

"I mean, do they give you any trouble?"

"How could they give me trouble? If they don't clean their cells, they don't eat. What else they do makes no difference to me. Which one you want to see?"

Pulcher took the letter from Judge Pegrin out of his pocket and examined the list of his new clients. Avery Foltis, Walter Hopgood, Jimmy Lasser, Sam Schlesterman, Bourke Smith, Madeleine Gaultry. None of the names meant anything to him.

"I'll take Foltis first," he guessed, and followed the turnkey to a cell.

The Foltis boy was homely, pimply and belligerent. "Cripes," he complained shrilly, "are you the best they can do for me?"

Pulcher took his time answering. The boy was not very lovable; but, he reminded himself, there was a fifty-dollar retainer from the county for each one of these defendants, and conditions being what they were, Pulcher could easily grow to love three hundred dollars.

"Don't give me a hard time," he said amiably. "I may not be the best lawyer in the Galaxy, but I'm the one you've got."

"Cripes."

"Tell me what happened. All I know is that you're accused of conspiracy to commit a felony, specifically an act of kidnapping a minor child."

"Yeah, that's it," the boy agreed.

"You want to know what happened?" He bounced to his feet, then began acting out his story. "We were starving to death, see?" Arms clutched pathetically around his belly. "The Icicle Works closed down. Cripes, I walked the streets nearly a year, looking for something to do. Anything." Marching in place. "I even rented out for a while, but — that didn't work out." Scowling and fingering his pimply face.

Pulcher nodded. Even a body-renter had to have some qualifications. The most important one was a good-looking, disease-free, strong and agile physique.

"So we got together and decided, the hell, there was money to be made hooking old Swinburne's son. So I guess we talked too much. They caught us." The boy gripped his wrists, like manacles.

Pulcher asked a few more questions, and then interviewed two of the other boys. He learned nothing he hadn't already known. The six youngsters had planned a reasonably competent kidnapping, and talked about it where they could be heard, and if there was any hope of getting them off, it did not make itself visible to their court-appointed attorney.

PULCHER left the jail and went up the street to see Charley Dickon.

The committeeman was watch-

ing a three-way wrestling match on a flickery old TV set.

"How'd it go, Milo?" he greeted the lawyer, keeping his eyes on the wrestling.

Pulcher said: "I'm not going to get them off, Charley."

"Oh? Too bad." Dickon looked away from the set for the first time. "Why not?"

"They admitted the whole thing. Handwriting made the Hopgood boy on the ransom note. The others had fingerprints and cell-types all over the place. And besides, they talked too much."

Dickon said with a spark of interest: "What about Tim Lasser's son?"

"Sorry."

The committeeman looked thoughtful.

"I can't help it, Charley," the lawyer protested.

The kids hadn't been even routinely careful. When they planned to kidnap the son of the mayor, they had talked it over, quite loudly, in a juke joint. The waitress habitually taped everything that went on in her booths. Pulcher suspected a thriving blackmail business, but that didn't change the fact that there was enough on tape to show premeditation.

The kids had picked the mayor's son up at school. He had come with them perfectly willingly — the girl, Madeleine Gaultry, had been a babysitter for him. The boy was

only three years old, but he couldn't miss an easy identification like that. And there was more: the ransom note had been sent special delivery, and young Foltis had asked the post office clerk to put the postage on instead of using the automatic meter. The clerk remembered the pimply face very well indeed.

"You'd think they wanted to get caught," Pulcher complained.

The committeeman sat politely while Pulcher explained, though it was obvious that most of his attention was on the snowy TV screen. "Well, Milo, that's the way it goes. Anyway, you got a fast three hundred, hey? And that reminds me."

Pulcher's guard went up.

"Here," said the committeeman, rummaging through his desk. He brought out a couple of pale green tickets. "You ought to get out and meet more people. The Party's having its annual Chester A. Arthur Day Dinner next week. Bring your girl."

"I don't have a girl," said Pulcher.

"Oh, you'll find one. Fifteen dollars per," the committeeman said, handing over the tickets.

Pulcher sighed and paid. Well, that was what kept the wheels oiled. And Dickon had suggested his name to Judge Pegrin. Thirty dollars out of three hundred still left him a better week's pay than he had had since the Icicle Works folded.

The committeeman carefully folded the bills into his pocket, with Pulcher watching gloomily. Dickon was looking prosperous, all right. There was easily a couple of thousand in that wad. Pulcher supposed that Dickon had been caught along with everybody else on the planet when the Icicle Works folded. Nearly everybody owned stock in it, and certainly Charley Dickon, whose politician brain got him a piece of nearly every major enterprise on Altair Nine — a big clump of stock in the Tourist Agency, a sizable share of the Mining Syndicate — certainly he would have had at least a few thousand in the Icicle Works. But it hadn't hurt him much.

Dickon said, "None of my business, but why don't you take that girl — that Madeleine Gaultry?"

"She's in jail."

"Get her out. Here." He tossed over a bondsman's card.

Pulcher pocketed it with a scowl. That would cost another forty bucks, he estimated; the bondsman would naturally be one of Dickon's club members.

Pulcher noticed that Dickon was looking strangely puzzled. "What's the matter?"

"Like I say, it's none of my business. But I don't get it. You and the girl have a fight?"

"Fight? I don't even know her."

"She said you did."

"Me? No. I don't know . . . Wait

a minute! Is Gaultry her married name? Did she used to be at the Icicle Works?"

Dickon nodded. "Didn't you see her?"

"I didn't get to the women's wing at the jail. I—" Pulcher stood up, oddly flustered. "Say, I'd better run along, Charley. This bondsman, he's open now? Well—" He stopped babbling and left.

Madeleine Gaultry! Only her name had been Madeleine Cossett. It was funny that she should turn up now — in jail and, Pulcher abruptly realized, likely to stay there indefinitely. But he put that thought out of his mind. First he wanted to see her.

THE snow was turning lavender now. Pink snow, green snow, lavender snow — any color of the pastel rainbow. It was nothing unusual. That was what had made Altair Nine worth colonizing in the first place.

Now, of course, it was only a way of getting your feet wet.

Pulcher waited impatiently at the turnkey's office while the turnkey shambled over to the women's wing and, slowly, returned with the girl. She and Pulcher looked at each other. She didn't speak. Pulcher opened his mouth, closed it, and silently took her by the elbow. He steered her out of the jail and hailed a cab. That was an extravagance, but he didn't care.

Madeleine shrank into a corner of the cab, looking at him out of blue eyes that were large and shadowed. She wasn't hostile. She wasn't afraid. She was only remote. "Hungry?"

She nodded.

Pulcher gave the cab driver the name of a restaurant. Another extravagance, but he didn't mind the prospect of cutting down on lunches. He had had enough practice at it.

A year before, this girl had been the prettiest secretary in the pool at the Icicle Works. He dated her half a dozen times. There was a company rule against it, but the first time it was a kind of school-boy's prank, breaking the headmaster's regulations, and the other times it was a driving need. Then—

Then came the Gumpert Process.

That was the killer, the Gumpert Process. Whoever Gumpert was. All anybody at the Icicle Works knew was that someone named Gumpert (back on Earth, one rumor said; another said he was a colonist in the Sirian system) had come up with a cheap, practical method of synthesizing the rainbow antibiotic molds that floated free in Altair Nine's air, coloring its precipitation and more important, providing a priceless export commodity. The Galaxy had depended on those rainbow molds, shipped in frozen suspensions to every inhabited planet by Altamycin, Inc. — the proper name for what everyone on Altair Nine called the Icicle Works.

When the Gumpert Process came along, suddenly the demand vanished.

Worse, the jobs vanished.

Pulcher had been on the corporation's legal staff, with an office of his own and a faint hint of a vice-presidency someday. He was out. The stenos in the pool, all but two or three of the five hundred who once had handled the correspondence and the bills, they were out. The shipping clerks in the warehouse were out, the pumphands at the settling tanks were out, the freezer attendants were out. Everyone was out. The plant closed down.

There were more than fifty tons of frozen antibiotics in storage and, though there might still be a faint trickle of orders from old-fashioned diehards around the Galaxy (backwoods country doctors who didn't believe in the new-fangled synthetics, experimenters who wanted to run comparative tests), the shipments already en route would much more than satisfy them.

Fifty tons? Once the Icicle Works had shipped three hundred tons a day — physical transport, electronic rockets that took years to cover the distance between stars. The boom was over. And of course, on a one-industry planet, everything else was over too.

Pulcher took the girl by the arm and swept her into the restaurant.

"Eat," he ordered. "I know what jail food is like."

He sat down, firmly determined to say nothing until she had finished.

BUT he couldn't. Long before she was ready for coffee, he burst out: "Why, Madeleine? Why would you get into something like this?"

She looked at him but did not answer.

"What about your husband?" Pulcher didn't want to ask it, but he had to. That had been the biggest of all the unpleasant blows that had struck him after the Icicle Works closed. Just as he was getting a law practice going — not on any big scale but, through Charley Dickon and the Party, a small, steady handout of political favors that would make it possible for him to pretend he was still an attorney — the gossip reached him that Madeleine Cossett had married.

The girl pushed her plate away. "He emigrated."

Pulcher digested that slowly. Emigrated? That was the dream of every Niner since the Works closed down. But it was only a dream. Physical transport between the stars was ungodly expensive. More, it was ungodly slow. Ten years would get you to Dell, the thin-aired planet of a chilly little red

dwarf. The nearest *good* planet was thirty years away.

What it all added up to was that emigrating was almost like dying. If one member of a married couple emigrated, it meant the end of the marriage.

"We got a divorce," said Madeleine, nodding. "There wasn't enough money for both of us to go, and Jon was unhappier here than I was."

She took out a cigarette and let him light it. "You don't want to ask me about Jon, do you? But you want to know. All right. Jon was an artist. He was in the advertising department at the Works, but that was just temporary. He was going to do something big. Then the bottom dropped out for him, just as it did for all of us. Well, Milo, I didn't hear from you."

Pulcher protested: "It wouldn't have been *fair* for me to see you when I didn't have a job or anything."

"Of course you'd think that. But I couldn't find you to tell you it was wrong, and then Jon was very persistent. He was tall, curly-haired, he had a baby's face — do you know, he only shaved twice a week! Well, I married him. It lasted three months. Then he just had to get away."

She leaned forward earnestly. "Don't think he was just a bum, Milo! He really was quite a good artist. But we didn't have enough

money for paints, even, and then it seems that the colors are all wrong here. Jon explained it. In order to paint landscapes that sell, you have to be on a planet with Earth-type colors. They're all the vogue. And there's too much altamycin in the clouds here."

Pulcher said stiffly, "I see." But he didn't, really. There was at least one unexplained part. If there hadn't been enough money for paint, then where had the money come from for a starship ticket, physical transport? It meant at least ten thousand dollars. There just was no way to raise ten thousand dollars on Altair Nine, not without taking a rather extreme step . . .

The girl wasn't looking at him. Her eyes were fixed on a table

across the restaurant, a table with a loud, drunken party. It was only lunch time, but they had a three-o'clock-in-the-morning air about them. They were *stinking*. There were four of them, two men and two women, and their physical bodies were those of young, healthy, quite goodlooking, perfectly normal Niners. The appearance of the physical bodies was entirely irrelevant, though, because they were tourists. Around the neck of each of them was a bright golden choker with a glowing red signal-jewel in the middle — the mark of the Tourist Agency — the sign that the bodies were rented.

Milo Pulcher looked away quickly. His eyes stopped on the white face of the girl, and now he knew how she had raised the money to send Jon to another world.

II

PULCHER found the girl a room and left her there, though that was not what he wanted. What he wanted was to spend the evening with her and to go on spending time with her, until time came to an end. But there was the matter of her trial.

Twenty-four hours ago he had got the letter notifying him that the court had appointed him attorney for six suspected kidnappers and looked on it as a fast fee, no work to speak of, no hope for success. He would lose the case, certainly. Well, what of it?

But now he wanted to win!

It meant some fast, hard work if he was to have even a chance — and at best, he admitted to himself, the chance would not be good. Still, he wasn't going to give up without a try.

The snow stopped as he located the home of Jimmy Lasser's parents. It was a sporting goods shop, not far from the main Tourist Agency; it had a window full of guns and boots and scuba gear. He walked in, tinkling a bell as he opened the door.

"Mr. Lasser?"

came aware of the Lassers just behind him. "But I think I can get an acquittal," he said, entirely out of hope, knowing that it wasn't true.

Dickon chuckled. "You got Lasser breathing down your neck? Sure, Milo. But you want my advice, you'll take a quick hearing, let them get sentenced and then try for executive clemency in a couple months. I'll help you get it. And that's another five hundred or so for you, see?"

The committeeman was being persuasive; it was a habit of his. "Don't worry about Lasser. I guess he's been telling you what a power he is in politics here. Forget it. And, say, tell him I notice he hasn't got his tickets for the Chester A. Arthur Day Dinner yet. You pick up the dough from him, will you? I'll mail him the tickets. No — hold on, don't ask him. Just tell him what I said."

The connection went dead.

Pulcher stood holding a dead phone, conscious of Lasser standing right behind him.

"So long, Charley," he said, paused, nodded into space and said, "So long," again.

Then the attorney turned about to deliver the committeeman's message about that most important subject, the tickets to the Chester A. Arthur Day Dinner.

Lasser grumbled: "Damn Dickon. He's into you for one thing after another. Where's he think I'm going

to get thirty bucks for tickets?"

"Will, please." His wife touched his arm.

Lasser hesitated. "Oh, all right. But you better get Jimmy off, hear?"

Pulcher got away at last and hurried out into the cold, slushy street.

At the corner he caught a glimpse of something palely glowing overhead and stopped, transfixed. A huge sky trout was swimming purposefully down the avenue. It was a monster, twelve feet long, at least, and more than two feet thick at the middle. It would easily go eighteen, nineteen ounces, the sort of lunker that sportsmen hiked clear across the Dismal Hills to bag. Pulcher had never in his life seen one that size. In fact, he could only remember seeing one or two fingerlings swim over inhabited areas.

It gave him a cold, worried feeling.

The sky fish were about the only tourist attraction Altair Nine had left to offer. From all over the Galaxy sportsmen came to shoot them, with their great porous flesh filled with bubbles of hydrogen, real biological zeppelins that did not fly in the air but swam it. Before human colonists arrived, they had been Altair Nine's highest form of life. They were so easy to destroy with gunfire that they had almost been exterminated in the inhabited sections. Only in the high, cold hills

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had a few survived. And now . . .

Were even the fish aware that Altair Nine was becoming a ghost planet?

THE next morning Pulcher phoned Madeleine but didn't have breakfast with her, though he wanted to very much.

He put in the whole day working on the case. In the morning he visited the families and friends of the accused boys; in the afternoon he followed a few hunches.

From the families he learned nothing. The stories were all about the same. The youngest boy was Foltis, only seventeen; the oldest was Hopgood at twenty-six. They all had lost their jobs, most of them at the Icicle Works; they saw no future, and wanted off-planet. Well, physical transport meant more money than any of them had a chance of getting in any legitimate way.

Mayor Swinburne was a rich man and his three-year-old son was the apple of his eye. It must have been an irresistible temptation to try to collect ransom money, Pulcher realized. The mayor could certainly afford it, and once the money was collected and they were aboard a starship, it would be almost impossible for the law to pursue them.

Pulcher managed to piece together the way the thing had started. The boys all lived in the same neighborhood, the neighbor-

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hood where Madeleine and Jon Gaulty had had a little apartment. They had seen Madeleine walking with the mayor's son — she had a part-time job now and then, taking care of him. The only aspect that was hard to believe was that Madeleine had been willing to take part in the scheme, once the boys approached her.

But Milo, remembering the expression on the girl's face as she looked at the tourists, decided that wasn't so strange after all.

For Madeleine had rented.

Physical transport was expensive and eternally slow.

But there was a faster way for one to travel from planet to planet — practically instantaneous, from one end of the Galaxy to the other. The pattern of the mind is electronic in nature. It can be taped, and it can be broadcast on an electromagnetic frequency. What was more, like any electromagnetic signal, it could be used to modulate an ultrawave carrier. The result: instantaneous transmission of personality, anywhere in the civilized Galaxy.

The only problem was that there had to be a receiver.

The naked ghost of a man, stripped of flesh and juices, was no more than the countless radio and other waves that passed through everyone all the time. The transmitted personality had to be given form. There were mechanical re-

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ceivers, of course — computerlike affairs with mercury memory cells — where a man's intelligence could be received, and could be made to activate robot bodies. But that wasn't *fun*. The tourist trade was built on *fun*.

Live bodies were needed to satisfy the customers. No one wanted to spend the price of a fishing trip to Altair Nine in order to find himself pursuing the quarry in some clanking tractor with photocell eyes and solenoid muscles. A body was wanted, preferably a rather attractive body; one which would be firm where the tourist's own, perhaps, was flabby, healthy where the tourist's own wheezed. Having such a body, there were other sports to enjoy than fishing.

Oh, the laws were strict about misuse of rented bodies.

But the tourist trade was the only flourishing industry left on Altair Nine. The laws remained strict, but they remained unenforced.

PULCHER checked in with Charley Dickon. "I found out why Madeleine got into this thing. She rented. Signed a long-term lease with the Tourist Agency and got a big advance on her earnings."

Dickon shook his head sadly. "What people will do for money," he commented.

"It wasn't for her! She gave it to her husband so he could get a

ticket to some place off-world." Pulcher got up, turned around and kicked his chair as hard as he could. Renting was bad enough for a man. For a woman it was—

"Take it easy," Dickon suggested, grinning. "So she figured she could buy her way out of the contract with the money from Swinburne?"

"Wouldn't you do the same?"

"Oh, I don't know, Milo. Renting's not so bad."

"The hell it isn't!"

"All right, the hell it isn't. But you ought to realize, Milo," the committeeman said stiffly, "that if it wasn't for the tourist trade, we'd all be in trouble. Don't knock the Tourist Agency. They're doing a perfectly decent job."

"Then why won't they let me see the records?"

The committeeman's eyes narrowed and he sat up straighter.

"I tried," said Pulcher. "I got them to show me Madeleine's lease agreement, but not till I threatened them with a court order. Why? Then I tried to find out a little more about the Agency itself — incorporation papers, names of shareholders and so on. They wouldn't give me a thing. Why?"

Dickon said, after a second; "I could ask you that too, Milo. Why did you want to know?"

Pulcher said seriously: "I have to make a case any way I can, Charley. On the evidence, they're

guilty. But every one of them went into this kidnapping stunt in order to stay away from renting. Maybe I can't get Judge Pegrin to listen to that kind of evidence, but maybe I can. It's my only chance. If I can show that renting is a form of cruel and unusual abuse — if I can find something wrong in it, something that isn't allowed in its charter — then I have that chance. Not a good chance, but a chance. And there's got to be something wrong, Charley, because otherwise why would they be so secretive?"

Dickon said heavily: "You're getting in pretty deep, Milo. Ever occur to you you're going about this the wrong way?"

"Wrong how?"

"What can the incorporation papers show you? You want to find out what renting's like. It seems to me the only way that makes sense is to try it yourself."

"Rent? *Me?*" Pulcher was shocked.

The committeeman shrugged. "Well, I got a lot to do," he said, and escorted Pulcher to the door.

The lawyer walked sullenly away. *Rent?* But he had to admit that there was a certain amount of sense . . .

He made a private decision. He would do what he could to get Madeleine and the others out of trouble. *Completely* out of trouble. But if, in the course of trying the case, he couldn't magic up some

way of getting her out of the lease agreement as well as getting an acquittal, he would make damn sure that he didn't get the acquittal.

Jail wasn't so bad. Renting, for Madeleine Gaultry, was considerably worse.

III

NEXT morning Pulcher marched into the unemployment office with an air of determination far exceeding what he really felt. Talk about loyalty to a client! But he had spent the whole night brooding about it, and Dickon had been right.

The clerk blinked at him and wheezed: "Gee, you're Mr. Pulcher, aren't you? I never thought I'd see *you* here. Things pretty slow?"

Pulcher's uncertainty made him belligerent. "I want to rent my body. Am I in the right place or not?"

"Well, sure, Mr. Pulcher. I mean, you're not, if it's voluntary, but it's been so long since they had a voluntary that it don't make much difference, you know. I mean, I can handle it for you. Wait a minute." He turned away, hesitated, glanced at Pulcher and said: "I better use the other phone."

He was gone only a minute. He came back with a look of determined embarrassment. "Mr. Pulcher. Look. I thought I better call

Charley Dickon. He isn't in his office. Why don't you wait until I can clear it with him?"

Pulcher said grimly: "It's already cleared with him."

The clerk hesitated. "But — Oh. All right," he said miserably, scribbling on a pad. "Right across the street. Oh, and tell them you're a volunteer. I don't know if that will make them leave the cuffs off you, but at least it'll give them a laugh."

Pulcher took the slip of paper and walked sternly across the street to the Tourist Rental Agency, Procurement Office, observing without pleasure that there were bars on the windows.

A husky guard at the door straightened up as he approached and said genially: "All right, sonny. It isn't going to be as bad as you think. Just gimme your wrists a minute."

"Wait," said Pulcher quickly, putting his hands behind him. "You won't need the handcuffs for me. I'm a volunteer."

The guard said dangerously: "Don't kid with me, sonny." Then he took a closer look. "Hey, I know you. You're the lawyer. I saw you at the Primary Dance." He scratched his ear. He said doubtfully: "Well, maybe you *are* a volunteer. Go on in."

But as Pulcher strutted past, he felt a heavy hand on his shoulder, and *click, click*, his wrists were circled with steel. He whirled.

"No hard feelings," said the guard cheerfully. "It costs a lot of dough to get you ready, that's all. They don't want you changing your mind when they give you the squeeze, see?"

"The squeeze? All right," said Pulcher, and turned away again uneasily.

The squeeze. It didn't sound so good, at that. But he had a little too much pride left to ask the guard for details. Anyway, it couldn't be *too* bad, he was sure. Wasn't he? After all, it wasn't the same as being executed.

An hour and a half later he wasn't so sure.

They had stripped him, weighed him, fluorographed him, taken samples of his blood, saliva, urine and spinal fluid; they had thumped his chest and listened to the strangled pounding of the arteries in his left arm.

"You pass," said a fortyish blonde in a stained nurse's uniform. "You're lucky today — openings all over. You can take your pick — mining, sailing, anything you like. What'll it be?"

"What?"

"While you're *renting*. What's the matter with you? You got to be doing something while your body's rented. You can have the tank if you want to, but they mostly don't like that. You're conscious the whole time, you know. It gets kind of boring otherwise."

PULCHER said honestly: "I don't know what you're talking about."

But then he remembered. While a person's body was rented out, there was the problem of what to do with his own mind and personality. It couldn't stay in the body. It had to go somewhere else. "The tank" was a storage device, only that and nothing more; the displaced mind was held in a sort of pickling vat of transistors and cells until its own body could be returned to it. He remembered a client of his boss's, while he was still clerking, who had spent eight weeks in the tank and had then come out to commit a murder. No, not the tank.

He said, coughing: "What else is there?"

The nurse said impatiently: "Golly, whatever you want, I guess. They've got a big call for miners right now, if you want that. It's pretty hot is all. They burn the coal into gas, and of course you're right in the middle of it. But I don't think you feel much. Not *too* much. I don't know about sailing or rock-eting, because you have to have some experience for that. There might be something with the taxi company, but usually the renters don't want that, I ought to tell you, because the live drivers don't like seeing the machines running cabs. Sometimes if they see a machine-

cab they tip it over. Naturally, if there's any damage to the host machine, it's risky for you."

Pulcher said faintly: "I'll try mining."

He went out of the room in a daze, a small bleached towel around his middle his only garment, and hardly aware of that. His own clothes had been whisked away and checked long ago. The tourist who would shortly wear his body would pick his own clothes; the haberdashery was one of the more profitable subsidiaries of the Tourist Agency.

Then he snapped out of his daze as he discovered what was meant by "the squeeze."

A pair of husky experts lifted him onto a slab, whisked away the towel, unlocked and tossed away the handcuffs. While one pinned him down firmly at the shoulders, the other began to turn viselike wheels that moved molded forms down upon him. It was like a sectional sarcophagus closing in on him.

Pulcher had an instant childhood recollection of some story or other — the walls closing in, the victim inexorably squeezed to death.

He yelled: "Hey, hold it! What are you doing?"

The man at his head, bored, said: "Oh, don't worry. This your first time? We got to keep you still, see? Scanning's close work."

"But—"

"Now shut up and relax," the man said reasonably. "If you wiggle when the tracer's scanning you, you could get your whole personality messed up. Not only that, we might damage the body an' then the Agency'd have a suit on its hands, see? Tourists don't like damaged bodies . . . Come on, Vince. Get the legs lined up so I can do the head."

"But—" said Pulcher again, and then, with effort, relaxed.

It was only for one day, after all. He could stand practically anything for a day, and he had been careful to sign up for only that long.

"Go ahead," he said. "It's only for twenty-four hours."

"What? Oh, sure, friend. Lights out, now. Have a pleasant dream."

And something soft but quite firm came down over his face.

He heard a muffled sound of voices. Then there was a quick ripping feeling, as though he had been plucked out of some sticky surrounding medium.

Then it *hurt*.

Pulcher screamed. It didn't accomplish anything. He no longer had a voice to scream with.

FUNNY, he had always thought of mining as something that was carried on underground. He was under *water*. There wasn't any doubt of it. He could see vagrant eddies of sand moving in a current. He could see real fish, not the

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hydrogen zeppelins of the air. He could see bubbles, arising from some source in the sand at his feet—

No! Not at his feet. He didn't have feet. He had tracks.

A great steel bug swam up in front of him and said raspingly: "All right, you there, let's go."

Funny again. He didn't hear the voice with ears — he didn't have ears, and there was no binaural sense — but he did, somehow, hear. It seemed to be speaking inside his brain. Radio? Sonar?

"Come on!" growled the bug.

Experimentally, Pulcher tried to walk.

"Watch it!" squeaked a thin little voice, and a tiny, many-treaded steel beetle squirmed out from under his tracks. It paused to rear back and look at him. "Dope!" it chattered scathingly. A bright flame erupted from its snout as it squirmed away.

The big bug rasped: "Go on, follow the burner, Mac."

Pulcher thought of walking, rather desperately. Yes, something was happening. He lurched and moved.

"Oh, God," sighed the steel bug, hanging beside him, watching with critical attention. "This your first time? I figured. They *always* give me the new ones to break in. Look, that burner — the little thing that just went down the cline, Mac! That's a burner. It's going to burn the hard rock out of a new shaft.

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You follow it and pull the sludge out. With your *buckets*, Mac."

Pulcher gamely started his treads and lurchingly followed the little burner. All around him, visible through the churned, silty water, he caught glimpses of other machines working. There were big ones and little ones, some with great elephantine flexible steel trunks that sucked silt and mud away, some with wasp's stingers that planted charges of explosive, some like himself with buckets for hauling and scooping out pits. The mine, whatever sort of mine it was to be, was only a bare scratched-out beginning on the sea floor as yet. It took him — an hour? a minute? he had no means of telling time—to learn the rudiments of operating his new steel body.

Then it became dull.

Also it became painful. The first few scoops of sandy grime he carried out of the new pit made his buckets tingle. The tingle became a pain, the pain an ache, the ache a blazing agony. He stopped. Something was wrong. They couldn't expect him to go on like this!

"Hey, Mac. Get busy, will you?"

"But it *hurts*."

"Godamighty, Mac, it's *supposed* to hurt. How else would you be able to feel when you hit something hard? You want to break your buckets on me, Mac?"

Pulcher gritted his not-teeth, squared his not-shoulders, and went

back to digging. Ultimately the pain became, through habit, bearable. It didn't become less. It just became bearable.

IT was tiresome, except when once he did strike a harder rock than his phosphor-bronze buckets could handle, and had to slither back out of the way while the burner chopped it up for him. But that was the only break in the monotony. Otherwise the work was strictly routine. It gave him plenty of time to think.

That was not altogether a boon.

I wonder, he thought, with a drowned clash of buckets, I wonder what my body is doing now.

Perhaps the tenant who now occupied his body was a businessman, Pulcher thought prayerfully. A man who had had to come to Altair Nine quickly, on urgent business — get a contract signed, make a trading deal, arrange an interstellar loan. That wouldn't be so bad! A businessman would not damage a rented property. At the worst, a businessman might drink one or two cocktails too many, perhaps eat an indigestible lunch. All right. So when — in only a few hours now — Pulcher resumed his body, the worst he could expect would be a hangover or dyspepsia. Well, what of that? An aspirin. A dash of bicarb.

But maybe the tourist would not be a businessman.

Pulcher flailed the coarse sand with his buckets and thought apprehensively: He might be a sportsman. Still, even that wouldn't be so bad. A sportsman might walk his body up and down a few dozen mountains, perhaps even sleep it out in the open overnight. There might be a cold, possibly even pneumonia. There might also be an accident — tourists did fall off the Dismal Hills; there could be a broken leg. But that was not *too* bad. It was only a matter of a few days' rest, a little medical attention.

But maybe, Pulcher thought grayly, ignoring the teeming agony of his buckets, maybe the tenant will be something worse.

He had heard queer, smutty stories about rented bodies, each one against the law. But you kept hearing the stories. All of them were unpleasant. And yet in a rented body, where the ultimate price of dissipation would be borne by someone else, who might not try any or all pleasures and lusts? For there was no physical consequence to the practitioner. If Mrs. Lasser was right, perhaps there was not even a consequence in the hereafter.

Twenty-four hours had never passed so slowly.

THE suction hoses squabbled with the burners. The scoops quarreled with the dynamiters. All

the animate submarine mining machines constantly irritably snapped at each other. But the work was getting done.

It seemed to be a lot of work to accomplish in one twenty-four hour day, Pulcher thought wearily. The pit was down two hundred yards now, and braced. New wet-setting concrete pourers were already laying a floor. Shimmery little spider-like machines whose limbs held chemical testing equipment were now sniffing every load of sludge that came out for richness of ore. The mine was nearly ready to start producing.

After a time Pulcher began to understand the short tempers of the machines. The minds in these machines were not able to forget that, up topside, their bodies were going about unknown errands, risking unguessed dangers. At any given moment that concrete pourer's body, for instance, might be dying . . . might be acquiring a disease . . . might be stretched out in narcotic stupor, or might gayly be risking dismemberment in a violent sport. Naturally tempers were touchy.

There was no such thing as rest, as coffee breaks or sleep for the machines; they kept going. When finally Pulcher remembered that he had had a purpose in coming here, that it was not merely some punishment that had come blindly to him for a forgotten sin, he began

to try to analyze his own feelings and to guess at the feelings of the others.

The whole thing seemed unnecessarily *mean*. Pulcher understood quite clearly why anyone who had had the experience of renting would never want to do it again. But why did it have to be so unpleasant? Surely conditions for the renter-mind in a machine-body could be made more bearable; the tactile sensations could be reduced from pain to some more supportable feeling without loss of sensation enough to accomplish the desired ends.

He wondered wistfully if Madeleine had once occupied this particular machine.

Then he wondered how many of the dynamiters and diggers were female, how many male. It seemed somehow wrong that their gleaming stainless-steel or phosphor-bronze exteriors should give no hint of age or sex. There ought to be some lighter work for women, he thought idly, and then realized that the thought was nonsense. What difference did it make? You could work your buckets off, and when you got back topside you'd be healthy and rested . . .

And then he had a quick dizzying qualm, as he realized that that would be the thought in the mind of the tourist now occupying his own body.

Pulcher licked his not-lips and

attacked the sand with his buckets more viciously than before.

"All right, Mac." The familiar steel bug was alongside him. "Come on, back to the barn," it scolded. "You think I want to have to haul you there? Time's up. Get the tracks back in the parking lot."

Never was an order so gladly obeyed.

But the overseer had cut it rather fine. Pulcher had just reached the parking space, had not quite turned his clanking steel frame around when, *rip*, the tearing and the pain hit him . . .

And he found himself struggling against "the squeeze."

"RELAX, friend," soothed a distant voice. Abruptly the pressure was removed from his face and the voice came nearer. "There you are. Have a nice dream?"

Pulcher kicked the rubbery material off his legs. He sat up.

"Ouch!" he said suddenly, and held his eye.

The man by his head looked down at him and grinned. "Some shiner. Must've been a good party." He was stripping the sections of rubbery gripping material off Pulcher as he talked. "You're lucky. I've seen them come back in here with legs broken, teeth out, even bullet holes. Friend, you wouldn't believe me if I told you. Especially the girls." He handed Pulcher

another bleached towel. "All right, you're through here. Don't worry about the eye, friend. That's easy two, three days old already. Another day or two and you won't even notice it."

"Hey!" Pulcher cried suddenly. "What do you mean, two or three days? How long was I down there?"

The man glanced at the green-tapped card on Pulcher's wrist. "Let's see, this is Thursday. Six days."

"But I only signed up for twenty-four hours!"

"Sure you did. *Plus* emergency overalls. What do you think, friend—the Agency's going to evict some big-spending tourist just because you want your body back in twenty-four hours? Can't do it. You can see that. The Agency'd lose a fortune that way."

Unceremoniously, Pulcher was hoisted to his feet and escorted to the door.

"If only these jokers would read the fine print," the first man was saying mournfully to his helper as Pulcher left. "Oh, well. If they had any brains, they wouldn't rent in the first place. Then what would me and you do for jobs?"

Six days! Pulcher raced through medical check-out, clothes redemption, payoff at the cashier's window.

"Hurry, please," he kept saying, "can't you please hurry?" He couldn't wait to get to a phone.

But he had a pretty good idea already what the phone call would tell him. Five extra days! No wonder it had seemed so long down there, while up in the city time had passed along.

He found a phone at last and quickly dialed the private number of Judge Pegrin's office. The judge wouldn't be there, but that was the way Pulcher wanted it. He didn't want to face the judge.

He got Pegrin's secretary. "Miss Kish? This is Milo Pulcher."

Her voice was cold. "So *there* you are. Where have you been? The judge was *furious*."

"I—" He despaired of explaining it to her. He could hardly explain it to himself. "I'll tell you later, Miss Kish. Please. Where does the kidnap case stand now?"

"Why, the hearing was yesterday. Since we couldn't locate you, the judge had to appoint another attorney. After all, Mr. Pulcher, an attorney is supposed to be in court when his clients are coming up for trial."

"I know that, Miss Kish. What happened?"

"It was open and shut. They all pleaded *non vult* — the whole thing was over in twenty minutes. It was the only thing to do on the evidence, you see. They'll be sentenced this afternoon—around three o'clock, I'd say. *If* you're interested."