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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE INDULGENCE OF NEGU MAH ***

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In silence Negu Mah and Sliss stood silent gazing at the moon drenched field.

The Indulgence of Negu Mah

by **ROBERT ARTHUR**

In his garden, Negu Mah, the Callisto uranium merchant, sat sipping a platinum mug of

mol kai with his guest, Sliss the Venusian.

Nanlo, his wife, pushing before her the small serving cart with its platinum mol kai decanter, paused for an instant as she entered the shell of pure vitrite which covered the garden, giving it the illusion of out-of-dooriness.

Negu Mah sat at his ease, his broad, merry, half-Oriental face good-humored, his features given a ruddy tinge by the light of rising Jupiter, the edge of whose sphere was beginning to dominate the horizon. Sliss, the intelligent amphibian, squatted across from him in the portable tub of water which he carried with him whenever absent from the swamps of his native Venus.

The amphibian's popping eyes turned toward her, the wide frog-face split in a smile of appreciation as Nanlo approached. She refilled their mugs deftly and withdrew. But before she reentered the house she could not resist hesitating to glance toward rising Jupiter and the slim shaft of the rocketship silhouetted now against its surface.

The ship was the cargo rocket Vulcan, newest and swiftest of Negu Mah's freighter fleet. Fully fueled and provisioned, storage space jammed with refrigerated foods that in space the cold of the encompassing void would keep perfectly for generations were it necessary, she would take off in the morning from the close-by landing port for Jupiter's other satellites, then go on to the Saturnian system, returning finally with full holds of uranium for Negu Mah's refineries on Callisto.

She was a beautiful craft, the Vulcan, and one man could manage her, though her normal crew was seven. She had cost a great sum. But Negu Mah was wealthy.

Nanlo's face, sylph-like in its beauty, hardened. Negu Mah was wealthy indeed. Had he not bought her, and had she not cost him more, much more, than the Vulcan?

But no, it was not quite accurate to say that Negu Mah had bought her. However, since time immemorial beautiful daughters had been, if not sold, yet urged into marriages to wealthy men for the benefit of their impoverished families. And though science had made great strides, conquering the realms of the telescope and invading those below the level of the microscope, finding cures for almost every disease the flesh of man was heir to, there was one ailment it had not yet conquered—poverty.

Nanlo's father had been a rocket port attendant. Once he had been a pilot, but a crash had crippled him for life. Thereafter, his wages had been quite insufficient to sustain him, his brood of half a dozen children, and their hard-working mother.

But Nanlo, growing up, had developed into a mature beauty that rivaled the exotic loveliness of the wild orchids of Io. And in debarking at the rocket port on a business trip to earth, because hurricanes had forced him to land far south of New York, Negu Mah had seen her.

Thereafter—But that is a story as ancient as history too.

It was a truth Nanlo conveniently overlooked now that she had not been unwilling to be Negu Mah's bride. It was true she had driven a sharp bargain with him—her father's debts paid, and sufficient more to ease her parents' life and educate her brothers and sisters. Plus a marriage settlement for herself, and a sum in escrow in the Earth Union bank, should she ever divorce him for cruelty or mistreatment. But that had been only innate shrewdness. She would still have married him had he refused her demands for her family. For his wealth fascinated her, and the prospect of being a virtual queen, even of a distant outpost colony such as that on Callisto, appealed to her.

And she had thought that she was taking little risk, for if she were dissatisfied, the law these days was very lenient toward unhappy marital relationships. It required only definite proof of misconduct, mistreatment, or oppression of any kind to win freedom from an unwanted partner. Nanlo had been confident that after a year or two she would be able to shake free of the bonds uniting her to Negu Mah and take flight for herself into a world made vastly more pleasant by the marriage settlement remaining to her.

But now she had been married, and had lived on Callisto, for a full five years, and her tolerance of Negu Mah had long since turned to bitter hate. Not because he was a bad husband, but because he was too good a one!

There was an ironic humor in the situation, but Nanlo was not disposed to recognize it. Lenient as the law was, yet it required some grounds before it could free her. And she had no grounds whatever. Negu Mah was at all times the model of courtesy and consideration toward her. He granted every reasonable wish and some that were unreasonable—although when he refused one of the latter, it was with a firmness as unshakeable as a rock.

Their home was as fine as any on earth. She had more than adequate help in taking care of

it. She had ample time for any pursuits that interested her. But she used it only to become more and more bitter against Negu Mah because she could find no excuse to divorce him.

So great had her bitterness become that, if she could have gotten off Callisto in any way, she would have deserted him. This would have meant forfeiting her marriage settlement and the sum that was in escrow. It would also have left her father in debt to Negu Mah for all that Negu Mah had given him. But Nanlo's passionate rebellion had reached such a state of ferment in her breast that she would have accepted all this to strike a blow at the plump, smiling man who now sat drinking molkai in their garden with their guest from Venus.

The answer to that was—Negu Mah would not let her leave Callisto. The journey to earth, he logically argued, was still one containing a large element of danger. There was no reason for her to visit any other planet, and law and custom required that she look after their home while he himself was away on business.

In this he was unshakeable. There was a stern and unyielding side to him, inherited perhaps from his Eastern ancestors, that left Nanlo shaken and frightened when it appeared. She had seen it the one time she had seriously gone into a tantrum in an effort to make him let her take a trip to earth. It had so startled and terrified her that she had never used those tactics again.

But now, as she wheeled away the molkai decanter and left Negu Mah and Sliss to themselves, joy and exultation was singing in her. Doubly. For she was going to run away from Negu Mah, run away with the man she loved, and in their flight they were going to steal the Vulcan. Thus Negu Mah would be doubly punished. He would be hurt in his pride and in his pocketbook. And all through the Jupiter and Saturn systems, where his wealth, his position, and his beautiful wife were openly envied, he would be laughed at and derided.

Humming lightly under her breath, Nanlo put the molkai decanter away in a little pantry and hurried on to her own apartment. Molkai was a powerful, though non-habit-forming drink. Under its influence one became talkative, but disinclined to movement. Sliss and her husband would remain as they were for hours, leaving her free to do as she would. The servants were asleep in another part of the building, and there was no one to note as she changed her clothes swiftly for a light, warm travelling suit, caught up two small bags, one holding her personal things, the other her jewels, and let herself out through her own private entrance into the darkness of the rear gardens.

Where in the shadows the tall, blonde young engineer, Hugh Neils, was waiting for her....

Negu Mah, when his beautiful wife had left the garden, sighed and put to one side his mug of molkai.

"Sliss, my friend," he said to the Venusian, who was regarding him with large, unblinking pop-eyes, "I am troubled in my mind. Tonight I must dispense justice. Justice to myself and justice to another. To be just is often to be terribly cruel."

Sliss blinked, once, a film moving horizontally across his large eyes and retracting, to show that he understood. Due to the difficulty of using his artificial speech mechanism, he refrained from speaking until speech was necessary.

"My wife, Nanlo," Negu Mah said heavily, "is unhappy. I have done all that is in my power to make her happy, but I have failed. She has made some requests that I have denied, namely, to be permitted freedom to visit earth. That I denied because I knew the paths she intended to tread would not have led her to happiness either, and I hoped that in the end, here she would find contentment. I have hoped in vain. Tonight she intends to take matters into her own hands."

Sliss blinked again, politely, to indicate that he was interested if Negu Mah cared to tell him more. Negu Mah rose.

"My friend," he said, "if you will come with me, I will show you what I mean."

Sliss grasped the edge of his tub with webbed hands and swung his webbed, yellow-skinned feet free from the water which kept the sensitive membranes from drying, and at the same time supplied his body tissues with liquid. Falling upon all fours, like a great, misshapen pet, he waddled awkwardly after his host.

Negu Mah led him to an elevator within the house. This took them to a higher floor, and there they followed a corridor to the rear of the building. Here Negu Mah, without showing a light, opened a door, and in silence they moved out upon a small balcony overlooking the rear gardens, which were shrouded in darkness because rising Jupiter was on the opposite side of the building.

They had stood there only a moment when below them a door opened, and a small figure

slipped through. Another figure appeared from beneath the shadows of a cluster of slender, purple neklo trees and moved forward to greet the first. They met in the center of a tiny open space, where a fountain spurting through holes in crystal made a sweet murmuring music. And to the two watchers rose whispered words—"Nanlo! Nanlo, my darling!" "Hugh! Oh, Hugh, my love, hold me close and tell me that everything is ready for us to leave!"

Hugh Neils' arms held her close, and his lips were hot on hers. That he was here as they had planned meant that he had succeeded in the other plans they had agreed upon. Exultation soared higher in Nanlo's breast.

"Then we can go? Go now?" she asked eagerly, as Hugh Neils released her. "The crew is asleep? You were able to arrange it?"

The young engineer looked down at her, his thin face a pale blur in the darkness.

"In five minutes, just five minutes, Nanlo, my own," he whispered. "I left the guard half an hour ago, drinking molkai into which I put a sleeping powder. Give him five more minutes to fall asleep, then we can go to the ship unseen, unchecked. Until then, we can wait here in the garden."

He led her toward the trilling fountain and they sat down upon a bench before it, of rare Callisto crystal. They still were in darkness, but the flame-like Jupiter light touched the tops of the neklo trees above them with a ruddy light which brought faint glimmerings from the radioactive leaves.

Hugh Neils was a recent college graduate whom Negu Mah had hired as an assistant supervisor in the refining mills on Callisto, where the precious uranium 235 was separated from the ordinary metal. It was not a desirable job, but the best Hugh Neils could get. His college record of reckless scrapes and entanglements with women had been against him. Indeed, this position had only come to him because his home was in the same section as Nanlo's, and Negu Mah had thought that perhaps his company on occasion would help alleviate Nanlo's restlessness.

It had—but to an extent Negu Mah had not foreseen.

"In less than a quarter of an hour, Nanlo my darling," Hugh Neils whispered now, "we'll be gone from here, and you'll belong only to me. We'll leave this infernal barren satellite to spin itself dizzy out here in no place. We'll leave that humpty-dumpty husband of yours and his hypocritical good-nature to whistle for his wife and his ship. We won't care. We'll be together, always together from now on, and he'll never see us again."

Nanlo leaned against his shoulder, the prospect that he painted seemed very sweet to her.

"You're sure you can manage the ship alone?" she asked. "But of course, I can help, a little anyway. You can teach me."

"Of course," Hugh Neils answered confidently, and bent to kiss her again. "I've been studying her for a week, asking questions, making friends with the crew. I can handle her one-handed. We'll take off and circle Jupiter first. They may think we landed on the other side, in the Outlaw Crevice. Or they may figure that we went on to Saturn, and will hide somewhere in the system there.

"But we won't do either, and they won't know where to look for us. Instead of turning back on the other side of Jupiter, we'll make a tangential angle out into space. We'll hold it for a month, for safety's sake. We could hold for fifty years, or a hundred, if we needed to. There's fuel and provisions, meant for the mines, enough to last that long.

"At the end of the month, we'll swing back, cut into the path of the sun, and pick up Mars as she comes in from behind Sol.

"On Mars, we can sell the Vulcan. There's an outfit in the Equator Zone, in the mountains west of the Great Canal, that will buy her and no questions asked. I learned about them from a fraternity brother while I was in college. He'd run into some hard luck, they gave him a job, and he was making money hand over fist. They're asteroid miners. The work they do is illegal, but it's perfectly justified morally. What right have men with more money than they know what to do with to own everything in the Solar System? How can a young fellow get a start any more, when corporations and rich old fogies own everything?"

"Maybe I'll join up with this outfit. After we've sold the ship I'll see. How does that sound to you?"

"Wonderful, Hugh," Nanlo whispered. "But I don't care about that. All I want is for us to be together. Always. You and me, and our love, together for eternity. That's all I want."

"That's all I want, too, darling Nanlo," Hugh Neils told her passionately, and kissed her.

"Together, forever. Just you and me."

Nanlo sighed, with luxuriant happiness, and peered at his radiumite wrist watch.

"The five minutes are up," she murmured. "Can't we go now?"

Hugh Neils nodded.

"We've waited plenty long enough," he decided. "The guard will be asleep by now. The crew were that way when I left them, in the dormitory. I saw that they had plenty of spiked molkai at dinner. Pretended it was my birthday celebration. And the ship's all ready and waiting for the take-off. All we have to do is lock the port and close the rising switch."

The two on the bench by the fountain rose, and for a long minute were locked in an embrace. Then they turned toward the dark-shadowed trees and disappeared beneath them, in the direction of the nearby space port.

Negu Mah silently turned back into the house. Sliss shuffled after him. The uranium merchant led the way back to the vitrite covered garden and there, a little wearily, resumed his seat and picked up his mug again. Sliss climbed back into his tub of water, sighed gratefully at the comfort it gave him, and then turned his pop-eyes toward his host. He blinked once, inquiringly, and Negu Mah understood that the intelligent amphibian was asking if he intended to do nothing to stop the pair who were running away.

Negu Mah sipped pensively at his drink.

"If she had only told me," he murmured. "If she had only come to me and said she desired her freedom. If they had only both come together and faced me, saying that though it meant giving up all they had, they wanted only each other! I would have been generous. I would have been indulgent. But they did not. They had not the courage. They were afraid of me. And they hated me."

Negu Mah was silent for a moment. Both he and his guest stared toward the graceful shaft of the Vulcan, now fully silhouetted against the whole tremendous bulk of Jupiter, sitting like a titanic scarlet egg upon the horizon of Callisto. The Jupiter light flooded the vitrite garden, gave the plants there, chosen with an eye to this, strange, exotic, glowing colors, flushed Negu Mah and Sliss with a ruby radiance.

Towards that dark, waiting craft the two they had watched were even now stealing, tense with the weight of their daring and their crime. In a moment they would reach her, enter her, actuate machinery that was miraculous in its complex simplicity, and be gone then on the wings it gave them into the concealing embrace of universal space.

"You see, my friend Sliss," Negu Mah said finally, "Nanlo is beautiful, but there is nothing within. Her beauty deceived me. I thought that where such loveliness existed, there must be a soul to animate it. I was wrong. She is like an imitation gem—beautiful on the surface, paste within. Yet the mistake was mine, and I did not blame her. I indulged her, and still hoped that something real would bloom within her."

He drained the molkai in his mug, one great gulp, and slumped back.

"The young man, too, Hugh Neils. I thought he would be a companion for her. But he too is weak. Yet they say they love each other. They swear—we heard them—that they want only each other and their love for all time."

Sliss blinked, twice, and Negu Mah nodded.

"Yes," he said. "If they carry out their plans as we heard them, that feeling will soon go. The sale of the Vulcan, even as stolen property, would give them many credits. After that—luxury, self-indulgence. And their natures are too weak to withstand the ravages of such things. So I have been troubled to know what to do."

"You see, my friend from Venus, though I would have let Nanlo go had she asked me, my own honor is at stake when she seeks to deal me an injury by slipping away in the night, and stealing from me the Vulcan. She is doing evil, and must be punished. The young man, too—indulgent as I am, I can not let him dishonor me thus without paying any penalty."

Sliss' eye membranes shut, questioningly.

"Yet," the uranium merchant went on, "I have a fondness for Nanlo. I will not prevent her from doing as she has chosen to do, for the intent would still be there, and knowing it as I do, all between us is over. I can not aid her to fulfill her plans, either, for that is to injure her and myself too. But there is another course. I have chosen that."

He gestured with one plump hand toward the silhouetted ship.

"I believe they have entered the Vulcan," he announced. "I saw light as the entrance port opened then."

The amphibian's great, frog head nodded agreement.

"So," Negu Mah continued, "I have decided to exercise what indulgence I can in the face of the injury they would do me. They shall have their chance."

He fell silent again. Sliss leaned forward in his tub. Both of them watched intently. A flare of greenish light had sprung up beneath the black pillar that was the Vulcan. For just an instant the freighter stood there, green radiance expanding around her. Then she leaped into the sky.

With her leap, she seemed to suck the radiance along. It became a great cone of glowing light that, arrow-like, raced away upward. For a long instant the black length of the ship, and the greenish fan of flame, were outlined against the scarlet background of Jupiter. Then the freighter rocket, flinging herself upward at three gravities or better, passed the edge of the planet and vanished.

Negu Mah sat very quiet for some moments. But at last he stirred again. Sliss' eyes turned toward him, immobile.

"Sometimes love transforms the weak," the uranium merchant said slowly. "Like fire giving temper to soft metal. Sometimes a mutual love will endure for all eternity, and the two who share it will gain from it a soul they did not have before. Nanlo and Hugh Neils have this chance. Both said they wanted only the other, and their love, for all eternity. To gain this, both were willing to cheat, to steal, to dishonor me and themselves.

"So, Sliss, my understanding friend, they have paid the price, they shall have what they ask for.

"As the man, Hugh Neils, said, there is fuel and food in the holds of the Vulcan to run the motors and last the lifetime of a man—or a man and a woman. Indeed, two lifetimes, or three, for I was aware of their plans, and secretly I placed aboard the craft many additional supplies. Fuel, and food, and books, and tools. And one additional thing the two who flee now there in space have not counted upon.

"Into the controls of the Vulcan one of my engineers has placed a small device. After two hundred hours, or when they are well beyond Jupiter, this device will swing the Vulcan straight toward Proxima Centauri, the nearest star. In that position the controls will lock. And for twenty years, a generation, it will be impossible either to alter the course of the Vulcan or to shut her blast motors off.

"At the end of that time the last tank of reserve fuel will be exhausted, and they will cease automatically. Then once more the Vulcan may be controlled by those aboard. They may switch the motors onto the tanks of fuel in the cargo holds, and continue onwards. If they were celestial navigators, they might try to turn, and seek earth again. But they are not navigators, and the sun will be but a tiny spark in the limitless darkness, one with a million others, not to be told apart. They will know that only Proxima Centauri in all space may the Vulcan hope to reach in their lifetime, or perhaps even in that of their descendants, for a message to that effect they will find presently.

"So it may be that they will continue onward of their own choice. If they make no choice, momentum will carry them onward, perhaps forever.

"But in any case, Nanlo and Hugh Neils will have exactly what they have asked for—each other, for all eternity. If truly that was what they wanted, a great destiny may be theirs. A lifetime of travel can bring them to the stars. They or their descendants can be the first humans to bridge the gap of nothingness that has thus far daunted the stoutest hearts."

As they watched, the green dart of light dwindled and was gone. And quite invisible at last in the arms of outer darkness, the Vulcan sped its two passengers onward toward the stars.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE INDULGENCE OF NEGU MAH ***

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