately. It’s a matter of life or death. Hurry!”

A gasp sounded from inside the door. Feet pattered away into inner distances. A moment later the door opened, revealing the Mayor himself.

“Here!” cried that frantic official. “She’s yours. Just take her away. I never saw her before in my life. Never saw Ess Pu. Never saw you. Never saw *anybody*. Oh, these reform riots! One scrap of incriminating evidence and I’m lost, lost!”

Macduff, a little astonished at finding himself fortune’s favorite, rose to the occasion capably.

“Depend on me,” he told the unhappy vegetable as a slim and lovely being was pushed out of the door into his arms. “She’ll leave Aldebaran Tau on the *Sutter* tomorrow at dawn. In fact, I’ll take her aboard immediately.”

“Yes, yes, yes,” the Mayor said, trying to close the door. Macduff’s foot kept it ajar.

“She’s got her space ticket?”

“Ticket? What ticket? Oh, that. Yes. In her wrist band. Oh, here they come! Look out!”

The terrified Mayor slammed the door. Macduff seized Ao’s hand and sped with her into the shrubbery of a plaza. A moment later the tortuous mazes of Aldebaran City swallowed them up.

CHAPTER II

Scent of Sphyghi

At the first convenient doorway Macduff paused and looked at Ao. She was worth looking at. She stood in the doorway, thinking of nothing at all. She didn't have to think of anything. She was too beautiful.

Nobody has ever yet succeeded in describing the beings of Lesser Vega and probably nobody ever will. Electronic calculators have broken down and had their mercury memory-units curdled trying to analyze that elusive quality which turns men into mush. Like all her race, however, Ao wasn't very bright. Macduff regarded her with entirely platonic greed.

For she was the perfect come-on. Probably some subtle emanation radiates from the brains of the Lesser Vegans which acts as a hypnotic. With Ao on the stage Macduff knew he could almost certainly have quelled his unruly audience an hour ago and averted the riot. Even the savage breast of Angus Ramsay might have been soothed by Ao's magical presence.

Curiously enough, male relationship with Ao was entirely platonic, with the natural exception of the males of Lesser Vega. Outside of this dim-brained species, however, it was enough for a beholder simply to look at Ao. And vision really had little to do with it, since standards of beauty are only species-deep. Almost all living organisms respond similarly to the soft enchantment of the Lesser Vegans.

"There's dark work afoot, my dear," Macduff said, resuming their progress. "Why was the Mayor so eager to get rid of you? But there's no use asking you, of course. We'd better get aboard the *Sutter*. I feel certain I can get Captain Masterson to advance me the price of another ticket. If I'd thought of it I might have arranged a small loan with the Mayor—or even a large one," he added, recalling the Mayor's obvious guilt reactions. "I seem to have missed a bet there."

Ao appeared to float delicately over a mud puddle. She was considering higher and lovelier things.

They were nearly at the spaceport by now and the sights and sounds Macduff heard from the far distance gave him an idea that the mob had set fire to the Mayor's porphyry palace. "However, he's merely a vegetable," Macduff told himself. "Still, my tender heart cannot help but—good heavens!"

He paused, aghast. The misty field of the spaceport lay ahead, the *Sutter* a fat ovoid blazing with light. There was a distant mutter of low thunder as the ship warmed up. A seething crowd of passengers was massed around the gangplank.

"Bless my soul, they're taking off," Macduff said. "Outrageous! Without even notifying the passengers—or perhaps there was a video warning sent out. Yes, I suppose so. But this may be awkward. Captain Masterson will be in the control room with a DO NOT DISTURB sign on the door. Take-offs are complicated affairs. How on Aldebaran Tau can we get aboard with only one ticket between us?"

The motors muttered sullenly. Haze blew like fat ghosts across the light-and-dark patterns of the tarmac. Macduff sprinted, dragging Ao, as thistledown, after him.

"I have a thought," he murmured. "Getting inside the ship is the first step. After that, of course, there'll be the regular passenger check but Captain Masterson will—hm-m."

He studied the purser who stood at the head of the gangplank, taking tickets, checking names off the list he held, his keen eyes watchful. Though the passengers seemed nervous they kept fair order, apparently reassured by the confident voice of a ship's officer, who stood behind the purser.

Into this scene burst Macduff at a wild run, dragging Ao and screaming at the top of his voice. "They're coming!" he shrieked, dashing through the crowd and overturning a bulky Saturnian. "It's another Boxer rebellion! One would think the Xerians had landed. They're all running around screaming, 'Aldebaran Tau for the Aldebarans!'"

Towing Ao and flailing frantically with his suitcase, Macduff burst into the center of a group and disintegrated it. Instantly he dashed through the line at the gangplank and back again, squealing bloody murder.

At the ship's port the officer was trying to make himself heard with little success. He was apparently stolidly sticking to his original lines, which has something to do with the fact that the Captain had been injured but there was no reason to be alarmed—

"Too late!" shrieked Macduff, bundling himself into the center of a growing nucleus of loud panic. "Hear what they're yelling? 'Kill the foreign devils!'—listen to the bloodthirsty savages. Too late, too late," he added at the top of his voice, scrambling through the mob with Ao. "Lock the doors! Man the gunports! *Here they come!*"

By now all thought of order had been lost. The passengers were demoralized into a veritable Light Brigade of assorted species and Macduff, clinging to Ao and his suitcase, rode the tide up the gangplank, over the prostrate bodies of the officer and the purser and into the ship, where he hastily assembled his various possessions and scrambled for cover. He fled down a passage, doubled and twisted, finally slowed to a rapid walk. He was alone, except for Ao, in the echoing corridor. From the far distance came annoyed curses.

"Useful thing, misdirection," Macduff murmured. "Only way to get aboard, however. What was that fool saying about the Captain's being injured? Nothing serious, I hope. I must hit him for a loan. Now where's your cabin, my dear?"

"Ah, yes. Stateroom R and here it is. We'd better hide till we're in space. Hear that siren? That means take-off, which is useful since it delays the passenger-check. Space-nets, Ao!"

He yanked open the door to Stateroom R and urged Ao toward a spiderweb filament of mesh that dangled like a hammock.

"Get in there and stay till I come back," he ordered. "I've got to find another shock-hammock." The gossamer net attracted Ao as surf attracts a mermaid. She was instantly ensconced in it, her angelic face looking dreamily out of the softly tinted cloud. She gazed beyond Macduff, thinking of nothing.

"Very good," Macduff told himself, going out, shutting the door and crossing to Stateroom X, which luckily was unlocked and vacant, with a web dangling ready. "Now—"

"You!" said an all-too-familiar voice.

Macduff turned quickly on the threshold. Across the passage, looking at him from the door adjoining Ao's, was the ill-tempered crustacean.

"What a surprise," Macduff said cordially. "My old friend Ess Pu. Just the—ah, Algolian I wanted to—"

He was not permitted to finish. With a bellow in which the words "Lethean dust" could be indistinctly understood, Ess Pu charged forward, eyes waving. Macduff hastily closed the door and locked it. There was a crash and then someone began to claw viciously at the panel.

“Outrageous assault on a man’s privacy,” Macduff muttered.

The hammering on the door grew louder. It was drowned out by the ultra-sonic, sonic, and resonating warning of an immediate take-off.

The hammering stopped. The sound of clicking claws receded into the distance. Macduff dived for the shock-net. Burrowing into its soft meshes he focused his mind on the hope that the awkward Algolian would be unable to make his hammock in time and that the acceleration would break every bone around his body.

Then the jets blazed, the *Sutter* rose from the troubled soil of Aldebaran Tau and Macduff really began to get into trouble.

It is perhaps time to deal, in some detail, with a matter which had already involved Macduff, though he didn’t know it. Cryptic reference has been made to such apparently unrelated matters as *sphyghi*-seeds and Xerians.

In the most expensive perfumeries of all, on the most luxurious worlds of all, there can be seen in tiny vials drams of a straw-colored fluid which carries the famous label of Sphyghi No. ∞. This perfume of perfumes, which bears the same price whether sold in a plain glass phial or in a jewel-studded platinum flagon, is so costly that by comparison Cassandra, Patou’s Joy or Martian Melée seem cheap.

Sphyghi is indigenous to Aldebaran Tau. Its seeds have been safeguarded so strictly that not even Aldebaran’s great trade rival, Xeria, has ever managed, by hook, crook or even honest means, to get hold of a single seed.

For a long time it had commonly been known that Xerians would have bartered their souls, or soul, for some of the seed. In view of the Xerians’ resemblance to termites there has always been some doubt as to whether an individual Xerian has a mind of his own and operates by free will or whether they are all ruled by a central common brain and determinism.

The trouble with *sphyghi* is that the growth cycle must be almost continuous. After the fruit is detached from the parent plant, its seeds become sterile in thirty hours, and must be planted in the meantime. Finally, the scent of *sphyghi* is unmistakable.

Not a bad take-off, Macduff mused, crawling out of the shock hammock. It would be too much to hope that Ess Pu suffered at least a simple fracture of the carapace, he supposed.

He opened the door, waited until the opposite door leaped open to reveal the Algolian’s watchful bulk and snapped back into Stateroom X with the agility of a frightened gazelle.

“Trapped like a rat,” he muttered, beginning a quick tour of the cabin. “Where is that intercom? Outrageous! Ah, here it is. Connect me with the Captain at once, please. Macduff is the name, Terence Lao-T’sé Macduff. Captain Masterson? Let me congratulate you on your take-off. A magnificent job. I gathered you have had an accident, which I trust is not serious.”

The intercom croaked hoarsely, caught its breath and said, “Macduff.”

“A throat injury?” Macduff hazarded. “But to come to the point, Captain. You are harboring a homicidal maniac on the *Sutter*. That Algolian lobster has gone perfectly insane and is lurking outside my door—Stateroom X—ready to kill me if I come out. Kindly send down some armed guards.”

The intercom made ambiguous sounds which Macduff took for assent.

“Thank you, Captain,” he said cheerily. “There is only one other small matter. It became necessary for me to board the *Sutter* at the last moment and I found it inexpedient to obtain a

ticket. Time pressed. Moreover, I have taken a Lesser Vegan girl under my protection, in order to save her from the dastardly machinations of Ess Pu and it would perhaps be wise to keep any knowledge of her presence in Stateroom R from that lobster.”

He took a deep breath and leaned familiarly against the intercom. “Frightful things have been happening, Captain Masterson—I have been subjected to persecution by a bloodthirsty mob, an attempt to swindle me at dice on Ess Pu’s part, threats of violence from Angus Ramsay—”

“Ramsay?”

“You may have heard of him under that name, though it’s probably an alias. The man was discharged in disgrace from the Space Service for smuggling opium, I believe—”

A knock came at the door. Macduff broke off to listen.

“Quick work, Captain,” he said. “I assume these are your guards?”

There was an affirmative grunt and a click. “*Au revoir*,” Macduff said cheerfully, and opened the door. Two uniformed members of the crew were standing outside, waiting. Across the corridor Ess Pu’s door was ajar and the Algolian stood there, breathing hard.

“You’re armed?” Macduff asked. “Prepare yourselves for a possible treacherous attack from that murderous crustacean behind you.”

“Stateroom X,” one of the men said. “Name, Macduff? Captain wants to see you.”

“Naturally,” Macduff said, pulling out a cigar and stepping dauntlessly into the corridor, making certain, however, that one of the crewmen was between him and Ess Pu. Nonchalantly clipping the cigar, he paused abruptly, his nostrils quivering.

“Let’s go,” one of the men said.

Macduff did not stir. From beyond the Algolian a breath of dim fragrance drifted like a murmur from paradise.

Macduff rapidly finished lighting his cigar. He puffed out great clouds of smoke as he hurriedly led the way down the corridor. “Come, come, my men,” he admonished. “To the Captain. Important matters are afoot.”

“We wouldn’t know,” a crewman said, slipping in front while the other one fell in behind. Macduff allowed himself to be escorted into the officers’ quarters, where he caught sight of himself in a reflecting bulkhead and blew out an approving smoke-cloud.

“Imposing,” he murmured. “No giant, of course, but unquestionably imposing in my fashion. The slight rotundity around my middle merely indicates that I live well. Ah, Captain Masterson! Very good, my men, you must leave us now. That’s right. Close the door as you go. Now, Captain—”

The man behind the desk lifted his gaze slowly. He was Angus Ramsay.

“Smuggling opium—aye!” said Angus Ramsay, exhibiting his teeth to the terrified Macduff. “Discharrged in disgrace—och! Ye nosty libeling scum, what am I going to do with ye?”

“Mutiny!” Macduff said wildly. “What have you done? Led the crew to mutiny and taken over the *Sutter*? I warn you, this crime will not go unpunished. Where’s Captain Masterson?”

“Captain Masterson,” said Ramsay, repressing his ire with a violent effort and losing the worst of his accent, “is in a hospital on Alderbaran Tau. Apparently the puir man got in the way of one of those raving mobs. The result is that I am captain of the *Sutter*. Offer me no cigars, ye dom scoundrel. I am interested in only one thing. Ye have nae ticket.”

“You must have misunderstood me,” Macduff said. “Naturally I had a ticket. I gave it to the purser when I came aboard. Those intercoms are notoriously unreliable.”

“So is that dom Immortality Elixir of yours,” Captain Ramsay pointed out. “So are some poker games, especially when the carrds are marked for blacklight reading.” The large hands closed significantly.

“Lay a finger on me at your peril,” Macduff said, with faint bluster. “I have the rights of a citizen—”

“Oh, aye,” Ramsay agreed. “But not the rights of a passenger on this ship. Therefore, ye wee blaggard, ye’ll worrk your way to the next port, Xeria, and there ye’ll be thrown off the *Sutter* bag and baggage.”

“I’ll buy a ticket,” Macduff offered. “At the moment, I happen to be slightly embarrassed —”

“If I catch ye mingling with the passengers or engaging in any games of chance with anyone at all ye will find yourself in the brig,” Captain Ramsay said firmly. “Black light, aye! Smuggling opium, is it? Aha!”

Macduff spoke wildly of a jury of his peers, at which Ramsay laughed mockingly.

“If I’d caught up with ye back on Aldebaran Tau,” he said, “I’d have taken great pleasure in kicking yer podgy carcass halfway arrround the planet. Now I wull get a deal more satisfaction out of knowing ye are harrd at work in the Hot Gang. Aboard this ship ye will be honest if it kills ye. And if ye have in mind that Lesser Vegan girl I have checked up thoroughly and ye cannot possibly figure out a way to swipe her ticket.”

“You can’t part a guardian and ward like this! It’s inhumanoid!” cried Macduff.

“Oot with ye, mon,” Ramsay said irately, rising. “To worrk, for probably the first time in yer misspent life.”

“Wait,” said Macduff. “You’ll regret it if you don’t listen to me. There’s a crime being committed on this ship.”

“Aye,” Ramsay said, “and ye’re committing it, ye stowaway. Oot!” He spoke into an intercom, the door opened and the two crew members stood waiting expectantly.

“No, no!” Macduff shrielled, seeing the yawning chasm of hard work widening inexorably at his very toes. “It’s Ess Pu! The Algolian! He—”

“If ye swindled him as ye swindled me,” Captain Ramsay began.

“He’s a smuggler!” Macduff shrieked, struggling in the grip of the crewmen who were bearing him steadily toward the door. “He’s smuggled *sphyghi* from Aldebaran Tau! I smelled the stuff, I tell you! You’re carrying contraband, Captain Ramsay!”

“Wait,” Ramsay ordered. “Put him down. Is this a trick?”

“I smelled it,” Macduff insisted. “You know what growing *sphyghi* smells like. It’s unmistakable. He must have the plants in his cabin.”

“The plants?” Ramsay pondered. “Noo I wonder. Hm-m. All right, men. Invite Ess Pu to my cabin.” He dropped back in his chair, studying Macduff.

Macduff rubbed his hands briskly together.

“Say no more, Captain Ramsay. You need not apologize for mistaken zeal. Having exposed this villainous Algolian, I shall break him down step by step till he confesses all. He will naturally be brigged, which will leave his cabin vacant. I leave it to your sense of fair play —”

“Tush,” said Captain Ramsay. “Close yer trap.” He scowled steadily at the door. After a while it opened to admit Ess Pu.

The Algolian lumbered ungracefully forward until he suddenly caught sight of Macduff. Instantly his mouth-membranes began to flush. A clicking claw rose ominously.

“Now, now, mon!” Ramsay warned.

“Certainly,” seconded Macduff. “Remember where you are, sir. All is discovered, Ess Pu. Facile lies will get you nowhere. Step by step Captain Ramsay and I have uncovered your plot. You are in the pay of the Xerians. A hired spy, you stole *sphyghi*-seeds from Aldebaran Tau and that *sphyghi* is even now in your cabin, a silent accuser.”

Ramsay looked thoughtfully at the Algolian.

“Weel?” he asked.

“Wait,” said Macduff. “When Ess Pu realizes that all is known he will see the uselessness of silence. Let me go on.” Since it was obviously impossible to stop Macduff, Captain Ramsay merely grunted and picked up the Handbook of Regulations on his desk. He began to study the thick volume doubtfully. Ess Pu twitched his claws.

“A feeble scheme from the beginning,” Macduff said. “Even to me, a visitor on Aldebaran Tau, it became immediately evident that corruption was at work. Need we seek far for the answer? I think not. For we are even now heading straight for Xeria, a world which has tried frantically for years, by fair means and foul, to break the *sphyghi* monopoly. Very well.”

He aimed a cigar accusingly at the Algolian.

“With Xerian money, Ess Pu,” Macduff charged, “you came to Aldebaran Tau and bribed the highest officials, got hold of some *sphyghi* seeds and circumvented the usual customs search for contraband. You bought the Mayor’s sealed okay by bribing him with Ao. You need not reply yet,” Macduff added hastily since he had no intention of cutting short his hour of triumph.

Ess Pu made a revolting noise in his throat. “Lethean dust,” he said, reminded of something. “*Ah-h!*” He made a sudden forward motion.

Macduff dodged hastily around the desk behind Ramsay. “Call your men,” he suggested. “He’s running amuck. Disarm him.”

“Ye cannot disarm an Algolian without dismembering him,” Captain Ramsay said rather absently, looking up from the Handbook of Regulations. “Ah—Ess Pu. Ye dinna deny this charge, I gather?”

“How can he deny it?” Macduff demanded. “The short-sighted scoundrel planted the *Sphyghi-seeds* in his cabin without even setting up an odor-denaturalizer. He deserves no mercy, the fool.”

“Weel?” Ramsay asked, in an oddly doubtful manner.

Ess Pu shook his narrow shoulders, crashed his tail emphatically against the floor, and spread his jaws in what might have been a grin.

“*Sphyghi?*” he asked. “Sure. So?”

“Convicted out of his own mouth,” Macduff decided. “Nothing else is necessary. Brig him, Captain. We will share the reward, if any.”

“No,” Captain Ramsay said, putting down the Handbook decisively. “Ye have put yer foot in it again, Macduff. Ye are no expert in interstellar law. We are now beyond the limits of ionization and therefore beyond the jurisdiction of Aldebaran Tau—with a guid deal of gibble-gabble the lawyers put in.

“But the meaning is clear enough. It was the job of the Aldebaranese to keep that *sphyghi* from being smuggled awa’ from them and since they failed, noo it is not my job to meddle. In

fact, I canna. Against Regulations.”

“That’s it,” Ess Pu said with complacent satisfaction.

Macduff gasped. “You condone smuggling, Captain Ramsay?”

“I’m covered,” the Algolian said, making a coarse gesture toward Macduff.

“Aye,” Ramsay said, “he’s richt. Regulations make it perfectly clear. As far as I am concerned it makes no difference whether Ess Pu is keeping *sphyghi* or daffodils in his cabin—or a haggis,” he added thoughtfully.

Ess Pu snorted and turned toward the door.

Macduff put a plaintive hand on the Captain’s arm.

“But he threatened me. My life isn’t safe around that Algolian. Just look at those claws.”

“Aye,” Ramsay said reluctantly. “Ye ken the penalty for murder, Ess Pu? Vurra good. I order ye not to murrder this nae doot deserving miscreant. I am bound to enforce Regulations, so dinna let me catch ye assaulting Macduff within earshot of me or any other officer. Ye ken?”

Ess Pu seemed to ken. He laughed hoarsely, ground a claw at Macduff and stalked out, swaying from side to side. The two crewmen were visible outside the door.

“Here,” Captain Ramsay ordered. “I have a job for ye two. Take this stowaway doon to the Hot Gang and turn him over to the Chief.”

“No, no!” squealed Macduff, retreating. “Don’t you dare lay a finger on me! Put me down! Outrageous! I *won’t* go down that ramp! Release me! Captain Ramsay, I demand—*Captain Ramsay!*”

CHAPTER III

Award of Ao

Days had passed, arbitrarily, of course, aboard the *Sutter*.

Ao lay curled in her shock-hammock, thinking her own dim thoughts and looking at nothing. High up in the wall there was a puffing sound, a scuffle, and a grunt. Behind the grille of the ventilating inlet appeared the face of Macduff.

“Ah, my little friend,” he said kindly. “So there you are. Now they have me creeping down the ventilating tubes of this ship like a phagocyte.”

He tested the meshed grille cautiously.

“Sealed, like all the others,” he observed. “However, I assume you’re being well treated, my dear.” He glanced greedily at the covered lunch-tray on a nearby table. Ao looked dreamily at nothing.

“I have sent a cable,” Macduff announced from the wall. “I bartered some small treasured heirlooms I happened to have with me and raised enough cash to send a cable, by the press rate. Luckily I still have my press card.” Macduff’s vast collection of credentials very likely may have included a membership in the Little Men’s Chowder and Marching Society, to choose the least likely example.

“Moreover, I have just received a reply. Now I must run a grave risk, my dear, a grave risk. Today the conditions of the ship’s pool—a lottery, you know—will be announced in the grand lounge. I must be present, even at the risk of being brigged by Captain Ramsay and savaged by Ess Pu.

“It will not be easy. I may say I’ve been subjected to every indignity imaginable, my dear, except perhaps—outrageous!” he added, as a cord tied around his ankle tightened and drew him backward up the shaft.

His distant cries grew fainter. He announced in a fading voice that he had a bottle of 2, 4, 5-trichlorophenoxyacetic acid in his pocket and that broken glass was a safety hazard. So saying he departed into inaudibility. Since Ao had not really noticed that he was present she remained unaffected.

“Ah, well,” Macduff philosophized as he flew down a corridor slightly ahead of the Atmospheric Inspector’s hurtling toe-cap, “Justice is blind. This is my thanks for working overtime—at least three minutes overtime. But now I am off duty and free to set my plans in motion.”

Five minutes later, having eluded the Inspector and smoothed his ruffled plumage somewhat, he made his way briskly toward the lounge.

“There’s one point in my favor,” he reflected. “Ess Pu apparently doesn’t know Ao is aboard. The last time he chased me he was still speaking bitterly of my part in forcing him to leave her on Aldebaran Tau. Unhappily that’s practically the only point in my favor. I must now mingle with the passengers in the grand lounge, while remaining undetected by Ess Pu, Captain Ramsay or any ship’s officer. I wish I were a Cerean.^[3] Ah, well.”

[3] (The inhabitants of Ceres were long supposed to be invisible. Lately it has been discovered that Ceres has no inhabitants.)

As Macduff cautiously made his way toward the lounge his memory dwelt all too vividly on his recent progress from riches to rags. His meteoric descent from job to worse job had been little short of phenomenal.

“Would you set a cinematome to digging ditches?” he had inquired. “Would you weigh elephants on a torquemeter?”

He was told to stop gabbling and pick up that shovel. Instantly he began to work out the most efficient application of the law of leverages. There was some delay while he extended his decimals to include the influencing factor of low-threshold radioactivity upon the alpha waves of the brain.

“Otherwise, anything can happen,” he explained, demonstrating. There was a crash.

Macduff was then, by request, taken off the Hot Gang and put to work elsewhere. But, as he took pains to point out, his frame of reference did not include special skills in the block-processing of garbage for fuel, oiling of the symbiotic hemostatic adjustment mechanisms provided for the comfort of the passengers or testing refractive indices of liquid-coated bimetallic thermostats. He proved this empirically.

So he was—by request—removed to Hydroponics, where the incident of the radioactive carbon tracer occurred. He said it wasn't the carbon, it was the gammexene, and besides it wasn't really the gammexene so much as his inadvertent neglect to supplement the insecticide with meso-inositol.

But when thirty square feet of rhubarb plants began breathing out carbon monoxide as a result of sudden heredity changes brought on by the gammexene Macduff was promptly sent down to the kitchens, where he introduced a growth-hormone into the soup, with mighty catastrophic results.

At present he was an unvalued member of the staff of Atmospheric Controls, where he did the jobs nobody else wanted to do.

More and more he had become conscious of the odor of *sphyghi* pervading the ship. Nothing could disguise its distinctive fragrance, which seeped by osmosis through membranes, trickled along the surface of molecular films, and very likely rode piggy-back on careening quanta. As Macduff made his stealthy way toward the lounge he realized that the word *sphyghi* was on every tongue, just as he had anticipated.

He paused warily on the threshold of the lounge, which ran like a belt (or cravat) around the entire ship, so that in two directions the floor seemed to slope steeply, until you tried to walk up it. Then it felt like a squirrel cage, which compensated automatically to your own speed.

Here was luxury. Macduff's sybaritic soul yearned toward the tempting buffets of smorgasbord, *ti-pali* and Gustators. Like a palace of ice an ornate per-ambulating bar swung slowly past on its monorail track. An orchestra was playing *Starlit Days and Sunny Nights*, an eminently suitable choice for a ship in space, and *sphyghi*-fragrance sent its luxurious breath from wall to wall.

Macduff stood with unobtrusive dignity near the door for some minutes, regarding the crowd. He was waiting for the appearance of Captain Ramsay. Presently a buzz of interested comment began to arise and a throng of passengers converged down the salon's slopes. The Captain had arrived. Macduff melted into the crowd and vanished with the suddenness of a Boojum.

Ramsay stood at the bottom of a concave sectioned amphitheater, looking up at his audience with an unaccustomed smile on his seamed face. There was no trace of Macduff, though a repressed mutter of sotto voce comment came occasionally from behind a broad-beamed member of the Plutonian lepidoptera.

Captain Ramsay spoke.

“As ye probably ken,” he said, “we are here to arrange about the ship’s pool. Some of ye may not have traveled in space before, so the acting firrst mate wull explain how this is done. Mister French, please.”

Mr. French, a serious young man, took the stage. He cleared his throat, hesitated and looked around as a brief burst of applause came from behind the Plutonian lepidoptera.

“Thank you,” he said. “Eh—many of you may be familiar with the old-time ship’s pool, in which passengers guessed the time of arrival in port. In space, of course, compensatory feedback devices, effectors and subtractors control our ship so exactly that we know the *Sutter* will arrive in Xeria at exactly the posted time, which is—”

“Come, come, my man, get to the point,” an unidentified voice put in from the audience. Captain Ramsay was observed to glance sharply toward the Plutonian.

“Eh—quite,” said Mr. French. “Does anyone have a suggestion?”

“Guessing the date on a coin,” a voice said eagerly, but it was drowned out by a chorus of cries mentioning the word *sphyghi*.

“*Sphyghi*?” Captain Ramsay asked with hypocritical blankness. “The perfume stuff, ye mean?”

There was laughter. A mousy Callistan got the floor.

“Captain Ramsay,” he said. “How about running a *sphyghi*-seed lottery here, the way they do on Aldebaran Tau? The way it’s done, I think, is by betting on how many seeds there are in the first *sphyghi*-fruit of the crop. The number always varies. Sometimes there are a few hundred, sometimes a few thousand and there’s no way of counting them until the fruit’s cut open. If Ess Pu could be induced to agree, perhaps—”

“Allow me,” Captain Ramsay said. “I’ll consult Ess Pu.”

He did so, while the crustacean looked blackly around. At first he was obdurate. But finally, in return for a half-share in the pool, he was prevailed upon to cooperate. Only the glamour of *sphyghi* and the unparalleled chance to boast about this lottery for the rest of their lives led the passengers to put up with his inordinate greed. But presently all was arranged.

“Stewards wull pass among ye,” Captain Ramsay said. “Write yer guess and yer name on these slips of paper and drop them in a box which wull be provided for the purpose. Aye, aye, Ess Pu. Ye wull be given a chance too if ye insist.”

The Algolian insisted. He wasn’t missing a bet. After long hesitation he put down a number, angrily scrawled the phonetic ideograph of his name and had turned to stalk away when something subtler than *sphyghi*-fragrance began to breathe through the salon. Heads turned. Voices died away. Ess Pu, glancing around in surprise, found himself facing the door. His infuriated bellow reverberated from the ceiling for several seconds.

Ao, standing on the threshold, paid no attention. Her lovely eyes gazed into the far distances. Concentric circles of magic drifted dreamily out from her. Already she was increasing the affective tone of all living organisms within the lounge, and Ess Pu was not excluded. However, as has already been disclosed, when an Algolian feels good his rage knows no bounds. Ao didn’t care.

“Mine!” Ess Pu mouthed, swinging toward the Captain. “The girl—mine!”

“Get ye claws awa’ from my face, mon,” Captain Ramsay said with dignity. “If ye wull join me in this quiet corner perhaps ye can state yer case in a more courteous fashion. Noo, what is it?”

Ess Pu demanded Ao. He took out a certificate which appeared to state that he had traveled to Aldebaran Tau with Ao as her guardian. Ramsay fingered his jaw undecidedly. Meanwhile there was a scuffle among the thronging passengers who were pressing folded slips of paper upon the stewards. The breathless, rotund figure of Macduff burst out of the crowd just in time to snatch Ao from Ess Pu’s possessively descending claws.

“Back, lobster!” he ordered threateningly. “Lay a claw on that girl at your peril.” Towing her, he dodged behind the Captain as Ess Pu lunged.

“I thought so,” Ramsay said, lifting a cautioning finger at Ess Pu. “Were ye no specifically forbidden to mingle with the passengers, Macduff?”

“This is a matter of law enforcement,” Macduff said. “Ao is my ward, not that criminal lobster’s.”

“Can ye prove it?” Ramsay inquired. “That certificate of his—”

Macduff tore the certificate from Ess Pu’s grip, scanned it hastily, crumpled it into a ball and threw it on the floor.

“Nonsense!” he said scornfully, taking out a cablegram in an accusing manner. “Read this, Captain. As you will observe it is a cable from the Lesser Vegan Control Administration. It points out that Ao was illegally deported from Lesser Vega and that an Algolian is suspected of the crime.”

“Eh?” Ramsay said. “One moment, Ess Pu.” But the Algolian was already hastily clashing his way out of the salon. Ramsay scowled at the cablegram, looked up and beckoned to a Cephan double-brained attorney among the passengers. There was a brief colloquy, from which Ramsay came back shaking his head.

“Can’t do much about this, Macduff,” he said. “It isn’t a GBI offense, unfortunately. I find I’m empowered only to turn Ao over to her rightful guardian and since she has none—”

“Your error, Captain,” Macduff broke in. “You want her richt—I mean, her rightful guardian? You’re looking at him. Here’s the rest of that cablegram.”

“What?” Captain Ramsay demanded.

“Exactly, Terence Lao-T’sse Macduff. That’s what it says. The Lesser Vegan Control Administration has accepted my offer to stand *in loco parentis* to Ao, *pro tem*.”

“Vurra weel,” Ramsay said reluctantly. “Ao’s yer ward. Ye wull have to take that up with the Xerian authorities when ye arrive, for as sure as my name is Angus Ramsay ye’ll gae head over basket doon the gangplank the minute we land on Xeria. Ye and Ess Pu can fight it oot there. In the meantime I dinna allow a crewman to mingle with my passengers. *Go for-rard!*”

“I demand the rights of a passenger,” Macduff said excitedly, backing up a step or two. “The price of the ticket includes the pool and I demand—”

“Ye are no passenger. Ye’re a dom insubordinate member of—”

“Ao’s a passenger!” Macduff contended shrilly. “She’s entitled to take part in the pool, isn’t she? Well, then, a slip, please, Captain.”

Ramsay growled under his breath. But finally he beckoned to the steward with the slotted box.

“Let Ao write doon her own guess,” he insisted stubbornly.

“Nonsense,” Macduff said. “Ao’s my ward. I’ll write it for her. Moreover, if by any miraculous chance she should happen to win the pool, it will be my duty to administer the dough in the best interests of her welfare, which obviously means buying us both tickets to Lesser Vega.”

“Och, why quibble?” Ramsay said suddenly. “If ye’re lucky enough to have a miracle happen, fair enough.”

Macduff, concealing what he wrote, scribbled busily, folded the paper and pushed it through the slot. Ramsay took a perma-seal from the steward and ran it across the box-top.

“Personally,” Macduff said, watching him, “I feel slightly degraded by the atmosphere of the *Sutter*. What with condoning smuggling, shyster tactics and pure vicious gambling, I’m forced to the unsavory conclusion, Captain, that you’re running a crime ship. Come, Ao, let us seek purer air.”

Ao licked her thumb and thought of something very nice, perhaps the taste of her thumb. No one would ever know.

CHAPTER IV

The Xerian's Dismay

Time passed, both Bergsonian and Newtonian. On either scale it seemed probable that Macduff's time was running rapidly out.

"Who sups wi' Auld Clootie should hae a long spoon," Captain Ramsay said to the acting first, on the day of the *Sutter's* scheduled arrival at Xeria. "The wonder is that Macduff has evaded Ess Pu's claw's this long, the way he's been trying to get at those *sphyghi*-plants.

"What baffles me is what he hopes to accomplish by sneaking around the Algolian's cabin with sodium iodide counters and microwave spectrosopes. Whatever he wrote doon in the lottery box canna be changed. The box is in my safe."

"Suppose he finds a way to open the safe?" the acting first suggested.

"In addition to the time lock it is keyed to the alpha radiations of my own brain," Captain Ramsay pointed out. "He canna possibly—ah, talk of the devil, Mr. French. Look who's coming."

The rotund yet agile form of Macduff came scuttling rapidly along the corridor, one jump ahead of the Algolian. Macduff was breathing hard. At sight of the two officers he dived behind them like a quail going to cover. Ess Pu, blind with fury, snapped his claws in the Captain's very face.

"Control yerself, mon!" Ramsay said sharply. The Algolian made a mindless gobbling sound and waved a paper wildly in the air.

"Man, indeed," Macduff said with some bitterness, from his position of precarious safety. "He's nothing but an acromegalic lobster. It's getting so any object can be classified as humanoid these days, the way they keep broadening the requirements. Letting in all the riff-raff of the Galaxy. Martians were the opening wedge. Now the deluge.

"I can see the need for a certain amount of latitude, but we peril the dignity of true humanoids when we apply the proud name of Man to a lobster. Why, the creature isn't even a biped. In fact, there's a certain air of indecent exposure about where he wears his bones."

"Tush, mon, ye ken the word's a mere figure of speech. What is it, Ess Pu? What's this paper ye keep thrusting at me?"

The Algolian was understood to gibber that Macduff had dropped it while fleeing. He recommended that the Captain read it carefully.

"Later," Ramsay said, thrusting it in his pocket. "We're due to land on Xeria vurra soon, and I must be in the control room. Go for-rard, Macduff."

Macduff obeyed with surprising alacrity, at least until he was out of sight. Ess Pu, muttering thickly, followed. Only then did Ramsay pull the paper from his pocket. He studied it, snorted and handed it to the acting first. Macduff's neat handwriting covered one side of the page, as follows:

Problem: Find out how many seeds in the first ripe sphyghi-fruit. How look inside a sealed fruit in which all seeds may not be formed yet? Ordinary vision useless.

First day: Attempted to introduce radio-tracer in sphyghi so I could count radioactivity day by day and work out useful graphs. Failed. Ess Pu installed

booby-trap, sign of low criminal mentality. No harm done.

Second day: Attempt to bribe Ess Pu with Immortality Elixir. Ess Pu outraged. Forgot Algolians regard adolescence as despicable. Small minds value size inordinately.

Third day: Tried to focus infra-red on sphyghi, to pick up secondary radiations with acoustical interferometer. Failed. Experimented in long-distance color-staining of sphyghi-cells with light waves. Failed.

Fourth day: Attempts to introduce chloroform into Ess Pu's quarters failed also. Impossible to get near enough fruit to try analysis through positive ion emissions. Am beginning to suspect Ess Pu was responsible for Captain Masterson's hospitalization back on Aldebaran Tau. Probably crept up from behind in dark alley. All bullies are cowards. Note: try to turn Xerians against Ess Pu on arrival. How?

There the quasi-diary ended. Mr. French looked up quizzically.

"I had na realized Macduff was applying science so thoroughly," Ramsay remarked. "But this merely confirms what Ess Pu told me weeks ago. He said Macduff was constantly trying to get at the *sphyghi*. But he couldna and he canna and noo we must prepare for landing, Mr. French."

He hurried away, trailed by the acting first. The corridor lay empty and silent for a little while. Then an intercom high in the wall spoke.

"General announcement," it said. "Passengers and crew of the *Sutter*, your attention, please. Prepare for landing. Immediately afterward, passengers will assemble in the grand lounge for the Xerian customs search. The results of the ship's pool will also be announced. Your attendance is compulsory. Thank you."

There was silence, a sound of heavy breathing and finally a new voice sounded. "That means you, Macduff," it said grimly. "Ye ken? Aye, ye'd better."

Four minutes later, the *Sutter* landed on Xeria.

Yanked protesting from his cabin, Macduff was dragged to the grand lounge, where everyone else had already assembled. A group of Xerian officials, repressing their joy with some difficulty, was also in evidence, making a rather perfunctory search of the passengers, while other Xerians went through the ship rapidly, testing for contraband.

But it was obvious that the contraband that excited them was the *sphyghi*. A table had been set up in the middle of the big room and upon it, each plant in its own little earthenware pot, the *sphyghi* stood. Plump golden fruit dangled from the branches, the pink glow of ripeness flushing their downy surfaces. An odor of pure delight exhaled from the plants. Ess Pu stood guardian, occasionally exchanging words with a Xerian official, who had already affixed a medal^[4] on the Algolian's carapace.

[4] (With suction-cups, of course.)

"Outrageous!" Macduff cried, struggling. "I merely needed another few minutes' work with a vitally important experiment I was—"

"Close your blabber-mouth," Captain Ramsay told him. "I shall take great pleasure in kicking you off the *Sutter* myself."

"Leaving me to the tender mercies of that lobster? He'll kill me! I appeal to our common humanoid—"

Captain Ramsay conferred briefly with the Xerian leader, who nodded.

“Quite right, Captain,” he or it said pedantically. “Under our laws debtors work out their debts, mayhem is assessed by its results and the aggressor forced to pay full reparations. Homicide naturally always carries the death penalty. Why do you ask?”

“That applies even to Ess Pu?” the Captain persisted.

“Naturally,” the Xerian said.

“Weel, then,” Ramsay said significantly to Macduff.

“Weel, then what? He’ll be so rich he won’t even mind paying reparations for the privilege of committing mayhem on my person. I bruise very easily.”

“But he wullna kill ye,” Ramsay said comfortingly. “And it will be a fine lesson to ye, Macduff.”

“Then at least I intend to get in one good blow,” said Macduff, seizing a stout Malacca cane from a nearby avian and giving Ess Pu a resounding smack across the carapace. The Algolian let out a steam-whistle shriek of fury and lunged forward while Macduff, brandishing the cane like a rapier, danced pudgily backward, threatening even as he retreated.

“Come on, you overgrown shore dinner,” cried Macduff valiantly. “We’ll have it out now, humanoid to lobster!”

“Lay on, Macduff!” shouted an erudite and enthusiastic Ganymedeian.

“Lay off!” bellowed Captain Ramsay, waving his officers to the rescue. But the Xerians were before them. They formed a quick barrier between the combatants and one of them twisted the cane from Macduff’s reluctant grasp.

“If he has harmed you, Ess Pu, he will make reparations,” the leader of the Xerians said. “Law is law. Are you injured?”

Despite Ess Pu’s inarticulate gobbles, it was obvious that he was not. And the Xerian jurisprudence takes no notice of injured pride. Termites are humble by nature.

“Let’s get this settled,” Captain Ramsay said, annoyed at having his grand lounge turned into a shambles. “There are only three passengers disembarking here. Ao, Ess Pu and Macduff.”

Macduff looked around for Ao, found her and, scuttling over, tried to hide behind her oblivious back.

“Ah, yes,” the leading Xerian said. “Ess Pu has already explained the matter of the ship’s pool. We will permit the lottery. However, certain conditions must be observed. No non-Xerian will be allowed to approach this table, and I will do the seed-counting myself.”

“That wull be satisfactory,” Ramsay said, picking up the sealed ballot box and retreating. “If ye’ll cut open the ripest of the fruit and count the seeds I’ll then open this box and announce the winner.”

“Wait!” Macduff cried out but his voice was ignored. The leading Xerian had picked up a silver knife from the table, plucked the largest, ripest *sphyghi*-fruit, and cut it neatly in two. The halves rolled apart on the table—to reveal a perfectly empty hollow within the fruit.

The Xerian’s shout of dismay echoed through the lounge. The silver knife flashed, chopping the fruit to fragments. But not a single seed glittered in the creamy pulp. “What’s happened?” Macduff demanded. “No seeds? Obviously a swindle. I never trusted Ess Pu. He’s been gloating—”

“Silence,” the Xerian said coldly. In a subdued quiet he used the silver knife again and again in an atmosphere of mounting tension.

“No seeds?” Captain Ramsay asked blankly as the last fruit fell open empty. The Xerian made no reply. He was toying with the silver knife and regarding Ess Pu.

The Algolian seemed as astounded as anyone else but as Macduff audibly remarked, it was hard to tell, with an Algolian. Captain Ramsay courageously broke the ominous silence by stepping forward to remind the Xerians that he was a representative of the GBI.

“Have no fear,” the Xerian said coldly. “We have no jurisdiction in your ship, Captain.”

Macduff’s voice rose in triumph.

“I never trusted that lobster from the start,” he announced, strutting forward. “He merely took your money and made a deal for seedless *sphyghi*. He is obviously a criminal. His hasty exit from Aldebaran, plus his known addiction to Lethean dust—”

At that point Ess Pu charged down upon Macduff, raging uncontrollably. At the last moment Macduff’s rotund figure shot toward the open port and the thin Xerian sunlight outside. Ess Pu clattered after him, shrieking with fury, mouth-membranes flaring crimson in his rage.

CHAPTER V

Pollen Double-Cross

At the Xerian leader's quick command, the other Xerians hurried after Macduff. There were distant, cryptic noises from outside. Presently Macduff reappeared, panting and alone.

"Awkward creatures, Algolians," he said, nodding familiarly to the Xerian leader. "I see your men have—ah—detained Ess Pu."

"Yes," the Xerian said. "Outside, he is of course under our jurisdiction."

"The thought had occurred to me," Macduff murmured, drifting toward Ao.

"Noo wait a minute," Captain Ramsay said to the Xerians. "Ye have na—"

"We are not barbarians," the Xerian said with dignity. "We gave Ess Pu fifteen million Universal Credits to do a job for us and he has failed. Unless he can return the fifteen million, plus costs, he must work it out. The man-hour"—here Macduff was seen to wince—"the man-hour on Xeria is the equivalent of one sixty-fifth of a credit."

"This is highly irregular," the Captain said. "However, it's out of my jurisdiction now. You, Macduff—stop looking so smug. You get off at Xeria too, remember. I advise ye to stay out of Ess Pu's way."

"I expect he'll be busy most of the time," Macduff said cheerfully. "I hate to remind a supposedly competent officer of his duties, but haven't you forgotten the slight matter of the ship's pool?"

"What?" Ramsay glanced blankly at the pulped fruit. "The pool's called off, of course. Yer money, ladies and gentlemen, will be refunded—"

"Nonsense," Macduff interrupted. "Let's have no evasions. One might suspect you of trying to avoid a pay-off."

"Mon, ye're daft. How can there be a pay-off? The lottery was based on guessing the seed-count in a *sphyghi*-fruit and it's perfectly obvious the *sphyghi* has no seeds. Vurra weel. If no one has any objections—"

"I object!" Macduff cried. "On behalf of my ward, I demand that every single guess be counted and tabulated."

"Be reasonable," Ramsay urged. "If ye're merely delaying the evil moment when I kick ye off the *Sutter*—"

"You've got to wind up the pool legally," Macduff insisted.

"Pah, shut yer clatterin' trap," Ramsay snapped sourly, picking up the sealed box and attaching a small gadget to it. "Just as ye like. But I am on to ye, Macduff. Noo, quiet please, everybody."

He closed his eyes and his lips moved in a soundless mumble. The box flew open, disgorging a clutter of folded papers. At Ramsay's gesture a passenger stepped forward and began to open the slips, reading off names and guesses.

"So ye gain pairhaps five minutes reprieve," Ramsay said under his breath to Macduff. "Then oot ye go after Ess Pu and let me say it is pairfectly obvious ye lured the Algolian out of the *Sutter* on purpose."

"Nonsense," Macduff said briskly. "Am I to blame if Ess Pu focused his ridiculous anti-social emotions on me?"

"Aye," Ramsay said. "Ye ken dom well ye are."

“Male Kor-ze-Kabloom, seven hundred fifty,” called the passenger unfolding another slip. “Lorma Secundus, two thousand ninety-nine. Ao, *per*—”

There was a pause.

“Well?” Captain Ramsay prompted, collaring Macduff. “Well, mon?”

“Terence Lao-T’se Macduff—” the passenger continued and again halted.

“What is it? What number did he guess?” Ramsay demanded, pausing at the open port with one foot lifted ready to boot the surprisingly philosophical Macduff down the gangplank. “*I asked ye a question!* What number’s on the slip?”

“Zero,” the passenger said faintly.

“Exactly!” Macduff declared, wriggling free. “And now, Captain Ramsay, I’ll thank you to hand over half the ship’s pool to me, as Ao’s guardian—less, of course, the price of our passage to Lesser Vega. As for Ess Pu’s half of the take, send it to him with my compliments.

“Perhaps it will knock a few months off his sentence, which, if my figures are correct, come to nine hundred and forty-six Xerian years. A Macduff forgives even his enemies. Come, Ao, my dear. I must choose a suitable cabin.”

So saying, Macduff lit a fresh cigar and sauntered slowly away, leaving Captain Ramsay staring straight ahead and moving his lips as though in slow prayer. The prayer became audible.

“Macduff,” Ramsay called. “*Macduff!* How did ye do it?”

“I,” said Macduff over his shoulder, “am a scientist.”

The Lesser Vegan cabaret hummed with festivity. A pair of comedians exchanged quips and banter among the tables. At one table Ao sat between Macduff and Captain Ramsay.

“I am still waiting to hear how ye did it, Macduff,” Ramsay said. “A bargain’s a bargain, ye know. I put my name on yon application, didn’t I?”

“I cannot but admit,” Macduff said, “that your signature facilitated my getting Ao’s guardianship, bless her heart. Some champagne, Ao?” But Ao made no response. She was exchanging glances with a Lesser Vegan young man at a nearby table.

“Come, noo,” Ramsay insisted. “Remember I will have to turn over my log at the end of the voyage. I must know what happened concerning yon *sphyghi*. Otherwise, d’ye think I’d hae gone oot on a limb and guaranteed yer tortuous character, even though I carefully added, ‘to the best of my knowledge?’ No. Ye wrote that zero when I saw ye do it, long before the fruit ripened.”

“Right,” Macduff said blandly, sipping champagne. “It was a simple problem in misdirection. I suppose there’s no harm in telling you how I did it. Consider the circumstances. You were going to maroon me on Xeria, side by side with that lobster.

“Obviously I had to cut him down to my size by discrediting him with the Xerians. Winning the pool was an unexpected secondary development. Merely a stroke of well-deserved good luck, aided by applied scientific technique.”

“Ye mean that stuff ye wrote down on the paper Ess Pu found—the gibble-gabble about interferometers and ionanalyzers? So ye did find some way to count the seeds—och, I’m wrong there, am I?”

“Naturally.” Macduff twirled his glass and preened himself slightly. “I wrote that paper for Ess Pu’s eyes. I had to keep him so busy protecting his *sphyghi* and chasing me that he never had a spare moment to think.”

“I still dinna ken,” Ramsay confessed. “Even if ye’d known the richt answer in advance, how could ye foresee the pool would be based on *sphyghi*?”

“Oh, that was the simplest thing of all. Consider the odds! What else could it be, with the Aldebaran Lottery fresh in every mind and the whole ship reeking of contraband *sphyghi*? If no one else had suggested it I was prepared to bring it up myself and—what’s this? Go away! Get out!”

He was addressing himself to the two comedians, who had worked their way around to Macduff’s table. Captain Ramsay glanced up in time to see them commence a new act.

The laugh-getting technique of insult has never basically changed all through the ages, and Galactic expansion has merely broadened and deepened its variety. Derision has naturally expanded to include species as well as races.

The comedians, chattering insanely, began a fairly deft imitation of two apes searching each other for fleas. There was an outburst of laughter, not joined by those customers who had sprung from Simian stock.

“Tush!” Ramsay said irately, pushing back his chair. “Ye dom impudent—”

Macduff lifted a placating palm. “Tut, tut, Captain. Strive for the objective viewpoint. Merely a matter of semantics, after all.” He chuckled tolerantly. “Rise above such insularity, as I do, and enjoy the skill of these mummies in the abstract art of impersonation. I was about to explain why I had to keep Ess Pu distracted. I feared he might notice how fast the *sphyghi* were ripening.”

“Pah,” Ramsay said, but relapsed into his chair as the comedians moved on and began a new skit. “Weel, continue.”

“Misdirection,” Macduff said cheerfully. “Have you ever had a more incompetent crew-member than I?”

“No,” Ramsay said, considering. “Never in my—”

“Quite so. I was tossed like spindrift from task to task until I finally reached Atmospheric Controls, which was exactly where I wanted to be. Crawling down ventilating pipes has certain advantages. For example, it was the work of a moment to empty a phial of two-four-five-trichlorophenoxyacetic acid”—he rolled the syllables lushly—“trichlorophenoxyacetic acid into Ess Pu’s ventilator. The stuff must have got into everything, including the *sphyghi*.”

“Trichloro—what? Ye mean ye gimmicked the *sphyghi* before the pool?”

“Certainly. I told you the pool was a later by-product. My goal at first was simply to get Ess Pu in trouble on Xeria to save my own valuable person. Luckily I had a fair supply of various hormones with me. This particular one, as the merest child should know, bypasses the need for cross-pollination. Through a law of biology the results will always be seedless fruit. Ask any horticulturist. It’s done all the time.”

“Seedless fruit—” Ramsay said blankly. “Cross-pollin—och, aye! Weel, I’ll be dommed.”

A modest disclaimer was no doubt on Macduff’s lips, but his eye was caught by the two comedians and he paused, cigar lifted, regarding them. The shorter of the two was now strutting in a wide circle, gesturing like one who smokes a cigar with great self-importance. His companion whooped wildly and beat him over the head.

“Tell me this, brother!” he cried in a shrill falsetto. “Who was that penguin I seen you with last night?”

“That wasn’t no penguin,” the strutter giggled happily. “That was a Venusian!” Simultaneously he gestured, and a spotlight sprang like a tent over Macduff’s shrinking head.

“What! What? *How dare you!*” screamed the outraged Macduff, recovering his voice at last amid ripples of laughter. “Libelous defamation of—of—I’ve never been so insulted in my life!” A repressed snort came from the Captain. The ruffled Macduff glared around furiously, rose to his full height and seized Ao’s hand.

“Ignore them,” Ramsay suggested in an unsteady voice. “After all, ye canna deny ye’re Venusian by species, Macduff, even though ye insist ye were hatched in Glasga’. Borrn, I mean. Aye, ye’re Scots by birth and humanoid by classification, are ye na? And no more a penguin than I’m a monkey.”

But Macduff was already marching toward the door. Ao trailed obediently after, casting back angelic looks at the Lesser Vegan male.

“Outrageous!” said Macduff.

“Come back, mon,” Ramsay called, suppressing a wild whoop. “Remember the abstract art of impairsonation. ’Tis a mere matter of semantics—”

His voice went unheard. Macduff’s back was an indignant ramrod. Towing Ao, his bottle-shaped figure stiff with dignity, Terence Lao-T’sse Macduff vanished irrevocably into the Lesser Vegan night, muttering low.

For Macduff, as should be evident by now to the meanest intellect,^[5] was not all he claimed to be. . . .

[5] (By which we mean the reader who skipped all the science, elementary as it was, in this chronicle.)

“Tush,” said Captain Ramsay, his face split by a grin, “that I should ha’ seen the day! Waiter! A whusky-and-soda—no more of this nosty champagne. I am celebrating a red-letter occasion, a phenomenon of nature. D’ye ken this is probably the first time in Macduff’s life that the unprincipled scoundrel has taken his departure without leaving some puir swindled sucker behind?”

“D’ye—eh? What’s that? What bill, ye daft loon? Pah, it was Macduff who insisted I be his guest tonight. Och, I—ah—eh—*Dom!*”

[The end of *The Voice of the Lobster* by Henry Kuttner]