

‘-We Also Walk Dogs’

‘General services - Miss Cornet speaking!’ She addressed the view screen with just the right balance between warm hospitable friendliness and impersonal efficiency. The screen flickered momentarily, then built up a stereo-picture of a dowager, fat and fretful, overdressed and underexercised.

‘Oh, my dear,’ said the image, ‘I’m so upset. I wonder if you can help me.’

‘I’m sure we can,’ Miss Cornet purred as she quickly estimated the cost of the woman’s gown and jewels (if real - she made a mental reservation) and decided that here was a client that could be profitable. ‘Now tell me your trouble. Your name first, if you please.’ She touched a button on the horseshoe desk which enclosed her, a button marked CREDIT DEPARTMENT.

‘But it’s all so involved,’ the image insisted. ‘Peter would go and break his hip.’ Miss Cornet immediately pressed the button marked MEDICAL. ‘I’ve told him that polo is dangerous. You’ve no idea, my dear, how a mother suffers. And just at this time, too. It’s so inconvenient -’

‘You wish us to attend him? Where is he now?’

‘Attend him? Why, how silly! The Memorial Hospital will do that. We’ve endowed them enough, I’m sure. It’s my dinner party I’m worried about. The Principessa will be so annoyed.’

The answer light from the Credit Department was blinking angrily. Miss Cornet headed her off. ‘Oh, I see. We’ll arrange it for you. Now, your name, please, and your address and present location.’

‘But don’t you know my name?’

‘One might guess,’ Miss Cornet diplomatically evaded, ‘but General Services always respects the privacy of its clients.’

‘Oh, yes, of course. How considerate. I am Mrs Peter van Hogbein Johnson.’ Miss Cornet controlled her reaction. No need to consult the Credit Department for this one. But its transparency flashed at once, rating AAA - unlimited. ‘But I don’t see what you can do,’ Mrs Johnson continued. ‘I can’t be two places at once.’

‘General Services likes difficult assignments,’ Miss Cornet assured her. ‘Now - if you will let me have the details . .

She wheedled and nudged the woman into giving a fairly coherent story. Her son, Peter III, a slightly shopworn Peter Pan, whose features were familiar to Grace Cornet through years of stereogravure, dressed in every conceivable costume affected by the richly idle in their pastimes, had been so thoughtless as to pick the afternoon before his mother’s most important social function to bung himself up - seriously. Furthermore, he had been so thoughtless as to do so half a continent away from his mater.

Miss Cornet gathered that Mrs Johnson’s technique for keeping her son safely under thumb required that she rush to his bedside at once, and, incidentally, to select his nurses. But her dinner party that evening represented the culmination of months of careful maneuvering. What was she to do?

Miss Cornet reflected to herself that the prosperity of General Services and her own very substantial income was based largely on the stupidity, lack of resourcefulness, and laziness of persons like this silly parasite, as she explained that General Services would see that her party was a smooth, social success while arranging for a portable full-length stereo screen to be installed in her drawing room in order that she might greet her guests and make her explanations while hurrying to her son’s side. Miss Cornet would see that a most adept social manager was placed in charge, one whose own position in society was irreproachable and whose connection with General Services was known to no one. With proper handling the disaster could be turned into a social triumph, enhancing Mrs Johnson’s reputation as a clever hostess and as a devoted mother.

‘Asky car will be at your door in twenty minutes,’ she added, as she cut in the circuit marked TRANSPORTATION, ‘to take you to the rocket port. One of our young men will be with it to get additional details from you on the way to the port. A compartment for yourself and a berth for your maid will be reserved on the 16:45 rocket for Newark. You may rest easy now. General Services will do your worrying.’

‘Oh, thank you, my dear. You’ve been such a help. You’ve no idea of the responsibilities a person in my position has.’

Miss Cornet cluck-clucked in professional sympathy while deciding that this particular girl was good for still more fees. ‘You do look exhausted, madame,’ she said anxiously. ‘Should I not have a masseuse accompany you on the trip? Is your health at all delicate? Perhaps a physician would be still better.’

‘How thoughtful you are!’

‘I’ll send both,’ Miss Cornet decided, and switched off, with a faint regret that she had not suggested a specially chartered rocket. Special service, not listed in the master price schedule, was supplied on a cost-plus basis. In cases like this ‘plus’ meant all the traffic would bear.

She switched to EXECUTIVE; an alert-eyed young man filled the screen. ‘Stand by for transcript, Steve,’ she said. ‘Special service, triple-A I’ve started the immediate service’

His eyebrows lifted. ‘Triple-A - bonuses?’

‘Undoubtedly. Give this old battleaxe the works - smoothly. And look - the client’s son is laid up in a hospital. Check on his nurses. If any one of them has even a shred of sex-appeal, fire her out and put a zombie in.’

‘Gotcha, kid. Start the transcript.’

She cleared her screen again; the ‘available-for-service’ light in her booth turned automatically to green, then almost at once turned red again and a new figure built up in her screen.

No stupid waster this. Grace Cornet saw a well-kempt man in his middle forties, flat-waisted, shrewd-eyed, hard but urbane. The cape of his formal morning clothes was thrown back with careful casualness. ‘General Services,’ she said. ‘Miss Cornet speaking.’

‘Ah, Miss Cornet,’ he began, ‘I wish to see your chief.’

‘Chief of switchboard?’

‘No, I wish to see the President of General Services.’

‘Will you tell me what it is you wish? Perhaps I can help you.’

‘Sorry, but I can’t make explanations. I must see him, at once.’

‘And General Services is sorry. Mr Clare is a very busy man; it is impossible to see him without appointment and without explanation.’

‘Are you recording?’

‘Certainly.’

‘Then please cease doing so.’

Above the console, in sight of the client, she switched off the recorder. Underneath the desk she switched it back on again. General Services was sometimes asked to perform illegal acts; its confidential employees took no chances. He fished something out from the folds of his chemise and held it out to her. The stereo effect made it appear as if he were reaching right out through the screen.

Trained features masked her surprise-it was the sigil of a planetary official, and the color of the badge was green.

‘I will arrange it,’ she said.

‘Very good. Can you meet me and conduct me in from the waiting room? In ten minutes?’

‘I will be there, Mster ... Mster -’ But he had cut off.

Grace Cornet switched to the switchboard chief and called for relief. Then, with her board cut out of service, she removed the spool bearing the clandestine record of the interview, stared at it as if undecided, and after a moment, dipped it into an opening in the top of the desk where a strong magnetic field wiped the unfixed patterns from the soft metal.

Agirl entered the booth from the rear. She was blond, decorative, and looked slow and a little dull. She was neither. `Okay, Grace,' she said. `Anything to turn over?'

`No. Clear board.'

“S matter? Sick?”

`No.' With no further explanation Grace left the booth, went on out past the other booths housing operators who handled unlisted services and into the large hail where the hundreds of catalogue operators worked. These had no such complex equipment as the booth which Grace had quitted. One enormous volume, a copy of the current price list of all of General Services' regular price-marked functions, and an ordinary look-and-listen enabled a catalogue operator to provide for the public almost anything the ordinary customer could wish for. If a call was beyond the scope of the catalogue it was transferred to the aristocrats of resourcefulness, such as Grace.

She took a short cut through the master files room, walked down an alleyway between dozens of chattering punched-card machines, and entered the foyer of that level. Apneumatic lift bounced her up to the level of the President's office. The President's receptionist did not stop her, nor, apparently, announce her. But Grace noted that the girl's hands were busy at the keys of her voder.

Switchboard operators do not walk into the offices of the president of a billion-credit corporation. But General Services was not organized like any other business on the planet. It was a sui generis business in which special training was a commodity to be listed, bought, and sold, but general resourcefulness and a readywit were all important. In its hierarchy Jay Clare the president, came first, his handyman, Saunders Francis, stood second, and the couple of dozen operators, of which Grace was one, who took calls on the unlimited switchboard came immediately after. They, and the field operators who handled the most difficult unclassified commissions - one group in fact, for the unlimited switchboard operators and the unlimited field operators swapped places indiscriminately.

After them came the tens of thousands of other employees spread over the planet, from the chief accountant, the head of the legal department, the chief clerk of the master files on down through the local managers. the catalogue operators to the last classified part time employee - stenographers prepared to take dictation when and where ordered, gigolos ready to fill an empty place at a dinner, the man who rented both armadillos and trained fleas.

Grace Cormet walked into Mr Clare's office. It was the only room in the building not cluttered up with electromechanical recording and communicating equipment. It contained nothing but his desk (bare), a couple of chairs, and a stereo screen, which, when not in use, seemed to be Krantz' famous painting `The Weeping Buddha'. The original was in fact in the sub-basement, a thousand feet below.

`Hello, Grace,' he greeted her, and shoved a piece of paper at her. `Tell me what you think of that. Sance says it's lousy.' Saunders Francis turned his mild pop eyes from his chief to Grace Cormet, but neither confirmed nor denied the statement.

Mss Cormet read:

CAN YOU AFFORD IT?

Can You Afford GENERAL SERVICES?

Can You Afford NOT to have General Services ? ? ? ??

In this jet-speed age can you afford to go on wasting time doing your own shopping, paying bills yourself, taking care of your living compartment?

We'll spank the baby and feed the cat.

We'll rent you a house and buy your shoes.

We'll write to your mother-in-law and add up your check stubs.

No job too large; No job too small - and all amazingly Cheap!

# GENERAL SERVICES

Dial H-U-R-R-Y - U-P

P.S. WE ALSO WALK DOGS

‘Well?’ said Clare.

‘Sance is right. It smells.’

‘Why?’

‘Too logical. Too verbose. No drive.’

‘What’s your idea of an ad to catch the marginal market?’

She thought a moment, then borrowed his stylus and wrote:

DO YOU WANT SOMEBODY MURDERED?

(Then don’t call GENERAL SERVICES)

But for any other job dial HURRY-UP - It pays!

P.S. We also walk dogs.

‘Mmmm ... well, maybe,’ Mr Clare said cautiously. ‘We’ll try it. Sance, give this a type B coverage, two weeks, North America, and let me know how it takes.’ Francis put it away in his kit, still with no change in his mild expression. ‘Now as I was saying -,’

‘Chief,’ broke in Grace Cornet. ‘I made an appointment for you in -’ She glanced at her watchfinger. ‘- exactly two minutes and forty seconds. Government man.’

‘Make him happy and send him away. I’m busy.’

‘Green Badge.’

He looked up sharply. Even Francis looked interested. ‘So?’ Clare remarked. ‘Got the interview transcript with you?’

‘I wiped it.’

‘You did? Well, perhaps you know best. I like your hunches. Bring him in.’

She nodded thoughtfully and left.

She found her man just entering the public reception room and escorted him past half a dozen gates whose guardians would otherwise have demanded his identity and the nature of his business. When he was seated in Clare’s office, he looked around. ‘May I speak with you in private, Mr Clare?’

‘Mr Francis is my right leg. You’ve already spoken to Miss Cornet.’

‘Very well.’ He produced the green sigil again and held it out. ‘No names are necessary just yet. I am sure of your discretion.’

The President of General Services sat up impatiently. ‘Let’s get down to business. You are Pierre Beaumont, Chief of Protocol. Does the administration want a job done?’

Beaumont was unperturbed by the change in pace. ‘You know me. Very well. We’ll get down to business. The government may want a job done. In any case our discussion must not be permitted to leak out -’

‘All of General Services relations are confidential.’

‘This is not confidential; this is secret.’ He paused.

‘I understand you,’ agreed Clare. ‘Go on.’

‘You have an interesting organization here, Mr Clare. I believe it is your boast that you will undertake any commission whatsoever - for a price.’

‘If it is legal.’

‘Ah, yes, of course. But legal is a word capable of interpretation. I admired the way your company handled the outfitting of the Second Plutonian Expedition. Some of your methods were, ah, ingenious.’

‘If you have any criticism of our actions in that case they are best made to our legal department through the usual channels.’

Beaumont pushed a palm in his direction. ‘Oh, no, Mr Clare - please! You misunderstand me. I was not criticising; I was admiring. Such resource! What a diplomat you would have made!’

‘Let’s quit fencing. What do you want?’ - Mr Beaumont pursed his lips. ‘Let us suppose that you had to entertain a dozen representatives of each intelligent race in this planetary system and you wanted to make each one of them completely comfortable and happy. Could you do it?’

Clare thought aloud. ‘Air pressure, humidity, radiation densities, atmosphere, chemistry, temperatures, cultural conditions - those things are all simple. But how about acceleration? We could use a centrifuge for the Jovians, but Martians and Titans - that’s another matter. There is no way to reduce earth-normal gravity. No, you would have to entertain them out in space, or on Luna. That makes it not our pigeon; we never give service beyond the stratosphere.’

Beaumont shook his head. ‘It won’t be beyond the stratosphere. You may take it as an absolute condition that you are to accomplish your results on the surface of the Earth.’

‘Why?’

‘Is it the custom of General Services to inquire why a client wants a particular type of service?’

‘No. Sorry.’

‘Quite all right. But you do need more information in order to understand what must be accomplished and why it must be secret. There will be a conference, held on this planet, in the near future - ninety days at the outside. Until the conference is called no ‘suspicion that it is to be held must be allowed to leak out. If the plans for it were to be anticipated in certain quarters, it would be useless to hold the conference at all. I suggest that you think of this conference as a roundtable of leading, ah, scientists of the system, about of the same size and makeup as the session of the Academy held on Mars last spring. You are to make all preparations for the entertainments of the delegates, but you are to conceal these preparations in the ramifications of your organization until needed. As for the details -,’

But Clare interrupted him. ‘You appear to have assumed that we will take on this commission. As you have explained it, it would involve us in a ridiculous failure. General Services does not like failures. You know and I know that low-gravity people cannot spend more than a few hours in high gravity without seriously endangering their health. Interplanetary gettogethers are always held on a low-gravity planet and always will be.’

‘Yes,’ answered Beaumont patiently, ‘they always have been. Do you realize the tremendous diplomatic handicap which Earth and Venus labor under in consequence?’

‘I don’t get it.’

‘It isn’t necessary that you should. Political psychology is not your concern. Take it for granted that it does and that the Administration is determined that this conference shall take place

on Earth.'

'Whynot Luna?'

Beaumont shook his head. 'Not the same thing at all. Even though we administer it, Luna City is a treaty port. Not the same thing, psychologically.'

Clare shook his head. 'Mr Beaumont, I don't believe that you understand the nature of General Services, even as I fail to appreciate the subtle requirements of diplomacy. We don't work miracles and we don't promise to. We are just the handyman of the last century, gone speed-lined and corporate. We are the latter day equivalent of the old servant class, but we are not Aladdin's genie. We don't even maintain research laboratories in the scientific sense. We simply make the best possible use of modern advances in communications and organization to do what already can be done.' He waved a hand at the far wall, on which there was cut in intaglio the time-honored trademark of the business - a Scottie dog, pulling against a leash and sniffing at a post. 'There is the spirit of the sort of work we do. We walk dogs for people who are too busy to walk 'em themselves. My grandfather worked his way through college walking dogs. I'm still walking them. I don't promise miracles, nor monkey with politics.'

Beaumont fitted his fingertips carefully together. 'You walk dogs for a fee. But of course you do - you walk my pair. Five minim-credits seems rather cheap.'

'It is. But a hundred thousand dogs, twice a day, soon runs up the gross take.'

'The "take" for walking this "dog" would be considerable.'

'How much?' asked Francis. It was his first sign of interest. Beaumont turned his eyes on him. 'My dear sir, the outcome of this, ah, roundtable should make a difference of literally hundreds of billions of credits to this planet. We will not bind the mouth of the kine that treads the corn, if you pardon the figure of speech.'

'How much?'

'Would thirty percent over cost be reasonable?'

Francis shook his head. 'Might not come to much.'

'Well, I certainly won't haggle. Suppose we leave it up to you gentlemen - your pardon, Miss Cornett! - to decide what the service is worth. I think I can rely on your planetary and racial patriotism to make it reasonable and proper.'

Francis sat back, said nothing, but looked pleased.

'Wait a minute,' protested Clare. 'We haven't taken this job.'

'We have discussed the fee,' observed Beaumont.

Clare looked from Francis to Grace Cornet, then examined his fingernails. 'Give me twenty-four hours to find out whether or not it is possible,' he said finally, 'and I'll tell you whether or not we will walk your dog.'

'I feel sure,' answered Beaumont, 'that you will.' He gathered his cape about him.

'Okay, masterminds,' said Clare bitterly, 'you've bought it.'

'I've been wanting to get back to field work,' said Grace.

'Put a crew on everything but the gravity problem,' suggested Francis. 'It's the only catch. The rest is routine.'

'Certainly,' agreed Clare, 'but you had better deliver on that. If you can't, we are out some mighty expensive preparations that we will never be paid for. Who do you want? Grace?'

'I suppose so,' answered Francis. 'She can count up to ten.'

Grace Cornet looked at him coldly. 'There are times, Sance Francis, when I regret having married you.'

'Keep your domestic affairs out of the office,' warned Clare. 'Where do you start?'

'Let's find out who knows most about gravitation,' decided Francis. 'Grace, better get Doctor Krathwohl on the screen.'

'Right,' she acknowledged, as she stepped to the stereo controls. 'That's the beauty about this business. You don't have to know anything; you just have to know where to find out.'

Dr Krathwohl was a part of the permanent staff of General Services. He had no assigned duties. The company found it worthwhile to support him in comfort while providing him with an unlimited drawing account for scientific journals and for attendance at the meetings which the learned hold from time to time. Dr Krathwohl lacked the single-minded drive of the research scientist; he was a dilettante by nature.

Occasionally they asked him a question. It paid.

'Oh, hello, my dear!' Doctor Krathwohl's gentle face smiled out at her from the screen. 'Look - I've just come across the most amusing fact in the latest issue of Nature. It throws a most interesting sidelight on Brownlee's theory of - 'Just a second, Doc,' she interrupted. 'I'm kinda in a hurry.'

'Yes, my dear?'

'Who knows the most about gravitation?'

'In what way do you mean that? Do you want an astrophysicist, or do you want to deal with the subject from a standpoint of theoretical mechanics? Farquarson would be the man in the first instance, I suppose.'

'I want to know what makes it tick.'

'Field theory, eh? In that case you don't want Farquarson. He is a descriptive ballistician, primarily. Dr Julian's work in that subject is authoritative, possibly definitive.'

'Where can we get hold of him?'

'Oh, but you can't. He died last year, poor fellow. A great loss.'

Grace refrained from telling him how great a loss and asked, 'Who stepped into his shoes?'

'Who what? Oh, you were jesting! I see. You want the name of the present top man in field theory. I would say O'Neil.'

'Where is he?'

'I'll have to find out. I know him slightly - a difficult man.'

'Do, please. In the meantime who could coach us a bit on what it's all about?'

'Why don't you try young Carson, in our engineering department? He was interested in such things before he took a job with us. Intelligent chap - I've had many an interesting talk with him.'

'I'll do that. Thanks, Doc. Call the Chief's office as soon as you have located O'Neil. Speed.' She cut off.

Carson agreed with Krathwohl's opinion, but looked dubious. 'O'Neil is arrogant and non-cooperative. I've worked under him. But he undoubtedly knows more about field theory and space structure than any other living man.'

Carson had been taken into the inner circle, the problem explained to him. He had admitted that he saw no solution. 'Maybe we are making something hard out of this,' Clare suggested. 'I've got some ideas. Check me if I'm wrong, Carson.'

'Go ahead, Chief.'

'Well, the acceleration of gravity is produced by the proximity of a mass - right? Earth-normal gravity being produced by the proximity of the Earth. Well, what would be the effect of placing a large mass just over a particular point on the Earth's surface. Would not that serve to counteract the pull of the Earth?'

'Theoretically, yes. But it would have to be a damn big mass.'

'No matter.'

'You don't understand, Chief. To offset fully the pull of the Earth at a given point would require another planet the size of the Earth in contact with the Earth at that point. Of course since you don't want to cancel the pull completely, but simply to reduce it, you gain a certain advantage through using a smaller mass which would have its center of gravity closer to the point in question than would be the center of gravity of the Earth. Not enough, though. While the attraction builds up inversely as the square of the distance - in this case the half-diameter - the mass and the consequent attraction drops off directly as the cube of the diameter.'

'What does that give us?'

Carson produced a slide rule and figured for a few moments. He looked up. 'I'm almost afraid to answer. You would need a good-sized asteroid, of lead, to get anywhere at all.'

'Asteroids have been moved before this.'

'Yes, but what is to hold it up? No, Chief, there is no conceivable source of power, or means of applying it, that would enable you to hang a big planetoid over a particular spot on the Earth's surface and keep it there.'

'Well, it was a good idea while it lasted,' Clare said pensively. Grace's smooth brow had been wrinkled as she followed the discussion. Now she put in, 'I gathered that you could use an extremely heavy small mass more effectively. I seem to have read somewhere about some stuff that weighs tons per cubic inch.'

'The core of dwarf stars,' agreed Carson. 'All we would need for that would be a ship capable of going light-years in a few days, some way to mine the interior of a star, and a new space-time theory.'

'Oh, well, skip it.'

'Wait a minute,' Francis observed. 'Magnetism is a lot like gravity, isn't it?'

'Well - yes.'

'Could there be some way to maqnetize these gazebos from the little planets? Maybe something odd about their body chemistry?'

'Nice idea,' agreed Carson, 'but while their internal economy is odd, it's not that odd. They are still organic.'

'I suppose not. If pigs had wings they'd be pigeons.'

The stereo annunciator blinked. Doctor Krathwohl announced that O'Neil could be found at his summer home in Portage, Wisconsin. He had not screened him and would prefer not to do so, unless the Chief insisted.

Clare thanked him and turned back to the others. 'We are wasting time,' he announced. 'After years in this business we should know better than to try to decide technical questions. I'm not a physicist and I don't give a damn how gravitation works. That's O'Neil's business. And Carson's. Carson, shoot up to Wisconsin and get O'Neil on the job.'

'Me?'

'You. You're an operator for this job - with pay to match. Bounce over to the port - there will be a rocket and a credit facsimile waiting for you. You ought to be able to raise ground in seven or eight minutes.'

Carson blinked. 'How about my job here?'

'The engineering department will be told, likewise the accounting. Get going.'

Without replying Carson headed for the door. By the time he reached it he was hurrying.

Carson's departure left them with nothing to do until he reported back - nothing to do, that is, but to start action on the manifold details of reproducing the physical and cultural details of three other planets and four major satellites, exclusive of their characteristic surface-normal gravitational accelerations. The assignment, although new, presented no real difficulties - to General Services. Somewhere there were persons who knew all the answers to these matters. The vast loose organization called General Services was geared to find them, hire them, put them to work. Any of the unlimited operators and a considerable percent of the catalogue operators could take such an assignment and handle it without excitement nor hurry.

Francis called in one unlimited operator. He did not even bother to select him, but took the first available on the ready panel - they were all 'Can do!' people. He explained in detail the assignment, then promptly forgot about it. It would be done, and on time. The punched-card machines would chatter a bit louder, stereo screens would flash, and bright young people in all parts of the Earth would drop what they were doing and dig out the specialists who would do the actual work.

He turned back to Clare, who said, 'I wish I knew what Beaumont is up to. Conference of scientists - phooey!'

'I thought you weren't interested in politics, Jay.'

'I'm not. I don't give a hoot in hell about politics, interplanetary or otherwise, except as it affects this business. But if I knew what was being planned, we might be able to squeeze a bigger cut out of it.'

'Well,' put in Grace, 'I think you can take it for granted that the real heavy-weights from all the planets are about to meet and divide Gaul into three parts.'

'Yes, but who gets cut out?'

'Mars, I suppose.'

'Seems likely. With a bone tossed to the Venerians. In that case we might speculate a little in Pan-Jovian Trading Corp.'

'Easy, son, easy,' Francis warned. 'Do that, and you might get people interested. This is a hush-hush job.'

'I guess you're right. Still, keep your eyes open. There ought to be some way to cut a slice of pie before this is over.'

Grace Cornet's telephone buzzed. She took it out of her pocket and said, 'Yes?'

'A Mrs Hogbein Johnson wants to speak to you.'

'You handle her. I'm off the board.'

'She won't talk to anyone but you.'

'All right. Put her on the Chief's stereo, but stay in parallel yourself. You'll handle it after I've talked to her.'

The screen came to life, showing Mrs Johnson's fleshy face alone, framed in the middle of the screen in flat picture. 'Oh, Mss Cornet,' she moaned, 'some dreadful mistake has been made. There is no stereo on this ship.'

'It will be installed in Cincinnati. That will be in about twenty minutes.'

'You are sure?'

'Quite sure.'

'Oh, thank you! It's such a relief to talk with you. Do you know, I'm thinking of making you my social secretary.'

'Thank you,' Grace said evenly, 'but I am under contract.'

'But how stupidly tiresome! You can break it.'

'No, I'm sorry Mrs Johnson. Good-bye.' She switched off the screen and spoke again into her telephone. 'Tell Accounting to double her fee. And I won't speak with her again.' She cut off and shoved the little instrument savagely back into her pocket. 'Social secretary!'

It was after dinner and Clare had retired to his living apartment before Carson called back. Francis took the call in his own office.

'Any luck?' he asked, when Carson's image had built up.

'Quite a bit. I've seen O'Neil.'

'Well? Will he do it?'

'You mean can he do it, don't you?'

'Well - can he?'

'Now that is a funny thing - I didn't think it was theoretically possible. But after talking with him, I'm convinced that it is. O'Neil has a new outlook on field theory - stuff he's never published. The man is a genius.'

'I don't care,' said Francis, 'whether he's-a genius or a Mongolian idiot - can he build some sort of a gravity thinnerouter?'

'I believe he can. I really do believe he can.'

'Fine. You hired him?'

'No. That's the hitch. That's why I called back. It's like this: I happened to catch him in a mellow mood, and because we had worked together once before and because I had not aroused his ire quite as frequently as his other assistants he invited me to stay for dinner. We talked about a lot of things (you can't hurry him) and I broached the proposition. It interested him mildly - the idea, I mean; not the proposition - and he discussed the theory with me, or, rather, at me. But he won't work on it.'

'Why not? You didn't offer him enough money. I guess I'd better tackle him.'

'No, Mr Francis, no. You don't understand. He's not interested in money. He's independently wealthy and has more than he needs for his research, or anything else he wants. But just at present he is busy on wave mechanics theory and he just won't be bothered with anything else.'

'Did you make him realize it was important?'

'Yes and no. Mostly no. I tried to, but there isn't anything important to him but what he wants. It's a sort of intellectual snobbishness. Other people simply don't count.'

'All right,' said Francis. 'You've done well so far. Here's what you do: After I switch off, you call EXECUTIVE and make a transcript of everything you can remember of what he said about gravitational theory. We'll hire the next best men, feed it to them, and see if it gives them any ideas to work on. In the meantime I'll put a crew to work on the details of Dr O'Neil's background. He'll have a weak point somewhere; it's just a matter of finding it. Maybe he's keeping a woman somewhere -

'He's long past that.'

- or maybe he has a by-blow stashed away somewhere. We'll see. I want you to stay there in Portage. Since you can't hire him, maybe you can persuade him to hire you. You're our pipeline, I want it kept open. We've got to find something he wants, or something he is afraid of.'

'He's not afraid of anything. I'm positive about that.'

'Then he wants something. If it's not money, or women, it's something else. It's a law of nature.'

'I doubt it,' Carson replied slowly. 'Say! Did I tell you about his hobby?'

'No. What is it?'

'It's china. In particular, Ming china. He has the best collection in the world, I'd guess. But I know what he wants!'

'Well, spill it, man, spill it. Don't be dramatic.'

'It's a little china dish, or bowl, about four inches across and two inches high. It's got a Chinese name that means "Flower of Forgetfulness".'

'Hmmm - doesn't seem significant. You think he wants it pretty bad?'

'I know he does. He has a solid colorgraph of it in his study, where he can look at it. But it hurts him to talk about it.'

'Find out who owns it and where it is.'

'I know. British Museum. That's why he can't buy it.'

'So?' mused Francis. 'Well, you can forget it. Carry on.'

Clare came down to Francis' office and the three talked it over. 'I guess we'll need Beaumont on this,' was his comment when he had heard the report. 'It will take the Government to get anything loose from the British Museum.' Francis looked morose. 'Well - what's eating you? What's wrong with that?'

'I know,' offered Grace. 'You remember the treaty under which Great Britain entered the planetary confederation?'

'I was never much good at history.'

'It comes to this: I doubt if the planetary government can touch anything that belongs to the Museum without asking the British Parliament.'

'Why not? Treaty or no treaty, the planetary government is sovereign. That was established in the Brazilian Incident.'

'Yeah, sure. But it could cause questions to be asked in the House of Commons and that would lead to the one thing Beaumont wants to avoid at all costs - publicity.'

'Okay. What do you propose?'

'I'd say that Sance and I had better slide over to England and find out just how tight they have the "Flower of Forgetfulness" nailed down - and who does the nailing and what his weaknesses are.'

Clare's eyes travelled past her to Francis, who was looking blank in the fashion that indicated assent to his intimates. 'Okay,' agreed Clare, 'it's your baby. Taking a special?'

'No, we've got time to get the midnight out of New York. Bye-bye.'

'Bye. Call me tomorrow.' -

When Grace screened the Chief the next day he took one look at her and exclaimed, 'Good Grief, kid! What have you done to your hair?'

'We located the guy,' she explained succinctly. 'His weakness is blondes.'

'You've had your skin bleached, too.'

'Of course. How do you like it?'

'It's stupendous - though I preferred you the way you were. But what does Sance think of it?'

He doesn't mind - it's business. But to get down to cases, Chief, there isn't much to report. This will have to be a lefthanded job. In the ordinary way, it would take an earthquake to get anything out of that tomb.'

'Don't do anything that can't be fixed!'

'You know me, Chief. I won't get you in trouble. But it will be expensive.'

'Of course.'

'That's all for now. I'll screen tomorrow.'

She was a brunette again the next day. 'What is this?' asked Clare. 'Amasquerade?'

'I wasn't the blonde he was weak for,' she explained, 'but I found the one he was interested in.'

'Did it work out?'

'I think it will. Sance is having a facsimile integrated now. With luck, we'll see you tomorrow.'

They showed up the next day, apparently empty handed. 'Well?' said Clare, 'well?'

'Seal the place up, Jay,' suggested Francis. 'Then we'll talk.' Clare flipped a switch controlling an interference shield which rendered his office somewhat more private than a coffin. 'How about it?' he demanded. 'Did you get it?'

'Show it to him, Grace.'

Grace turned her back, fumbled at her clothing for a moment, then turned around and placed it gently on the Chief's desk.

It was not that it was beautiful - it was beauty. Its subtle simple curve had no ornamentation, decoration would have sullied it. One spoke softly in its presence, for fear a sudden noise would shatter it.

Clare reached out to touch it, then thought better of it and drew his hand back. But he bent his head over it and stared down into it. It was strangely hard to focus - to allocate - the bottom of the bowl. It seemed as if his sight sank deeper and ever deeper into it, as if he were drowning in a pool of light.

He jerked up his head and blinked. 'God,' he whispered, 'God - I didn't know such things existed.'

He looked at Grace and looked away to Francis. Francis had tears in his eyes, or perhaps his own were blurred.

'Look, Chief,' said Francis. 'Look - couldn't we just keep it and call the whole thing off?'

'There's no use talking about it any longer,' said Francis wearily. 'We can't keep it, Chief. I shouldn't have suggested it and you shouldn't have listened to me. Let's screen O'Neil.'

'We might just wait another day before we do anything about it,' Clare ventured. His eyes returned yet again to the 'Flower of Forgetfulness'.

Grace shook her head. 'No good. It will just be harder tomorrow. I know.' She walked decisively over to the stereo and manipulated the controls.

O'Neil was annoyed at being disturbed and twice annoyed that they had used the emergency signal to call him to his disconnected screen.

'What is this?' he demanded. 'What do you mean by disturbing a private citizen when he has disconnected? Speak up-and it had better be good, or, so help me, I'll sue you!'

'We want you to do a little job of work for us, Doctor,' Clare began evenly.

'What!' O'Neil seemed almost too surprised to be angry. 'Do you mean to stand there, sir, and tell me that you have invaded the privacy of my home to ask me to work for you?'

'The pay will be satisfactory to you.'

O'Neil seemed to be counting up to ten before answering. 'Sir,' he said carefully, 'there are men in the world who seem to think they can buy anything, or anybody. I grant you that they have much to go on in that belief. But I am not for sale. Since you seem to be one of those persons, I will do my best to make this interview expensive for you. You will hear from my attorneys. Good night!'

'Wait a moment,' Clare said urgently. 'I believe that you are interested in china -,'

'What if I am?'

'Show it to him, Grace.' Grace brought the 'Flower of Forgetfulness' up near the screen, handling it carefully, reverently. O'Neil said nothing. He leaned forward and stared. He seemed to be about to climb through the screen. 'Where did you get it?' he said at last.

'That doesn't matter.'

'I'll buy it from you - at your own price.'

'It's not for sale. But you may have it - if we can reach an agreement.'

O'Neil eyed him. 'It's stolen property.'

'You're mistaken. Nor will you find anyone to take an interest in such a charge. Now about this job -,'

O'Neil pulled his eyes away from the bowl. 'What is it you wish me to do?'

Clare explained the problem to him. When he had concluded O'Neil shook his head. 'That's ridiculous,' he said.

'We have reason to feel that is theoretically possible.'

'Oh, certainly! It's theoretically possible to live forever, too. But no one has ever managed it.'

'We think you can do it.'

'Thank you for nothing. Say!' O'Neil stabbed a finger at him out of the screen. 'You set that young pup Carson on me!'

'He was acting under my orders.'

'Then, sir, I do not like your manners.'

'How about the job? And this?' Clare indicated the bowl. O'Neil gazed at it and chewed his whiskers. 'Suppose,' he said, at last, 'I make an honest attempt, to the full extent of my ability, to supply what you want - and I fail.'

Clare shook his head. 'We pay only for results. Oh, your salary, of course, but not this. This is a bonus in addition to your salary, if you are successful.'

O'Neil seemed about to agree, then said suddenly, 'You may be fooling me with a colorgraph. I can't tell through this damned screen.'

Clare shrugged. 'Come and see for yourself.'

'I shall. I will. Stay where you are. Where are you? Damn it, sir, what's your name?'

He came storming in two hours later. 'You've tricked me! The "Flower" is still in England. I've investigated. I'll ... I'll punish you, sir, with my own two hands.'

'See for yourself,' answered Clare. He stepped aside, so that his body no longer obscured O'Neil's view of Clare's desk top.

They let him look. They respected his need for quiet and let him look. After a long time he turned to them, but did not speak.

‘Well?’ asked Clare.

‘I’ll build your damned gadget,’ he said huskily. ‘I figured out an approach on the way here.’

Beaumont came in person to call the day before the first session of the conference. ‘Just a social call, Mr Clare,’ he stated. ‘I simply wanted to express to you my personal appreciation for the work you have done. And to deliver this.’ ‘This’ turned out to be a draft on the Bank Central for the agreed fee. Clare accepted it, glanced at it, nodded, and placed it on his desk.

‘I take it, then,’ he remarked, ‘that the Government is satisfied with the service rendered.’

‘That is putting it conservatively,’ Beaumont assured him. ‘To be perfectly truthful, I did not think you could do so much. You seem to have thought of everything. The Callistan delegation is out now, riding around and seeing the sights in one of the little tanks you had prepared. They are delighted. Confidentially, I think we can depend on their vote in the coming sessions.’

‘Gravity shields working all right, eh?’

‘Perfectly. I stepped into their sightseeing tank before we turned it over to them. I was as light as the proverbial feather. Too light - I was very nearly spacesick.’ He smiled in wry amusement. ‘I entered the Jovian apartments, too. That was quite another matter.’

‘Yes, it would be,’ Clare agreed. ‘Two and a half times normal weight is oppressive to say the least.’

‘It’s a happy ending to a difficult task. I must be going. Oh, yes, one other little matter - I’ve discussed with Doctor O’Neil the possibility that the Administration may be interested in other uses for his new development. In order to simplify the matter it seems desirable that you provide me with a quitclaim to the O’Neil effect from General Services.’

Clare gazed thoughtfully at the ‘Weeping Buddha’ and chewed his thumb. ‘No,’ he said slowly, ‘no. I’m afraid that would be difficult.’

‘Why not?’ asked Beaumont. ‘It avoids the necessity of adjudication and attendant waste of time. We are prepared to recognize your service and recompense you.’

‘Hmmm. I don’t believe you fully understand the situation, Mr Beaumont. There is a certain amount of open territory between our contract with Doctor O’Neil and your contract with us. You asked of us certain services and certain chattels with which to achieve that service. We provided them - for a fee. All done. But our contract with Doctor O’Neil made him a full-time employee for the period of his employment. His research results and the patents embodying them are the property of General Services.’

‘Really?’ said Beaumont. ‘Doctor O’Neil has a different impression.’

‘Doctor O’Neil is mistaken. Seriously, Mr Beaumont - you asked us to develop a siege gun, figuratively speaking, to shoot a gnat. Did you expect us, as businessmen, to throw away the siege gun after one shot?’

‘No, I suppose not. What do you propose to do?’

‘We expect to exploit the gravity modulator commercially. I fancy we could get quite a good price for certain adaptations of it on Mars.’

‘Yes. Yes, I suppose you could. But to be brutally frank, Mr Clare, I am afraid that is impossible. It is a matter of imperative public policy that this development be limited to terrestrials. In fact, the administration would find it necessary to intervene and make it government monopoly.’

‘Have you considered how to keep O’Neil quiet?’

‘In view of the change in circumstances, no. What is your thought?’

‘A corporation, in which he would hold a block of stock and be president. One of our bright young men would be chairman of the board.’ Clare thought of Carson. ‘There would be stock enough to go around,’ he added, and watched Beaumont’s face.

Beaumont ignored the bait. ‘I suppose that this corporation would be under contract to the Government - its sole customer?’

‘That is the idea.’

‘Mmmm ... yes, it seems feasible. Perhaps I had better speak with Doctor O’Neil.’

‘Help yourself.’

Beaumont got O’Neil on the screen and talked with him in low tones. Or, more properly, Beaumont’s tones were low. O’Neil displayed a tendency to blast the microphone. Clare sent for Francis and Grace and explained to them what had taken place.

Beaumont turned away from the screen. ‘The Doctor wishes to speak with you, Mr Clare.’

O’Neil looked at him frigidly. ‘What is this claptrap I’ve had to listen to, sir? What’s this about the O’Neil effect being your property?’

‘It was in your contract, Doctor. Don’t you recall?’

‘Contract! I never read the damned thing. But I can tell you this: I’ll take you to court. I’ll tie you in knots before I’ll let you make a fool of me that way.’

‘Just a moment, Doctor, please!’ Clare soothed. ‘We have no desire to take advantage of a mere legal technicality, and no one disputes your interest. Let me outline what I had in mind -’ He ran rapidly over the plan. O’Neil listened, but his expression was still unmollified at the conclusion.

‘I’m not interested,’ he said gruffly. ‘So far as I am concerned the Government can have the whole thing. And I’ll see to it.’

‘I had not mentioned one other condition,’ added Clare.

‘Don’t bother.’

‘I must. This will be just a matter of agreement between gentlemen, but it is essential. You have custody of the “Flower of Forgetfulness”.’

O’Neil was at once on guard. ‘What do you mean, “custody”? I own it. Understand me - own it.’

“Own it,” repeated Clare. ‘Nevertheless, in return for the concessions we are making you with respect to your contract, we want something in return.’

‘What?’ asked O’Neil. The mention of the bowl had upset his confidence.

‘You own it and you retain possession of it. But I want your word that I, or Mr Francis, or Miss Cornet, may come look at it from time to time - frequently.’

O’Neil looked unbelieving. ‘You mean that you simply want to come to look at it?’

‘That’s all.’

‘Simply to enjoy it?’

‘That’s right.’

O’Neil looked at him with new respect. ‘I did not understand you before, Mr Clare. I apologize. As for the corporation nonsense - do as you like. I don’t care. You and Mr Francis and Miss Cornet may come to see the “Flower” whenever you like. You have my word.’

‘Thank you, Doctor O’Neil - for all of us.’ He switched off as quickly as could be managed gracefully.

Beaumont was looking at Clare with added respect, too. ‘I think,’ he said, ‘that the next time I shall not interfere with your handling of the details. I’ll take my leave, Adieu, gentlemen - and Miss Cornet.’

When the door had rolled down behind him Grace remarked, ‘That seems to polish it off.’



‘Yes,’ said Clare. ‘We’ve “walked his dog” for him; O’Neil has what he wants; Beaumont got what he wanted, and more besides.’

‘Just what is he after?’

‘I don’t know, but I suspect that he would like to be first president of the Solar System Federation, if and when there is such a thing. With the aces we have dumped in his lap, he might make it. Do you realize the potentialities of the O’Neil effect?’

‘Vaguely,’ said Francis.

‘Have you thought about what it will do to space navigation? Or the possibilities it adds in the way of colonization? Or its recreational uses? There’s a fortune in that alone.’

‘What do we get out of it?’

‘What do we get out of it? Money, old son. Gobs and gobs of money. There’s always money in giving people what they want.’ He glanced up at the Scottie dog trademark.

‘Money,’ repeated Francis. ‘Yeah, I suppose so.’

‘Anyhow,’ added Grace, ‘we can always go look at the “Flower”.’