Dynamic Science Fiction

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Cover by Alex Schomberg
(illustrating "Snail's Pace")

ROBERT W. LOWNDES, Editor

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"We're stronger than men in some ways," Jean Lee told Cyleen, "we have more endurance in the long run. But we can't face death and deadly danger alone, the way they can." It didn't make sense to Cyleen until she found herself alone as no other woman had ever been . . .

FISHERS OF MEN

by Hal Annas *(illustrated by C. A. Murphy)*

CYLEEN MOXBY caught her breath, pressed her tall, stately figure against the bulkhead. She had never before seen Holby Gradwell looking as though he had just taken one in the solar-plexus, and she had been with the troupe a year Earthtime, come November.

Gradwell staggered past her blindly, pudgy jaw slack, narrow shoulders hunched forward. Even his paunch seemed to have shrunken and slipped an inch lower; his face was ghastly.

Cyleen stared after him, blue eyes worried, smooth brow trying to crin-

kle. She brushed a wisp of blonde hair back from her eyes, swung about on high heels which made her nearly six feet tall, and hurried to the lounge.

Except for Jean Lee Misha the lounge was vacant. Jean Lee looked puzzled but not worried. She was alternately sipping from a glass, puffing on a cigaret and blowing smoke-rings. She rolled her black eyes from the direction of the port, looked at Cyleen.

"What's up?" Cyleen asked huskily. "Gradwell sick?"

Jean Lee sat forward in the plush chair. "How do I know?" She lifted plump shoulders and let them fall. "If he is, every male aboard ship is sick."

"Space-sickness?"

Jean Lee frowned. "No, dearie. We're not hopping about the cosmos with a bunch of jive-jerries who get butterfly bellies every time we alter course. You know better than that."

"Then what?"

"Look, honey: men get upset about things that don't bother us. We're tougher than men, but they don't know it. If they think something is wrong, they're not going to tell us; they don't want to frighten us. They've got some deep-rooted instinct which makes them want to protect you and me and every female aboard. It's just the way men are. And take it from me, honey, you'd better go along with the idea. If men didn't feel that way about women, we wouldn't be worth a snap of my fingers."

"But I don't understand," Cyleen persisted. "Gradwell almost walked over me. He looked stunned; I don't think he even saw me."

Jean Lee shrugged. "Go ask your Jack Roland. Maybe you can make him talk."

Color rose in Cyleen's pale cheeks. "You know he isn't *my* Jack Roland."

"You're crazy about the big brute."

"I admire him. So does every other girl in the troupe. And the men, too. Who wouldn't? He's got everything."

"Except money," Jean Lee corrected.

Cyleen bristled. "If he had money to carry on his experiments, he wouldn't be with this troupe. He's not a natural actor; he's a scientist."

Jean Lee smirked. "You said it, sister; he isn't an actor at all. He just can't make believe. If he wasn't so big and handsome he wouldn't be with the troupe."

Cyleen turned away. She found Jack Roland in the chart room.

"Jack," she said, "what's up?"

He turned slowly, lines showing in his strong features. "Nothing much," he said. "Everything's going to be all right."

"Jack!" Cyleen studied what she could see of his brown eyes behind half-closed lids. "Jack, what is it? You frighten me. I've never seen you look like this before. You look— I describe it—older, worried or something."

"Indigestion, maybe," he said evenly. "Don't worry about it."

"Mr. Gradwell, and now you." Cyleen's cheeks twitched. "Jack, you never pretend, and I've never known you to lie; tell me what you men are keeping from us."

Roland leaned against the table. "This thing isn't for girls," he said. "You let us work it out. And the less you bother us the more chance we'll have."

"But Jack, can't you tell me? Maybe I could help!"

Roland's full lips clamped tight, and his eyes blinked impatiently. "Please don't ask any more questions," he said. and turned back to the charts.

CYLEEN drew back, swallowed. She turned slowly, glanced back once. She caught a glimpse of Benson, chief pilot, staggering along the passage. She hurried after him.

"Mr. Benson," she said, clutching his arm, "what's happened?"

Benson shrugged her off. "I've got a wife aboard," he said bitterly; "she's all the pestering I can stand. If you girls in the troupe don't lay off me, I'm going to complain to the captain and get you confined to quarters."

"Has something gone wrong with the engines?" Cyleen persisted.

"No. Nothing has gone wrong with the ship. And we don't call them engines; we call them reactors. All you girls have been around enough to know what the score is on a spaceship. Be your age; let me alone."

"Are we off-course, or anything?"

"No, we're not off-course. We're on it, and it looks as though we're going to stay on it—maybe forever."

"Huh? You mean, we're in a warp or something, and just going right on and on through space?"

"No!" Benson said sharply. "We're not in a warp. If you'll go up to the observatory you can switch on the telescope and see our destination less than a quarter parsec away."

"Then we'll soon be there?"

"We will not. Uh, excuse me.... I'm not supposed to tell you that. Don't mention it to the captain, please."

"Of course not. But what's happened?"

"Why don't you go and stay with the other girls?" Benson reasoned. "Some of them are fixing things for a party, I understand. Why don't you go and help?"

"But I've got to know what it's all about," Cyleen insisted. "I'm frightened. Something terrible must have happened, or you men wouldn't be like this."

Benson placed a hand on her shoulder. "Don't spread any talk like that among the women," he warned. "We've got enough trouble now."

"But what can it possibly be? If the ship is all right and we're moving all right, and—"

"We aren't."

"You mean, we've stopped?"

Benson shrugged. "Promise you won't ask any more questions, and I'll answer that."

"I won't ask any more right now."

"All right. Everything indicates that we're moving at three-quarter speed, but we're not getting any nearer to our destination, and we're not getting any farther away from the stars behind us."

"Then the stars and planets are moving with us?"

"No. They are not moving different from what they ordinarily do. But we are moving, fast, and we're not getting anywhere."

"What happens when you try to go the other way?"

Benson frowned. "You promised you wouldn't ask any more questions."

"I'm sorry."

"That's all right. The fact is, we have stopped and reversed and turned. We still don't get anywhere."

"But if that's all it is," Cyleen said sweetly, "I'm sure you men will figure it out in no time at all. I don't see what everybody is so worried about."

Benson nodded. "If that was all, we would already have figured it." He strode away, called back over his shoulder: "Don't start any wild talk among the women. Nothing is going to happen to you as long as men are alive in the ship to prevent it."

Cyleen was pondering this when Jean Lee came up behind her. "So he gave you that story about being stalled in space, did he?"

Cyleen eyed the shorter girl. "He's telling the truth, of course; but there's something worse, much worse."

Jean Lee nodded. "Of course. But honey, you're not helping the men by nagging for information. Take it from an old trouper who remembers the first skycan to get out beyond the orbit of Mars: something big and pretty frightful has happened. The men are working themselves to death trying to figure some way to get us women out

of whatever it is. They don't expect to come out of it alive themselves. I know men, honey, and I'm telling you this because I want you to let them alone."

"But why couldn't they tell us and let us share it?"

"Look, honey!" Jean Lee linked an arm through Cyleen's and led her to a rightangle passage with a port at the end of it. "One time back on Earth I left the stage for a while. I married and had a daughter. My husband was an adventurous man, but he settled down on my account, and made only an occasional trip to Venus or Mars. We made a lot of short hops around the surface of Earth."

JEAN LEE paused dreamily. Cyleen waited, watched the dreamy look change to one of pain.

"One day we had an accident," Jean Lee went on. "Just my husband, my daughter, and I in the ship. It was an atmosphere-craft and something fouled one wing; it went out of control. My husband got my daughter and I into parachute harness, actually threw us out of the ship. Then I remembered there had not been but two parachutes aboard to begin with. My husband knew. He knew it when he strapped the harness on us."

Jean Lee hesitated, blew her nose, wiped her eyes.

"When we got down," she added, "and I got to the wreck, there were men all around it. They tried to keep me back. They didn't know I just had to see Arthur one more time; they did know what the sight would do to me. They must have known someway that, in the future, I would wake night after night screaming at the sight of Arthur all twisted and broken, his insides torn out."

Cyleen experienced momentary dizziness.

"I'm sorry, honey. You're pale as a ghost; I thought you could take it better than that. Anyway, you see what I'm trying to make you understand. If those men had had their way, I'd gone on seeing Arthur alive and strong and brave, and so determined and positive in his last effort as he flung us from the ship. You understand?"

Cyleen nodded weakly.

"So if these men here won't tell you something," Jean Lee said, "it's probably something you can't take any better than I took seeing Arthur all broken. The best thing for every woman aboard is to have a lot of understanding, to be patient, and do everything in their power to help the men any way they can."

"And just a little while ago you were telling me how tough we women are," Cyleen argued; "you said we were tougher than men."

"We are in the long run," Jean Lee reasoned; "we have more endurance. But when I saw Arthur last I went into hysteria. Men are different."

"I know, but I don't understand."

"It's this way, Cyleen: men don't mind danger to themselves. They face it and get a thrill out of it. But there is something deeply ingrained, maybe an instinct to keep the race alive, that makes them want to shelter women from danger."

"Not all men. Some are brutes."

"You are thinking of some of those you see across the footlights—the playboys, the irresponsible, the immature—and you're thinking of the situations that develop in lovenests, in drinking-bouts, and in the more sordid side of life. You're not thinking about real men at their best. Honey, don't ever underestimate real men."

"But couldn't we do something?"

"Yes. We could take some coffee round. I imagine your Jack Roland would like a cup, maybe with a touch of brandy in it."

"He drinks scotch when he drinks," Cyleen said quickly.

Jean Lee smiled. "Know all about him, don't you? Well, take him some scotch."

Cyleen felt self-conscious about carrying a drink to the chart-room, especially for someone else. It would have seemed natural, she knew, to carry her own drink there and then offer to share it with anyone present. She slowed her steps as she approached the entrance.

The voice of Jamill, astrogator, reached her ears: "It's so confined, sir, it can't be but one thing."

Cyleen paused.

"And that?" It was the captain's deep voice.

"They are rolling a small segment of space, sir." It was the astrogator again. "We alter our course; the roll changes with us. We use full gravcompen and try to reverse our flight; the grain of the roll reverses. It's just like being inside a hollow sphere which is floating free—or maybe a better illustration would be a treadmill. Everything to indicate we're moving, but we don't move."

"Could it be a hole in space?" This was the second pilot's voice.

"No." It was the deep voice of the captain. "Reactors would push us through a hole. Jamill's got the right idea. Besides, we know the thing is controlled; we've already received an ultimatum."

GRADWELL appeared at the distant end of the corridor. With a sense of guilt, Cyleen stepped quickly to the entrance, entered. There was a sudden hush. Cyleen felt both confused and ashamed; she hurried to the side of Jack Roland.

"Thought you might like a drink," she said without looking directly into his eyes. She pressed the glass into his hand. "Excuse me. I—I've got to be going." Cyleen hurried out, pressed a hand to her heart, leaned against the bulkhead.

"They're beginning to suspect the truth." Roland's voice reached her ears. "If it wasn't for the women, I'd say to hell with their ultimatum."

"And every man aboard would back you up," said the astrogator.

Cyleen glanced along the corridor. Gradwell was no longer in sight. She remained where she was, breathing deeply.

"How much time left?" asked the second pilot.

"Three hours," said the captain. "And it's a hard decision to make. I've never been faced with anything like this before. If it were not for the women aboard, there wouldn't even be a question in my mind; I'd tell them to come and get us."

"Are you issuing arms?" Jack Roland asked.

"No point in it," the captain said, "unless we try to fight. And what are you going to fight? What's outside?"

"You've already had a demonstration of what they can do?"

"Yes. Beaney Skimpton. Poor fella! We can't knock him out with morphine or any of the stronger drugs. Nothing takes effect. We'll have to kill him; there's nothing else to do. I've got him in a soundproofed cabin. Two men are with him. I change them every hour; his screams and cries and pleading would drive everybody aboard insane."

"It makes my flesh crawl," said the astrogator. "I haven't been able to eat anything since it happened."

Cyleen felt that she was going to faint. Her knees trembled, tried to give under her. But something surged up from the depths of her being and seemed to whisper to her commonsense: *Don't collapse here. Don't put an added burden on the men when they have tried so hard to shield you. Don't hamper them in what they have to do. Don't fall here in the corridor where they will find you at the very moment when they are faced with a decision that in itself would stagger the mind of the sanest person alive.*

Cyleen moved drunkenly along the corridor, found her own cabin, collapsed on the bed. Afterward she could

not clearly remember traversing the distance. She found no solace here. It seemed horrible to be all alone with thoughts of Beaney Skimpton, communications-officer, who was somewhere aboard ship begging for death.

Cyleen thought of Beaney Skimpton's wife, plump and jolly, the very antithesis of the tall, lean, serious man himself. Cyleen leaped up, sprang to the door, hesitated. She took a moment to repair the damage to her face, then hurried toward the Skimpton cabin. As she passed the lounge she heard voices, looked in. Netta Skimpton stood there, her jolly but quiet laughter a trifle more enthusiastic than that of the troupers.

For an instant Cyleen was revolted, but for an instant only. Then she understood quite clearly why the men shielded the women. Netta Skimpton would never really learn what had happened to her husband. It was best that way; there was no use for her to have to wake night after night screaming.

Cyleen felt closer to an understanding of men than she had ever experienced before. They had been just males, sometimes coarse and vulgar; sometimes merely callous; oftimes gay and chivalrous and a little awe-inspiring in the way they accepted the world, the planets, the universe as their own mess of oysters. They were demanding, egotistical and had ten thousand foibles; but in the final analysis there was something fine and noble about them.

CYLEEN started up to the observatory, halted on the circular ramp.

Face to the rounded bulkhead, handkerchief stuffed in her mouth, was Jean Lee sobbing quietly. From the opening to the observatory came the sound of tense masculine voices: "Gradwell won't go along with casting lots. Won't think of allowing one of his troupers— Says he's old and has had a good life. Says he's going to do the job himself."

"Did the captain agree?"

"No. Neither did Jack Roland."

Cyleen held her breath.

"Roland's got some idea up his sleeve. He's sweating it out with the captain and the astrogator now. They've found a way tc lick the roll, but it takes time. At least they think they've got the answer. It takes into consideration the theory that space is the reality and matter is a fault in it, a rumple. It's too deep for me, but Roland's up on that stuff. Claims it is not another dimension, but another perception. I don't know just what it is, but he says we perceive things five ways. He claims there is a multiple of this which will perceive space as the equivalent of a tangible. Somehow we've got to find a multiple for our senses, but how? And who could do it in the time we've got? I think he's sweating his brain out for nothing. I think we ought to try to fight."

"Fight what?"

"We've got to do something. We'll go mad like this. We ought at least to heat those launching tubes and loosen the plates, so we can turn the stuff back into the ship if worst comes to worst."

"You mean, burn ourselves up?"

"It's preferable to becoming like Beaney Skimpton."

Cyleen may have drawn a quick breath, made a sudden movement, or it may have been the hammering of her heart which made known her presence to the older woman. She was never to learn. She stood there tensely holding her breath while Jean Lee deliberately, and with effort, brought her sobbing under control. Her shoulders stopped quivering, her head lifted, one hand moved quickly to her eyes, dabbing with the hankerchief; then she turned and her tear-streaked face was smiling exactly as she smiled across the footlights. "Oh! It's you, honey! Come. We've got to get out of here."

They paused beside a port off the lower corridor.

"So you knew all along?" Cyleen said accusingly.

The older woman shook her head. "I learned after you'd gone to see Jack Roland. Remember? I talked different after you came back."

"What can we do?" Cyleen wanted to know.

"Honey, I just wish we were men."

The sense of frustration grew. Cyleen could not endure it. She had to talk, ask questions. "Tell me all you know, and I'll tell you all I know," she bargained.

The older woman lowered her voice to a whisper. "There's some sort of intelligence outside the ship or nearby. The men have not seen anything, but a message came over the ultra-wave visicom. There was no image; it may have been some sort of mental projection. But all the men present think they heard it and then read it. It told them what would happen to Beaney Skimpton. He was operating the equipment, you know. Then it happened. The men did what they could for poor Beaney. It wasn't much. The doctor recommends euthanasia."

"Have they carried it out yet?"

"I don't think so. Anyway, whatever is outside soon knew about it and told them it would provide another victim as fast as they disposed of them. Then it issued an ultimatum."

"What sort of ultimatum?"

"I don't know; I wasn't intentionally eavesdropping. But there's a fault in the ship-structure where the ventilation pipes pass from the lounge to the conference room. I overheard some of the officers talking. I think that outside intelligence demands that we deliver one or more of us outside the ship. They tried to make clear the purpose, but no one can grasp their meaning."

"Does that mean the ship would then be freed?"

"There is no promise, but that's what the officers believe."

"Have the men decided yet?"

"Yes. The men cast lots, all but Holby Gradwell. He demanded to be allowed to go himself. He had it all figured out so the troupe would never know what happened to him. But the thing outside wants a younger person."

"Tell me. Who's to go?"

Jean Lee put an arm about Cyleen. "Kid, you've got to take this like a trouper. Jack Roland lost; some of the men think he cheated and did it deliberately."

CYLEEN fought back the blackness. "No," she breathed. "Not Jack! No. He mustn't."

"But kid—"

"No. Jack shan't go. He can't. He mustn't. If they cast lots they've got to include us women. If men take their chances, why shouldn't we?"

"But listen, kid. You're just a baby; you know you couldn't go through with it. And if the other women even find out about it they will go into hysterics. No, Cyleen; it's a man's job, and not a man among them would even consider letting a woman in on it."

"But why not some other man? Not Jack Roland?"

"Now look kid: you go to your room and I'll bring you a drink."

Cyleen shook the blinding tears out of her eyes. "I'm going to do something," she said.

Jean Lee led her toward the stateroom. "What can a woman do when it comes to something like this? All we can do is cry. God shouldn't have made such a helpless and wailing sex. I'd willingly go myself, but I know I'd faint before I got outside the airlock."

"I won't faint," Cyleen said determinedly.

"Honey, you could go with Jack, and as long as he was there you'd be all right. But you just couldn't go alone; don't you understand?"

"No. I don't understand anything except that I can't sit here and wait for Jack to walk out that airlock."

"Take it easy for a few minutes. Sit quietly. Maybe Jack won't be hurt. I'm going to get you a drink. I won't be but a few minutes; don't dare leave here."

Cyleen waited until the door closed. She had made her decision and the decision itself steadied her nerves, gave her strength.

Moving softly but quickly, she left the room, went toward the spacesuit compartment. She passed the conference-room, glanced in, saw Jack Roland signing something. She allowed her blue eyes to dwell on his profile, his heavy shoulders briefly, then hurried on.

At the entrance to the spacesuit compartment she halted, caught her breath. The door was ajar. Sounds came from the room. Momentarily she experienced a wave of relief at the thought somebody else, not Jack Roland, was preparing for the task.

Inching forward, she glanced into the room. Her big eyes blinked. Her knees trembled. Inside the room Jean Lee was struggling with a spacesuit. Jean Lee's breath came fast. Cyleen could see the vein standing out on her temple, throbbing, could see that the older woman was working in frantic haste—and accomplishing exactly nothing.

Cyleen went on inside. Jean Lee almost fainted at the sight of her.

"I can't do it," Jean Lee wept. "I just can't; my hands won't stop trembling."

Cyleen took the suit from her, worked into it herself, wishing now that she had slipped out of her dress. Jean Lee stood as though stricken.

"Help me with the helmet," Cyleen ordered.

The shaking hands obeyed. "Honey, I never knew, never dreamed, what it takes to be a man."

Cyleen tried to smile. It turned into a grimace. "Me neither," she said. "I've envied men their privileges. Women are fools; they don't know the responsibilities that go along with those privileges."

"Are you going to be able to make it, Cyleen?"

The blonde girl struggled with the worlds: "I—I don't know. This thing is so awkward and I feel so weak. Put the helmet on me, and you'll have to help me with the airlock."

Jean Lee glanced out first. No one was in sight. Cyleen followed awkwardly.

"They haven't released the interlocking switch in the control room." The words came to Cyleen gratingly, not through her ears, but through the bone behind her ears against which two tiny clamps pressed.

Instantly there followed a restrained cry as though from the pits of torment. The cry was masculine. It sent shivers through Cyleen because it seemed so strange and terrifying to hear a man finally break and express his anguish, an expression that was not human.

The intercom crackled: "Jack Roland! Jack Roland! They've set the time forward. That's the second demonstration; if you're ready, move quickly."

THE GREEN light flashed, signalling the release of the interlock. Cyleen touched Jean Lee's shoulder, gestured. Jean Lee pressed the button, steadied herself against the wall.

The big airlock opened slowly. The intercom crackled. Orders were shouted through the ship. Cyleen moved.

The last thing to impress her before the air chamber closed was the look on Jean Lee's features. It was a look of inhuman terror, but through it came a ray of admiration shining out of the woman's dark eyes.

The chamber closed. Cyleen stood alone. There was no sound, no hint of movement, nothing. She was here alone, cut off from all life in an air chamber. There was no turning back, not another last look at humans as

she knew them, no one to hear her sobbing.

She seized the handgrips, held on, fought the pressure as the outer lock opened, kept herself from being snatched out abruptly.

And then she saw the blackness of space beyond the faint shimmering light that was reflected from the ship itself. The pressure had been momentary. There was nothing now; just the beckoning void lighted by all the bright jewels of the cosmos against a background of total dark.

Something sounded. It was the airlock closing again. It was being operated from inside. She had to move quickly. She adjusted the tiny jets, pressed the stud. She swam out from the ship into blackness.

Terror racing through every fibre, Cyleen fought the stud, swung the guide, came about. The ship was fifty yards off and drifting farther.

Then it happened. Cyleen was literally snatched away from the ship. She felt the force about her. She saw nothing but the ship and what was happening there as she receded into the depth of the void. She saw the airlock come open again.

Some indescribable wave of feeling flooded Cyleen. It was a sense of mingled terror and pride and happiness at the sight of another human jetting in her wake. Never in her life had she ever been so thrilled by the sight of another person.

The ship was a tiny dot. The figure of the person in the spacesuit grew. The jet left a vapor trail behind it. Cyleen fired her own jets, but nothing resulted. She watched as the figure swung its jets about to brake. She realized she had stopped moving away from the ship.

And then she saw through the plastic face of the helmet, recognized the man, and suddenly she was no longer afraid. She could die now, or suffer whatever came with good will; she was no longer alone.

"Jack!" She was glad her voice would be distorted slightly by the waves that carried it to him. She did not want the expression of feeling to go through.

"Cyleen!" It was deep and husky and distorted. "Don't use your jets; don't do anything. Just let everything go as it will. I'm working close to you. Have to be careful. Easy to overshoot. Now! Take my hand. Hang on to me."

Cyleen was never happier to obey orders.

"Move closer," Roland ordered. "You can't see it, but I've got a nine-way polarizing field in front of me. Press close and look through it."

Cyleen looked, gasped. Outlined in the cosmos was not a tangible figure, but visible and curving rays of light which were in no way reflected.

"How can we see light when it isn't reflected?" she asked.

"You see what I see?" Roland asked.

"Yes. A great giant of starlight, and behind him other giants. Jack, the whole cosmos looks real and solid."

"I think it is, Cyleen; we just haven't perceived it before. They are watching us. We must go to them."

"But what are they going to do to us?"

"I don't want to build up false hope," Roland said, "but I'm hoping we'll come out of this. I've figured on some things. Just trust me, and don't do anything I don't tell you to do."

"I'll always trust you in everything."

THEY APPROACHED the starlight-beings slowly. At length one of them extended a hand. Great webs of light ran out from it.

"It looks like a fishing net, Jack."

"I think it is," he admitted. "I think they have been fishing for men. See how the net extends out to the ship and around it? No wonder we couldn't get anywhere. They can run it in and out at will; I was certain I had it figured right."

Cyleen heard something like static, then a new sound, or it may have been just thought running into her mind: *"We have tried long to net one of your ships. We hoped to establish a medium of communication with your kind."*

"You've done that," Roland said. "We have fulfilled the terms of your ultimatum. The one with me is my opposite in sex, vital to sustain life among our kind. You will allow her to return to the ship?"

"No!" Cyleen stifled the word. She recalled Roland's warning.

"Yes. She may return."

"Go, Cyleen! Go," Roland ordered. "Go quickly!"

"No. I can't. I can't leave you."

"Go, please, quickly. Don't answer again. Go! Please trust me. Don't doubt. Go."

There was a moment that seemed an eternity. Cyleen could no longer make a decision. She had lost all will to control herself. She was driven by his words; she jetted toward the ship.

It seemed hours. She waited outside the airlock, neither despairing nor hoping, a semi-dead thing. She had seen Roland disappear into the arms of one of those beings. Her mind no longer worked. She could not think clearly about anything; even all feeling had died within her.

Then Roland was suddenly beside her, stepping out of the hand of one of those beings.

Time meant nothing. Sometime later she was able to whisper, "Jack, you're wonderful."

"You're sort of great yourself," he said.

Then there was talk, Roland talking: "About like we figured it," he was saying. "They didn't know what pain and death were as we know them; they had no idea they were literally torturing every nerve in Beaney Skimpton's body. Possess none of our senses. Perceive space as material, matter as a rumple in it. One of them figured out a way to bridge between them and us, and they swung a moving net of some sort of force about the ship."

"Beaney's all right now. Shock! He'll be all right."

"Yes. They merely wanted to hold his mind in some sort of field. They don't have nerves, and didn't know what it would do to him."

"You say, they didn't mean us any harm?"

"No," Roland went on. "It seems to be a law of Nature that no creature of any kind will willfully harm another except out of fear, hunger, greed, or an aberration. Greed may be an aberration in war. Fear may also. But we had it figured right. They don't want to harm us; they do want us to cooperate with them in bridging the gap. And that nine-way polarization enables us to perceive them by sight, and they've reached us by mental projections, and so the way is wide open."

Cyleen paid little attention to all this. When the opportunity came she repeated, "Jack, you're wonderful."

"So are you," he insisted.

"But no woman can be as wonderful as you," she argued. "When I think about it all—"

"Now wait a minute," he said. "Don't belittle women. It takes every whit as much courage, as much brains, as much of everything, to be a real woman as it does to be a real man."

"But women can't do things like men."

"Hold on!" Roland looked deep into her eyes. "You went out there to save others. It wasn't exactly in your line, but you did the best you could. It was great.

"After all," he added wryly, "I'd make a poor showing trying to compete with *you* in having a baby."

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