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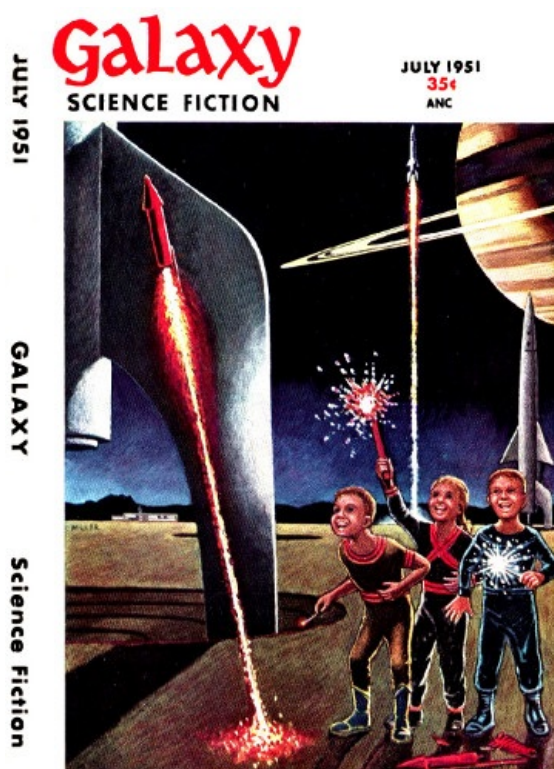
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\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK PEN PAL \*\*\*



# **PEN PAL**

**Illustrated by DON SIBLEY**

**By MILTON LESSER**

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**All she wanted was a mate and she had the gumption  
to go out and hunt one down. But that meant  
poaching in a strictly forbidden territory!**

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The best that could be said for Matilda Penshaws was that she was something of a paradox. She was thirty-three years old, certainly not aged when you consider the fact that the female life expectancy is now up in the sixties, but the lines were beginning to etch their permanent paths across her face and now she needed certain remedial undergarments at which she would have scoffed ten or even five years ago. Matilda was also looking for a husband.

This, in itself, was not unusual—but Matilda was so completely wrapped up in the romantic fallacy of her day that she sought a prince charming, a faithful Don Juan, a man who had been everywhere and tasted of every worldly pleasure and who now wanted to sit on a porch and talk about it all to Matilda.

The fact that in all probability such a man did not exist disturbed Matilda not in the least. She had been known to say that there are over a billion men in the world, a goodly percentage of whom are eligible bachelors, and that the right one would come along simply because she had been waiting for him.

Matilda, you see, had patience.

She also had a fetish. Matilda had received her A.B. from exclusive Ursula Johns College and Radcliff had yielded her Masters degree, yet Matilda was an avid follower of the pen pal columns. She would read them carefully and then read them again, looking for the masculine names which, through a system known only to Matilda, had an affinity to her own. To the gentlemen upon whom these names were affixed, Matilda would write, and she often told her mother, the widow Penshaws, that it was in this way she would find her husband. The widow Penshaws impatiently told her to go out and get dates.

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That particular night, Matilda pulled her battered old sedan into the garage and walked up the walk to the porch. The widow Penshaws was rocking on the glider and Matilda said hello.

The first thing the widow Penshaws did was to take Matilda's left hand in her own and examine the next-to-the-last finger.

"I thought so," she said. "I knew this was coming when I saw that look in your eye at dinner. Where is Herman's engagement ring?"

Matilda smiled. "It wouldn't have worked out, Ma. He was too darned stuffy. I gave him his ring and said thanks anyway and he smiled politely and said he wished I had told him sooner because his fifteenth college reunion was this weekend and he had already turned down the invitation."

The widow Penshaws nodded regretfully. "That was thoughtful of Herman to hide his feelings."

"Hogwash!" said her daughter. "He has no true feelings. He's sorry that he had to miss his college reunion. That's all he has to hide. A stuffy Victorian prude and even less of a man than the others."

"But, Matilda, that's your fifth broken engagement in three years. It ain't that you ain't popular, but you just don't want to cooperate. You don't *fall* in love, Matilda—no one does. Love osmoses into you slowly, without you even knowing, and it keeps growing all the time."

Matilda admired her mother's use of the word osmosis, but she found nothing which was not objectionable about being unaware of the impact of love. She said good-night and went upstairs, climbed out of her light summer dress and took a cold shower.

She began to hum to herself. She had not yet seen the pen pal section of the current *Literary Review*, and because the subject matter of that magazine was somewhat highbrow and cosmopolitan, she could expect a gratifying selection of pen pals.

She shut off the shower, brushed her teeth, gargled, patted herself dry with a towel, and jumped into bed, careful to lock the door of her bedroom. She dared not let the widow Penshaws know that she slept in the nude; the widow Penshaws would object to a girl sleeping in the nude, even if the nearest neighbor was three hundred yards away.

Matilda switched her bed lamp on and dabbed some citronella on each ear lobe and a little droplet on her chin (how she hated insects!). Then she propped up her pillows—two pillows partially stopped her post-nasal drip; and took the latest issue of the *Literary Review* off the night table.

She flipped through the pages and came to personals. Someone in Nebraska wanted to trade match books; someone in New York needed a midwestern pen pal, but it was a woman; an elderly man interested in ornithology wanted a young chick correspondent interested in the same

subject; a young, personable man wanted an editorial position because he thought he had something to offer the editorial world; and—

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Matilda read the next one twice. Then she held it close to the light and read it again. The *Literary Review* was one of the few magazines which printed the name of the advertiser rather than a box number, and Matilda even liked the sound of the name. But mostly, she had to admit to herself, it was the flavor of the wording. This very well could be *it*. Or, that is, *him*.

Intelligent, somewhat egotistical male who's really been around, whose universal experience can make the average cosmopolite look like a provincial hick, is in need of several female correspondents: must be intelligent, have gumption, be capable of listening to male who has a lot to say and wants to say it. All others need not apply. Wonderful opportunity cultural experience ... Haron Gorka, Cedar Falls, Ill.

The man was egotistical, all right; Matilda could see that. But she had never minded an egotistical man, at least not when he had something about which he had a genuine reason to be egotistical. The man sounded as though he would have reason indeed. He only wanted the best because he was the best. Like calls to like.

The name—Haron Gorka: its oddness was somehow beautiful to Matilda. Haron Gorka—the nationality could be anything. And that was it. He had no nationality for all intents and purposes; he was an international man, a figure among figures, a paragon....

Matilda sighed happily as she put out the light. The moon shone in through the window brightly, and at such times Matilda generally would get up, go to the cupboard, pull out a towel, take two hairpins from her powder drawer, pin the towel to the screen of her window, and hence keep the disturbing moonlight from her eyes. But this time it did not disturb her, and she would let it shine. Cedar Falls was a small town not fifty miles from her home, and she'd get there a hop, skip, and jump ahead of her competitors, simply by arriving in person instead of writing a letter.

Matilda was not yet that far gone in years or appearance. Dressed properly, she could hope to make a favorable impression in person, and she felt it was important to beat the influx of mail to Cedar Falls.

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Matilda got out of bed at seven, tiptoed into the bathroom, showered with a merest wary trickle of water, tiptoed back into her bedroom, dressed in her very best cotton over the finest of uplifting and figure-moulding underthings, made sure her stocking seams were perfectly straight, brushed her suede shoes, admired herself in the mirror, read the ad again, wished for a moment she were a bit younger, and tiptoed downstairs.

The widow Penshaws met her at the bottom of the stairwell.

"Mother," gasped Matilda. Matilda always gasped when she saw something unexpected. "What on earth are you doing up?"

The widow Penshaws smiled somewhat toothlessly, having neglected to put in both her uppers and lowers this early in the morning. "I'm fixing breakfast, of course...."

Then the widow Penshaws told Matilda that she could never hope to sneak about the house without her mother knowing about it, and that even if she were going out in response to one of those foolish ads in the magazines, she would still need a good breakfast to start with like only mother could cook. Matilda moodily thanked the widow Penshaws.

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Driving the fifty miles to Cedar Falls in a little less than an hour, Matilda hummed Mendelssohn's Wedding March all the way. It was her favorite piece of music. Once, she told herself: Matilda Penshaws, you are being premature about the whole thing. But she laughed and thought that if she was, she was, and, meanwhile, she could only get to Cedar Falls and find out.

And so she got there.

The man in the wire cage at the Cedar Falls post office was a stereotype. Matilda always liked to think in terms of stereotypes. This man was small, roundish, florid of face, with a pair of eyeglasses which hung too far down on his nose. Matilda knew he would peer over his glasses and answer questions grudgingly.

"Hello," said Matilda.

The stereotype grunted and peered at her over his glasses. Matilda asked him where she could find Haron Gorka.

"What?"

"I said, where can I find Haron Gorka?"

"Is that in the United States?"

"It's not a that; it's a he. Where can I find him? Where does he live? What's the quickest way to

get there?"

The stereotype pushed up his glasses and looked at her squarely. "Now take it easy, ma'am. First place, I don't know any Haron Gorka—"

Matilda kept the alarm from creeping into her voice. She muttered an *oh* under her breath and took out the ad. This she showed to the stereotype, and he scratched his bald head. Then he told Matilda almost happily that he was sorry he couldn't help her. He grudgingly suggested that if it really were important, she might check with the police.

Matilda did, only they didn't know any Haron Gorka, either. It turned out that no one did: Matilda tried the general store, the fire department, the city hall, the high school, all three Cedar Falls gas stations, the livery stable, and half a dozen private dwellings at random. As far as the gentry of Cedar Falls was concerned, Haron Gorka did not exist.

Matilda felt bad, but she had no intention of returning home this early. If she could not find Haron Gorka, that was one thing; but she knew that she'd rather not return home and face the widow Penshaws, at least not for a while yet. The widow Penshaws meant well, but she liked to analyze other people's mistakes, especially Matilda's.

Accordingly, Matilda trudged wearily toward Cedar Falls' small and unimposing library. She could release some of her pent-up aggression by browsing through the dusty slacks.

This she did, but it was unrewarding. Cedar Falls had what might be called a microscopic library, and Matilda thought that if this small building were filled with microfilm rather than books, the library still would be lacking. Hence she retraced her steps and nodded to the old librarian as she passed.

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Then Matilda frowned. Twenty years from now, this could be Matilda Penshaws—complete with plain gray dress, rimless spectacles, gray hair, suspicious eyes, and a broom-stick figure....

On the other hand—why not? Why couldn't the librarian help her? Why hadn't she thought of it before? Certainly a man as well-educated as Haron Gorka would be an avid reader, and unless he had a permanent residence here in Cedar Falls, one couldn't expect that he'd have his own library with him. This being the case, a third-rate collection of books was far better than no collection at all, and perhaps the librarian would know Mr. Haron Gorka.

Matilda cleared her throat. "Pardon me," she began. "I'm looking for—"

"Haron Gorka." The librarian nodded.

"How on earth did you know?"

"That's easy. You're the sixth young woman who came here inquiring about that man today. Six of you—five others in the morning, and now you in the afternoon. I never did trust this Mr. Gorka...."

Matilda jumped as if she had been struck strategically from the rear. "You know him? You know Haron Gorka?"

"Certainly. Of course I know him. He's our steadiest reader here at the library. Not a week goes by that he doesn't take out three, four books. Scholarly gentleman, but not without charm. If I were twenty years younger—"

Matilda thought a little flattery might be effective. "Only ten," she assured the librarian. "Ten years would be more than sufficient, I'm sure."

"Are you? Well. Well, well." The librarian did something with the back of her hair, but it looked the same as before. "Maybe you're right. Maybe you're right at that." Then she sighed. "But I guess a miss is as good as a mile."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean anyone would like to correspond with Haron Gorka. Or to know him well. To be considered his friend. Haron Gorka...."

The librarian seemed about to soar off into the air someplace, and if five women had been here first, Matilda was now definitely in a hurry.

"Um, where can I find Mr. Gorka?"

"I'm not supposed to do this, you know. We're not permitted to give the addresses of any of our people. Against regulations, my dear."

"What about the other five women?"

"They convinced me that I ought to give them his address."

Matilda reached into her pocket-book and withdrew a five dollar bill. "Was this the way?" she demanded. Matilda was not very good at this sort of thing.

The librarian shook her head.

Matilda nodded shrewdly and added a twin brother to the bill in her hand. "Then is this better?"

"That's worse. I wouldn't take your money—"

"Sorry. What then?"

"If I can't enjoy an association with Haron Gorka directly, I still could get the vicarious pleasure of your contact with him. Report to me faithfully and you'll get his address. That's what the other five will do, and with half a dozen of you, I'll get an overall picture. Each one of you will tell me about Haron Gorka, sparing no details. You each have a distinct personality, of course, and it will color each picture considerably. But with six of you reporting, I should receive my share of vicarious enjoyment. Is it—ah—a deal?"

Matilda assured her that it was, and, breathlessly, she wrote down the address. She thanked the librarian and then she went out to her car, whistling to herself.

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Haron Gorka lived in what could have been an agrarian estate, except that the land no longer was being tilled. The house itself had fallen to ruin. This surprised Matilda, but she did not let it keep her spirits in check. Haron Gorka, the man, was what counted, and the librarian's account of him certainly had been glowing enough. Perhaps he was too busy with his cultural pursuits to pay any real attention to his dwelling. That was it, of course: the conspicuous show of wealth or personal industry meant nothing at all to Haron Gorka. Matilda liked him all the more for it.

There were five cars parked in the long driveway, and now Matilda's made the sixth. In spite of herself, she smiled. She had not been the only one with the idea to visit Haron Gorka in person. With half a dozen of them there, the laggards who resorted to posting letters would be left far behind. Matilda congratulated herself for what she thought had been her ingenuity, and which now turned out to be something which she had in common with five other women. You live and learn, thought Matilda. And then, quite annoyed, she berated herself for not having been the first. Perhaps the other five all were satisfactory; perhaps she wouldn't be needed; perhaps she was too late....

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As it turned out, she wasn't. Not only that, she was welcomed with open arms. Not by Haron Gorka; that she really might have liked. Instead, someone she could only regard as a menial met her, and when he asked had she come in response to the advertisement, she nodded eagerly. He told her that was fine and he ushered her straight into a room which evidently was to be her living quarters. It contained a small undersized bed, a table, and a chair, and, near a little slot in the wall, there was a button.

"You want any food or drink," the servant told her, "and you just press that button. The results will surprise you."

"What about Mr. Gorka?"

"When he wants you, he will send for you. Meanwhile, make yourself to home, lady, and I will tell him you are here."

A little doubtful now, Matilda thanked him and watched him leave. He closed the door softly behind his retreating feet, but Matilda's ears had not missed the ominous click. She ran to the door and tried to open it, but it would not budge. It was locked—from the outside.

It must be said to Matilda's favor that she sobbed only once. After that she realized that what is done is done and here, past thirty, she wasn't going to be girlishly timid about it. Besides, it was not her fault if, in his unconcern, Haron Gorka had unwittingly hired a neurotic servant.

For a time Matilda paced back and forth in her room, and of what was going on outside she could hear nothing. In that case, she would pretend that there was nothing outside the little room, and presently she lay down on the bed to take a nap. This didn't last long, however: she had a nightmare in which Haron Gorka appeared as a giant with two heads, but, upon awaking with a start, she immediately ascribed that to her overwrought nerves.

At that point she remembered what the servant had said about food and she thought at once of the supreme justice she could do to a juicy beefsteak. Well, maybe they didn't have a beefsteak. In that case, she would take what they had, and, accordingly, she walked to the little slot in the wall and pressed the button.

She heard the whir of machinery. A moment later there was a soft sliding sound. Through the slot first came a delicious aroma, followed almost instantly by a tray. On the tray were a bowl of turtle soup, mashed potatoes, green peas, bread, a strange cocktail, root-beer, a parfait—and a thick tenderloin sizzling in hot butter sauce.

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Matilda gasped once and felt about to gasp again—but by then her salivary glands were working overtime, and she ate her meal. The fact that it was precisely what she would have wanted could, of course, be attributed to coincidence, and the further fact that everything was extremely palatable made her forget all about Haron Gorka's neurotic servant.

When she finished her meal a pleasant lethargy possessed her, and in a little while Matilda was asleep again. This time she did not dream at all. It was a deep sleep and a restful one, and when she awoke it was with the wonderful feeling that everything was all right.

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The feeling did not last long. Standing over her was Haron Gorka's servant, and he said, "Mr. Gorka will see you now."

"Now?"

"Now. That's what you're here for, isn't it?"

He had a point there, but Matilda hardly even had time to fix her hair. She told the servant so.

"Miss," he replied, "I assure you it will not matter in the least to Haron Gorka. You are here and he is ready to see you and that is all that matters."

"You sure?" Matilda wanted to take no chances.

"Yes. Come."

She followed him out of the little room and across what should have been a spacious dining area, except that everything seemed covered with dust. Of the other women Matilda could see nothing, and she suddenly realized that each of them probably had a cubicle of a room like her own, and that each in her turn had already had her first visit with Haron Gorka. Well, then, she must see to it that she impressed him better than did all the rest, and, later, when she returned to tell the old librarian of her adventures, she could perhaps draw her out and compare notes.

She would not admit even to herself that she was disappointed with Haron Gorka. It was not that he was homely and unimpressive; it was just that he was so *ordinary*-looking. She almost would have preferred the monster of her dreams.

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He wore a white linen suit and he had mousy hair, drab eyes, an almost-Roman nose, a petulant mouth with the slight arch of the egotist at each corner.

He said, "Greetings. You have come—"

"In response to your ad. How do you do, Mr. Gorka?"

She hoped she wasn't being too formal. But, then, there was no sense in assuming that he would like informality. She could only wait and see and adjust her own actions to suit him. Meanwhile, it would be best to keep on the middle of the road.

"I am fine. Are you ready?"

"Ready?"

"Certainly. You came in response to my ad. You want to hear me talk, do you not?"

"I—do." Matilda had had visions of her prince charming sitting back and relaxing with her, telling her of the many things he had done and seen. But first she certainly would have liked to get to *know* the man. Well, Haron Gorka obviously had more experience along these lines than she did. He waited, however, as if wondering what to say, and Matilda, accustomed to social chatter, gave him a gambit.

"I must admit I was surprised when I got exactly what I wanted for dinner," she told him brightly.

"Eh? What say? Oh, yes, naturally. A combination of telepathy and teleportation. The synthetic cookery is attuned to your mind when you press the buzzer, and the strength of your psychic impulses determines how closely the meal will adjust to your desires. The fact that the adjustment here was near perfect is commendable. It means either that you have a high psi-quotient, or that you were very hungry."

"Yes," said Matilda vaguely. Perhaps it might be better, after all, if Haron Gorka were to talk to her as he saw fit.

"Ready?"

"Uh—ready."

"Well?"

"Well, what, Mr. Gorka?"

"What would you like me to talk about?"

"Oh, anything."

"Please. As the ad read, my universal experience—is universal. Literally. You'll have to be more specific."

"Well, why don't you tell me about some of your far travels? Unfortunately, while I've done a lot of reading, I haven't been to all the places I would have liked—"

"Good enough. You know, of course, how frigid Deneb VII is?"

Matilda said, "Beg pardon?"

"Well, there was the time our crew—before I had retired, of course—made a crash landing there. We could survive in the vac-suits, of course, but the *thlomots* were after us almost at once. They go mad over plastic. They will eat absolutely any sort of plastic. Our vac-suits—"



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"—were made of plastic," Matilda suggested. She did not understand a thing he was talking about, but she felt she had better act bright.

"No, no. Must you interrupt? The air-hose and the water feed, these were plastic. Not the rest of the suit. The point is that half of us were destroyed before the rescue ship could come, and the remainder were near death. I owe my life to the mimicry of a *flaak* from Capella III. It assumed



the properties of plastic and led the *thlomots* a merry chase across the frozen surface of D VII. You travel in the Deneb system now and Interstellar Ordinance makes it mandatory to carry *flaaks* with you. Excellent idea, really excellent."

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Almost at once, Matilda's educational background should have told her that Haron Gorka was mouthing gibberish. But on the other hand she *wanted* to believe in him and the result was that it took until now for her to realize it.

"Stop making fun of me," she said.

"So, naturally, you'll see *flaaks* all over that system—"

"Stop!"

"What's that? Making fun of you?" Haron Gorka's voice had been so eager as he spoke, high-pitched, almost like a child's, and now he seemed disappointed. He smiled, but it was a sad smile, a smile of resignation, and he said, "Very well. I'm wrong again. You are the sixth, and you're no better than the other five. Perhaps you are even more outspoken. When you see my wife, tell her to come back. Again she is right and I am wrong...."

Haron Gorka turned his back.

Matilda could do nothing but leave the room, walk back through the house, go outside and get into her car. She noticed not without surprise that the other five cars were now gone. She was the last of Haron Gorka's guests to depart.

As she shifted into reverse and pulled out of the driveway, she saw the servant leaving, too. Far down the road, he was walking slowly. Then Haron Gorka had severed that relationship, too, and now he was all alone.

As she drove back to town, the disappointment melted slowly away. There were, of course, two alternatives. Either Haron Gorka was an eccentric who enjoyed this sort of outlandish tomfoolery, or else he was plainly insane. She could still picture him ranting on aimlessly to no one in particular about places which had no existence outside of his mind, his voice high-pitched and eager.

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It was not until she had passed the small library building that she remembered what she had promised the librarian. In her own way, the aging woman would be as disappointed as Matilda, but a promise was a promise, and Matilda turned the car in a wide U-turn and parked it outside the library.

The woman sat at her desk as Matilda had remembered her, gray, broom-stick figure, rigid. But now when she saw Matilda she perked up visibly.

"Hello, my dear," she said.

"Hi."

"You're back a bit sooner than I expected. But, then, the other five have returned, too, and I imagine your story will be similar."

"I don't know what they told you," Matilda said. "But this is what happened to me."

She quickly then related everything which had happened, completely and in detail. She did this first because it was a promise, and second because she knew it would make her feel better.

"So," she finished, "Haron Gorka is either extremely eccentric or insane. I'm sorry."

"He's neither," the librarian contradicted. "Perhaps he is slightly eccentric by your standards, but really, my dear, he is neither."

"What do you mean?"

"Did he leave a message for his wife?"

"Why, yes. Yes, he did. But how did you know? Oh, I suppose he told the five."

"No. He didn't. But you were the last and I thought he would give you a message for his wife—"

Matilda didn't understand. She didn't understand at all, but she told the little librarian what the message was. "He wanted her to return," she said.

The librarian nodded, a happy smile on her lips. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you something."

"What's that?"

"I am Mrs. Gorka."

The librarian stood up and came around the desk. She opened a drawer and took out her hat and perched it jauntily atop her gray hair. "You see, my dear, Haron expects too much. He expects entirely too much."

Matilda did not say a word. One madman a day would be quite enough for anybody, but here she

found herself confronted with two.

"We've been tripping for centuries, visiting every habitable star system from our home near Canopus. But Haron is too demanding. He says I am a finicky traveler, that he could do much better alone, the accommodations have to be just right for me, and so forth. When he loses his temper, he tries to convince me that any number of females of the particular planet would be more than thrilled if they were given the opportunity just to listen to him.

"But he's wrong. It's a hard life for a woman. Someday—five thousand, ten thousand years from now—I will convince him. And then we will settle down on Canopus XIV and cultivate *torgas*. That would be so nice—"

"I'm sure."

"Well, if Haron wants me back, then I have to go. Have a care, my dear. If you marry, choose a home-body. I've had the experience and you've seen my Haron for yourself."

And then the woman was gone. Numbly, Matilda walked to the doorway and watched her angular figure disappear down the road. Of all the crazy things....

Deneb and Capella and Canopus, these were stars. Add a number and you might have a planet revolving about each star. Of all the insane—

They were mad, all right, and now Matilda wondered if, actually, they were husband and wife. It could readily be; maybe the madness was catching. Maybe if you thought too much about such things, such travels, you could get that way. Of course, Herman represented the other extreme, and Herman was even worse in his own way—but hereafter Matilda would seek the happy medium.

And, above all else, she had had enough of her pen pal columns. They were, she realized, for kids.

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She ate dinner in Cedar Falls and then she went out to her car again, preparing for the journey back home. The sun had set and it was a clear night, and overhead the great broad sweep of the Milky Way was a pale rainbow bridge in the sky.

Matilda paused. Off in the distance there was a glow on the horizon, and that was the direction of Haron Gorka's place.

The glow increased; soon it was a bright red pulse pounding on the horizon. It flickered. It flickered again, and finally it was gone.

The stars were white and brilliant in the clear country air. That was why Matilda liked the country better than the city, particularly on a clear summer night when you could see the span of the Milky Way.

But abruptly the stars and the Milky Way were paled by the brightest shooting star Matilda had ever seen. It flashed suddenly and it remained in view for a full second, searing a bright orange path across the night sky.

Matilda gasped and ran into her car. She started the gears and pressed the accelerator to the floor, keeping it there all the way home.

It was the first time she had ever seen a shooting star going *up*.

\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK PEN PAL \*\*\*

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