

THE ORIGINAL

35¢

SCIENCE FICTION

STORIES

JULY



FEMMEQUIN 973
by Fritz Leiber

A
DOUBLE-ACTION
MAGAZINE

THE ORIGINAL SCIENCE FICTION STORIES

35¢

Volume 8

Number 1

July, 1957

NOVELET

- THE DISAPPEARING MAN *Theodore L. Thomas* 4
Health is a wonderful thing, and this society had perfect health, physically and mentally. But the result was a sort of "Healthy sickness", and something vital had been lost . . .

SHORT STORIES

- NEUTRAL PLANET (illustrated on cover)
..... *Robert Silverberg* 39
Interstellar war may be a possibility, but it seems more likely that, should it occur, it wouldn't be the shooting kind . . .
- THE DISINHERITED *Irving Cox Jr.* 54
Earth's surface had changed almost beyond recognition, and there was a surprise in store for the newcomers . . .
- FEMMEQUIN 973 *Fritz Leiber* 69
You've heard of mannequins, of course. Well . . .
- GOLDEN BOY *Winston K. Marks* 81
There was a fortune, not only in Sam's fistic powers, but in Sam himself . . . literally . . .
- THE GARDENER *Raymond F. Jones* 94
He didn't want to be different—he wanted to be like the other kids around him . . .
- GAG RULE *Thomas N. Scortia* 110
A planetful of practical jokers is a wonderful market for manufacturers of tricky devices . . .

DEPARTMENTS

- THE EDITOR'S PAGE *Robert A. W. Lowndes* 34
There are two ways of looking at science fiction—at least two—but once you take your pick, it's a case of "Not Both Ways!"
- THE LAST WORD *The Readers* 120

Editor: ROBERT A. W. LOWNDES

MARIE A. PARK, Asso. Ed.

COVER BY FREAS

DOROTHY B. SEADOR, Asso. Ed.

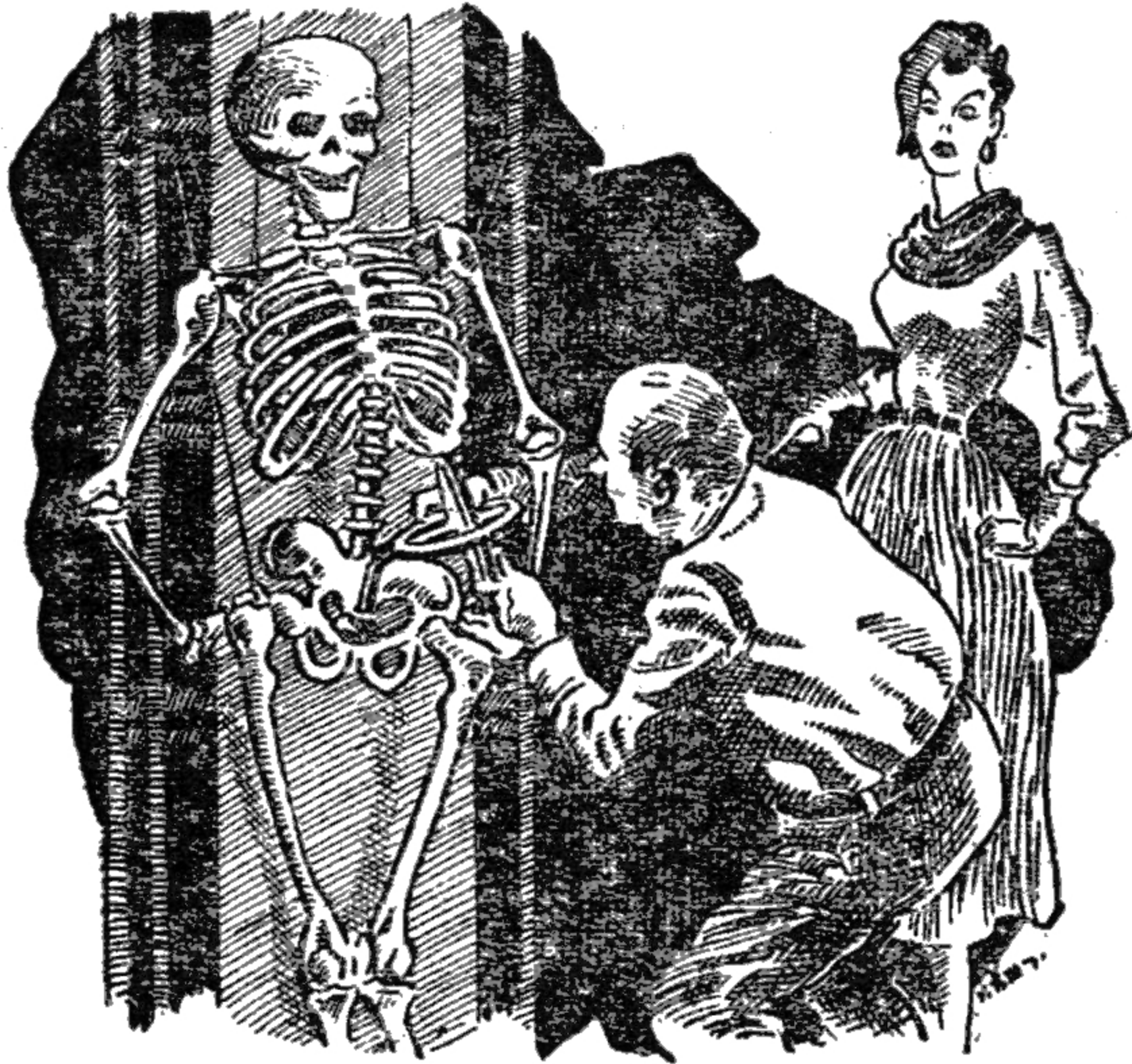
Illustrations by Emsch, Freas, Murphy, and Orban

SCIENCE FICTION STORIES, July, 1957, published bi-monthly by COLUMBIA PUBLICATIONS, INC., 1 Appleton Street, Holyoke, Mass. Editorial and executive offices at 241 Church Street, New York 13, New York. Entered as second class matter at the Post Office at Holyoke, Mass., under the act of March 3, 1879. Entire contents copyright 1957 by Columbia Publications, Inc. 35¢ per copy; yearly subscriptions \$2.10. Printed in the U. S. A.

femmequin 973

by Fritz Leiber

(author of "Coming
Attraction")



The skeleton had a female look.

illustrated by C. A. MURPHY



FEMMEQUIN 973



by Fritz Leiber

The femmequin that Rita Bruhl wanted Harry Chernik to make for an old acquaintance was somewhat irregular!

YOU WOULD have known that the gleaming skeleton hanging from the black work-rack was going to be a girl, although the steel bones were thinner and fewer, the platform for the electronic brain was in the chest and not in the head, and the pelvis held not a womb but a large gyroscope. The skeleton had that air and attitude; it was that enticing, provocative gesture that means woman—whether it turns up in a fashion-magazine advertisement or a Stone Age carving.

It was a room like a cave, black except where bright lights beat on the work-rack and the silvery skeleton. A stooping man was touching a limb of the skeleton with a tool that made a faint *grrr*. Behind the man, unseen by him, was a real woman, clothed in flesh and embellished with clothes—except that after seeing that dangling skeleton you would always doubt a little whether any woman was real and warm and alive. And this woman's face was straight out of a

fashion magazine in its cold inscrutable pride, and deadly purpose. She advanced toward the unknowing man. The silvery skeleton got more distinct to her, she could see the cables of its muscles, thin as threads. She could make out on its gleaming limbs—tiny humps, to which a substitute for flesh would later be attached. She could discern the disdainful curves of the latticework making up its metallic skull. She could see the black motors and batteries crowding its slender waist.

The stooped man also became clearer. He was short, even allowing for his stoop. The two lines going up between his eyebrows looked as if slashed by a black pencil. He seemed to be trembling a little, but never when he touched the gleaming skeleton. The *grrr* had stopped and he was stroking a silver limb with a pad of rouge.

The woman hesitated for a moment. Then she said, "Chernik!" and at the same instant touched his shoulder. He jumped as if her two fingers were the fangs of a poisonous snake.

HARRY CHERNIK had one of the oddest jobs in one of the strangest and most secret businesses in the modern world. He was assistant engineer and final tune-up man in a femmequin factory.

Harry owed his job to the intervention of a friend and his own unusual mechanical talents. It was he who cut the cams that gave the pale suede-rubber shoulders of the shimmying femmequins such a delectably lazy wriggle. It was his itch for perfection that kept the powerful electric motors inside the dainty torsos as silent as shy innocence, and the tungsten-steel cables that went down to each rosy toe and fingertip—as quiet in their sheathes as blase experience. And as for the quartz-crystal inner ear which controlled the gyroscope that kept the femmequin in perfect balance in all attitudes (replacing the less reliable mecury type), he was actually its inventor, though there was no question of patents on such a device, any more than there was on the reciprocating, contractile, variable pulse gadget that was the central feature of each femmequin.

In fact, Harry Chernik was far more important to the company than Mr. Jones, the chief engineer, though he was never told this by Mr. Bissel—the man who shipped the femmequins to the very

wealthy individuals (or the clubbed-together slightly-less-wealthy men) buying them, and who also raked in the profits.

But Harry Chernik would never have stayed on at his peculiar job for a lifetime, except that he believed himself to be a very ugly man, and as such incapable of arousing love in any woman. His work was a substitute for the tender relationships that life denied him, or that he denied himself. When he was mounting a motor—whether a powerful one in the molybdenum-steel ribwork of a femmequin, or a featherweight one in the armored skull to tighten the delicate ring of cable that puckered the lips—he was possessed by an intense and unwearying excitement that was more than that generated by the exercise of fine craftsmanship.

WHEN A millionaire customer asked for some new and almost undevisably realistic feature in a femmequin, Harry could be depended upon to work five nights running without the prod of extra money. Mr. Bissel and Mr. Jones were well aware of how their assistant engineer was wedded to his work, and how much of their own financial success was due to the passion of this marriage; being wise, if not generous men, they gave him no hint of this. Indeed, they pretend-

ed to find a great deal of fault with his work and even after twenty years were not above hinting that he might shortly be discharged. They believed, and quite accurately, that fear of losing a job that meant much more to Chernik than money would drive him to a higher pitch of inventiveness.

Mr. Bissel would sometimes explain frankly to his intimates, "You can't turn out a really good product unless you love it. Now most of us here are just a little bit contemptuous of our girls, and of the boobs who buy them. In the selling end, that doesn't hurt; but in the production end it does. We have only two people here who really love our girls, and Chernik is one of them."

It must not be thought that Harry Chernik's position allowed him to enjoy the ingenious robot caresses of the femmequins he labored to perfect, and that such crass privileges were the final tie between him and his job. Quite the opposite was the case.

AFTER THE femmequins left him in the form of eerie steel skeletons, to receive their suede-rubber flesh and have their eyes and tongues and other details mounted, he was hardly permitted to touch them. More than once at final tune-up Mr. Bissel had said, "Not you,

Harry. Your hands are oily, you'll smudge her," and it would be Rita Bruhl's or Joe Novak's fingers which would burrow into the invisible slit in the femmequin's back and unzip the large window there. Only when this was fully open, and the rest of the femmequin draped in a protective shroud, would Harry be allowed to approach and work his magic on the motors, making the final corrections that first testing had shown necessary.

He was invariably dismissed before final testing. This delicate job was the prerogative of Joe Novak, who nevertheless dressed like a fashion plate and was handsome in a beefy way. Mr. Bissel put a great deal of trust in Joe's judgement, believing him to have had a wealth of amatory experience in real life. (This last assumption was quite untrue, but there were limits even to Mr. Bissel's sagacity. In any case Joe's judgements were vindicated in terms of customer satisfaction.)

Yet, Harry Chernik's ardor was not dampened by the fact that he knew vastly more about the insides of his girls than a surgeon knows about the insides of his repeater patients, without enjoying anything of a surgeon's dignity and prestige. A real skeleton would have horrified a prospective customer less than a glimpse of one of the femmequins in the

extremely undressed state in which Harry Chernik worked on them. But Harry, viewing them, was ravished by titillations invisible to other eyes. He saw the langorous undulation of a hip in the curves of a cam, the inviting turn of a haughty head in the routing of a cable, the unswerving glance of wide blue eyes in the adjustment of a photoelectric cell. In fact, Harry might have outgrown his job except for the exceedingly devious nature of the satisfactions he found in it. As in the case of normal love, distance added enchantment.

THERE WAS, of course, a more personal reason for Harry Chernik's strange pattern of life than these general considerations. Long ago, he had fallen utterly in love. More important, Louise had been submissive, and more easily hurt than himself, so that for once he had managed to conquer his terrible dread of ridicule and really think of asking someone to marry him. She had returned his love; he had been about to propose, when she had been snatched away from him by an exceedingly handsome and brilliant young man, who had overwhelmed her by imaginative romantic attentions and then actually gone on to marry her. It had always seemed unjust to Harry cruelly that John Gottschalk had deprived him of Louise; Gottschalk had the

equipment to win any girl, no matter how beautiful, proud and vixenish. Why should John insist on a mousy and gentle creature like Louise?

It was after this catastrophe, that a guarded message about "an interesting job opportunity" had come from, of all people, Rita Bruhl.

RITA WAS an exceptionally handsome, but always severely-dressed girl, who had been John Gottschalk's companion on double dates with Louise and Harry, before the attraction between John and Louise had shown itself. Harry had always thought of Rita, with impersonal bitterness, as the sort of girl whom men like John should take the trouble to win. He would never have dreamed of risking any advances himself, and was quite startled that she should remember him at all, let alone do him a favor.

It turned out that Rita worked for a firm manufacturing dress shop mannequins, according to the story she first told him. She introduced him to Mr. Bissel, who, after sounding him out carefully and seeing some evidence of his mechanical ability, bound him to secrecy and then revealed to him that they were bringing out a line of animated mannequins, which a chain of big department stores planned as its smash advertising surprise for next year. Harry found pleasure in dis-

cussing the means whereby the movements of wheels and levers and tiny pneumatic pumps could be translated into the flexures and swellings of a chilly pseudo-flesh. (That was before he knew that the femmequins were temperature-controlled to human normal.) Taken to the machine shop, he saw the fleshless steel forms in all their surrealist beauty. Inspecting them more closely, he spotted mechanical crudities that made his fingers and mind itch to be tinkering. He took the job.

IT WASN'T many weeks before he realized that the story about department store advertising had been a blind. But by that time he loved his "skelegirls" (as he sometimes called them) a bit too much.

Indirectly he heard enough about John Gottschalk to know that both he and his marriage were prospering, though with some setbacks, as when Louise's first and only child died at birth—a tragedy which happened to coincide with Harry finishing work on the first femmequin which he felt to be stamped with his own individual craftsmanship.

What he did hear about John Gottschalk was also enough to keep his hatred alive. Once in a while, Rita Bruhl made use of Chernik, curtly asking secret favors. He made no other friends at the factory.

AND SO Harry Chernik worked for more than twenty years in his shadowland of steel houris, nursing his fear of Mr. Bissel; his awe of Rita Bruhl; his contempt for Joe Novak; his hatred of John Gottschalk, and his thin, unreal love for Louise.

These desires and anxieties, and also his despairs, naturally created a considerable degree of nervousness in Harry Chernik, so that when Rita Bruhl stole up behind him in his workshop and stung him on the shoulder with two fingers, he jumped the earth-bound equivalent of half a mile.

"Rita!" he protested gaspingly, "You make me think it's Mr. Bissel, you make me think it's the Federal Bureau of Morals. Why, Rita? We're friends, Rita. Why?"

Rita's eyes were like marble as she looked at him. The pupils and irises were almost lost in the expanse of white.

"Because there is a special reason," she said. "Because I want you to make a special femmequin for a special customer."

"Do we ever do anything besides that, Rita?"

"No," she said, "but femmequin 973 must have motors many times as powerful as any of the others, it must have cables many times as strong, the gadget must be specially armed—I mean equipped. And I must impress my own voice on the wires."

"But that's against the safety rules," Chernik protested. "Our femmequins are built to crack up at that point where they could hurt a customer. Besides, Rita, although you dub in a word here and there, you're not supposed to do whole wires. And as for fooling with the central gadget—"

"Yes," Rita said, "but femmequin 973 is for a very special customer." And she smiled thoughtfully.

RITA BRUHL went to work for Mr. Bissel just as any other attractive career girl might join the staff of a couturier or fashion magazine. And her work was very much the same. It was to style the femmequins, to decide from her studies of cafe society and fashion art as to whether legs should be made a trifle longer, waists a bit slimmer, breasts full or budding. In compliance with her recommendations, the suede-rubber faces were given a haughty look one year, a palsy-walsy one the next, or perhaps a dewily-innocent expression—or even an intellectual one.

In her early days with the company, such expressions were molded into the suede-rubber. Later, as Harry Chernik's inventiveness bore fruit, they came to depend on the tensions of tiny systems of wires rooted in the suede-rubber, or the inflation and deflation of ballon-like cavities in the cheeks. Expressions be-

came living instead of fixed; variety and a greater degree of naturalness were achieved. Frequently she, and Mr. Jones, and Harry would analyze motion-picture close-ups of glamorous actresses, breaking down a sultry or outraged expression into all its split-second stages; then Harry would go off to cut a miraculous new cam. Sometimes, when they couldn't get just what was wanted, Rita herself would emote for Harry; he would watch carefully, and the resultant cam would be even more of a masterpiece.

Frequently Rita's styling assignments involved individualizing a femmequin: that is, making it a duplicate of some famous screen or TV star, or of a popular advertising model or society girl. In this case, she would have to do a little research to get the exact measurements and characteristic attitudes and gestures. It would also be necessary to run through a great deal of recorded vocal material from radio broadcasts and the like by the desired star, in order to piece together — from sentences, phrases and even single-words—the saucy and tender utterances to be impressed on the magnetic wires in the femmequin's voice box. But Rita was a good mimic; she often used her own voice in difficult cases, even when the needed material might have been otherwise obtained.

Of course such individualizing upped the price of a femmequin considerably, but that was all right with Mr. Bissel.

ON RARE occasions, a customer might ask for a copy of some girl not in the public eye. In this case, it would be necessary for Rita to contact the girl—frequently by posing as the representative of a fashion house that wanted to popularize its products by giving them away to selected individuals. Then she got the necessary data by means of tiny hidden camera and recorders, and by her amazing memory for female mannerisms and behavior.

Mr. Bissel was uneasy about accepting orders of this sort, ever since one had almost involved him in a murder case. The customer had asked for a duplicate of an obscure strip-tease dancer. Some weeks later, the newspapers were screaming about the murder of a very wealthy relative of this same dancer. The girl was under suspicion, since she inherited a fortune, but she had an unbreakable alibi: she had been performing at the burlesque bar at the crucial time. Mr. Bissel was convinced that the girl herself had ordered the femmequin, and used it to perform her act; but there was nothing he could do about it—especially as his business was much more profitable than blackmail. Afterwards, sim-

ilar orders always worried Bissel, but he could hardly refuse them; they brought the most money of all.

THE REASON the duplicate would have been able to put on a convincing strip act was that this was an accomplishment of all the femmequins. Harry Chernik's cams for this were wonders of intricacy, and Rita Bruhl worked with him closely in styling the clothing of the femmequins—the more expensive came with elaborate trousseaus, like costly dolls—just as she styled every other particular of their equipment and behavior.

And like Harry Chernik, Rita derived intense secret satisfaction from her work—giving herself to many men in many guises, without the unpleasantness of physical, or the responsibility of emotional contact. High priestess of the cult of her own beauty, she was preoccupied with the preliminary stages of sexual attraction. The later stages were quite repulsive to her.

Naturally, her work permitted Rita to satisfy completely her obsession with nubile female beauty; it was as if she ran a charm school with the added incalculable privilege of creating her pupils from the toes up. But she always put something wholly of herself into her creations—some phrase or gesture or expression that was hers alone. It was for this reason that she

so often impressed her own voice on the wires and that she so frequently modeled emotions and postures for Harry Chernik. And she felt a stab of shivery excitement whenever a femmequin was shipped off in its coffin. Coffins were really used for shipping femmequins. It permitted the shipment to be accompanied by a personal representative of the firm, militating against detection. Also, modern coffins, with their rosily quilted interiors, were appropriated and pleasantly expensive jewel-cases for the robot girls.

THE LITTLE signatures that Rita inscribed on the femmequins were not always unmalicious. She frequently had interviews with men ordering femmequins and during these interviews (when she always behaved with the impersonality of a lawyer or architect) she was able to spot the chinks in the armor around the client's ego—the things that would be most apt to shake his self confidence. Then, if anything about the client annoyed her (and it generally did), she would insert into the femmequin's voice wires some seemingly innocuous remarks calculated to give the client a bad moment or two. But she was careful never to carry this practice so far that complaints came back to Mr. Bissel; in fact, it probably added to the life-

likeness and success of the femmequins.

Also, like Harry Chernik, Rita Bruhl had her private reasons for finding her life's satisfactions in a peculiar occupation, and they were concerned with the same man—John Gottschalk, and the same woman—his wife Louise. John had been one of the very few men, almost the only one, with whom Rita had contemplated falling in love. She sensed in him enough hidden weaknesses, especially a great need to be admired. Rita had definitely decided to say "Yes"—eventually—when he would begin asking her to marry him.

It therefore came to her as a tremendous shock when John shifted his attention to an insignificant, merely pretty girl like Louise and then, monstrously, went on to propose. She could only conceive that he had done it to be revenged on her, because she had not instantly thrown herself into his arms.

THE PASSING years brought no obvious change to Rita. At forty-five her beauty seemed as fresh and unwrinkled as at twenty-five. She became a trifle slimmer—that was the only difference. It was almost as if she herself were one of her metal proteges, immune to age. Occasionally even Mr. Bissel sensed this and almost shuddered—though oddly enough, John, smiling at her across

the luncheon table, never seemed to notice.

But there was change in Rita. Deep inside the perpetual youth of her maidenhood, a worm gnawed. And it was the worm that shaped her words and licked her lips as she patted Harry Chernik's trembling shoulder, down by the work-rack and said, "Don't worry so, Harry dear. You've put all sorts of other special features into femmequins. This one you're working on has seven fingers on each hand, hasn't she? And that one there in the coffin is over six feet tall. So why not one with stronger motors and cables, and with a specially armed gadget, and with only my voice on its wires? Come on, Harry."

But Harry pulled away from her reluctantly, until he was half in the shadows. "I can't do it, Rita," he mumbled. "If Mr. Bissel ever found out I had broken the safety rules..."

"He won't find out, I'll take care of that," Rita assured him.

"And what is this...arming, you call it, for the central gadget?"

"I'll tell you when the time comes to install it."

"But if something should happen to the customer..." Chernik whined desperately.

Rita laughed. "I don't think you'd mind having anything happen to this customer, Harry," she told him. "You see,

femmequin 973 is for John Gottschalk."

JOH N GOTTSCHALK'S secret was that he was afraid of women, far more so than Harry Chernik. That was why he married Louise; he could be certain she would never desert him or taunt him in any fashion. She would be an unfailing refuge to which he could return...

For of course there were other women, but his ego became more insecure with each new conquest—he had that much more to lose.

He continued to be a thoughtful husband to Louise, within reasonable limits. It did not occur to him that, as regards himself, anyone could object to reasonable limits and demand everything.

With Rita Bruhl he maintained a luncheon-relationship, nothing more. She showed toward him a dispassionate yet untiring interest deeper, it sometimes seemed, even than love.

JOH N ALWAYS laughed appreciatively at the bits of information Rita let slip about her unusual job. Gradually he inferred the true nature of Mr. Bissel's femmequins and maintained an attitude of slightly contemptuous interest. Though when Rita told him about Harry Chernik's employment in the same business and about Harry's increasing eccentricity and

withdrewal, John would merely smile and shrug.

With the passage of years, John Gottschalk's curiosity about Mr. Bissel's femmequins became by imperceptible degrees more marked. Inevitably so, since John's nervous singlemindedness in his affairs made him look more and more on mental and emotional qualities as merely troublesome.

So it happened that John and Rita began to talk jokingly about what qualities he would like in a femmequin.

When he finally did come to place the order, he felt a sudden twinge of uneasiness, but this was dispelled by Rita's impersonal but approving manner—like a Jeeves when his master has decided to order just the proper wardrobe.

And so, since Harry Chernenik was a faithful and inspired workman, since Rita Bruhl was a stern and much-interested task-mistress—and since Mr. Bissel was not an overly-inquisitive boss, the femmequin for John Gottschalk got delivered in its canvas-covered coffin.

BUT JOHN was out. It was his wife Louise who timidly opened the door and showed the two delivery men to John's bedroom. The delivery man, who was Mr. Bissel's representative, never for a moment thought that Louise was Mr. Gottschalk's wife; her manner and her clothes

convinced him that she was a servant. He even had his assistant strip the canvas from the coffin, and he smiled knowingly at Louise as he departed.

Afterwards, Louise went back to the bedroom and sat looking at the coffin.

Louise Gottschalk had never thought of herself as an attractive woman and could never understand why John had chosen her; she adored him, made a god of him, and found that the hallmark of a god is that he demands sacrifices. John's affairs sharpened her sense of inadequacy.

And now she sat looking at the strange box shaped so much like a coffin. She wondered if John had taken up an interest in statuary or model spaceships. After looking at the box for a long while, she touched its side.

It opened at once.

A SLIM, BEAUTIFUL woman whom Louise knew sat up stiffly and looked at her. The woman was dressed delectably from the male viewpoint, plunging neckline and all.

"Miss Bruhl...Rita," Louise said astoundedly, edging back.

"My little timid one, my frightened darling," Femmequin 973 exclaimed, suddenly standing up in the coffin. "You see, I know you are frightened, for I know you're

afraid of all women, and of me especially."

Louise shrank away. "Please, Rita, please don't be silly," she croaked faintly.

Femmequin 973 leaned forward, so that the plunging neckline plunged farther. "Don't run, darling. I know you're very surprised and very frightened, but you can't get away from me now." The femmequin suddenly jumped out of the coffin and slowly advanced.

Louise tried to shrink away farther, but the wall was at her back. "Rita, Rita, this is terrible," she gasped.

The slim hands of Femmequin 973 went to its waist and the plunging neckline plunged. "Look at me," she commanded. "I'm very beautiful, aren't I, and even more frightening. I'm afraid this is going to scare you very much;

and it's going to hurt you, too." And the arms of Femmequin 973 stretched out and suddenly clasped tight around Louise.

Then Louise finally screamed and fought and shouted, "Stop, Rita, stop!" but Femmequin 973 did not stop. It clasped and loosed and clasped again, for what seemed to be hours of torture, all the while murmuring in Louise's ear. Finally, clutching her tighter yet, Femmequin 973 drew back its exquisite triumphant face and said, "This is what scares you the most, isn't it? This is what you're afraid women will do to you, you..."

Fainting in the steel and suede-rubber embrace, Louise hardly heard the faint clashing and grinding sound, as Femmequin 973 breathed, "...you eunuch."