

The Half Pair  
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"NOTHING", he said, "is more infuriating than a half pair of anything."

"I've said that I'm sorry," she replied, in a tone of voice that implied that she wasn't. "But you're making such a *fuss* about it. Who gave them to you? Some blonde?"

"I gave them to myself," he replied sulkily. "It so happened that the need for a decent pair of cuff links coincided with my having enough money to buy them. I've had them for *years* ..."

"And you were very attached to them," she said. "Don't cry. Mummy will buy you a new pair when we get back to civilization."

"I want a pair now," he said sulkily.

"But why?" she asked, genuinely puzzled. "We're alone together in this tub of ours, half-way between the Asteroid Belt and Mars, and you have this insane desire for a pair of cuff links ..."

"We agreed", he said stiffly, "that we weren't going to let ourselves lapse, get sloppy, the way that some prospecting couples do. You must remember those dreadful people we met on Px173A – the ones who asked us to dinner aboard their ship. He dressed in greasy overalls, she in what looked like a converted flour sack. The drinks straight from the bottle and the food straight from the can ..."

"That", she told him, "was an extreme case."

"Admittedly. And my going around with my shirt sleeves rolled up, or flapping, would be the thin end of the wedge." He brooded. "What I can't get over is the *clottishness* of it all. I go through into the bathroom to rinse out my shirt. I leave the cuff links on the ledge over the basin while I put the shirt on the stretcher to dry. Picking up the cuff links, to transfer them to a clean shirt, I drop one into the basin. It goes down the drain. I hurry to the engine-room to get a spanner to open the pipe at the U-bend. I return to find you filling the basin to wash your smalls. I tell you what's happened – and you promptly pull out the plug, washing the link over and past the bend ..."

"I wanted to *see*," she said.

"You wanted to see," he mimicked. He brooded some more. "It wouldn't be so bad if this were one of the old-fashioned ships working on an absolutely closed cycle. All that I'd have to do would be to take the plumbing adrift foot by foot until I found my cuff link. But with more water than we can possibly use as a by-product of the Halvorsen Generator, and all our waste automatically shot out into space..."

"Anyone would think", she said, "that you'd lost the Crown Jewels."

"My cuff links", he said, "mean at least as much to me as the Crown Jewels mean to the Empress."

"I've told you", she flared, "that I'll buy you another pair!"

"But they won't be the same," he grumbled.

"Where are you going?" she demanded.

"To the Control Room," he answered briefly.

"To sulk?"

"No," he said. "No, my dear. No."

She lost her temper when the tangential rockets flared briefly to kill the rotation of the ship around her longitudinal axis. She was in the galley at the time, preparing spaghetti for dinner. Spaghetti and Free Fall don't mix – or they mix all too well. She did not wait to clean the clinging, viscous strands from her face and hair, but went straight to the Control Room, pulling herself along the guide rails with a skill that she had not been aware that she possessed.

"You ... You butterfly-brained ape!" she snarled. "Since when can I do without gravity – even though it is only centrifugal force – in the galley? You've ruined dinner."

"I", he said proudly, "have found my cuff link. You know how the garbage ejection system works – all waste is flung out tangentially, by centrifugal force, at right angles to the line of flight. There was, I thought, just the smallest chance that anything metallic would show up on the screen, especially if I killed the ship's rotation. I stepped up the gain and the sensitivity, too."

"So?" she demanded. "So?"

"There it is," he said, pointing happily to the beam-bearing fluorescent screen that circled the Control

Room. "Do you see it – that little blip that could be a tiny satellite. It *is* a tiny satellite, come to that ..."

"So you know where it is," she said. Just three hundred metres away, and spiralling outwards all the time. And for this piece of quite useless knowledge you've ruined dinner."

"It's not useless knowledge. "What do you think we carry space-suits for?"

"You aren't going out," she said. "Surely you aren't. Even you couldn't be such a fool."

Just because you", he replied, "happen to have a phobia about space-suits."

"And whose fault was it that the air tank was three-quarters empty?" she asked.

"Yours," he said. "Everybody knows that whoever is wearing a suit is supposed to make a personal check of every item of equipment before going Outside."

"Some women", she said, "are fools enough to trust their husbands. They're the ones who haven't learned the hard way, the same as I did."

"Some men", he replied, are fools enough to kid themselves that their wives have an elementary knowledge of plumbing." He gestured towards the screen. "There's my cuff link –and I'm going after it."

"You'll never find it," she said.

"Of course I shall. I'll have my reaction unit with me, as well as a lifeline. I'll push straight off from the ship, from the airlock – it's only a couple of metres forward from the scuppers. Then you'll be watching the screen, and you'll talk me into a position where I shall intersect the orbit of the cuff link."

"You don't really mean it," she said. "You must be insane."

"No more insane than you were when you pulled out that plug. Less so."

"But ... But anything might happen. And you know that I can't wear a suit again, that I can't come out after you, until I've been reconditioned . . ."

"Nothing will happen," he told her. "Just you sit and watch the screen and talk me into position. It's the least you can do."

He pulled his space-suit out of its locker, began to zip and buckle himself into the clumsy garment.

He should have known better. He should have considered the fact that the rules made by the Interplanetary Transport Commission are wise ones, and that Rule No. 11a is no exception. "No person", it reads, "shall venture into Space from his ship unless accompanied by a shipmate." The Rules, admittedly, are all very well for big ships swarming with almost redundant personnel – but the skipper-owners of the little Asteroid prospectors who ignore them rarely live to a ripe old age.

Unlike his wife, he had never had any trouble with spacesuits – and this, perhaps, made him careless. He hung motionless on the end of his lifeline waiting for the first instructions to come through his helmet phone. They came at last, grudgingly.

"Aft two metres ... Hold it! Out a metre!"

His reaction pistol flared briefly. "

He saw the cuff link sailing towards him then – a tiny, gold speck gleaming in the sunlight. He laughed. He stretched out both hands to catch it – then realized that one of them was holding the pistol, his right hand, the hand with which he would have to grab the little trinket as it passed. He tried to transfer the pistol to his left hand and, in his haste, let go of it. It sailed away into the emptiness.

What does it matter? he thought. It's covered by insurance, but my cuff links aren't ...

"Got it!" he shouted into his helmet microphone.

The return to the ship would be easy – all that he would have to do would be to haul himself in on the lifeline. It was then that he made the discovery that drove the jubilation from his mind. Somehow – it must have been when he dropped the pistol – the line had parted; the Asteroid Prospectors are notorious for their cheap, second-hand gear. Slowly he was drifting away from the ship. There was nothing that he could throw against the direction of drift to check himself – nothing, that is, except the solitary cuff link, and its mass, he knew, was too small to have any appreciable effect.

"What's wrong?" asked his wife sharply.

"Nothing," he lied.

She'll never get into a space-suit while she has her phobia, he thought. And even if she does – it'll be too risky. There's no sense in both of us getting lost. Good-bye, he thought. Good-bye, my darling. It's

been good knowing you. Sell the ship and get back to Earth.

"What's wrong?" she asked again, sharply.

"Nothing," he gasped – and knew that even though the gauge on his tank had registered the full twelve hundred pounds there was nothing like that pressure in actually.

"There is something wrong!" she shouted.

"Yes," he admitted. "Promise me one thing – when you get back to Mars demand a survey of all the equipment sold by Sorensen, the ship chandler. And ... And ..." He was fighting for breath, holding off unconsciousness. "It was all my fault. And look after yourself. Look after yourself – not me..."

He fainted.

He was surprised when he awoke in his bunk. He was surprised that he awoke at all. Her face was the first thing that he saw – tear-stained it was, and dirty – and happy. He saw then what she was holding – a clean, white, glistening shirt with, at the end of each sleeve, gleaming cuff links.

"You came Outside," he said softly. "You brought me in ... But your phobia, darling ... Your space-suit phobia."

"I found", she said, "that I have an even stronger one. It's the same as yours." She bent down to kiss him. "I do so hate half a pair of anything – and I don't mean only cuff links!"