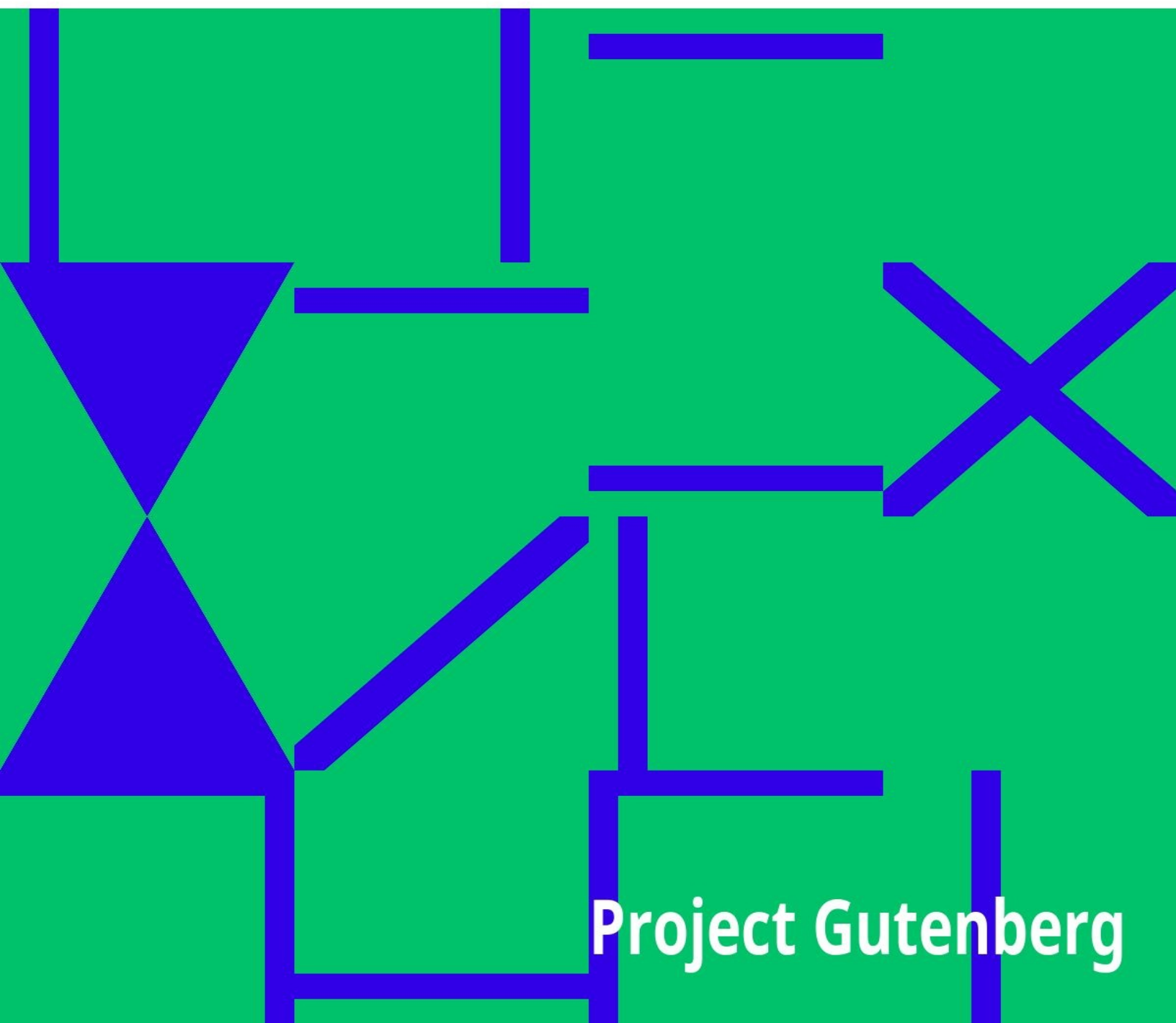


The Servant Problem

Robert F. Young



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The Servant Problem

Selling a whole town, and doing it inconspicuously, can be a little difficult ... either giving it away freely, or in a more normal sense of “selling”. People don't quite believe it....

by Robert J. Young

Illustrated by Schoenherr

If you have ever lived in a small town, you have seen Francis Pfleuger, and probably you have sent him after sky-hooks, left-handed monkey-wrenches and pails of steam, and laughed uproariously behind his back when he set forth to do your bidding. The Francis Pfleugers of the world have inspired both fun and laughter for generations out of mind.

The Francis Pfleuger we are concerned with here lived in a small town named Valleyview, and in addition to suffering the distinction of being the village idiot, he also suffered the distinction of being the village inventor. These two distinctions frequently go hand in hand, and afford, in their incongruous togetherness, an even greater inspiration for fun and laughter. For in this advanced age of streamlined electric can openers and sleek pop-up toasters, who but the most naïve among us can fail to be titillated by the thought of a buck-toothed, wall-eyed moron building Rube Goldberg contrivances in his basement?

The Francis Pfleuger we are concerned with did his inventing in his kitchen rather than in his basement; nevertheless, his machines were in the Rube Goldberg tradition. Take the one he was assembling now, for example. It stood on the kitchen table, and its various attachments jutted this way and that with no apparent rhyme or reason. In its center there was a transparent globe that looked like an upside-down goldfish bowl, and in the center of the bowl there was an object that startlingly resembled a goldfish, but which, of course, was nothing of the sort. Whatever it was, though, it kept growing brighter and brighter each time Francis added another attachment, and had already attained a degree of incandescence so intense that he had been forced to don cobalt-blue goggles in order to look at it. The date was the First of April, 1962—April Fool's Day.

Actually, the idea for this particular machine had not originated in Francis' brain, nor had the parts for it originated in his kitchen-workshop. When he had gone out to get the milk that morning he had found a box on his doorstep, and in the box he had found the goldfish bowl and the attachments, plus a sheet of

instructions entitled, DIRECTIONS FOR ASSEMBLING A MULTIPLE MÖBIUS-KNOT DYNAMO. Francis thought that a machine capable of tying knots would be pretty keen, and he had carried the box into the kitchen and set to work forthwith.

He now had but one more part to go, and he proceeded to screw it into place. Then he stepped back to admire his handiwork. Simultaneously his handiwork went into action. The attachments began to quiver and to emit sparks; the globe glowed, and the goldfishlike object in its center began to dart this way and that as though striking at flies. A blue halo formed above the machine and began to rotate. Faster and faster it rotated, till finally its gaseous components separated and flew off in a hundred different directions. Three things happened then in swift succession: Francis' back doorway took on a bluish cast, the sheet of instructions vanished, and the machine began to melt.

A moment later he heard a whining sound on his back doorstep.

Simultaneously all of the residents of Valleyview heard whining sounds on *their* back doorsteps.

Naturally everybody went to find out about the whining.



The sign was a new one. At the most it was no more than six months old. YOU ARE ENTERING THE VILLAGE OF VALLEYVIEW, it said. PLEASE DRIVE CAREFULLY—WE ARE FOND OF OUR DOGS.

Philip Myles drove carefully. He was fond of dogs, too.

Night had tiptoed in over the October countryside quite some time ago, but the village of Valleyview had not turned on so much as a single streetlight—nor, apparently, any other kind of light. All was in darkness, and not a soul was to be seen. Philip began to suspect that he had entered a ghost town, and when his headlights darted across a dark intersection and picked up the overgrown grass and unkempt shrubbery of the village park, he was convinced that he had. Then he saw the girl walking the dog.

He kitty-cornered the intersection and pulled up alongside her. She was a blonde, tall and chic in a gray fall suit. Her face was attractive—beautiful even, in a cold

and classic way—but she would never see twenty-five again. But then, Philip would never again see thirty. When she paused, her dog paused too, although she did not have it on a leash. It was on the small side, tawny in hue, with golden-brown eyes, a slender white-tipped tail, and shaggy ears that hung down on either side of its face in a manner reminiscent of a cocker spaniel's. It wasn't a cocker spaniel, though. The ears were much too long, for one thing, and the tail was much too delicate, for another. It was a breed—or combination of breeds—that Philip had never seen before.

He leaned across the seat and rolled down the right-hand window. “Could you direct me to number 23 Locust Street?” he asked. “It's the residence of Judith Darrow, the village attorney. Maybe you know her.”

The girl gave a start. “Are *you* the real-estate man I sent for?”

Philip gave a start, too. Recovering himself, he said, “Then *you're* Judith Darrow. I'm ... I'm afraid I'm a little late.”

The girl's eyes flashed. The radiant backwash of the headlights revealed them to be both green and gray. “I specified in my letter that you were supposed to be here at nine o'clock this morning!” she said. “Maybe you'll tell me how you're going to appraise property in the dark!”

“I'm sorry,” Philip said. “My car broke down on the way, and I had to wait for it to be fixed. When I tried to call you, the operator told me that your phone had been disconnected. If you'll direct me to the hotel, I'll stay there overnight and appraise your property in the morning. There *is* a hotel, isn't there?”

“There is—but it's closed. Zarathustra—down!” The dog had raised up on its hind legs and placed its forepaws on the door in an unsuccessful attempt to peer in the window. At the girl's command, it sank obediently down on its haunches. “Except for Zarathustra and myself,” she went on, “the village is empty. Everyone else has already moved out, and we'd have moved out, too, if I hadn't been entrusted with arranging for the sale of the business places and the houses. It makes for a rather awkward situation.”

She had leaned forward, and the light from the dash lay palely upon her face, softening its austerity. “I don't get this at all,” Philip said. “From your letter I assumed you had two or three places you wanted me to sell, but not a whole town. There must have been at least a thousand people living here, and a thousand people just don't pack up and move out all at once.” When she

volunteered no explanation, he added, "Where did they move to?"

"To Pfleugersville. I know you've never heard of it, so save the observation." Then, "Do you have any identification?" she asked.

He gave her his driver's license, his business card and the letter she had written him. After glancing at them, she handed them back. She appeared to be undecided about something. "Why don't you let me stay at the hotel?" he suggested. "You must have the key if it's one of the places I'm supposed to appraise."

She shook her head. "I have the key, but there's not a stick of furniture in the place. We had a village auction last week and got rid of everything that we didn't plan on taking with us." She sighed. "Well, there's nothing for it, I guess. The nearest motel is thirty miles away, so I'll have to put you up at my house. I have a few articles of furniture left—wedding gifts, mostly, that I was too sentimental to part with." She got into the car. "Come on, Zarathustra."

Zarathustra clambered in, leaped across her lap and sat down between them. Philip pulled away from the curb. "That's an odd name for a dog," he said.

"I know. I guess the reason I gave it to him is because he puts me in mind of a little old man sometimes."

"But the original Zarathustra isn't noted for his longevity."

"Perhaps another association was at work then. Turn right at the next corner."

A lonely light burned in one of number 23 Locust Street's three front windows. Its source, however, was not an incandescent bulb, but the mantle of a gasoline lantern. "The village power-supply was shut off yesterday," Judith Darrow explained, pumping the lantern into renewed brightness. She glanced at him sideways. "Did you have dinner?"

"As a matter of fact—no. But please don't—"

"Bother? I couldn't if I wanted to. My larder is on its last legs. But sit down, and I'll make you some sandwiches. I'll make a pot of coffee too—the gas hasn't been turned off yet."



The living room had precisely three articles of furniture to its name—two armchairs and a coffee table. After Judith left him, Philip set his brief case on the floor and sat down in one of the chairs. He wondered idly how she expected to make the trip to Pfleugersville. He had seen no car in the driveway, and there was no garage on the property in which one could be concealed. Moreover, it was highly unlikely that buses serviced the village any more. Valleyview had been bypassed quite some time ago by one of the new super-duper highways. He shrugged. Getting to Pfleugersville was her problem, not his.

He returned his attention to the living room. It was a large room. The house was large, too—large and Victorianesque. Judith, apparently, had opened the back door, for a breeze was wafting through the downstairs rooms—a breeze laden with the scent of flowers and the dew-damp breath of growing grass. He frowned. The month was October, not June, and since when did flowers bloom and grass grow in October? He concluded that the scent must be artificial.

Zarathustra was regarding him with large golden eyes from the middle of the living-room floor. The animal did somehow bring to mind a little old man, although he could not have been more than two or three years old. “You’re not very good company,” Philip said.

“Ruf,” said Zarathustra, and turning, trotted through an archway into a large room that, judging from the empty shelves lining its walls, had once been a library, and thence through another archway into another room—the dining room, undoubtedly—and out of sight.

Philip leaned back wearily in the armchair he had chosen. He was beat. Take six days a week, ten hours a day, and multiply by fifty-two and you get three hundred and twelve. Three hundred and twelve days a year, hunting down clients, talking, walking, driving, expounding; trying in his early thirties to build the foundation he should have begun building in his early twenties—the foundation for the family he had suddenly realized he wanted and someday hoped to have. Sometimes he wished that ambition had missed him altogether instead of waiting for so long to strike. Sometimes he wished he could have gone right on being what he once had been. After all, there was nothing wrong in living in cheap hotels and even cheaper rooming houses; there was nothing wrong in being a lackadaisical door-to-door salesman with run-down heels.

Nothing wrong, that is, except the aching want that came over you sometimes, and the loneliness of long and empty evenings.

Zarathustra had re-entered the room and was sitting in the middle of the floor again. He had not returned empty-handed—or rather, empty-mouthed—although the object he had brought with him was not the sort of object dogs generally pick up. It was a rose—

A green rose.



Disbelievingly, Philip leaned forward and took it from the animal's mouth. Before he had a chance to examine it, however, footsteps sounded in the next room, and prompted by he knew not what, he thrust the rose into his suitcoat pocket. An instant later, Judith Darrow came through the archway bearing a large tray. After setting it down on the coffee table, she poured two cups of coffee from a little silver pot and indicated a plate of sandwiches. “Please help yourself,” she said.

She sat down in the other chair and sipped her coffee. He had one of the sandwiches, found that he didn't want any more. Somehow, her proximity, coupled with her silence, made him feel uncomfortable. “Has your husband already left for Pfleugersville?” he asked politely.

Her gray-green eyes grew cold. “Yes, he left quite some time ago,” she said. “A year ago, as a matter of fact. But for parts unknown, not Pfleugersville. Pfleugersville wasn't accessible then, anyway. He had a brunette on one arm, a redhead on the other, and a pint of Cutty Sark in his hip pocket.”

Philip was distressed. “I ... I didn't mean to pry,” he said. “I'm—”

“Sorry? Why should you be? Some men are born to settle down and raise children and others are born to drink and philander. It's as simple as that.”

“Is it?” something made Philip ask. “Into which category would you say I fall?”

“You're in a class by yourself.” Tiny silver flecks had come into her eyes, and he realized to his astonishment that they were flecks of malevolence. “You've never married, but playing the field hasn't made you one hundred per cent cynical. You're still convinced that somewhere there is a woman worthy of your devotion. And you're quite right—the world is full of them.”

His face tingled as though she had slapped it, and in a sense, she had. He

restrained his anger with difficulty. “I didn't know that my celibacy was that noticeable,” he said.

“It isn't. I took the liberty of having a private investigator check into your background. It proved to be unsavory in some respects, as I implied before, but unlike the backgrounds of the other real-estate agents I had checked, it contained not the slightest hint of dishonesty. The nature of my business is such that I need someone of maximum integrity to contract it with. I had to go far and wide to find you.”

“You're being unfair,” Philip said, mollified despite himself. “Most real-estate agents are honest. As a matter of fact, there's one in the same office building with me that I'd trust with the family jewels—if I had any family jewels.”

“Good,” Judith Darrow said. “I gambled on you knowing someone like that.”

He waited for her to elaborate, and when she did not he finished his coffee and stood up. “If you don't mind, I'll turn in,” he said. “I've had a pretty hard day.”

“I'll show you your room.”

She got two candles, lit them, and after placing them in gilt candlesticks, handed one of the candlesticks to him. The room was on the third floor in under the eaves—as faraway from hers, probably, as the size of the house permitted. Philip did not mind. He liked to sleep in rooms under eaves. There was an enchantment about the rain on the roof that people who slept in less celestial bowers never got to know. After Judith left, he threw open the single window and undressed and climbed into bed. Remembering the rose, he got it out of his coat pocket and examined it by candlelight. It was green all right—even greener than he had at first thought. Its scent was reminiscent of the summer breeze that was blowing through the downstairs rooms, though not at all in keeping with the chill October air that was coming through his bedroom window. He laid it on the table beside the bed and blew out the candle. He would go looking for the bush tomorrow.



Philip was an early riser, and dawn had not yet departed when, fully dressed, he left the room with the rose in his coat pocket and quietly descended the stairs. Entering the living room, he found Zarathustra curled up in one of the armchairs, and for a moment he had the eerie impression that the animal had extended one

of his shaggy ears and was scratching his back with it. When Philip did a doubletake, however, the ear was back to normal size and reposing on its owner's tawny cheek. Rubbing the sleep out of his eyes, he said, "Come on, Zarathustra, we're going for a walk."

He headed for the back door, Zarathustra at his heels. A double door leading off the dining room barred his way and proved to be locked. Frowning, he returned to the living room. "All right," he said to Zarathustra, "we'll go out the front way then."

He walked around the side of the house, his canine companion trotting beside him. The side yard turned out to be disappointing. It contained no roses—green ones, or any other kind. About all it did contain that was worthy of notice was a dog house—an ancient affair that was much too large for Zarathustra and which probably dated from the days when Judith had owned a larger dog. The yard itself was a mess: the grass hadn't been cut all summer, the shrubbery was ragged, and dead leaves lay everywhere. A similar state of affairs existed next door, and glancing across lots, he saw that the same desuetude prevailed throughout the entire neighborhood. Obviously the good citizens of Valleyview had lost interest in their real estate long before they had moved out.

At length his explorations led him to the back door. If there were green roses anywhere, the trellis that adorned the small back porch was the logical place for them to be. He found nothing but bedraggled Virginia creeper and more dead leaves.

He tried the back door, and finding it locked, circled the rest of the way around the house. Judith was waiting for him on the front porch. "How nice of you to walk Zarathustra," she said icily. "I do hope you found the yard in order."

The yellow dress she was wearing did not match the tone of her voice, and the frilly blue apron tied round her waist belied the frostiness of her gray-green eyes. Nevertheless, her rancor was real. "Sorry," he said. "I didn't know your back yard was out of bounds." Then, "If you'll give me a list of the places you want evaluated, I'll get started right away."

"I'll take you around again personally—after we have breakfast."

Again he was consigned to the living room while she performed the necessary culinary operations, and again she served him by tray. Clearly she did not want him in the kitchen, or anywhere near it. He was not much of a one for mysteries, but this one was intriguing him more and more by the minute.

Breakfast over, she told him to wait on the front porch while she did the dishes, and instructed Zarathustra to keep him company. She had two voices: the one she used in addressing Zarathustra contained overtones of summer, and the one she used in addressing Philip contained overtones of fall. “Some day,” Philip told the little dog, “that chip she carries on her shoulder is going to fall off of its own accord, and by then it will be too late—the way it was too late for me when I found out that the person I'd been running away from all my life was myself in wolf's clothing.”

“Ruf,” said Zarathustra, looking up at him with benign golden eyes. “Ruf-ruf!”



Presently Judith re-appeared, sans apron, and the three of them set forth into the golden October day. It was Philip's first experience in evaluating an entire village, but he had a knack for estimating the worth of property, and by the time noon came around, he had the job half done. “If you people had made even half an effort to keep your places up,” he told Judith over cold-cut sandwiches and coffee in her living room, “we could have asked for a third again as much. Why in the world did you let everything go to pot just because you were moving some place else?”

She shrugged. “It's hard to get anyone to do housework these days—not to mention gardening. Besides, in addition to the servant problem, there's another consideration—human nature. When you've lived in a shack all your life and you suddenly acquire a palace, you cease caring very much what the shack looks like.”

“Shack!” Philip was indignant. “Why, this house is lovely! Practically every house you've shown me is lovely. Old, yes—but oldness is an essential part of the loveliness of houses. If Pfleugersville is on the order of most housing developments I've seen, you and your neighbors are going to be good and sorry one of these fine days!”

“But Pfleugersville isn't on the order of most housing developments you've seen.

In fact, it's not a housing development at all. But let's not go into that. Anyway, we're concerned with Valleyview, not Pfleugersville.”

“Very well,” Philip said. “This afternoon should wind things up so far as the appraising goes.”

That evening, after a coffee-less supper—both the gas and the water had been turned off that afternoon—he totaled up his figures. They made quite a respectable sum. He looked across the coffee table, which he had commandeered as a desk, to where Judith, with the dubious help of Zarathustra, was sorting out a pile of manila envelopes which she had placed in the middle of the living-room floor. “I’ll do my best to sell everything,” he said, “but it's going to be difficult going till we get a few families living here. People are reluctant about moving into empty neighborhoods, and businessmen aren't keen about opening up business places before the customers are available. But I think it'll work out all right. There's a plaza not far from here that will provide a place to shop until the local markets are functioning, and Valleyview is part of a centralized school district.” He slipped the paper he had been figuring on into his brief case, closed the case and stood up. “I’ll keep in touch with you.”

Judith shook her head. “You'll do nothing of the sort. As soon as you leave, I'm moving to Pfleugersville. My business here is finished.”

“I'll keep in touch with you there then. All you have to do is give me your address and phone number.”

She shook her head again. “I could give you both, but neither would do you any good. But that's beside the point. Valleyview is your responsibility now—not mine.”

Philip sat back down again. “You can start explaining any time,” he said.

“It's very simple. The property owners of Valleyview signed all of their houses and places of business over to me. I, in turn, have signed all of them over to you—with the qualification, of course, that after selling them you will be entitled to no more than your usual commission.” She withdrew a paper from one of the manila envelopes. “After selling them,” she went on, “you are to divide the proceeds equally among the four charities specified in this contract.” She handed

him the paper. “Do you understand now why I tried so hard to find a trustworthy agent?”

Philip was staring at the paper, unable, in his astonishment, to read the words it contained. “Suppose,” he said presently, “that circumstances should make it impossible for me to carry out my end of the agreement?”

“In case of illness, you will already have taken the necessary steps to transfer the property to another agent who, in your opinion, is as completely honest as you are, and in case of death, you will already have taken the necessary steps to bequeath the property to the same agent; and he, in both cases, will already have agreed to the terms laid down in the contract you're holding in your hands. Why don't you read it?”



Now that his astonishment had abated somewhat, Philip found that he could do so. “But this still doesn't make sense,” he said a short while later. “Obviously you and the rest of the owners have purchased new houses. Would it be presumptuous of me to ask how you're going to pay for them when you're virtually giving your old houses away?”

“I'm afraid it would be, Mr. Myles.” She withdrew another paper from the envelope and handed it to him. “This is the other copy. If you'll kindly affix your signature to both, we can bring our business to a close. As you'll notice, I've already signed.”

“But if you're going to be incommunicado,” Philip pointed out, anger building up in him despite all he could do to stop it, “what good will your copy do you?”

Judith's countenance took on a glacial quality. So did her voice. “My copy will go into the hands of a trusted attorney, sealed in an envelope which I have already instructed him not to open till five years from this date. If, at the time it is opened, you have violated the terms of our agreement, he will institute legal proceedings at once. Fortunately, although the Valleyview post office is closed, a mail truck passes through every weekday evening at eight. It's not that I don't trust you, Mr. Myles—but you are a man, you know.”

Philip was tempted to tear up the two copies then and there, and toss the pieces into the air. But he didn't, for the very good reason that he couldn't afford to.

Instead, he bore down viciously on his pen and brought his name to life twice in large and angry letters. He handed Judith one copy, slipped the other into his breast pocket and got to his feet. "That," he said, "brings our official business to a close. Now I'd like to add an unofficial word of advice. It seems to me that you're exacting an exorbitant price from the world for your husband's having sold you out for a brunette and a redhead and a pint of Scotch. I've been sold out lots of times for less than that, but I found out long ago that the world doesn't pay its bills even when you ask a fair price for the damages done to you. I suggest that you write the matter off as a bad debt and forget about it; then maybe you'll become a human being again."

She had risen to her feet and was standing stiffly before him. She put him in mind of an exquisite and fragile statue, and for a moment he had the feeling that if he were to reach out and touch her, she would shatter into a million pieces. She did not move for some time, nor did he; then she bent down, picked up three of the manila envelopes, straightened, and handed them to him. "Two of these contain the deeds, maps and other records you will need," she said in a dead voice. "The third contains the keys to the houses and business places. Each key is tagged with the correct address. Good-by, Mr. Myles."

"Good-by," Philip said.

He looked around the room intending to say good-by to Zarathustra, but Zarathustra was nowhere to be seen. Finally he went into the hall, opened the front door and stepped out into the night. A full moon was rising in the east. He walked down the moonlit walk, climbed into his car and threw his brief case and the manila envelopes into the back seat. Soon, Valleyview was far behind him.

But not as far as it should have been. He couldn't get the green rose out of his mind. He couldn't get Judith Darrow out of his mind either. Nor could he exorcise the summer breeze that kept wafting through the crevices in his common sense.

A green rose and a grass widow and a breeze with a green breath. A whole town taking off for greener pastures....

He reached into his coat pocket and touched the rose. It was no more than a stem and a handful of petals now, but its reality could not be denied. But roses do not bloom in autumn, and green roses do not bloom at all—

"Ruf!"

He had turned into the new highway some time ago, and was driving along it at a brisk sixty-five. Now, disbelievingly, he slowed, and pulled over onto the shoulder. Sure enough, he had a stowaway in the back seat—a tawny-haired stowaway with golden eyes, over-sized ears, and a restless, white-tipped tail. “Zarathustra!” he gasped. “How in the dickens did you get in there?”

“Ruf,” Zarathustra replied.

Philip groaned. Now he would have to go all the way back to Valleyview. Now he would have to see Judith Darrow again. Now he would have to—He paused in midthought, astonished at the abrupt acceleration of his heartbeat. “Well I’ll be damned!” he said, and without further preamble transferred Zarathustra to the front seat, U-turned, and started back.



The gasoline lantern had been moved out of the living-room window, but a light still showed beyond the panes. He pulled over to the curb and turned off the ignition. He gave one of Zarathustra's over-sized ears a playful tug, absently noting a series of small nodules along its lower extremity. “Come on, Zarathustra,” he said. “I may as well deliver you personally while I’m at it.”

After locking the car, he started up the walk, Zarathustra at his heels. He knocked on the front door. Presently he knocked again. The door creaked, swung partially open. He frowned. Had she forgotten to latch it? he wondered. Or had she deliberately left it unlatched so that Zarathustra could get in? Zarathustra himself lent plausibility to the latter conjecture by rising up on his hind legs and pushing the door the rest of the way open with his forepaws, after which he trotted into the hall and disappeared.

Philip pounded on the panels. “Miss Darrow!” he called. “Judith!”

No answer. He called again. Still no answer.

A summer breeze came traipsing out of the house and engulfed him in the scent of roses. What kind of roses? he wondered. Green ones?

He stepped into the hall and closed the door behind him. He made his way into the living room. The two chairs were gone, and so was the coffee table. He walked through the living room and into the library; through the library and into

the dining room. The gasoline lantern burned brightly on the dining-room table, its harsh white light bathing bare floors and naked walls.

The breeze was stronger here, the scent of roses almost cloying. He saw then that the double door that had thwarted him that morning was open, and he moved toward it across the room. As he had suspected, it gave access to the kitchen. Pausing on the threshold, he peered inside. It was an ordinary enough kitchen. Some of the appliances were gone, but the stove and the refrigerator were still there. The back doorway had an odd bluish cast that caused the framework to shimmer. The door itself was open, and he could see starlight lying softly on fields and trees.

Wonderingly he walked across the room and stepped outside. There was a faint sputtering sound, as though live wires had been crossed, and for a fleeting second the scene before him seemed to waver. Then, abruptly, it grew still.

He grew still, too—immobile in the strange, yet peaceful, summer night. He was standing on a grassy plain, and the plain spread out on either hand to promontories of little trees. Before him, the land sloped gently upward, and was covered with multicolored flowers that twinkled like microcosmic stars. In the distance, the lights of a village showed. To his right, a riotous green-rose bush bloomed, and beneath it Zarathustra sat, wagging his tail.

Philip took two steps forward, stopped and looked up at the sky. It was wrong somehow. For one thing, Cassiopeia had changed position, and for another, Orion was awry. For still another, there were no clouds for the moon to hide behind, and yet the moon had disappeared.

Zarathustra trotted over to where he was standing, gazed up at him with golden eyes, then headed in the direction of the lights. Philip took a deep breath, and followed him. He would have visited the village anyway, Zarathustra or no Zarathustra. Was it Pflugersville? He knew suddenly that it was.



He had not gone far before he saw a highway. A pair of headlights appeared suddenly in the direction of the village and resolved rapidly into a moving van. To his consternation, the van turned off the thoroughfare and headed in his direction. He ducked into a coppice, Zarathustra at his heels, and watched the heavy vehicle bounce by. There were two men in the cab, and painted on the

paneling of the truckbed were the words, PFLEUGERSVILLE MOVERS, INC.

The van continued on in the direction from which he had come, and presently he guessed its destination. Judith, clearly, was in the midst of moving out the furniture she had been too sentimental to sell. The only trouble was, her house had disappeared. So had the village of Valleyview.

He stared at where the houses should have been, saw nothing at first except a continuation of the starlit plain. Then he noticed an upright rectangle of pale light hovering just above the ground, and presently he identified it as Judith's back doorway. He could see through it into the kitchen, and by straining his eyes, he could even see the stove and the refrigerator.

Gradually he made out other upright rectangles hovering just above the ground, some of them on a line with Judith's. All of them, however, while outlined in the same shimmering blue that outlined hers, lacked lighted interiors.

As he stood there staring, the van came to a halt, turned around and backed up to the brightest rectangle, hiding it from view. The two men got out of the cab and walked around to the rear of the truckbed. "We'll put the stove on first," Philip heard one of them say. And then, "Wonder why she wants to hang onto junk like this?"

The other man's voice was fainter, but his words were unmistakable enough: "Grass widows who turn into old maids have funny notions sometimes."

Judith Darrow wasn't really moving out of Valleyview after all. She only thought she was.

Philip went on. The breeze was all around him. It blew through his hair, kissed his cheeks and caressed his forehead. The stars shone palely down. Some of the land was under cultivation, and he could see green things growing in the starlight, and the breeze carried their green breath to his nostrils. He reached the highway and began walking along it. He saw no further sign of vehicles till he came opposite a large brick building with bright light spilling through its windows. In front of it were parked a dozen automobiles of a make that he was unfamiliar with.

He heard the whir of machinery and the pounding of hammers, and he went over and peered through one of the windows. The building proved to be a furniture factory. Most of the work was being done by machines, but there were enough

tasks left over to keep the owners of the parked cars busily occupied. The main manual task was upholstering. The machines cut and sewed and trimmed and planed and doweled and assembled, but apparently none of them was up to the fine art of spitting tacks.



Philip returned to the highway and went on. He came to other buildings and peered into each. One was a small automobile-assembly plant, another was a dairy, a third was a long greenhouse. In the first two the preponderance of the work was being performed by machines. In the third, however, machines were conspicuously absent. Clearly it was one thing to build a machine with a superhuman work potential, but quite another to build one with a green thumb.

He passed a pasture, and saw animals that looked like cows sleeping in the starlight. He passed a field of newly-sprouted corn. He passed a power plant, and heard the whine of a generator. Finally he came to the outskirts of Pfleugersville.

There was a big illuminated sign by the side of the road. It stopped him in his tracks, and he stood there staring at its embossed letters:

PFLEUGERSVILLE, SIRIUS XXI
Discovered April 1, 1962
Incorporated September 11, 1962

Philip wiped his forehead.

Zarathustra had trotted on ahead. Now he stopped and looked back. *Come on*, he seemed to say. *Now that you've seen this much, you might as well see the rest.*

So Philip entered Pfleugersville ... and fell in love—

Fell in love with the lovely houses, and the darling trees in summer bloom. With the parterres of twinkling star-flowers and the expanses of verdant lawns. With the trellised green roses that tapestried every porch. With the hydrangealike blooms that garnished every corner. With Pfleugersville itself.

Obviously the hour was late, for, other than himself, there was no one on the streets, although lights burned in the windows of some of the houses, and dogs

of the same breed and size as Zarathustra occasionally trotted by. And yet according to his watch the time was 10:51. Maybe, though, Pfleugersville was on different time. Maybe, here in Pfleugersville, it was the middle of the night.

The farther he progressed into the village, the more enchanted he became. He simply couldn't get over the houses. The difference between them and the houses he was familiar with was subtle, but it was there. It was the difference that exists between good- and not-quite-good taste. Here were no standardized patios, but little marble aprons that were as much a part of the over-all architecture as a glen is a part of a woods. Here were no stereotyped picture windows, but walls that blended imperceptibly into pleasing patterns of transparency. Here were no four-square back yards, but rambling star-flowered playgrounds with swings and seesaws and shaded swimming holes; with exquisite doghouses good enough for little girls' dolls to live in.

He passed a school that seemed to grow out of the very ground it stood on. He passed a library that had been built around a huge tree, the branches of which had intertwined their foliage into a living roof. He passed a block-long supermarket built of tinted glass. Finally he came to the park.

He gasped then. Gasped at the delicate trees and the little blue-eyed lakes; at the fairy-fountains and the winding, pebbled paths. Star-flowers shed their multicolored radiance everywhere, and starlight poured prodigally down from the sky. He chose a path at random and walked along it in the twofold radiance till he came to the cynosure.

The cynosure was a statue—a statue of a buck-toothed, wall-eyed youth gazing steadfastly up into the heavens. In one hand the youth held a Phillips screw driver, in the other a six-inch crescent wrench. Standing several yards away and staring raptly up into the statue's face was the youth himself, and so immobile was he that if it hadn't been for the pedestal on which the statue rested, Philip would have been unable to distinguish one from the other.

There was an inscription on the pedestal. He walked over and read it in the light cast by a nearby parterre of star-flowers:

FRANCIS FARNSWORTH
PFLEUGER,
DISCOVERER OF
PFLEUGERSVILLE
Born: May 5. 1941. Died: —

Profession Inventor. On the first day of April of the year of our Lord, 1962, Francis Farnsworth Pfleuger brought into being a Möbius coincidence field and established multiple contact with the twenty-first satellite of the star Sirius, thereby giving the people of Valleyview access, via their back doorways, to a New World. Here we have come to live. Here we have come to raise our children. Here, in this idyllic village, which the noble race that once inhabited this fair planet left behind them when they migrated to the Greater Magellanic Cloud, we have settled down to create a new and better Way of Life. Here, thanks to Francis Farnsworth Pfleuger, we shall know happiness prosperity and freedom from fear.

FRANCIS FARNSWORTH PFLEUGER, WE, THE NEW
INHABITANTS OF SIRIUS XXI, SALUTE YOU!

Philip wiped his forehead again.

Presently he noticed that the flesh-and-blood Francis Pfleuger was looking in his direction. “Me,” the flesh-and-blood Francis Pfleuger said, pointing proudly at the statue. “Me.”

“So I gather,” Philip said dryly. And then. “Zarathustra—come back here!”

The little dog had started down one of the paths that converged on the statue. At Philip's command, he stopped but did not turn; instead he remained where he was, as though waiting for someone to come down the path. After a moment, someone did—Judith Darrow.

She was wearing a simple white dress, reminiscent both in design and décor of a Grecian tunic. A wide gilt belt augmented the effect, and her delicate sandals did nothing to mar it. In the radiance of the star-flowers, her eyes were more gray than green. There were shadows under them, Philip noticed, and the lids were faintly red.

She halted a few feet from him and looked at him without saying a word. “I ... I brought your dog back,” he said lamely. “I found him in the back seat of my car.”

“Thank you. I've been looking all over Pfleugersville for him. I left my Valleyview doors open, hoping he'd come home of his own accord, but I guess he had other ideas. Now that you've discovered our secret, Mr. Myles, what do

you think of our brave new world?”

“I think it's lovely,” Philip said, “but I don't believe it's where you seem to think it is.”

“Don't you?” she asked. “Then suppose you show me the full moon that rose over Valleyview tonight. Or better yet, suppose I show you something else.” She pointed to a region of the heavens just to the left of the statue's turned-up nose. “You can't see them from here,” she said, “but around that insignificant yellow star, nine planets are in orbit. One of them is Earth.”

“But that's impossible!” he objected. “Consider the—”

“Distance? In the sort of space we're dealing with, Mr. Myles, distance is not a factor. In Möbius space—as we have come to call it for lack of a better term—any two given points are coincidental, regardless of how far apart they may be in non-Möbius space. But this becomes manifest only when a Möbius coincidence-field is established. As you probably know by now, Francis Pfleuger created such a field.”

At the mention of his name, Francis Pfleuger came hurrying over to where they were standing. “E,” he declared, “equals mc^2 .”

“Thank you, Francis,” Judith said. Then, to Philip, “Shall we walk?”

They started down one of the converging paths, Zarathustra bringing up the rear. Behind them, Francis returned to his Narcissistic study of himself in stone. “We were neighbors back in Valleyview,” Judith said, “but I never dreamed he thought quite so much of himself. Ever since we put up that statue last week, he's been staring at it night and day. Sometimes he even brings his lunch with him.”

“He seems to be familiar with Einstein.”

“He's not really, though. He memorized the energy-mass equation in an attempt to justify his new status in life, but he hasn't the remotest notion of what it means. It's ironic in a way that Pfleugersville should have been discovered by someone with an IQ of less than seventy-five.”

“No one with an IQ of less than seventy-five could create the sort of field you were talking about.”

“He didn't create it deliberately—he brought it into being accidentally by means

of a machine he was building to tie knots with. Or at least that's what he says. But we do know that there was such a machine because we saw its fused parts in his kitchen, and there's no question but what it was the source of the field. Francis, though, can't remember how he made the parts or how he put them together. As a matter of fact, to this day he still doesn't understand what happened—though I have a feeling that he knows more than he lets on.”

“What *did* happen?” Philip asked.

For a while Judith was silent. Then, “All of us promised solemnly not to divulge our secret to an outsider unless he was first accepted by the group as a whole,” she said. “But thanks to my negligence, you know most of it already, so I suppose you're entitled to know the rest.” She sighed. “Very well—I'll try to explain....”

When Francis Pfleuger's field had come into being, something had happened to the back doors of Valleyview that caused them to open upon a planet which one of the local star-gazers promptly identified as Sirius XXI. The good folk of Valleyview had no idea of how such a state of affairs could exist, to say nothing of how it could have come about, till one of the scientists whom they asked to join them as a part of the plan which they presently devised to make their forthcoming utopia self-sufficient, came up with a theory that explained everything.

According to his theory, the round-trip distance between any two planetary or stella bodies was curved in the manner of a Möbius strip—i.e., a strip of paper given a half-twist before bringing the two ends together. In this case, the strip represented the round-trip distance from Earth to Sirius XXI. Earth was represented on the strip by one dot, and Sirius XXI by another, and, quite naturally, the two dots were an equal distance—or approximately 8.8 light years—apart. This brought them directly opposite one another—one on one side of the strip, the other on the other side; but since a Möbius strip has only one surface—or side—the two dots were actually occupying the same space at the same time. In “Möbius space”, then, Earth and Sirius XXI were “coincidental”.



Philip looked over his shoulder at the little yellow sun twinkling in the sky. “Common sense,” he said, “tells me differently.”

“Common sense is a liar of the first magnitude,” Judith said. “It has misled man ever since he first climbed down from the trees. It was common sense that inspired Ptolemy's theory of cosmogony. It was common sense that inspired the burning of Giordano Bruno....”

The fact that common sense indicated that 8.8 light years separated Earth and Sirius XXI in common-sense reality didn't prove that 8.8 light years separated them in a form of reality that was outside common-sense's dominion—i.e., Möbius space—and Francis Pfleuger's field had demonstrated as much. The back-door nodal areas which it had established, however, were merely limited manifestations of that reality—in other words, the field had merely provided limited access to a form of space that had been in existence all along.

“Though why,” Judith concluded, “our back doors should have been affected rather than our front doors, for example, is inexplicable—unless it was because Francis built the machine in his kitchen. In any event, when they did become nodal areas, they manifested themselves on Sirius XXI, and the dogs in the immediate vicinity associated them with the doorways of their departed masters and began whining to be let in.”

“Their departed masters?”

“The race that built this village. The race that built the factories and developed the encompassing farms. A year ago, according to the records they left behind them, they migrated to the Greater Magellanic Cloud.”

Philip was indignant. “Why didn't they take their dogs with them?”

“They couldn't. After all, they had to leave their cars and their furniture behind them too, not to mention almost unbelievable stockpiles of every metal imaginable that will last us for centuries. The logistics of space travel make taking even an extra handkerchief along a calculated risk. Anyway, when their dogs ‘found’ us, they were overjoyed, and as for us, we fell in love with them at first sight. Our own dogs, though, didn't take to them at all, and every one of them ran away.”

“This can't be the only village,” Philip said. “There must be others somewhere.”

“Undoubtedly there are. All we know is that the people who built this one were the last to leave.”

The park was behind them now, and they were walking down a pleasant street.

“And when you and your neighbors discovered the village, did you decide to become expatriates right then and there?” Philip asked.

She nodded. “Do you blame us? You've seen for yourself what a lovely place it is. But it's far more than that. In Valleyview, we had unemployment. Here, there is work for everyone, and a corresponding feeling of wantedness and togetherness. True, most of the work is farmwork, but what of that? We have every conceivable kind of machine to help us in our tasks. Indeed, I think that the only machine the Sirians lacked was one that could manufacture food out of whole cloth. But consider the most important advantage of all: when we go to bed at night we can do so without being afraid that sometime during our sleep a thermonuclear missile will descend out of the sky and devour us in one huge incandescent bite. If we've made a culture hero out of our village idiot, it's no more than right, for unwittingly or not, he opened up the gates of paradise.”

“And you immediately saw to it that no one besides yourselves and a chosen few would pass through them.”

Judith paused beside a white gate. “Yes, that's true,” she said. “To keep our secret, we lived in our old houses while we were settling our affairs, closing down our few industries and setting up a new monetary system. In fact, we even kept our ... the children in the dark for fear that they would talk at school. Suppose, however, we *had* publicized our utopia. Can't you imagine the mockery opportunists would have made out of it? The village we found was large enough to accommodate ourselves and the few friends, relatives and specialists we asked to join us, but no larger; and we did, after all, find it in our own back yard.” She placed her hand on the white gate. “This is where I live.”

He looked at the house, and it was enchanting. Slightly less enchanting, but delightful in its own right, was the much smaller house beside it. Judith pointed toward the latter dwelling and looked at Zarathustra. “It's almost morning, Zarathustra,” she said sternly. “Go to bed this minute!” She opened the gate so that the little dog could pass through and raised her eyes to Philip. “Our time is different here,” she explained. And then, “I'm afraid you'll have to hurry if you expect to make it to my back door before the field dies out.”

He felt suddenly empty. “Dies out?” he repeated numbly.

“Yes. We don't know why, but it's been diminishing in strength ever since it first came into being, and our ‘Möbius-strip scientist’ has predicted that it will cease to exist during the next twenty-four hours. I guess I don't need to remind you that you have important business on Earth.”

“No,” he said, “I guess you don't.” His emptiness bowed out before a wave of bitterness. He had rested his hand on the gate, as close to hers as he had dared. Now he saw that while it was inches away from hers in one sense, it was light years away in another. He removed it angrily. “Business always comes first with you, doesn't it?”

“Yes. Business never lets you down.”

“Do you know what I think?” Philip said. “I think that you were the one who did the selling out, not your husband. I think you sold him out for a law practice.”

Her face turned white as though he had slapped it, and in a sense, he had. “Good-by,” she said, and this time he was certain that if he were to reach out and touch her, she would shatter into a million pieces. “Give my love to the planet Earth,” she added icily.

“Good-by,” Philip said, his anger gone now, and the emptiness rushing back. “Don't sell us short, though—we'll make a big splash in your sky one of these days when we blow ourselves up.”

He turned and walked away. Walked out of the enchanting village and down the highway and across the flower-pulsing plain to Judith's back doorway. It was unlighted now, and he had trouble distinguishing it from the others. Its shimmering blue framework was flickering. Judith had not lied then: the field was dying out.

He locked the back door behind him, walked sadly through the dark and empty house and let himself out the front door. He locked the front door behind him, too, and went down the walk and climbed into his car. He had thought he had locked it, but apparently he hadn't. He drove out of town and down the road to

the highway, and down the highway toward the big bright bonfire of the city.

Dawn was exploring the eastern sky with pale pink fingers when at last he parked his car in the garage behind his apartment building. He reached into the back seat for his brief case and the manila envelopes. His brief case had hair on it. It was soft and warm. “Ruf,” it barked. “Ruf-ruf!”

He knew then that everything was all right. Just because no one had invited him to the party didn't mean that he couldn't invite himself. He would have to hurry, though—he had a lot of things to do, and time was running out.

Noon found him on the highway again, his business transacted, his affairs settled, Zarathustra sitting beside him on the seat. One o'clock found him driving into Valleyview; two-five found him turning down a familiar street. He would have to leave his car behind him, but that was all right. Leaving it to rust away in a ghost town was better than selling it to some opportunistic dealer for a sum he would have no use for anyway. He parked it by the curb, and after getting his suitcase out of the trunk, walked up to the front door of Number 23. He unlocked and opened the door, and after Zarathustra followed him inside, closed and locked it behind him. He strode through the house to the kitchen. He unlocked and opened the back door. He stepped eagerly across the threshold—and stopped dead still.

There were boards beneath his feet instead of grass. Instead of a flower-pied plain, he saw a series of unkempt back yards. Beside him on an unpainted trellis, Virginia creeper rattled in an October wind.

Zarathustra came out behind him, descended the back-porch steps and ran around the side of the house. Looking for the green-rose bush probably.

“Ruf!”

Zarathustra had returned and was looking up at him from the bottom step. On the top step he had placed an offering.

The offering was a green rose.

Philip bent down and picked it up. It was fresh, and its fragrance epitomized the very essence of Sirius XXI. “Zarathustra,” he gasped, “where did you get it?”

“Ruf!” said Zarathustra, and ran around the side of the house.

Philip followed, rounded the corner just in time to see the white-tipped tail disappear into the ancient dog house. Disappointment numbed him. That was where the rose had been then—stored away for safe-keeping like an old and worthless bone.

But the rose was fresh, he reminded himself.

Did dog houses have back doorways?

This one did, he saw, kneeling down and peering inside. A lovely back doorway, rimmed with shimmering blue. It framed a familiar vista, in the foreground of which a familiar green-rosebush stood. Beneath the rosebush Zarathustra sat, wagging his tail.

It was a tight squeeze, but Philip made it. He even managed to get his suitcase through. And just in time too, for hardly had he done so when the doorway began to flicker. Now it was on its way out, and as he watched, it faded into transparency and disappeared.

He crawled from beneath the rosebush and stood up. The day was bright and warm, and the position of the sun indicated early morning or late afternoon. No, not sun—suns. One of them was a brilliant blue-white orb, the other a twinkling point of light.

He set off across the plain in Zarathustra's wake. He had a speech already prepared, and when Judith met him at the gate with wide and wondering eyes, he delivered it without preamble. "Judith," he said, "I am contemptuous of the notion that some things are meant to be and others aren't, and I firmly believe in my own free will; but when your dog stows away in the back seat of my car two times running and makes it impossible for me not to see you again, then there must be something afoot which neither you nor I can do a thing about. Whatever it is, I have given in to it and have transferred your real estate to an agent more trustworthy than myself. I know you haven't known me long, and I know I'm not an accepted member of your group, but maybe somebody will give me a job raking lawns or washing windows or hoeing corn long enough for me to prove that I am not in the least antisocial; and maybe, in time, you yourself will get to know me well enough to realize that while I have a weakness for blondes who look like Grecian goddesses, I have no taste whatever for redheads, brunettes, or Cutty Sark. In any event, I have burned my bridges behind me, and whether I ever become a resident of Pfleugersville or not, I have already become a resident of Sirius XXI."

Judith Darrow was silent for some time. Then, “This morning,” she said, “I wanted to ask you to join us, but I couldn't for two reasons. The first was your commitment to sell our houses, the second was my bitterness toward men. You have eliminated the first, and the second seems suddenly inane.” She raised her eyes. “Philip, please join us. I want you to.”

Zarathustra, whose real name was Siddenon Phenphonderill, left them standing there in each other's arms and trotted down the street and out of town. He covered the ground in easy lopes that belied his three hundred and twenty-five years, and soon he arrived at the Meeting Place. The mayors of the other villages had been awaiting him since early morning and were shifting impatiently on their haunches. When he clambered up on the rostrum they extended their audio-appendages and retractile fingers and accorded him a round of applause. He extended his own “hands” and held them up for silence, then, retracting them again, he seated himself before the little lectern and began his report, the idiomatic translation of which follows forthwith:

“Gentlemen, my apologies for my late arrival. I will touch upon the circumstances that were responsible for it presently.

“To get down to the matter uppermost in your minds: Yes, the experiment was a success, and if you will use your psycho-transmutative powers to remodel your villages along the lines my constituents and I remodeled ours and to build enough factories to give your ‘masters’ that sense of self-sufficiency so essential to their well-being, and if you will ‘plant’ your disassembled Multiple Möbius-Knot Dynamos in such a way that the resultant fields will be ascribed to accidental causes, you will have no more trouble attracting personnel than we did. Just make sure that your ‘masters’ quarters are superior to your own, and that you behave like dogs in their presence. And when you fabricate your records concerning your mythical departed masters, see to it that they do not conflict with the records we fabricated concerning ours. It would be desirable indeed if our Sirian-human society could be based on less deceitful grounds than these, but the very human attitude we are exploiting renders this impossible at the moment. I hate to think of the resentment we would incur were we to reveal that, far from being the mere dogs we seem to be, we are capable of mentally transmuting natural resources into virtually anything from a key to a concert hall, and I hate even more to think of the resentment we would incur were we to reveal that, for all our ability in the inanimate field, we have never been able to materialize so much as a single blade of grass in the animate field, and that our reason for coincidentalizing the planet Earth and creating our irresistible little

utopias stems not from a need for companionship but from a need for gardeners. However, you will find that all of this can be ironed out eventually through the human children, with whom you will be thrown into daily contact and whom you will find to possess all of their parents' abiding love for us and none of their parents' superior attitude toward us. To a little child, a dog is a companion, not a pet; an equal, not an inferior—and the little children of today will be the grown-ups of tomorrow.

“To return to the circumstances that occasioned my late arrival: I ... I must confess, gentlemen, that I became quite attached to the ‘mistress’ into whose house I sought entry when we first established our field and who subsequently adopted me when I convinced her real dog that he would find greener pastures elsewhere. So greatly attached did I become, in fact, that when the opportunity of ostracizing her loneliness presented itself, I could not refrain from taking advantage of it. The person to whom she was most suited and who was most suited to her appeared virtually upon her very doorstep; but in her stubbornness and in her pride she aggravated rather than encouraged him, causing him to rebel against the natural attraction he felt toward her. I am happy to report that, by means of a number of subterfuges—the final one of which necessitated the use of our original doorway—I was able to set this matter right, and that these two once-lonely people are about to embark upon a relationship which in their folklore is oftentimes quaintly alluded to by the words, ‘They lived happily ever after.’

“And now, gentlemen, the best of luck to you and your constituents, and may you end up with servants as excellent as ours. I hereby declare this meeting adjourned.”

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