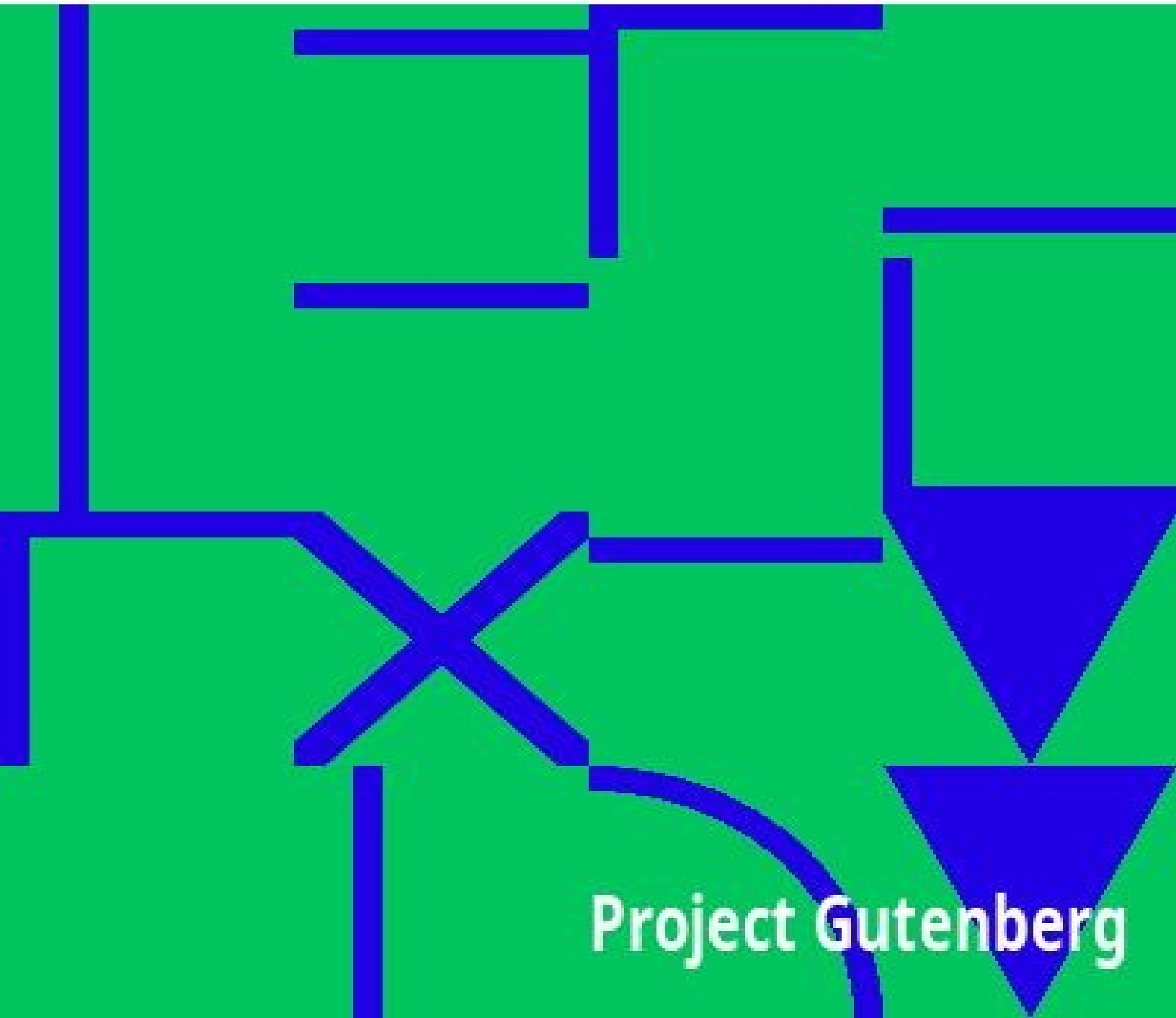
George Loves Gistla

James McKimmey



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GEORGE
LOVES
GISTLA

By JAMES McKIMMEY, Jr.

"Why don't you find yourself some nice little American girl," his father had often repeated. But George was on Venus ... and he loved pale green skin ... and globular heads and most of all, George loved Gistla.

GEORGE KENINGTON was sixteen, and, as he told himself, someone who was sixteen knew more about love than someone who was, say, forty-two. Like his father, for instance. A whole lot more probably. When you were forty-two, you got narrow-minded and nervous and angry. You said this is this, and that is that, and there is nothing else. When someone thought and felt and talked that way, George thought bitterly, there was not enough room inside that person to know what it was like, loving a Venusian.

But George knew. He knew very well.

Her name was Gistla. She was not pretty in standards of American colonists. She had the pale greenish Venusian skin, and she was too short and rather thick. Her face, of course, was not an American face. It was the face of native Venus. Round and smooth, with the large lidless eyes. There were no visible ears and a lack of hair strengthened the globular look of her head.

But she was a person. The beauty was inside of her. Did you have to point to a girl's face and say, "Here is where the nose should be, here is where the ears should be?" Did you have to measure the width between eyes and test the color of the skin? Did you have to check the size of the teeth and the existence of hair? Was all of this necessary to understand what was *inside* someone?

George snapped a leaf from an overhanging vine and threw it angrily to the ground. He was walking along a thin path that led from the colony to the tangled hills beyond, where hues of red and yellow and purple reflected like bold sweeps of watercolor. In a moment he would see Gistla, and with the color before his eyes and the sweet perfume of the flowers in his lungs, he felt again the familiar rise of excitement.

George had not always lived on Venus. The Colony was very new. By 2022, most of the Earth countries had sent colonizers to Mars. But as yet, in June of that year, Venus had been touched by only the sparsest invasion of American civilization. George had arrived just three years ago, when his father had been appointed Secretary of the colonizing unit.

And that was the whole trouble, really. Father was the Secretary, Mother was the Secretary's wife, Sister was the daughter of the Secretary. Everybody was wrapped up in it. Except George.

George loved Gistla.

"Why don't you find yourself some nice little American girl?" his father had said. "Say like Henry Farrel's little daughter?"

Henry Farrel's little daughter was a sweet sickening girl with a nasty temper and a nasty tongue. Her father was Governor of the Colony. She told you about it all the time.

"Or," his father had told him, "why not little what's-her-name, Doug Brentwood's daughter?"

Little what's-her-name's father was the President of the Council. "My father is President of the Council," she said. Over and over, as though in a settlement the size of the Colony, there would be anyone who wouldn't know her father was the President of the Council.

It was all a very tight and careful circle, chosen on Earth with a great deal of "common sense."

There were the ordinary settlers, of course. They had daughters. Some of them were very pretty and long-limbed. And George had thought about that.

Certainly there wasn't a decent-looking girl in the whole Governing circle, and the sight of a girl with flashing eyes and a nice red mouth, who was shaped a little like something besides a tree stump, was indeed an exciting sight.

But there were limitations to the settler girls.

They had no background to speak of, and though that didn't make any difference, George assured himself, they knew nothing about art, music, poetry, or anything really worth while. And, too, while George's father had said, "Now, George,

we're all one here. Each of us is as good as another. Joe Finch, who cares for the flowers outside, is every bit as good a man as I am"—still George knew, if he told his parents he was going to marry Joe Finch's daughter someday, there would be hell to pay.

So as long as the restrictions had been bound around him, there was no reason to go just half-way. George was not an ordinary boy. He did things in extreme. He was now in love with a Venusian girl, and his family was already starting to make him pay.

GEORGE turned off the path, just beyond an arch of thick purple-green vines that always reminded him of a gate to a garden. There was a quiet simplicity to this small clearing where he and Gistla met. There was an aloneness to it, and only the sound of the flat shiny leaves sliding together and the high, trilling sound of the small Venusian birds broke the peaceful silence. They had always met here, nowhere else.

Now, as George found himself in the clearing, he began to wonder what Gistla would say or do when he told her he was taking her home to meet his family. It had been a sudden decision, brought out of anger and indignation.

George sat down upon the flat hollow of a large vine. The sky was murky as usual, but the soft warm feel and smell of the growth around him, with its color and brightness, made up for a sunless sky.

As he waited, he remembered what his mother had said:

"Oh, George, you're really not serious about bringing a *Venusian* into our home!"

And his sister, Mari, had said, "My God!" Mari, who was eighteen, said this to most anything.

But his father, eyes bright and alert, had said, "No, now if George wants to bring one of these, ah, Venusians home with him, that's his privilege. I think it would be very interesting."

George knew what his father meant by interesting.

Exposing Gistla to his family would result in deliberate sarcasm and eye-squinting and barely hidden smiles. There would be pointed remarks and direct insults. And when it was over, George knew, he would be expected to see the error of his ways. He would then be expected to forget about this odd creature and find himself a nice ignorant little Colony girl, whose father was a member of the Governing circle.

"And to hell with that, too," George said.

"What?" George heard Gistla say. He turned quickly. She was standing at the edge of the clearing, her round green eyes looking soft and serious. She wore the usual gray cape that reached her ankles. Her voice was a deep round sound, and there was hardly any accent in the words she had learned so quickly since the Colony had begun.

"Talking to myself," George grinned. The old excitement was inside of him. There was a kind of exotic quality in meeting Gistla that never disappeared.

She crossed the clearing, not too gracefully, and touched her fingers against his hand. This had been the extent of their physical expression of love.

"It is nice to see you, George."

He noticed his feeling of pleasure when he heard her speak his name. There was something about his own name being spoken by Gistla that had always seemed even more strange than anything else.

She sat down beside him, and they looked at each other while the leaves whispered around them and the birds fluttered and chirped. He discovered again the feeling of rightness, sitting beside Gistla. There was a solidity about her, a quiet maturity that he seemed able to feel in himself only when he was with her. And that too was strange, because in American terms of age, she was much younger than he.

Sitting, as they were doing, silent, watching each other, had been most of their activity. You did not need to entertain Gistla with foolish small-talk or exaggerated praising.

But right now he wanted to tell her quickly, to make sure that she would feel the enthusiasm he had felt.

"Listen, Gistla," he said, while she watched him with her soft-looking round

eyes. "I want you to come with me today to meet my family."

His words seemed to have an odd ring to them, and George waited tensely until he was sure that she was not shocked or angry about what he had just said.

She sat silently for a moment and then she said, "Do you think that is right for me to do, George?"

"Sure it is! Why not? They know about you and me. They know we're in love."

"Love—" She spoke the word as though it were an indefinite, elusive thing that you could not offer as reason for doing anything.

Gistla was very wise, George realized, but this was a time for enthusiasm, a time to strengthen their own relationship in this world.

"Say you will!" George said.

"Do you want me to?"

"Well, sure I do. What did you think?"

She held her hands in her lap quietly. They were not unlike his own, George observed, except for the extreme smallness and the color.

"I do not think it will be nice for you or them," she said.

"Ah, listen, Gistla. Don't talk that way. It'll be fine!" But he knew that he was not deceiving her with the lightness he tried to put into his voice.

Then, although she had never done it before, she reached out and touched his cheek. George had grown used to the emotions that reflected on her face, and he knew she was suddenly very sad. "Yes, George," she said. "I will go with you to meet your family." And she said it as though she were telling him good-by.

IT WAS no better than he had expected. It was worse. Much worse. And he was growing angrier by the moment. They were all seated in the rock-walled patio behind the large white house. Gistla sat beside him, looking very small and frightened and very different. And it was that obvious difference that George had

hoped everyone might ignore. But instead, each of them, his father, his mother, his sister, appeared to be trying to make it even more obvious.

The first strain, when everyone had sat there staring at Gistla as though she were something behind a cage, had passed. But now his parents and sister were moving in a new direction. They had relaxed, having found control of the situation, and they were cutting her to pieces.

"Tell me," his sister was saying, her eyes dancing slyly, "don't you people have some very strange tricks you can do?"

George tightened his fingers against his palms. He heard Gistla answer, "Tricks?"

"Yes." His sister's white smile shined. "You know, like making things disappear, things like that."

"My father," Gistla said seriously, "can do very wonderful things. He is a musician."

George's father leaned forward, blinking amusedly. "Really? What does he play?"

"Play?" asked Gistla.

"Yes. He's a musician. He must play something, some kind of instrument."

Gistla looked at George, but George did not know what to say. He wished he had never tried to do this. He wished he had just ignored his family and gone on loving Gistla in the privacy of his own emotions.

"Well, now," Mr. Kenington was saying rather impatiently. "Does he play something like our violin or clarinet or oboe, or what?" His father, George had noticed, was becoming impatient more frequently since he had become Secretary. The Secretarial post was very important.

"He does not play anything," Gistla said carefully. "He just ... makes the music and I hear it."

"But how?" Mr. Kenington insisted. "What does he play the music *on*? He certainly can't make the music without using something to make it on."

Gistla glanced again at George and he said quickly, "It's pretty hard to

understand, Father. I don't think—"

"No, now don't interrupt just now, son. This is very interesting. We'd like to know what she's talking about."

Mrs. Kenington spoke for the first time. "Are you just making this up?"

It was like a whip coming through the air. His mother sat there, blinking, the suspicion and distrust she felt for this creature showing in her eyes and upon her mouth and even in the way she was sitting.

"Now, Lois," Mr. Kenington said, as though he really sympathized with what she had said, believing that not only Gistla was making it up, but that all of her race made everything up. But he was stubborn. "Come now, tell us. Tell us what you mean."

Gistla's smooth head turned this way and that. "Sometimes," she said slowly, "my father journeys to other places, and if he cannot return soon, he sends me music. When the light has gone from the day and I am alone, I hear it."

"You mean he sends it by wires or by radio?" Mr. Kenington asked with surprise.

"No."

"Now, wait a minute," George's sister leaned forward, smiling. "You just hear this music, is that right? Up here." She tapped her forehead.

"Yes," said Gistla.

"My God," George's sister said. She looked at her parents, arching her eyebrows.

"You shouldn't make things up," George's mother said.

"Mother," George said, his face coloring. "She's not making things up!"

"Just a moment, son," Mr. Kenington said crisply. "You don't want to talk to your mother in that tone."

"No, but, my God," George's sister went on. "Imagine. No wires, no loudspeakers, just ... up here." She tapped her forehead again.

"I'm not talking to my mother in any tone at all," George said, disregarding his sister.

"Well, she shouldn't lie," said Mrs. Kenington with conviction.

George stood up. "She is not lying, Mother."

"I forbid you to argue with your mother that way, George," said Mr. Kenington.

"I mean, my God," said George's sister happily. "This is an innovation! Can you imagine? Gistla, or whatever your name is, could your father make his music sometime when we have a dance?"

Gistla's eyes were hurt and she was, George knew, confused. She shook her head.

Mrs. Kenington was blinking accusingly. "Do they teach you to make these things up? Is that what they teach you at home?"

"Mother, will you please?" George said. "Why must you talk to her that way?"

Mr. Kenington stood up quickly. "I did not raise my son to show an attitude like that to his mother."

"But she isn't making this up," George said. "You asked her to tell you and she —"

George's sister had jumped out of her chair and she was waltzing over the patio. She began humming as she danced. "Can't you just see it? Everyone dancing around, listening to music in their heads? No orchestra or records or anything?"

Mr. Kenington stood very tall. "Are you taking the word of your mother, or this ... this ..." He motioned curtly at Gistla.

George licked his lips, looking defensively at each one of his family. "It isn't a matter of taking anyone's word at all. It's just something we don't understand."

George's sister whirled and then suddenly she stopped, putting her hand against her mouth. "My God, what if everyone got the music different? I mean, does everyone hear the same music, dear? Because if they didn't, what a mess!" She began dancing again, her skirt swirling over the bricks of the patio.

Mr. Kenington's voice was louder. "I think we understand, all right, George. There isn't anything about this we don't understand!"

George's lips were paling.

His sister dipped and turned. "We could call it a Music In The Head dance. Everybody brings his own head!" She laughed merrily. "My God!"

George noticed then that Gistla was disappearing out of the rear gate. He stood, clenching his fists and glaring at his family. His sister had stopped dancing but she was still laughing.

"I didn't think, George," his mother said resolutely, "that you were going to invite someone who lied."

George turned and ran after Gistla.

THEY sat again in the clearing. George could still feel the anger churning inside him, and he held his hands together so tightly that his fingers began to ache. "I hate them for that," he said.

Gistla touched his arm. "No, George. It is all right. It is the way things are."

"But they don't need to be! My family did that on purpose."

"They just don't understand. My race is very different from yours and it seems strange."

"So does mine," George said, standing and beginning to pace back and forth.

It had been what he really had expected. But still he had hoped, somehow, that his family might have understood. He looked at Gistla, sitting quietly, her large eyes watching him. He knew he loved her very much just then, more in fact than he ever had before, because she had been refused by his family.

"Listen, Gistla," he said, kneeling on the grass in front of her. "It won't make any difference what anyone thinks or does or says. I love you, and I'll go on loving you. We'll build our own life the way we want it."

She shook her head slowly. "No, George. It does make a difference. You cannot forget your family or your people. That is important to you. I would only hurt you."

"Do you love me?"

"Yes."

"Then that's all that's important to me. Not what anyone thinks. Not what my sister thinks or my father or my mother."

"We are different, you and I." She sat unmoving, her smooth face unchanging. "My people seem strange to yours because we can do things your people do not understand. We seem strange because we look differently, we act differently, we value things differently."

"My values are the same as yours," George pleaded. "I love you because of what you are, not because of some kind of stupid chart for physical beauty, not because ..."

"George," she said. "Look at me."

George met her eyes suddenly, caught by the urgency in her voice. And slowly, in front of his eyes, she changed. Her features shifted, until George saw a beautiful young girl with pink white skin and red lips. He saw shining blue eyes and shimmering golden hair that fell over her shoulders. Gistla's body had changed to a lithe, smooth figure that revealed its contours beneath the gray cape.

He caught his breath and wiped a hand at his eyes.

"What you see," said Gistla softly, "is an illusion. You see what would be in your values, a beautiful girl."

George opened his mouth but was unable to find his voice.

"Do not be afraid, George. Beneath the illusion of your senses, I am still Gistla. I am still a Venusian."

George reached out and touched his fingers against a white arm and a white shoulder bared by the cape. He touched the golden hair. "Gistla," he said, amazed. "You're beautiful."

"Yes," she said sadly.

"But—you really are! Your hair and your eyes and your mouth. How did you do it?"

She shook her head to show its unimportance. "It is something—like your

hypnotism."

George raised himself from his knees and sat beside her. "But I can't believe it!"

"You can see, you can feel."

"Yes," George said. "Yes."

"You are happy with me this way, aren't you, George?"

"But you're so beautiful."

The golden-haired girl nodded her head, and the shining blue eyes watched him carefully.

"You see then," Gistla said. "It does make a difference. You love me more this way."

"No," George said, touching her hair again. "I don't love you more, but if you can do this, why then, we'll have no more worries. Don't you see?"

"I think so," Gistla said, looking away.

George's voice was excited, and his eyes darted over her face and body. "Would other people see you as I do?"

"If I wished, yes."

"Then you see? It's all changed! You are what I see. Golden-haired and pale-skinned—"

"I am still Gistla. You would always know that. Would you love something that is not real, just because you see it with your eyes?"

"BUT I can feel that you're real," George said, putting his hands on her shoulders. He pulled her closer and kissed her hair. "You're Gistla," he said, "and you're beautiful." He tipped her face up to his and bent to kiss her mouth.

His lips touched smooth green skin and he looked into Gistla's large round lidless eyes. He recoiled as though he had been touched by fire.

She watched him as he wiped a trembling hand across his chest, and her globular head glistened in the reflection of the late sun.

She nodded. "When you see what I really am, the difference *is* important." She gathered her cloak around her and stood up.

George felt the flush of his face, and he could not meet her eyes. He heard her walk a few steps away.

"Good-by, George," she said.

He jumped up quickly. "That wasn't fair."

"No," she said slowly, "but it proved the value of things."

"It wasn't fair," George repeated. "And it didn't prove anything."

"I think it did," she said, moving away.

"No, listen, Gistla," he said. "You can't judge anything by what I did or said. We are different, in a physical sense, but that doesn't really matter. If a golden-haired girl materializes in front of my eyes, you can't blame me for what my emotions did. It's still you I love. Not the color of your skin or the shape of your mouth. But you and what you or I or anybody else looks like isn't important!"

He followed her and caught her arm. She turned to face him. "You can say that," she said. "Your words tell me that and your eyes, but I know it isn't true."

The embarrassment was still inside him, but the way she denied him made him want her more than ever. He held to her arm and then he said, "Gistla, could you change me? I mean, so that other people, even I, would see me as they see you—as a Venusian?"

She stood very still, staring at him.

"Could you?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Then do it, Gistla. I'll prove to you that nothing is important but you and me. I'll be a Venusian, like you are. I'll go back to my family as a Venusian and I'll take you with me. I'll prove that neither they nor anybody else makes any difference in how I love you!"

Gistla watched him solemnly. Finally she said, "Would you really do that?"

"Yes," he said quickly, "Yes."

"I love you, George," she said in her deep round voice.

He lifted his hands to touch her face and he found that his skin had turned to pale green. He touched his own face, and he knew that if he looked into a mirror he would see a round smooth head with large lidless eyes.

"Is that what you wanted?" she asked.

"Yes," he said stubbornly. "That's what I wanted." He stood there for a long time, trying to become used to it, fighting the fear that ran through him every time he looked at his hands or touched his head. Finally he said, quietly, "Let's go meet my family."

AS THEY drew near the house, he knew his family was still in the patio. He could hear the voices of his mother and father and the high, piercing laughter of his sister.

"And, my God," he heard his sister say, "did you see the way those horrible eyes looked at you? What ever gets into George?"

"Dear, dear, dear," he heard his mother say.

Gistla was looking at him. "You do not have to do this."

"Yes," he said, feeling his heart jump. "I do."

He took her hand and they walked to the gate of the patio. He stood there, feeling Gistla's hand tighten about his own. And as he said, "Hello, everybody," he felt his breath shorten as though he had suddenly gotten stage fright.

He saw his father turn around. "What's this?" Mr. Kenington said, frowning.

"Hello, Father," George said.

"*Father*," Mr. Kenington repeated. "What are you doing in this patio?"

"I brought Gistla back."

"So I see," said Mr. Kenington, his eyes narrow as he looked at Gistla. "Where's George?"

"I'm George."

"I'm not in the mood for joking with Venusians," his father snapped. "What made you think you could come in here like this?"

Gistla's hand tightened again. "Try to understand," George said. "Gistla—"

"What's going on?" his sister interrupted.

"Gistla, or whatever her name is," Mr. Kenington said, "has brought a friend of hers, another Venusian." He said the word, Venusian, as though it were a curse or a filthy word.

"My God," said his sister, squinting at them.

Mrs. Kenington leaned over in her chair, peering. "Tell them not to come into the patio, Harry," she said to her husband.

"Listen, Father," George said, feeling the panic begin. "Gistla changed my appearance, so that I seem to look like a Venusian. I came here to tell you that it doesn't make any difference what I look like, whether I look like a Venusian or a leaf on a vine or anything else. I still love her, and it doesn't make any difference." He heard his voice rising and becoming louder.

"My God," said his sister, giggling. "More black magic. Can you make music?" she asked George.

"Harry," his mother said. "They frighten me. Can't you make them keep off the patio?"

"Mother—" George began.

"Now see here," Mr. Kenington growled. "You know we don't allow Venusians around here. I'd advise you to get out of here. Quick!"

"Why does he keep calling you father and mother?" his sister asked. "Isn't that queer, how he keeps doing that? Make some music," she said to George.

George could see the hatred in his father's eyes and in his mother's. And behind

his sister's sarcastic smile, he could see the hatred there, too. He felt himself getting more tense, and the panic raced through him.

"Listen," he shouted. "I'm George, don't you understand? George!"

"I don't want to tell you again," his father said, his face very red. "I don't know what your little game is, but it isn't coming off, and so I'll tell you just this one time. You get the hell off this property, or I'll ..."

"Listen," George yelled. "I'm *GEORGE*! Don't you understand?"

His father's lips thinned to a white line, and he began shouting for Joe Finch, the gardener.

George knew what he should have done then, he should have taken Gistla and gone. He should have walked with her, hand in hand, down the road and away from there. But instead, the panic made his heart pound and he saw the hatred all around him. He couldn't help it when he shouted to her, "Gistla! For God's sake, change me back! Right now! Gistla!"

He stood there, breathing hard, his muscles knotted like steel, while she stared at him, looking into his eyes.

Suddenly, he heard his father gasp and say, "*George!*"

He looked at his hands and they were white and he felt of his face and it was his own. He saw his sister's hand against her mouth, and his father stared at him with unbelieving eyes. His mother had gotten up and was coming over to him, her eyes blinking. "George," she said, "what did they do to you?" She patted his shoulder, her hands fluttering like bird wings.

He turned back to Gistla and she was gone. Beyond the gate now, he knew, and walking slowly, alone, down the road. Only this time he would not go after her. He couldn't. And as he stood there, feeling his mother's hand patting his shoulder, hearing his sister say, "My God," seeing his father shake his head slowly, he felt very young and at the same time, very old, and he wanted to cry.

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