

Jack Vance . . . Meet Miss Universe - Fantastic Universe March 1955

The Oxford English Dictionary would scarcely hold all of the words that have been written about feminine beauty by Shakespeare alone. Lesser bards have swelled the total hugely. Is feminine beauty only skin-deep? Or can it be more justly compared to a sunset, staining the sky with depths beyond depths of radiance? Science-fiction maestro Jack Vance has an answer that will give you pause, in a frame of reference startlingly, excitingly new.

Miss universe was quite the most glamorous creature in all the universe of stars. How could earthmen be so tragically blind?

Hardeman Clydell turned to-ward his smart young assistant Tony LeGrand. "Your idea has a certain mad charm," he said. "But—can it add to what we've already got?"

"That's a good question," Le-Grand said. He looked down across what they already had: the Calif-nia Tri-Centennial Exposition, a concrete disk two miles wide, crusted with white towers, rust-red terraces, emerald gardens, sapphire pools, segmented by four great: boulevards: North, East, South, West—3.1416 square miles of grandeur and expense in the middle of the Mojave Desert.

A five-thousand-foot pylon, rear-ing from the Conclave of the Universe, held a tremendous mag-nesium parasol against the sting of the desert sun. Half-way up the pylon, a platform supported the administrative offices and an ob-servation deck where Hardeman Clydell, the Exposition's General Director, and Tony LeGrand now stood.

"I believe," said LeGrand, frowning at the cigar Clydell had given him, "that anything can stand improvement, including the Cali-fornia Tri-Centennial Exposition."

Hardeman Clydell smiled indul-gently. "Assuming all these beau-tiful women exist—"

"I'm sure they do."

"—how do you propose to lure them here across all that space, all those light years?"

LeGrand, glib, insouciant, hand-some, considered himself an au-thority on female psychology. "In the first place, all beautiful' women are vain."

"As well as all the rest of them."

LeGrand nodded. "Exactly. So we offer free passage on a deluxe packet and a grand prize for the winner. We won't have any trou-ble collecting contestants."

Clydell puffed on his cigar. He had enjoyed a good lunch; the construction, furbishing, decoration of the Exposition was proceeding on schedule; he was in the mood for easy conversation.

"It's a clever thought," said Clydell. "But—" He shrugged. "There are considerations past and beyond the mere existence of beautiful women."

"Oh, I agree one hundred per cent."

"Lots of the out-world folk don't like to travel. I believe the word is 'parochial.' And what do we use for prizes? There's a problem!"

LeGrand nodded thoughtfully. "It's got to be something spectacu-lar." He was usually able to shift the ground under Clydell, maneuvering so that Clydell's objections *con* insensibly became arguments *pro*.

"'Spectacular' isn't enough," said Clydell. "We've also got to be practical. We offer a yacht. A girl from Deserta Delicta wins. She's never seen more than a mud-puddle. What does she do with the yacht?"

"Something we've got to consider."

Clydell went on. "Take a girl on Conexxa. Give her jewels and she'd laugh at you. She's thrown diamonds big as your fist at strange dogs."

"Maybe a Rolls Royce Aero-naut—"

"There again. Veidranus ride butterflies. Picture a Veidranu girl driving

an Aeronaut through all those vines and flowers!"

LeGrand took a shallow puff at the cigar. "It's a challenge, Harde-man . . . What kind of prize would you suggest?"

"Something indefinite," said Cly-dell. "Give 'em whatever they want. Let the winner name it."

"Suppose she named the city of Los Angeles?" LeGrand said with a merry laugh.

"Anything within reason. Set a valuation of a hundred thousand dollars on it."

"By golly, Hardeman, I think you've come up with something!" Tony put down his cigar. "Of course there are problems ..."

This was a key gambit. Harde-man Clyde's favorite aphorism was, "Every problem has its solu-tion." To use the word "problem" was to push one of Clydell's most reliable buttons.

"Hmnmf. Nothing which couldn't be solved," said Clydell. "Every problem has its solution."

Tony approached the second phase of his plan; so startling and outré was the entirety that he had not dared to broach the whole thing at once.

"We'd be pretty limited, of course," he said. "There's only half a dozen worlds with humanoid life. Some of those are C's and D's -not really human at all. And we wouldn't want to fool with any-thing second-rate." He slapped his fist into his palm. "I've got it! Listen to this, Hardeman, it's a killer!"

"I'm listening," said Clydell noncommittally.

"Let's throw the contest wide open! Come one, come all! Every planet sends their most beautiful female!"

Clydell stared blankly. "What do you mean, 'every planet'? Every planet in the Solar System?"

"No!" cried LeGrand enthusias-tically. "Every planet that's got an intelligent civilization. Let the whole galaxy in on it!"

Clydell smiled at the whimsy of his aide. "Okay. We get a Millamede and a Johnsonian, a Pentacynth or two, and maybe a Jangrill from Blue-star if we can find one. So horrible that even their own husbands won't look them in the face. And we set them up against, say, Althea Daybro, or Mercedes O'Donnell."

Clydell spat over the railing, made a rasping noise in his throat. "I admit it makes a macabre spec-tacle-but where does 'beauty con-test' come in?"

LeGrand nodded thoughtfully. "It's a problem that's got to be worked out. A problem ..."

Clydell shook his head. "I'm not sold on this last angle. It lacks dignity."

"You're right," said Tony Le-Grand. "We can't let this become a farce. Because it's not just an ordinary beauty-contest-it's more important. An experiment in inter-world relations. Now if we got some very distinguished men for judges-yourself for instance-the Secretary General-Mathias Bradisnek-Herve Christom. Also judges from some of the other worlds. The Prime of Ursa Major. The Veidranu Prefect-what's his name? And the Baten Kaitos Grand Mar-shall ..."

Clydell puffed his cigar. "Organizing it that way would make the judging impartial . . . But how in the world could I compare some cute little Earth girl with a Sadal Suud Isobrod? Or one of those Pleiades dragon-women? That's the rub of the whole matter."

"It's a stumbling block ... A big problem. A big problem."

"Well," said Clydell. "Every problem has its solution. That's an axiom,"

Tony said thoughtfully, "Sup-pose we judged each candidate by her own standards-by the ideals of her own people? That way the contest becomes perfectly fair."

Clydell puffed vigorously on his cigar. "Possible, possible."

"We do some research, get the ideal of every race. A set of specifi-cations. Whoever most closely ap-proaches the ideal specifications is winner. Miss Universe!"

Hardeman Clydell cleared his throat. "All this is very well, Tony."

. . .But, you're neglecting one very important aspect. Financing."

"It's too bad," said Tony.

"What's too bad?"

"You and I being in the position we are. We're stuck by the ethics of the situation."

Clydell looked at him with a puzzled frown, opened his mouth to speak, but Tony hurried on.

"There's no way we could honorably stage this tremendous spectacle ourselves."

Clydell looked interested. "You think it would make money?"

Tony LeGrand smiled wryly. "How many people have seen as much as a Mars Arenasaur? Let alone a Pentacynth or a Sagittarius Helmet-head? And we'll have the beauty queens of the whole universe gathered here!"

"True," said Clydell. "Very true indeed."

"It'll be the biggest thing in the whole Exposition."

Clydell threw his cigar over the side. "It'll bear thinking about."

Which Tony LeGrand knew to be a form of qualified approval.

II

Hardeman Clydell, for reasons known best to himself, had never married. At this stage in his life he was portly, with a smooth pink face, fine white hair which he wore in dashing sideburns. An extremely wealthy man, he was serving as General Director at a salary of a dollar a year. He was an ardent sportsman; he owned his own space-boat; he enjoyed cooking and serving little dinners of viands imported from distant worlds. His cigars were rolled to order from a special black tobacco grown on the Andaman Islands, smoked over native campfires, cured with arrack, and aged between oak leaves.

He had met Tony LeGrand on the beach at Tannu Tuva, offered him a cigar. When Tony pronounced it the best he had ever smoked, Clydell knew that here was a man whose judgment he could trust absolutely. He hired Tony as his private assistant and trouble-shooter.

Tony had made himself invaluable. Clydell found that some of his most ingenious ideas occurred during talks with Tony . . . The Galactic Beauty Contest for instance. From the germ of an idea— who had voiced it first, himself or Tony? —Clydell had organized a scheme that would make talk for years to come!

With the grand design sketched in, Clydell allowed Tony to manage the morass of petty detail. When Tony ran into something he couldn't handle, he came to Clydell for advice. By and large he seemed to be doing a good workman-like job.

After considering the extensive list of worlds known to be inhabited by intelligent or quasi-intelligent races, Tony, with Clydell's counsel, eliminated all but thirty-three. The criteria which they applied were:

1. Is the race socially organized?

(Races living without social structure, in a state of intense competition, or anarchy, might not comprehend the theory of the contest, and so might prove uncooperative, perhaps make trouble if they failed to win.)

2. Can we adequately communicate?

Are interpreters available? (The Merak tribes used clair-voyance to read another individual's internal flagella. The Gongs of Fomalhaut transmitted information through the medium of complex odors, impregnated into wads of hair and spit. The air-swimming Carboids of Cepheus 9621 communicated by a system susceptible to no explanation whatever. None of these races were considered.)

3. Is the race's environment easily duplicable on Earth?

(The weirdly beautiful Pavos d'Oro lived at a temperature of 2,000° K. The complex molecules of the Sabik Betans exploded in pressures less than 30,000 Earth atmospheres. The viability of the Chastainian Grays depended on their fluid-gaseous helium blood-stream, a state which could be maintained only at or near 0° K.)

4. Is there an element of the race which reasonably can be spoken of as female?

(Styles of reproduction among the life forms of the universe admitted of the most extreme variation. The Giant Annelids of Mauvaise collapsed into two hundred segments, each of which might become an adult organism. Among the Grus Gammans not two but five different sexes participated in the procreative act. The humanoid Churo of Gondwana were mono-sexual.)

5. Is the race notoriously short-tempered, vicious or truculent? Are they able to check any habits or instincts which might prove offensive or dangerous to visitors at the Exposition?

When the five criteria had been applied to the life-forms which peopled the worlds of the galaxy, all were eliminated but thirty-three, eight of which were humanoid, classes A to D. (Class A comprised true men and close variants; anything less man-like than Class D was no longer really man-like.)

Hardeman Clydell made a quick check of Tony's research, pointing out a flaw here, a miscalculation there; adding a race or two, finding others unsuitable on one score or another. Tony argued over Clydell's decisions.

"These Soteranians — they're beautiful things! I've seen pictures! Great filmy wings!"

"Too ticklish taking care of them," Clydell said. "They breathe flourine . . . Same way with those porcelain insects that live in a vacuum."

Tony shrugged. "Okay. But here—" he pointed to one of Clydell's additions —"Mel. I don't get it. In fact I've never heard of the place."

Clydell nodded placidly. "Interesting race. I read an article about them. Rigidly stratified; the males do the work and the females stay at home and preen. Should make a fine addition."

"What do they look like?"

Clydell clipped the end from one of his cigars. Tony tried to appear busy, but Clydell held out his cigar-case. "Here, Tony, have a smoke. You appreciate 'em; wouldn't waste them on anyone else."

"Thanks, Hardeman. About these Mels—"

"To tell you the truth, I don't remember much about them. They live in monstrous cities, they're said to be hospitable to a fault, extremely friendly all around. Just the sort we want. Good-sized creatures."

"Okay," said Tony. "Mel, it is." The final list numbered thirty-one races. It was at this point that Tony secured the ideal specifications. He sent coded space-wave messages to Earth representatives on each planet, describing his problem and requesting absolutely exact data on the local concept of female beauty.

When the information had been returned and filed, Tony prepared invitations, which were signed by Hardeman Clydell, and dispatched to each of the planets. The value of the prize had been hiked to a million dollars, both to entice contestants and to make more of a splash in the news organs of the world.

Twenty-three of the thirty-one worlds agreed to send representatives.

"Think of it!" marvelled Hardeman Clydell. "Twenty-three worlds confident enough in the beauty of their women to pit them against the class of the galaxy!"

And Tony LeGrand started grinding out publicity.

"The most beautiful creatures in the universe! Meet Miss Universe, at the California Tri-Centennial Exposition!"

The California Tri-Centennial Exposition opened at eight o'clock on the morning of Admission Day. During the first twenty-four hours well over a million men, women, and children entered the grounds through turnstiles at the heads of the four great boulevards, or up from the underground tube terminals. Second day attendance was almost 900,000; the count on the third day was 800,000. After the first week, attendance leveled off at a steady half-million a day.

The Trans-Galactic Beauty Contest was scheduled for the month of February, when attendance might be expected to undergo a seasonal lull.

Twenty-three glass-walled cases, fifty-five feet long, thirty feet deep, twenty feet high, were being constructed under joint supervision of the Astro-physical Society of America and the World Bureau for Biological Research. Each case carefully duplicated home conditions of pressure, temperature, gravity, radiation and chemistry for one of the contestants.

In most cases the adjustments were minor: the addition of a few percent of sulphur dioxide to the atmosphere; the elimination of water vapor; regulation of the temperature.

The interior of each vivarium simulated a landscape on the contestant's home planet. Case #21 was a lake of quicksilver, broken by carborundum crags. The floor of Case #6 was crusted over with brown algae. A curtain of liverish Spiratophore hung at the back; a long igloo of dried moss humped up at the right.

Case #17 was upholstered with a brown shaggy fiber, like enormously magnified sponge. Hanging on hooks were massive toilet implements. This was the vivarium in which Miss Mel would display herself to the eyes of curious Earth people.

Case #20 was a jungle of the red, yellow, blue and green vegetation of Veidranu... Case #15 depicted the Martian desert, with the crystal curve of a dome-wall at the back. Case #9 simulated a street in Montparnasse: plane trees, a sidewalk cafe, kiosks plastered with posters. This last was Exposition headquarters for Miss Earth, Sancha Garay of Paris.

During the middle of January contestants began to arrive at Los Angeles space-port. Hardeman Clydell, a judge, decided to see none of the off-world beauties before the actual contest, and Tony LeGrand delivered official greetings in his name.

Back at the Exposition office, he reported to Clydell.

"There's one or two cute ones among the humanoids. The others may be beautiful in a technical sense—but not for me."

Clydell looked curiously at a bruise on Tony's face. "Did you get in a fight?"

"That's your friendly Miss Mel. She reached out to pat my cheek."

"Oh," said Clydell. "She's the big one, isn't she?"

"Big and rough. Miss Mel. Or better Miss Smell. Part elephant, part dragon, part gorilla, part lion. And affectionate? Already she's invited me home for a visit. I can stay as long as I want."

"No trifling with the ladies' affections," Clydell warned with a waggish shake of the finger, and a mocking smile.

"I wouldn't mind trifling with Miss Veidranu or Miss Alschain . . ." He handed Clydell a packet of blue-bound pamphlets.

"What am I supposed to do with these?" asked Clydell.

"Read them. It's information you'll need for the judging: a briefing on the background of each of the contestants, a description of her home planet, and most important, the standards on which she is to be judged."

"Well, well," said Clydell. "Let's see what we have here." He reached in his humidor for a cigar, pushed it across to Tony.

"Not now, Chief. I've just had lunch."

"That's when they're best!" Tony slowly selected a cigar. "Now," said Clydell, "to busi-ness." He glanced at a paper clip-ped to the cover of the first pam-phlet.

"That's a master-list," said Tony. "We'll print 'em up in the bulk and give them away to the audi-ence."

Clydell studied the sheet.

"the first trans-galactic beauty contest!
quest for miss universe!
prize for winner:
her heart's desire.
Judging begins February 1st.
Each contestant will be rated by
the standards of beauty OF HER own world.

JUDGES:

- 1.Mr. Skde Shproske, Ambas-sador from Gamma Grus.
- 2.Mr. 92-14-63-55, Commercial Factor from Aspidiske (Iota Argus).
- 3.Mr. A-O-INH, Student from Persigian (Leo 4A563).
- 4.Mr. SSEET-TREET, Com-mercial Factor from Kaus Australis (Eta Sagittarii).
- 5.The Honorable Hardeman Clydell of Earth.

THE CONTESTANTS:

1. Miss Conexxa—"

Tony LeGrand interrupted Hardeman Clydell's reading. "You will notice that I've made an in-formal note or two after each of the contestants. They're for your own information only—they won't be included on the public pro-gram."

Clydell nodded, took a luxuriant puff of his cigar, read on down the list.

1.Miss Conexxa (Beta Trianguli). Humanoid, Type A. Tall, rangy. Red hair in varnished spikes, copper skin, black lips and ears. Shins overgrown with glossy black fur, like cowboys chaps. Attractive in a weird kind of way. Weight 150 lbs.

2.Miss Alschain (Beta Aquilae) Humanoid, Type B. Little, like a big-eyed elf. Eyebrows like tufts of green feathers. Thin pale hair like corn-silk. Insectivorous. Weight 80 lbs.

3.Miss Chromosphoro (Centauri 9518). Upper half like a big red fish, surrounded by eighteen jointed legs, the knees at eye-level. Weight 150 lbs.

4.Miss Shaula (Lambda Scorpii). Inverted tub. Mottled brown and gray. Shiny. A hundred little sucker-legs underneath. Eye in center like a periscope. Weight 200 lbs.

5. Miss TIX (Tau Draconis). Humanoid D. Jackstraw type. 9 feet tall, spindly. Big head, no chin. Faceted eyes. Cockroach-color. Suckers at tips of fingers (16 fingers). Weight 90 lbs.

6.Miss Aries 44R951. A big dry tumbleweed, with a hundred jellyfish tangled in it. Weight 40 lbs.

7.Miss Vindematrix (Eta Virginis). Translucent eel with dorsal spines and four hands around mouth. Brain in long spinal band, phosphoresces visibly during thought processes. Weight 60 lbs. 3 ounces.

8.Miss Achernar (Alpha Eridani) Armadillo with wasp head. Green scales. Highly telepathic. Be careful what you think around this one. Weight 150 lbs.

9. Miss Earth. Sancha Garay of Paris. Need I describe her? Hu-manoid A. Weight 115 lbs.

10. Miss Theta Piscium. 40 star-fish strung on a seven-foot length of bamboo. She rolls, walks up-right, or jumps. Weight 30 lbs.

11.Miss Arneb (Alpha Leporis). A globe of blue jelly. Inside are seven balls of yellow light floating around 3 balls of red light. Weight: ?

12.Miss Jheripur (Omega Crucis). Humanoid C. Four feet high, three feet wide, yellow as butter. No hair. Weight 250 lbs. Quite an armful.

13. Miss Delta Corvi. The name fits. She looks like a crow. Tall, no beak, black skin, no feathers except crest running down neck. Weight 200 lbs.

14. Miss Alphard (Alpha Draconis). Like a metal lobster, without claws, antennae. Low to the ground. Said to be fast on feet; also rather touchy. Don't joke with this one. Weight: ? Maybe 500 lbs. Maybe more.

15. Miss Mars. Lorraine Jorgensen, of Polar Colony. Blonde, big blue eyes. Very nice. Weight 124 lbs.

16. Miss Claverops. Humanoid C. Amphibious, sleek like a seal. Greenish-brown. Hands and feet like a frog. Weight 180 lbs.

17. Miss Mel. A monster. Eighteen feet long, color of raw oysters. Six big arms. Makes constant noise like a loud laugh. Head something like a gorilla, thorax like queen termite. Weight—I don't dare guess. Be careful of this one. She likes to pet you. I'm black and blue from her love-taps. Smells like slaughter-house. There's something she seems to want, but I can't make out what it is.

18. Miss Sadal Suud (Beta Aquarii). Mandrake. Body like green-white carrot. Red foliage sprouting from head. Sadal Suud means Luckiest of the Lucky. Will she win? Weight 150 lbs.

19. Miss Persigian (Auriga 225-G). Bright blue lizard. Pretty color. Said to sting like a nettle on contact. Weight 100 lbs.

20. Miss Veidranu (Psi Hercules). Humanoid B. Fragile thing. Covered with moth-dust. Pink, green, blue film for hair, running down her back. Nice figure. Pretty. Weight 100 lbs.

21. Miss Gomeisa (Beta Canis Minor). A ten-foot pontoon with an iron sail. Lives in an ocean of mercury. Charged electrically. Care! Don't touch! Weight: ? Heavy.

22. Miss Procyon (Alpha Canis Minor). Forty feet of Manila hawser.

23. Miss Grglash (Eta Cassiopeiae). Humanoid D. Woman-like form misleading. Basic chemistry siliconic. Skull is a furnace, flames shoot out of holes in scalp. Looks like beautiful orange hair. She's hot. Don't touch! Weight 180 lbs.

Hardeman Clydell laid down the paper. "Good job. Thumb-nail sketch of each contestant." He picked out one of the blue-bound pamphlets at random. "Miss Aries 44B951." He looked back at the master-list. "'A big tumbledweed with a hundred jellyfish tangled in it.' Let's see . . . 'She lives on the surface of shallow lakes crusted over with algae. Males construct igloos of peat-moss on shore.' Mmmm . . . 'Perform complicated dances on sacred lakes . . .' Mm hm . . . Mm hm . . . Here's what I'm looking for. The specifications."

"You'll find 'em definite," said Tony. "To the hundredth of an inch."

"They look rather technical," said Clydell. "'Diameter measured from agrix to therulta—'" He looked up at Tony. "What in heaven's name is an agrix? And a therulta? Should I know?"

"They're explained in the appendix. There's a diagram of the creature's physiology. The agrix and therulta, as I recall, are terminal kinks of one of the veruli. A veruli, naturally, is a fiber."

"I see, I see," muttered Clydell. "Well, well. 'Diameter measured from agrix to therulta: 42.571 centimeters. From clavon to gadel—' I suppose these terms are also explained?"

"Oh, yes. Definitely." Clydell puffed his cigar. "'38.092 centimeters. Ganglionic orgotes—'"

"They're the jellyfish things."

"—should number 43.' What are all these figures!" He pointed.

Tony came around the desk, looked down at the pamphlet. "Oh, those. They're the indexes of hardness, viscosity, temperature and color of the orgotes—which, by the way, should give off no perceptible odor."

"Am I expected to smell these orgotes—all forty-three of them?"

"I suppose so—to do a fair job."

Hardeman Clydell's face became stubborn and sulky. "I don't mind examining thighs and measuring bosoms—but this fooling with agrices and smelling of

orgotes— I just don't have the time." Thoughtfully he contemplated Tony LeGrand, who quickly leaned forward, found another pamphlet.

"Now this Miss Veidranu. I've seen her. She's cute as a bug's ear. Golly, some of the things you've got to measure on her!"

But Hardeman Clydell was not to be diverted. "Tony, I trust your judgment as I do my own."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that!"

"Yes," said Clydell firmly. "We will let my name stand on the list of judges—but you'll do the judg-ing—"

"But, Hardeman—I don't think I'm up to it!"

"Of course you are," said Clydell bluffly. "You're acquainted with these creatures. You've studied them."

"Yes, but—"

"You make your measurements, come to a fair verdict. I'll look it over and then at the right time, I'll be the figure-head."

Tony grimaced. "It's mainly that Miss Mel. If only she'd keep her big hands off me. Frankly, Chief—" He looked at his cigar, gently tapped the ash in a pottery dish, looked up; Clydell was gazing at him with a mildly questioning glance.

"Very well," muttered Tony. "I suppose this is the kind of thing I'm being paid for."

Hardeman Clydell nodded. "Ex-actly."

IV

Tony paid a visit to Hotel Mira Vista, in Los Angeles, where Miss Zzpui Koyae, from the fourteenth of Alschain's planetary throng, occupied a suite. Miss Koyae was lovely by the standards of anybody's world. Hardly five feet tall, she was light as a puff of smoke, charming and saucy as a kitten in tall grass. Her skin was pastel green, the tuft of hair over her delicate face was pale as moonlight. She wore scarlet slippers, a smock of blue gauze, and a green chrysanthemum-like bangle in her ear.

She looked like a fairy from one of the ancient fables: not quite human. She greeted Tony with a burst of eager chatter, and when she learned that Tony was to judge the contest she became even more vivacious. She knew a few words of English, and taking both Tony's hands in hers, she expressed her pleasure at his visit.

"And after the contest—then you must come see me! On Plais, by the star you call Alschain. Ah, it is a lovely planet! You will be my guest, you will live with me in my little house by River Chthis. Of course I will win, and I will buy a million yards of rich black silk, and then you will find what gratitude means to one of my race!"

Tony laughed. "You're sweet, you little rascal!" He put his arm around her shoulders, which pulsed like the breast of a bird. He kissed the tip of her nose, and would have proceeded further, but she held him off. "No, no, my Tony! After the contest!"

* * * *

Miss Sancha Garay had taken an apartment at the Desert Inn on the slopes of Mount Whitney. The call-button sounded, and a maid answered the summons. She recognized the face in the reception plate, and spoke to Miss Garay over the intercom. "It's that young man from the Exposition. The one that wanted all the information."

"Peste!" said Sancha. "How tire-some. Must I see him?" She gave the pillow by her feet a petulant kick. "Very well. Allow him in the room for two minutes. No more. Be firm. Take no excuse."

Tony came into the room. "Hello, Miss Garay." He looked around. "Completely comfortable, I hope?"

"Yes. Very." Sancha scowled out across Death Valley, jumped up to her

knees, turned her back on Tony, put her chin on her hands.

"It's a nuisance," said Tony. "As if I don't have enough work, now I'm one of the judges at the beauty contest."

With one movement Sancha Garay had whirled, jumped to her feet, and was facing him, her love-ly face radiant. "Toneee! How wonderful! And to think that we're such friends!"

"It is nice, isn't it?" said Tony.

"Mmm," said Sancha, "you're so sweet, Tony, coming to see me like this—So sweet. Give me a little kiss—"

The maid entered the room. "I'm sorry, Miss Garay. The dress-fitter is here. She won't wait. You have got to come at once."

"Rats," said Tony. "Very well. I guess I better go."

"*Grand diable du sacre feu!*" said Sancha Garay under her breath.

* * * *

"You're so strong," said Miss Fradesut Consici, of Veidranu, in her husky-sweet voice. "On my planet the men are effete. After the contest I will stay on Earth, where men are strong! The money I win—perhaps you help me spend it? Eh, Tony?"

"I'd sure like to help," said Tony. "Ah, but you're so soft, fragile . . ." He put his hands on her arm, stroked the skin which glowed with subtle moth-wing colors, began to draw her toward him. She fluttered like one of the butterflies she was accustomed to ride through the Veidranu swamps.

"No, no! Love is not for now! You would not wish the gloss to leave my skin? I must be beautiful! Afterwards—then you will see!"

"Afterwards," grumbled Tony. "Always afterwards!"

"Tony!" sighed the Veidranu girl, "you frown, you sulk. It is not because of me?"

Tony sighed. "No. Not alto-gether. I've got to go see that blast-ed Mel monster, arrange to have her brought down to the Exposit-ion. She's so big I'll need two air-freighters instead of one . . ."

* * * *

He paused outside of the vivari-um in which Miss Magdalipe, of Mel, made her residence, and the interpreter, an officious little Breiduscan, humanoid, thin as a willow whistle, with a voice like a cricket, spied him.

"Ah, Mr. LeGrand, at last you have come. Miss Magdalipe is anx-ious; she is waiting to see you."

"Just a minute," growled Tony. At last he had found a use for Hardeman Clydell's cigars: the smoke tended to over-power the Mel atmosphere.

The cigar was alight. Tony coughed, spit. "Okay," he said grimly. "I'm ready."

The interpreter preceded him into the vivarium. Magdalipe was crouching with her great thorax to-ward the door. At the first shrill sounds of the interpreter's speech, she lurched around, and seeing Tony, roared in pleasure. She pat-ted him, squeezed. Tony's ribs creaked; his feet left the ground. The great maw bellowed a foot from his ear.

Behind Tony the interpreter translated. "Miss Magdalipe is glad to see you. She likes you. She says if she wins the contest, she will invite you to her palace on Mel. She says she is very fond of you; you will enjoy yourself."

"Not bloody likely," thought Tony. He puffed vigorously on his cigar, blew smoke in her face. If one of Clydell's special cigars fail-ed to daunt her, nothing could. She gurgled in pleasure, reached out to pat him again, but missing his back, cuffed the side of his face. And Tony's head rang like a bell.

On the night of January 31, twenty-three air-freighters grappled twenty-three enormous glass cases in various parts of California, lift-ed them high, conveyed them across the Mojave Desert to the glinting metal mushroom crouch-ing on the pale sand. On the morn-ing of February 1, visitors to the Tri-Centennial Exposition found the Conclave of the Universe ring-ed by twenty-three show-cases dis-playing the beauty of the universe.

On February 1, paid admission to the Exposition exceeded a mil-lion and a half.

Judging commenced at four o'clock in the afternoon.

Each judge was required to in-spect each of the contestants sepa-rately, measure her every dimen-sion, analyze her color, determine her viscosity, elasticity, density, area, temperature, refractive index, conductivity; then he must compare all these results with the previous-ly ascertained racial ideal.

It was slow work. But there was no hurry. Each day the turnstiles clicked a million times or more. By February 14 all expenses inci-dent to the beauty contest had been liquidated; it was pure gravy-until February 28.

The public as a whole saw no reason to delay the final decision. The consensus made Sancha Garay winner, Lorraine Jorgensen of Mars runner-up, followed closely by Miss Zzpil Koyae of Alschain, Miss Fradesut Consici of Veidranu and Miss Arednillia of Beta Trianguli, the Type A humanoid with the spiky red hair and the black fur on her legs.

One of the more sensational news organs pulled a switch and conducted an Ugliness Contest, an-nouncing its results February 15.

"We have conducted this Ugli-ness Contest on a basis as fair as the five judges are conducting their Beauty Contest.

"Our standards are those of physical reaction. We have asked ourselves, which of these twenty-three lovelies nauseate us most completely?

"On these bases, Miss Earth, Miss Mars, Miss Veidranu, Miss Beta Trianguli and Miss Alschain fail miserably. None of them nau-seate us. Otherwise it's a close race.

"We make the following judg-ments:

Most frightening and hideous face. #17, #8.

Most disgusting color. #17, #5.

Most violent odor. #17.

Most unbelievable. #21, #23, #5.

Least desired opponent in catch-as-catch-can match. #17.

Least dainty. #17.

Consensus, and winner. Miss Magdalipe of Mel."

The public agreed. It was the conclusion to which roughly twenty million of them had already ar-rived.

So, on February 28, it came as a tremendous surprise when the judges unanimously named Con-testant #17, ' Miss Magdalipe of Mel, winner of the contest, and crowned her Miss Universe, Queen of Interstellar Beauty.

The joint statement, subsequent-ly published in the press, sounded a defensive note.

"There is no possibility of doubt or question. The decision of the judges has been based on most careful measurements and is final. By the rules of the contest and by unanimous agreement of the judges, Miss Magdalipe of Mel, having most closely approximated the ideal standards of her world, is hereby declared Miss Universe, Queen of Interstellar Beauty.

"Tomorrow, March 1, at four o'clock, Miss Universe will name her Heart's Desire, and if it lies within the power of the officials of the California Tri-Centennial Ex-position, her desire will be satis-fied."

VI

Tony LeGrand called on Miss Sancha Garay. "Look, kid," he said, "you don't know how I worked for you. Gave you every possible break . . ."

She sidled up to him with the prancing gait of a colt. "You filthy name of a blue dog!" She hissed, "Go and never return! I spit at you!"

Miss Zzpii Koyae of Alschain was less vehement. "In my country there is no fighting, no enemies. Everyone is friendly . . . And why? Because when we have enemies we do—*this!*" And she slapped a ribbon across his cheek. It vibrated with, small black dots, which jump-ed to Tony's skin and scurried down inside his clothes. Presently they began to bite.

A doctor managed to remove most of the virulent creatures from Tony's flesh, and prescribed a soothing ointment. Tony made no attempt to contact either Miss Veidranu or Miss Beta Trianguli, both of whose races on occasion practiced human sacrifice.

It was nearly time for the Grand Award, the presenting of Heart's Desire. Tony returned to the Ex-position, rode the elevator up to the administration office.

Clydell greeted him cordially. "Well Tony, everything went off beautifully. Good work all around . . . Better arrange to have those vivaria freighted out of here tonight. All except Miss Universe, I suppose . . . Miss Universe." Clydell wrinkled up his pink face. "There couldn't possibly have been a slip-up?"

"No . . . She just melted into those specifications."

"All I can say is the men on her planet don't show any kind of taste . . . Well, it's quarter to four. Let's go down, find what she wants. We'll get it for her, ship her home."

Descending to the Conclave of the Universe, they mounted the presentation platform which had been erected in front of Case #17.

It was festooned with flowers, metal ribbons, and gala insignia. Places were ready for each of the five judges, none of whom were yet on the scene.

Reporters and TV photographers were busy with Miss Universe. They were inclined to be facetious, joking and laughing among them-selves, hinting of improper relations between Miss Magdalipe and her pipe-stem interpreter.

"Tell us, Miss Universe, how does it feel to be the most beautiful female in the universe?"

"Just like always," she bellowed. "No different."

"You get lots of attention on Mel? Lots of boy friends?"

"Oh, yes. Very many."

"The men must be pretty rugged, eh?"

"No. Weaklings, pipsqueaks. They do the work."

"Were you surprised when you won?"

"No surprise." "You expected to win?"

"Of course. There is no way I could lose."

"Exactly why is that?" he asked.

Both Miss Universe and the in-terpreter seemed surprised by the question; they conversed back and forth—contrabass and piccolo. Finally Miss Magdalipe made a state-ment and the pipe-stem Breiduscan translated.

"The letter comes in from Earth asking measurements of most beautiful woman. They measure me. I permit nothing else. I am most beautiful woman. In

fact I am only woman. I lay eggs for whole plan-et."

There was great excitement, amusement. The reporters spotted Clydell and Tony, and demanded a statement. "Has Miss Mel won the contest fairly? Any chance of disqualification?"

Hardeman Clydell flushed angrily, looked at Tony. "What's the truth of all this, Tony?"

"To the best of my knowledge and belief," said Tony, "Miss Uni-verse has fulfilled all the condi-tions of winning the contest. The fact that she is the only woman on the planet constitutes a mere tech-nicality."

Clydell recovered his poise. "That is my position exactly. Now, if you gentlemen will be so good, we are about to find out what that lady wants for her prize. Her Heart's Desire."

The reporters made way. Clydell and Tony approached the vivarium.

Clydell tipped his hat to Miss Universe, who, on the other side of the glass, thumped her tremen-dous thorax upon the floor.

Clydell looked around the pre-sentation platform. "Where are the other judges?"

A messenger girl in blue slacks approached, whispered to Clydell. He cleared his throat, addressed the reporters and the TV cameras. "The other judges have given us as much of their time as they were able; and in the name of the Ex-position I want to make known my gratitude to them. It is my duty to ask of Miss Universe her Heart's Desire; and if it lies within my capabilities, to provide it for her."

He turned, approached the viva-rium. "Miss Universe, it now be-comes my privilege to ascertain your Heart's Desire."

The interpreter piped across his message, Miss Universe growled and grumbled a statement in re-turn. The interpreter faced back to Clydell. The reporters poised their recorders; the TV cameras brought the scene to a hundred million eyes.

"She says she wants only one thing. That's him." The interpreter pointed at Tony.

Tony's knees went limp. "She wants me?"

"She says you must come to live with her at her palace on Mel. She says she likes you very much."

Tony laughed nervously. "I can't leave Earth . . . It's impossible!" Tony looked around the circle of faces. Clydell was solemn; the re-porters were shaking their heads. The TV cameras scrutinized his face with impersonal glass eyes.

Why couldn't they wink?

The interpreter continued, "She says you come to spend at least a month with her."

Clydell said, "That's not unrea-sonable, Tony. A month soon passes."

The reporters agreed. "Sounds fair enough."

The interpreter remarked, "A year on Mel equals fourteen Earth-years."

Tony cried, "That makes a month more than an Earth-year!"

"Each year," said the interpreter, "is divided into four months."

"Cripes!" yelled Tony. "That's two and a half years!"

A reporter asked, "What's the basis for this beautiful friendship? Interests in common? Attraction of the minds? Romance of the souls?"

"Don't be asinine!" snarled Tony.

The interpreter said, "Miss Magdalipe likes the way he smells. He smells very good. She likes to pet him."

"Just a minute," said Tony. "I've got to check something. I want to talk to her alone." He moved for-ward as he spoke, brushing past Clydell and jostling him slightly, then as quickly apologizing. "Sorry, old man. That was awkward of me."

Tony entered the vivarium with the interpreter; Miss Universe thumped him cordially.

"Look here," said Tony. "You like the way I smell?"

Miss Universe croaked assent.

He stepped closer to her. "Smell me now. Do you notice a change?"

Miss Universe backed away, her massive thorax vibrating as if in startled affirmation.

"Well look here," Tony said. "You see that man with the pink face, in the light brown suit? He still smells the way I did. It was just temporary with me. With him it's permanent."

Clydell rapped the glass jovially. "What's going on in there?"

Tony and the interpreter came out. Miss Universe lumbered to the door of the vivarium.

The interpreter beckoned to Cly-dell. "Miss Universe wants to smell you."

"Sure," said Clydell breezily. "First I apply the old equalizer— so I don't smell Miss Mel" He sucked on his cigar, and letting a fine plume of smoke escape through his nostrils, approached Miss Uni-verse.

She rumbled and banged Clydell on the back.

The interpreter said, "Miss Uni-verse said the wrong thing. She don't want Tony; She wants you."

Tony nodded thoughtfully. "I thought she had made a mistake."

"I don't understand this!" cried Clydell.

"Looks like you're in for a trip to Mel," said one of the reporters.

"It's only a month, old man," said Tony.

"You and your fancy ideas!" Said Clydell savagely.

I'll keep the office going, Har-deman."

Miss Universe's clumsy arm cir-cled Clydell's waist. The interpreter said, "She is ready to go."

"But I'm not ready," cried Cly-dell. "I'm not even packed, I need clothes, my shaving equipment!"

"It's not cold on Mel. Especially inside the hive. You don't need clothes."

"My affairs, my business!"

"She says she wants to go now. Immediately—this minute."

Tony smiled, remembering how badly he had been tempted to light the cigar he'd borrowed from Cly-dell only a moment before. If he had not jostled Clydell and return-ed" the noxious weed to that in-veterate smoker's pocket where would he be now? In Clydell's shoes, undoubtedly.

Tony's smile broadened. A fast thinker and, a deviously subtle one was he! He'd even remembered Clydell's odd way with cigars. Clydell carried four or five, usually, in his vest pocket but just before light-ing one he had a peculiar habit of transferring the weed to his loose, easily accessible jacket pocket, a vantage point or midway stop, so to speak, from whence he could the more readily pop it into his mouth.

On her home planet Miss Uni-verse quite possibly reveled in the rich bouquet of decaying vegetable matter in lieu of champagne. Sure-ly only decaying vegetation on an alien world could smell quite as rank as one of Clydell's cigars. Or possibly Miss Universe had even more decadent tastes, from a Ter-restrial point of view, and feasted on—

Tony shuddered. Well, he might as well think it. Protein detritus—nitrogenous organic compounds yielding amino acids, in a state of advanced decay. Dried death.

Tony moved up close to the cage, the grin once more on his face. "Good-bye, old man!" he shouted. "Have a pleasant trip!"