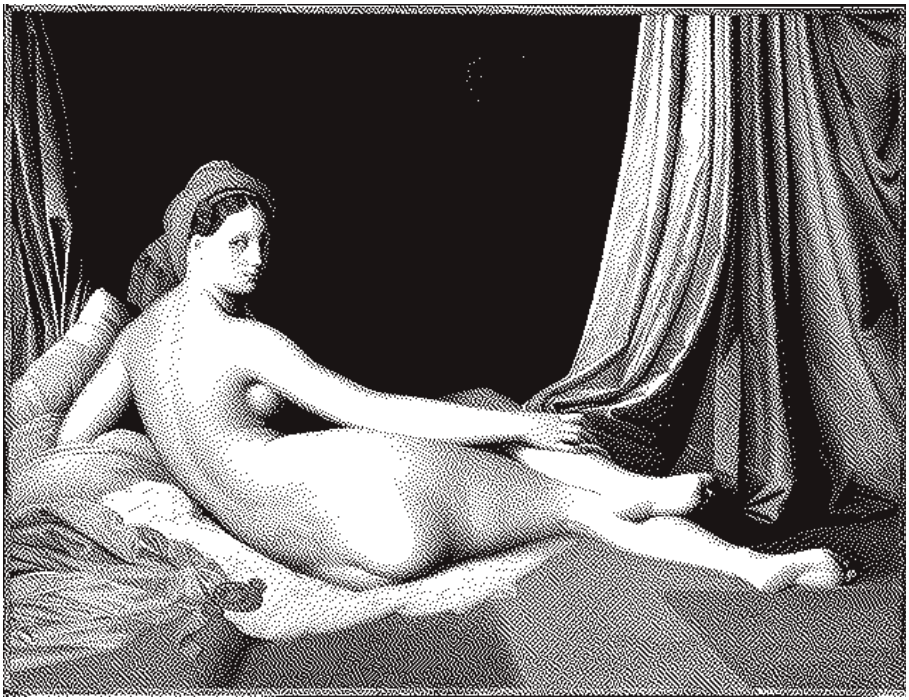

Cosmic Striptease

By Harlan Ellison

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COSMIC STRIPTEASE

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A Gaslight zine from HOUDINI Magazine.

The Atlas didn't make it—it blew up. And so did the Thor. The Vulcan wasn't much better; it just went *pfftt*. None of them got anywhere near outer space—the *real* outer space. Oh, yes, they went up hundreds of miles, even thousands. The Vulcan went nearly five thousand. But they were still in the Electro-Magnetic Field. Nobody really understood the EMF. Einstein had hit on it with his final theory, before he died. He said gravity and magnetism were just manifestations of something else, some single thing that held the very secret of matter.

It was suspected that the Vulcan had reached the limits of the EMF, but nobody was sure. You can't be very sure about a thing that just goes *pfftt*, and then isn't there any more. Not there at all! That's what radar said, and telescopes, and theodolites, and every other detection apparatus conceivable. Not until the Jason went up where no rocket had ever gone were they sure. Sure that man would never leave the confines of his EMF—at least until he solved the problem of the nature of the EMF. And that seemed the problem of the nature of matter itself. You'll have to admit, that's a difficult problem to tackle.

Yes, they tackled it. Theories were a dime a dozen. But just *what* the EMF really was, nobody could say even mathematically. Instead of wasting money on rockets that went *pfftt*, they began to investigate space with rays, frequencies, radiations, echoes, electronic things the man in the street just didn't understand. What he did understand, however, was the answer that came back from space, as a result of all this electronic probing.

Mars picked us up, and answered!

We thought we had quite a bit of electronic science. But we turned out to be babes in the woods. The Martians knew more about rays and waves and frequencies and vibrations than the Yanks knew about buying baseball players. They had a real cool signal. They called it the Resonating Magnetic Field. You know what a resonating field is, don't you? It's like a great big drum—you hit it right, and it'll vibrate with the biggest boom you ever heard. It resonates.

* * *

Our scientists knew how to resonate crystals; but the Martians could resonate the atmosphere. And when they resonated our atmosphere, every Earthman dug them, no matter where he was. That's the way their first signal reached us—a resonant voice sounded clearly everywhere on Earth, speaking in the language of the area in which it was heard. It was all a matter of resonant pitch. A thought has a basic wave, and it can be keyed to any pitch. When you say something, you express a thought by resonating the atmosphere. No matter if you speak English, or German, or Brooklyn—it's all the same thought. Well, when the Martians talked, we, each of us, were our own wave converter, and the vibrations that hit our eardrums came out whatever language we talked.

How did they do it? Well, how do you explain electronic knowledge as advanced as that? You're right, they didn't. They didn't even try. They said we wouldn't get it anyway, so why waste air-time?

A few of our big-domes were incensed, but the Martians let them smoke. They said they'd been watching our rocket efforts, and had figured we were pretty stupid, since everybody in the Solar System (and outside it for that matter) knew you couldn't lick the EMF with rockets. But then we'd started our electronic probing of outer space, and they lifted their mental eyebrows. It, they said, gave them the itch to give us a few pointers.

You can imagine the fuss there was in the Pentagon; and in the Kremlin for that matter. Here was a chance to load up on classified stuff of the highest order, and something called an RMF was the biggest leak the world had ever known.

Well, the Martians deep-froze that kind of idea right away. They weren't going to have any truck with secrets, especially secret weapons. They gave us quite a ribbing about weapons, and there were a lot of red faces on Earth. They were civilized, they said, and even their plows had been beaten into resonators. They had a highly developed moral sense, and the word war appeared in their dictionaries only in the archaic section.

They were going to tell us a lot of things, to be sure, but they were going to elevate us. They were going to make real ladies and gentlemen out of us, like they were. And as a beginning, they said they were going to put on a pageant. They were going to depict life on Mars for us as it was today, in all its glory and perfection, and they were going to do it in the form of a play.

You can picture the Broadway producers perking up their ears at this, and right away they began thinking of the whole thing in the terms of a "production." Naturally, when the Martians said it would be done via world-wide television, the big networks immediately sensed a big deal, and they jumped almost as high as Vulcan.

But the Martians said the broadcast didn't need receivers, but that the sky itself would be the TV screen. This was going to be exactly the opposite of closed-circuit TV. This was wide open—as wide open as Minsky's in the Twenties.

* * *

Nobody knows how they did it, but NBC and CBS got a dual contract with the Martians for the commercials! Yes, it's true. The Martians agreed to monitor their commercials, and then rebroadcast them as part of the Big Show that was to introduce Earthmen to Martians.

The sponsors weren't difficult to sell! They fell all over themselves to get spots on the program.

Actually, the whole thing was the most serious development in world history. Picture it for yourself. Out of a clear sky, one day (and night, because it involved the whole Earth in the same instant) a voice came from outer space, from Mars, and introduced us to a form of life our scientists had always claimed was a member of the lichen family, but which actually was a lot more human than you are. What we had thought was the lowest form of mossback, was actually the highest human civilization in the solar system. Wedgewood china, suspension bridges, and hot dogs were old stuff thirty thousand years ago with the Martians. They were really advanced. And when we understood it (most of us, that is) we felt

mighty flattered to think that they were going to try to rub some of it off on us.

* * *

Actually the Big Show idea was a good one. Their psychologists had studied us, and had decided that the best way to educate us was the painless way—by entertaining us. They knew how TV fascinated us. They noted our bowed shoulders, our kinked necks, our TV squint. What more natural thing than to put on the biggest TV show of all, and at the same time take the bow out of our shoulders, the kink out of our necks, and restore the focus of our eyes to the natural one of infinity? The whole sky was going to become one gigantic television screen, in perfect focus, in full (how full we never imagined until we saw it!) color, and in Three-D.

This Big Show, they said, was going to come in like cosmic rays, from every direction, but seeming to focus directly overhead. Every seat in the house would be the best seat in the house. You were the entire audience, sitting in the one seat, surrounded from horizon to zenith by the entire stage. The Earth's EMF, they said, was a perfect lens shape—and it formed a perfect focus on the center of the Earth. The atmosphere was a perfect lens also, because it was governed by, and in fact owed its existence, as did the entire Earth, to the EMF.

Ever stop to think that it's the EMF that makes the direction exactly opposite to your feet the direction we call up, no matter where we stand on Earth? To a Chinese, up is the other way. It's the EMF does that. The EMF, expressing itself as gravity. There really isn't anything called gravity, as an entity. The EMF is the entity, and gravity is one of its legs. Magnetism is the other. Maybe the only way you could describe the EMF would be to call it the body. And nobody knows what the head is!

The egotist who thinks he is the center of the universe may be right after all. Except that he's not alone. Everybody else is at the center too!

Not that Edith Miller was ego-centric. She was beautiful, yes, but not ego-centric. She was not only beautiful, but she was private

secretary to Herman Fendler, head of the new NBC-CBS Big Show Merger. It was quite true that she would not have been secretary had she not been beautiful. After all, it's what you see on TV that counts, and the bosses never let that fact get very far out of their minds. Anything that couldn't go before a camera, didn't go in TV, *anywhere*. Edith went *everywhere*. She was the kind of a girl who, when you saw her, you wanted to see more—and you cursed the "things as they are" that made it impossible. It just wasn't fair, was the thought that instantly suggested itself as you saw enough to realize there was much more.

* * *

That was the thought that Roy Mallory usually carried in his mind as he went about his business of Production and Coordination. And sometimes it effected his coordination, but never his production. As a TV producer, he was tops. And now, the youngest man in the sharpest of all businesses, he was assigned to handle the biggest "spectacular" of them all. To give you an idea of how highly regarded he was, having given him the assignment, Herman Fendler also gave him his secretary—but strictly on loan.

Roy's face was flushed as he walked back to his office, Edith beside him, Fendler's words still ringing in his ears.

"The Big Show!" he breathed. "Wow!"

"Not too big for you," said Edith.

"Not with you to handle the details," he returned, gallantly.

"That will be wise," she said.

"Huh?" he said.

"To let me do all the handling."

He flushed a different kind of flush now. "What makes you think...."

"The look on your face when Mr. Fendler said you could have me. I've seen that look hundreds of times, and it always means the same thing."

"But...." he protested.

"We understand each other perfectly, don't we?" she asked sweetly.

"Yes. We have our desks in separate offices."

"No we don't. I intend to sit with my desk directly opposite you so I can keep my eye on you at all times. Mr. Fendler gave me the job of seeing that you do your job, and I'm going to do it."

"Sadist," he snapped.

"Of course," she agreed. "But can I help it?"

He looked at her, and suddenly he grinned. "No, you can't. But with you sitting across from me, that realization won't lessen my sufferings any."

"It won't be so bad," she said. "You can look."

"You *are* a sadist!" he exclaimed.

* * *

The Big Show opened with a commercial. Roy and Edith were sitting atop the roof of the central studio, relaxing in contour chairs. Roy's chair adjusted to his figure comfortably as he leaned back, but Edith's found the task impossible. She squirmed about until Roy glanced at her and remarked: "Why don't you give up? The chair isn't made that can fit those curves. You've just got too much of a good thing, that's all."

"It isn't the chair," she said, "it's that commercial. Just look at it!"

Roy stared at the huge box of breakfast food that loomed across the entire sky.

"The sponsor is probably delirious with joy," he said. "Did you ever see such color, and such sharpness of focus? It's so vivid you can almost reach right up and touch it. It's *really* there, not a picture!"

"But what a thing to open the most important historical event of all time—the establishment of visual communication with another planet!"

"I get what you mean," said Roy. "But if you don't stop squirming, I'll find myself unable to concentrate on the Big Show."

Footsteps behind them announced the late arrival of Herman Fendler, and he literally hurled himself into his contour chair as he puffed: "Stupendous! Utterly stupendous! And to think that we've got the contract for these commercials!"

Now the scene changed, and it was Fendler himself, announcing the Big Show. Fendler beamed as his own voice rolled out of the sky, sonorous and dignified and with the clarity of a golden bell, slightly amalgamated with bronze.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the world. We bring you now the Big Show. The sensational Martian television broadcast of the Pageant of Life as it is lived on Mars. It is with great pride that we announce that through the combined efforts of NBC-CBS we bring you the most historic event in television history, or in the Earth's history, for that matter.

"You all know how the Martians first communicated with us from space. You all heard the voice that came to us so unexpectedly. But now, at last, we can see as well as hear! For the first time you will see our fellow men and women from Mars, enacting before you the glorious pageant of their 35,000 year history.

"It is through this history that they hope to acquaint you with themselves, so that we can go on through the future as brother worlds, understanding each other, respecting each other, loving each other. It is true that our Martian brothers are far advanced over us, in the mechanics of civilization as well as the moral values. It is also true that as we watch, we will be forced to revise many of our own standards, but all for the better. It is the fond hope of the Martians, and of the many among us who are concerned with our future development, the governments, the churches, the universities, that we will be speeded up along the path of civilization upon which the Martians have so long trod.

"Let us pray that what we see now, and in the days to follow, nay, the weeks and months, for it will be a pageant of tremendous length to show the history of 35,000 years, will be as a leaven to enlarge our lives, and catapult us into a higher development that can enrich us beyond our dreams.

"My fellow men, I give you—the Martians!"

* * *

A burst of applause followed, and Fendler beamed. "You think of everything, my boy," he approved. "Makes the show seem more

live."

Roy looked at Edith and snorted, almost inaudibly. She looked back. "No matter what you think," she whispered, "I can tell you he expected it, and your name would be mud if you hadn't included it. Don't let it go to your head."

"That's right," whispered Roy sarcastically. "Look out for me like a mother."

Another voice came now, and with it the face of the first Martian ever seen on Earth.

Edith gasped for breath. "He's *beautiful*!"

The wind sagged out of Roy's sails, "Oh, no!" he groaned. "The last thing I expected—competition!"

"Not at all," said Edith. "You never had a chance!"

"He'll never lay a hand on you," said Roy maliciously. "Unless he can do it over TV."

"If he could, I think I'd let him," returned Edith sweetly.

"Your cruelty is savage beyond comprehension," growled Roy. "Why don't you jump off the roof...." His voice trailed away as he listened to the Martian.

"Fellow men and women of Earth," came the voice, exquisitely clear and cultured. "We are happy to present ourselves to you. In order that you may know us completely, we will begin with what we on Mars consider the most important facet of our lives—the family. The next thing you will see is a Martian wedding, which is really the beginning of living on Mars. Until the day a Martian man and woman join themselves as a family, to begin the wonderful task of continuing the race, it cannot be said that they have really been alive, but only going through the first faint stirrings of life as it really is. Look now upon a Martian wedding day."

* * *

As the voice faded away, the face of the Martian, which had filled the whole sky, began to recede, and as it did so, his shoulders came into view, his bronzed chest, his perfectly formed arms, his gleaming nude torso....

"Oh, my goodness!" screamed Edith, sitting erect in her chair. "Oh, my goodness!"

"He's stark naked!" roared Fendler. "Mallory, he's nude as a jaybird!"

"So I see," said Roy uncomfortably. "Rather makes the classical sculptures of the ancient Greeks seem crude by comparison, doesn't he?"

"Eh?" said Fendler. "Oh ... yes, he ... does.... I see what you mean. But ..." he subsided and relaxed in his chair, because now the figure had vanished. "Classical art, personified. Great artists, those Martians must be...."

Roy looked covertly at Edith, who was trembling and trying to compose herself as she too returned to her reclining position.

"Eight, nine, ten," he muttered.

"What did you say?" asked Edith faintly, her composure returning.

"Just counting myself out," said Roy sadly. "If that's what it takes, I'm long gone."

Once more the gigantic television screen of the sky came to life, and this time Roy Mallory sat erect. "This is more like it!" he exclaimed with renewed interest.

The scene was a great cathedral-like building, with the rays of the sun streaming redly through fantastically carved windows that seemed made of diamonds. Walking straight toward them came a young woman, smiling radiantly, and bearing in her arms a large bouquet of the most vivid and exotic flowers Roy had ever seen. Except for the flowers she wore absolutely nothing other than a gold band around her forehead, in the center of which was a gigantic, blood-red ruby.

* * *

Standing on both sides were long rows of smiling men and women, two by two, and in common with the girl who advanced down the aisle between them, they were all completely naked.

"One thing seems certain," said Fendler. "Clothing is unknown on Mars. I hadn't suspected, but I suppose it would be best to make

nothing of it."

"Exactly, Mr. Fendler," said Roy. "God created man and woman in the Garden of Eden, unclothed, and it was only the warping effect of sin in their minds that made them wear clothing. Obviously on Mars this either never happened, or they have returned to godliness and purity."

"You're right, my boy," said Fendler, beginning to beam again. And this time he beamed with distinct pleasure. "Beautiful, aren't they?"

"Terrific!" said Roy.

"The flowers are lovely," said Edith bravely. "She carries them so gracefully."

"Flowers?" said Roy absently. "Oh, yes, flowers. Very nice. Geraniums, aren't they? Look! She's giving them to the audience!"

"There's the groom," said Fendler. "My ... she's a lucky girl!"

Edith threw the executive a look that should have made him sink through the roof, but he didn't see it. She returned her gaze quickly to the heavens and tried to stare composedly. Once again she found it difficult to find a comfortable position in her chair.

For long minutes the three along with every other person on Earth, watched the ensuing ceremony, which was simple, direct, noble and uplifting. Background music that began as a murmur, grew until it became a virtual pæan of joy as the young Martian couple announced their eternal vows in ringing tones. Then, before the assembled audience, they removed their golden circlets from about their heads, and exchanged them. Obviously this completed the wedding ceremony, for now they clasped their arms around each other and kissed, long and tenderly.

"It is ... lovely," said Edith wistfully.

Now the young couple, arm in arm, advanced slowly up a few steps toward an ornate couch, around which burned candles with flames of a color never seen on Earth.

"Eh?" said Fendler. He leaned forward anxiously.

"Oh!" said Edith, her hand flying to her mouth as though to stifle any further outburst.

"Ah!" said Roy.

The couple advanced to the couch and sat down upon it. A moment of incredulous silence was broken as Fendler leaped to his feet. "Mallory!" he roared. "Get that show off the air! Cut the power! Smash the cameras! Do anything! The FCC will murder us!"

"There's no power to cut," said Roy. "This isn't our show—remember. Just the commercials."

"Then put on a commercial! Hurry, man!"

"Right in the middle of the show?" asked Roy. "Besides, *they* control the commercials too. Immediately after this scene, as I understand it, they'll put on the breakfast cereal again. And it will be rather well-timed, I'd say...."

Edith rose to her feet, her face flaming. "You've got to do *something*...."

"I don't know what," said Roy, looking at the sky intently. "Besides, isn't this what they got married for?" He settled himself more comfortably.

Fendler turned and raced from the roof. "Somebody turn that thing off!" he screamed. His voice floated back to Roy and Edith on the roof. It died away in the recesses of the building.

"Nobody can turn it off," said Roy. "And it's going to go on for months...."

"For months!" exclaimed Edith, horrified. She cast a glance upward, then turned away, clenching her fists, and biting her lips.

"What's the matter?" asked Roy. "Can't you take it?"

She stamped her foot. "Roy Mallory, you say one more word, and I'll...."

Roy shrugged. "I'm surprised at you. Offhand, I'd say the Martians were highly advanced, sensible, uninhibited, pretty wonderful human beings. At least they know what they're living for. Maybe it would do you good to watch."

Edith looked up momentarily at the sky, then lowered her gaze swiftly. "I ... I can't!" she whispered. Then she too ran from the roof and disappeared down the stairway.

Roy looked after her a moment, then shrugged and returned to his contour chair and settled himself deeply into it.

As the Big Show went on, he had no idea of the turmoil that was sweeping the world. It was only when the day's performance was over and he went down to his office that he got his first inkling. It consisted of the discovery that he had been fired—at the request of a certain breakfast cereals company.

* * *

By noon the next day every sponsor who had signed up for the Big Show had cancelled their contracts, and by midnight it became painfully obvious that although the contracts could easily be cancelled, it was not equally easy to cancel the show. That night the Big Show went on, depicting more of the family life of the Martians, taking Earth viewers through a typical day of a Martian couple on the day of the birth of their first child. To many of those who watched the show, it offered a tremendous fascination; but to others, more squeamish and unable to face the naked realities, both of the flesh and of the business of giving birth to a baby, neither of which spared any detail in their presentation, it was an experience past their ability to endure.

However, as one prominent physician said: "*This* is the way a baby should be born! Every woman on Earth can take a lesson from what we have just seen ... if they did we'd have little use for doctors, psychiatrists or psychologists. This is the miracle of birth as it was meant to be."

It was the unfortunate sponsor who made the loudest noise, though. His screams were heard the world over. His brand of beer, spoken of in such glowing terms before and after the broadcast, wasn't worth a nickel after the Martians did a re-run of the show depicting how the birth would have gone if the mother had been a drunkard. Now, indeed, were there faintings and mental blowups among the populace. The scene *was* rather ghastly. Some thought the Martians had overdone it, but as the president of the W.C.T.U. remarked triumphantly: "Exactly what we've been saying for decades!"

At midnight the FCC suspended the license of the NBC-CBS Big Show Merger, and Herman Fendler himself lost his job. Along with

him, of course, Edith Miller became unemployed, although no woman in that category could claim to be more beautifully unemployed.

* * *

Roy Mallory, visiting his office to remove some of his personal belongings, found her emptying her own desk.

"Oh," he said. "Another casualty?"

"You read the papers, don't you?" she asked.

"Yes, I heard of the FCC closing the networks up. But it hasn't stopped the show. Tonight, you know, is the Martian version of what they do for entertainment. I suppose we'll be watching that happy young couple going out on the town and doing it up brown, or buff, as you might say...."

"*You* will be watching," Edith cut in acidly. "I have no doubt at all. As for me...."

"Certainly I'll be watching. That doll is almost as beautiful as you are, and I keep thinking how nice it would be if we were on Mars."

"We're not," she said. "And we won't ever be."

"Alas!" he said glumly. "And alack!"

"You're as funny as a crutch," she said, stuffing the last of her belongings into her bag. "You ought to get yourself a job as a comedian."

"Oh, I've already got a job," he said airily.

"Oh?"

"Yes."

She stood there, poised as if to leave, but not actually translating the poise into action.

"Where?" she asked, setting down her bag with a defiant slam.

"I could use a good secretary," he said.

"Tell me where you're working," she demanded impatiently.

"I'm starting my own business in television producing," he said. "And I'll never make it go without a competent secretary, and ..." he put his hands behind his back, "... look, no hands."

"I'll take the job," she said. "And what are you doing for your first show?"

"Give me time," he grinned. "I just this minute started the new company."

"I thought so," she said calmly. "Well, how about the Big Show?"

"The Big Show!"

"Why not?"

"Who'll we get for a sponsor?" he asked sarcastically.

"How about Sunbathing Magazine?" she suggested.

He looked at her wide-eyed. "Sunbathing Magazine!" he gasped.

"Of course. With all this publicity, their circulation will zoom to the moon, if they just grab it—and it's up to you to see that they do!"

"Baby," he said wonderingly, "I just don't know how to take you."

"Don't try it," she said, picking up a letter-knife and toying with it.

* * *

Exactly one week later the Martians dropped all their previously scheduled commercials, and put on the first of the new commercials. As Roy Mallory reclined in the contour chair atop the roof of his newly rented office, Edith Miller suddenly appeared at his side and looked around.

"Where's my chair?" she asked.

He leaped to his feet. "I didn't think you cared to watch the Big Show," he said. "I only ordered one chair. You're always yelling about extravagance...."

"All right," she said. "I'll sit on the parapet."

"You'll get a stiff neck."

"I've already got one," she said.

"I'll say you have," he said disgustedly. "But why not forget all that? This chair is big enough for two."

"I don't need this job that bad."

He grunted and sat down in the chair again. "Okay. But tell me if your neck does get stiff—I'll change off with you, fifty-fifty."

"Fair enough," she said.

The show began, and there was silence on the roof. Edith watched calmly, and Roy divided his attention between watching

her and the show. As the show progressed, it became obvious that the script was perfect for the new sponsor.

"We'll make a million on that percentage agreement," said Edith.

"Two million," said Roy. "I think I'll make you a partner for that bit of masterminding."

"Keep it," she said. "And by the way, isn't that the roof of the Sunbathing Magazine building over there?"

"Yes."

"And isn't that the editorial staff of Sunbathing Magazine out on the roof watching the show?"

"Yes."

"And aren't they in the buff, as you so crudely put it, in spite of the fact the sun isn't out?"

Roy sat up in his chair and looked sharply at the roof in question. In the vivid light from the sky-pictures, which now were showing a happy couple soaring fantastically in a Martian equivalent of the aerial gadgets of Coney Island, still unimpeded by the briefest of entangling garments, it was quite obvious that the editorial staff of Sunbathing Magazine was indeed buffing it.

"They're pretty modern over there," he said. "You can't blame them for practicing what they preach."

"But isn't this an innovation?"

"I believe so. Usually they limit their activities to private camps."

"I heard today that there were new teenage clubs being formed, patterned after the Big Show," said Edith.

"Clubs?"

"Yes. The police arrested a whole group of them in Sandusky, Ohio, for stripping off their clothes during a local hop."

"That's not so good," said Roy.

"Oh, I don't know. They weren't really doing anything wrong."

Roy almost choked. "Nothing wrong...."

"No. They were conducting the whole affair on a highly moral plane. The police let them go, and dismissed the case when their parents showed up and suggested that it was all rather natural, and that they felt no harm had been done."

"The parents said that?" asked Roy incredulously.

* * *

Weeks passed, and the Big Show went on. The audience, which had always been huge, now became almost universal. And no longer were there any remarks about nudity, but instead "sunbathing" groups began springing up everywhere. For a time this development, which began to edge its way into public places with an accelerated pace, rather than private camps, stirred up another storm, and there were demands that Sunbathing Magazine be banned from the newsstands. This fell through when the authorities pointed out the magazine was tame compared to the show in the heavens.

Then one day Edith handed the phone to Roy with the remark: "Another sponsor."

"Who?" asked Roy in surprise.

"The League of Decency," said Edith. "Something about if they can't lick them, to join them." There was a peculiar look in her eyes as Roy took the phone and leaned back in his swivel chair to talk. When he had finished he turned back to Edith and said: "Baby, I've got a hunch that it won't be long before the only use the people on this Earth will have for clothing will be for protection from the elements—which after all, are not as temperate on Earth as they are on Mars, with its scientifically controlled weather."

"You may be right," she said. She busied herself with her filing cabinet.

* * *

That night as Roy lay back on the roof-chair watching the Martian version of a musical show, which several weeks ago would have seemed tremendously daring, it stirred scarcely a flicker in his nervous system. It was in the middle of the ballet, wherein lovely Martian girls soared about on twinkling toes gloriously nude, bathed only in incredibly exotic color symphonies played on them by a master color organist, that Roy heard the soft pad of footsteps beside him. He heard Edith seat herself in her chair, but paid no attention, so engrossed was he in the spectacle before him. But as

he lay there, something nagged at the back of his mind disturbingly, and all at once it hit him.

Edith's footsteps had had the unmistakable slap of bare feet....

For an instant he lay there frozen, then he turned his head with a jerk. Edith was lying in her contour chair, composedly looking at the Big Show. And she was as naked as the day she was born!

He sat up angrily. "This is going too far!" he exploded.

Edith turned to him in wonderment, her eyes wide. "What?" she gasped. "That's certainly a strange reaction, coming from you!"

"You're as buff as a billiard ball!" he said indignantly, his face growing red.

"I don't think I look like a billiard ball," she said. "I've always been under the impression I was rather nice looking. Neither square, nor perfectly round. Just nicely curved...."

"Your sadism has gone too far this time!" he snapped. "I don't appreciate it at all. You can sit here and moon-bath if you want to, I'm going downstairs and work...."

He began to stride toward the roof entrance.

"What's the matter, can't you take it?" she called after him.

He whirled. "If it'll satisfy your sadistic little mind," he said, "I can't! Now, are you pleased with yourself?"

She looked hurt. "Who's being a sadist?" she said. She stood up and came toward him.

He grew giddy and for a moment the roof whirled around him. Then all at once he found himself lying on the roof, and his head cradled on her lap. He looked up at her.

"You aren't being a sadist?" he persisted.

"Of course not," she said. "After all, the Martians are thirty thousand years ahead of us, and if it's all right with them ... who am I to be backward?"

"Baby," he said, drawing her lips down to his, "you've been ahead of them all the time!"

And all over the Earth mankind took a gigantic step forward, into a new Eden that promised many good things....

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