The Monk, as they called him, settled himself on the camp-chair beside his bunk and stared through the window at the harsh sand and black-blue sky of Mars. He did not mean to begin his ‘work’ for ten minutes yet. Not, of course, the work he had been brought there to do. He was the meteorologist of the party, and his work hi that capacity was largely done; he had found out whatever could be found out. There was nothing more, within the limited radius he could investigate, to be observed for at least twenty-five days. And meteorology had not been his real motive. He had chosen three years on Mars as the nearest modern equivalent to a hermitage in the desert. He had come there to meditate: to continue the slow, perpetual rebuilding of that inner structure which, in his view, it was the main purpose of life to rebuild. And now his ten minutes’ rest was over. He began with his well-used formula. ‘Gentle and patient Master, teach me to need men less and to love thee more.’ Then to it.

There was no time to waste. There were barely six months of this lifeless, sinless, un-suffering wilderness ahead of him. Three years were short - but when the shout came he rose out of his chair with the practised alertness of a sailor.

The Botanist in the next cabin responded to the same shout with a curse. His eye had been at the microscope when it came. It was maddening. Constant interruption. A man might as well try to work in the middle of Piccadilly as in this infernal camp. And his work was already a race against time. Six months more - and he had hardly begun. The flora of Mars, these tiny, miraculously hardy organisms, the ingenuity of their contrivances to live under all but impossible conditions- it was a feast for a lifetime. He would ignore the shout. But then came the bell. All hands to the main room.

The only person who was doing, so to speak, nothing when the shout came was the Captain. To be more exact, he was (as usual) trying to stop thinking about Clare, and get on with his official journal. Clare kept on interrupting from forty million miles away. It was preposterous. ‘Would have needed all hands,’ he wrote. Hands … his own hands … his own hands, hands, he felt, with eyes in them, travelling over all the warm-cool, soft-firm, smooth, yielding, resisting aliveness of her. ‘Shut up, there’s a dear,’ he said to the photo on his desk. And so back to the journal, until the fatal words ‘had been causing me some anxiety’. Anxiety -oh God, what might be happening to Clare now? How did he know there was a Clare by this time? Anything could happen. He’d been a fool ever to accept this job. What other newly married man in the world would have done it? But it had seemed so sensible. Three years of horrid separation but then … oh, they were made for life. He had been promised the post that, only a few months before, he would not have dared to dream of. He’d never need to go to Space

again. And all the by-products; the lectures, the book, probably a title. Plenty of children. He knew she wanted that, and so in a queer way (as he began to find) did he. But damn it, the journal. Begin a new paragraph - and then the shout came.

It was one of the two youngsters, technicians both, who had given it. They had been together since dinner. At least Paterson had been standing at the open door of Dickson's cabin, shifting from foot to foot and swinging the door, and Dickson had been sitting on his berth and waiting for Paterson to go away.

'What are you talking about, Paterson?' he said. 'Who ever said anything about a quarrel?'

"That's all very well, Bobby,' said the other, 'but we're not friends like we used to be. You know we're not. Oh, I'm not blind. I did ask you to call me Clifford. And you're always so standoffish.'

'Oh, get to hell out of this!' cried Dickson. 'I'm perfectly ready to be good friends with you and everyone else in an ordinary way, but all this gas - like a pair of schoolgirls - I will not stand. Once and for all -'

'Oh look, look, look," said Paterson. And it was then that Dickson shouted and the Captain came and rang the bell and within twenty seconds they were all crowded behind the biggest of the windows. A spaceship had just made a beautiful landing about a hundred and fifty yards from camp.

'Oh boy!' exclaimed Dickson. 'They're relieving us before our time.'

'Damn their eyes. Just what they would do,' said the Botanist.

Five figures were descending from the ship. Even in space-suits it was clear that one of them was enormously fat; they were in no other way remarkable.

'Man the air-lock,' said the Captain.

Drinks from their limited store were going round. The Captain had recognized in the leader of the strangers an old acquaintance, Ferguson. Two were ordinary young men, not unpleasant. But the remaining two ?

'I don't understand,' said the Captain, 'who exactly -I mean we're delighted to see you all of course - but what exactly…?1

'Where are the rest of your party?' said Ferguson.

'We've had two casualties, I'm afraid,' said the Captain. 'Sackville and Dr Burton. It

was a most wretched business. Sackville tried eating the stuff we called Martian cress. It drove him fighting mad in a matter of minutes. He knocked Burton down and by sheer bad luck Burton fell in just the wrong position: across that table there. Broke his neck. We got Sackville tied down on a bunk but he was dead before the evening.'

'Hadna he even the gumption to try it on the guinea-pig first?' said Ferguson.

'Yes,' said the Botanist. 'That was the whole trouble. The funny thing is that the guinea-pig lived. But its behaviour was remarkable. Sackville wrongly concluded that the stuff was alcoholic. Thought he'd invent a new drink. The nuisance is that once Burton was dead, none of us could do a reliable post-mortem on Sackville. Under analysis this vegetable shows-'

'A-a-a-h,' interrupted one of those who had not yet spoken. 'We must beware of oversimplifications. I doubt if the vegetable substance is the real explanation. There are stresses and strains. You are all, without knowing it, in a highly unstable condition, for reasons which are no mystery to a trained psychologist.'

Some of those present had doubted the sex of this creature. Its hair was very short, its nose very long, its mouth very prim, its chin sharp, and its manner authoritative. The voice revealed it as, scientifically speaking, a woman. But no one had had any doubt about the sex of her nearest neighbour, the fat person.

'Oh dearie,' she wheezed. 'Not now. I tell you straight I'm that flustered and faint, I'll scream if you go on so. Suppose there ain't such a thing as a port and lemon handy ? No? Well, a little drop more gin would settle me. It's me stomach reelly.'

The speaker was infinitely female and perhaps in her seventies. Her hair had been not very successfully dyed to a colour not unlike that of mustard. The powder (scented strongly enough to throw a train off the rails) lay like snow drifts in the complex valleys of her creased, many-chinned face.

'Stop!' roared Ferguson. 'Whatever ye do, dinna give her a drap mair to drink.'

"E's no 'art, ye see,' said the old woman with a whimper and an affectionate leer directed at Dickson.

'Excuse me,' said the Captain. 'Who are these-ah-ladies and what is this all about ?'

'I have been waiting to explain,' said the Thin Woman, and cleared her throat. 'Anyone who has been following World-Opinion-Trends on the problems arising out of the psychological welfare aspect of interplanetary communication will be conscious of the growing agreement that such a remarkable advance inevitably demands of us far-reaching ideological adjustments. Psychologists are now well aware that a forcible

inhibition of powerful biological urges over a protracted period is likely to have unforeseeable results. The pioneers of space-travel are exposed to this danger. It would be unenlightened if a supposed ethicality were allowed to stand in the way of their protection. We must therefore nerve ourselves to face the view that immorality, as it has hitherto been called, must no longer be regarded as unethical -'

'I don't understand that,' said the Monk.

'She means,' said the Captain, who was a good linguist, 'that what you call fornication must no longer be regarded as immoral.'

That's right, dearie,' said the Fat Woman to Dickson, 'she only means a poor boy needs a woman now and then. It's only natural.'

'What was required, therefore,' continued the Thin Woman, 'was a band of devoted females who would take the first step. This would expose them, no doubt, to obloquy from many ignorant persons. They would be sustained by the consciousness that they were performing an indispensable function in the history of human progress.'

'She means you're to have tarts, duckie,' said the Fat Woman to Dickson.

'Now you're talking,' said he with enthusiasm. 'Bit late in the day, but better late than never. But you can't have brought many girls in that ship. And why didn't you bring them in ? Or are they following ?'

'We cannot indeed claim,' continued the Thin Woman, who had apparently not noticed the interruption, 'that the response to our appeal was such as we had hoped. The personnel of the first unit of the Woman's Higher Aphrodisio-Therapeutic Humane Organization (abbreviated WHAT-HO) is not perhaps … well. Many excellent women, university colleagues of my own, even senior colleagues, to whom I applied, showed themselves curiously conventional. But at least a start has been made. And here,'

she concluded brightly, 'we are.'

And there, for forty seconds of appalling silence, they were. Then Dickson's face, which had already undergone certain contortions, became very red; he applied his handkerchief and spluttered like a man trying to stifle a sneeze, rose abruptly, turned his back on the company, and hid his face. He stood slightly stooped and you could see his shoulders shaking.

Paterson jumped up and ran towards him; but the Fat Woman, though with infinite gruntings and upheavals, had risen too.

'Get art of it, Pansy,' she snarled at Paterson. 'Lot o' good your sort ever did.' A

moment later her vast arms were round Dickson; all the warm, wobbling maternalism of her engulfed him.

There, sonny,' she said, 'it's goin' to be OK. Don't cry, honey. Don't cry. Poor boy, then. Poor boy. I'll give you a good time.'

'I think,' said the Captain, 'the young man is laughing, not crying.'

It was the Monk who at this point mildly suggested a meal.

Some hours later the party had temporarily broken up.

Dickson (despite all his efforts the Fat Woman had contrived to sit next to him; she had more than once mistaken his glass for hers) had hardly finished his last mouthful when he said to the newly arrived technicians:

'I'd love to see over your ship, if I could.'

You might expect that two men who had been cooped up in that ship so long, and had only taken off their space-suits a few minutes ago, would have been reluctant to re-assume the one and return to the other. That was certainly the Fat Woman's view. 'Nar, nar,' she said. 'Don't you go fidgeting, sonny. They seen enough of that ruddy ship for a bit, same as me. 'Tain't good for you to go rushing about, not on a full stomach, like.' But the two young men were marvellously obliging.

'Certainly. Just what I was going to suggest,' said the first. 'OK by me, chum,' said the second. They were all three of them out of the air-lock in record time.

Across the sand, up the ladder, helmets off, and then:

'What in the name of thunder have you dumped those two bitches on us for?' said Dickson.

'Don't fancy 'em?' said the Cockney stranger. The people at 'ome thought as 'ow you'd be a bit sharp set by now. Ungrateful of you, I call it.'

'Very funny to be sure,' said Dickson. 'But it's no laughing matter for us.'

'It hasn't been for us either, you know,' said the Oxford stranger. 'Cheek by jowl with them for eighty-five days. They palled a bit after the first month.'

'You're telling me,' said the Cockney.

There was a disgusted pause.

‘Can anyone tell me,’ said Dickson at last, ‘who in the world, and why in the world, out of all possible women, selected those two horrors to send to Mars ?’

‘Can’t expect a star London show at the back of beyond,’ said the Cockney.

‘My dear fellow,’ said his colleague, ‘isn’t the thing perfectly obvious? What kind of woman, without force, is going to come and live in this ghastly place-on rations- and play doxy to half a dozen men she’s never seen ? The Good Time Girls won’t come because they know you can’t have a good time on Mars. An ordinary professional prostitute won’t come as long as she has the slightest chance of being picked up in the cheapest quarter of Liverpool or Los Angeles. And you’ve got one who hasn’t. The only other who’d come would be a crank who believes all that blah about the new ethicality. And you’ve got one of that too.’

‘Simple, ain’t it ?’ said the Cockney.

‘Anyone,’ said the other, ‘except the Fools at the Top could of course have foreseen it from the word go.’

‘The only hope now is the Captain,’ said Dickson.

‘Look, mate,’ said the Cockney,’ ‘if you think there’s any question of our taking back returned goods, you’ve ‘ad it. Nothing doing. Our Captain’ll ‘ave a mutiny to settle if he tries that. Also ‘e won’t. ‘E’s ‘ad ‘is turn. So’ve we.

It’s up to you now.’

‘Fair’s fair, you know,’ said the other. ‘We’ve stood all we can.’

‘Well,’ said Dickson, ‘we must leave the two chiefs to fight it out. But discipline or not, there are some things a man can’t stand. That bloody schoolmarm-‘ ‘She’s a lecturer at a redbrick university, actually.’ ‘Well,’ said Dickson after a long pause, ‘you were going to show me over the ship. It might take my mind off it a bit.’

The Fat Woman was talking to the Monk. ‘… and oh, Father dear, I know you’ll think that’s the worst of all. I didn’t give it up when I could. After me brother’s wife died … ‘e’d ‘ave ‘ad me ‘ome with ‘im, and money wasn’t that short. But I went on, Gawd ‘elp me, I went on.’ ‘Why did you do that, daughter?’ said the Monk. ‘Did you like it?’

‘Well not all that, Father. I was never partikler. But you see- oh, Father, I was the goods in those days, though you wouldn’t think it now… and the poor gentlemen, they did so enjoy it.’

‘Daughter,’ he said, ‘you are not far from the Kingdom. But you were wrong. The desire to give is blessed. But you can’t turn bad bank-notes into good ones just by giving them away.’

The Captain had also left the table pretty quickly, asking Ferguson to accompany him to his cabin. The Botanist had leaped after them.

‘One moment, sir, one moment,’ he said excitedly. ‘I am a scientist. I’m working at very high pressure already. I hope there is no complaint to be made about my discharge of all those other duties which so incessantly interrupt my work. But if I am going to be expected to waste any more time entertaining those abominable females-‘

‘When I give you any orders which can be considered ultra vires,’ said die Captain, ‘it will be time to make your protest.’

Paterson stayed with the Thin Woman. The only part of any woman that interested him was her ears. He liked telling women about his troubles; especially about the unfairness and unkindness of other men. Unfortunately the lady’s idea was that the interview should be devoted either to Aphrodisio-Therapy or to instruction in psychology. She saw, indeed, no reason why the two operations should not be carried out simultaneously; it is only untrained minds that cannot hold more than one idea. The difference between these two conceptions of the conversation was well on its way to impairing its success. Paterson was becoming ill-tempered; the lady remained bright and patient as an iceberg.

‘But as I was saying,’ grumbled Paterson, ‘what I do think so rotten is a fellow being quite fairly decent one day and then -‘

‘Which just illustrates my point. These tensions and maladjustments are bound, under the unnatural conditions, to arise. And provided we disinfect the obvious remedy of all those sentimental or-which is quite as bad -prurient associations which the Victorian age attached to it-‘

‘But I haven’t yet told you. Listen. Only two days ago -‘

‘One moment. This ought to be regarded like any other injection. If once we can persuade-‘

‘How any fellow can take a pleasure -‘

‘I agree. The association of it with pleasure (that is purely an adolescent fixation) may have done incalculable harm. Rationally viewed -‘

‘I say, you’re getting off the point.’

‘One moment-‘

The dialogue continued.

They had finished looking over the spaceship. It was certainly a beauty. No one afterwards remembered who had first said, ‘Anyone could manage a ship like this.’

Ferguson sat quietly smoking while the Captain read the letter he had brought him. He didn’t even look in the Captain’s direction. When at last conversation began there was so much circumambient happiness in the cabin that they took a long time to get down to the difficult part of their business. The Captain seemed at first wholly occupied with its comic side.

‘Still,’ he said at last, ‘it has its serious side too. The impertinence of it, for one thing! Do they think -‘

‘Ye maun recall,’ said Ferguson, ‘they’re dealing with an absolutely new situation.’

‘Oh, new be damned! How does it differ from men on whalers, or even on windjammers in the old days? Or on the North-west Frontier? It’s about as new as people being hungry when food was short.’

‘Eh mon, but ye’re forgettin’ the new light of modern psychology.’

‘I think those two ghastly women have already learned some newer psychology since they arrived. Do they really suppose every man in the world is so combustible that he’ll jump into the arms of any woman whatever ?’

‘Aye, they do. They’ll be sayin’ you and your party are verra abnormal. I wadna put it past them to be sending you out wee packets of hormones next.’

‘Well, if it comes to that, do they suppose men would volunteer for a job like this unless they could, or thought they could, or wanted to try if they could, do without women?’

‘Then there’s the new ethics, forbye.’ ‘Oh stow it, you old rascal. What is new there either? Who ever tried to live clean except a minority who had a religion or were in love? They’ll try it still on Mars, as they did on Earth. As for the majority, did they ever hesitate to take their pleasures wherever they could get them? The ladies of the profession know better. Did you ever see a port or a garrison town without plenty of brothels?

Who are the idiots on the Advisory Council who started all this nonsense?’

‘Och, a pack o’ daft auld women (in trousers for the maist part) who like onything sexy, and onything scientific, and onything that makes them feel important. And this gives them all three pleasures at once, ye ken.’

‘Well, there’s only one thing for it, Ferguson. I’m not going to have either your Mistress Overdone or your extension lecturer here. You can just-‘

‘Now there’s no manner of use talkin’ that way. I did my job. Another voyage with sic a cargo o’ livestock I will not face. And my two lads the same. There’d be mutiny and murder.’

‘But you must, I’m -‘

At that moment a blinding flash came from without and the earth shook.

‘Ma ship! Ma ship!’ cried Ferguson. Both men peered out on empty sand. The spaceship had obviously made an excellent take-off.

‘But what’s happened?’ said the Captain. ‘They haven’t—’

‘Mutiny, desertion, and theft of a government ship, that’s what’s happened,’ said Ferguson. ‘Ma twa lads and your Dickson are awa’ hame.’

‘But good Lord, they’ll get hell for this. They’ve ruined their careers. They’ll be—’

‘Aye. Nae dout. And they think it cheap at the price. Ye’ll be seeing why, maybe, before ye are a fortnight older.’

A gleam of hope came into the Captain’s eyes. ‘They couldn’t have taken the women with them ?’

‘Talk sense, mon, talk sense. Or if ye hanna ony sense, use your ears.’

In the buzz of excited conversation which became every moment more audible from the main room, female voices could be intolerably distinguished.

As he composed himself for his evening meditation the Monk thought that perhaps he had been concentrating too much on ‘needing less’ and that must be why he was going to have a course (advanced) in ‘loving more’. Then his face twitched into a smile that was not all mirth. He was thinking of the Fat Woman. Four things made an exquisite chord. First, the horror of all she had done and suffered. Secondly, the pity—thirdly, the comicality—of her belief that she could still excite desire; fourthly, her bless’d ignorance of that utterly different loveliness which already existed within her and

which, under grace, and with such poor direction as even he could supply, might one day set her, bright in the land of brightness, beside the Magdalene. But wait! There was yet a fifth note in the chord. ‘Oh, Master,’ he murmured, ‘forgive—or can you enjoy?—my absurdity also. I had been supposing you sent me on a voyage of forty million miles merely for my own spiritual convenience.’