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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK SERVICE WITH A SMILE ***

Service with a Smile

*Herbert was truly a gentleman
robot. The ladies' slightest
wish was his command....*

BY CHARLES L. FONTENAY

HERBERT bowed with a muted clank—indicating he probably needed oiling somewhere—and presented Alice with a perfect martini on a silver tray. He stood holding the tray, a white, permanent porcelain smile on his smooth metal face, as Alice sipped the drink and grimaced.

"It's a good martini, Herbert," said Alice. "Thank you. But, dammit, I wish you didn't have that everlasting smile!"

"I am very sorry, Miss Alice, but I am unable to alter myself in any way," replied Herbert in his polite, hollow voice.

He retired to a corner and stood impassively, still holding the tray. Herbert had found a silver deposit and made the tray. Herbert had found sand and made the cocktail glass. Herbert had combined God knew what atmospheric and earth chemicals to make what tasted like gin and vermouth, and Herbert had frozen the ice to chill it.

"Sometimes," said Thera wistfully, "it occurs to me it would be better to live in a mud hut with a real man than in a mansion with Herbert."

The four women lolled comfortably in the living room of their spacious house, as luxurious as anything any of them would have known on distant Earth. The rugs were thick, the furniture was overstuffed, the paintings on the walls were aesthetic and inspiring, the shelves were filled with booktapes and musictapes.

Herbert had done it all, except the booktapes and musictapes, which had been salvaged from the wrecked spaceship.

"Do you suppose we'll ever escape from this best of all possible manless worlds?" asked Betsy,



Illustrated by Paul Orban

fluffing her thick black hair with her fingers and inspecting herself in a Herbert-made mirror.

"I don't see how," answered blond Alice glumly. "That atmospheric trap would wreck any other ship just as it wrecked ours, and the same magnetic layer prevents any radio message from getting out. No, I'm afraid we're a colony."

"A colony perpetuates itself," reminded sharp-faced Marguerite, acidly. "We aren't a colony, without men."

They were not the prettiest four women in the universe, nor the youngest. The prettiest women and the youngest did not go to space. But they were young enough and healthy enough, or they could not have gone to space.

It had been a year and a half now—an Earth year and a half on a nice little planet revolving around a nice little yellow sun. Herbert, the robot, was obedient and versatile and had provided them with a house, food, clothing, anything they wished created out of the raw elements of earth and air and water. But the bones of all the men who had been aspace with these four ladies lay mouldering in the wreckage of their spaceship.

And Herbert could not create a man. Herbert did not have to have direct orders, and he had tried once to create a man when he had overheard them wishing for one. They had buried the corpse—perfect in every detail except that it never had been alive.

"It's been a hot day," said Alice, fanning her brow. "I wish it would rain."

Silently, Herbert moved from his corner and went out the door.

Marguerite gestured after him with a bitter little laugh.

"It'll rain this afternoon," she said. "I don't know how Herbert does it—maybe with silver iodide. But it'll rain. Wouldn't it have been simpler to get him to air-condition the house, Alice?"

"That's a good idea," said Alice thoughtfully. "We should have had him do it before."

HERBERT had not quite completed the task of air-conditioning the house when the other spaceship crashed. They all rushed out to the smoking site—the four women and Herbert.

It was a tiny scoutship, and its single occupant was alive.

He was unconscious, but he was alive. And he was a man!

They carted him back to the house, tenderly, and put him to bed. They hovered over him like four hens over a single chick, waiting and watching for him to come out of his coma, while Herbert scurried about creating and administering the necessary medicines.

"He'll live," said Thera happily. Thera had been a space nurse. "He'll be on his feet and walking around in a few weeks."

"A man!" murmured Betsy, with something like awe in her voice. "I could almost believe Herbert brought him here in answer to our prayers."

"Now, girls," said Alice, "we have to realize that a man brings problems, as well as possibilities."

There was a matter-of-fact hardness to her tone which almost masked the quiver behind it. There was a defiant note of competition there which had not been heard on this little planet before.

"What do you mean?" asked Thera.

"I know what she means," said Marguerite, and the new hardness came natural to her. "She means, which one of us gets him?"

Betsy, the youngest, gasped, and her mouth rounded to a startled O. Thera blinked, as though she were coming out of a daze.

"That's right," said Alice. "Do we draw straws, or do we let him choose?"

"Couldn't we wait?" suggested Betsy timidly. "Couldn't we wait until he gets well?"

Herbert came in with a new thermometer and poked it into the unconscious man's mouth. He stood by the bed, waiting patiently.

"No, I don't think we can," said Alice. "I think we ought to have it all worked out and agreed on, so there won't be any dispute about it."

"I say, draw straws," said Marguerite. Marguerite's face was thin, and she had a skinny figure.

Betsy, the youngest, opened her mouth, but Thera forestalled her.

"We are not on Earth," she said firmly, in her soft, mellow voice. "We don't have to follow terrestrial customs, and we shouldn't. There's only one solution that will keep everybody happy—all of us and the man."

"And that is...?" asked Marguerite drily.

"Polygamy, of course. He must belong to us all."

Betsy shuddered but, surprisingly, she nodded.

"That's well and good," agreed Marguerite, "but we have to agree that no one of us will be favored above the others. He has to understand that from the start."

"That's fair," said Alice, pursing her lips. "Yes, that's fair. But I agree with Marguerite: he must be divided equally among the four of us."


Chattering over the details, the hard competitiveness vanished from their tones, the four left the sickroom to prepare supper.

After supper they went back in.

Herbert stood by the bed, the eternal smile of service on his metal face. As always, Herbert had not required a direct command to accede to their wishes.

The man was divided into four quarters, one for each of them. It was a very neat surgical job.

END

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