

The Science Fiction Anthology

Various Authors



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**THE
SCIENCE FICTION
ANTHOLOGY**

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The Sentimentalists, by Murray Leinster

Rhadampsicus and Nodalictha were on their honeymoon, and consequently they were sentimental. To be sure, it would not have been easy for humans to imagine sentiment as existing between them. Humans would hardly associate tenderness with glances cast from sets of sixteen eyes mounted on jointed eye stalks, nor link langorous thrills with a coy mingling of positronic repulsion blasts—even when the emission of positron blasts from beneath one's mantle was one's normal personal mode of locomotion. And when two creatures like Rhadampsicus and Nodalictha stood on what might be roughly described as their heads and twined their eye stalks together, so that they gazed fondly at each other with all sixteen eyes at once, humans would not have thought of it as the equivalent of a loving kiss. Humans would have screamed and run—if they were not paralyzed by the mere sight of such individuals.

Nevertheless, they were a very happy pair and they were very sentimental, and it was probably a good thing, considered from all angles. They were still newlyweds on their wedding tour—they had been married only seventy-five years before—when they passed by the sun that humans call Cetus Gamma.

Rhadampsicus noted its peculiarity. He was anxious, of course, for their honeymoon to be memorable in every possible way. So he pointed it out to Nodalictha and explained what was shortly to be expected. She listened with a bride's rapt admiration of her new husband's

wisdom. Perceiving his scientific interest, she suggested shyly that they stop and watch.

Rhadampsicus scanned the area. There were planets—inner ones, and then a group of gas giants, and then a very cosy series of three outer planets with surface temperatures ranging from three to seven degrees Kelvin.

They changed course and landed on the ninth planet out, where the landscape was delightful. Rhadampsicus unlimbered his traveling kit and prepared a bower. Nitrogen snow rose and swirled and consolidated as he deftly shifted force-pencils. When the tumult subsided, there was a snug if primitive cottage for the two of them to dwell in while they waited for Cetus Gamma to accomplish its purpose.

Nodalictha cried out softly when she entered the bower. She was fascinated by its completeness. There was even running liquid hydrogen from a little rill nearby. And over the doorway, as an artistic and appropriate touch, Rhadampsicus had put his own and Nodalictha's initials, pricked out in amber chlorine crystals and intertwined within the symbol which to them meant a heart. Nodalictha embraced him fondly for his thoughtfulness. Of course, no human would have recognized it as an embrace, but that did not matter.

Happily, then, they settled down to observe the phenomenon that Cetus Gamma would presently display. They scanned the gas giant planets together, and then the inner ones.

On the second planet out from the sun, they perceived small biped animals busily engaged in works of primitive civilization. Nodalictha was charmed. She asked eager questions, and Rhadampsicus searched his memory and told her that the creatures were not well known, but had

been observed before. Limited in every way by their physical constitution, they had actually achieved a form of space travel by means of crude vehicles. He believed, he said, that the name they called themselves was “men.”

The sun rose slowly in the east, and Lon Simpson swore patiently as he tried for the eighteenth time to get the generator back again in a fashion to make it work. His tractor waited in the nearby field. The fields waited. Over in Cetopolis, the scales and storehousings waited, and somewhere there was doubtless a cargo ship waiting for a spacegram to summon it to Cetus Gamma Two for a load of *thanas* leaves. And of course people everywhere waited for *thanas* leaves.

A milligram a day kept old age away—which was not an advertising slogan but sound, practical geriatric science. But *thanas* leaves would only grow on Cetus Gamma Two, and the law said that all habitable planets had to be open for colonization and land could not be withheld from market.

There was too much population back on Earth, anyhow. Therefore the Cetus Gamma Trading Company couldn't make a planetwide plantation and keep *thanas* as a monopoly, but could only run its own plantation for research and instruction purposes for new colonists. Colonists had to be admitted to the planet, and they had to be sold land. But there are ways of getting around every law.

Lon Simpson swore. The Diesel of his tractor ran a generator. The generator ran the motors in the tractor's catawheels. But this was the sixth time in a month that the generator had broken down, and generators do not break down.

Lon put it together for the eighteenth time this breakdown, and it still wouldn't work. There was nothing detectably wrong with it, but he couldn't make it work.

Seething, he walked back to his neat, prefabricated house. He picked up the beamphone. Even Cathy's voice at the exchange in Cetopolis could not soothe him, he was so furious.

"Cathy, give me Carson—and don't listen!" he said tensely.

He heard clickings on the two-way beam.

"My generator's gone," he said sourly when Carson answered. "I've repaired it twice this week. It looks like it was built to stop working! What is this all about, anyhow?"

The representative of the Cetus Gamma Trading Company sounded bored.

"You want a new generator sent out?" he asked without interest. "Your crop credit's still all right—if the fields are in good shape."

"I want machinery that works!" Lon Simpson snapped. "I want machinery that doesn't have to be bought four times over a growing season! And I want it at a decent price!"

"Look, those generators come out from Earth. There's freight on them. There's freight on everything that comes out from Earth. You people come to a developed planet, you buy your land, your machinery, your house, and you get instruction in agriculture. Do you want the company to tuck you in bed at night besides? Do you want a new generator or not?"

"How much?" demanded Lon. When Carson told him, he hit the ceiling. "It's robbery! What'll I have left for my crop if I buy that?"

Carson's voice was still bored. "If you buy it and your crop's up to standard, you'll owe the crop plus three hundred credits. But we'll stake you to next growing season."

"And if I don't?" demanded Lon. "Suppose I don't give you all my work for nothing and wind up in debt?"

"By contract," Carson told him, "we've got the right to finish cultivating your crop and charge you for the work because we've advanced you credit on it. Then we attach your land and house for the balance due. And you get no more credit at the Company stores. And passage off this planet has to be paid for in cash." He yawned. "Don't answer now," he said without interest. "Call me back after you calm down. You'd only have to apologize."

Lon Simpson heard the click as he began to describe, heatedly, what was in his mind. He said it anyhow. Then Cathy's voice came from the exchange. She sounded shocked but sympathetic.

"Lon! Please!"

He swallowed a particularly inventive description of the manners, morals and ancestry of all the directors and employees of the Cetus Gamma Trading Company. Then he said, still fuming, "I told you not to listen!"

His wrongs overcame him again. "It's robbery! It's peonage! They've got every credit I had! They've got three-quarters of the value of my crop charged up for replacements of the lousy machinery they sold me—and now I'll end the growing season in debt! How am I going to ask you to marry me?"

"Not over a beamphone, I hope," said Cathy.

He was abruptly sunk in gloom.

"That was a slip," he admitted. "I was going to wait until I got paid for my crop. It looked good. Now—"

“Wait a minute, Lon,” Cathy said. There was silence. She gave somebody else a connection.

The phone-beams from the colony farms all went to Cetopolis and Cathy was one of the two operators there. If or when the colony got prosperous enough, there would be a regular intercommunication system. So it was said. Meanwhile, Lon had a suspicion that there might be another reason for the antiquated central station.

Cathy said brightly, “Yes, Lon?”

“I’ll come in to town tonight,” he said darkly. “Date?”

“Y-yes,” stammered Cathy. “Oh, yes!”

He hung up and went back out to the field and the tractor. He began to think sourly of a large number of things all at once. There was a law to encourage people to leave Earth for colonies on suitable planets. There was even governmental help for people who didn’t have funds of their own. But if a man wanted to make something of himself, he preferred to use his own money and pick his own planet and choose his own way of life.

Lon Simpson had bought four hectares of land on Cetus Gamma Two. He’d paid his passage out. He’d given five hundred credits a month for an instruction course on the Company’s plantation, during which time he’d labored faithfully to grow, harvest, and cure *thamar* leaves for the Company’s profit. Then he’d bought farm machinery from the Company—and a house—and very painstakingly had set out to be a colonist on his own.

Just about that time, Cathy had arrived on a Company ship and taken up her duties as beamphone operator at Cetopolis. It was a new colony, with not more than five thousand humans on the whole planet, all of them concentrated near the one small town with its plank sidewalks and prefabricated buildings. Lon Simpson met

Cathy, and his labors on his *thandar* farm acquired new energy and purpose.

But he was up against a shrewd organization. His inordinately expensive farm machinery broke down. He repaired it. After a time it could not be repaired any longer and he had to buy more. Before the *thandar* plants were half grown, he owed more than half his prospective crop for machinery replacements.

Now he could see the method perfectly. The Company imported all machinery. It made that machinery in its own factories, machinery that was designed to break down. So this year—even if nothing else happened—Lon would wind up owing more for machinery replacements than the crop would bring.

It was not likely that nothing else would happen. Next season he would start off in debt, instead of all clear, and if the same thing happened he would owe all his crop and be six thousand credits behind. By harvest after next, his farm and house could be foreclosed for debt and he could either try to work for other colonists—who were in the process of going through the same wringer themselves—or hire out as a farmhand on the Company's plantation. He would never be able to save space-fare away from the planet. He would be very much worse off than the assisted emigrants to other planets, who had not invested all they owned in land and machinery and agricultural instructions.

And there was Cathy. She owed for her passage. It would be years before she could pay that back, if ever. She couldn't live in the farmhand barracks. They might as well give up thinking about each other.

It was a system. Beautifully legal, absolutely airtight. Not a thing wrong with it. The Company had a monopoly on *thandar*, despite the law. It had all the cultivated land on Cetus Gamma Two under its control, and its labor problem

was solved. Its laborers first paid something like sixteen thousand credits a head for the privilege of trying to farm independently for a year or two, and then became farmhands for the Company at a bare subsistence wage.

Lon Simpson was in the grip of that system. He had taken the generator apart and put it back together eighteen times. There was nothing visibly wrong with it. It had been designed to break down with nothing visibly wrong with it. If he couldn't repair it, though, he was out fifteen hundred credits, his investment was wiped out, and all his hopes were gone.

He took the generator apart for the nineteenth time. He wondered grimly how the Company's designers made generators so cleverly that they would stop working so that even the trouble with them couldn't be figured out. It was a very ingenious system.

Out on the ninth planet, Rhadampsicus explained the situation to his bride as they waited for the interesting astronomical phenomenon. They were quite cosy, waiting. Their bower was simple, of course. Frozen nitrogen walls, and windows of the faint bluish tint of oxygen ice. Rhadampsicus had grown some cyanogen flower-crystals to make the place look homelike, and there was now a lovely reflection-pool in which liquid hydrogen reflected the stars. Cetus Gamma, the local sun, seemed hardly more than a very bright and very near star—it was four light-hours away—and it glimmered over the landscape and made everything quite charming.

Nodalictha, naturally, would not enter the minds of the male bipeds on the inner planet. Modesty forbade such a thing—as, of course, the conscientiousness of a brand-new husband limited Rhadampsicus to the thoughts of the males among the bipeds. But Nodalictha was distressed when Rhadampsicus told her of what was occurring among the

bipeds. He guided her thoughts to Cathy, in the beamphone exchange at Cetopolis.

“But it is terrible!” said Nodalictha in distress when she had absorbed Cathy’s maiden meditations. She did not actually speak in words and soundwaves. There is no air worth mentioning at seven degrees Kelvin. It’s all frozen. A little helium hangs around, perhaps. Nothing else. The word for communication is not exactly the word for speech, but it will do. Nodalictha said, “They love each other! In a cute way, they are like—like we were, Rhadampsicus!”

Rhadampsicus played a positron-beam on her in feigned indignation. If that beam had hit a human, the human would have curled up in a scorched, smoking heap. But Nodalictha bridled.

“Rhadampsicus!” she protested fondly. “Stop tickling me! But can’t you do something for them? They are so cute!”

And Rhadampsicus gallantly sent his thoughts back to the second planet, where a biped grimly labored over a primitive device.

Lon Simpson, staring at the disassembled generator, suddenly blinked. The grimness went out of his expression. He stared. An idea had occurred to him. He went over it in his mind. He blew out his breath in a long whistle. Then, very painstakingly, he did four or five things that completely ruined the generator for the extremely modest trade-in allowance he could have gotten for it at the Company store.

He worked absorbedly for perhaps twenty minutes, his eyes intent. At the end of that time he had threads of

unwound secondary wire stretched back and forth across a forked stick of *dhil* weed, and two small pieces of sheet iron twisted together in an extremely improbable manner. He connected the ends of the secondary wire to contacts in his tractor. He climbed into the tractor seat. He threw over the drive control.

The tractor lurched into motion. The Diesel wasn't running. But the tractor rolled comfortably as Lon drove it, the individual motors in the separate catawheels drawing power from a mere maze of wires across a forked stick—plus two pieces of sheet iron. There was plenty of power.

Lon drove the tractor the rest of the morning and all afternoon with a very peculiar expression on his face. He understood what he had done. Now that he had done it, it seemed the most obvious of expedients. He felt inclined to be incredulous that nobody had ever happened to think of this particular device before. But they very plainly hadn't. It was a source of all the electric power anybody could possibly want. The voltage would depend on the number of turns of copper wire around a suitably forked stick. The amperage would be whatever that voltage could put through whatever was hooked to it.

He no longer needed a new generator for his tractor. He had one.

He didn't even need a Diesel.

With adequate power—he'd been having to nurse the Diesel along, too, lately—Lon Simpson ran his tractor late into the twilight. He cultivated all the ground that urgently needed cultivation, and at least one field he hadn't hoped to get to before next week. But his expression was amazed. It is a very peculiar sensation to discover that one is a genius.

That night, in Cetopolis, he told Cathy all about it. It was a very warm night—an unusually warm night. They

walked along the plank sidewalks of the little frontier town—as a new colony, Cetus Gamma Two was a frontier—and Lon talked extravagantly.

He had meant to explain painfully to Cathy that there was no use in their being romantic about each other. He'd expected to have to tell her bitterly that he was doomed to spend the rest of his life adding to the profits of the Cetus Gamma Trading Company, with all the laws of the human race holding him in peonage. He'd thought of some very elegant descriptions of the sort of people who'd worked out the system in force on Cetus Gamma Two.

But he didn't. As they strolled under the shiver trees that lined the small town's highways, and smelled the *chanel* bushes beyond the town's limits, and listened to the thin violinlike strains of what should have been night birds—they weren't; the singers were furry instead of feathered, and they slept in burrows during the day—as they walked with linked fingers in the warm and starlit night, Lon told Cathy about his invention.

He explained in detail just why wires wound in just that fashion, and combined with bits of sheet iron twisted in just those shapes, would produce power for free and forever. He explained how it had to be so. He marveled that nobody had ever thought of it before. He explained it so that Cathy could almost understand it.

"It's wonderful!" she said wistfully. "They'll run spaceships on your invention, won't they, Lon? And cities? And everything! I guess you'll be very rich for inventing it!"

He stopped short and stared at her. He hadn't thought that far ahead. Then he said blankly:

"But I'll have to get back to Earth to patent it! And I haven't got the money to pay one fare, let alone two!"

"Two?" asked Cathy hopefully. "Why two?"

“You’re going to marry me, aren’t you?” he demanded. “I sort of hope that was all settled.”

Cathy stamped her foot.

“Hadn’t you heard,” she asked indignantly, “that such things aren’t taken for granted? Especially when two people are walking in the starlight and are supposed to be thrilled? It isn’t settled—not until after you’ve kissed me, anyhow!”

He remedied his error.

Out on the ninth planet, very far away, Nodalictha blushed slightly. As a bride, she was in that deliciously embarrassing state of becoming accustomed to discussions which would previously have been unconventional.

“They are so quaint!” Then she hesitated and said awkwardly, “The idea of putting their—their lips together as a sign of affection—”

Rhadampsicus was amused, as a bridegroom may be by the delightful innocences of a new wife. He evinced his amusement in a manner no human being could conceivably have recognized as the tender laugh it was.

“Little goose!” he said fondly. Of course, instead of a fowl, he thought of a creature that had thirty-four legs and scales instead of feathers and was otherwise thoroughly ungooselike. “Little goose, they do that because they can’t do this!”

And he twined his eye stalks sentimentally about hers.

Days passed on Cetus Gamma Two. Lon Simpson cultivated his *thanas* fields. But he began to worry. His new power source was more than a repair for a broken-down tractor. It was valuable. It was riches! He had in it one of those basic, overwhelmingly important discoveries by

which human beings have climbed up from the status of intelligent Earthbound creatures to galactic colonists—And a lot of good it had done them!

It was a basic principle for power supply that would relieve mankind permanently of the burden of fuels. The number of planets available for colonization would be multiplied. The cost of every object made by human beings would be reduced by the previous cost of power. The price of haulage from one planet to another would be reduced to a fraction. Every member of the human race would become richer as a result of the gadget now attached to Lon Simpson's tractor. He was entitled to royalties on the wealth he was to distribute. But....

He was a *thandar* farmer on Cetus Gamma Two. His crop was mortgaged. He could not possibly hope to raise enough money to get back to Earth to arrange for the marketing of his invention. Especially, he could not conceivably raise money enough to take Cathy with him. He had riches, but they weren't available. And something else might happen to ruin him at any time.

Something else did. The freezer element of his deep-freeze locker broke down. He didn't notice it. He had a small kitchen locker in which food for week-to-week use was stored. He didn't know anything about the deep-freeze unit that held a whole growing season's supply of food. The food in it—all imported from Earth and very expensive—thawed, fermented, spoiled, developed evil smelling gases, and waited for an appropriate moment to reveal itself as a catastrophe.

There were other things to worry about at the time. A glacier up at Cetus Gamma Two's polar region began to retreat, instead of growing as was normal for the season. There was a remarkable solar prominence of three days' duration swinging around the equator of the local sun.

There was a meeting of directors of the Cetus Gamma Trading Company, at which one of the directors pointed out that the normal curve of increase for profits was beginning to flatten out, and something had to be done to improve the financial position of the company. Ugly sun-spots appeared on the northern hemisphere of Cetus Gamma. If there had been any astronomers on the job, there would have been as much excitement as a four alarm fire. But there were no astronomers.

The greatest agitation on the second planet of Cetus Gamma Two was felt by Lon Simpson. Cathy had made friends with a married woman colonist who would chaperon her on a visit to Lon's farm, and was coming out to visit and see the place that was to be the scene of the ineffable, unparalleled happiness she and Lon would know after they were married.

She came, she saw, she was captivated. Lon blissfully opened the door of the house she was to share. He had spent the better part of two days cleaning up so it would be fit for her to look at. Cathy entered. There was a dull, booming noise, a hissing, and a bubbling, and then a rank stench swept through the house and strangled them.

The boom, of course, was the bursting open of the deep-freeze locker from the pressure of accumulated gases within it. The smell was that of the deep-freeze contents, ten days thawed out without Lon knowing it. There are very few smells much worse than frozen fish gone very, very bad in a hot climate. If there are worse smells, they come from once-frozen eggs bursting from their shells when pressure outside them is relieved. In this case, trimmings were added by fermenting strawberries, moldy meat and badly decayed vegetables, all triumphantly making themselves known at the same instant.

Cathy gasped and choked. Lon got her out of doors, gasping himself. It was not difficult to deduce what had happened.

He opened the house windows from the outside, so the smell could go away. But he knew despair.

“I—can’t show you the house, Cathy,” he said numbly. “My locker went bad and all the food followed suit.”

“Lon!” wailed Cathy. “It’s terrible! How will you eat?”

Lon began to realize that the matter was more serious than the loss of an opportunity for a sentimental inspection of the house. He had dreamed splendidly, of late. He didn’t quite know how he was going to manage it, but since his tractor was working magnificently he had come to picture himself and Cathy in the rôle of successful colonists, zestfully growing *thamar* leaves for the increasing multitudes of people who needed a milligram a day.

He’d reverted to the pictured dreams in the Cetus Gamma Trading Company’s advertisements. He’d daydreamed of himself and Cathy as growing with the colony, thriving as it thrived, and ultimately becoming moderately rich—in children and grandchildren, anyhow—with life stretching out before them in a sort of rosy glow. He’d negligently assumed that somehow they would also be rich from the royalties on his invention. But now he came down to reality.

His house was uninhabitable for the time being. He could continue to cultivate his fields, but he wouldn’t be able to eat. The local plant-life was not suitable for human digestion. He had to live on food imported from Earth. Now he had to buy a new stock from the Company, and it would bankrupt him.

With an invention worth more—probably—than the Cetus Gamma Company itself, if he could realize on it, he

still was broke. His crop was mortgaged. If Carson learned about his substitute for a generator, the Company would immediately clamp down to get it away from him.

He took Cathy back to Cetopolis. He feverishly appealed to other colonists. He couldn't tell them about his generator substitute. If they knew about it, in time Carson would know. If they used it, Carson would eventually get hold of a specimen, to send back to Earth for pirating by the Cetus Gamma Trading Company. All Lon could do was try desperately to arrange to borrow food to live on until his crop came in, though even then he wouldn't be in any admirable situation.

He couldn't borrow food in quantity. Other colonists had troubles, too. They'd give him a meal, yes, but they couldn't refill his freezer without emptying their own. Which would compel them to buy more. Which would be charged against their crops. Which would simply hasten the day when they would become day-laborers on the Company's *thanas* farm.

Lon had about two days' food in the kitchen locker. He determined to stretch it to four. Then he'd have to buy more. With each meal, then, his hopes of freedom and prosperity—and Cathy—grew less.

Of course, he could starve....

Rhadampsicus was enormously and pleasantly interested in what went on in Cetus Gamma's photosphere. From the ninth planet, he scanned the prominences with enthusiasm, making notes. Nodalictha tried to take a proper wifely interest in her husband's hobby, but she could not keep it up indefinitely. She busied herself with her housekeeping. She fashioned a carpet of tufted methane fibres and put up curtains at the windows. She enlarged the garden Rhadampsicus had made, adding

borders of crystallized ammonia and a sort of walkway with a hedge of monoclinic sulphur which glittered beautifully in the starlight. She knew that this was only a temporary dwelling, but she wanted Rhadampsicus to realize that she could make any place a comfortable home.

He remained absorbed in the phenomena of the local sun. One great prominence, after five days of spectacular existence, divided into two which naturally moved apart and stationed themselves at opposite sides of the sun's equator. They continued to rotate with the sun itself, giving very much the effect of an incipient pinwheel. Two other minor prominences came into being midway between them. Rhadampsicus watched in fascination.

Nodalictha came and reposed beside him on a gentle slope of volcanic slag. She waited for him to notice her. She would not let herself be sensitive about his interest in his hobby, of course, but she could not really find it absorbing for herself. A trifle wistfully, she sent her thoughts to the female biped on the second planet.

After a while she said in distress, "Rhadampsicus! Oh, they are so unhappy!"

Rhadampsicus gallantly turned his attention from the happenings on the sun.

"What's that, darling?"

"Look!" said Nodalictha plaintively. "They are so much in love, Rhadampsicus! And they can't marry because he hasn't anything edible to share with her!"

Rhadampsicus scanned. He was an ardent and sentimental husband. If his new little wife was distressed about anything at all, Rhadampsicus was splendidly ready to do something about it.

Lon Simpson looked at his kitchen locker. The big deep-freezer was repaired now. Once a season, a truck came out from Cetopolis and filled it. The food was costly. A season's supply was kept in deep-freeze. Once in one or two weeks, one refilled the kitchen locker. It was best to leave the deep-freeze locker closed as much as possible. But now the big deep-freeze was empty. He'd cleaned out the ghastly mess in it, and he had it running again, but he had nothing to put in it. To have it refilled would put him hopelessly at the Company's mercy, but there was nothing else to do.

Bitterly, he called the Trading Company office, and Carson answered.

"This is Simpson," Lon told him. "How much—"

"The price for a generator," said Carson, bored, "is the same as before. Do you want it sent out?"

"No! My food locker broke down. My food store spoiled. I need more."

"I'll figure it," replied Carson over the beamphone. He didn't seem interested. After a moment, he said indifferently, "Fifteen hundred credits for standard rations to crop time. Then you'll need more."

"It's robbery!" raged Lon. "I can't expect more than four thousand credits for my crop! You've got three thousand charged against me now!"

Carson yawned. "True. A new generator, fifteen hundred; new food supplies fifteen hundred. If your crop turns out all right, you'll start the new season with two thousand credits charged up as a loan against your land."

Lon Simpson strangled on his fury. "You'll take all my leaves and I'll still owe you! Then credit for seed and food and—if I need to buy more machinery, you'll own my

farm *and* crop next crop time! Even if my crop is good! Your damned Company will own my farm!”

“That’s your lookout,” Carson said without emotion. “Being a *thandar* farmer was your idea, not mine. Shall I send out the food?”

Lon Simpson bellowed into the beamphone. He heard clicking, then Cathy’s voice. It was at once reproachful and sympathetic.

“Lon! Please!”

But Lon couldn’t talk to her. He panted at her, and hung up. It is essential to a young man in love that he shine, somehow, in the eyes of the girl he cares for. Lon was not shining. He was appearing as the Galaxy’s prize sap. He’d invested a sizable fortune in his farm. He was a good farmer—hard-working and skilled. In the matter of repairing generators, he’d proved to be a genius. But he was at the mercy of the Cetus Gamma Company’s representative. He was already in debt. If he wanted to go on eating, he’d go deeper. If he were careful and industrious and thrifty, the Trading Company would take his crop and farm in six more months and then give him a job at day-labor wages.

He went grimly to the kitchen of his home. He looked at the trivial amount of food remaining. He was hungry. He could eat it all right now.

If he did—

Then, staring at the food in the kitchen locker, he blinked. An idea had occurred to him. He was blankly astonished at it. He went over and over it in his mind. His expression became dubiously skeptical, and then skeptically amazed. But his eyes remained intent as he thought.

Presently, looking very skeptical indeed, he went out of the house and unwound more copper wire from the remnant of the disassembled generator. He came back to the kitchen. He took an emptied tin can and cut it in a distinctly peculiar manner. The cuts he made were asymmetrical. When he had finished, he looked at it doubtfully.

A long time later he had made a new gadget. It consisted of two open coils, one quite large and one quite small. Their resemblance to each other was plain, but they did not at all resemble any other coils that had been made for any other purpose whatsoever. If they looked like anything, it was the “mobiles” that some sculptors once insisted were art.

Lon stared at his work with an air of helplessness. Then he went out again. He returned with the forked stick that had proved to be a generator. He connected the wires from that improbable contrivance to the coils of the new and still more unlikely device. The eccentrically cut tin can was in the middle, between them.

There was a humming sound. Lon went out a third time and came back with a mass of shrubbery. He packed it in the large coil.

He muttered to himself, “I’m out of my head! I’m crazy!”

But then he went to the kitchen locker. He put a small packet of frozen green peas in the tin can between the two coils.

The humming sound increased. After a moment there was another parcel of green peas—not frozen—in the small

coil.

Lon took it out. The device hummed more loudly again. Immediately there was another parcel of green peas in the small coil. He took them out.

When he had six parcels of green peas instead of one, the mass of foliage in the large coil collapsed abruptly. Lon disconnected the wires and removed the debris. The native foliage looked shrunken, somehow, dried-out. Lon tossed it through the window.

He put a parcel of unfrozen green peas on to cook and sat down and held his head in his hands. He knew what had happened. He knew how.

The local flora on Cetus Gamma Two naturally contained the same chemical elements as the green peas imported from Earth. Those elements were combined in chemical compounds similar, if not identical to, those of the Earth vegetation. The new gadget simply converted the compounds in the large coil to match those in the sample—in the tin can—and assembled them in the small coil according to the physical structure of the sample. In this case, as green peas.

The device would take any approximate compound from the large coil and reassemble it—suitably modified as per sample—in the small coil. It would work not only for green peas, but for roots, barks, herbs, berries, blossoms and flowers.

It would even work for *thandar* leaves.

When that last fact occurred to him, Lon Simpson went quietly loony, trying to figure out how he had come to think of such a thing. He was definitely crooked, because he picked up the beamphone and told Cathy all about it. And he was not loony because he told Cathy, but because he forgot his earlier suspicions of why there was a central

station for beamphones in Cetopolis, instead of a modern direct-communication system.

In fact, he forgot the system in operation on Cetus Gamma Two—the Company’s system. It had been designed to put colonists through the wringer and deposit them at its own farm to be day-laborers forever with due regard to human law. But it was a very efficient system.

It took care of strokes of genius, too.

That night, Carson, listening boredly to the record of all the conversations over the beamphone during the day, heard what Lon had told Cathy. He didn’t believe it, of course.

But he made a memo to look into it.

Rhadampsicus stretched himself. Out on the ninth planet, the weather was slightly warmer—almost six degrees Kelvin, two hundred and sixty-odd degrees centigrade below zero—and he was inclined to be lazy. But he was very handsome, in Nodalictha’s eyes. He was seventy or more feet from his foremost eye stalk to the tip of his least crimson appendage, and he fluoresced beautifully in the starlight. He was a very gallant young bridegroom.

When he saw Nodalictha looking at him admiringly, he said with his customary tenderness:

“It was fatiguing to make him go through it, darling, but since you wished it, it is done. He now has food to share with the female.”

“And you’re handsome, too, Rhadampsicus!” Nodalictha said irrelevantly.

She felt as brides sometimes do on their honeymoons. She was quite sure that she had not only the bravest and handsomest of husbands, but the most thoughtful and considerate.

Presently, with their eye stalks intertwined, he asked softly:

“Are you weary of this place, darling? I would like to watch the rest of this rather rare phenomenon, but if you’re not interested, we can go on. And truly I won’t mind.”

“Of course we’ll stay!” protested Nodalictha. “I want to do anything you want to. I’m perfectly happy just being with you.”

And, unquestionably, she was.

Carson, though bored, was a bit upset by the recorded conversation he’d listened to. Lon Simpson had been almost incoherent, but he obviously meant Cathy to take him seriously. And there were some things to back it up.

He’d reported his generator hopelessly useless—and hadn’t bought a new one. He’d reported all his food spoiled—and hadn’t bought more. Carson thought it over carefully. The crop inspection helicopter reported Simpson’s fields in much better shape than average, so his tractor was obviously working.

Carson asked casual, deadpan questions of other colonists who came into the Company store. Most of them were harried, sullen and bitter. They were unanimously aware of the wringer they were being put through. They knew what the Company was doing to them and they hated Carson because he represented it. But they did answer Carson’s casual questions about Lon Simpson.

Yes, he’d tried to borrow food from them. No, they couldn’t lend it to him. Yes, he was still eating. In fact he was offering to swap food. He was short on fruit and long on frozen green peas. Then he was long on fruit and frozen green peas and short on frozen sweet corn and strawberries. No, he didn’t want to trade on a big scale. One package of frozen strawberries was all he wanted. He

gave six packages of frozen peas for it. He gave six packages of frozen strawberries for one package of frozen sweet corn. He'd swapped a dozen parcels of sweet corn for one of fillet of flounder, two dozen fillet of flounder for cigarettes, and fifty cartons of cigarettes for a frozen roast of beef.

It didn't make sense unless the conversation on the beamphone was right. If what Lon had told Cathy was true, he'd have his frozen food locker filled up again by now. He had some sort of device which converted the indigestible local flora and fauna into digestible Earth products. To suspect such a thing was preposterous, but Carson suspected everyone and everything.

As representative of the Company, Carson naturally did its dirty work. New colonists bought farms from the central office on Earth and happily took ship to Cetus Gamma Two. Then Carson put them through their instruction course, outfitted them to try farming on their own, and saw to it that they went bankrupt and either starved or took jobs as farmhands for the Company, at wages assuring that they could never take ship away again.

It was a nasty job and Carson did it very well, because he loved it.

While he still debated Lon's insane boasts to Cathy over the beamphone system, he prepared to take over the farm of another colonist. That man had been deeper in debt than Lon, and he'd been less skilled at repairs, so it was time to gather him in. Carson called him to Cetopolis to tell him that the Company regretfully could not extend further credit, would have to take back his farm, house, and remaining food stores, and finish the cultivation of his *thanas* leaf crop to repay itself for the trouble.

The colonist, however, said briefly: "Go to hell."
