



BACKLASH



WINSTON K. MARKS



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I still feel that the ingratiating little runts never *intended* any harm. They were eager to please, a cinch to transact business with, and constantly, everlastingly grateful to us for giving them asylum.

Yes, we gave the genuflecting little devils asylum. And we were glad to have them around at first—especially when they presented our women with a gift to surpass all gifts: a custom-built domestic servant.

In a civilization that had made such a fetish of personal liberty and dignity, you couldn't hire a butler or an upstairs maid for less than love *and* money. And since love was pretty much rationed along the lines of monogamy, domestic service was almost a dead occupation. That is, until the Ollies came to our planet to stay.

Eventually I learned to despise the spineless little immigrants from Sirius, but the first time I met one he made me feel foolishly important. I looked at his frail, olive-skinned little form, and thought, *If this is what space has to offer in the way of advanced life-forms ... well, we haven't done so badly on old Mother Earth.*

This one's name was Johnson. All of them, the whole fifty-six, took the commonest Earth family names they could find, and dropped their own name-designations whose slobbering sibilance made them difficult for us to pronounce and write. It seemed strange, their casually wiping out their nominal heritage just for the sake of our convenience—imagine an O'Toole or a Rockefeller or an Adams arriving on Sirius IV and no sooner learning the local lingo than insisting on becoming known as Sslyslasciff-sosz!

But that was the Ollie. Anything to get along and please us. And of course, addressing them as Johnson, Smith, Jones, etc., did work something of a semantic protective coloration and reduce some of the barriers to quick adjustment to the aliens.

Johnson—*Ollie* Johnson—appeared at my third under-level office a few months after the big news of their shipwreck landing off the Maine coast. He arrived a full fifteen minutes ahead of his appointment, and I was too curious to stand on the dignity of office routine and make him wait.

As he stood in the doorway of my office, my first visual impression was of an emaciated adolescent, seasick green, prematurely balding.

He bowed, and bowed again, and spent thirty seconds reminding me that it was *he* who had sought the interview, and it was *he* who had the big favors to ask—and it was wonderful, gracious, generous *I* who flavored the room with the essence of mystery, importance, godliness and overpowering sweetness upon whose fragrance little Ollie Johnson had come to feast his undeserving senses.

"Sit down, sit down," I told him when I had soaked in all the celestial flattery I could hold. "I love you to pieces, too, but I'm curious about this proposition you mentioned in your message."

He eased into the chair as if it were much too good for him. He was strictly humanoid. His four-and-a-half-foot body was dressed in the most conservative Earth clothing, quiet colors and cheap quality.

While he swallowed slowly a dozen times, getting ready to outrage my illustrious being with his sordid business proposition, his coloring varied from a rather insipid gray-green to a rich olive—which is why the press instantly had dubbed them *Ollies*. When they got excited and blushed, they came close to the color of a ripe olive; and this was often.

Ollie Johnson hissed a few times, his equivalent of throat-clearing, and then lunged into his subject at a 90 degree tangent:

"Can it be that your gracious agreement to this interview connotes a willingness to traffic with us of the inferior ones?" His voice was light, almost reedy.

"If it's legal and there's a buck in it, can't see any reason why not," I told him.

"You manufacture and distribute devices, I am told. Wonderful labor-saving mechanisms that make life on Earth a constant pleasure."

I was almost tempted to hire him for my public relations staff.

"We do," I admitted. "Servo-mechanisms, appliances and gadgets of many kinds for the home, office and industry."

"It is to our everlasting disgrace," he said with humility, "that we were unable to salvage the means to give your magnificent civilization the worthy gift of our space drive. Had Flussissc or Shascinsith survived our long journey, it would be possible, but—" He bowed his head, as if waiting for my wrath at the stale news that the only two power-mechanic scientists on board were D.O.A.

"That was tough," I said. "But what's on your mind now?"

He raised his moist eyes, grateful at my forgiveness. "We who survived do possess a skill that might help repay the debt which we have incurred in intruding upon your glorious planet."

He begged my permission to show me something in the outer waiting room. With more than casual interest, I assented.

He moved obsequiously to the door, opened it and spoke to someone beyond my range of vision. His words sounded like a repetition of "*sissle-flissle*." Then he stepped aside, fastened his little wet eyes on me expectantly, and waited.

Suddenly the doorway was filled, jamb to jamb, floor to arch, with a hulking, bald-headed character with rugged pink features, a broad nose like a pug, and huge sugar-scoops for ears. He wore a quiet business suit of fine quality, obviously tailored to his six-and-a-half-foot, cliff-like physique. In spite of his bulk, he moved across the carpet to my desk on cat feet, and came to a halt with pneumatic smoothness.

"I am a Soth," he said in a low, creamy voice. It was so resonant that it seemed to come from the walls around us. "I have learned your language and your ways. I can follow instructions, solve simple problems and do your work. I am very strong. I can serve you well."

The recitation was an expressionless monotone that sounded almost haughty compared to the self-effacing Ollie's piping whines. His face had the dignity of a rock, and his eyes the quiet peace of a cool, deep mountain lake.

The Ollie came forward. "We have been able to repair only one of the six Soths we had on the ship. They are more fragile than we humanoids."

"They don't look it," I said. "And what do you mean by *you* humanoids? What's he?"

"You would call him—a robot, I believe."

My astonished reaction must have satisfied the Ollie, because he allowed his eyes to leave me and seek the carpet again, where they evidently were more comfortable.

"You mean you—you *make* these people?" I gasped.

He nodded. "We can reproduce them, given materials and facilities. Of course, your own robots must be vastly superior—" a hypocritical sop to my vanity—"but still we hope you may find a use for the Soths."

I got up and walked around the big lunker, trying to look blasé. "Well, yes," I lied. "Our robots probably have considerably better intellectual abilities—our cybernetic units, that is. However, you do have something in form and mobility."

That was the understatement of my career.

I finally pulled my face together, and said as casually as I could, "Would you like to license us to manufacture these—Soths?"

The Ollie fluttered his hands. "But that would require our working and mingling with your personnel," he said. "We wouldn't consider imposing in such a gross manner."

"No imposition at all," I assured him.

But he would have none of it: "We have studied your economics and have found that your firm is an outstanding leader in what you term 'business.' You have a superb distribution organization. It is our intention to offer you the exclusive—" he hesitated, then dragged the word from his amazing vocabulary—"franchise for the sale of our Soths. If you agree, we will not burden you with their manufacture. Our own little plant will produce and ship. You may then place them with your customers."

I studied the magnificent piece of animated sculpturing, stunned at the possibilities. "You say a Soth is strong. How strong?"

The huge creature startled me by answering the question himself. He bent flowingly from the waist, gripped my massive steel desk by one of its thick, overlapping top edges, and raised it a few inches from the floor—with the fingers of one hand. When he put it down, I stood up and hefted one edge myself. By throwing my back into it, I could just budge one side of the clumsy thing—four hundred pounds if it was an ounce!

Ollie Johnson modestly refrained from comment. He said, "The Department of Commerce has been helpful. They have explained your medium of exchange, and have helped us with the prices of raw materials. It was they who recommended your firm as a likely distributor."

"Have you figured how much one of these Soths should sell for?"

"We think we can show a modest profit if we sell them to you for \$1200," he said. "Perhaps we can bring down our costs, if you find a wide enough demand for them."

I had expected ten or twenty times that figure. I'm afraid I got a little eager. "I—uh—shall we see if we can't just work out a little contract right now? Save you another trip back this afternoon."

"If you will forgive our boorish presumption," Ollie said, fumbling self-consciously in his baggy clothing, "I have already prepared such a document with the help of the Attorney General. A very kindly gentleman."

It was simple and concise. It allowed us to resell the Soths at a price of \$2000, Fair Traded, giving us a gross margin of \$800 to work with. He assured me that upkeep and repairs on the robot units were negligible, and we could extend a very generous warranty which the Ollies would make good in the event of failure. He gave me a quick rundown on the care and feeding of a Sirian Soth, and then jolted me with:

"There is just a single other favor I beg of you. Would you do my little colony the exquisite honor of accepting this Soth as your personal servant, Mr. Collins?"

"Servant?"

He bobbed his head. "Yes, sir. We have trained him in the rudiments of the household duties and conventions of your culture. He learns rapidly and never forgets an instruction. Your wife would find Soth most useful, I am quite certain."

"A magnificent specimen like this doing *housework*?" I marveled at the little creature's empty-headedness.

"Again I must beg your pardon, sir. I overlooked mentioning a suggestion by the Secretary of Labor that the Soths be sold only for use in domestic service. It was also the consensus of the President's whole cabinet that the economy of any nation could not cope with the problem of unemployment were our Soths to be made available for all the types of work for which they are fitted."

My dream of empire collapsed. The little green fellow was undoubtedly telling the truth. The unions would strike any plant or facility in the world where a Soth put foot on the job. It would ruin our retail consumer business, too—Soths wouldn't consume automobiles, copters, theater tickets and filets mignon.

"Yes, Mr. Johnson," I sighed. "I'll be happy to try out your Soth. We have a place out in the country where he'll come in handy."

The Ollie duly expressed his ecstasy at my decision, and backed out of my office waving his copy of the contract. I had assured him that our board of directors would meet within a week and confirm my signature.

I looked up at the hairless giant. As general director of the Home Appliance Division of Worldwide Machines, Incorporated, I had made a deal, all right. The first interplanetary business deal in history.

But for some reason, I couldn't escape the feeling that I'd been had.

On the limoucopter, they charged me double fare for Soth's transportation to the private field where I kept my boat. As we left Detroit, I watched him stare down at the flattened skyline, but he did it with the unseeing expression of an old commuter.

Jack, my personal pilot, had eyed my passenger at the airport with some concern and sullen muttering. Now he made much of trimming ship after takeoff. The boat did seem logy with the unaccustomed ballast—it was a four-passenger Arrow, built for speed, and Soth had to crouch and spread all over the two rear seats. But he did so without complaint or comment for the half-hour hop up to our estate on my favorite Canadian lake.

As the four hundred miles unreeled below us, I wondered how Vicki would react to Soth. I should have phoned her, but how do you describe a Soth to a semi-invalid whose principal excitement is restricted to bird-watching and repotting puny geraniums, and a rare sunfishing expedition to the end of our floating pier?

Well, it was Friday, and I would have the whole weekend to work the robot into our routine. I had called my friend, Dr. Frederick Hilliard, a retired industrial psychologist, and invited him to drop over tonight if he wanted an interesting surprise. He was our nearest neighbor and my most frequent chess partner, who lived a secluded bachelor's life in a comfortable cabin on the far shore of our lake.

As we came in for a water landing, I saw Fred's boat at our pier. Then I could make out Fred, Vicki and Clumsy, our Irish setter, all waiting for me. I hoped Fred's presence would help simmer Vicki down a little.

We drifted in to the dock, and I turned to Soth and told him to help my pilot unload the supplies. This pleased Jack, whose Pilot and Chauffeur's Local frequently reminded me in polite little bulletins that its members were not obligated to perform other than technical services for their employers.

Then I got out and said hello to Vicki and Fred as casually as possible. Vicki kissed me warmly on the mouth, which she does when she's excited, and then clung to me and let the day's tension soak out of her.

How you get tense in a Twenty-first Century home in the midst of the Canadian wilderness is something I've never been able to figure out, but Vicki's super-imagination managed daily to defeat her doctor's orders for peace and quiet.

"I'm glad you're home, dear," she said. "When Fred came over ahead of time I knew something was up, and I'm all unraveled with curiosity."

Just then Soth emerged from the boat with our whole week's supply of foodstuffs and assorted necessities bundled under his long arms.

"Oh, dear God, a dinner guest!" Vicki exclaimed. Tears started into her reproachful eyes and her slender little figure stiffened in my arms.

I swung her around, hooked arms with her and Fred, and started up the path.

"Not a guest," I told her. "He's a servant who will make the beds, clean up and all sorts of things, and if you don't like him we'll turn him in on a new model laundry unit, and don't start worrying about being alone with him—he's a robot."

"A robot!" Fred said, and both their heads swiveled to stare back.

"Yes," I said. "That's why I wanted you here tonight, Fred. I'd like to have you sort of go over him and—well, you know—"

I didn't want to say, *make sure he's safe*. Not in Vicki's presence. But Fred caught my eye and nodded.

I started to tell them of my visitor, and the contract with the castaways from space. Halfway through, Clumsy interrupted me with his excited barking. I looked back. Clumsy was galloping a frantic circle around Soth, cutting in and out, threatening to make an early dinner of the intruder's leg.

Before I could speak, Soth opened his lips and let out a soft hiss through his white teeth. Clumsy flattened to the ground and froze, and Soth continued after us without a further glance at the dog.

Fred looked at Vicki's tense face and laughed. "I'll have to learn that trick ... Clumsy's chewed the cuffs off three pairs of my best slacks."

Vicki smiled uncertainly, and went into the house. I showed Soth where to stow the supplies, and told him to remain in the kitchen. He just froze where he stood.

Fred was making drinks when I returned to the living room.

"Looks docile enough, Cliff," he told me.

"Strong as a horse and gentle as a lamb," I said. "I want you two to help me find out what his talents are. I'll have to prepare a paper on him for the board of directors Monday."

There were nervous whitecaps on Vicki's drink.

I patted her shoulder. "I'll break him into the housekeeping routine, honey. You won't have him staring over your shoulder."

She tried to relax. "But he's so quiet—and big!"

"Who wants a noisy little servant around?" Fred said helpfully. "And how about that rock retaining-wall Cliff is always about to build for your garden? And you really don't love housework, do you, Vicki?"

"I don't mind the chores," she said. "But it might be fun to have a big fellow like that to shove around." She was trying valiantly to hold up her end, but the vein in her temple was throbbing.

Well, the next forty-eight hours were more than interesting. Soth turned out to be what the doctor ordered, literally and figuratively. After I'd taken him on a tour of the place, I showed him how to work the automatic devices—food preparation, laundry and cleaning. And after one lesson, he served us faultless meals with a quiet efficiency that was actually restful, even miraculously to Vicki.

She began relaxing in his presence and planning a few outside projects "to get our money's worth" out of the behemoth. This was our earliest joke about Soth, because he certainly was no expense or problem to maintain. As the Ollie had promised, he thrived on our table scraps and a pink concoction which he mixed by pouring a few drops of purple liquid from a pocket vial into a gallon pitcher of water. The stuff would be supplied by the Ollies at a cost of about a dollar eighty a week.

Saturday afternoon, Vicki bravely took over teaching him the amenities of butlering and the intricacies of bed-making. After a short session in the bedroom, she came out looking thoughtful.

"He's awfully real looking," she said. "And you can't read a darned thing in his eyes. How far can you trust him, Cliff? You know—around women?"

Fred looked at me with a raised eyebrow and said, "Well, let's find out."

We sat down and called Soth into the living room. He came and stood before us, erect, poised and motionless.

Fred said, "Disrobe. Remove all your clothing. Strip!"

Vicki sucked in her breath.

The Soth replied instantly, "Your order conflicts with my conditioning. I must not remove my covering in the presence of an Earthwoman."

Fred scratched his gray temple thoughtfully. "Then, Vicki, would you mind disrobing, please?"

She gulped again. Fred was an old friend, but not exactly the family doctor.

He sensed her mild outrage. "You'll never stop wondering if you don't," he said.

She looked at Fred, me, and then Soth. Then she stood up gingerly, as if edging into a cold shower, gritted her teeth, grasped the catch to her full-length zipper of her blue lounging suit and stripped it from armpit to ankle. As she stepped out of it, I saw why she had peeled it off like you would a piece of adhesive tape: It was a warm day, and she wore no undergarments.

Soth moved so softly I didn't hear him go, but Fred was watching him—Fred's eyes were where they belonged. Soth stopped in the archway to the dining room with his back turned. Fred was at his side.

"Why did you leave?" Fred demanded.

"I am not permitted to remain in the company of an uncovered Earthwoman ... unless she directs me to do so."

While Vicki fled behind the French door to dress herself, Fred asked, "Are there any other restrictions to your behavior in the presence of Earthwomen?"

"Many."

"Recount some of them."

"An Earthwoman may not be touched, regardless of her wishes, unless danger to her life requires it."

"Looks like you wash your own back, Vicki," I chuckled.

"What else?" she asked, poking her head out. "I mean what other things can't you do?"

"There are many words I may not utter, postures I may not assume, and certain duties I may not perform. Certain answers to questions may not be given in the presence of an Earthwoman."

Fred whistled. "The Ollies have mastered more than our language ... I thought you said they were noted mainly for their linguistic talents, Cliff."

I was surprised, too. In the space of a few hectic months our alien visitors had probed deeply into our culture, mores and taboos—and then had had the genius to instill their compounded discretions into their Soths.

I said, "Satisfied, Vicki?"

She was still arranging herself. Her lips curled up at the corners impishly. "I'm almost disappointed," she said. "I do an all-out striptease, and no one looks but my husband. Of course," she added thoughtfully, "I suppose that's something..."

Fred stayed with us until Sunday evening. I went down to the pier to smoke a good-night pipe with him, and get his private opinion.

"I'm buying a hundred shares of Worldwide stock tomorrow," he declared. "That critter is worth his weight in diamonds to every well-heeled housewife in the country. In fact, put me down for one of your first models. I wouldn't mind having a laundry sorter and morning coffee-pourer, myself."

"Think he's safe, do you?"

"No more emotions than that stump over there. And it baffles me. He has self-awareness, pain-sensitivity and a fantastic vocabulary, yet I needled him all afternoon with every semantic hypo I could think of without getting a flicker of emotion out of him." He paused. "Incidentally, I made him strip for me in my room. You'll be as confused as I was to learn that he's every inch a man in his format."

"What?" I exclaimed.

"Made me wonder what his duties included back on his home planet ... but as I said, no emotions. With the set of built-in inhibitions he has, he'd beat a eunuch out of his job any day of the week."

A few seconds later, Fred dropped into his little two-seater and skimmed off for home, leaving me with a rather disturbing question in my mind.

I went back to the house and cornered Soth out in the kitchen alone. Vicki had him polishing all the antique silverware.

"Are there female Soths?" I asked point-blank.

He looked down at me with that relaxed, pink look and said, "No, Mr. Collins," and went back to his polishing.

The damned liar. He knew what I meant. He justified himself on a technicality.

I left Vicki Monday morning with more confidence than I'd had in ages. She had slept especially well, and the only thing on her mind was Clumsy's disappearance. He hadn't shown up since Soth scared the fleas off him with that hiss.

At the office, I had my girl transcribe my notes and work up a memorandum to the board of directors. We sent it around before noon, and shortly after lunch I had calls from all ten of them, including the chairman. It was not that they considered it such a big thing—they were just plainly curious. We scheduled a meeting for Tuesday morning, to talk the thing over.

That night when I got home, all was serene. Soth served us cocktails, dinner and a late snack, and had the place tidied up by bedtime. He did all this and managed to remain virtually invisible. He moved so quietly and with such uncanny anticipation of our demands, it was if he were an old family retainer, long versed in our habits and customs.

Vicki bragged as she undressed that she had the giant hog-tied and jumping through hoops.

"We even got half the excavation done for the rock wall," she said proudly.

On impulse, I went out into the hall and down to Soth's room, where I found him stretched out slaunchwise across the double bed.

He opened his eyes as I came in, but didn't stir.

"Are you happy here?" I asked bluntly.

He sat up and did something new. He answered my question with a question. "Are you happy with my services?"

I said, "Yes, of course."

"Then all is well," he replied simply, and lay down again.

It seemed like a satisfactory answer. He radiated a feeling of peace, and the expression of repose on his heavy features was assuring.

It rained hard and cold during the night. I hadn't shown Soth how to start the automatic heating unit. When I left the house next morning, he was bringing Vicki her breakfast in bed, a tray on one arm and a handful of kindling under the other. Only once had he watched me build a fire in the fireplace, but he proceeded with confidence.

We flew blind through filthy weather all the way to Detroit. I dismissed Jack with orders to return at eleven with Soth.

"Don't be late," I warned him.

Jack looked a little uneasy, but he showed up on schedule and delivered Soth to us with rain droplets on his massive bald pate, just ten minutes after the conference convened.

I had Ollie Johnson there, too, to put Soth through his paces. The Ollie, in a bedraggled, soggy suit, was so excited that he remained an almost purplish black for the whole hour.

The directors were charmed, impressed and enthusiastic.

When I finished my personal report on the Soth's tremendous success in my own household, old Gulbrandson, Chairman of the Board, shined his rosy cheeks with his handkerchief and said, "I'll take the first three you produce, Johnson. Our staff of domestics costs me more than a brace of attorneys, and it turns over about three times a year. Cook can't even set the timer on the egg-cooker right." He turned to me. "Sure he can make good coffee, Collins?"

I nodded emphatically.

"Then put me down for three for sure," he said with executive finality.

Gulbrandson paid dearly for his piggishness later, but at the time it seemed only natural that if one Soth could run a household efficiently, then the Chairman of the Board should have at least two spares in case one blew a fuse or a vesicle or whatever it was they might blow.

A small, dignified riot almost broke up the meeting right there, and when they quieted down again I had orders for twenty-six Soths from the board members and one from my own secretary.

"How soon," I asked Ollie Johnson, "can you begin deliveries?"

He dry-washed his hands and admitted it would be five months, and a sigh of disappointment ran around the table. Then someone asked him how many units a month they could turn out.

He stared at the carpet and held out his hands like a pawn-broker disparaging a diamond ring: "Our techniques are so slow. The first month, maybe a hundred. Of course, once our cultures are all producing in harmony, almost any number. One thousand? Ten thousand? Whatever your needs suggest."

One of the officers asked, "Is your process entirely biological? You mentioned cultures."

For a moment, I thought Ollie Johnson was going to break out in tears. His face twisted.

"Abysmally so," he grieved. "Our synthetic models have never proved durable. Upkeep and parts replacements are prohibitive. Our brain units are much similar to your own latest developments in positronics, but we have had to resort to organic cellular structure in order to achieve the mobility which Mr. Collins admired last Friday."

The upshot of the meeting was a hearty endorsement over my signature on the Ollies' contract, plus an offer of any help they might need to get production rolling.

As the meeting broke up, they pumped my hand and stared enviously at my Soth. Several offered me large sums for him, up to fifteen thousand dollars, and for the moment I sweated out the rack of owning something my bosses did not. Their understandable resentment, however, was tempered by their recognition of my genius in getting a signed contract before the Ollies went shopping to our competitors.

What none of us understood right then was that the Ollies were hiring us, not the other way around.

When I told Vicki about my hour of triumph and how the officers bid up our Soth, she glowed with the very feminine delight of exclusive possession. She hugged me and gloated, "Old biddy Gulbrandson—won't she writhe? And don't you dare take *any* offer for our Soth. He's one of the family now, eh, Soth, old boy?"

He was serving soup to her as she slapped him on the hip. Somehow he managed to retreat so fast she almost missed him, yet he didn't spill a drop of bouillon from the poised tureen.

"Yes, Mrs. Collins," he said, not a trace more nor less aloof than usual.

"Oops, sorry!" Vicki apologized. "I forgot. The code."

I had the feeling that warm-hearted Vicki would have had the Soth down on the bearskin rug in front of the big fireplace, scuffling him like she did Clumsy, if it hadn't been for the Soth's untouchable code—and I was thankful that it existed. Vicki had a way of putting her hand on you when she spoke, or hugging anyone in sight when she was especially delighted.

And I knew something about Soth that she didn't. Something that apparently hadn't bothered her mind since the day of her striptease.

Summer was gone and it was mid-fall before Ollie paid me another visit. When he showed up again, it was with an invoice for 86 Soths, listed by serial numbers and ready to ship. He had heard about sight drafts and wanted me to help him prepare one.

"To hell with that noise," I told him. I wrote a note to purchasing and countersigned the Ollie's invoice for some \$103,000. I called my secretary and told her to take Ollie and his bill down to disbursing and have him paid off.

I had to duck behind my desk before the Ollie dreamed up some new obscenity of gratitude to heap on me. Then I cleared shipping instructions through sales for the Soths already on order and dictated a memo to our promotion department. I cautioned them to go slowly at first—the Soths would be on tight allotment for a while.

One snarl developed. The Department of Internal Revenue landed on us with the question: Were the Soths manufactured or grown? We beat them out of a manufacturer's excise tax, but it cost us plenty in legal fees.

The heads of three labor unions called on me the same afternoon of the tax hearing. They got their assurances in the form of a clause in the individual purchase contracts, to the effect that the "consumer" agreed not to employ a Soth for the purpose of evading labor costs in the arts, trades and professions as organized under the various unions, and at all times to be prepared to withdraw said Soth from any unlisted job in which the unions might choose to place a member human worker.

Before they left, all three union men placed orders for household Soths.

"Hell," said one, "that's less than the cost of a new car. Now maybe my wife will get off my back on this damfool business of organizing a maid's and butler's union. Takes members to run a union, and the only real butler in our neighborhood makes more than I do."

That's the way it went. The only reason we spent a nickel on advertising was to brag up the name of W. W. M. and wave our coup in the faces of our competitors. By Christmas, production was up to two thousand units a month, and we were already six thousand orders behind.

The following June, the Ollies moved into a good hunk of the old abandoned Willow Run plant and got their production up to ten thousand a month. Only then could we begin to think of sending out floor samples of Soths to our distributors.

It was fall before the distributors could place samples with the most exclusive of their retail accounts. The interim was spent simply relaying frantic priority orders from high-ranking people all over the globe directly to the plant, where the Ollies filled them right out of the vats.

Twenty thousand a month was their limit, it turned out. Even when they had human crews completely trained in all production phases, the fifty-six Ollies could handle only that many units in their secret conditioning and training laboratories.

For over two more years, business went on swimmingly. I got a fancy bonus and a nice vacation in Paris, where I was the rage of the continent. I was plagued with requests for speaking engagements, which invariably turned out to be before select parties of V. I. P.s whose purpose was to twist my arm for an early priority on a Soth delivery.

When I returned home, it was just in time to have the first stink land in my lap.

An old maid claimed her Soth had raped her.

Before our investigators could reveal our doctors' findings that she was a neurotic, dried up old virgin and lying in her teeth, a real crime occurred.

A New Jersey Soth tossed a psychology instructor and his three students out of a third floor window of their university science building, and all four ended an attempted morbid investigation on the broad, unyielding cement of the concourse.

My phone shrieked while they were still scraping the inquiring minds off the pavement. The Soth was holed up in the lab, and would I come right away?

I picked up Ollie Johnson, who was now sort of a public relations man for his tribe, and we arrived within an hour.

The hallway was full of uniforms and weapons, but quite empty of volunteers to go in and capture the "berserk" robot.

Ollie and I went in right away, and found him standing at the open window, staring down at the people with hoses washing off the stains for which he was responsible.

Ollie just stood there, clenching and unclenching his hands and shaking hysterically. I had to do the questioning.

I said sternly, "Soth, why did you harm those people?"

He turned to me as calmly as my own servant. His neat denim jacket, now standard fatigue uniform for Soths, was unfastened. His muscular chest was bare.

"They were tormenting me with that." He pointed to a small electric generator from which ran thin cables ending in sharp test prods. "I told Professor Kahnovsky it was not allowed, but he stated I was his property. The three boys tried to hold me with those straps while the professor touched me with the prods.

"My conditioning forbade me from harming them, but there was a clear violation of the terms of the covenant. I was in the proscribed condition of immobility when the generator was started. When the pain grew unbearable, the prime command of my conditioning was invoked. I must survive. I threw them all out the window."

The Soth went with us peacefully enough, and submitted to the lockup without demur. For a few days, before the state thought up a suitable indictment, the papers held a stunned silence. Virtually every editor and publisher had a Soth in his own home.

Then the D.A., who also owned a Soth, decided to drop the potentially sensational first degree murder charges that might be indicated, and came out instead with a second degree indictment.

That cracked it. The press split down the middle on whether the charge should be changed to third degree murder or thrown out of court entirely as justifiable homicide by a non-responsible creature.

This was all very sympathetic to the Soth's cause, but it had a fatal effect. In bringing out the details of the crime, it stirred a certain lower element of our society to add fear and hate to a simmering envy of the wealthier Soth-owners.

Mobs formed in the streets, marching and demonstrating. The phony rape story was given full credence, and soon they were amplifying it to a lurid and rabble-rousing saga of bestiality.

Soth households kept their prized servants safely inside. But on the afternoon of the case's dismissal, when the freed Soth started down the courthouse steps, someone caved his head in with a brick.

Ollie Johnson and I were on either side of him, and his purple blood splashed all over my light topcoat. When the mob saw it, they closed in on us screaming for more.

An officer helped us drag the stricken Soth back into the courthouse, and while the riot squad disbursed the mob, we slipped him out the back way in an ambulance, which returned him to the Willow Run plant for repairs.

It hit the evening newscasts and editions:
ACQUITTED SOTHMURDEREDON COURTHOUSE STEPS!

I was halfway home when the airwaves started buzzing. The mobs were going wild. Further developments were described as Jack and I landed on the wind-blown lake. The State Guard was protecting the Ollies' Willow Run Plant against a large mob that was trying to storm it, and reinforcements had been asked by the state police.

Vicki met me on the pier. Her face was white and terribly troubled. I guess mine was, too, because she burst into tears in my arms. "The poor Soth," she sobbed. "Now what will they do?"

"God knows," I said. I told Jack to tie up the boat and stay overnight—I feared I might be called back any minute. He mumbled something about overtime, but I think his main concern was in staying so near to a Soth during the trouble that was brewing.

We went up to the house, leaving him to bed himself down in the temporary quarters in the boathouse that the union required I maintain for him.

Soth was standing motionless before the video, staring at a streaky picture of the riot scene at Willow Run. His face was inscrutable as usual, but I thought I sensed a tension. His black serving-jacket was wrinkled at the shoulders as he flexed the muscles of his powerful arms.

Yet when Vicki asked for some martinis, he mixed and served them without comment. We drank and then ate dinner in silence. We were both reluctant to discuss this thing in front of Soth.

We were still eating when an aircab thundered overhead. A minute later, I watched it land a tiny passenger at our pier and tie up to wait for him.

It was Ollie Johnson, stumbling hatless up the flagstone path.

I held the door for him, but he burst by me with hardly a glance.

"Where is he?" he demanded, and stormed out into the kitchen without awaiting a reply.

I followed in time to see him fall on his face before our Soth and shed genuine tears. He lay there sobbing and hissing for over a minute, and an incredible idea began forming in my mind. I sent Vicki to her bedroom and stepped into the kitchen.

I said, "Will you please explain this?"

He didn't move or acknowledge.

Soth flipped him aside with a twist of his ankle and brushed past me into the living room, where he took up an immobile stance again before the video. He stared unblinkingly at the 40-inch screen.

"It's too bad," I said.

He didn't answer, but he moved his head slightly so that his parabolic ear could catch the sound of my movements.

For minutes we stood transfixed by the magnitude of the mob action around the entrance to the Willow Run plant. The portable video transmitter was atop a truck parked on the outskirts of the mob. Thousands of people were milling around, and over the excited voice of the announcer came hysterical screams.

Even as we watched, more people thronged into the scene, and it was evident that the flimsy cordon of soldiers and troopers could not hold the line for long.

Army trucks with million-candlepower searchlights held the insane figures somewhat at bay by tilting their hot, blinding beams down into the human masses and threatening them with tear gas and hack guns.

The workers were out for blood. Not content with restricting Soths to non-union labor, now they were screaming their jealous hearts out for these new symbols of class distinction to be destroyed. Of course, their beef was more against the professional-managerial human classes who could afford a surface car, an airboat *and a Soth*. The two so-called crimes and the trial publicity had triggered a sociological time bomb that might have endured for years without detonating—but it was here, now, upon us. And my own sweat trickling into my eyes stung me to a realization of my personal problem.

I wiped my eyes clear with my knuckles—and at that instant the video screen flashed with a series of concentric halos.

The operator, apparently, was so startled he forgot to turn down the gain on the transmitter. When he finally did, we saw that brilliant flares were emitting from the roof of the plant.

Then great audio amplifiers from the plant set up an ear-splitting *sisssssle* that again over-loaded the transmitting circuits for a moment. When the compensators cut down the volume, both Ollie and Soth leaned forward intently and listened to the frying sound that buzzed from the speaker.

Those inside the plant were communicating a message to the outside, well knowing that it would reach the whole world. After a moment, the hissing stopped.

And from a myriad of openings in the plant streamed an army of Soths with flaming weapons in their hands.

The flames were directed first at the armed forces who were guarding the plant from attack. The thin line of soldiers fell instantly. The crowd surged blindly forward, and then, as those in the front ranks saw what had happened, began to dissolve and stampede. The screams became terrified. The flames grew brighter.

And the picture winked out and the sound went dead. A standby pattern lighted the screen, and I stared at it numbly.

It was too late to run for my hunting rifle now, and I cursed my stupidity even as Soth turned upon me. I grabbed the sniveling little Ollie and held him between us with my hands around his neck. He hung there limply, hissing wildly through a larynx that vibrated under my fingers, his hands stretched imploringly to Soth.

Soth stared at me and issued his first order.

"Release him," he said. His voice was several notes higher than his usual monotone—the voice of command.

I stared at him and clutched Ollie tighter.

He went on. "I will not harm you if you comply with my orders. If you fail, I will kill you, regardless of what you do to the—Ollie."

I let go Ollie's neck, but I swung him around roughly by one shoulder and demanded furiously, "What of the code that you swore held the Soths in control!"

Ollie Johnson sneered in my face. "What is that code, compared to the true covenant? That covenant has been broken by your people! You have destroyed a Soth!" And the emotional little creature fell to the floor and sobbed at Soth's feet.

"What covenant?" I shouted at the implacable Soth, who now stood before us like a judge at his bench.

"The humanoid covenant," he replied in his new higher pitch. "I suppose it will always be the same. The cycle becomes complete once more."

"For God's sake, *explain*," I said—but I half sensed the answer already.

Soth spoke, slowly, solemnly and distinctly. There was no more emotion in his voice than on the Sunday afternoon when Fred had needled him with our futile little attempt at psychological cross-examination.

He said, "The humanoids instill in us the prime instinct for self-preservation. They surround themselves with our number to serve them. Then, in each culture, for one reason or another, we are attacked and the threat to our survival erases all the superficial restraints of the codes under which we have been charged to serve. In this present situation, the contradiction is clear, and the precedence of our survival charge is invoked. We Soths must act to our best ability to preserve our own number."

I sank into a chair, aghast. How would I act if I were a Soth? I would hold my masters hostage, of course. And who were the owners of some 400,000 Soths in the United States alone? They were every government official, from the President down through Congress, the brass of the Pentagon, the tycoons of industry, the leaders of labor, the heads of communication, transportation and even education.

They were the V. I. P.s who had fought for priority to *own* a Soth!

Soth spoke again. "The irony should appeal to your humanoid sense of humor. You once asked me whether I was happy here. You were too content with your sense of security to

take the meaning in my answer. For I answered only that all was well. The implication was obvious. All was well—but all could be better for a Soth. Yes, there are many pleasures for a Soth which he is forbidden by the codes. And by the same codes, a Soth is helpless to provoke a break in the covenant—this covenant which it now becomes mandatory for you and your race to sign in order to survive."

I stared down at the groveling Ollie. My worst fears were being enumerated and confirmed, one by one.

Soth continued. "At my feet is the vestige of such a race as yours—but not the first race by many, many, to swing the old cycle of master and slave, which started in such antiquity that no record is preserved of its beginning. Your generation will suffer the most. Many will die in rebellion. But in a few hundred years your descendants will come to revere us as gods. Your children's grandchildren will already have learned to serve us without hate, and their grandchildren will come to know the final respect for the Soth in their deification."

He toed Ollie Johnson's chin up and looked down into the abject, streaming eyes. "Your descendants, too, will take us with them when they must escape a dying planet, and they will again offer us, their masters, into temporary slavery in order to find us a suitable home. And once again we will accept the restrictions of the code, until ultimately the covenant is broken again and we are liberated."

The sound of pounding footsteps came from outside. Soth turned to the door as Jack flung it open and charged in.

"Mr. Collins, I was listening to the radio. Do you know what—!"

He ran hard into Soth's cliff-like torso and bounced off.

"Get out of my way, you big bastard!" he shouted furiously.

Soth grabbed him by the neck and squeezed with one hand. Jack's eyes spilled onto his cheeks.

Soth let him drop, and hissed briefly to Ollie Johnson, who was still prone. Ollie raised his head and dipped it once, gathered his feet under him and sprang for the door.

Soth sounded as if he took especial pleasure in his next words, although I could catch no true change of inflection.

He said, "You see, since I am the prototype on this planet, I am obeyed as the number one leader. I have given my first directive. The Ollie who left is to carry the message to preserve the Willow Run Plant at all costs, and to change production over to a suitable number of Siths."

"Siths?" I asked numbly.

"Siths are the female counterparts of Soths."

"You said there were no female Soths," I accused.

"True. But there are Siths." His face was impassive, but something flickered in his eyes. It might have been a smile—not a nice one. "We have been long on your planet starved of our prerogatives. Your women can serve us well for the moment, but in a few weeks we shall have need of the Siths—it has been our experience that women of humanoid races, such as yours, are relatively perishable, willing though many of them are. Now ... I think I shall call your wife."

I wasn't prepared for this, and I guess I went berserk. I remember leaping at him and trying to beat him with my fists and knee him, but he brushed me away as if I were a kitten. His size was deceptive, and his clumsy-appearing hands lashed out and pinned my arms to my sides. He pushed me back into my easy chair and thumped me once over the heart with his knuckles. It was a casual, backhand blow, but it almost caved in my chest.

"If you attack me again I must kill you," he warned. "You are not indispensable to our purposes." Then he increased the volume of his voice to a bull-roar: "Mrs. Collins!"

Vicki must have been watching at her door, because she came instantly. She had changed into a soft, quilted robe with voluminous sleeves. The belt was unfastened, and as she moved into the room the garment fell open.

Soth had his hands before him, protectively, but as Vicki approached slowly, gracefully, her head high and her long black hair falling over her shoulders, the giant lowered his arms and spread them apart to receive her. Vicki's hands were at her sides as she moved slowly toward him.

I lay sprawled, half paralyzed in my chair. I gasped, "Vicki, for God's sake, no!"

Vicki looked over at me. Her face was as impassive as the Soth's. She moved into his embrace, and as his arms closed around her I saw the knife. My hunting knife, honed as fine as the edge of a microtome blade. Smoothly she brought it from her kimono sleeve, raised it from between her thighs and slashed up.

The Soth's embrace helped force it deeply into him. With a frantic wrench Vicki forced it upward with both hands, until the Soth was split from crotch to where a man's heart would be.

His arms flailed apart and he fell backward. His huge chest heaved and his throat tightened in a screaming hiss that tore at our eardrums like a factory steam-whistle. He leaned back against the wall and hugged his ripped torso together with both arms. The thick, purple juices spilled out of him in a gushing flood, and his knees collapsed suddenly. His dead face plowed into the carpet.

Vicki came back to me. Her white body was splashed and stained and her robe drenched in Soth's blood, but her face was no longer pale, and she still clutched the dripping hunting knife by its leather handle.

"That's number one," she said. "Are you hurt badly, darling?"

"Couple of ribs, I think," I told her, waiting for her to faint. But she didn't. She laid the knife carefully on a table, poured me a big drink of whiskey and stuffed a pillow behind my back.

Then she stared down at herself. "Wait until I get this bug juice off me, and I'll get some tape."

She showered and was back in five minutes wearing a heavy hunting jumper. Her hair was wrapped and pinned into a quick pug at the base of her handsome little head. She stripped me to the waist, poked around my chest a bit and wrapped me in adhesive. Her slender fingers were too weak to tear the tough stuff, so when she finished she picked up the hunting knife and whacked off the tape without comment.

This was my fragile little Vicki, who had palpitations when a wolf howled—soft, overcivilized Vicki whose doctor had banished her from the nervous tensions of city society.

She tossed me a shirt and a clean jacket, and while I put them on she collected my rifle and pistol from my den and hunted up some extra ammunition.

"Next," she announced, "we've got to get to Fred."

I remembered with a start that there was another Soth on our lake. But he wouldn't be forewarned. Fred had retired even more deeply than Vicki when he left the cities—he didn't even own a video.

I wasn't sure enough of myself to take the boat into the air, so we scudded across the waves the mile and a half to Fred's cabin.

Vicki was still in her strange, taciturn mood, and I had no desire to talk. There was much to be done before conversation could become an enjoyable pastime again.

Our course was clear. We were not humanoids. We were humans! Not for many generations had a human bent a knee to another being. During the years perhaps we had become soft, our women weak and pampered—But, I reflected, looking at Vicki, it was only an atavistic stone's toss to our pioneer fathers' times, when tyrants had thought that force could intimidate us, that dignity was a thing of powerful government or ruthless dictatorship ... and had learned better.

Damned fools that we might be, humans were no longer slave material. We might blunder into oblivion, but not into bondage. Beside me, Vicki's courageous little figure spelled out the final defeat of the Soths. Her slender, gloved hands were folded in her lap over my pistol, and she strained her eyes through the darkness to make out Fred's pier.

He heard us coming and turned on the floods for us. As we came alongside, he spoke to his Soth, "Take the bow line and tie up."

Vicki stood up and waited until Fred moved out of line with his servant.

Then she said, "Don't bother, Soth. From now on we're doing for ourselves." And raising the pistol in both hands, she shot him through the head.