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Title: Clean Break

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Release Date: May 2, 2010 [EBook #32212]

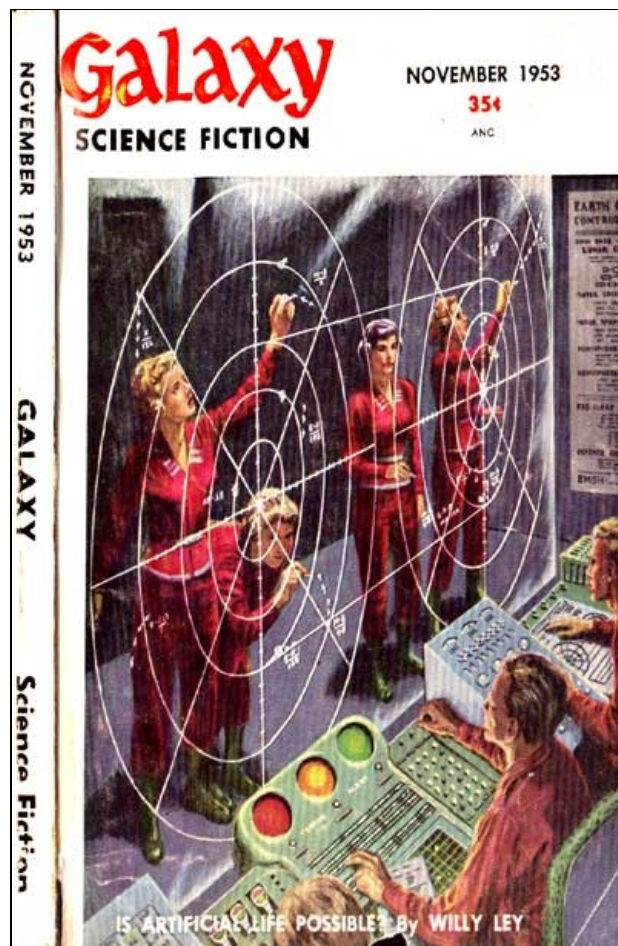
Language: English

Credits: Produced by Sankar Viswanathan, Greg Weeks, and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <http://www.pgdp.net>

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Transcriber's Note:

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CLEAN BREAK

By **ROGER DEE**

Illustrated by **CONNELL**

A veteran veterinarian might have vamoosed—but Watts had to help any sick animal...

Nothing more exciting ever happened to Oliver Watts than being rejected by his draft board for a punctured eardrum until, deferring as usual to the superior judgment of his Aunt Katisha and of Glenna—his elder and militantly spinster sister—he put away his lifelong dream and took up, at the age of twenty-five, the practice of veterinary medicine.

The relinquished dream was Oliver's ambition, cherished since childhood, to become some day a hunter and trainer of jungle animals. It had been discouraged firmly and at length by his Aunt Katisha, who maintained that the skin of the last male Watts was not to be risked in a pursuit so perilous; and his Aunt Katisha won. He would do far better, Oliver realized finally, to resign himself to the quiet suburban life of Landsdale, Florida, and to perpetuate the Watts line by marrying some worthy and practical local girl. The quiet life, it developed, was that of a D. V. M.; the worthy and practical girl, Miss Orella Simms of Tampa, to whom he was now engaged.

To put it plainly, Oliver was until the moment of his Great Opportunity a good-humored stooge with a cowlick and a sense of responsibility, whose invariable cue was family obligation and whose crowning virtue was docility. He was maneuvered into becoming a D. V. M. (though to tell the truth the profession suited him well enough, being the nearest possible approach to realizing his ambition) solely because the veterinary college in Tampa was near enough to Landsdale for commuting and because his later practice could be carried on under the guiding aegis of his personal matriarchy. The virtuous, and vapid, Orella Simms became his fiancée by the same tactics and for the same reasons.

Oliver *had* considered rebellion, of course, but common sense discouraged the idea. He had no intimates outside his family nor any experience with the world beyond Landsdale and Tampa, and his fledgling self-confidence invariably bogged down in a welter of introspective apprehensions when he thought of running away. Where would he go, and to whom could he turn in emergency?

Such was the character and condition of Oliver Watts when his newly undertaken practice of veterinary medicine threw him into the company of "Mr. Thomas Furnay" and of a girl whose name, as nearly as it can be rendered into English, was Perrl-high-C-trill-and-A-above. Their advent brought Oliver face to face for the first time in his sedentary life with High Adventure—with adventure so high, as a matter of fact, that it took him literally and bodily out of this humdrum world.

The initial step was taken when Mr. Furnay, known to Landsdale as a wealthy and eccentric old recluse who had recently leased a walled property on Federal Route 27 that had once been the winter retreat of a Prohibition-era gangster, was driven by emergency to call upon Oliver for professional service. Mr. Furnay usually kept very much to himself behind his iron-grilled gates and his miles of stuccoed wall; but it happened that in pursuit of his business (whose true nature would have confounded Landsdale to its insular core) he had just bought up the entire menagerie of an expiring circus billed as Skadarian Brothers, and it was the sudden illness of one of his newly acquired animals that forced him to breach his isolation.

Mr. Furnay called at the Watts place in his town car, driven by a small, dark and taciturn chauffeur named Bivins. He found Oliver at work in his neatly ordered clinic at the rear of the big house, busily spooning cod-liver oil into a trussed and thoroughly outraged chow named Champ.

"I have a sick animal," Mr. Furnay stated tersely. He was a slight man with a moderately long and wrinkled face, a Panama hat two sizes too large and a voice that had, in spite of its excellent diction, a jarring timbre and definitely foreign flavor.

Oliver blinked, surprised and a little dismayed that Fate should have sent him so early in his career a known and patently captious millionaire. Bivins, waiting in visored and putteed impassivity to reopen the door for his master, was silently impressive; the town car, parked on the crushed shell driveway outside, glittered splendidly in the late afternoon sunshine.

"I'll be happy to call later in the day," Oliver said. He removed the padded block that had held Champ's jaws apart, and narrowly missed losing a finger as the infuriated chow snapped at his hand. "My aunt and sister are bringing my fiancée down from Tampa for dinner this evening, and I can't leave the clinic until they get here. Someone might call for his pet."

Mr. Furnay protested his extremity of need. "The animal suffers periodic convulsions," he said. "It may be dangerously ill!"

Oliver unstrapped Champ from his detention frame and dodged with practiced skill when the chow tried to bite him on the thigh. He had taken it for granted—having heard none of the gossip concerning Mr. Furnay's recent purchase of the Skadarian Brothers' menagerie—that the sick animal in question was a dog or cat or perhaps a saddle horse, and the bald description of its symptoms startled him more than Champ's predictable bid for revenge.

"Convulsions? What sort of animal is it, Mr. Furnay?"

"A polar bear," said Mr. Furnay.

"Polar bear!" echoed Oliver, and in his shock of surprise he dropped a detaining strap and let Champ loose.

The dog sprang across the room—without a breath of warning, as chows will—and bit Bivins on the leg just above his puttee. The chauffeur screamed in a high and peculiarly raucous voice and jerked away, jabbering in a vowelless and totally unfamiliar foreign tongue. Mr. Furnay said something sharply in the same grating language; Bivins whipped out a handkerchief, pressed it over the tear in his whipcords and went quickly out to the car.

Oliver collared the snarling Champ and returned him to his cage, where the dog pressed bristling against the bars and stared at Mr. Furnay hungrily with wicked, muddy eyes.

Mr. Furnay's shocked voice said, behind Oliver, "What a ghastly world, where even the *pets*..."

He broke off sharply as Oliver turned from the cage.

"I'm truly sorry, Mr. Furnay," Oliver apologized. "If there's anything I can do ... a dressing for Bivins' leg—"

Mr. Furnay gathered himself with an effort. "It is nothing, a scratch that will heal quickly. But my bear—you will come to see him at once?"

At another time, the thought of absenting himself without due notice to his Aunt Katisha and Glenna would have prompted Oliver to refuse; but the present moment called more for diplomacy than for convention. Better to suffer matriarchal displeasure, he thought, than to risk a damage suit by a millionaire.

"I'll come at once," Oliver said. "I owe you that, I think, after the fright Champ gave you."

And, belatedly, the realization that he might handle a bear—a great, live, lumbering bear!—surged up inside him to titillate his old boyhood yearning. Perhaps it was as well that his aunt and sister were away; this chance to exercise his natural skill at dealing with animals was too precious to decline.

"Of course I won't guarantee a cure," Oliver said, qualifying his promise, "because I've never diagnosed such a case. But I think I can help your bear."

Oddly enough, he *was* almost sure that he could. Oliver, in his younger days, had read a great deal on the care and treatment of circus animals, and the symptoms in this instance had a familiar sound. Mr. Furnay's bear, he thought, in all probability had worms.

The Furnay town car purred away, leaving Oliver to marvel at his own daring while he collected the instruments and medicines he might need.



In leaving the clinic he noted that Mr. Furnay's chauffeur had dropped his handkerchief at the doorway in his hurry to be gone—but Oliver by this time was in too great a hurry to stop and retrieve it.

His Aunt Katisha might spoil the whole adventure on the instant with a telephone call from Tampa. Bivins could wait.

The drive, after a day spent in the antiseptic confines of his clinic, was like a holiday jaunt.

The late June sun was hot and bright, the rows of suburban houses trim and clean as scrubbed children sunning themselves among color-splashed crotons and hibiscus and flaming poincianas. Oliver whistled gaily as he turned his little white-paneled call truck off the highway and drove between twin ranks of shedding cabbage palms toward the iron gates of the Furnay estate.

A uniformed gateman who might have been a twin to Bivins admitted him, pointing out a rambling white building that lay behind the stuccoed mansion, and shut the gate. Oliver parked his truck before the menagerie building—it had been a stable in the heyday of the Prohibition-era gangster, when it had held horses or cases of contraband as occasion demanded—and found Bivins waiting for him.

Bivins, looking upset and sullen in immaculate new whipcords, opened the sliding doors without a word.

The vast inside of the remodeled stable was adequately lighted by roof-windows and fluorescent bulbs, but seemed dark for the moment after the glare of sun outside; there was a smell, familiar to every circus-goer, of damp straw and animal dung, and a restless background stir of purring and growling and pacing.

Oliver gaped when his eyes dilated enough to show him the real extent of Mr. Furnay's menagerie holdings. At the north end of the building two towering Indian elephants swayed on picket, munching hay and shuffling monotonously on padded, ponderous feet. A roped-off enclosure held half a dozen giraffes which nibbled in aristocratic deprecation at feed-bins bracketed high on the walls; and beyond them three disdainful camels lay on untidily folded legs, sneering glassily at the world and at each other.

The east and west sides of the building were lined with rank after rank of cages holding a staggering miscellany of predators: great-maned lions with their sleek green-eyed mistresses; restless tigers undulating their stripes back and forth and grinning in sly, tusky boredom; chattering monkeys and chimpanzees; leopards and cheetahs and a pair of surly black jaguars whose claw-scored hides indicated either a recent difference of opinion or a burst of conjugal affection.

The south end of the vast room had been recently partitioned off, with a single heavy door breaking the new wall at its center. On either side of this door the bears held sway: shaggy

grizzlies, black bears, cinnamon and brown; spectacled Andeans and sleek white polars padding silently on tufted feet.

The sick bear sulked in a cage to himself, humped in an oddly doglike pose with his great head hanging disconsolately.

Oliver sized up the situation, casting back to past reading for the proper procedure.

"I'll need a squeeze-cage and a couple of cage boys to help immobilize the brute," he said. "Will you—"

He was startled, in turning, to find that Bivins had not accompanied him into the building. He was not alone, however. The door at the center of the partitioning wall had opened while he spoke, and a slender blonde girl in the briefest of white sunsuits was looking at him.

Apparently she had not expected Oliver, for there was open interest in her clear green eyes. She said something in a clear and musical—but completely unintelligible—voice that ranged, with a remarkably operatic effect, through two full octaves.

Oliver stared. "I'm here to doctor the sick bear," he said.

"Oh, a *native*," the girl said in English.

Obviously she was trying to keep her voice within the tonal range of his own, but in spite of the effort it trilled distractingly up and down the scale in a fashion that left Oliver smitten with a sudden and unfamiliar weakness of the knees.

"May I help?" she said.

She might, Oliver replied. She could have had as readily, he might have added, a pint of his blood.

Many times while they worked, finding a suitable squeeze-cage and dragging it against the bear's larger cage so that the two doors coincided, Oliver found the prim and reproachful image of Miss Orella Simms rising to remind him of his obligations; but for the first time in his life an obligation was surprisingly easy to dismiss. His assistant's lively conversation, which was largely uninformative though fascinatingly musical, bemused him even to the point of shrugging off his Aunt Katisha's certain disapproval.

The young lady, it seemed, came from a foreign country whose name was utterly unpronounceable; Oliver gathered that she had not been long with Mr. Furnay, who was of another nationality, and that she was homesick for her native land—for its "saffron sun on turquoise hills and umber sea," which could only be poetic exaggeration or simple unfamiliarity with color terms of a newly learned language—and that she was as a consequence very lonely.

She was, incredibly, a trainer of animals.

"Not of such snarling fierce ones as yours," she said, with a little shiver for the polar bear watching them sullenly through the bars, "but of my own gentle beasts, who are friends."

Her name was a startling combination of soprano sounds that might have been written as Perrl-high-C-trill-and-A-above, but which Oliver was completely unable to manage.

"Would you mind," he asked, greatly daring, "if I called you Pearl instead?"

She would not. But apparently Mr. Furnay would.

The millionaire, who had entered the menagerie unheard, spoke sternly to the girl in his own raucous tongue and pointed a peremptory finger toward the door through which she had come. The girl murmured "*Ai docssain, Tsammai*," in a disappointed tone, gave Oliver a smile that would have stunned a harem guard, and disappeared again into her own territory.

Oliver, being neither Chesterfield nor eunuch, was left with the giddy sensation of a man struggling to regain his balance after a sudden earth temblor.

His client reoriented him brusquely, "Treat my bear," Mr. Furnay said.

"I've been waiting for help," Oliver said defensively. "If you'll send around your menagerie manager and a cage boy or two—"

"I have none," Mr. Furnay said shortly. "There are only the four of us here, and not one will approach within touching distance of a brute so vicious."

Oliver stared at him in astonishment.... Four of them meant only Bivins, the gateman, the lovely blonde creature who called herself Perrl-high-C-trill-and-A-above and Mr. Furnay himself.

"But four inexperienced people can't possibly look after a menagerie of this size!" Oliver protested. "Circus animals aren't house pets, Mr. Furnay—they're restless and temperamental,

and they need expert care. They bite and claw each other—"

"There will be more of us later," Mr. Furnay said morosely, "but I doubt that numbers will help. We had not anticipated a ferocity so appalling, and I fear that my error may have proved the ruin of an expensive project. The native beasts were never so fierce on other—"

He broke off. "I am sorry. You will have to manage as best you can alone."

And he left the menagerie without looking back.

To deal tersely with subsequent detail, Oliver did manage alone—after a fashion and up to a point. It was a simple matter, once he found a four-foot length of conveniently loose board, to prod the unhappy bear from his larger prison to the smaller. The process of immobilizing the brute by winching the squeeze-cage tight was elementary.

But in his casting-back Oliver had overlooked two vitally important precautions: he'd forgotten to secure the gear fastenings, and he'd neglected to rope the smaller cage to the larger.

The bear, startled by the prick of the needle when Oliver gave him a sizable injection of nembotal, reacted with a frantic struggling that reversed the action of the unsecured winch and forced the two cages apart. The door burst open, sprung by the sudden pressure.

The bear stood free.

A considerable amount of legitimate excitement could be injected into such a moment by reporting that the bear, at last in a position to revenge itself for past indignities, leaped upon its tormentor with a blood-freezing roar and that Oliver, a fragile pygmy before that near-ton of slaving fury, escaped only by a hair or was annihilated on the spot.

Neither circumstance developed, however, for the reason that the bear was already feeling the effects of the anesthetic given it and wanted nothing so much as a cool dark place where it might collapse in privacy. And Oliver, caught completely off guard, was too stunned by the suddenness of catastrophe to realize his own possible danger.

What did happen was that Perrl-high-C-trill-and-A-above chose that particular moment to open her door again and look out.

Her fortuitous timing altered the situation on the instant; the bear, bent only on escape and seeing comparative gloom beyond the door, charged not at Oliver but through the opening. And Oliver, still too confused to think past the necessity of retrieving his error, ran after it, brandishing his length of board and shouting wildly.

The smaller area beyond the partition was dimly lighted, but to judge by its straw-covered floor and faint animal smell was evidently a special division of Mr. Furnay's menagerie. The light was too dim and the emergency too great to permit Oliver more than a brief and incredulous glimpse of the improbable beast placidly munching hay in a corner; his whole attention was centered first on the fleeing bear and then upon the prostrate form of Perrl-high-C-trill-and-A-above, who had been violently bowled over by the bear's rush.

"Pearl!" yelled Oliver, petrified with horror.

The bear stood swaying upright over her, threshing its tufted forepaws for balance and showing yellow tusks in a grimace that stemmed from drugged weakness but which passed quite creditably for a snarl of demoniac fury.

Obviously something had to be done. Oliver, galvanized by the realization, came to the rescue with a promptness that amounted to reflex action.

"Down, boy!" he said, and dealt the bear a sharp blow across the muzzle with his board.

The bear dealt Oliver a roundhouse clout in return that stretched him half-conscious beside Perrl-high-C-trill-and-A-above. Then, at precisely that moment of greatest dramatic impact, it shook its head dizzily and passed out cold.

The girl scrambled up and knelt beside Oliver to listen to his heartbeat, found that he was alive and raised her voice in an urgent arpeggio that held in spite of its operatic timbre a distinct note of command.

In answer to her call the great beast in the corner—built something on the order of a hippopotamus but with unorthodox variations in that it boasted six legs to either side and was covered with close-curling, bright blue wool—trotted out of the shadows and scooped up the unconscious bear in its four powerful anterior arms.

A word from Perrl-high-C-trill-and-A-above sent it into the main menagerie quarters, where it stuffed the limp bear into its old cage and trotted back to its mistress with a look of adoring deference on its round face.

The girl gave the creature a random trill of commendation and, displaying surprising strength for one so slight, herself dragged the reviving Oliver back to the scene of his unfinished diagnosis.

The order given her earlier by Mr. Furnay was not forgotten, however, for she did not linger.

"Not handsome, no," she murmured, locking the partition door behind her this time. "But O Personal Deity of Unmarried Maidens, such headlong bravery!"

Oliver roused ten minutes later to find himself alone with a memory of nightmare and a sleeping bear that offered no resistance whatever when he funneled a quantity of tetrachlorethylene down its throat.

He was still alone an hour later—and still trying dizzily to separate fact from fancy, having tried the partition door and found it locked—when the bear returned to semi-consciousness and submitted groggily to a follow-up dosage of purgative.

Oliver would have liked to stay long enough to learn the results of his diagnosis and to see Perrl-high-C-trill-and-A-above if she should reappear, but a glance at his watch electrified him with the realization that he had been away from his clinic for more than two hours and that his Aunt Katisha and Glenna might by now have the state police beating the palmetto flats for his body. Accordingly he left the Furnay estate in a great hurry, pausing at the gate only long enough to leave word for Mr. Furnay that he would ring later in the evening to check his patient's progress.

It was not until he had returned home and found his Aunt Katisha still out that his overworked nerves, punished outrageously by shock, violence and confusion, composed themselves enough to permit him a reasonable guess as to what actually had happened—and by that time his conclusions had taken a turn so fantastically improbable that he was lost again in a hopeless muddle of surmise.

He poured himself a glass of milk in the kitchen (he preferred coffee, but his Aunt Katisha frowned on the habit) and took his grisly suspicions down to the clinic, where he felt more at ease than in the antimacassared austerity of the house. There he mulled them over again, and time was able to weave into the pattern the disjointed impressions carried over from his period of semi-consciousness and dismissed until now as nightmare figments from the delirium of shock. Their alignment with other evidence increased his conviction:

Mr. Furnay and Ménage, Oliver concluded with a cold thrill of horror, were not human beings at all but monsters.

The pattern became even more disturbing when he considered various stories of local saucer-sightings and fireballs, which linked themselves with chilling germanity to the events of the day.

First there had been Champ's instant distrust of Mr. Furnay and Bivins, and his attempt to rout them for the aliens they were. There had been Bivins' anomalous scream when bitten—a raucous sound certainly not human—and Mr. Furnay's grittily inconsonant order, spoken in no identifiable earthly tongue. The isolation of the Furnay estate took on a sinister and significant logic, as did its understaffed condition; there was the evident but baffling reluctance of Mr. Furnay and his myrmidons (with the notable exception of the golden-voiced Pearl) to approach even safely caged beasts, and the greater mystery of why a man so terrified of wild animals should have bought a menagerie in the first place.

Considering the part played by Perrl-high-C-trill-and-A-above in a scheme of things so fantastic left Oliver more disturbed than ever, but for a different reason. That she was unarguably as alien as the others made her equally mysterious, but connoted no share in whatever devious plot occupied the Furnay faction; a reexamination of Mr. Furnay's harshly dictatorial attitude toward her, coupled with Oliver's own uncertain memory of the moment when the girl had come to his rescue, convinced him that she was not ipso facto a member of the extraterrestrial cabal but was its prisoner instead.

Visualizing the probable fate of a beautiful girl held captive by aliens—and forced by them to train outlandish, half-remembered brutes like the one behind the partition—rather strained Oliver's talent for surmise, but at the same time moved him to the uneasy conviction that it was his duty to rescue her in turn.

The thought that he might already be too late appalled him. The slender blonde beauty of Perrl-high-C-trill-and-A-above was distractingly fresh in his mind, the eager arpeggiation of her voice an indelible memory. Recalling the smile she had given him in parting stirred an internal warmth unguessed at before, an emotional ignition certainly never kindled by his fiancée or family.

Orella Simms, Glenna, his Aunt Katisha!

Thought of his obligations brought him back to reality with a jar; the appalling gulf between fact and fancy made clear to him with sudden and shocking clarity the nonentity's role that had

been played, and must be played, all his life by Oliver Watts.

He was the perennial romantic introvert, dreaming impossible dreams compounded of escape reading and frustration, grasping timorously at any thread of adventure that might lead him to forget for the moment the drab monotone of his existence. His mouth twisted wryly. There was, of course, no fantastic alien plot incubating on the Furnay estate, no sunsuited damsel in distress awaiting rescue at his inept hands. He'd imagined the romantic aspects of the episode—the "unearthly" tongue, the improbable beast. No one required, or ever would require, anything of Oliver Watts except his Aunt Katisha and Glenna, who demanded obedience, and Orella Simms, who expected conformity.

As if on cue, the Watts family car swung off the highway and rolled down the crushed shell driveway past the clinic. Oliver's Aunt Katisha got out, leaving Glenna and Orella Simms to wait, and strode into the clinic office.

"I see you've managed to spoil another one," she said acidly, pausing long enough to retrieve the handkerchief Mr. Furnay's chauffeur had lost earlier. "Moreover, I called twice this afternoon and found you gone. Where?"

Oliver, as usual, weathered the storm in silence. Somewhere near the end he managed to squeeze in the information that he had treated a sick animal at the Furnay place—a saddle horse, he said, lying automatically as the lesser of two evils.

His aunt Katisha, her inquisitorial duty discharged, dropped the discolored handkerchief pointedly on Oliver's desk and rejoined Glenna and Orella Simms. The car drove away. Oliver, left alone in the growing dusk of evening to his miserable introspection, found his wandering attention returning unaccountably to the crumpled handkerchief, and drew it closer for a better look.

It was only a harmless square of linen, smudged with dust and spotted with blood from Bivins' chow-bitten leg—but with his closer look Oliver's world sprang up and exploded with a shattering bang in his startled face.

The dust was quite ordinary, but Bivins' blood was not.

It was green.

He was never quite sure, later, just what happened next. He retained a vague memory of roaring away in his Aunt Katisha's car through a reckless showering of crushed shell; sometimes he could recall the cool onrush of wind whipping his face and the frantic dodging of approaching headlamps on the highway. But in the main, his descent upon the Furnay estate was a blank.

Only one fact stood out with freezing clarity, excluding any thought of his Aunt Katisha's certain wrath or of Orella's maidenly reproaches: Perrl-high-C-trill-and-A-above was in Deadly Danger, and there was none but Oliver Watts to rescue her.

There was a brief instant of lucidity as he approached the Furnay gates through the cabbage palms and was forced to choose a course of action.

The attendant certainly would not admit him without orders from Mr. Furnay, who as certainly would not give them; the walls were much too high and sheer for climbing; and to make the need for haste even more critical, it was only too obvious that the Furnay gang was about to depart.

A tremendous saucer-shaped ship had landed by the menagerie building, where it sat with circular peripheral ports aglow and lines of bold enigmatic hieroglyphs fluorescing greenly on its smooth undersurface. Jointed metal figures scurried here and there, chivvying the last of Mr. Furnay's herbivores up a ramp into the belly of the ship; the predators, in cages drawn by other sleek robot stevedores, followed in orderly procession.

Oliver solved his problem of entry by driving headlong through the iron grillwork.

There was a raucous yelling from the gateman, a monstrous rending of metal and jangling of broken glass. Aunt Katisha's car slewed erratically down the Furnay drive, turned over twice and pitched Oliver out, stunned for the second time that day, into the greenish glow shed by the saucer-ship's lights.

He struggled back to awareness to find his head pillowed on something soft and wonderfully comfortable. A circle of startled faces, most of them dark facsimiles of the putteed Bivins', stared uncertainly down at him. In the near foreground stood Mr. Furnay, wringing his hands and muttering grittily to himself in his own dissonant tongue. Mr. Furnay, seen now for the first time without his too-large Panama, exhibited instead of hair a crest of downy blue feathers and pronged antennae that vibrated softly in the evening breeze.

"Where is she?" Oliver demanded. He scrambled dizzily to his feet, and the circle of faces melted backward hastily. "What have you done with Pearl, you monsters?"

Perrl-high-C-trill-and-A-above, on whose lap Oliver's head had been pillowed, stood up to move between Oliver and the patently apprehensive Mr. Furnay. She wore a light maroon cape over

her sunsuit against the mild chill of evening, and could not possibly have looked less like a damsel in distress. She seemed, as a matter of fact, quite happy.

"I hoped you would come to see me again before blastoff," she said. Her voice skipped, tinkling with pleasure, from octave to octave. "But so suddenly—so dashing, so impetuous!"

"You're going away *willingly*?" Oliver said dumbly. "Then they're not forcing—you're not a prisoner after all?"

Her laugh was an arpeggiando blending of surprise and amusement. "A prisoner of these *Tsammai*? No. I am a performer in their company, hired by Xtl—Mr. Furnay—to train and exhibit animals native to my own world."

"But I heard Furnay threaten you in the menagerie building this afternoon! His tone—"

"The *Tsammai* tongue sounds dreadful because it is all consonants and not based on pitch and nuance as mine is," she said. "But the *Tsammai* themselves are only tradesmen, and are very gentle. Xtl—Mr. Furnay—only feared that I might say too much to you then, when it was important that the natives should not suspect our identity."

"It is true," Mr. Furnay nodded, sounding relieved. "We must avoid notice on such worlds as yours, which are too backward to appreciate the marvels of our show. We stop here only to scout for new and novel exhibits."

"Show!" Oliver echoed, "You mean all this is—is—"

"What else?" asked Mr. Furnay. He pointed with his antennae to the fluorescent hieroglyphs on the undersurface of the saucer-ship. "See, in our *lingua galactica* it reads: SKRRFF BROTHERS' INTERSTELLAR CIRCUS, THE GALAXY'S GREATEST. It is the best on the circuit."

He indicated the circle of identical Bivinses. "These are the Skrrff brothers, our owners. I, sir, am business manager."

"But not always a good one," one of the brothers said pointedly. "This time he has bought an entire menagerie of such fierceness that our trainers cannot exhibit it. It will have to be sold to some frontier-planet zoo, and our loss will be staggering."

It was left for Perrl-high-C-trill-and-A-above to deal with the problem, which she did with universal feminine practicality.

"Oliver made your bear well," she pointed out. "And he is afraid of nothing—nothing! Could he not train his own fierce beasts as well as I train my gentle ones?"

Oliver said, "Huh?"

The Skrrff brothers, of course, implored Oliver on the spot to join them at any salary.

Perrl-high-C-trill-and-A-above said demurely, in three octaves and for all the world to hear: "And I'm *lonely*, Oliver!"

Oliver never had a chance.

Life in Landsdale goes quietly on, the ripples made by Oliver's departure long since smoothed away by the years.

Miss Orella Simms has married the Methodist minister who was to have married her to Oliver. Aunt Katisha and Glenna have resigned themselves to Oliver's escape and have taken over the job of assisting Orella to superintend her husband's career, an occupation eminently satisfactory to all because the placid cleric never dreams troublesome dreams of adventure, as Oliver did, to try their matriarchal patience.

... But life is never dull for Mr. and Mrs. Oliver Watts, whose breathtaking performances currently electrify the thrill-hungry cultures of a thousand worlds. They have traveled from Sirius to Sagittarius, and at this writing have two children: a golden-haired daughter of four named Perrl-high-C-trill-and-A-sharp-above, and a tow-headed boy of two who has a cowlick like his father's and whose name is Butch.

They are very happy and there has been no talk between them, though they are wealthy enough in galactic credits by now to have bought half a planet for a home, of settling down to the quiet life. They are quite satisfied to leave such consequential decisions to those who like change for the sake of change or who, unlike Oliver, never know when they are well off.

One clean break to a lifetime, Oliver maintains, is enough.

—ROGER DEE

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