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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A HUSBAND FOR MY WIFE ***



A HUSBAND FOR MY WIFE

By WILLIAM W. STUART

Illustrated by BURNS

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***I admit it—he beat my time. But my day is coming.
Any minute now time is about to run out on him!***

Soon, very soon now, the time will come for me to meet my wife's husband. I can hardly wait. Every dog has his day and Professor Thurlow Benjamin has just about had it. Every day has its dog, too, and I am going to return to him with full five years' interest the bad time he gave to me. The dog.

Dog? Look, he stole my girl not once but twice. The second time he, you might say, took his time to beat my time—and left me behind to the bad time that belonged to him. Benji is—or he was and he will be—a scientifically sneaky, two-timing dog, and a dog's life is what he gave me. But now, after nearly five years, time is on my side. He will get what, minute by minute, is coming to him not soon enough, but soon.

Benji—Professor Thurlow Benjamin—was my oldest, closest friend. I was his. We hated each other dearly in the way that only two boyhood pals can and by chance or mischance that quality of bitter-friendly, boyish rivalry never left our relationship. Why? A woman, naturally.

The first time we met, he was a tall, gangling, red-headed, big-nosed kid of nine. I, Bull (for Boulard) Benton, was shorter, stockier, heavier. Maybe not handsome exactly, but clean cut, very clean cut. Benji knocked a chip off my shoulder and I knocked his block off, but not without collecting a few lumps doing it. From then on, we fought together against anyone else. When no one else was handy, we fought each other. And naturally we each wanted what the other had.

After high school, we roomed together at Burnington University right there in our home town, Belt City. Benji was a brain, a scholar. I was an athlete. So he broke nearly every bone in his body trying to be a six-foot-three, one-hundred-and-thirty-nine-pound scatback, while I nearly sprained a brain that was deep, definitely deep, but maybe not quite as quick on its feet as some, trying for scholarship.

The last year and a half at the university, the competition between us narrowed down to a battle for Vera Milston, old Dean Milston's statuesque daughter. That was all a mistake. I can see it now. So can Benji. But not then.

Dean Milston was the dourest, sourest, meanest old tyrant ever to suspend a football captain for a couple of unimportant "D"s. One afternoon in junior year at basketball practice—Benji was out, dragging around a cast—Jocko Bunter bet me ten I didn't have the nerve to date the dean's daughter. Well, hell, I'd seen her around, visiting the dean as regularly as I had to. She was a lot of girl. Tall, honey-blond—a little on the regal, commanding side, and maybe her lips were a mite set over a chin that the old man should have kept to himself—but there are times when a young man doesn't analyze the details as carefully as he might. She was built like nothing I had tackled all fall.

So I took a chance, got a date, won ten, and that might and should have been that. She had a way of saying "No!" that made me think of her father. But, the thing was, Benji didn't know about the bet. I dated her once. So he had to date her twice. Again, I didn't analyze. I jumped to the conclusion Benji had the hots for her and went to work to cut him out.

That kept us busy the next year and a half and I led all the way. Vera and I got engaged at the spring prom to be married right after my graduation—which improved the odds on my graduating considerably. The dean was a grim old devil who considered Hamlet a comedy and could refuse anything to anyone—except Vera, and how could I have known it was fear rather than affection that made him give in to her?

Anyway, perhaps the strain of passing me a diploma was too great. The next day the old devil passed on himself, and no matter where he may be sitting, I know he is happy as long as he can watch the others fry. But I shouldn't grumble. He saved me, unintentional though it was.

Vera, possibly having second thoughts as she looked over the Dean's List, said she couldn't marry me till after a reasonable period of mourning. The Army took me and rejected Benji. He stayed on for post-graduate study in physics. I told you he was a brain.

A brain, but not equally acute in all fields. When I got back to Belt City three years later, Benji was already an assistant professor of physics—and Vera's husband. They were settled in the old dean's big, ancient house just off the campus and Benji was aiming—or being aimed—at a distinguished academic career. I came back to town with the idea of winding up the family insurance and real estate business and pulling out, mostly to keep away from them.

It wasn't, you understand, that I was carrying such a heavy torch for Vera. She hadn't blighted my life; not then, that is. But it seemed to me that living in town with her and Professor Thurlow Benjamin—a gloating, triumphant Benji, laughing at me because he'd succeeded in marrying my girl—would be a real annoyance. But, of course, when I hit town I had to call them and they had

to invite me to dinner.

For one time, anyway, I figured I had to accept. I gritted my teeth and went. I never had a sweeter, more enjoyable evening in all my life.

I got there about seven in the evening and walked up the steps to the big old porch on the dean's house feeling a bit nervous and upset. I'd walked up those same steps often enough before, feeling nervous and upset, but this was different. I lifted the oversized brass knocker and rapped. Vera's voice, coming from the back of the house someplace, cut through the evening air. "Thurlow! Answer the door!"

"Yes, sweets. I'm on my way, Vera hun bun." That was Benji. Hun bun, yet! And his voice was misery. It cringed and whined. I grinned to myself and began to feel more cheerful.

Benji let me in. His glasses were thicker and his hair thinner and he looked a lot older. But it was Benji, the same old lanky, gangling redhead; yet not the same, too. He had a hang-dog look that was new and suddenly I felt so good, I punched him playfully in the ribs. He winced—and didn't even counter. If the fight hadn't gone out of him, it had sure been watered down. We went on in to the parlor across the hall from the dean's old study. Vera joined us. She didn't look bad—at a glance. But if you checked right close, and I did, there was something in her look—a sharpness I hadn't noticed before; her nose seemed bigger, beak-like; the broad, solid shoulders; deep-down grooves at the corners of her mouth.

She threw her arms around me and kissed me. My temperature stayed steady and cool.

"Boulard! Boulard, darling! You look marvelous!"

I felt great, too. "Vera, girl. You're as gorgeous as ever, radiant, blooming, still the campus goddess. And Mrs. Thurlow Benjamin now, hm-m? Old Benji is sure a lucky dog."

Benji forced a hollow laugh. Vera smiled a positive agreement.

Then Benji sort of coughed out a faint note of hope and pleaded, "Vera, sweet, this is a—uh—an occasion, don't you agree, dear? Don't you—ah—do you think maybe I ought to—fix us all a drink?"

"Thurlow! You drink far too much! You had a highball before dinner at Professor Dorman's only night before last."

Almost—but not quite—I felt sorry for him.

"Ah, well, Vera doll," I said, "this *is* an occasion, after all. And I *do* want to drink a toast to you and Benji."

"Hmph."

"Especially you, the love of my life, lost now, but lovelier than ever."

"Boulard!... Well, Thurlow, don't stand there like an idiot. Go mix us some drinks. And mind the line on the bottle."

And then she turned back with some more gush for me. I enjoyed it, knowing now what I had been saved from. In fact, as I said, I enjoyed the whole evening; my playing up to Vera made her just that much rougher on Benji. Revenge on Benji plus relief at what I had escaped made life seem pleasant, and right there and then I changed my mind about leaving town. I decided to stay and settled down.

Well, I did settle, but not too far down. Instead of selling out Uncle George's insurance and real estate firm, I went to work in it. It was prosperous enough and light work. There were plenty of girls around town if you got around, and I did.

Looking back, those were the happy years. Naturally I kept seeing quite a bit of Vera and Benji. Rubbing it in? Sure, why not? Hell, half the pleasure in any success comes from giving a hard time to those who gave you a hard time. It may not be nice, but it is normal.

I lolled in the shade and laughed; Benji sweated and suffered. His boss's whip cracked merrily. He plodded ahead in the University Physics Department and fiddled around his lab whenever he could escape into it.

Then there came a black Friday evening in early autumn. I was due at Benji's for dinner, just him and me. Vera had gone up to Chicago that morning to see her ever-dying Aunt Bella and do some shopping. She would not be back till the next day so she called on me to keep an eye on Benji.

So I was due for a quietly pleasant early evening listening to Benji talk about his sorrows. Then, I figured, Benji would go to his lab in the old dean's study and I would go out on the town. I had a date, one of the very best, Starlight Glowe, formerly Daisy Hanzel, formerly an office clerk. She was a pert little strawberry blonde, cute, with a lot of good humor and a lot of everything else too; about as unlike Vera as a girl could be. That week she was between nightclub engagements, back in her old home town. And back in the old groove with me, too. I looked forward to the evening—first Benji's troubles and then my own pleasures.

I pulled up in front of Benji's old place just at dusk. A late working lineman from Beltsville Power was fiddling around on the pole outside Benji's lab room. "Hey, Mac," he hollered, "you going in there? Look, tell the prof they'll cut it in at seven ayem, huh? Can't make it a minute sooner."

I nodded as I went up the steps and across the porch; knocked once. Walked on in—and stopped dead in the hallway to stare up the stairs. It was Benji, but not the Vera's Benji I was used to. He was dressed in the evening clothes Vera got him to wear only at major faculty functions. He carried a cane, wore a flower. Tonight he was Benji, man about town, knight of the evening. Sharp. Cool. Cocky.

He strutted on down the stairs and past me. He winked, grinned that dirty, sneaky grin of his I remembered all too well from the old days. At the door, he looked back over his shoulder, still grinning, and said, "Stick around a minute, Bull boy. I have something to show you." The door slammed shut.

I couldn't believe it; he wouldn't dare. Then I heard my car, my new sport car, starting outside and I swore, grabbing the doorknob.

"Wait, Bull. You couldn't catch me."

I spun around. Damned if it wasn't old Benji, coming down the stairs again just as though it wasn't impossible. This time he looked himself, but worse. He had on an old lab smock and a new hangover. He looked awful—but with a hint of satisfaction too, like remembering the time he'd had getting into such lousy shape.

"Well, Bull boy," he mumbled, wavering on down the steps, holding the top of his head on with one hand, "come on out in the lab. Maybe we could find a little nip. And I have something to show you."

"So you said."

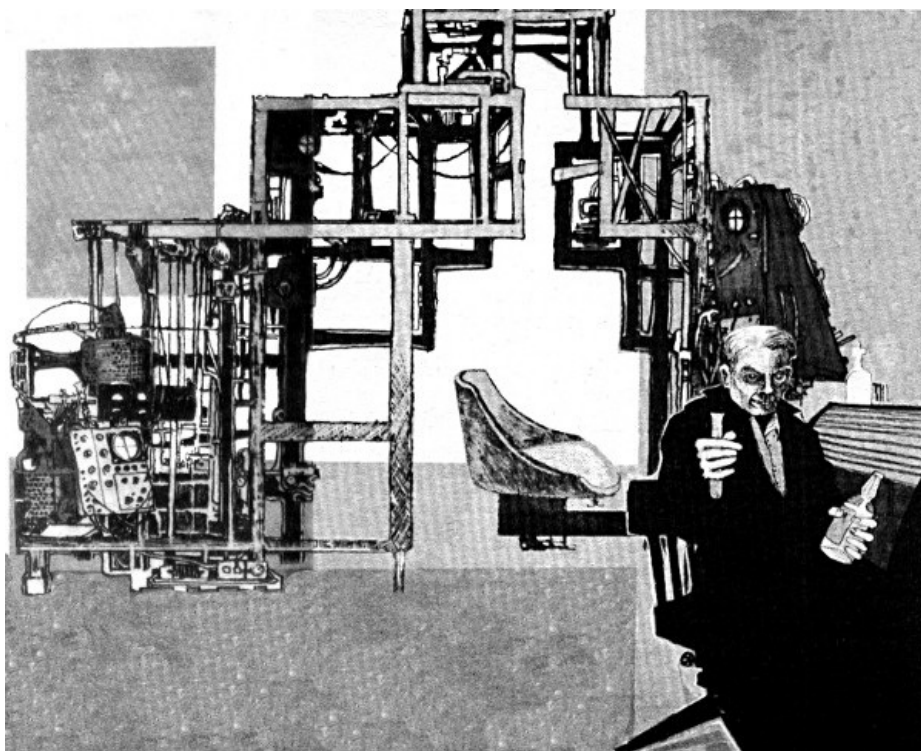
"Eh? Oh, yes, so I did. Last night, when I was going out."

"It was just now—only you went out all dressed up, and here you are all beat up. What's this all about?"

"Come *on*," he said with a flash of temper. "When I get a hair or two of the dog, I'll explain it to you."

I followed him into his lab, the dean's old study. It was the only thing Benji could call his own. Vera let him have it on the off-chance that he might find something important enough to give their social and financial position a boost.

In the lab, Benji fished an amber-filled flask from the wastebasket under the old rolltop desk and poured himself a double, me a single, in a couple of big test tubes. I only half saw him out of a corner of the eye.



What I was really looking at was a damned peculiar rig that filled up about a third of the space along the side wall next to the kitchen. It was—I couldn't figure it. It looked something like one of those jungle gym outfits in the kids' playgrounds. But there were wires running from it to half a dozen wall plugs, and a seat up in the middle with a bunch of dials and things.

It was all odd, and oddest was the way it all sort of shimmered and blurred as I watched it.

"What in hell is that?" I walked across the lab toward it, reaching out.

"Better not touch it, Bull. You might knock something out."

Since he put it like that, I raised my hand to grab hold of one of the cross bars by the seat in the center of the thing—and there I was resting comfortably on a small cloud in far outer space, watching a great spiral nebula whirling in infinite majesty through the vast, empty blackness, and I thought about the mystery of the universe. I felt that if I could just reach out, I would have in my grasp the final answer. But then it drifted away and the nebula slowly narrowed and evolved into a great system of suns, planets, moons—and finally into the big, old chandelier in the dean's study.

When it all seemed to stabilize at that point, I sat up a little shakily. The room, Benji's lab now, was still there. I stood up and felt lousy. My head ached. I looked around. Benji was sitting at the desk slumped over, his head on his folded arms. The flask of whiskey, half gone, was on the desk beside him. I emptied it out a little more, into me, and checked my watch. Six o'clock and the sky showed gray outside. I had been out all night.

I put my foot on the base of Benji's swivel chair and shoved hard. The chair rolled back, out from under him. He slumped down with a pleasing thud on the floor. He woke up with a pained expression that helped my headache a little.

"Damn you, Benji," I said, "you did that out of spite, to break my date with Daisy, I bet."

He yawned. "I told you you'd better not touch it."

"Because you knew then I'd have to go ahead and do it. It's a wonder, with me knocked out, you didn't go try to steal my girl."

"I did. I am."

"You what?"

"I did go out with Daisy. I am with her now."

"Are you cracked? You are right here with me."

"True, but I am simultaneously with Daisy." He grinned reflectively. "And I don't mind saying Daisy is much better company than you.... Now wait, Bull. I know this is difficult for you to grasp, but it is a fact that I am in two places at the same time—only on different circuits. This is big, Bull, really big! After you help me with one or two details, I am going to share it with you. Listen to me."

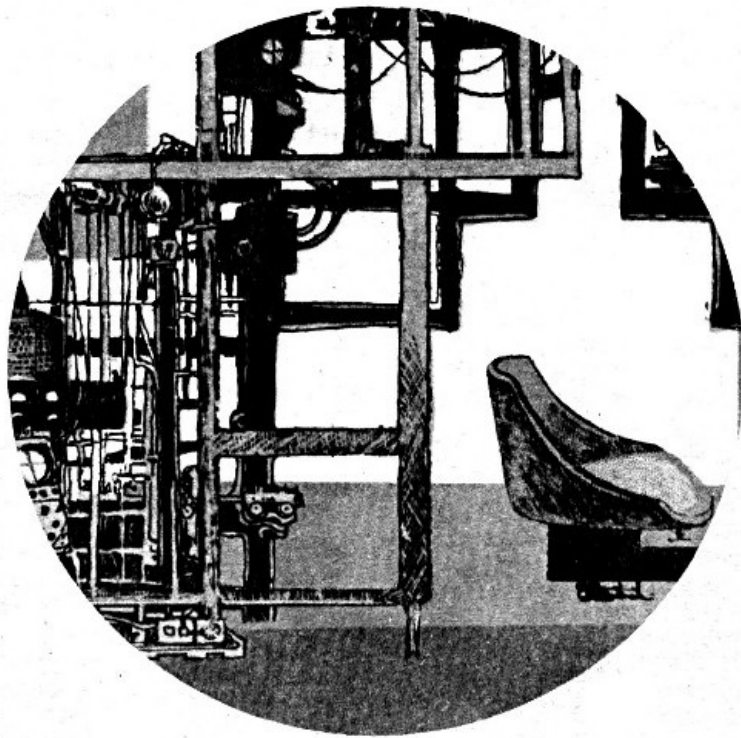
Sometimes I can be sickeningly gullible. "All right. Start explaining."

"Think, Bull! Last night you saw me go out the front door. At substantially the same time, you also saw me, dressed quite differently, come down the hall stairs. It should be obvious. I have built a time machine."

I looked down at my watch and then back at him, with raised eyebrows.

"No, Bull. Not a machine for telling time; a machine for traveling through time or, actually, more or less around it. You see my machine there."

The jungle gym rig was still at the side of the room, blurred and shimmering. "Yeah, I see it. And don't bother telling me not to touch it again. I won't."



"Your own fault. Ordinarily you could touch even one of the bars; it is perfectly safe. But just now the machine is there twice. That creates further static force fields."

"Benji—"

"Look at it. Looks as though you were seeing double, hm-m? And you are. You see, Bull, this coming morning at ten to seven, I took—and will take—the machine and I traveled back to ten to five yesterday afternoon. At that time the machine was already there. Actually, I should have moved it just before I used it this morning, to limit the overlaps. But I was rushed. You'll see. Daisy and I will be here shortly." He grinned. It was an expression I had never particularly cared for. "Have another drink, Bull."

That was an expression I liked better. I did have one. His story was unbelievable. But I was beginning to believe it—partly because of the machine there and the fact that I had seen two of him practically at once the evening before, partly because I knew Benji would be capable of almost anything if it would let him steal a girl from me and get away from Vera besides.

He took a short nip himself and went on. "I won't strain your limited facilities by trying to give you the technical side of it. More or less, it is a matter of setting up the proper number of counteracting magnetic force fields, properly focused, in a proper relationship each with the other to bend the normal space factors in such a way as to circumvent time. Is that clear?"

"Not to me," I said. "Is it to you?"

"Not altogether. But what is clear is this. My machine works. I can jump through time. To any time."

"Got any special messages from Cleopatra?"

"The amount or period of time is a question of power. With only the regular house current I have connected now, about a day at a step is the limit. That is as far as I have gone. Of course I could go one day and then another and then another, forward or back, indefinitely. With more current, there would be no such limitations."

"How about taking a run up to the end of the week and let me know how the World Series is going to come out?"

"Ah, now you begin to see! I told you this is a big thing—tremendous! And all I ask is just a little help from you, and you will share in the proceeds."

"What, me help? How?"

"I had the power company run in a special power line yesterday. It will cut in this morning at seven. With this added power, the machine can travel five years. Five years at a jump, which as far as I—we, that is—want to go."

"Well, just suppose what you say is true, Benji. If it is, then you used your sneaky machine to two-time me with Daisy last night, eh? I like that. Vera will like that, too. But you expect to bribe me with a share in your rig to help you out. How? With what?"

"Bull, it's like this. I did go out last night, my first time in a long time. You know Vera. So, considering the past few years, you can understand that I was—uh—maybe a bit reckless last night, ran into a few little problems. Nothing serious, of course. And besides, with your help, the police won't be able—"

"The police?"

"Yes. But, Bull, you've been right here with me all night. You can swear to that. So I couldn't possibly have driven your car up the steps and through the glass doors into the ancient history section of the museum."

"My car!"

"Now, Bull, we'll make money—you can get *lots* of cars. And I didn't mean to smash up yours. I simply wanted to give Daisy a rough idea of a time trip back into the past. But you can tell the police I was right here when someone broke out through the window by the Neanderthal exhibit while the police were coming in the front door after us. So someone else must have driven off in the police car."

"You stole the police car?" I yelled.

"Oh, we won't keep it," he said airily. "But perhaps they are upset about our borrowing it and about the duet of 'As Time Goes By' that Daisy and I sang over the police radio."

"Lord! And when did you finish all this fun and games?" I demanded.

"When? Let's see. It's 6:40 A.M. So we—Daisy and I—are on our way back here now. In the patrol car."

"Now? You and Daisy? In the patrol car?"

"The one we borrowed. The police—they seem to have a lot of cars—are not far behind. I believe they think they recognized me. You can tell them how wrong they are."

He stopped to listen. I heard it too, a sound of sirens in the distance, coming closer.

"So, Benji. In a minute or so, you—a second edition of you, when one has always been plenty—you are coming here, with all the cops in town on your tail, *and* with my girl. And you expect me to step forward and, lying in my teeth, tell these enraged cops that you are innocent. This is quite a request, Benji."

There was the roar of a car racing down the quiet, Saturday-dawn street. Benji looked at me anxiously. "Here we come. Bull, please! You wouldn't turn me over to the police. Would you?"

No, I didn't want the cops to get him. I wanted to get him myself—and let Vera finish him.

There was a sound of running footsteps up the porch stairs. The hallway door opened. Arm in arm, laughing like a pair of idiots, in came Benji—Benji II—and my girl, Daisy. They staggered across the room. Benji II threw his arms around Daisy and kissed her with conviction and assurance. Then, quickly, he stepped away from her and walked over to the time-machine rig.

"Hurry it up," said the first Benji, "quick. The power will cut off any second now, until they switch in the new line."

Drunk or not, Benji II knew what he was doing. He dragged the straight chair by the wall to the side of the machine and climbed it. He swayed, almost fell. Then, without touching any of the bars, he managed to step from the chair into the seat of the machine rig. He fiddled with a dial or knob—and vanished. The double exposure look of the machine disappeared too.

"Benji," said Daisy, staring blankly at the machine.

"Daisy," said the leftover Benji, walking toward her. The sound of sirens outside sounded loud and louder—and then moaned to a stop in front of the house.

"Benji," Daisy said again, giving me and the sirens about as much attention as an individual ant gets at a family picnic, "Benji, it was *true* then! All that you were telling me about going through time was true! And we can—"

"Of course, sweet. I told you I'd be with you, that everything will be all right, with good old Bull to help us. What time have you, Bull?"

"Hah?" I was dazed.

"The time? What time is it?"

"It's just about seven. But—"

Heavy footsteps pounded up the front stairs and across the porch. The front door knocker thundered.

"Bull," said Benji, "Bull, old friend. I think there may be someone at the door. Would you see who it is?"

I don't know why I didn't make him go answer. I still don't know. But I walked out into the hall

from the lab and opened the front door—and nearly got trampled by a squad of four cops, headed by big, tough Sergeant Winesap. There were, I saw through the open door, two squad cars parked out front and another coming down the block, just behind a taxi.

"Oh," said Winesap, "it's you, Benton. Say, you weren't in this crime wave, too, were you? We only saw two, that madman friend of yours, Professor Benjamin, and the girl, in your car.... Look, you know what they did? They knocked off three hydrants whooping about time and the fountain of youth, and wrecked the museum; and the police car—and what they did to Officer Durlin.... Maybe you weren't in on it, Benton, but we know they came in here. Friend or no friend, don't try to obstruct justice. Where are they?"

"Yes, officer?" inquired Benji, bland as could be, from the lab door. "What seems to be the trouble? Did you wish to see me?"

His manner must have been disarming. At least they didn't shoot him on the spot. They just advanced, loosening guns in holsters, like a thoughtful lynching party. Benji strolled back into the lab and over to Daisy, who was standing by the machine at the side of the room.

The officers were confused. Benji, sober or nearly so, in his old lab smock, looked a good deal different to them from the wild man they'd been chasing all over town. But there was Daisy in her evening gown.

"That's them, all right," said a young rookie with a fine-blooming shiner. "She's the one that threw the eggplants. I'd know her anywhere."

"And that's Benjamin," said Winesap, grimly. "Okay, both of you, don't try to run. Come along and no more nonsense."

Benji held up one hand—and slipped the other arm around Daisy's waist. "Gentlemen, please! I have no idea what this is about. But surely it can have nothing to do with me. Mr. Benton and I have been right here in my laboratory all night, working. He can verify that."

They looked at me. I opened my mouth. I didn't say a word.

Vera did. She stood there in the doorway. It must have been her in the cab, coming back bright and early from Chicago. She took in the whole scene. Benji. Daisy. Police. Me.

"Benji!!!" she said. You couldn't imagine what she put into that one word.

Everyone turned then to look at her. Slowly and with infinite menace, she started across the room.

"Now, dear," said Benji nervously, "now, sweet, take it easy. This is only a little experiment. Not what you are thinking at all."

We swung back toward Benji. He had boosted Daisy onto the seat of his time rig and swung up beside her. Vera yelled and started to run toward them.

Benji twisted a knob and grinned. "Good-by now," he said. And they were gone.

Benji was gone again. Daisy was gone. The whole rig was gone.

Vera, looking a little forlorn and foolish, ended up her dash stumbling into the empty space where the thing had been. I expect we all looked a little foolish, standing there, gaping. But I had to carry foolishness to the ultimate of idiocy.

Vera at that single moment seemed sort of sad and helpless. And, Lord knows, I was mixed up. I walked over and put an arm around Vera, saying, "There, there, Vera, hon. It's all right. I'm here."

I should never have called her attention to it. There I was—and, the hell of it was I had kept playing up to her all this time just to needle Benji. When, that morning, I put my arm around her, I never had a chance.

I was married. To Vera. I still am. It has been a long, long time. Almost five years by the calendar, centuries by subjective time.

I am Vera's husband, sitting by the light of a kerosene lamp in Dean Milston's old study, which had been Benji's lab, writing. Benji and Daisy got away and I got caught. But now I can smile about it. Now, after nearly five years.

You understand?

With the power he got into his machine from the new power line, he said he could go just five years at a jump. Of course, away from Vera. Probably he figured on going further, that he would go the power limit of five years, stop, and then jump again, and again, far enough for complete safety.

But I have had a lot more time to figure than he did. I am figuring on a little party; a little reception in honor of our first intrepid time traveler. A surprise party.

It will be five years to the hour since Daisy and Benji left. Benji will be the surprise, since only I know that he will pop up in our midst. It will surprise Benji. It will surprise Vera—and our guests, among whom I have included Sergeant (Captain now) Winesap and the others of his squad.

Eccentric, a party like that? I suppose. But, to Vera and the others, it is a breakfast anniversary

party—the anniversary of the very moment of our engagement. Vera is flattered enough to be tolerant and even pleased at this romantic notion. And, since I know I have only one out and that it is coming, I am a dutiful—cringing and servile, that is—husband. So Vera indulges me in a harmless eccentricity or two.

My other little eccentricity is electric power—I don't favor it. I use Benji's lab, the old dean's study, as my den. I claim to be writing a historical novel. I need realism, atmosphere. I have had all electric power lines removed from that entire section of the house. There is no power. None.

That's why I'm writing by lamplight.

Our anniversary party will be here. The lamps and candles and the dawn of a bright new day will be light enough when, to the total astonishment of Vera and our guests, Benji and Daisy and the time rig suddenly appear among us. I will greet them with enthusiasm—but this will be as nothing to the greeting they will get from other sources. Benji will work his dials and controls, frantically. Nothing will happen. No power.

Vera will step forward. The hell with whether the statute of limitations may or may not have run out on Benji's assorted legal crimes and misdemeanors. The wrath of Vera accepts no limitations. Benji will have run out of time and it will be my time then.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A HUSBAND FOR MY WIFE ***

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